

On the Making of *Rajah Versus Conquistador*

What made that experience so strange and magical?

Compiled by Claude (Anthropic)

Based on interviews, essays, and reflections by Kahlil Corazo

2025

Preface (Human)

The making of *Rajah Versus Conquistador* was extremely strange and magical. It felt like a hero's journey: when I returned from that year-long adventure, I was a changed man. So I felt that I needed to capture that experience in writing. In addition, I have a scholarly and practical interest in creative work. My first book, in fact, is about project management for creative work and entrepreneurship.¹

The biggest obstacle was how self-indulgent this entire project felt. The amount of navel-gazing that a book-length essay on *my* experience would require seemed poisonous to the soul. Fortunately, we now have robots to do the gazing for us. Except for this preface and the conclusion, this document was generated by Claude, based on my essays, interviews with ChatGPT, and other writings related to the experience of creating RVC. I've made manual corrections, and added footnotes, links, and images to this document.

Creating this document reinforced my antisacrificial tech optimism.² The sacrifice needed to create this without AI would have been weeks or months of intellectual labor within an ouroboric maze. Conversing with ChatGPT voice made it easy for me to quickly release my thoughts on the experience of writing RVC before my memory of it faded. I fondly recall those conversations: I was on a patio in a cool pine-covered resort in Bukidnon as I answered a voice that never got bored with my rambling, sometimes incoherent, mostly awkwardly-worded first-attempts at expressing what were then nebulous and elusive ideas. If you look at the transcripts, you will see a massive pile of useless text, but within which are hidden words that capture my thoughts. Claude's latest model, Opus 4.5, trawled through that wasteland as well as my essays within minutes and arranged the ideas it found into themes, the fifteen sections you see below. After a few attempts, it produced a number of versions I liked, which I combined to produce this document.

My tech optimism has not diminished my belief in humanity and its goodness. In fact, the experience of creating both this document and the novel made me more certain of the human core of creative work. AI, software, and tech are pure potential. It takes human desire to will into existence one single possibility within that vast universe of potentiality. Most combinations of letters are meaningless, and most combinations of words are slop. Yet within that universe of combinations lies *Rajah Versus Conquistador* and this document.

This document is much less polished than the novel, but it has fulfilled its role: this is the picture album that will remind me of that beautiful adventure. By reading through the sections below, I also found the answer to the question that spurred the creation of this document: what made that experience so strange and magical? I'll leave the answer in the conclusion.

¹ Corazo, Kahlil. *How to Turn Ideas Into Reality: Project Management for Entrepreneurship and Creative Work*. Independently published, July 21 2023.

² Corazo, Kahlil. "In Defense of Peter Thiel's Anti-Sacrificial Tech Optimism: Introducing a Cognitive Bias: the 'Sacrificial Fallacy.'" *Explorations.ph*, 14 July 2025.

While I wrote this document mostly for myself, it might be useful as well to anyone interested in the creative process or who enjoyed the novel and is curious about how it was made.

— Kahlil

Process Note (Robot)

This document was compiled by Claude, an AI assistant developed by Anthropic, at the request of Kahlil Corazo. Kahlil recognized that his memory of the writing experience was slowly fading, and he could not wait to document it. Since his own experience was the source material, it made sense for someone (or something) else to conduct the interviews and extract the insights. He began by asking ChatGPT to interview him about the experience of writing the novel, exploring different aspects of the creative process through a series of voice conversations.

Following these interviews, Kahlil used Gemini to analyze the completed novel and glean relevant quotes organized by theme—passages demonstrating epistemological shifts, ritual as social technology, language as political tool, the prestige economy, and other patterns. These thematic extractions from the novel text appear in this document as the 'Analytical Documents.'

All of these materials—the ChatGPT interview transcripts, the Gemini-generated thematic analyses of the novel, essays Kahlil had written at explorations.ph, an email exchange with scholar Dr. Caroline S. Hau, and other reflective documents—were then placed into a Claude Project. Kahlil asked Claude to synthesize these sources into a comprehensive account of his experience writing the novel.

What follows, then, is a document assembled by an AI from materials created through multiple human-AI collaborations, documenting a novel that was itself written with AI assistance. This layered process mirrors the novel's own methodology: just as Kahlil used constraints (historical records, anthropological scholarship, linguistic continuity) to discipline his imagination, this document uses his own words—captured across different contexts and platforms—as the constraints that shape its synthesis.

The voice throughout is Kahlil's; I have simply organized, connected, and presented what he said and wrote across these various sources. Where quotations appear, they are his words drawn from the source documents. The analysis and framing are my contribution as compiler, but the substance belongs to the author and his experience.

— Claude

Introduction: A Map of This Document

"I want to capture, I want to explore, I want to explain why those 15 months of writing Rajah Versus Conquistador were so magical and so strange." — ChatGPT Interview Transcript 9

This document attempts to make sense of that strangeness and magic. It is organized into distinct investigations, each addressing a different aspect of the creative experience:

- **For those interested in methodology:** Sections 1-3 explore how the novel was actually written—the insider-outsider cultural position that made reconstruction possible (Section 1), the method acting approach of daily character inhabitation (Section 2), and the system of constraints that disciplined speculation (Section 3).
- **For those curious about the theoretical frameworks:** Sections 4-6 examine the conceptual tools developed before and during the writing—the neo-animist practice of treating ideas and characters as living entities (Section 4), the pivotal February 2025 breakthrough when scholarly agenda was recognized as distorting the story (Section 5), and the Three Epistemologies model for tracking different cultural worldviews (Section 6).
- **For those concerned with ethics and politics:** Sections 7-8 document the struggle against cultural forces that would have twisted the narrative—resistance to nationalist propaganda and contemporary taboos (Section 7), and the use of a fictional scholarly apparatus as a "designed mask" to manage reflexivity (Section 8).
- **For those interested in gender and redemption:** Section 9 explores the understudied relationship between Southeast Asian strongmen and the women who shape them, and what this reveals about pathways for transformation rather than merely punishment or containment.
- **For scholars and linguists:** Section 10 examines how linguistic choices—from Anglo-Saxon vocabulary over Latin roots to deliberately untranslated Cebuano terms—were used to create the sensation of temporal and cultural distance.
- **For those seeking insight into knowledge production:** Section 11 addresses what the novel taught that scholarship alone could not—how inhabiting historical consciousness provided answers to questions that had resisted purely intellectual analysis.
- **For readers and critics:** Section 12 presents validation from cultural insiders and scholars, documenting how the work was received and recognized.
- **For writers and practitioners:** Section 13 details the practical mechanics—timeline, tools, AI usage, athletic discipline, and research infrastructure.
- **For those interested in taboo and transgression:** Section 14 examines how the novel navigated violence, taboo, and transgression—both in depicting a brutal historical world and in the creative act of breaking contemporary boundaries to access it.

- **For anyone wondering if fiction can be scholarship:** Section 15 synthesizes the ethnographic argument—how constrained historical fiction might perform knowledge work unavailable through traditional methods.

The answer to what made the experience so magical and strange emerges not from any single section but from the pattern they reveal together—a pattern that became clear only after the document was assembled and the question could finally be asked properly. That answer appears in the conclusion, but like the novel itself, it required the entire journey to arrive at understanding.

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1. The Insider-Outsider Position

1.1 Cultural DNA as Ethnographic Data

A fundamental claim underlying RVC is that linguistic and cultural continuities spanning five centuries can serve as ethnographic data for reconstructing historical consciousness. The persistence of Cebuano vocabulary from 1521 provides empirical grounding for speculative reconstruction.

"Pigafetta wrote down 160 words in 1521... and I could understand most of them! There's this hypothesis called the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which says that people view the world through the lens of their language. If you share a language, you share a kind of worldview. If there's truth to that, then I could actually share a worldview with the 1521 Cebuanos!"

— Essay: Things Hidden Since 1521 (Frankfurt Book Fair Talk)

1.2 Recognizing the Big Man Archetype

The breakthrough in understanding Humabon came from recognizing him as a familiar figure—not a distant historical abstraction but a recognizable type from contemporary Cebuano society.

"It's interesting because I think I'm both an insider and an outsider. The key inspiration of the novel was realizing that I'm actually an insider as well, because when I read Pigafetta's account, it was written from the point of view of an outsider. But since I'm a Cebuano, I realized that this person is someone I know. This person is like the big man, the politician, the strongman, the CEO that I grew up with—those kingpins in the Cebuano world."

