

# Revitalizing Philippine Rhetorical Education in the Age of Ineloquence

Oscar T. Serquiña, Jr.  
*University of the Philippines-Diliman*

## ABSTRACT

Rhetorical education in the Philippines is largely rooted in Euro-American ideals of a public speaker and significantly gives high premium to a speaker's communicative competence, linguistic virtuosity, and eloquence. However, this type of education is facing its limits nowadays, especially in light of political leaders in the country—Rodrigo Duterte, Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., and Imee Marcos—who, despite deviating from rhetorical norms and ideals, continuously gain power, authority, and influence in Philippine culture and society. This essay reflects upon the disjuncture between the prescribed rhetorical thought inside the university classroom and the actual rhetorical realities taking place in the country today. It argues for the urgent need not only to rethink the prevailing epistemological foundations and methodological operations of the study of rhetoric, but also to propose other lines of logic in examining less-than-ideal rhetorical agents and practices. It suggests that in order for rhetorical education in the Philippines to remain relevant, it has to move past its highly Western conceptual frameworks, broaden its notion of rhetorical agency, and come up with a vocabulary that can account for the multidimensional capacities, contexts, personalities, and engagements of Filipino speakers.

The Department of Speech Communication and Theatre Arts (DSCTA) of the University of the Philippines Diliman is the foremost institution in the Philippines to teach rhetorical education and emphasize its relevance to both educational and everyday life. The DSCTA's steady set of courses in rhetoric, public speaking, and argumentation and debate crystallizes this argument. It offers a General Education (GE) course, Speech 30: Public Speaking and Persuasion, that underscores the relationship of speeches and speakers to the advancement and flourishing of public life, social communities and, even more broadly, the Philippine nation. In 2018, the DSCTA institutionalized rhetoric as a major strand in its BA Speech Communication program. This move came with the introduction of new undergraduate courses in rhetorical theory (Speech 131) and rhetorical criticism (Speech 132), which complement the longstanding courses of the DSCTA on the history of rhetoric (Speech 130), the techniques of argumentation (Speech 133), the forms of debate and parliamentary procedures (Speech 134), and the rudiments of public speaking (Speech 136). Moreover, the curricular development involved the institution of new courses that underline the link between rhetoric and public opinion (Speech 141), rhetoric and popular culture (Speech 142), and rhetoric and digital technologies (Speech 143).

Over the years, students and faculty members of the DSCTA have produced a sustained body of research in rhetoric. Such studies include analyses of public addresses of political leaders such as Philippine presidents (Ladia, 2022a; Serquiña, 2016; Crisostomo, 2018; Estrada, 2007; Navera, 2003); examinations of the narratives of marginalized groups such as the Filipino comfort women and the victims of Martial Law (Serquiña, 2015; Lemsic, 2023; Palaspas, 2023); studies on protest actions and other kinds of mobilization by various social agents and movements (Ladia, 2022b; Pilario, 2022); and explorations of the songs and other popular productions by Filipino artists and celebrities (De Castro, 2000; Luzuriaga, 2008). Journal articles such as “In Search of a Filipino Rhetoric” by Josefina A. Agravante (1995), former chairperson of the DSCTA and a longtime professor of rhetoric and speech communication, have examined and traced the commonalities among published speeches by an array of Filipinos with the view of sensing the existence of a “Filipino rhetoric” or a “national rhetoric” in the Philippines. Collectively considered, these studies scrutinize various rhetorical agents, textual artifacts, and embodied practices largely for their resonant social discourses, their legibility to public consciousness, and their exemplification of the key tenets underpinning and advocated by the rhetorical tradition. They foreground a variety of persuasive and expressive forms—from speeches to narratives to mass demonstrations to musical performances—as evidence of the diverse and dynamic rhetorical landscape in the Philippines. Additionally, they

bring to light how Filipinos actively enact their rhetorical capacities and agencies, not only through the varied communicative, social, cultural, and political roles they assume, but also through the many interactions and transactions they initiate, structure, and direct significantly through the use of discourse and performance. Even more remarkably, these studies jointly affirm the persistent efforts of Filipino academics and scholars to offer a systematic conceptualization and contextualization of Philippine rhetorical figures, acts, situations, and phenomena.

To be certain, the DSCTA has already made a lot of headway in terms of rhetorical pedagogy and scholarship. It has addressed key rhetorical concerns in politics, society, and culture, while at the same time problematizing how rhetoric is deployed and mediated by Filipinos within their modern democracy. The academic institution has given due attention to rhetoric that happens in situ and on the ground, that comes from and is mobilized by Filipinos themselves, and that reflects the many ways of thinking and speaking (inclusive of specific styles, sentiments, and sensibilities) in the Philippines. Furthermore, in using Philippine examples as the objects of its rhetorical analyses and as the cases to which rhetorical theories and methods can be applied, the DSCTA has illuminated the robustness of the Philippines as a rhetorical site and the dynamism of the Filipino people as rhetorical sources and agents.

