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Roces/Women’s Movements and the Filipina, 1986-2008

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Introduction

WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS AND WOMANHOOD

Maria, Maria

Since the 1980s, feminist songs have been part of the repertoire of women’s activism. These songs revealed a preoccupation with María (a metaphor for all Filipino women) especially with her roles, her character, and her stories. These songs implored “Maria” to reject traditional stereotypes and embrace new role models. For example, one song titled “Maria” advised women that they should not allow themselves to be treated as toys that could be discarded or as subjects confined to the kitchen and the bedroom, but instead should model themselves on past women revolutionaries.¹ The lyrics of another song, “Sabon” (Soap), compelled women to reject television’s two stereotypes of themselves as either sublumne helpers (maids), or decorative objects.² The words of the song “Babae” (Woman), condemned weak women who were preoccupied with finding a man, and suggested women be inspired by revolutionaries and political activists.³ Finally, “Bangon, Maria” (Arise, Maria) demanded that women wake up and break their chains.⁴

Feminists from the 1980s made the task of theorizing the feminine a priority. Because it was important to them that traditional constructions of the feminine be unpacked and dismantled, defining the Filipina—what she was, what she is, and what she will become—was central to activist ideologies. Furthermore, discourses on the feminine were imperative in the struggle against patriarchy. Representations of the
INTRODUCTION

feminine were used in strategies such as lobbying for legislative changes. At the same time, women activists also were engaged in the business of critiquing cultural constructions of the feminine for the purposes of altering stereotypical sex roles. In this sense, representations of the Filipino woman were crucial in the feminist reeducation campaign—in the overall plan to resocialize the populace to give symbolic capital (prestige) to its women vis-à-vis its men. Thus, the question of Maria’s heritage and identity (past, present, and future) has been central to the agendas and ideologies of women's movements since the 1980s.

This book is about the feminist project and its interrogation of the Filipino woman in the period from about the mid-1980s until 2008: locating her in history, society, and politics; imagining her past, present, and future; representing her in advocacy; and identifying strategies that transform her. The focus is on how women's organizations imagined and refashioned the Filipina in their campaign to improve women's status in the legal and cultural contexts. The drive to alter women's situations included a political strategy (for lobbying, campaigning, and changing legislation) and a cultural strategy (to change social attitudes and women's own assessment of themselves). Intrinsic to the achievement of these goals was analysis of the status of women and a feminist critique of that status. Although it is true that the women's movements were focused on altering legislation, lobbying, research, political advocacy, and education (to alter cultural attitudes), all these activities made it necessary to invoke discourses about the Filipino woman. Representations of Filipino women were of critical importance to feminist advocacy. They were important in justifying demands for legislative changes, they were needed as ammunition for criticizing gender relations in society, and they were crucial in the campaign to refashion women as advocates. I am interested in the cultural side of the feminist agenda: how women's organizations critiqued womanhood and how they themselves engaged in fashioning an alternative woman. This cultural production has been identified by feminist scholar Delia Aguilar as the realm in which women have been the most energetic and passionate: “The publication of books and journals, staging of plays, music composition, the visual arts, performances on radio and TV—in these utilization of women's talent, imagination, creativity and resources has been both remarkable and inspiring.” This study examines the history of this feminist project.

In particular, this book addresses the following specific questions: How did women's activists theorize the Filipino woman and how did they use this analysis to lobby for pro-women's legislation or alter social
attitudes? What sort of “new Filipinas” did they propose as alternative role models? How were these new ideas disseminated to the public? And finally, what cultural strategies did they deploy to gain a mass following? Although inevitably the discussion surveys the history of women’s movements since the 1980s, the emphasis is on the ways the Filipina has been imagined as intrinsic to women’s advocacy.

Discourses on the Filipino woman were necessary in the projects of representing women for particular advocacies (for example, on behalf of prostitutes, women workers, or indigenous women), and in fashioning women (in imbuing feminist consciousness, or in introducing new role models and feminist epistemologies, and in the feminist practices designed to transforming “survivors” into “advocates”). Given the very vibrant nature of the women’s movements, it is not surprising that activists produced many discourses (some of them contradictory) about the Filipino woman as part of their overall agendas of deconstructing Filipino womanhood or improving women’s status. There was never one single consistent narrative produced on this controversial topic; instead, each narrative was linked to a specific advocacy or activist agenda. Some of these narratives will be discussed in this book.

Despite the myriad types of discourses, women activists were united in the overall project of women’s empowerment. At face value, this larger aim often conflicted with some of the representations of women as victims or modern-day slaves. I argue that feminists often adopted what I will call a double narrative, or the deployment of two contrasting discourses—a narrative of victimization and a narrative of activism. I suggest that a double narrative of victim/survivor and advocate was used by activists in their discourses about the Filipino woman. I prefer the term “double narrative” because these representations of women reflect two sides of the same coin; although they are contradictory, women’s movements have tapped on both opposing discourses for feminist ends. I also imply that the lines between both narratives are fluid and not fixed, because it is acknowledged that victims could become advocates or that the label “victim” was not totally devoid of agency (which is why the women’s movements often prefer the term “survivor” to “victim”). For example, women activists deployed the victim narrative to argue for the passage of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003 that decriminalized prostitutes (whether or not there was consent), but preferred to use the narrative of advocacy, agency, and empowerment when fashioning former prostitutes and survivors of trafficking into feminist activists. The latter was part of the overall feminist project of dismantling cultural constructions of the feminine as “suffering
martyr” and rejecting the cultural capital associated with this ideal. In feminist herstories published by women’s organizations, the colonial period is blamed for taking away women’s religious power and replacing it with the ideology of domesticity emerging from the colonizer’s patriarchal ideology. But juxtaposed in this narrative are stories of women’s resistance and activism throughout history. Whereas women workers were represented as the most oppressed and exploited of women or as modern-day slaves, they also were imagined to be the most militant of advocates who had the potential not just of being the mass followers, but also of being the leaders of the women’s movements. In presenting these contradictory discourses as a double narrative, I do not see contradictory discourses as necessarily “bad” or “good,” or even problematic. Indeed, the contradictions merely stress the complexities faced by activists while acknowledging their adroit skills and political savvy in representing and fashioning women to fulfill their agendas.

The word “victim” here refers to the experience of violation—a material reality. The term “victim narrative” refers to the discourse in which women’s experiences were constructed in a history of continuing oppression and violation. Its opposite—the story of resistance and activism—describes the narrative of advocacy. In this book, I adopt the view of hybrid agency to refer to the manner in which women activists adopt and adapt transnational notions of consent, and exercise choice both within and against cultural and political structures.

In this book, the term “women’s movements” referred to women’s activism initiated by women’s organizations for the purposes of improving women’s status. Here I refer to the various agendas of a plethora of women’s organizations collectively. This study is confined only to those who are feminist, and does not include organizations formed and led by women for purposes of philanthropy or civic organizations formed by wives or female kin of politicians that act as a support group for male politicians. Although some of these groups aimed to provide a livelihood for impoverished women (with some even claiming NGO status), they fall within the more traditional types of units not explicitly feminist in orientation.

The term “feminist organization” refers to those organizations whose main aims are to critique women’s inequality and whose activism centers on altering or changing structures in society in order to remove gender discrimination. Many of these organizations might address only issues of particular or specific (or even narrow) groups of women, but in doing so they challenge patriarchy from small to significant ways.
Certainly, not all women and not all sectors are represented by these organizations, but the reality is that only those women who organized themselves can demand to be heard. I am deliberately using a very broad definition of “feminism”: many women activists are uncomfortable with the term because it has long been associated with bra-burning, man-hating, or with manly or unfeminine women. These activists’ qualms can be explained by their perception that feminism is a Western term. Even though they might quibble with whether they considered themselves to be feminists (with feminism still carrying negative connotations) however, they see themselves as part of the women’s movements. Although a number of women activists and women’s organizations are happy to carry the badge of “feminist,” I have noticed that even those who are anxious about the term, by the end of my interview with them, would concede that, given a general definition of the term, yes, they could be classified as a feminist. All the organizations included in this study are at least feminist in orientation.