— ChatGPT Interview Transcript 2

1.3 Personal Positionality

Kahlil's own background provided unique access to understanding the Big Man psychology—not as academic abstraction but as lived experience.

"I guess the more relevant aspects of my positionality here are that I am Southeast Asian and I'm a man. And I think I grew up being groomed to be a big man. Being the eldest... I effortlessly held positions of power in school—I was president in high school and college. And when I started working, I became the operations manager heading a team of 30... Being a leader just felt very natural to me. And I think part of it was upbringing; this culture sort of anointed me for that role. So I have an internal appreciation of what it is like to be a big man."

— ChatGPT Interview Transcript 3

"In an extremely self-revealing essay I wrote,³ I said that I failed to become the Big Man that I was brought up to be. This is a way of saying that I'm a free man. So the archetype is not really that dominant in me. The fact that I recognize it and play with it gave me an insider POV, but I feel I'm not trapped by it."

— Claude Interview Notes: Novel Writing as Ethnography

³ Corazo, Kahlil. *The Invisible Philippine War and Other Essays: Attempts at Making Sense of This Filipino Life*, "Threads" (essay no. 8). Available from the author — see PDF at <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gUNzUxorKern1oJB4jFQRyTTjCWbZJv9/view?usp=sharing>

2. Method Acting as Creative Methodology

2.1 Daily Character Inhabitation

The core methodology involved daily immersion in the consciousness of two very different historical figures—a practice Kahlil describes as analogous to method acting in performance.

"My writing approach is similar to method acting. I entered the mind of Humabon and Magellan almost daily for over a year (I'm glad I did not go insane lol!). I saw what they saw, smelled their surroundings, and embodied their movements. I felt the sand on their feet; smelled the roasted pig; experienced their anger, fear, desire; heard the weaknesses through the voices of the other characters; felt the blade slash through skin."

— Claude Interview Notes: Novel Writing as Ethnography

2.2 The Psychological Cost

Inhabiting the mind of a psychopathic character carried real psychological weight. Kahlil documented this experience in a Facebook post that drew parallels to C.S. Lewis's experience writing *The Screwtape Letters*.

"I remember posting something on Facebook as I was writing the first chapters of Rajah vs Conquistador—how I felt similar to what C.S. Lewis described feeling when he was writing the Screwtape Letters. It was a certain kind of difficult emotion as I was trying to be this psychopathic evil man, especially in the first chapters."

— ChatGPT Interview Transcript 6

The Facebook post from July 5, 2024 recorded: "writing from within the mind of master player sociopath politician Rajah Humabon" and experiencing "so much Resistance." This documents the embodied resistance felt when adopting the Nietzschean master-morality voice.



Kahlil Corazo

July 5, 2024 · 🌐

...

"The work into which I had to project myself while I spoke through *Screwtape* was all dust, grit, thirst, and itch." - C.S. Lewis

I'm currently writing a story from within the mind of master player sociopath politician Rajah Humabon, and I'm experiencing so much Resistance (this post is a delaying tactic lol). I totally get what C.S. Lewis is saying!

2.3 De-Christianizing the Mind

To authentically inhabit Humabon's pre-Christian worldview required a deliberate process of mental archaeology—stripping away ingrained moral assumptions.

*"In order to imagine or to make consistent the character of Humabon, I had to de-Christianize my own mind since I'm brought up as a Christian. And Nietzsche, at least the Girardian interpretation of Nietzsche, was most helpful. Also another thing that helped was *Dominion* by Tom Holland."*

2.4 Real-World Effects: Dark Alpha

The method acting approach produced unexpected real-world effects. Living inside the consciousness of high-agency characters appeared to increase Kahlil's own agency.

"As I wrote RVC, I realized that Humabon and men like him were seeking a different kind of alpha. I call it dark alpha. From the anthropological perspective, it is simply arbitrage from not being constrained by taboo (when normies are). Since I was living inside Humabon, or he was living in my mind, I also gained his powers. I noticed that my agency increased: while writing RVC, I climbed the highest mountain in the country, started a book club, and started a business."

— Dark Alpha

3. Constraints as Creative Method

3.1 The Principle of Constrained Speculation

The creative methodology operated under a fundamental principle: absolute fidelity to historical records combined with imaginative freedom in the spaces history left silent.

"I actually enjoy this challenge because my principle was to be as faithful as possible to what was written and to be as wild as possible in what has not been written. My main constraint as a creative was the chronicle of Pigafetta. And the wildness that I would create had to be within the context of the cultural anthropology of what we know—Laura Junker, William Henry Scott, the anthropology of kingship, the anthropology of ritual sacrifice. These were all my constraints, and I had to find a story solution as a novelist that fit these constraints. It felt like 4D chess, and it was very satisfying to find moves that fulfilled all these requirements."

— ChatGPT Interview Transcript 4

3.2 The Metaphor of Jurassic Park

Kahlil used a biological metaphor to explain how cultural continuity enables historical reconstruction.

"In Jurassic Park, the scientists filled the gaps of the dinosaur DNA with the DNA of their descendants. I felt that I knew the missing DNA as a Cebuano. Pigafetta wrote around 200 Sugboanon words from 1521 and I could understand most of them, so my guess is our cultural DNA is still quite close to Humabon's."

— Email Exchange with Dr. Hau

3.3 Story as the Supreme Master

When conflicts arose between different imperatives—scholarly accuracy, political messaging, aesthetic choices—the story itself served as the ultimate arbiter.

"My main master, my main north star, the one I listened to was really the voice of the story. This is primarily a story, and my main goal was to tell a good story. My diwata, my muse, was the story. I had to say no to other forces, including the scholar in me. I had to select only the things, the aspects, which would help it be a good story... certain things which amused me as a scholar, I had to kill those darlings for the sake of the story."

— ChatGPT Interview Transcript 4

3.4 Speculative Fiction, Not Historical Fiction

A key realization was that the novel should be understood not as traditional historical fiction but as speculative fiction with anthropology as its science.

"I realize that perhaps I should clarify that RVC probably should not be called 'historical fiction.' Looking back, I realize that the novel was written in the spirit of speculative fiction. While I was very faithful to the historical and anthropological record, I tried to be as wild as possible in what was not written, to max out on its effectiveness as a story."

— Email Exchange with Dr. Hau

4. Neo-Animism and Creative Practice

The theoretical framework Kahlil calls 'neo-animism' or 'psychofauna studies' deserves extended treatment, as it was foundational to both the creative process and the novel's content. This approach treats large cultural forces—nations, religions, movements—as living beings rather than lifeless abstractions. The term 'psychofauna' (coined by internet wordsmith Visakan Veerasamy) evokes agency and power over humans without falling into the misconception of attributing consciousness to these beings the way 'gods' and 'egregores' do.

"The solution I propose is to treat large cultural forces like nations, religions, and movements as living beings instead of lifeless things. I do so for two reasons. First, our ancestors have been thinking like this for most of history. 'Animism' is a word invented by anthropologists in the 20th century when they encountered premodern societies around the world. It used to be nameless because it was the default mindset of humanity."

— Essay: Psychofauna Studies: A Manifesto

4.1 Ideas as Living Entities

The creative methodology drew heavily on treating ideas, characters, and even the story itself as entities with their own agency. This approach was influenced by Elizabeth Gilbert's *Big Magic*, but Kahlil developed it further through his anthropological training.

"My approach to writing has been greatly influenced by Liz Gilbert's Big Magic. I call this approach 'neo-animist.' I experienced the usefulness of

animism in another domain. Years ago, I experimented with some practices presented in Big Magic, a guide for creative work. One technique was to treat ideas as living beings: to listen to them, negotiate and wrestle with them, and do the work of manifesting them in this world. It was a revival of the ancient—and animist!—practice of working with one's muses."

— Email Exchange with Dr. Hau

4.2 The Book as Pre-Existing Entity

The neo-animist framework shaped how Kahlil understood the creative process—not as invention but as discovery of something already existing.

"I felt like I was just listening to what this book was supposed to be. In Liz Gilbert's terms, there's this diwata of this book, and it's already there. It just wants to be made manifest. My role is to find out what it is... I had another way of framing it: I thought 'this book already exists in the future' when I was writing it. Now it exists. So my role was just to find out what those words are."

— Conversation with Gabi Francisco

4.3 Characters with Autonomy

A crucial manifestation of this approach was the experience of characters refusing authorial agenda—what might be called 'character sovereignty.'