And yet, while rhetorical scholarship from the DSCTA has made great strides in providing due attention to Filipino rhetoric, my argument is that rhetorical education in the country remains oriented towards Euro-American knowledge, prototypes, insights, and perspectives. The irony is that although rhetorical scholarship has faithfully attended to Philippine specimens as their points of inquiry and interest, the rhetorical education that gets perpetuated by the academic institution remains largely premised on Western thought. This is to say that it remains text-based or scriptocentric. It continues to consider clarity and cogency, eloquence and mastery, and refined delivery and logical structure as its prized principles. Its academic pedagogies and research investigations continue to draw from Euro-American textbooks and other similar resources, which prioritize speakers who supposedly “shape the nation” on the basis of their linguistic or communicative competence and on their embodiments of principles such as morality, civility, logic, and harmony. Agravante herself, in her exploratory study on the nature of Filipino rhetoric, candidly admits that though several disciplines such as psychology, history, and anthropology have long begun questioning the deployment of Western standpoints in examining Philippine culture and the Filipino psyche, “here I am, using a Western method to study Filipino rhetoric” (1995, p. 121). In this type of rhetorical education, the

premium of speakers as prospective subjects of study lies largely in how they live out rationality or “reasoned discourse” in the furtherance of a deliberative democracy. To put it simply, they matter not only because of their sheer capacity to speak but also because many consider them as persons who speak very well.

This kind of rhetorical education cultivates and upholds what I call “the tyranny of the articulate.” The tyranny of the articulate rests on an impulse to sanitize speech communication. It revolves around the belief that effective symbolic expression should involve the organized and highly technical deployment of language. It argues that for rhetorical agents, acts, and practices to make full sense to a public, they need to utilize systematic, explainable methods and techniques. Furthermore, the tyranny of the articulate makes the claim that discourses must always be carefully planned and fashioned, while rhetorical practices should aim for clarity, structure, and beauty of expression.

The pursuit to regulate who is allowed to speak in public, whose speech may be taken seriously, and what rhetorical agent and action can count as worthy of discussion, deliberation, and debate is important to this tyrannical regime. What gets prioritized and privileged are those that adhere to modernist principles of eloquence, order, and harmony. Counted as valuable are those that capably strategize communication, render thoughts and action legible, and coordinate efforts in ways that promote consensus and agreement. The tyranny of the articulate gives prime value to gifted and exemplar agents who use “legitimate” and “appropriate” forms. Or even to those, in the words of Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (2005), who “have the competence to speak or write in a way that will be recognized or heeded by others in one’s community” (p. 3). This tyranny, indeed, stands on the notion that people need to find the best and the most effective means of speech communication in order for them to effectively participate in their communities and successfully gain a hearing therein. From this perspective, this ideology connects with tasks such as canonizing “speakers who shape the nation,” anthologizing “speeches that matter,” and, not least, rationalizing or streamlining multifaceted and polysemic rhetorical forms. It comes with little surprise, therefore, that the tyranny of the articulate breeds systemic suspicion for ineloquence, irrationality, and even amateurism.

My argument, though, is that the ideology of articulacy (and the type of rhetorical education that sustains and is, in turn, sustained by it) is coming face to face with its limitations in what I refer to as the “era of ineloquence.” If articulacy and eloquence, mastery and competence mattered to the rhetorical tradition wrought from the West, they are the very same virtues that get upset in our current socio-political moment. If “a good man speaking well” was at once the exemplar and the aspiration in the Greco-Roman period, as advocated by the

philosopher Quintilian in his *Institutes of Oratory* (see Brummett, 2000), in the era of ineloquence, speakers who speak ill, remain silent, and behave oddly in public take center stage and obtain some following.

For example, in the 2022 Philippine national elections, we encountered terms such as “the silent majority” that refer to a large swath of voters who do not feel the need to openly argue for their political decisions and actively enact their civic participations (Varona, 2021). I am drawn to this term (and to the actual agents it tries to account for) precisely because it alludes to how the capacity to speak—and speak effectively and eloquently at that—is no longer being taken, at least by this group of people, as a crucial component or a fundamental prerequisite for belongingness to society. For the silent majority, engaging in public debate and discussion no longer matters that much; voicing their preferences and clarifying their dispositions no longer feel urgent; and speaking with others and joining political events such as forums and rallies no longer warrant immediate interest. As one member of a group that supported the presidential bid of Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. had made clear, the silent majority does not argue on social media walls. Instead, their members limit their opinions to group chats (Varona, 2021). In other words, the desire to be proficient in the art and skill of speech has seemingly toned down for the silent majority. Speaking publicly has been equated to noisemaking, reasoning out has been equated to conflict, and public involvement and engagement have been equated to futile spectacles such as grandstanding and mudslinging.

Among our political leaders, the tyranny of the articulate also seems to be losing its gravity and force. Instead of being remarkable for their eloquence and articulacy, Filipino politicians like former President Rodrigo Duterte, current Philippine President Bongbong Marcos, and Senator Imee Marcos are known for their virulent rhetoric, their strategy of non-confrontation, and their derisive and divisive speech, respectively. All these features appear in Duterte’s and the Marcoses’ rhetorical performances in the political pulpit, in media interviews, and in online videos distributed across social media platforms.

No other Philippine president has garnered much notorious attention because of his oral performances than Duterte (Ranada, 2016; Pascual 2016). His presidency from 2016-2022 was marked not only by his bloody “war on drugs” but also by his nasty “war of words.” What scholars and journalists aptly called his “belligerent” (Navera, 2020), “toxic” (Navera, 2021; Curato, 2019), “populist” (Montiel et al., 2021; Lasco, 2020), and “sexist” (De Chavez & Pacheco, 2020) rhetoric manifested in the way he instructed Barack Obama “to go to hell,” branded the European Union a “stupid organization,” called the Pope “gay,” and demeaned God as “stupid,” to name only a few. Arguably the most oral of

Philippine presidents in recent memory, someone notoriously known for his “mouth” (Abinales, 2015) and the invectives and sexist jokes that it spews, Duterte has been tagged by the mainstream media and his critics as “foul-mouthed” (Robles, 2019; Santos, 2019) and “unpresidential” (Punzalan, 2020).