The labels of socialist feminists, liberal feminists, Marxist feminists, national-democratic feminists, and radical feminists and ecofeminists do not apply to Filipino women’s organizations whose ideologies often straddle these categories. My interviews with leading feminists in the Philippines confirmed that it is not helpful to categorize women’s organizations according to these classifications. The women’s movement is much divided, and hence it is more accurate to use the term “women’s movements” (plural) than the term “women’s movement” (singular) to describe feminist activism since the 1980s. Feminists remain divided over all the major issues and consequently any writing about women’s activism in the contemporary era (including this book) will be controversial. Ideological differences, though present, have not usually been the major reason for organizations splitting up; conflict is usually over political tactics and strategies, and the politics of critical collaboration with the state. Personality clashes were often cited as responsible for triggering the tendency to leave one organization and form a new one, and activists seem very comfortable with this regular splintering, although discussing it is still very much taboo. Activists, if they were willing to elaborate on differences, preferred to keep the information “off the record”: personal intrigues and disagreements over tactics often occur even within the same organization. Intergenerational challenges are beginning to enter the picture as the young generation—women who are no longer directly affected by the national-democratic struggle—begin to question the dominant feminist discourses and reject the victim/agency dichotomy.
I will not be focusing on the disunity here (and it was difficult to find activists willing to talk about it) but will call attention to some of the major differences when they are pertinent to my arguments.

This book includes a discussion of how the mainstream nationwide lowland Christian women's movements represented the indigenous women of the highlands. Cordillera women's political activism during the Marcos dictatorship (1972–1986) has been mythologized by women's movements. Since the Spaniards were unable to colonize the Cordillera, indigenous women were spared from Spanish Catholicism, identified by the women's movements as the most profound and enduring ideology that has shaped Filipino womanhood from the sixteenth century to the present. Chapter 4 focuses on indigenous women to illustrate how women's movements have interacted with indigenous women as the “other Filipina.” Finally, the absence of a section on the Filipino Muslim women's movements points to an important gap not covered in this study. Muslim women's issues are different from the dominant Christian majority (for example, a fatwa, or Islamic ruling, exists on the issue of reproductive health). There is a vibrant group of Muslim feminists, including a number of Muslim feminist lawyers; they merit an entire study on their own.

Short History of the Women's Movements

The history of feminism in the Philippines begins with the suffrage movement that was led by the National Federation of Women's Clubs in the 1920s. The vote was won largely due to the organizational skills of the first generation of feminists who campaigned hard to win the franchise from a constitutional convention that was largely against women's suffrage. But once suffrage was won in 1937 and women entered political office, feminists became practically inactive until the 1960s, at which time student activism injected new life into the dormant women's movement. In the early 1970s, the Free Movement of New Women (MAKIBAKA; Malayang Kilusan ng Bagong Kababaihan) was organized as an offshoot of the Nationalist Youth (Kabataan Makabayan), founded initially to mobilize women as part of the student activism of the late 1960s and early 1970s. These activists protested social injustices, the Vietnam War, U.S. influence on domestic affairs, oil prices, inflation, the Marcos government's fascist tendencies, and the wide disparity between the rich and the poor. Under the leadership of Lorena Barros, MAKIBAKA developed a feminist consciousness. But when martial law was declared in
September 1972 and the students were forced underground (and Lorena Barros was killed by the military), MAKIBAKA was prevented from mutating into a feminist movement with a nationalist orientation, or, alternatively, a nationalist movement with a feminist orientation. With the premature silencing of MAKIBAKA, the development of the women’s movement experienced a second hiatus.

There were, however, some women in the Communist underground whose common experience of gender discrimination in the Communist Party brought them together. The bonding of this small group who began to question the left’s treatment of women cadres resulted in the formation of the Organization of Women for Freedom (KALAYAAN; Katipunan ng Kababaihan Para sa Kalayaan) in 1983. This clearly feminist organization tackled issues of rape, domestic violence, pornography, and abortion. Reminiscing on the rationale behind the formation of KALAYAAN, Aida Santos, Fe Mangahas, and Ana Maria “Princess” Nemenzo admitted that they were determined to have a feminist group that was autonomous but committed to two revolutions—one for national liberation and one for women’s liberation. Together with another organization, PILIPINA (formed in 1981 and composed of left-leaning activists, including a feminist Benedictine nun), these two groups revived feminist activism, insisting that women’s issues be given equal priority in the struggle against the dictatorship. Scholar Leonora Angeles, who has written an excellent master’s thesis on the history of the woman question in the Philippines, identified both KALAYAAN and PILIPINA as among the first to apply feminism to their analytical framework at a time when the word “feminist” was shunned due to its association with Western feminism and women’s liberation. This cohort of women members of KALAYAAN and PILIPINA became the first group of feminist leaders that inspired the newly revitalized women’s movement in the first decade of the 1980s. They pioneered activism with a feminist perspective tackling issues such as sexism in the media, reproductive rights, prostitution, and violence against women.

But just at the time when political activists against the Marcos regime were developing a feminist consciousness, Marcos’ chief political opponent, Benigno Aquino Jr. was assassinated on August 21, 1983. This one political act launched a tidal wave of protests that culminated in the People Power 1 revolution, which ousted President Ferdinand Marcos in 1986. The urgent need to devote their energy on the antidictatorship struggle in 1983 meant that once again women’s liberation had to be temporarily shelved in order to focus on the movement to oust the dictator.
INTRODUCTION

From 1983 until the ouster of Marcos, a number of activist women's groups mushroomed. These women's organizations were dedicated to the mobilization of women as a gendered force to politicize them against the Marcos regime. In March 1984, a group of women's organizations coalesced to form GABRIELA (General Assembly Binding Women for Reforms, Integrity, Equality, Leadership and Action). At that time, there were about fifty organizations in Manila and thirty-eight in Mindanao affiliated with GABRIELA. By 1992, 120 organizations were affiliated with GABRIELA. At its inception, GABRIELA was interested in harnessing women's power for the anti-Marcos dictatorship movement rather than in advocating specific feminist or women's issues.

But it was only after democratic institutions were restored in 1986 that women's activism gained momentum, resulting in what Carolyn Sobritchea has labeled “a critical mass of highly motivated feminist advocates” and what interviewees referred to as the era of a “blossoming” of the women's movements. There were organizations of women of various sectors (such as peasants, urban poor, Muslim women, Cordilleran women, migrant women, women workers, and women in media, to name a few) and issue-oriented organizations (such as those specializing on women's health, domestic violence, prostitution, women's legal advocacy and services, and “comfort women,” or victims of sexual slavery during the Japanese Occupation, for example). The Women's Media Circle Foundation Inc. (WMC) used the potential of tri-media (radio, television, and print media) for the women's movements, whereas women's health advocates and feminist lawyers explored the possibilities of alliance building for advocacy. The spectacular growth and effectiveness of NGOs could be partially explained by the impacts of the international conferences on women and the United Nations conferences in particular, as well as the funding made available for NGOs in the developing world. Although GABRIELA tended to receive the lion's share of media and international attention because of its visible presence at demonstrations and the formation of its own women's party in 2003 (see subsequent section in this introduction, Women and Formal Politics), by the 1990s the myriad group of women's organizations including hundreds of grassroots organizations, women NGOs, coalitions, and professional groups, underscored the point that one could no longer speak of a single women's movement. Delia Aguilar was careful to point out that GABRIELA was no longer as central to the women's movement as it had been in the 1980s because of the many groups flourishing outside its alliance. A direct consequence of the plural nature of women's
activism was disunity, but it could be argued that its very plurality legitimated its claim to speak for the Filipina. Carolyn Sobritchea claims that differences, instead of being counterproductive “served as a catalyst for all to work harder and cover all fronts, so to speak in the struggle to advance women's rights in the Philippines.”26 Although disagreement is not unusual for activist groups and may in fact enrich the women's projects, we need to note its negative consequences (most evident in the failure of women's parties to get politicians elected; see subsequent section in this introduction, Women and Formal Politics).