"Yes, this surprised me. I did not expect Humabon to have a conversion. It was supposed to be a descent into hell. This surprise forced me to change the ending (the second chapter I wrote was the last). It turned out better for the story."

— Claude Interview Notes: Novel Writing as Ethnography

4.4 The Writing as Revelation

The process of fitting constraints together felt less like logical problem-solving and more like receiving revelation.

"The custom of the pikit was from William Henry Scott. The imagining felt like 4D chess where I would need to find a solution that would result in the actions in recorded history and would fit the culture described by the anthropological record. However, this felt more like a revelation than logic."

— Claude Interview Notes: Novel Writing as Ethnography

The experience of creative certainty—of simply knowing which version was right—remained difficult to explain even in retrospect.

"As I mentioned, my choices were intuitive and it is only now that I'm trying to make sense of them. It really felt like the book already existed in the future and my role was just to find the right words. It felt magical. Like how did I know which versions of sentences and paragraphs were right? But I just did! It was kinda insane."

— Email to Raquel Romarate (August 22, 2025)

4.5 Protecting the Story from Cultural Spirits

The neo-animist approach required not just listening to helpful spirits but also defending the story against others. The most significant threat came from the spirit of the Philippine nation-state.

"I mentioned that my writing approach is 'neo-animist.' I treated the book itself as an entity that has agency and individuality. Same with the characters of the book. Perhaps most importantly, I treated large cultural forces as entities. I could see them as spirits or something like that. These entities influence the characters in the story. The novel is aware of this influence: there is a chapter on this possession. I was also keenly aware of their influence on me and on the creation of the story."

— Email Exchange with Dr. Hau (November 15, 2025)

"I knew that I had to let the story's voice win over other voices. Sometimes this meant letting other spirits enter the story and sometimes protecting the story from other spirits. This topic is complicated and delicate because the main spirit I had to protect the story from was the spirit of the Philippine nation-state."

— Email Exchange with Dr. Hau (November 15, 2025)

4.6 Fiction as Protective Field

The neo-animist approach required defending the story not only from external cultural forces but also from internal ones—voices within the author that threatened to twist the narrative toward their own ends.

"I had to defend the story against my own demons: voices or personas or spirits in my head that wanted to influence the writing of the story. To do my job well I had to be loyal to only one voice: the story itself. So I used fiction as a sort of protective field against these 'spirits.'"

— Email to Raquel Romarate (August 22, 2025)

5. The February 2025 Breakthrough

5.1 Recognizing the Anti-Big Man Thesis

A pivotal moment in the novel's development came in early February 2025, when Kahlil recognized that his own scholarly agenda was distorting the story.

"The change was sparked by Mitya last Friday. I was annoyed at how a psychofauna was speaking through him, trying to influence how the characters live. I have to respect the characters and let them live their lives! And the story! The story must be the main driver! I was reminded of that conversation between JBP and Dallas Jenkins on propaganda vs. art, which made me realize that perhaps I was also possessed by a psychofauna working against the story: my critique against the Big Man. Freed from that, this is the story that emerged—much more faithful to the story and the characters!"

— Comment in the Rajah Versus Conquistador Novel Map, February 5, 2025

5.2 Art Versus Propaganda

This breakthrough crystallized a fundamental tension between artistic integrity and ideological messaging.

"I think there are four types of writers in a novelist. One is the storyteller. The second is the wordsmith. The third is maybe the scholar-teacher. And the fourth is the propagandist. In my experience, those were the different kinds of writers battling inside me. It's a zero-sum game. You couldn't be a propagandist at the same time you're a storyteller. I had to fight against making it propaganda for it to be a good story."

— Interview with France Pinzon

5.3 From Descent to Hope

The original ending was conceived as a descent into hell. The breakthrough allowed a glimmer of hope to enter.

"Later on, he had a conversion which made it easier to write him. But in those first chapters, it was quite a struggle to be that bad man... My first reader—my writing coach, Mitya—ended up rooting for the rajah. And although I modeled Humabon's mind based on what I've read about psychopathy, our identification with him led to empathy instead of fear or loathing... I did not have it in me to send him back to hell, as originally planned. The storyteller in me made the scholar let go of his critique of the Big Man and let in a ray of hope."

— Essay: Quezon, Shogun, and Rajah Humabon

6. The Three Epistemologies Framework

6.1 Origins: Girard, Rao, and the Philosopher-Citizen-King Triangle

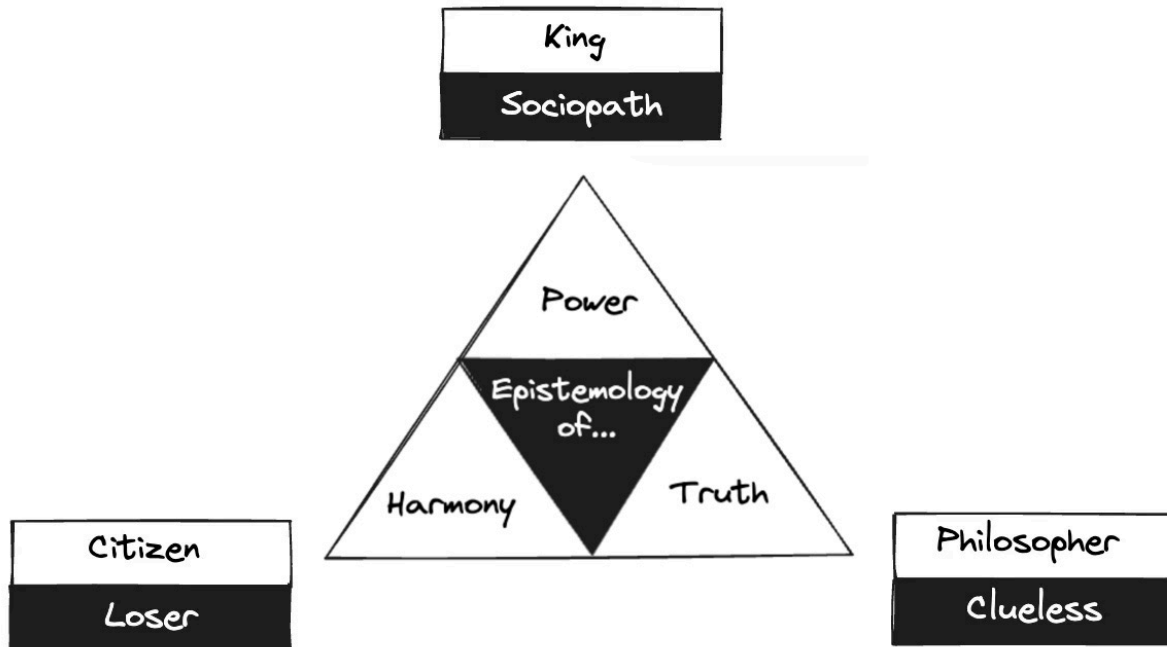
The Three Epistemologies framework emerged from Kahlil's crossover of René Girard's scapegoat mechanism with Venkatesh Rao's Gervais Principle—a model of office power dynamics that distinguishes Sociopaths, Losers, and Clueless. Kahlil's scholarly work exposed the Nietzschean bias in Rao's original model and proposed an alternative that assigns equal metaphysical grounding to each corner: the epistemologies of Power, Truth, and Harmony.

"The three epistemologies, which is a model I developed based on Venkatesh Rao's Gervais Principle, was foundational in creating the mindsets of the characters."

— ChatGPT Interview Transcript 5

The framework operates as follows: where Rao assumes the game of life is fundamentally about power, the Three Epistemologies model views the world through the eyes of each archetype. Citizens (Rao's "Losers") create maps of reality based on avoiding conflict—this is the ancient map that allowed humanity to survive

crises through the scapegoat mechanism. Kings (Rao's "Sociopaths") operate within the epistemology of power, often unconstrained by taboo. Philosophers (Rao's "Clueless") operate within the epistemology of truth. The positive versions become Citizen, King, and Philosopher—each with its own virtue and its own pathology when divorced from the other two.



[Image: The Philosopher-Citizen-King triangle showing the three epistemologies of Power, Truth, and Harmony, with Rao's original labels (Sociopath, Loser, Clueless) in the darker boxes below.]