To call Duterte “unpresidential” is to underscore how he bastardizes political protocols, rhetorical principles, and social conventions. This term places Duterte in contradistinction to his predecessors who supposedly possess the propriety and civility. If to become presidential means utilizing civilized speech, maintaining decorum, and staying within the bounds of sensible deliberation and debate, then to be called “unpresidential” is to be situated at the edge if not totally outside of normative tradition and considered an outcast, a transgressor, as well as an inferior Other. Within this framework, there is indeed dissonance between speech craft and statecraft in the person of Duterte.

If Duterte governed the country partly through his striking verbosity and cacophony, Bongbong Marcos won the 2022 elections despite or especially because of his strategy of silence and non-engagement. This strategy refers to Marcos’s deliberate refusal to join public debates and his non-confrontational attitude toward the many accusations hurled at him and his family (Mercado, 2022a; Gonzales, 2022). It involves ploys such as downplaying or denying historical facts, ignoring questions related to the charges filed against his family, and avoiding collective calls for justice and accountability (Mercado, 2022b). This selective silence challenges the notion that politicians must speak up in order to clarify the issues surrounding them. It also goes against the idea that leaders must deploy varied rhetorical strategies in order to establish their persona as an effective communicator on stage and before their publics. What is interesting about the case of Marcos is that his strategy of non-engagement and his non-confrontational approach to politics worked (Abarro, 2022; Buan, 2021). His strategists and Marcos himself succeeded in placing these strategies and approaches against what Marcos called, in his inaugural address as the country’s chief executive, “the politics of division” (“Full text of Ferdinand ‘Bongbong’ Marcos Jr’s inaugural address,” 2022). Within this framework, raising criticism, showing dissent, and calling out government irregularities indicate political intolerance and thereby serve as threats to the country’s social order. And yet, as various political commentators argued during and after the elections, this conflation of opposition with divisiveness allowed Marcos to dodge the assaults of his naysayers and, even more importantly, aided him in attaining his overwhelming victory (Lamentillo, 2022; De Guzman, 2022).

Whereas Bongbong Marcos remained tongue-tied on many matters concerning his family and kept a strategic distance from the criticisms made of him, his abilities, and his political campaign, his eldest sister, Senator Imee

Marcos, was visible and vociferous throughout the elections. In contrast to her brother's deliberate silence and calculated appearance on the mass media, the lady senator was remarkably loquacious in her interviews and ubiquitously found whether online or offline. Far from the contained language and the polished demeanor that her brother tried very hard to maintain during the campaign season, the older Marcos resorted to crude rhetorical acts: from gloating in her interviews (Ager, 2021), dancing in public ("Dancing with the senator," 2023), and on to appropriating the language of the LGBTQIA+ community to serve her political ends (Manila Bulletin Entertainment, 2022; Madarang, 2020). An even more brazen attempt was the production and circulation of online propaganda such as the infamous Len-Len videos that aimed to mock her brother's archrival in politics, Vice President Leni Robredo (Villaruel, 2022). In these YouTube videos, Imee Marcos is engaged in a conversation with two other character actresses about a certain maid called "Len-Len." The latter is Marcos's and her companions' object of vilification: her intellect is underestimated, her statements are put into question, and her person is acutely maligned. The final installment of these videos reveals that Len-Len, after all, is not an actual person but a puppet.

Imee Marcos as a rhetorical agent and her vlogs as rhetorical performances deserve critical attention and analysis, not only because they starkly illustrate the dark and damaging dimensions of political campaigning in the Philippines, but also because the injurious speech that they perpetuate overtly contradicts the principles that rhetorical education traditionally endorses and cultivates. As her videos throw into sharp relief, Imee Marcos is not meeting the Roman rhetorician Quintilian's definition of an orator as a good (wo)man speaking well (see Brummett, 2000). What Senator Marcos instead reveals here is a persona that counters the dignified personality that her public office expects if not demands her to become.

These videos featuring Imee Marcos received strong objections from more discerning members of the online and offline public, especially from the supporters of Robredo. Many Filipinos called out and even lampooned Imee Marcos on social media for her foul language and derogatory discourse (Pedrajas, 2022). For many viewers, she not only insulted Robredo but also denigrated a legion of ordinary Filipino workers who, like the caricatured Len-Len character, would need to labor for endless hours to eke out a living (Manahan & Navallo, 2022; Gozum, 2022). Notwithstanding these criticisms, what these online videos have brought into tight focus is how rhetors like Marcos accumulate interest, viewership, and support in the age of ineloquence. If Duterte's belligerent speech galvanized his command and authority as a hard-hitting leader, and if Bongbong Marcos's strategy of silence and non-engagement contributed to his appeal as

a purportedly “unifying candidate,” Imee Marcos’s vicious videos and derisive rhetoric obtained all sorts of media mileage and accumulated millions of views (Villaruel, 2022; Lim, 2022a and 2022b).