The issues raised by women's movements covered almost the entire gamut of women's experiences: health and reproductive rights, domestic violence, sexual harassment, globalization and its effects, the plight of women workers and peasant women, indigenous women, Muslim women, rape, incest, class, unemployment and the contractualization of the labor force, “comfort women,” militarization, prostitution, the impact of Christianity on shaping feminine ideal role models, the media, and education as socializing factors, sexuality including lesbianism, poverty, environmental factors, foreign debt, and other national issues.27 Divorce and abortion have been much more controversial and thus public discussion on these issues has been muted (see Chapter 9). This book will examine the discourses on the Filipino woman that emerged in the advocacy of some of these issues.

Women and Formal Politics

Women were still marginalized in formal politics, with a general average of a mere 11 percent (from 1986 to 2006) elected to local and national office.28 Because of these grim statistics, the most common tactic used by activists to ensure that pro-women legislative acts were proposed, discussed, and passed in the legislature was to draft legislation and then convince their allies in the legislature to sponsor them. But women activists also were interested in claiming power themselves. The first women's party, Women for the Mother Country (KAIBA; Kababaihan Para sa Inang Bayan) was established in 1987; KAIBA won only one congressional seat (Dominique Anna “Nikki” Coseteng) in the 1987 election. This congresswoman eventually joined a traditional party.29 Angeles explains KAIBA’s failure in terms of women's relative isolation from patronage politics.30 Eventually KAIBA became moribund.

But in 1995 the passage of the Party-List System Act that classified women as a sector enabled women’s parties to compete on a more level
INTRODUCTION

playing field. This legislation provided that 20 percent (at least fifty) of the House of Representatives (250) be reserved for representatives of labor, peasants, urban poor, indigenous peoples, youth, fisherfolk, elderly, veterans, women, and other marginalized sectors elected through a party list system.31 A new system allowing sectors to compete for “reserved seats” meant that those parties who were deprived of the traditional patronage networks like women’s groups would have a chance at making it in the lower house. A total of six women’s parties offered candidates under the women sector although only one party Abanse! Pinay (made up of PILIPINA members) was able to get a congresswoman (Patricia Sarenas) elected. The other women’s parties who fielded candidates but were unsuccessful in gaining a seat were The New Filipina (Ang Bagong Pilipina), Women (Babayi), the National Council of Women in the Philippines, Gloria’s League of Women (GLOW), and Womenpower.32 One must also include the rare number of feminists who were elected as members of other sectoral parties such as the Akbayan (Citizen’s Action Party; this party has an affirmative action platform stipulating that one of the three candidates fielded must be a woman) and Country First (Bayan Muna). For example, Liza Largoza Maza, then secretary general of GABRIELA, ran under Bayan Muna and Etta Rosales with Akbayan. Both women were elected to Congress and were credited for proposing pro-women legislation during their term. Congresswoman Maza was responsible for filing fifteen out of the thirty-eight pro-women bills and resolutions filed under the thirteenth congress.33 In July 2003, GABRIELA launched its own women’s party. Liza Maza became the first GABRIELA women’s party member to enter Congress when she won a seat in the 2004 elections. In 2007, Luzviminda Calolot “Luz” Ilagan became the second, and in 2010 Emerciana “Emmi” de Jesus became the third.

The poignant history of Abanse! Pinay could serve as a case study for the challenges faced by the feminists in formal politics. In a peculiar example of déjà vu, Abanse! Pinay shared the same fate as KAIBA and became moribund; PILIPINA is still active, however. The party failed to get a seat in 2004 and 2007, making it ineligible to run again in the party list unless it registered under a new name. Like KAIBA, Abanse! Pinay had a short life span. A candid interview with Patricia Sarenas provided some insights into the reasons for the party’s decline. According to Sarenas, PILIPINA had always been divided over what strategies to use to increase the membership of the party.34 These debates within the party itself were never resolved.35 If one added to this potent mix the personal disputes between members resulting in some members leaving
the organization or abandoning the party, the fragile unity of this organization no doubt contributed to its failure to survive in the long term.\textsuperscript{36} Whereas such disputes are not unusual in the dynamics of Philippine political parties, there is no denying that the consequences for the women's movements were crippling, preventing them from surviving as viable parties in the long term. Although GABRIELA seems to be holding its ground (as of this writing in 2010), it is still too soon to tell its future.

Election campaigns could be used for feminist propaganda. In reality, however, this potential is yet to be realized. Josefa Francisco argued that in the 1998 elections parties did not use election campaigns as a forum for debating each other. According to Francisco, the result was that “not a ripple of debate was felt,” even over top priority issues such as reproductive rights, sexual rights, and women's poverty. Instead, these issues were avoided during the election campaign. Perhaps this could be explained by the fear of reprisals from the Catholic Church in such controversial issues. The consequence of the silence was that the women's parties missed the opportunity of using election campaigns as a venue for feminist propaganda.\textsuperscript{37} Maybe election campaigns by nature—the need to entice potential voters—were far from ideal as venues for challenging patriarchy.

On the other hand, the activist strategy of lobbying with legislators sympathetic to particular women's issues has been very effective.\textsuperscript{38} This strategy has been deployed consistently (with a good track record) from 1986 onwards. So far, it has been the best method of ensuring that pro-women legislation is passed. Another area of successful collaboration with the state is the link with the government body—the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women (NCRFW). The NCRFW was established on January 7, 1975, through Presidential Decree No. 633 as an advisory body to the president and the cabinet on policies and programs for the advancement of women; it was renamed the Philippine Commission on Women on August 14, 2009.\textsuperscript{39} But active collaboration of NGOs and government began after the 1986 revolution, when President Corazon Aquino appointed Remmy Ricken from PILIPINA as executive director of NCRFW. Carolyn Sobritchea has acknowledged the role of the NCRFW in initiating links between the state or government and women’s NGOs through the formation of alliances such as the GO-NGO network in 1993.\textsuperscript{40} There are areas where collaboration with the government has been positive for the women’s movements although the activists were fully aware of the limits of this alliance. Members of PILIPINA have been appointed to the NCRFW. This book, however,
moves away from a focus on women's engagement with the state; a thorough examination of the politics of critical collaboration with the state remains a topic for future research.

Filipino Feminisms in the Local and International Contexts

Although there is no doubt that Filipino feminist theory was influenced by international literature on the topic, Western feminism was immediately targeted as alien by activists who were self-conscious about their nationalist-democratic roots (as leftists). A rejection of the imperial hold also implied a rejection of imperial mentalities, including feminism. Women activists claimed that Filipino feminist theories were homegrown, based on the analysis of the women's situation in the Philippine context, influenced by the experiences of women survivors of exploitation.