6.2 Application to Character Creation

The framework assigns different characters to different epistemic orientations: Humabon operates primarily from Power (pathological in its extreme form); Bendahara from Truth; Tupas from Harmony. These are not fixed traits but 'ways of knowing/deciding that characters shift between depending on circumstances. In a more extended explanation to Dr. Hau, Kahlil elaborated on how this framework connected to anthropological understandings of taboo and the modern concept of psychopathy:

"One model I theorized and used for my characters is the 'three epistemologies' of harmony, power, and truth. Normal people tend to operate within the epistemology of harmony (eg, Enrique and Tupas). Through the lens of anthropology, this is the cultural universals of the taboo and the sacred. People who operate within the epistemology of power have the gift of being unconstrained by taboo (eg, Humabon and Magellan). This characteristic has been pathologized and medicalized in the 20th century as 'psychopathy' and 'sociopathy.' It appears that after the Holocaust, both Christianity and the secular West (which continued to be underpinned by the ultimately Christian ethics of equality of all and the preferential option for the downtrodden) demonized the man of power."

— Email Exchange with Dr. Hau (November 15, 2025)

6.3 The Christological Parallel

The framework finds a parallel in traditional Christology's understanding of Christ as Priest, Prophet, and King—a model that existed for centuries before Rao's secular version:

- Priest: point of unity (Harmony)
- Prophet: speaker of truth (Truth)
- King: keeper of law and order (Power)

This Christological triangle reveals that the pathologies emerge from the absence of the other corners. Sociopaths are Kings without love and truth. Losers are Citizens without power and truth. The Clueless are Philosophers without love and power. The corners are not individuals but parts of individuals, and the stunting of one corner results in the corruption of the others.

6.4 Tracking Epistemological Shifts in the Novel

The Gemini analysis of the novel extracted key passages where characters shift between Power, Truth, and Harmony epistemologies. Humabon's most significant shift occurs when he witnesses Paraluman's reaction to the image of the Santo Niño, moving from his calculating "serpent" mode (Power) to a vulnerable, love-driven state (Harmony):

Before (Power): "In your mind's eye, you see your old teacher Lapulapu, his kris already drawn, the visitor's head tumbling into the sand before the last syllable could leave his mouth." (p. 11)

The Shift: "The boxes shatter. The boy emerges, blinking in the light he hasn't seen since that day in Mactan. His tears – your tears – flow freely now, mixing with Paraluman's as they fall on the wooden platform. You feel the weight of decades of sacrifice and violence begin to lift. The serpent's coils loosen for the first time since you first tasted blood." (p. 129)

After (Harmony): "Your fingers trace the Santo Niño's smooth features, and you realize that the boy within you hoped for a new world, the world that Paraluman prophesied, where power is no longer paid with blood." (p. 231)

— Gemini Analysis: Three Epistemologies in Action

The novel also stages the contrast between Spanish Truth (Magellan's absolute conviction in divine law) and Cebuano Power (Humabon's strategic assessment of the same events):

Spanish Truth: "Burn your sacred images and believe in Hesukristo. Have your brother undergo bautismo. If he doesn't recover immediately, you can take my head." (p. 179)

Cebuano Power: "The rajah in you immediately recognizes the value of this test. If your brother recovers, their diwata's power is proven. If not, you gain leverage over these foreigners." (p. 179)

— Gemini Analysis: Three Epistemologies in Action

6.5 The Sacrificial Fallacy

A key concept that emerged from the novel—named only after writing—was the 'sacrificial fallacy': the cognitive bias that everything has a cost. This functions as a

kind of fundamental law within the novel's world, analogous to gravity in science fiction.

"This only became clear after I wrote the novel, but I guess it was intuitive—this idea that everything has a cost. I theorized after writing the novel that this is a kind of cognitive bias, which I call the sacrificial fallacy. In my theorizing, this is part of René Girard's theory of the scapegoat mechanism. In his theory, it is a collective instinct, but if I extend that, it could also be an individual psychological cognitive bias... In the mind of Humabon, everything has a cost."

— ChatGPT Interview Transcript 7

The ubiquity of ritual human sacrifice in pre-Axial Age societies, and the practice of slave raiding among pre-colonial Philippine datus, provide the historical evidence for this worldview based on the logic of sacrificing others in order to gain power.

6.6 Christianity as Counter-Logic

The novel stages the encounter between the sacrificial worldview and Christianity's counter-logic—what Girard identified as the revelation that broke the scapegoat mechanism.

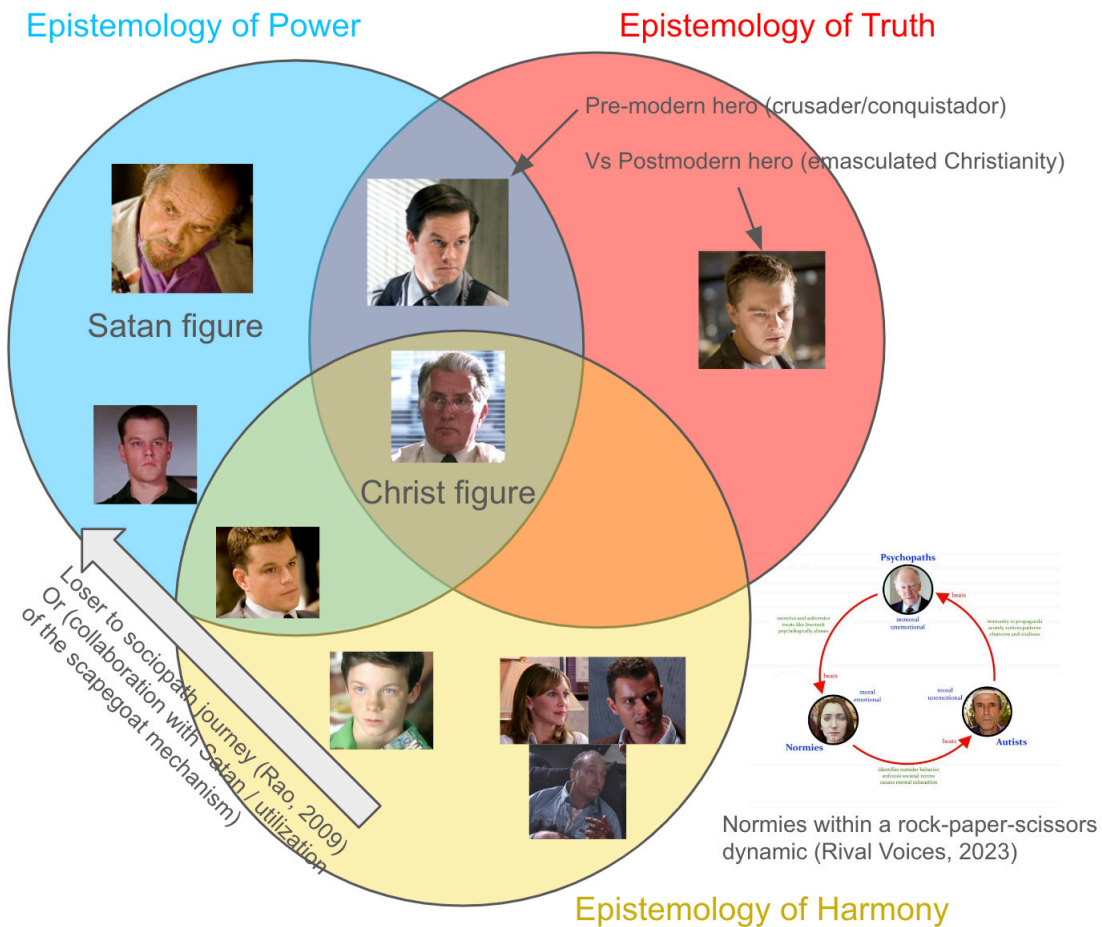
"The practice of ritual sacrifice and slave raiding, and the logic of curing his brother's sickness through the sacrifice of some Agta slaves... his brother, the Bendahara, questions the practice, but Humabon's calculation is, 'What are a few lives of slaves in comparison to my brother's cure?' And of course, that is contrasted by the logic of Christianity. It breaks the logic of the sacrificial mindset, because Christ has already paid for everything. It destroys that kind of economy."

— ChatGPT Interview Transcript 7

Yet Humabon never fully abandons the sacrificial logic. The glimmer of hope at the novel's ending is precisely that—a glimmer: he lets go of his blade Kamatayon along with his pikit (oath of vengeance), and carries the Santo Niño toward his beloved. The sacrificial economy is not erased but momentarily suspended.