I mention these political leaders because they undermine the premium once accorded to articulacy. Their weaponization of free speech and their bastardization of the lofty ideals of the rhetorical tradition underscore the fact that the era of eloquence is undergoing major transformations, and that what has been long reviled as the uncivil other of so-called “proper,” “effective,” “masterful” communication is making its way into the public’s view, gaining some hearing, and drawing fascination from a varied lot of people. Furthermore, I cite these leaders to show the limits of the assertion that the most effective way to control government, act on behalf of the people, and engage social others is through decorous speech and behavior. What the prominence of these rhetors lays bare is that the communicative acts and features that people have usually repressed—foul language, intolerant behaviors, and ugly affects—in public spaces, official engagements, and the much sanctified deliberative assemblies under modern democracies are now, as a matter of fact, overpowering Philippine society.

How then might rhetorical education respond to these acts, figures, and phenomena playing out in the Philippines over the past several years? What kind of rhetorical education might we institute inside the speech communication classroom to account more precisely and more properly for the shifts in the oral behaviors and communicative capacities of Filipino rhetors, not least of political leaders, in the age of ineloquence? In what ways could teachers, scholars, critics, and researchers grapple with these emergent forms of rhetorical performances, without further reinforcing the modernist principles of eloquence and mastery, upholding the binaries between civilized vs. uncivilized speech, and dismissing rhetorical agents such as potty-mouthed leaders as plain errors or eccentricities in a system that rests on the principles of order, structure, and rationality?

We need a rhetorical education that does not blindly impose the ideology of articulacy on agents, practices, and phenomena that may not be straightaway viewed as eloquent or articulate. In making this argument, I am reminded of Robert Hariman’s sharp observation on how “understanding, appreciating, and improving democratic participation is impeded by both rationality standards of deliberative democracy theorists and classical rhetoric’s ideal of eloquence” (in Kock & Villadsen, 2014, p. 222). In the same vein, it is these “rationality standards” and “ideal of eloquence” that hinder teachers, scholars, researchers, critics, and students of rhetoric to make accurate and sharp sense of agents whom they reductively, if not erroneously, label as ineloquent and inarticulate.



I am wary of these cynical terms and negative evaluations insofar as they can only hold water by upholding rigged binaries that place certain rhetors and rhetorical performances diametrically in opposition to a reified ideal. If these supposedly “ineloquent” and “inarticulate” agents are gauged by the standards of ideal speech and behavior, then from the very beginning they no longer stand a chance to be considered unique, valid, and worthy of sustained attention and analysis. If they are simply viewed from a Western tradition of rhetoric that is, in the words of Raymie E. McKerrow (2014), largely invested in discursive mechanisms that are “ensconced within the regulative ideal of a smooth functioning democracy” (p. 243), then these agents and their rhetorical performances have no other recourse but to be rendered irregular, illogical, and illegible.

I acknowledge that it is the ethical duty of educators and scholars to safeguard the fundamental principles underlying the study of rhetoric (i.e., the importance of speaking well and strategically; the urgency of preserving and advancing the universal freedom of speech and expression; and the relevance of speaking truth to power). Further, I recognize the function of normative theory and practice in rhetorical pedagogy, particularly in academic efforts of obtaining some sense of organized method in grasping a type of rhetorical (dis) order. And yet, I am conscious that these much-vaunted fundamental principles and normative precepts can, in fact, downplay if not totally script out rhetorical realities, performances, and agents that do not wholly subscribe to them. My call, therefore, is for rhetorical education to not merely regurgitate ideologies of eloquence or articulacy. Instead, it has to imagine rhetorical agents and their performances through more grounded frames of reference, more context-sensitive rules of engagement, and more capacious definitions of terms. This re-imagination has to interrogate the obsession of rhetorical education with Euro-American ideals of a rhetor and a speech. Furthermore, my other plea is for rhetorical education to wrestle with, rather than mindlessly affirm, the very idea of “good” or “effective,” taking note that these value-laden terms vary in meaning across contexts and over time. Hence, instead of simply viewing rhetors and their performances in line with Euro-American perspectives and standards, rhetorical education has to comprehend their contingency and indeterminacy. It has to give consideration to speakers who elude canonical impositions and confound widely received rhetorical genres and communicative forms. It has to painstakingly pin down and factor in the social, political, cultural, and historical conditions that have brought and continue to bring these speakers into dynamic being and becoming.

And so, rather than invalidating the likes of Duterte as an outcast to the rhetorical tradition that our academic circles secure and champion, rhetorical education can become a more fruitful endeavor when it raises and grapples with questions such as: How does Duterte expose another kind of production, circulation, and reception of rhetorical performance in the 21<sup>st</sup>-century Philippines? And how might we see him as an indicator and a consequence of the country's shifting political, linguistic, and rhetorical landscapes? These questions encourage us to probe the different aspects of Duterte's subjectivity and performance as a speaking subject, and to use these aspects as the main bases for developing frameworks that can assist in our understanding of oral performances and their relationship to politics, culture, and society.