The leaders of the women's movements from the 1980s were highly educated women from the middle class and a tiny group of religious women (feminist nuns). Although feminist nuns were marginalized in the history and leadership of American second-wave feminisms, they were in the vanguard of Filipino women's activism. The high profile of Catholic nuns, some of whom were celebrities and role models, was archetypical, injecting a unique flavor to women's movements in the Philippines and problematizing the very notion of class. (A number of these nuns were actually from the upper classes who took a vow of poverty when they entered the convent and often lived with the poor; see Chapters 1 and 8.) Women activists also wore different hats as academics, leaders of women's organizations, and government appointees or advisers; they also served as Philippine representatives to transnational and international organizations that formulate policies on women in the developing world (see Chapter 8). These close ties with the "field" cast a legitimizing aura on their ability to speak for women of the lower classes and other sectors. Upper-class women, who were the prime movers of the suffrage movement in the 1920s, were rarely present in this next phase of women's activism. Perhaps this could be partly explained by the fact that these women had achieved their aims—the right to vote and run for office—and were now benefiting from this victory by becoming politicians themselves (or were marrying politicians). Women's studies academics writing on Filipino feminist theory were involved in feminist praxis as leaders and activists in women's organizations.
Since the leaders of the women's movements were once political activists against the Marcos regime, the desire to build a mass following and claim the lower classes as their constituency was foremost in their agendas. In fact, the Philippine women's movement in their self-representations (and legitimizing discourses) consistently claimed to speak for the lower classes. Whether this self-representation was supported by reality, however, was difficult to assess; nonetheless, the activists must be credited with making a conscious and persistent effort to research on the impacts of particular issues on the lower classes and to include lower-class members in their organization. It is appropriate to claim that women's movements reflected alliances between the middle class and lower classes.

THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Responding to demographic trends since the 1970s, feminists theorized the Filipina as “servants of globalization,” working for wealthier countries all over the world as domestic helpers, entertainers, professional workers, and live-in caregivers; they were also seen as migrants for marriage. The women's movements responded quickly to this shifting movement across national borders by making sure that the organizations they founded were transnationally based. These organizations lobbied the Philippine government, as well as countries hosting Filipino women workers or migrants, and international bodies such as the United Nations. Some of the activists themselves, particularly the feminist nuns, were particularly effective precisely because they were transnational activists unmoored in space and place (see Chapter 8). Many of the organizations discussed in this book established branches overseas, and advocacy work was performed simultaneously across the seas. Linked through the Internet, the cell phone, and the more traditional print and audiovisual media, the entire world was staked as their public arena of protest.

Transnational locations were also shifting locations as organizations sprouted or closed down around the world, depending on necessity. Locally based organizations therefore looked outwards towards the outside world when they represented the Filipina. On the other hand, the international branches of these transnational organizations looked back towards the Philippines—all the way to the woman's cultural socialization in her home country—to understand the woman migrant's past, an essential strategy in their advocacy. This two-way process—looking
away from and towards the Philippines—-informed activists’ feminist positions.

The international outlook embraced by activists was not merely a product of the need to address the Filipina as transnational subject brought on by globalization and the place of the Philippines in the global south. Despite the self-conscious representation of Filipino feminists as homegrown (a label that has some credibility), the international context is vital. I hesitate to subscribe to a division between Western feminists and feminists of the rest of the world, and prefer to see Filipino feminists participating in international feminist debates. After all, four Filipino women have chaired the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), and three have acted as experts for the Commission on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Filipino activists were also members of international feminist organizations (and often office bearers of organizations) such as Coalition Against Trafficking in Women-International (CATW-International); Women’s Commission of EATWOT (Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians); International Lesbian and Gay Association (ILGA); and Asian Peasant Network, to name a few. In this sense, one could argue that Filipina activists contributed to the international musings on the “woman question,” providing expertise on migration and trafficking, in particular. They were not merely at the receiving end of a Western feminist lecture, but were actually proactive in challenging the Atlantic-centered feminists at international conferences. Filipina activists of CATW-AP clashed with Dutch feminists over whether prostitution is violence against women or sex work, and Filipino feminist nuns contributed to feminist theological debates.

The histories of women’s movements in the Philippines must be located in a transnational context despite the anxiety over feminism as a Western or foreign import. After all, since the fiery debates between women of all color at the United Nations’ first world conference on women held in Mexico City in 1975, international feminists can no longer be seen as predominantly middle-class white. Although United Nations protocols and international shifts in feminist theories have an impact on the Philippines, Filipino activists have through their positions in the United Nations, United Nations Development Fund for Women, and NGOs also participated in the international conversation about the “woman question.” At the same time, because funding for NGOs often came from overseas, United Nations priorities had an impact on the distribution of money intended for development.
FILIPINO FEMINIST THEORIES/FILIPINO FEMINISMS

The fundamental question of how women’s groups constructed the Filipina—and how this has affected women’s movements has not yet been seriously posed by scholars writing on women’s movements in the Philippines. There has been no comprehensive study on women’s movements in the Philippines or on Filipino feminist theory that documents the activists’ self-conscious enterprise of developing an indigenous brand of feminism. It is in the second half of the 1980s that a “critical mass” of women’s organizations adopting a feminist perspective and prioritizing feminist issues appeared, and it is also from 1985 onwards that activists officially lay the foundation for Filipino feminist theory in the process of designing teaching modules for women’s studies courses at the tertiary level. It is also at the end of the 1980s that women’s organizations decided to focus on grassroots women.

Mary John Mananzan (OSB) (Order of Saint Benedict), a Benedictine feminist nun, has been credited with running the first women’s studies workshop in the Philippines in 1985 at St. Scholastica’s College. This group of eighteen activists was the first to design a syllabus for a Filipino women’s studies module. Mananzan later founded Nursia in 1988. Nursia ran three-day women’s orientation seminars six times a year for “grassroots women”; these seminars were held in the Center and in the provinces. Whereas St. Scholastica’s College ran women’s studies courses for women in higher education, Nursia offered these women orientation seminars (or abridged versions of these courses) to factory workers, peasant women, and urban poor women.

The Center for Women’s Resources (CWR) was another women’s NGO whose forte was providing basic women’s orientation workshops for all sorts of women’s organizations. Founded in 1982, it excels in the publication of educational materials on Filipino women’s issues, coordinates the Paaralang Lisa Balando (PLB; an education training school for grassroots women), and develops education modules and instructor’s training seminars.

The University of the Philippines was the first Philippine university to offer a graduate degree in women’s studies. It founded its own University Center for Women’s Studies in 1988. Miriam College (formerly Maryknoll College), a women’s college with a critical mass of women activists in its faculty, set up the WAGI in 1997, offering training and education workshops for the community. The three women’s studies centers complemented their research activities with advocacy, training,
and outreach services to the community. These outreach services were very important as evidence of the activists’ stress on the community as their primary constituency and the lower classes as their priority.

What is Filipina feminist theory? Specifically, activists seek to answer questions such as, Who is the Filipina woman? What sorts of enduring grand narratives of the feminine have been reproduced over the centuries? Where is this “Filipina woman” located? How can activists empower her? And finally, What new Filipina or what alternative narratives of women should we propose and fashion? This book focuses on how activists have deconstructed Filipino womanhood, and how they hoped to fashion an alternative Filipino woman. The analysis of Filipino constructions of the feminine was absolutely critical as the foundation for Filipino feminist theory. In addition, feminists have operated from a theoretical framework that perceived the Filipina as deeply connected with the world, with the premise that the Filipina postcolonial condition placed her at the bottom rung of the global racial hierarchy, epitomized by the women factory workers (especially in the electronics industries), by peasant women, and by the plight of domestic helpers overseas. Basic women’s orientation seminars run by CWR explain the exploitation suffered by women workers as the result of the feudal nature of Philippine society, and discuss the country’s developing world status subject to the neo-imperialism of the rich northern countries and their transnational operations. Since the activist perspective was to locate the Filipino woman in both the international and local context, and because for practical reasons organizations chose to have branches overseas, Filipino feminist theory could not be critiqued for being inward-looking.