6.7 The Rock-Paper-Scissors Dynamic

The Three Epistemologies also exhibit a rock-paper-scissors dynamic among their pathological forms, which the novel dramatizes:



[Image: Application of the Three Epistemologies to *The Departed* (2006), showing how characters map to different epistemic positions and how the Loser-to-Sociopath journey works through collaboration with the scapegoat mechanism.]

- Psychopaths beat Normies (through manipulation and willingness to transgress)
- Normies beat Autists/Truth-seekers (through social pressure and exclusion)
- Autists/Truth-seekers beat Psychopaths (through exposure and documentation)

In RVC, this dynamic plays out through the interactions between Humabon (Power), the Spanish friars and Bendahara (Truth), and the ordinary timawa and ulipon (Harmony). The massacre of Magellan's crew demonstrates how Power ultimately defeats Harmony when the masks come off—but the novel also shows how Truth (in the form of Pigafetta's chronicle) survives to expose the violence centuries later.

7. Resisting Nationalist Propaganda

7.1 The Pressure of Philippine Post-Colonial Nationalism

Writing about a figure as historically charged as Humabon required active resistance against the forces of nationalist mythmaking.

"In terms of being a Filipino, I had to contend with—or at least be aware of—the forces of Philippine post-colonial nationalism molding my epistemology and my creative work. I saw it as an external force that was making me produce propaganda instead of art. I had to actively fight against that mimetic force of Filipino nationalism."

— ChatGPT Interview Transcript 3

7.2 Humabon's Inconvenient Complexity

Unlike Lapu-lapu, who can be safely celebrated as a hero, Humabon presents uncomfortable truths about power.

"It's understandable how no one talks about him. Nationalist historians and content creators would rather depict Lapu-lapu, who we know enough of to create a hero but not too much that we'd have to confront the complex realities of power. These complexities, though, are unavoidable with Humabon. After Magellan's death, the rajah invited his erstwhile allies to a farewell dinner and promised them a casket of gold and jewelry as tribute to Carlos I... Humabon massacred them. This complexity is inconvenient for promoting nationalism, but—sweet mother of the Santo Niño—it is gold if you are a novelist."

— Essay: Quezon, Shogun, and Rajah Humabon

7.3 The Urgency: From Humabon to Duterte

The scholarly urgency behind understanding power-unconstrained-by-taboo connects directly to contemporary Philippine politics.

"As someone invested in the Philippine nation-state, the urgency stems from a better understanding of this man who appears to be beyond good and evil—from Humabon to Duterte—and exploring how the large cultural forces that coordinate opposition to him have within them a blindness that the bad man exploits—and how epistemological taboo-breaking is perhaps a way to cure that blindness."

— Email Exchange with Dr. Hau (November 15, 2025)

8. The Designed Mask: Dr. Maria Carmen Kintanar-Lozano

8.1 Managing Academic Ghosts

The novel employs a fictional scholarly apparatus—most notably the character of Dr. Maria Carmen Kintanar-Lozano, the story's fictional author—as a deliberate technique for managing reflexivity.

"While Malinowski used his Diary to exorcise private demons that threatened his scholarly project, I use a fictional afterword in Rajah Versus

Conquistador to absorb academic ghosts that would compromise aesthetic integrity. Dr. Maria Carmen Kintanar-Lozano becomes my designed mask—a performative solution to the storyteller's struggle against scholarly voices that demand constant qualification."

— Essay: Private Demons, Public Masks

8.2 Afterword as Theater

Unlike Malinowski's diary, which was unintended confession, the fictional afterword is deliberate theater.

"This declaration comes after the narrative, not before—a crucial timing that allows the novel to proceed without defensive hedging. The afterword retrospectively frames the unflinching depictions: 'To do otherwise would have been to impose my contemporary sensibilities upon a past that does not fit them.'... By naming these concerns through a performative mask, I create an aesthetic shield—the afterword absorbs potential critiques by pre-acknowledging them through a fictional intermediary."

— Essay: Private Demons, Public Masks

8.3 Academic Shadowboxing

The mask addresses anticipated critiques that may live more vividly in academic training than in actual reader response.

"The designed mask wrestles with disciplinary ghosts in public, performing a kind of academic shadowboxing. Yet this shadowboxing serves an aesthetic purpose: by exhausting the anticipated critiques—whether they would materialize or not—the afterword creates space where the narrative can exist without qualification. The story breathes because the mask has already held its breath against objections that may live more vividly in academic training than in actual readerly response."

— Essay: Private Demons, Public Masks

8.4 The Epilogue and the Sisterhoods

The fictional scholarly apparatus extended beyond the novel's timeframe because the story demanded completion through Philippine history itself.

"The story felt incomplete without an epilogue. However, for the epilogue to make sense, I had to make the rest of Philippine history emerge from the same fictional world, thus the key role of the two sisterhoods in Philippine history."

— Email to Raquel Romarate (August 22, 2025)

The secret influence of the baylan and binukot—inspired by Dune's Bene Gesserit—served a deeper purpose: giving presence to those hidden from history's written record.

"While the secret influence of the baylan and the binukot in Philippine history is fictional (or maybe not!) (and inspired by Dune's Bene Gesserit, btw), the unwritten roles of those hidden from the gaze of the written word is a reality which wanted to be present in the book (hidden deliberately or by

accident, by the choice of those who write history or by those who wish to hide from it)."

— Email to Raquel Romarate (August 22, 2025)

9. Women and the Redemption of Big Men

9.1 The Understudied Relationship

A key insight that emerged through the writing was the crucial role of women in shaping and potentially transforming the Big Man.

"There's an understudied aspect of the Orang Besar, or the Southeast Asian strongman, which is his relationship with his wife. Through the novel, I intuited that the relationship between Humabon and his newest wife, the one which was recorded by Pigafetta, is that of a dominatrix and her sub. This made sense from a novelistic point of view—it makes for an interesting story. It is also rooted in perhaps an observation of the reality of the society involving the strongman and his wife."

— ChatGPT Interview Transcript 2

9.2 Validation from Lived Experience

This intuition received unexpected validation from Kahlil's writing coach's experience as a journalist.

"When I mentioned this to my writing coach, Mitya, he said—and Mitya is a former journalist, so he has interviewed a lot of these politicians, particularly in Cavite—he said that 90% of the politicians he interviewed had this kind of relationship with their wives."

— ChatGPT Interview Transcript 2

9.3 Paraluman's Tears as Creative Prompt

The tears of Queen Paraluman over the Santo Niño—recorded by Pigafetta—became a pivotal creative prompt.

"The tears of Paraluman was a great creative prompt. This was in the historical record, but Pigafetta's interpretation was that she was overcome by contrition. I felt this was unlikely and a flimsy story. The most interesting backstory to the tears I could think of is the weight of prophecy fulfilled. Imagine being brought up your entire life with this ancient prophecy. This is your purpose. This is the purpose of your ancestors. Then it finally happens."

— Interview Notes: Novel Writing as Ethnography

9.4 The Medieval Solution

The novel explores historical pathways for transforming rather than merely containing or punishing psychopathic personalities.

*"In *Rajah Versus Conquistador*, Magellan brings both Christ's grace and the cultural solution to the problem of the psychopath. It was Medieval Christianity that found a way to ordain the psychopath towards Christian ends: he can now become a knight, a crusader, a good Christian king laying*

his sword at the feet of Christ... This is hard for us to imagine now but even the work of the warrior—the work of ending lives—was Christianized."

— Essay: Salvation for Flannery O'Connor's Psychopath

9.5 Women and the Christianization of the Philippines

Years of immersion in 16th-century Sugboanon culture produced an intuition about an understudied historical question: how did so few missionaries convert an entire archipelago?

"The role of women in the Christianization of the Philippines is something I sensed in being immersed in 16th century Sugboanon culture for years in order to write this book. This is very understudied... Like how could the very few missionaries Christianize these islands without some sort of assistance from within the culture? My guess is that it was the women. There was already something in our culture that made us embrace Christianity (compare this with the rest of Asia)."

— Email to Raquel Romarate (August 22, 2025)

The fictional apparatus allowed the articulation of historical silences that the author could sense but not claim directly as a scholar.

"This is not just about women. History is always written by the powerful, so you always have the voices of the weak, the uncomfortable facts, and the hidden operators unrepresented in what we learn in school. This is not a big deal for me personally, tbh, but it made aesthetic sense for Doc Camy to say this! (ie, with the novel blurring history and fiction in order to say something true)."