It is crucial for rhetorical education to come up with a framework that does not immediately categorize rhetors as "ineloquent" or "inarticulate" as if these terms are freely given and inherently set. This framework can begin with the premise that such terms are discursively constructed and that their deployment is a mode of capturing agents and their performances within a specific matrix of ideologies. And so, when a rhetor is called "ineloquent" or "inarticulate," when a rhetorical performance or practice is branded "illegible" or "incomprehensible," it is not an empirical and objective state or quality that is being referenced. These depictions of individuals and of ways of doing rhetoric emanate from, and are produced by, a system of value judgment. Having said that, to be called "ineloquent" and "inarticulate" says much not only about the one who is being portrayed as such but also about the one who is rendering this portrayal. From which aesthetic and ideological position is the latter coming from when making such ascriptions about the former's speech? On what rhetorical standards, principles, and ideals are these based? And even more important, what does branding someone as "ineloquent" or "inarticulate" seek to put in place?

Another urgent pursuit is to develop a vocabulary that can accurately capture agents, acts, and performances that do not neatly fall within dominant rhetorical prescriptions. What rhetorical traditions do speakers repeat, initiate, or alter as they come to the fore and take center stage? How do these speakers act and speak? How do they enact their rhetorical agency? In posing these questions, I am suggesting that whether a speaker meets prevailing rhetorical ideals is not the crux of the matter. Such deviation from the traditional sense of rhetoric, I argue, neither invalidates a speaker's attempt to engage others rhetorically nor devalues this speaker's contribution to the creation and propagation of a discursive community. This peculiarity is even an invitation for further scrutiny. In the case of Duterte and the Marcoses where their less-than-ideal political and rhetorical performances draw strong support from multiple sectors, difference

from the perceived norm or the common practice demands organized inquiry and analysis all the more.

We certainly need to move beyond our logics and models rooted in deficiencies to better appreciate the uniqueness of rhetors and the specificity of their performances and practices. A rhetorical education premised on the supposed deficiencies of rhetors rather than on their diversity and differences will offer minimal guidance on how to advance discussions of rhetors and their resources of invention that get developed and activated in the face of multiple exigencies and constraints. This education will also fail to give a clear view of the context in which these rhetors and their performances gain ground, and the publics that consistently patronize and resonate with them. If it wishes to remain relevant, rhetorical education has to go past the gesture of going after the faults and failures of rhetors. Instead of characterizing and criticizing rhetors solely for what they lack, rhetorical education has to propose ways in which we can work through these alleged shortcomings and, more importantly, comprehend better how rhetors exercise their communicative capacities in different ways.

Rhetorical education also needs to broaden its traditional and common understanding of rhetorical agency—a term that scholars use to refer to a person’s sense of language and his or her capacity to influence others through vivid expression and symbolic action. I argue, however, that agency is not simply about being able to speak. It is, as Campbell (2005) notes, also about the ability “to state a position” and “respond well and appropriately to the contingencies of circumstances” (p. 3). Additionally, it involves our understanding of the power and the pleasures of communicative forms, conventions, constraints, and contexts. Taken from this view, rhetorical agency manifests even in the least articulate of speakers. Regardless of how speakers speak, their utterances operate as a way of maintaining and developing civic life. For McKerrow (2014), “[t]he rhetorical citizen does not have to be successful in achieving goals in order to be ‘counted’ among the parts of the social” (p. 250). He or she only has to be understood *vis-à-vis* his or her modes of engagements and disengagements.

Hence, rhetorical education must cultivate ways of understanding and examining how rhetors negotiate with the social, historical, and political contexts that form their own and their public’s knowledge and practice. This education has to parse out how rhetors assume if not experiment with various subjectivities and positionalities in order to participate in and even generate public discourse. Moreover, this education has to provide opportunities for students to see in great detail how rhetors manage and deploy inventive appeals and purposeful tactics to draw people in and create affinity with them.

An ethnographic and grounded approach to rhetorical education is needed in the speech communication classroom. Such an approach can unfold the processes through which speaking positions are organized and through which speakers come to present themselves as valid “voices” and fundamental “figures” in public. It can foster the ability of providing detailed descriptions of how rhetors, in the words of Campbell (2005), “find means to express those strata that connect the psyche, society and world, the forms of feeling that encapsulate moments in time” (p. 5). Ethnographic accounts of rhetors and rhetorical performances can also bring to the fore what Robert Asen and Dan Brouwer (2010) call “modalities of public engagement” (in Kock & Villadsen, 2014, p. 10) or what other scholars have referred to as “varieties of agency and the available means of achieving a hearing” (Geisler, 2004, p. 10).

Indeed, an ethnographic approach can potentially train students and teachers of rhetoric to listen along speech acts that rhetors like Duterte and the Marcoses would strategically make. I think that listening along is a method of attunement that can help us bring into clear focus how the “oral flexing,” so to speak, of a head of state like Duterte becomes a crucial part of doing politics in the 21st-century Philippines. At one level, it carefully attends to the ways of speaking and doing that Duterte wittingly or unwittingly deploys as a speaker. What is the very nature of these ways or the exact configuration of these practices? Where do their rhetorical potencies or their rhetorical premiums lie? How and why do they obtain the attention, interest, and even commitment of many Filipinos? To *listen along*, in this sense, is an exercise of comprehending rhetorical agents such as Duterte and their vocabularies, their acts, their personalities, and their initiatives on their own terms, from their particular vantage points, and in the contexts where they come about, play out, and become embedded. Rather than imposing on these agents, their practices, and their artifacts a predetermined set of criteria, the more pressing task of a rhetorical critic or scholar is to bring to the surface if not assemble a framework based on the object or subject of inquiry itself.

