

ERIC GAMALINDA'S *EMPIRE OF MEMORY* AS HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION¹

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The grand narratives that fashion themselves, unwittingly or otherwise, as emissaries of universal truth and knowledge have been frowned upon by the postmodern and postcolonial positions. The skepticism from these latter paradigms has been directed at hegemonic and positivist epistemologies that assume a stance which builds itself up as unproblematic, as if omniscient words wrote themselves down on paper, impartial and unbiased. The challenges in history and literature raised by postmodern thought against homogenizing practices and values such as narrative unity and singularity—with its inevitable assumptions concerning beginnings and endings; its rationale behind inclusion and exclusion; truth, representation and interpretation—can be demonstrated in what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction. This kind of novel, Hutcheon claims, “self-consciously reminds us that, while events did occur in the real empirical past, we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning.” (“The Postmodern” 375) Hutcheon problematizes the constitution of a purely objective and homogenous historical knowledge by exposing and problematizing the areas where historiography mimics fiction writing, in its “common use of conventions of narrative, of reference, of the inscribing of subjectivity, of their identity as textuality and even of their implication in ideology.” (“The Pastime” 276)

Throughout the course of this paper, I intend to demonstrate how history and fiction necessarily intersect within these specific areas by deploying them in Eric Gamalinda’s 1992 novel *Empire of Memory*. After illustrating how the boundaries of history and fiction are blurred, I will have hoped to establish the historiographic metafiction novel as a postmodern project that

resists the grand narratives' objective to establish a "single, essentialized, transcendent concept" (Hutcheon, "The Postmodern" 367) of genuine history.

I should begin by articulating a preemptive statement to address the attacks that seem to misconstrue the similarities of history and fiction as posited by the postmodern project. Historiographic metafiction does not, cannot discard historical knowledge. How can it do so when it relies almost exclusively on history as its condition of existence? Indeed, "it reinstalls historical context as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge." (Hutcheon, "The Postmodern" 367) History is not fiction, to be sure, but when resemblances are drawn, it is not to imply that both are completely synonymous. The effort is made to demonstrate that "both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past ("exertions of the shaping, ordering imagination"). In other words," Hutcheon clarifies, "the meaning and shape are not in the events, but *in the systems* which make those events into historical facts." ("The Postmodern" 367)

Empire of Memory is set in the martial law years of the Marcos administration. The protagonist Alfonso Diaz and his colleague, Jun Hidalgo are part of a Malacañang public relations outfit and think tank dubbed A.S.I.A. (Agency for the Scientific Investigation for the Absurd). They are tasked to write a national heirloom: an encyclopedia of Philippine history starting from the country's prehistory all the way to the present regime's "New Society." Consequently, the duo has also been instructed to make up for the first lady's third rate family roots in Leyte by establishing some sort of relations with the blue-blooded Romualdez, Zabarte and Suarez families. The research brings them to Isla de San Miguel, a fictitious island somewhere in the Visayas territory where they encounter a host of characters that animate the novel's backdrop.

For historians and fictionists alike, there seems to be no escaping the process of narrativization in the creation of their

respective mediums. Both must necessarily arrange events in a specific order while techniques such as selection, temporal pacing and emplotment are employed throughout their texts. This process is crucial, if any kind of meaning and coherence is to be forged. In her paper "History, Theater and Counter-Memory," Professor Priscelina Patajo-Legasto expounds on Hyden White's insights:

White, for instance, shows that to transform chronicles of events into stories would require the historian to select which event would be assigned an inaugurating motif for the beginning of a story; a transitional motif for the middle part of the story; and a terminating motif for the story's denouement. That an event can be assigned different motifs in a historian's story and that the same event can be differently located in other stories illustrate the active role of the historian in this process of narrativization. (461)

And just like the storyteller, the historian doesn't merely find history. In postmodern writings of the past, whether in fiction or history, Hutcheon observes "overt attempts to point to the past as already "semiotized" or encoded, that is, already inscribed in discourse and therefore "always already" interpreted (if only by the selection of what was recorded and its insertion into a narrative)." ("The Postmodern" 375) In other words, to situate any event without the influence of one's subject position and claim impartiality sounds implausible. It is intrinsic for the narrative process to determine what should be included and what must be excluded from the text. Consequently, the text is able to "silence, exclude and absent certain past events – and people..." ("Hutcheon) The Pastime" 277) Hyden White questions the historian's innocence:

It is sometimes said that the aim of the historian is to explain the past by "finding," "identifying," or "uncovering" the stories that lie buried in chronicles; and that the difference between