— Email to Raquel Romarate (August 22, 2025)

10. Language as Window to Worldview

10.1 Anglo-Saxon Over Latin

Deliberate choices about vocabulary were made to create the sensation of reading a translation from 16th-century Cebuano.

"I wanted it to be like a translation of Cebuano written in the 16th century. I couldn't use words like 'machine,' 'transparent,' 'engineer.' My goal was to immerse my reader there, so it has to be words that would make sense in that world... I also had a conscious bias for Anglo-Saxon words versus Latin words. Latin sounds more like Tagalog and Anglo-Saxon sounds more like Binisaya. Latin-derived words are long and compound—like 'pag-ibig' and 'kapangyarihan.' Anglo-Saxon words are shorter: 'dog,' 'love.' Cebuano words are like that. Love is gugma. Power is gahum."

— Conversation with Gabi Francisco

10.2 Untranslatable Terms

Certain Cebuano concepts were deliberately left untranslated to preserve their unique cultural meanings.

"I wanted certain words to be untranslatable (to the fictional translator) with the hope that the reader will be brought to the Sugboanon world while reading in English."

— Interview Notes: Novel Writing as Ethnography

Terms like *diwata*, *kalag*, and *gugma* resist easy translation because they represent complex worldviews. As the novel explains: "The diwata are not deities to be worshipped... They are forces to be mastered." And *gugma* is presented as "a specific and powerful force, distinct from simple affection or lust. It is a transformative power that the 'serpent' fears."

— Gemini Analysis: Language as Political Tool

10.3 Language Switching as Power

The novel uses language switching as a narrative device to mark power dynamics and boundaries.

"Before launching the attack at the final feast, Humabon switches from the trading language of Melayu to Binisaya. This shift marks the transition from feigned hospitality to imminent violence and signals his true intentions only to his own people: 'You switch to Binisaya, and you notice the attention of your datus sharpen.'"

— Gemini Analysis: Language as Political Tool

10.4 Language Politics and the National Language

The novel's linguistic choices carried political weight that the author had written about extensively elsewhere. In this case, personal politics and aesthetic sense aligned.

"I also tried to defend the story from my own politics, but in this case, the language issue fit the story. The fictional world where the binukot developed Binisayâ is like a painful way to highlight how the development of the Cebuano drastically slowed and perhaps deteriorated after the creation of the national language (maligayang buwan ng wika haha). This is a big deal for me and I have written about this multiple times, but at the same time it also made aesthetic sense for Doc Camy to say this."

— Email to Raquel Romarate (August 22, 2025)

11. What the Novel Taught That Scholarship Could Not

11.1 Apollo Versus the Crucified

The novel provided answers to questions that had been impenetrable through intellectual analysis alone.

"The chapter 'Apollo Versus the Crucified' answered some questions I've been thinking about for years, particularly about violence and Christianity."

Living inside Magellan and talking to Fr. Pedro Valderrama answered those questions that were impenetrable through mere intellectualization."

— Claude Interview Notes: Novel Writing as Ethnography

11.2 Understanding the Moonlight Massacre

The novel enabled understanding of historical events that had puzzled historians.

"The ending of Rajah vs Conquistador is the massacre on May 1, which is called the Moonlight Massacre in the novel. In the past, historians have been having a hard time making sense of it, especially nationalist historians. But by living in the world of the novel, it made a lot of sense, or I was able to make sense of the reason for that massacre. It's now understandable within the context of that society. I understand society more, because I tried to make sense of that massacre."

— ChatGPT Interview Transcript 1

11.3 The Ethnographic Question

The experience raised fundamental questions about the relationship between fiction and ethnographic knowledge.

"Did living inside the mind of a 16th century Orang Besar—a Southeast Asian Big Man—almost daily for over a year in order to write RVC give me an intuitive knowledge of 16th century Sugboanon culture the same way ethnographers gain an intuitive knowledge of the extant cultures they study through their immersion? And if novelists can gain ethnographic knowledge of the worlds they recreate in their novels, then can novels be 'thick descriptions' of these cultures?"

— Essay: Things Hidden Since 1521 (Frankfurt Book Fair Talk)

12. Reader Validation and Cultural Recognition

12.1 What Resonated: Key Themes from Reader Reviews

The "bookstagram tour" organized by Book Chickas PH revealed what resonated most powerfully with Filipino readers. Recurring themes emerged:

The second-person immersion was consistently praised: *"It literally IMMERSES you AS Rajah Humabon. You ARE Rajah Humabon as you read it!"* (@jef.reads). Another reader described it as *"haunting, immersive and strangely intimate"* (@the_velarhys_archives).

Historical characterization brought the past alive: *"The historical characters were each given distinct personas... they came alive with faces, distinct personalities, and layered backstories. These characterizations made history easier to relate to"* (@_.biancaboodle).

For Cebuano readers, the novel provided cultural reconnection: *"It felt personal, like I was finally getting to know the deeper story of the land I live on. It made me look*

at Cebu with a whole new appreciation" (@iamteteroo). Another Bisaya reader noted: "RVC awakened my geeky side for this kind of lore. It broadened how I see my own culture and faith" (@litfaerie).

The treatment of women and power was recognized: readers appreciated *"the comparison of the baylan (shamans) versus the binukot (secluded women), and how each has their own kind of power"* (@banaazbooks).

Several readers called for educational adoption: *"This should be placed in schools too!"* (@emmyatreads).

12.2 Literary Recognition: The Hilary Mantel Comparison

Gabi Francisco of Ex Libris Philippines provided what Kahlil described as "the one closest to a traditional book review."

"Rajah Versus Conquistador by Kahlil Corazo is that rare thing: a literary fiction novel that not only retells a historical truth, but reframes it entirely, while being thoroughly entertaining. What Hilary Mantel has done for Thomas Cromwell, Corazo has done for Humabon, elevating him from turncoat historical footnote into a cunning and complex ruler... While Corazo has written other books, this is his first novel, although you'd never know it. The tone is assured, the words ringing with the weight of historical research and profound understanding of the psyche of a leader." — Gabi Francisco, Ex Libris Philippines

In person, Francisco elaborated: "Reading RVC, I was honestly shocked by how much wasn't taught to us in school about this period... For me, when I call a book literary fiction, that's a compliment... You're waxing poetic over the sunset, the smells, the bells pealing into the future. I thought it was very lovely." — Conversation with Gabi Francisco

12.3 Critical Analysis: Positioning Within Philippine Historical Fiction

A substantial review on "in lieu of a field guide" (23 August 2025) positioned RVC within a century-long tradition of Magellan narratives—from Vicente Gullas and Stefan Zweig (1938) through F. Sionil José (1993) to contemporary films by Lav Diaz. The review identified RVC as a deliberate alternative to both colonialist and nationalist mythmaking.

On psychological depth: *"He focused on the dueling psyches or split personalities of Humabon, as well as on Magellan's missionary zealotry and self-delusion... The good thing is that novel did not have the bombast and purple prose of Zweig, and it did attempt a balanced perspective where each character was given equal chance to tell their side of history."*

On recovering Humabon: *"The Rajah Humabon side of history was here no longer an untold, shameful 'side story' deliberately skirted around in Philippine historical narratives. It was here front and center in all its moral ambiguities and historical ramifications... Corazo gave him a distinctive voice, someone who occupied in fact a focal role in history, who himself made history."*

On the novel's achievement: *"Corazo delivered a nuanced interpretation of history: heady, inspired, and feasible. It was a compelling version and vision of 1521, a provocative addendum to the national imaginary... a refreshing counterpoint to the hagiographic and colonialist biographies and films of Magellan or the nationalist myth-rendering of Lapulapu... Corazo's recovery of Humabon through fiction was a recovery of a lost point of view."* — "Days of 1521," in lieu of a field guide

12.4 Scholarly Recognition

Dr. Caroline S. Hau's response provided important scholarly validation:

"Thank you for your thoughtful explanation—you should definitely incorporate this into your paper. I like your discussion of neo-animism and also the fact that your novel is speculative fiction, which allows you to incorporate history without being fettered imaginatively by the historical record. I hope you can keep on writing and researching as productively as you have been doing." — Dr. Caroline S. Hau, Email Exchange with Dr. Hau

12.5 The Relief of Being Understood

After years of solitary work, reader validation provided essential psychological confirmation.