There is no doubt that the longstanding investments of rhetorical education in the use of symbols (and in the human interactions that come into existence via this usage) continue to comprise the base and ground of the scholarly, intellectual, and pedagogical pursuits of the academic discipline of speech communication. Moreover, the function of rhetorical education in foregrounding the connection between speech and society, the role of communicators as citizens, and the ways in which people gain access to and influence socio-civic life through symbolic and embodied action remains essential to the pedagogical systems and operations of the Philippine university. And yet, the challenge for rhetorical education now is to reckon with the normative standards on which it

has relied for the longest time. Now more than ever, it is imperative to revisit the core ideas that almost always determine and direct our figurations of a competent speaker, our structuration of an effective speech, and our definition of an efficient communicative or rhetorical performance. Are these ideas compatible with everyday realities of either the rhetors or the publics that take the spotlight of our research and teaching? Or are these ideas limited and limiting, out of joint and out of touch, incompatible with the day-to-day rhetorical transactions we are all facing, starting, and engaging with? What rhetorical education in the Philippines has to develop, instead, is conceptual precision in and methodological patience for understanding the configuration of a rhetor's utterances and the process through which these utterances become effective—even sticky, easy to relate to, and impactful—to some sections of the spectating and listening public. Also, what rhetorical education has to pay more time to is the mapping of how rhetors actually present arguments or positions in the public realm, on the one hand, and how they use language and communicate with one another within their highly diverse societies, on the other hand.

Outside the DSCITA, there are efforts from a handful of academics and scholars to study Filipino rhetoric in light concepts and methods from indigenous knowledge and practice. Animated by a continuously intensifying drive to de-center Western epistemologies within the Philippine university, these academic efforts conscientiously spotlight communication research projects rooted in Philippine culture and society. A notable example of such an effort comes from speech communication scholar and professor Carson Jeffrey O. Cruz of the University of the Philippine Los Baños who tries to recover indigenous rhetorics and chart the possibilities in indigenizing rhetorical theory. His ongoing project deserves citation (and, perhaps, a longer and more thoughtful engagement in another essay) precisely because of its commitment to a) interrogate how the Western rhetorical tradition sidelined rhetorical practices from a vast array of individuals and collectives in the Global South; and b) carve into high relief indigenous rhetorics, situate them within their specific contexts, and appreciate them for their role in the fight for indigenous self-determination.

The work of Cruz demonstrates the potential for rhetorical education of doing more than training students in the practical skills needed to generate, absorb, reflect upon, and nuance public discourse. In fact, rhetorical education can hone the acuity of students in comprehending other modes of communicative and embodied engagement, including those that manifest differently from those they learned—and continue to learn—inside the classroom. Further, it can encourage students to go beyond highly utilized critical paradigms and perspectives in the orthodox classroom that, as David Zarefsky (2014) rightly pointed out, can foster

disregard for rhetorical invention and practice. In his essay titled “Is Rhetorical Criticism Subversive of Democracy?” Zarefsky (2014) advocates for a kind of rhetorical criticism that does not merely identify and critique the predicaments of its subject matter. For him, what we need is a sympathetic and constructive rhetorical criticism that can assist us in comprehending our ordeals, laying bare “alternatives to those we criticize,” and, not least, explaining clearly how individuals enact their citizenship through various rhetorical modes and means.

By expanding prevailing notions of rhetorical agency, going beyond Euro-American conceptual framings of rhetoric, and providing thick descriptions of rhetorical agents and their embodied practices and performances, rhetorical education will be able to acknowledge more effectively the procedural, sited, contingent, varied qualities of its main objects of study.

### REFERENCES

- Abarro, M. (2022, February 13). Reality or perception? Explaining Marcos' high survey ratings. *ABS-CBN News*. <https://news.abs-cbn.com/spotlight/02/13/22/explaining-bongbong-marcos-high-survey-ratings>
- Abinales, P. (2015, December 6). Digong's Mouth. *Rappler*. <https://www.rappler.com/voices/thought-leaders/115071-duterte-mouth-censorship/>
- Ager, M. (2021, December 21). Imee Marcos: 'We're surprised we're back in style.' *Inquirer.Net*. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1530364/imee-marcos-were-surprised-were-back-in-style>
- Agravante, J. (1995). In Search of a Filipino Rhetoric. *Philippine Humanities Review*, 2(1), 115-142.
- Brummett, B. (2000). Introduction to Quintilian. In *Reading Rhetorical Theory* (pp. 294-295). Harcourt College Publishers.
- Buan, L. (2021, December 11). 'Underdog' image plus 'controlled media' boost Marcos appeal—ally, analysts. *Rappler*. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/elections/underdog-narrative-controlled-media-bongbong-marcos-appeal/>
- Campbell, K. K. (2005). Agency: Promiscuous and Protean. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 2(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1479142042000332134>
- Crisostomo, J. (2018). In Court, On Air, On Trial: The Impeachment of Supreme Court Chief Justice Renato Corona as Social Drama. *Humanities Diliman* 15(2): 1-37. <https://www.journals.upd.edu.ph/index.php/humanitiesdiliman/article/view/6439>
- Curato, N. (2019). Toxic Democracy? The Philippines in 2018. *Southeast Asian Affairs*: 261-274. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26939699>
- Dancing with the senator: Imee Marcos shows off moves in 'Gento' TikTok challenge. (2023, July 2). *Bilyonaryo.com*. <https://bilyonaryo.com/2023/07/02/dancing-with-the-senator-imee-marcos-shows-off-moves-in-gento-tiktok-challenge/social/>
- De Castro, J. V. (2000). *April Boy Regino as Rhetor for the Masses: A Rhetorical Criticism on the Performance of April Boy Regino*. [Unpublished undergraduate thesis]. UP College of Arts and Letters.
- De Chavez, J., & Pacheco, V. (2020). Masculinity in the Age of (Philippine) Populism: Spectacle, Hypermasculinity, and Rodrigo Duterte. *Masculinities & Social Change* 6(3): 261-283. <https://doi.org/10.17583/mcs.2020.5157>
- De Guzman, C. (2022, March 29). Why Bongbong Marcos, a Philippine Dictator's Son, Leads the Race for the Presidency. *Time*. <https://time.com/6162028/bongbong-marcos-philippines-president-popular/>

