

Constructing from Discord: The Word and the Nation in *My Sad Republic*

Jaimee Faith J. Santos

University of the Philippines Diliman

ABSTRACT

As a first place winner of the Centennial Literary Prize, Eric Gamalinda's *My Sad Republic* (2000) is inextricably tied to discourses about the nation and its formation. In particular, it demonstrates the mutually constitutive relationship between the nation and the novel. *My Sad Republic's* participation in the political project of nation-building is revealed not only in its entry and subsequent success in a large-scale government-sponsored contest, but also in its documentation of the components of nation-formation. Furthermore, the novel mimics the heterogeneous composition of the nation through its combination of historical, marvelous and romantic elements, as well as through the multiplicity of voices that its characters represent. Paradoxically, however, the novel also shows how the very diversity of individuals that constitute the nation inevitably leads to violent conflicts that hinder the actualization of the nation. The novel hence encourages the idea of self-sacrifice, the surrender of various personal agenda for the sake of a single national interest. At the same time, it also shows how the inherently problematic construction of the nation can be imagined only through literature, specifically the novel. The nation, in other words, depends on the novel not only for the promotion of nationalist ideals, but also for its very existence.

Keywords: Novel, nation, Centennial Literary Prize

"The word," wrote the late Adrian E. Cristóbal, "has had a larger part in the Filipino fight for freedom than in most other nationalist struggles."¹ So significant was the perceived contribution of the word that, in 1998, the Philippine government was inspired to enlist its power once again. As part of the centenary celebration of Emilio Aguinaldo's proclamation of Philippine independence, the Centennial Literary Prize was born. Proposed by then-Senator Blas F. Ople, the contest conferred honors to novels, essays, drama, epic poetry and screenplays in both English and Filipino, as well as a special prize to an epic poem in Spanish.

In this essay, I take particular interest in the first place winner of the Centennial Literary Prize's novel in English category: Eric Gamalinda's *My Sad Republic* (2000).² I find that, due to its participation and subsequent success in such a large-scale, state-funded competition, *My Sad Republic* is inextricably tied to discourses about the nation and nationalism. But what, exactly, is the nature of the novel's relationship with the two?

I will begin with a brief discussion of the nationalist project, which is reified in the Rizal Law, the Philippine government's most important attempt to employ literature in promoting nationalism. I aim to show how similar principles underpin the conception of both the Rizal Law and the Centennial Literary Prize. From there, I will proceed with questions that concern *My Sad Republic* itself. How does the novel, in terms of the narrative itself and the form, construct the nation? What does the novel reveal about the hindrances to the construction or actualization of the nation? How does the novel position itself in relation to the nation? By the end of this paper, I hope to make clear how and why the novel and the nation are inevitably and necessarily entwined.

THE NATION

Before any analysis can begin, we must first ask: what, exactly, is a "nation"? The question may not be the most obvious one to ask, but, as Benedict Anderson notes, the concept of "nation" is haunted by three paradoxes. First, nations are relatively modern constructions to historians; and yet, they appear to be ancient communities to nationalists (5). Second, nationality is "universal" in the modern world, in the sense that everyone "has" a nationality; however, the concrete applications of nationality differ (5), e.g., the principle of *jus sanguinis* determines nationality by one's blood relationships, as opposed to that of *jus soli* or *jus loci*, which determines nationality by the territory where one is born (Lazo 139). Third, while nationalism is politically powerful, it suffers from "philosophical poverty and incoherence"; it has not produced any "great" thinkers, e.g., Marx or Weber, who have theorized on it extensively (Anderson 5).

For a working definition, I subscribe to Anderson's formulation of the nation as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (6). The nation is imagined, because, while its members will never meet each other, their communion exists in the minds of every individual member (6). It is limited, because beyond its elastic but finite boundaries exist other nations (7). It is sovereign, because it is grounded in the idea of the freedom that came after the

fall of divinely-appointed monarchies (7). And finally, it is a community, because it is envisioned as a comradeship between its members, in spite of the inequalities that may exist between them (7).

In one way, this formulation of the nation as imagined explains the existence of the nationalist project and by nationalist project, I pertain to the persisting attempts of various institutions (which may or may not be affiliated with the government) to promote the notion of a unified nation. Members of one nation will have similarities in their imaginings of the community; however, they will also have differences that may prevent them from working together towards certain goals. But whose goals? And how can the various imaginings be united into one?

In the Philippine context, the nationalist project, as undertaken by the government, has come to rely heavily on the power of literature to unify the people. This is best demonstrated by the enactment of the Rizal Law, also known as Republic Act 1425, more than 50 years ago. The Rizal Law mandates the incorporation of Jose Rizal's life and writings, particularly his novels *Noli Me Tangere* (1887) and *El Filibusterismo* (1891), in high school and college curricula all over the country. The law, however, is not a mere way of memorializing the role of Rizal and his novels in the 1896 revolution. As Caroline Hau observes, it is a political measure that relies on the assumption that the hero's life and writings embody certain ideals that can effect social transformation (*Fictions 2, 8*). Rizal and his novels are entrusted with the burden of fostering a national consciousness by providing knowledge about the country's past, which can lead to an understanding of its present condition and which, in turn, may inspire the people to *make* the nation's future (cf. *Fictions 8*).