Inevitably, however, discourses on the Filipino woman also reveal the complex relationship between women’s movements and the state as the government is identified as both the enemy (in the case of prostitution, for example, where the state is critiqued for tacitly endorsing it and is willing to sacrifice its women for remittances and tourist dollars), and as an ally (as some departments including the legislature work with women’s organizations and some activists gain political power or government positions). The Catholic Church and traditional Filipino cultural attitudes (particularly the pressures from the kinship group) receive their fair share of criticism in the narratives of the feminist movements. The complexities of activism in the Philippine context are particularly obvious when discussing the perceptive power of the Catholic Church (often seen as even more powerful than politicians) and the fact that
Introduction

Some feminist leaders are Catholic nuns working with the poorest and most marginalized of women.

Filipino activists since the 1980s could not be accused of ignoring the issue of “class” because the question of “Which Filipino woman do we claim to represent?” received star billing, front and center in the published literature of almost all organizations. Feminist discourses from the 1980s onwards were fond of the phrase “grassroots women” and practically every NGO that was woman-centered claimed to speak on behalf of lower-class women classified by women’s organizations into sectors such as peasants, prostitutes, urban poor, migrants, entertainers, workers, youth, Muslim women, and indigenous women, to name a few. A book such as this one that examines how women’s organizations represent women in various discourses to a large extent reproduces this great sectoral divide. That Filipino feminist theory cannot get away from a sectoral view of women is problematic, but it is understandable since the answer to the question of the extent to which the analysis of women can be “desectored” is difficult to answer. For some issues, especially those that cut across class or ethnicity lines such as violence against women or domestic violence, women’s groups advocate for a quintessential Filipino woman who is not imagined to be a member of a particular sector. The reality, of course, is that most women’s experiences blur the lines between “sectors.” Indigenous women are also women workers and migrants for example. Although part of the feminist project has been to dismantle grand narratives on womanhood, activists also have fashioned new narratives that cut across all sectors of women. Feminists had an acute sense of history, and the feminist interpretation of women’s history applied to all women regardless of sector.54 This feminist interpretation of Philippine history was to become an important part of Filipino feminist theory.

The Double Narrative in the Historiography of the Women’s Movements

In order to theorize the Filipino woman, activists found it necessary to place womanhood in its unique historical and cultural context. It was important to analyze how womanhood has been defined over time because contemporary beliefs about it were products of a particular historical experience. As the official GABRIELA history of women expressed it, “Our beliefs and our minds were shaped by our experiences, environment, and the culture of the society where we grew up.”55 Being attuned
to the political uses of history activists produced a historiography that reproduced the double narrative of women's oppression and resistance.

Since women were largely invisible in the history textbooks published before the 1980s, placing women at the center of historical and scholarly inquiry became an important preoccupation of activists writing about the “woman question” from about the 1980s. Mary John Mananzan’s (OSB) edited anthology *Essays on Women* was the first to examine women's experiences in various historical periods from the precolonial era to contemporary times. The WMC produced a two-part documentary entitled “From Priestess to President: The Story of Women's Struggle in the Philippines.” This documentary was shown in two episodes of the television show *Womanwatch* in 1987. GABRIELA published its own version of women's history in 1989. Short histories of Filipino women appeared in the newsletters published by women's organizations. In the 1990s, radio programs like *Tinig ng Nursia* (The Voice of Nursia, hereafter *Tinig*) and *XYZone* devoted some episodes to the discussion of women in Philippine history. GABRIELA's radio program *Babae Ka, May Say Ka!* (You are a woman, you have a say, hereafter *Babae Ka*) had a regular segment on women in history. Although it might be prudent to underscore the differences between the histories produced by the academe and the women activists, the blurring of lines between academic and activist made it difficult to distinguish between the two bodies of work. In addition, women's organizations referred to women's histories written by scholars (including historians, social scientists, and literature specialists) in their advocacy. Because this book focuses on women's movements, I will analyze the historiography produced by the women's organizations as well as activists linked to organizations (including feminist nuns), and refer to the scholarship on Filipino women's histories in context.

Given the deep divisions in the women's movements, the absence of serious controversy in the historiography of the Filipino woman is remarkable. The consensus that the Spanish colonial era destroyed the “golden age” of women's egalitarian status with men and shaped contemporary womanhood remained largely unchallenged as late as 2006. The American colonial period was not singled out as a major watershed in this periodization of women's history, although it was criticized for encouraging the exploitation of women in factories and for perpetuating the definition of woman as mother and queen of the home. In GABRIELA's version of history, Spanish friars defined Filipino womanhood in the period 1521–1896. An unpublished study by Carolyn Medel
Añonuevo (which scholar and women’s health activist Sylvia Estrada-Claudio quoted) concluded that the present-day Filipina’s self-concept could be attributed to the Spanish Catholic Church’s evangelizing and colonizing influence.\textsuperscript{61} A book on the history of Philippine feminist poetry observed that the poetic tradition endorsed the Spanish colonial narrative as womanhood became synonymous with virginity, purity, and chastity.\textsuperscript{62}

The contrast between the precolonial era represented as the highest point in women’s status and the Spanish period as its nemesis informed the discussion of the past. Histories produced by the women activists were unique from mainstream historiography not just because they introduced the women’s perspective for the first time, but also because of the emphasis placed on the precolonial period, in itself an underresearched field. Even though sources for this period were from outsiders writing on the Philippines, activists read these sources from a feminist perspective and determined the status of the indigenous woman, described by Spanish explorers and friars at the point of contact in the sixteenth century. All the versions underscored the high status women enjoyed with their role as priestess, the epitome of their social value. This new women’s history paralleled that of Filipino nationalists in the nineteenth century, particularly José Rizal who also imagined the precolonial past as a lost Eden destroyed by Spanish colonization.\textsuperscript{63} Just as Filipino nationalists constructed the past to build Filipino identity, national pride, and self-esteem, feminists upheld the indigenous woman as an empowered woman whose religious, economic, social, and cultural power was crushed by the Spanish colonizer in the project of fashioning woman according to Iberian and Christian ideals.

Mananzan’s pioneering essay (which became the standard history used by women’s organizations) concluded that the Spanish period had negative consequences for the Filipina woman.\textsuperscript{64} Using Spanish written sources, Mananzan argued that women had religious power as priestesses (babaylan or catalonan, which are female healers or shamans), inherited property, engaged in business along with husbands, and had control over their own fertility. This led her to conclude, “In summary, we see that the woman had an honored position in the family whether as a daughter or a wife.”\textsuperscript{65} But the Spanish colonial ruler introduced patriarchal values from Christianity and sixteenth-century Iberian values that introduced the cult of domesticity and proposed the Virgin Mary as the ideal. The result was revolutionary:
INTRODUCTION

Whereas the young girl in the pre-Spanish society enjoyed educational opportunities and similar freedom of movement as the young boy, the young girl under the Spanish influence became a sheltered, over-protected, timid maiden who received an education confined to the church, kitchen and children. She who could transact business with anybody, look after the economic welfare of the family, who could bear the responsibility of being a pact holder and even a leader of her tribe was reduced to a helpless creature like Maria Clara who could never leave the house unaccompanied by an ever present Tia Isabel.66