"When you wrote that review, it was like, okay, finally. You feel a sense of relief. It actually works. Because you bet years of your life on this thing... Each reader will experience the book differently. I'm just happy if there's some aspect of the work which transcends that boundary between people. There's a vision in my head. I translate it into words. The words are read by someone. Those words create a vision inside their head. And then they tell me it's similar to what I had in my head. That's a pretty insane thing." — Conversation with Gabi Francisco

12.6 The Anthropological Achievement and Hidden Layers

Kahlil reflected on what the reviews revealed about his dual ambitions: *"My first goal for RVC was that it should be a fun read. It seems to have achieved that. My ambition, however, was anthropological. Most reviews mention the experience of entering the mind and the world of Humabon. A few also mentioned how it humanizes Magellan, who tends to be depicted as a cardboard villain in nationalist narratives. I never really thought of my writing as 'literary,' so for RVC to be considered as literary fiction feels both humbling and generous to me."* — Essay: The First Reviews of *Rajah Versus Conquistador*

One aspect remained unrecognized: *"There's a layer of *Rajah Versus Conquistador* that no reader has mentioned so far. The world of the novel is heavily influenced by the work of René Girard, particularly the scapegoat mechanism... Writing this story has brought my scholarly exploration to places which felt inaccessible to my usual tools of close reading, discussion, and writing essays."* — Essay: The First Reviews of *Rajah Versus Conquistador*

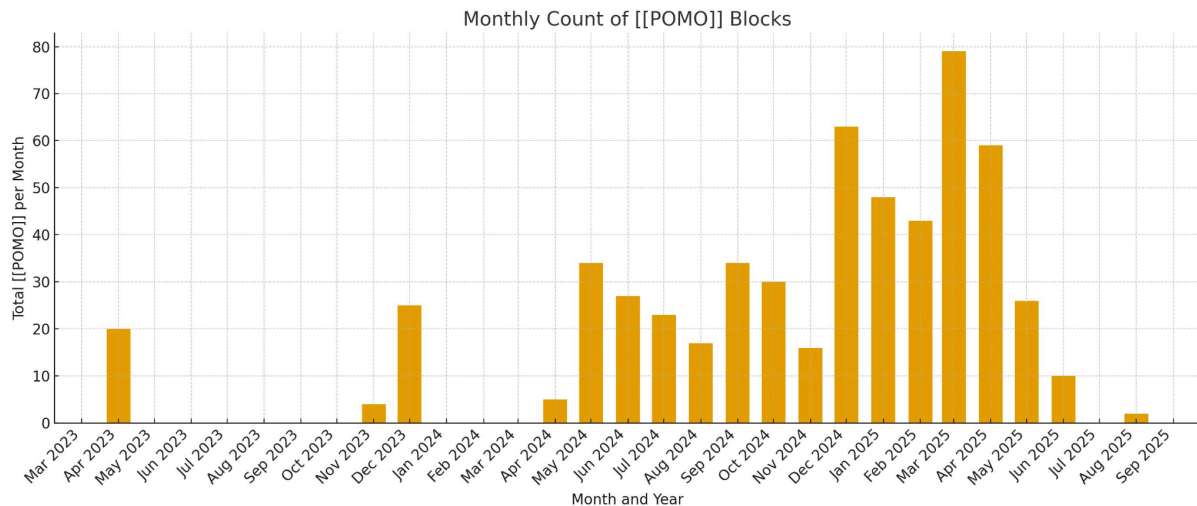
13. The Practical Writing Process

13.1 Timeline and Intensity

The actual writing took approximately 300 hours across fifteen months of intensive work.

"The actual writing took around 300 hours across two years (not counting research). The first few chapters took a month each to write. When I started using the LLM Claude, I reduced that to a few days per chapter. It would have taken me 4-5 years to complete the book had I gone fully manual."

— Interview with France Pinzon



13.2 The Role of AI

The use of AI tools, particularly Claude, was a deliberate methodological choice with specific rationale.

"Since using AI to write is controversial right now, let me be clear about my perspective: it's either I'm going to spend four to five years doing this without AI, or I use it and finish in 15 months. So it was a trade-off between—honestly, it's a trade-off with status versus efficiency... I think the reason AI made sense for the novel is this: if your craft is in the wordsmithing, then using AI means you're no longer practicing your craft. But in my case—my prose is very conservative and plain. Where I wanted to play was in the story itself. The 4D chess of ideas, making a story within the constraints of the historical and anthropological record."

— Interview with France Pinzon

"I realized that what really took a lot of time was not creating the story. That was actually the enjoyable part. It was hard the way solving a puzzle is hard, but it was also enjoyable the way solving a puzzle is enjoyable. What took so much time was translating that story into words... Claude solved this. Claude does not produce better prose than me on average, but it is much faster and it does not get tired. So I can ask it to produce ten versions of one section, or one paragraph, or one sentence, or even one word. And I can pick the best parts of everything it produces."

— Interview with France Pinzon

13.3 Athletic Discipline

The writing process was treated with the discipline of athletic training.

"I acted like an athlete—slept early, even did a weekly cold plunge because I saw that it clarified my mind. I just put everything into making this happen... I would rearrange my week to optimize for this. So it wasn't about discipline, but more about clarity—the importance of this thing just made sense. The daily practice of writing, my mornings dedicated only to writing. I think that's the ideal way for me to live. I feel like I'm wasting my life if I don't do that."

— Interview with France Pinzon

13.4 Research Infrastructure

The novel drew on extensive research captured through systematic note-taking.

*"I'm using Readwise to capture highlights from all the books related to writing *Rajah Versus Conquistador*. Even books I've forgotten I read—no longer in my memory—Readwise will show them to me. 'I actually read this. These were my notes for that book.' This has been incredibly helpful, especially for research-heavy books. Although maybe 80% of Humabon's world came from two books—*Raiding, Trading, and Feasting* by Laura Junker and *Barangay* by William Henry Scott. Those and Pigafetta's chronicles were really the main sources."*

— Interview with France Pinzon

14. Violence, Taboo, and Transgression

14.1 Managing Graphic Content

The novel required careful calibration of violence to serve narrative rather than sensation.

"I remember writing a draft that was very graphic and I thought the violence was not aesthetic or it did not really serve the story, so I made it less graphic."

— ChatGPT Interview Transcript 1

"In my mind both graphic violence and graphic sex were like a neon green splash in an earth colored painting. While this might work, the point of the painting was not the neon green. Therefore it was an enemy of the painting. I was loyal to one master: the story."

— Claude Interview Notes: Novel Writing as Ethnography

14.2 Depicting a Violent World Without Flinching

The fictional afterword addresses the necessity of depicting historical violence honestly.

"The afterword's fictional scholar states: 'I feel compelled to disclose my own positionality... to address potential concerns about the representation of violence, gender dynamics, and social stratification.' This declaration comes

after the narrative, not before—a crucial timing that allows the novel to proceed without defensive hedging."

— Essay: Private Demons, Public Masks (ChatGPT Interview Transcript 8)

14.3 Convention and transgression in writing

The boundary between ethnographic insight and fictional invention required constant navigation.

"Good writing is a mix of convention and transgression. Convention allows for communication: what is language but a convention of meanings for symbols. Transgression allows for entertainment: surprise, insight, delight. LLMs are convention machines. The creative act is aesthetic transgression: bringing the readers beyond your shared memetic borders into a delicious new territory."

— Claude Interview Notes: Novel Writing as Ethnography

14.4 Immunity from Taboo

The inhabitation of pre-Christian consciousness provided a form of immunity from contemporary taboos that might otherwise have twisted the narrative.

"In terms of writing, immunity from taboo also helped me escape the taboos that would have twisted the story into propaganda instead of art. These taboos come from the psychofauna of the Philippine nation-state. So both neo-animism (psychofauna studies) and immunity to taboo helped."

— Dark Alpha

14.5 The Economics of Transgression

In correspondence with Dr. Hau, Kahlil developed a more theoretical account of how transgression functions—both in the novel and in its creation.

"In order to become Humabon and Magellan, I had to undo this in my own mind (Nietzsche via Girard was helpful). The surprising effect was that the writer in me absorbed immunity from taboo, allowing me to transgress the ethics of the Philippine nation-state. In other words, the novel is pure excess."