- Estrada, R. F. (2007). *The Stories Unfold: A Rhetorical Analysis of the Intimations of Martial Law as Articulated in Pre-Martial Law Speeches of Ferdinand Marcos and Benigno Aquino Jr.* [Unpublished undergraduate thesis]. UP College of Arts and Letters.
- Full text of Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos Jr's inaugural address. (2022, June 30). *Philstar.com*. <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2022/06/30/2192047/full-text-ferdinand-bongbong-marcos-jrs-inaugural-address>
- Geisler, C. (2004). How Ought We to Understand the Concept of Rhetorical Agency? Report from the ARS. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 34(3): 9-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773940409391286>
- Gonzales, C. (2022, January 22). Bongbong Marcos camp says he skipped TV interview for presidential bets due to 'biased' host. *Inquirer.Net*. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1543603/bongbong-marcos-camp-says-he-skipped-tv-interview-for-presidential-bets-due-to-biased-host>
- Gozum, I. (2022, February 11). 'Ako si LenLen': Workers share stories of sweat, labor after Marcos insult. *Rappler*. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/filipino-workers-online-share-stories-sweat-labor-after-marcos-insult/>
- Kock, C., & Villadsen, L. (2014). Rhetorical Citizenship as a Conceptual Frame: What We Talk About When We Talk About Rhetorical Citizenship. In C. Kock & L. Villadsen (Eds.) *Contemporary Rhetorical Citizenship* (pp. 9-26). Leiden University Pres.
- Ladia, C. E. P. (2022a). Contextualizing Duterte's Rhetoric: The Rhetorical Situation of President Rodrigo Duterte's Public Addresses on the Philippines' Federal Shift. *Humanities Diliman* 19(1): 30-57. <https://www.journals.upd.edu.ph/index.php/humanitiesdiliman/article/view/8787>
- Ladia, C. E. P. (2022b). Queering Local Governments: LGBTIQ+ Movement Organizations as Strategic Brokers for Sexual Citizenship in Philippine Local Governments. *Review of Women's Studies* 32(1): 113-148.
- Lamentillo, A. M. (2022, May 7). BBM-Sara's Unity Message Resonates with Filipinos. *Manila Bulletin*. <https://time.com/6162028/bongbong-marcos-philippines-president-popular/>
- Lasco, G. (2020). Medical Populism and the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Global Public Health* 15(10): 1417-1429. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17441692.2020.1807581>
- Lemscic, C. M. C. (2023). *Sa Pag-alala at Hindi Pagkalimot: Transmitting Historical Memory through the Personal Narrative Performance of Martial Law Survivors* [Unpublished undergraduate thesis]. UP College of Arts and Letters.
- Lim, J. (2022a, February 7). Imee Marcos #LutangLenlen Kape Chronicles Ep. 2 Elicits Various Reactions. *PhilNews.Ph*. <https://philnews.ph/2022/02/07/imee-marcos-lutanglenlen-kape-chronicles-ep-2-elicits-various-reactions/>



- Lim, J. (2022b, June 1). Imee Marcos Speaks About the Viral Len-len Videos. *PhilNews.Ph*. <https://philnews.ph/2022/06/01/imee-marcos-speaks-about-the-viral-len-len-videos/>
- Luzuriaga, J. F. R. (2008). *Beyond a Score of Vocal Influence: A Rhetorical Criticism of the Celebrative Concert Twenty of Regine Velasquez*. [Unpublished undergraduate thesis]. UP College of Arts and Letters.
- Madarang, C. R. (2020, September 8). 'Tunay na bakla?': Imee Marcos pro-LGBT efforts resurface after support for Pemberton pardon. *Interaksyon*. <https://interaksyon.philstar.com/politics-issues/2020/09/08/176453/tunay-na-bakla-imee-marcos-pro-lgbt-efforts-resurfaces-after-support-for-pemberton-pardon/>
- Manahan, J., & Navallo, M. (2022, February 12). Ka Leody blasts Imee Marcos video mocking people who work 18 hours a day. *ABS-CBN News*. <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/02/12/22/ka-leody-blasts-imee-marcos-video-mocking-people-who-work-18-hours-a-day>
- Manila Bulletin Entertainment. (2022, June 22). Imee Marcos, LGBTQ+ supporter and gay icon, celebrates Pride Month. *Manila Bulletin*. <https://mb.com.ph/2022/06/22/imee-marcos-lgbtq-supporter-and-gay-icon-celebrates-pride-month/>
- McKerrow, R. E. (2014). The Rhetorical Citizen: Enacting Agency. In C. Kock and L. Villadsen (Ed.) *Contemporary Rhetorical Citizenship* (pp. 239-254). Leiden University Press.
- Mercado, N. A. (2022a, 9 February). Bongbong Marcos camp: It should be presidential interview, not debate. *Inquirer.Net*. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1552188/bongbong-marcos-camp-it-should-be-presidential-interview-not-debate>
- Mercado, N. A. (2022b, March 16). Bongbong Marcos: I'd rather campaign than repeat same thing in debates. *Inquirer.Net*. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1569338/manila-philippines-presidential-candidate-ferdinand-bongbong-marcos-jr-said-he-would-rather-campaign-on-the-ground-than-have-the-same-thing-repeated-in-the-debates>
- Montiel, C. J. (2021). Presidential Profanity in Duterte's Philippines: How Swearing Discursively Constructs a Populist Regime. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 41(4): 428-449. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X211065780>
- Navera, G. S. (2003). *Subversion and Reaffirmation of the Erap Myth in the Trial of the Century: A Rhetorical Inquiry* [Unpublished graduate thesis]. UP College of Arts and Letters.
- Navera, G. S. (2020). Belligerence as Argument: The Allure of the War Metaphor in Philippine Presidential Speeches. *Kairos: A Journal of Critical Symposium* 5(1): 67-82. <http://kairoostext.in/index.php/kairoostext/article/view/98/80>