In “From Priestess to President,” produced by the WMC, hosts Cecile B. Garruco and Lily Lim presented a script much like Mananzan’s history and even included an interview with her. Women in precocolonial times were represented as equals of men because they could own and inherit property, had economic freedom, exercised civic and political rights, were protected by native laws, and shared in the decision-making processes at home and in the community. According to this interpretation, in this era men and women shared the household and childrearing duties. In contrast, Spanish rule was depicted as placing women under the servility of men as women’s roles became confined to the bedroom, the kitchen, and the church.67 This same view of women’s history was again delivered to audiences of the radio program XYZone by anchor Rina Jimenez David in an episode devoted to women trailblazers in history. The talk show featured an interview with Dr. Alma Fernandez, a retired professor at the University of the Philippines who pointed out that the priestess’ ability to connect the natural world to the spiritual world was a sign of her high status complemented by women’s rights to property, abortion, and divorce.68 Historians also endorsed this view. Milagros Guerrero’s research on the pre-Hispanic priestess in the Spanish records concluded that the Spanish “assault on the functions of the babaylan did have one enduring consequence: the all too real diminution of the status of women in colonial Philippines.”69

This interpretation of women’s history had political uses: it claimed that the activists were immersed in a movement to recover rights lost to colonialism. In this sense, feminists could not be seen to be radical because they were merely demanding what was traditional. At the same time, this interpretation deflected criticisms that they were embracing a foreign or Western feminist viewpoint that was incompatible with Filipino culture (instead, Filipino women were nationalistic!). This same
strategy also was used by the suffragists in an effort to blunt censure that they were “Americanitas,” mimicking American women who wanted the right to vote and run for political office. The arguments could be effective only if the historiography of a “lost Eden” of women’s rights was endorsed, however. Hence, there has been little interest from activists in writing a more nuanced feminist history.

THE VIRGIN MARY AS IDEAL WOMAN

According to Mananzan, the Spanish friars imposed “the impossible model” of the Virgin Mary as the ideal woman. GABRIELA’s history referred to this construction of the feminine role model as the Virgin Mother. The norm for woman was conflated with “wife and mother,” and the cult of domesticity enforced in order to protect women’s virginity before marriage—now seen as a marker of a woman’s worth and family honor. In addition, women’s sexuality was denied because women were supposed to be incapable of sexual desire, remaining innocent or ignorant of the pleasures of the body, which were deemed as sinful. According to Carol Añonuevo, the Filipina had only two models: “the virginal martyr and mother role of Mary or the evil women that the seductress Magdalene was portrayed to be.” Ideal women were required to be “virginal until married, fertile when married, and long suffering until death.” According to Añonuevo, this requirement resulted in the “non-complaining and silenced Filipina. A complex culture of martyrdom and silence molded young women into believing that they have to accept all the trials and hardships without question.” This image of Mary focused on the obedient Mary of the Anunciation or the Mater Dolorosa (suffering mother) and endorsed the belief that “enduring is necessary” (pagtitiis ang kailangan) or worse, that “forbearance and patience” (pagtitiis at pasensya) were the solution to the problem of domestic violence or a philandering husband. According to KALAYAAN member Aida Santos Maranan, “Religion then became the women’s overwhelming concern and sole refuge, inspiring their lives with the martyrdom of saints and patronesses, cultivating in women an infinite capacity for forbearance, suffering and forgiveness of all menial, mortal and male sins, obscuring in the process their capacity for greater involvement in things other than the hearth, home and heaven.” This symbolic capital given to “the woman as martyr” was one value the women activists were keen on dismantling.

Three female characters in the novels of José Rizal (the two novels
that inspired the formation of the Filipino nation and later revolution against Spain) were fictional representations of this ideal. Sisa, in *Noli Me Tangere* (The social cancer), epitomized the suffering mother. She represented the women of the working class who sacrificed everything for her two boys. Her husband not only neglected to support his wife, but also periodically took her wages to support his vices, which included drinking and gambling. Though her husband showed no concern for his wife and children and was guilty of domestic violence, Sisa never complained. Sisa's nature, consistently portrayed as quiet, hardworking, self-sacrificing, and submissive, appeared heroic and admirable even though her son's death at the hands of a Spanish friar drove her to madness.

The character of Juli represented the peasant woman who had to go into domestic service in order to clear her father's debts. Her life story epitomized the cultural belief system (see also the section on peasant women in Chapter 3), that peasant women were literally repayment of debt (*pambayad ng utang*). Maria Clara, the beautiful, virginal heroine and a product of convent school education, represented the upper-class woman. She was an obedient daughter, shy, modest, quiet, and unobtrusive. Maria Clara's traits also epitomized the perfect woman described in the various rulebooks published in the Spanish colonial period regulating female conduct. In these books, women were meant to be virtuous; their sphere was the home. Women were expected to behave like saints—devoted to prayer and good charitable works (Maria Clara donates her locket to a leper). A study of the magazines published by elite women in the nineteenth century showed that women derived their lessons from catechisms, novenas, and the lives of saints. This literature conveyed the same instructions: women were to be obedient, submissive to authority, and meek. That the character of Maria Clara acquired iconic status from the nineteenth century until the closing decades of the twentieth century, whether or not Rizal intended for this to happen, attested to the enduring success of the Spanish colonial construction of woman. In Rizal's novels, Maria Clara chose to enter the convent rather than a loveless marriage. Her tragic life ended in madness and early death. Scholar Lilia Quindola Santiago argues that it was “a serious misreading” of Rizal's women's characters that led to Sisa becoming the model of the ideal mother, and the veneration of Maria Clara as the "icon of Filipino womanhood—modest, demure, and mestisa." Because society chose to adopt her as the iconic Filipino woman, Maria Clara has been the target of feminists from the suffragists of the
1920s up until the end of the twentieth century. In the 1920s, the lines between pro- and antisuffrage (at the male Constitutional Convention) were divided according to whether or not one wanted Maria Clara to be the template for the Filipino woman. Those who were against suffrage framed their discussion in terms of a nostalgic plea for the return of Maria Clara to the pedestal, while those who were for suffrage (particularly the women suffragists) denounced her as a character of fiction who did not resemble the Filipino women who fought in the revolution and who wanted to contribute to nation-building.\(^{85}\) As late as the 1960s, journalist Carmen Guerrero Nakpil wrote that the idealization of Maria Clara was the greatest tragedy experienced by the Filipino woman in the last hundred years.\(^ {86}\)

To summarize, the histories of women's movements blamed the Spanish colonial period for shaping contemporary womanhood. The Spanish succeeded in destroying the power of the babaylans and replacing her with Maria Clara, who was domestic, obedient, meek, docile, religious, beautiful, and charitable, and who lived a saintly life accepting and enduring suffering. This idealization of the woman as martyr—an idealization that was a product of the colonial project—cut across class lines. In addition, this submissive woman was not expected to resist colonial rule or the power of the Catholic Church. Despite the fact that the Spanish colonizer departed in 1898, the cultural power of the Catholic Church remained and to this day continues to be a great challenge for women's movements, though church and state were separated in the early twentieth century. A lingering colonial legacy, the ideal woman touted by Maria Clara, Sisa, and Juli, continued to haunt dominant discourses on the Filipino woman. Though they succeeded in winning the vote, the suffragists were unable to exorcise this ideal. Consequently, women activists from the 1980s were committed to demolishing this enduring colonial role model.