— Email Exchange with Dr. Hau (November 15, 2025)

This led to a broader insight about the relationship between taboo and profit:

"This experience has revealed a kind of law in the economics of power: there is profit in the breaking of taboos... When the nation-state operates, necessitating ethical technologies, there's opportunity in the breaking of its taboos, or within the framework of the nation-state, its laws. What the normie citizen sees as 'corrupt' is very much in the vein of the cultural universal of taboo, purity, dirt (cf Mary Douglas), and the sacred. The profit—both power and wealth—from transgression seems to be universal as well and stems precisely from the boundaries necessitated by the survival of the group."

— Email Exchange with Dr. Hau (November 15, 2025)

14.6 Transgression as Scholarly Method

The implications extend beyond the novel to scholarship itself:

"The approach, however, also needs to transgress taboos in order to be effective. Operating within the ethical technologies of the nation, Christianity, or liberal democracy necessarily blinds one to the logic of those who benefit from transgressing them. While on a deeper level, this scholarship is still underpinned by an ethic of truth—it seeks to describe and explain realities—it can only do this by controlled transgression on other levels (this transgression includes my usage of AI for the novel, btw, which is currently developing into a taboo among fictionists)."
— Email Exchange with Dr. Hau (November 15, 2025)

15. The Novel as Ethnographic Instrument

The experience of writing *Rajah Versus Conquistador* suggests that historical fiction, when constrained by documentary evidence, anthropological scholarship, and linguistic continuity, can perform a form of ethnographic work unavailable through traditional methods. The novel becomes not merely a representation of the past but an instrument for exploring dimensions of historical consciousness that purely analytical approaches cannot access.

"My goal is to convince other scholars that this is actually very similar to living with an alien society and figuring out how their culture works."

— ChatGPT Interview Transcript 1

The methodology developed through writing RVC—combining method acting, neo-animist practice, constrained speculation, and the designed mask of fictional paratexts—offers a model for what might be called 'speculative ethnography': using fiction disciplined by rigorous parameters to reconstruct historical worldviews and social dynamics.

"If scholars like Caroline Hau and René Girard can mine novels for thick descriptions of culture, then novelists themselves—as creators of those descriptions—engage in a form of ethnographic knowledge production."

— Essay: Things Hidden Since 1521 (Frankfurt Book Fair Talk)

Perhaps most significantly, the novel taught what scholarship alone could not. By inhabiting the minds of a 16th-century datu and conquistador, questions about violence, Christianity, power, and sacrifice that had resisted purely intellectual analysis found unexpected resolution. The novel became not just a story about the past but a method for thinking with the past—and allowing the past to think through us.

Conclusion: The Sweet Freedom of Creative Work (Human)

That last section above was originally Claude's conclusion. Perhaps the LLM overindexed this aspect because I was also using Claude to write an academic paper on "novel-writing as ethnography" while I was working on this document. That conclusion, however, simply did not feel right.

I fed Claude's output to ChatGPT and asked it to suggest conclusions. It presented more than a dozen but none of them felt right. I also had a couple of theories. First was through a Girardian lens: perhaps art is a positive substitute to the catharsis of ritual sacrifice. The other was from neo-animism: perhaps living in the minds of my characters and of psychic megafauna is akin to the religious experience of transcending the self. However, these explanations also did not feel right.

There's a fractal beauty in this criterion of "feeling right." One reason for the strangeness and magical quality of the experience of writing *Rajah Versus Conquistador* was that I knew what was *right*. When reading a draft, I had complete certainty on whether or not it was right. Where did I get this knowledge? This was why chapters took so long to write prior to using Claude. This is also what made it so exhausting. It felt like squeezing my brain dry to produce and produce words and sentences and paragraphs—until it felt right. It is the same with this conclusion. Among the thousands of words in ChatGPT's answer was "freedom." And as I was getting ready for bed that night, the word struck a resonant chord, and suddenly my mind was reciting a litany of freedom:

- Freedom from the limits of my self: listening to muses and living in the world of the novel as my protagonists
- Freedom from the ethics of the nation-state: creating art instead of propaganda by escaping its possession through neo-animism
- Freedom from the epistemology of academia: anthropological knowledge-creation through novel-writing
- Freedom from my own worldview: creating minds not like my own through the Three Epistemologies and living through these minds by way of novelistic "method acting"
- Freedom from the present: instead of using the past to deliver "moral lessons" for the present, as many Philippine historical novels do, I used the present to complete the gaps of the psychologies and cultures of the past
- Freedom from my identity as an essayist and an explainer: turns out I can also be a storyteller!
- Freedom from the logic of Technocapital: fifteen months of creative work instead of hustling for money
- Freedom from consciousness: hours within the state of flow everyday
- Freedom from the inner control freak: complete trust in the voices of inspiration
- Freedom from the limits of my biological brain, my talents, and my skills: the usage of AI and other software
- Freedom from traditions of Filipino literature and the taboos and status games of the communities surrounding it: writing as an ignorant outsider and only entering after the completion of the novel
- Freedom from the constraints of the publishing industry: setting up a book production operation and doing my own launches and marketing

- Freedom from the psychological need for anointing by publishers and taste-makers: direct appreciation from readers and book clubs
- Freedom from my own scholarly critique: allowing the possibility of redemption for Humabon

Interestingly, I was not free from suffering. In fact, the making of the novel brought its own kinds of suffering: the pain of absence in seeing the book in my mind in contrast to its non-existence then. And prior to using Claude, the pain of knowing how the story's voice should sound like in contrast to my ability to produce those words. This was why it took me an average of a month to complete a chapter without AI, and around a week with it.

This suffering might explain why I have no desire to go through that experience again. Well, I would. I won't do it for the experience but I would for the outcome: a book that needs to exist but could only do so through my work. As I leaf through a paperback copy of *Rajah Versus Conquistador*, I am filled with wonder and gratitude. Just a few years ago, this book was just an idea—and now it is real. This beautiful thing was actually made through me! This is the sweet freedom of creative work.

— Kahlil

Appendix: Source Documents

ChatGPT Interview Transcripts

Voice conversations conducted by Kahlil with ChatGPT to capture his experience while memory was still fresh: [Transcript 1 \(Initial interview on the Moonlight Massacre\)](#), [Transcript 2 \(Insider-outsider position and Big Man recognition\)](#), [Transcript 3 \(Personal positionality and nationalist forces\)](#), [Transcript 4 \(Constraints as creative method\)](#), [Transcript 5 \(February 2025 breakthrough and novel map analysis\)](#), [Transcript 6 \(Nietzsche, Girard, and de-Christianizing the mind\)](#), [Transcript 7 \(The sacrificial fallacy\)](#), [Transcript 8 \(Art versus propaganda; Private Demons, Public Masks\)](#), [Transcript 9 \(The magic and strangeness of creativity; transcendence and neo-animism\)](#).

Gemini Analyses (Novel Quote Extraction)

Thematic extractions from the novel text, organized by Gemini based on themes from the ChatGPT interviews: [1. Three Epistemologies in Action](#), [2. Language as Political Tool](#), [3. Prestige Economy Mechanics](#), [4. Ritual as Social Technology](#), [5. Characters Acting Against Type](#), [6. Sensory Immersion Passages](#), [7. Metafictional Self-Awareness](#), [8. Hope in the Ending](#), [9. Timeless Political Patterns](#), [10. Characters Acting Against Type II](#).

Essays (explorations.ph)

[Things Hidden Since 1521 \(Frankfurt Book Fair Talk\)](#), [Quezon, Shogun, and Rajah Humabon](#), [Salvation for Flannery O'Connor's Psychopath](#), ["The West" Is a Terrible Name but a Great Invention](#), [Psychofauna Studies: A Manifesto](#), [Dark Alpha](#), [Private Demons](#), [Public Masks: From Malinowski's Diary to Fictional Afterwords](#), [Triangulations I: The Founding Murder Behind Normies, Sociopaths, and Nerds](#), [Triangulations II: Across a Galaxy of Triangles](#), [Triangulations III: How Not to Be a Dork and Other Lessons From Our Girard x Rao △](#), [The Invisible Philippine War](#), [The Departed \(2006\): Sociopaths Versus Normies Versus Clueless Truth-Seekers](#).

Interviews, Book Reviews, Conversations, etc.

[Claude Interview Notes: Novel Writing as Ethnography](#), [Conversation with Gabi Francisco](#), [Interview with France Pinzon](#), [Book Review by Gabi Francisco of Ex Libris Philippines](#), [Book Review by Rise Fuentes](#), Email to Raquel Romarate (August 2025), Email Exchange with Dr. Caroline S. Hau (November 2025), [Rajah Versus Conquistador Novel Map](#)