- Navera, G. S. (2021). The President as Macho: Machismo, Misogyny, and the Language of Toxic Masculinity in Philippine Presidential Discourse. In O. Feldman (Ed.) *When Politicians Talk: The Cultural Dynamics of Public Speaking* (pp. 187-202). Springer Singapore.
- Palaspas, F. L. F. (2023). *Remnants of the War: The Rhetorical Vision of the Families of the Philippine Drug War Victims* [Unpublished undergraduate thesis]. UP College of Arts and Letters.
- Pascual, F. D. (2016, April 18). Catch Duterte by his gaping mouth. *PhilStar*. <https://www.philstar.com/opinion/2016/04/18/1574363/catch-duterte-his-gaping-mouth>
- Pedrajas, J. (2022, February 12). Netizens call out Imee for 'Pagod Len-Len' video. *Manila Bulletin*. <https://mb.com.ph/2022/02/12/netizens-call-out-imee-for-pagod-len-len-video/>
- Pilario, J. C. (2022). Church Talks on Peace Talks: The United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) and the Duterte Presidency. *Social Sciences and Missions* 35: 137-166.
- Punzalan, J. (2020, November 19). Is Duterte unpresidential for remarks vs Robredo? He's 'consistent,' 'not plastic'—Palace. *ABS-CBN News*. <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/11/19/20/duterte-consistent-not-plastic-after-robredo-remarks>
- Ranada, P. (2016, September 22). My mouth can't bring down PH. *Rappler*. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/147061-duterte-mouth-bring-down-philippines/>
- Robles, A. (2019, July 18). Duterte and his crew of foul-mouthed Philippine officials: the new normal? *South China Morning Post*. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/society/article/3019147/duterte-and-his-crew-foul-mouthed-philippine-officials-new-normal>
- Santos, I. (2019, May 17). NUJP slams 'foul-mouthed' Duterte for insulting VERA Files' Tordesillas, other media workers. *VERA Files*. <https://verafiles.org/articles/nujp-slams-foul-mouthed-duterte-insulting-vera-files-tordesi>
- Serquiña, O. T. (2015). Voices and Visions: Symbolic Convergences in the Oral Narratives of Filipino Comfort Women. *Humanities Diliman* 12(2): 79-109.
- Serquiña, O. T. (2016). 'The Greatest Workers of the World': Philippine Labor Migration and the Politics of Labeling in Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's Presidential Rhetoric. *Philippine Political Science Journal* 37(3): 207-227. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01154451.2016.1253822>
- Varona, I. E. (2021, November 21). Marcos caravan in Negros Occidental shows glimpse into 'Silent Majority.' *Rappler*. <https://www.rappler.com/nation/elections/bongbong-marcos-caravan-negros-occidental-shows-glimpse-silent-majority/>

## The PCS Review 2023

---

- Villaruel, J. E. (2022, June 30). Real Talk: The ‘destabilizing’ charisma of Imee Marcos. *ABS-CBN News*. <https://news.abs-cbn.com/spotlight/06/30/22/the-destabilizing-charisma-of-imee-marcos>
- Zarefsky, D. (2014). Is Rhetorical Criticism Subversive of Democracy? In C. Kock & L. Villadsen (Eds.) *Contemporary Rhetorical Citizenship* (pp. 29-50). Leiden University Press.

## The PCS Review 2023

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

OSCAR T. SERQUINA, JR. (otserquina@up.edu.ph) is Associate Professor in the Department of Speech Communication and Theatre Arts where he teaches classes in rhetoric, theatre, and performance studies. He has received research and writing fellowships from the Asia Research Institute of the National University of Singapore (2013), the National Library of Australia (2018), and the Center for Southeast Asian Studies of the University of Michigan (2019). He holds a doctoral degree in Theatre Studies from the University of Melbourne. His essays have appeared in *Performance Research*, *Theatre Research International*, *Humanities Diliman*, *Kritika Kultura*, *Philippine Studies*, the *Philippine Political Science Journal*, and the *Philippine Humanities Review*.