

Flagging the Nation in Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo's *Recuerdo*

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But oh, what a poor thing it is—this construct of words—beside the dream in my mind! I dreamed of enchantment, I longed to weave sorcery. And all I have produced is this. . .!

And is it just another morality play? Again, a groping about for that which continues to elude us—some notion of NATION writ large?

What am I saying? It does not even pretend to be that. Did I not want merely to tell one woman's story, and that woman myself?

Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo, Recuerdo

Thus ends Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo's novel *Recuerdo* (1996), a narrative reconstructing the history of the narrator's family by grafting incrementally into each other, uncountable stories—both remembered and fictionalized—of women in her life. To a certain extent, the challenge in reading a novel like this lies in disproving its adamant denial of the fact that it is related to the nation. An engagement with a narrative like *Recuerdo* makes it necessary to pose quite a number of questions. For example, how does a critic reckon with a novel written by a middle-class

writer who has been associated with the ruling literary *barkada* in the Philippines? How is one to recover the novel from readings that have condemned the narrative as an articulation of a hopeless bourgeois imagination? Is it possible to read postcoloniality into this narrative — rendered in epistolary form (i.e., in e-mail letters) — that pieces together the lost parts of a middle-class family's history? These are just some questions that I wish to address in my analysis of *Recuerdo*.

A novel that hopscoches not just from year to year but from one century to another, *Recuerdo* opens with the e-mail of Amanda, the major voice/persona, to her daughter Risa, a college student at the University of the Philippines. After living in different countries, Amanda decides to take her children home to the Philippines. Shortly after settling down in the Philippines, however, she takes on a job as a consultant for a short-term project in Thailand. Thus begins the entire narrative which is basically composed of Amanda's e-mails to her daughter — these are letters assuring the latter of the merits of her decision to take her family back to the Philippines. The e-mail form also takes on a new function in *Recuerdo* — as a form of catharsis (or should I say, as a quillier couch for Amanda who is apparently processing her emotions and thoughts) for a woman within whom lurks a yearning for a history, no matter how provisional, of her family. The epilogue of the novel is Amanda's letter to the historian Rafael M. Ortega of the UP Department of History, explaining how her manuscript (i.e., the entire epistolary novel in e-mail form) is not memory but fiction; Amanda, in putting together the tales of her mother and the other women in her family admits to having “invented” and “embellished” a bit.

There is much to be said about the very form of the narratives—the e-mails and a couple of letters which Amanda's daughter Risa never answers—but I will defer the discussion of this to the end of my paper.