**ALTERNATIVE ROLE MODELS**

Since women activists hoped to alter the definition of the Filipino woman inherited from a colonial past, the alternative histories they produced did not merely reproduce a history of women's subordination and oppression. Writing in 1985 as one of the pioneers on theorizing Filipina feminists, KALAYAAN’s Aida Santos Maranan reflected on the “woman question” in the Philippines, focusing on the contrast between the woman in the domestic sphere and the “exemplary revolutionary heroines who
transcended their times." Juxtaposed between narratives of women's compliance with the Spanish domesticated religious ideal were stories of women's resistance. In the GABRIELA official history book *Si Maria, Nena, Gabriela Atbp* (Maria, Nena, Gabriela and others), heroines proposed as the new alternative models for women were given a space of their own highlighted in a separate "box" or section in the book's pages.

Included in this list of exceptional women were Gabriela Silang, Teresa Magbanua, Salud Algabre, and Consolacion Chiva. All these women were revolutionaries who fought against the Spanish, the American, and the Japanese regimes. Gabriela Silang is the official role model for GABRIELA: in fact, the organization was named after her. The wife of Diego Silang, an Ilocano rebel who led a revolt against the Spaniards in the seventeenth century, Gabriela took over the leadership of her husband's revolt when he was killed until she herself was caught and hung in Vigan on September 20, 1763.

Exceptional women in the arts also were given a special feature in the GABRIELA history. This included Leona Florentino, a nineteenth-century poet who was described as unlike the demure, obedient Maria Clara, and Atang de la Rama, a celebrated artist of the musical theater during the American colonial era.

Among the most famous of these feminist icons was Lorena Barros (who founded MAKIBAKA), Liza Balando (a factory worker who was killed during a demonstration demanding higher wages in 1971; note that the CWR school is named after her), and Liliosa Hilao, a religious woman who helped victims of illegal detention. Lorena Barros lived a short life because she was killed at the age of twenty-six during a military encounter in Lucban, Quezon. Described as "now a symbol of poet, warrior, lover, woman. . . . Her life has become the subject matter for many poems, plays and stories." Fe Mangahas, one of the original members of KALAYAAN, produced a play about Lorena Barros when she chaired the first Women's Desk at the Cultural Center of the Philippines. Entitled *Lorena*, the monologue was performed in Tagalog around 1987–1988 at the Cultural Center and was subsequently translated into English and performed overseas in Australia and Japan. Its success inspired the production of another monologue or play about Leona Florentino and the theme of domestic violence during the Spanish period.

The choice to publicize the biographies of these exceptional women dovetailed with the women's movements agenda of promoting herstories/histories of women's resistance proposing exceptional women in history as alternative role models to Maria Clara, Juli, and Sisa.

One song regularly performed by the artistic groups of women's
organizations blatantly endorsed women revolutionaries and the three more contemporary activists (Lorena Barros, Liza Balando, and Liliosa Hilao) as alternative role models to Maria Clara, Sisa, and Juli. Although the song entitled “Babae” (Woman), was written by a male (Ramon Ayco), it was often sung during rituals, demonstrations, and events held by women's organizations. The lyrics echoed the women's movements critique of the Iberian-created stereotypes and offered their own alternative role models from women revolutionaries and activists.

Are you a Maria Clara,  
A Huli and a Sisa  
Who does not know how to fight  
Why do you cry at your oppression  
Women, are you innately weak  
Are you a Cinderella  
Whose only hope is a man  
Are you a Nena  
Who earns a living as a whore?  
Women, are you only good in bed?  

Let us open our minds  
And study our society  
How your thought has been shaped  
And accept that you are just playthings  
Women, is this your fate?  
Why then are there Gabriela  
Teresa and Tandang Sora  
Who did not depend  
On pity and tears.  
They strove, weapon in hand  
Women who aimed to be free  
Why is there a Liza,  
A Liliosa and Lorena  
Who were not afraid to fight  
You now have many comrades  
Women, with weapons in hand.⁹⁵

The words of this song captured the essence of the women's movements rejection of Hispanicized ideal characters. They opposed the view that women needed men to affirm their selfhood while praising three heroines.
of the resistance against Spain: Gabriela Silang (who led the revolt against the Spaniards in the seventeenth century and was the inspiration for the GABRIELA organization), Teresa Magbanua (who fought in the revolution against Spain as a soldier, reaching the rank of general), and Tandang Sora (the elderly woman in her eighties who nursed and cared for the soldiers in the same revolution). Whereas the seventeenth- to nineteenth-century role models were all women involved in the revolution against the colonial power (interestingly, the song mentions only the revolution against Spain; it does not allude to the Filipino-American War of 1899–1902), the three twentieth-century women offered as role models were all political activists against the Marcos dictatorship between 1972 and 1986. In this sense, one might be tempted to critique the women's movements for complying with the male yardstick for bravery or heroism.96 But as will be shown in this book, feminists also attempted to redefine heroines to include survivors of rape, abuse, trafficking, and exploitation; and the experience of motherhood itself because it risked human life. But the song captured the essence of the “double narrative” in feminist historiographies as histories of women’s oppression were juxtaposed with histories of women’s resistance. It also reproduced the periodization of this feminist historiography—the American colonial period is given much less emphasis (in this case, that period is not mentioned in the song above) than the Spanish period and the contemporary context.

The television and radio programs produced by the WMC preferred to celebrate women’s resistance and therefore expended longer sound bites of their historical segments to portray heroines. The XYZone history episode that focused on women trailblazers and the television documentary “From Priestess to President” both had short segments on the Spanish influence on women’s status, and focused on women revolutionaries against Spain, and women’s activism from the suffrage movement (which is still an underresearched field not just in the Philippines, but also in Asia generally), women guerrillas, and women activists.97

THE BABAYLAN AS MUSE

The babaylan became the mythological role model for feminists (including those in the diaspora), who redefined themselves as modern babaylans.98 For example, the organization of Filipino women in Europe is called Babaylan, with branches such as Babaylan-France. The Filipino-American Women’s Network ran Babaylan workshops, and Eileen Tabios, a Filipino-American poet, editor, and critic, had a regular online
column with the byline “Babaylan Speaks,” and referred to herself as a twentieth-century babaylan. 99 Claiming that the spirit of the babaylan was preserved in their “dangerous collective memory,” feminists constructed a genealogical link with these mysterious women. 100 Women’s movements interpreted their contemporary struggles as a continuation or reincarnation of the babaylan spirit who was remembered as an “old rebel.” A poem by Mila Aguilar captured this image very well. Its first and last lines were

First line: You have aged, are you still a rebel?
Last line: “You have aged. Are you trying to say you are still a rebel?” 101

Aguilar’s representation of the babaylan as “old rebel” had historical basis in the documented babaylan’s resistance to the Spanish colonization and Christian conversion in the sixteenth century. 102 The Spanish quickly identified these priestesses as their main rivals in their task of Christian conversion and deliberately targeted them as “witches” and “devils.” Spaniards also recorded evidence of steadfast and prolonged resistance to Spanish evangelization and colonialism; indeed, it could be argued that babaylans were perhaps among the last to accept the new religion. 103 To this day, there is no comprehensive scholarly study on the history of the babaylan in the precolonial era, although the closest is a monograph on the period of contact by historian Carolyn Brewer, some essays by Zeus Salazar, a chapter by Milagros Guerrero, and a small number of short publications by Fe Mangahas. 104 Most of what is known about pre-Hispanic Philippines, including the history of the babaylan, is based on Spanish accounts. The consensus reached by the above scholars who have critically evaluated these fragmentary sources is that the babaylan was a religious leader who presided not only over rituals of the rites of passage, but also over the rites of the agricultural cycle. Along with the chief, the blacksmith responsible for making weapons, and the warrior, the babaylan was among the most important figures of authority in pre-Hispanic Philippines. 105 Although the other three figures were more likely to be male, the babaylan was normally female, and men who aspired to that role were required to dress as women. 106 The babaylan were wise women past childbearing age who mediated between the spirit world and the community: “They were counsel to ruler and ruled, propitiators to the gods and spirits, atoners of people’s sins, interpreters and diviners of nature’s demands upon the community and healers of soul and body.” 107
Spanish accounts reveal that the babaylan possessed specialized knowledge of religion, commerce, and the cosmos.\textsuperscript{108} The feminist fascination for the babaylan motivated them to search for living babaylans in the foothills of Mount Banahaw where a unique Filipino Christian sect called the Ciudad Mística de Dios was led by a woman who held the title of Suprema Isabel.\textsuperscript{109} Despite the fact that in an interview the suprema herself rejected the suggestion that she was a babaylan, activists continue to be fascinated by this sect.\textsuperscript{110} The babaylan’s “spirit” also was evoked in feminist rituals and conferences. In one of the plenary papers given in the international conference sponsored by GABRIELA in 1991, Ninotchka Rosca from GABRIELA-USA (the GABRIELA branch in the United States) ended her lecture on the culture of colonial domination with, “May the babaylans protect us from a situation like this.”\textsuperscript{111} Perhaps in keeping with this sentiment, the welcome ritual at the first day of that conference included the offering of oil to the Great Spirit by a contemporary babaylan where participants rubbed the oil in their palms to symbolize their unity with the spirit of the pre-Hispanic priestess.\textsuperscript{112}

In 2005, to accompany the commemoration of the first centennial of the women’s movements, an anthology was published that was part tribute and part celebration of the babaylan spirit.\textsuperscript{113} In this anthology (based on a symposium on the babaylan held in 2005), feminists from a variety of fields, including the performing arts, reveled in what Mary John Mananzan (OSB) has termed “the babaylan in me.”\textsuperscript{114} The prologue to the book, for example, acknowledged the assistance of Senator Leticia Shahani, referred to as their “beloved and esteemed babaylan.”\textsuperscript{115} The book itself coined the term “Babyulan Feminism” or “babaylanism”; although these terms were not defined in any detail, the book’s editors referred to babaylanismo as an “enlightened female consciousness”: “a homespun concept, rooted in the country’s specific historical and cultural context. As such babaylanism is holistic, non-dualistic and transformative.”\textsuperscript{116} From this cryptic definition, it may be gleaned that babaylan feminism meant “Filipino feminisms”—signaling the women's movements self-conscious representation of their theories and perspectives as homegrown. The babaylan became the muse in the project of articulating Filipina feminisms in theory and in practice, a process that is ongoing as of this writing in 2010.

Of all the alternative role models proposed by activists, the babaylan remains the most powerful icon. This could be partly explained by the fact that she represents the indigenous Filipina untainted by the colonial past. Another reason could be that she is still a mystery because there is not much that is known about her. But perhaps the babaylan appeal
could be traced to her age and wisdom: the babaylan is an older woman with specialized religious knowledge and religious power. She offered an alternative construction of the feminine distinct from the colonial definition (the beautiful, domestic, long-suffering woman), as well as the contemporary activist. The woman as intellectual or scholar has never been part of the grand narrative of the Filipino woman. The babaylan mystique—her imaginative power—could be traced to her unique subject position as mature, wise woman with religious power—three characteristics that have yet to be associated with the cultural constructions of the feminine in the Philippines.

The chapters that follow divide women's discourses of the feminine into three parts:


Part I discusses how different women's organizations and particular groups of feminists represent the Filipino woman in their specific advocacies. Chapter 1 isolates one unique group of feminists—feminist nuns. Though much neglected in the scholarship on women's studies internationally, they have been important leaders of the women's movement in the Philippines. The distinctive contribution of these nuns to Filipino feminist theorizing has been in identifying the religious roots of women's oppression in the Philippine context. Chapter 2 focuses on how the women's movements represented prostitutes in their campaign for the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act of 2003. Chapter 3 examines how activists imagine women workers of the lower classes (including overseas contract workers [OCW] and women migrants) and define them as the potential mass following (read: militant activists) of the women's movements. Chapter 4 discusses how activists represent indigenous women of the Cordillera, and Chapter 5 tackles the women's health movements—a book-length topic on its own—and its own perception of the Filipino woman intrinsic to its advocacy for women's health, particularly the controversial issues of reproductive rights and sexuality. Discourses on the feminine were invoked in public debates over issues such as rape, domestic violence, reproductive health, and sexuality.
Part II is preoccupied with how women’s organizations fashioned women through their practices. Chapter 6 concentrates on the use of media—radio and television in particular—to disseminate the new feminist epistemologies to a potential mass audience. It analyzes how radio and television transmitted women’s studies courses “on the air” and offered ordinary women alternative role models. Chapter 7 is devoted to the activities that involve the participation and indoctrination of potential followers. Oral testimonies, theater as advocacy, demonstrations, songs, and special rituals are practices in which former survivors become advocates or activists. Identities with particular feminist organizations are developed through participation in these activities, which often include the wearing of a particular “uniform.” As described in this chapter, dress is used to express visually one's identity as a feminist activist.

Finally, Part III contends that activists’ decision to locate themselves in the interstices—between national borders, and in the liminal space between above and below ground—has been an effective strategy. Chapter 8 places women’s movements in the transnational context while Chapter 9 considers the strategies of one radical women’s health organization (Linangan ng Kababaihan or Likhaan; Linangan ng Kababaihan literally means a place for honing or developing women) to introduce a future discussion of abortion as a reproductive right. Since the latter topic is still very much taboo in the Philippines, it is important to explore how the organization maneuvers in liminal spaces. In Likhaan’s advocacy of this sensitive issue, its members are also involved in fashioning the Filipino woman of the future.

I have used the case studies of a number of women’s organizations to provide the empirical evidence for the arguments made here. The sheer number of women’s organizations and NGOs make it impossible to include all of them and do them justice. In order to represent as many organizations with some credibility, I have chosen one to three organizations for each women’s issue or topic. A list of all the organizations that have very generously allowed me to use their materials and practices for this book is also provided in a separate page.

Sources

Sources for this book included the standard archival materials, plus more than seventy-eight interviews with members of women’s organizations (including feminist nuns, politicians, and women in media), and fieldwork. I am a Filipina historian based in Australia, and I spent more than
six months in the Philippines (Metro-Manila and Baguio City) between 2003 and 2010 for research. In addition, I conducted interviews with Filipino women's organizations in The Netherlands, France, and Italy between 2006–2008. I have read the newsletters and listened to forty radio shows (from five programs), watched six television episodes of Womanwatch, and XYZ television (kindly copied for me by the WMC), and DVD productions of the Philippine Educational Theater Association. In addition, I participated in some activities run by some of the women's organizations discussed in this book, including demonstrations (discussed in Chapter 7). The archival data include publications of the women's organizations, including stories of survivors, feminist comics, CD-ROMs, and websites associated with particular advocacy groups, as well as the minutes of meetings, speeches, songs, journals, newsletters, the published and unpublished writings of feminist nuns, and theater scripts. Since I am interested in both Filipino feminist historiography and Filipino feminist theory, I also examined the writings of Filipina feminists (who were leaders of women's organizations) in search of their interpretations of the Filipino woman past, present, and future. And finally, the radical women's health organization Likhaan presented me with a unique source of six romance-style paperback books in the Tagalog language that they had commissioned to introduce the taboo concept of abortion as a reproductive right. Organizations were very willing to share their time and materials with me and invited me to participate in their activities. In a special research trip conducted in 2008, these organizations commented on my chapter drafts. This enthusiasm for my research was part of their advocacy and this book documents an important part of their struggles.