The same assumptions about the role that literature plays in nation-building can also be seen, albeit to a lesser extent, in the conception of the Centennial Literary Prize. In its stipulation that every entry submitted be situated around the declaration of independence on June 12, 1898, the Centennial Literary Prize encouraged a knowledge of the past that is, just as importantly, contextualized by the present. It also actualized, through slightly different means, the pedagogical imperative that is also present in the Rizal Law: two years after it won, *My Sad Republic* was jointly published by the Philippine Centennial Commission and the state-funded University of the Philippines Press. Additionally, as if to further attest to the government's hand in the event, the contest also awarded hefty cash prizes to the winners. First placers like Gamalinda received a million pesos each, while second and third placers were awarded three-quarters of a million and half a million pesos, respectively (Groyon). Cash rewards of this size are a rarity in the local literary scene; even the yearly Palanca awards do not hand out sums as large (Groyon).

THE NATION AND THE NARRATIVE

That *My Sad Republic* achieved much success in the Centennial Literary Prize is perhaps not surprising, considering how Gamalinda has won various other awards for his prose and poetry. However, it is also interesting to note how the novel reflects the very theme of the contest, that is, the nation and its formation. Its narrative, in particular, traces to a smaller scale the “beginnings” of the Philippine nation.

My Sad Republic is a re-imagining of the life of Dionisio Magbuela,³ a 19th century faith healer and revolutionary leader who became better known as Isio, Pope of Negros. The young Isio is a worker in a sugar plantation, where he falls in love with the owner’s sole heiress, Asuncion. Their romantic affair, along with the escalating tension between the peasantry and the landed elite, leads to a lifelong rivalry between Isio and Tomas Agustin, a *mestizo* military captain. Agustin eventually marries Asuncion and has her child, Felipe. As the century draws to a close, Isio and Agustin are also forced to engage the American James Smith, the island’s new liberator-turned-conqueror.

A close examination of the narrative reveals what Timothy Brennan refers to as “the necessary components of nation-forming” (66). These components are found in nationalist discourse—not only in the Philippines, but in other countries as well—precisely because they are essential to *creating* or making the “myth” of the nation. In using the term “myth,” Brennan acknowledges the multiple meanings that the word conjures: “myth as distortion or lie; myth as mythology, legend, or oral tradition; myth as literature *per se*; myth as shibboleth” (44). He thus appeals to Bronislaw Malinowski’s functional description of “myth”:

Myth, as a statement of primeval reality which still lives in present-day life and as a justification by precedent, supplies a retrospective pattern of moral values, sociological order, and magical belief . . . The function of myth, briefly, is to strengthen tradition and endow it with a greater value and prestige by tracing it back to a higher, better, more supernatural reality of initial events. (Malinowski 122; qtd. in Worsley 5; qtd. in Brennan 45)

The nation as “myth,” in other words, validates the current social order by repeatedly associating itself with tradition and conferring itself with a sense of origin, i.e., a sense of history. The nation thus constructed contains elements of both “truth” and “fiction.” The narrative of *My Sad Republic*, for example, may rely on mythmaking elements; however, it is also based, albeit loosely, on past events that happened on an *actual* island, Negros, inhabited by an *actual* people.

In *My Sad Republic*, the most salient of the components of nation-formation is “the sense of religious mission with its attendant violence” (Brennan 66). The nationalism the novel often portrays is characterized as messianic (cf. Brennan 59). Incidentally, appeals to the divine are also manifested in the large cultural systems that preceded nationalism, i.e., religion and kinship/kingship (Anderson 4, 12). According to Anderson, religious communities were built around the notion of sacred script-languages that can give access to truth, while dynastic realms were centered on divinely-ordained monarchs (12-22, 36). While the nation purportedly arose from the failure of these two systems, the three remain connected by a common reliance on something *beyond* human—something divine—for legitimacy. The legitimacy acquired is then taken as a permit to perform certain actions and to impose often-arbitrary norms, all beyond the opposition of “lesser” beings who, apparently, do not possess the favor of God. In messianic nationalism, in particular, the action legitimized is that of “saving others,” the “others” being these “lesser” people.

In *My Sad Republic*, this sense of messianism figures prominently in the main protagonist, Pope Isio. Isio gains the confidence of the farmers through his “access” to the saints, whose attention to his prayers allows him to perform miracles, particularly of healing. The people’s faith, coupled with his own unearthly visions, eventually convinces Isio himself to believe that God has chosen him to save the people. Other key characters, while not explicitly motivated by religious belief, are also driven by a desire to “save”: Tomas Agustin imagines himself as “Prometheus, bringing light down to his people” (Gamalinda 69), Felipe outright proclaims himself as the “Savior of the world” (302), and even James Smith believes that “he came to [the Philippine] islands with a greater purpose: to save the people from themselves” (337).

Ironically, the desire to save—to preserve life—is the very thing that causes death. In their zeal to save *their* people, these characters wind up engaging in violent campaigns against whoever is not part of the *chosen* group. In Isio’s case, for example, this means attacking whoever is not a “native” of Negros. But perhaps the most ironic aspect of this idea of messianism is how it can turn on the very people it tries to save. James Smith’s belief in the United States as a chosen nation leads him to “save,” not just *his* people, but also the people of another nation, the Philippines. Messianism becomes “benevolence,” becomes colonialism: in order to save the Filipinos, Smith must force them to submit, which he eventually accomplishes through bloodshed.

This, however, is not accomplished by Smith alone. He comes to dominate Bacolod only through the “treasonous impulses of a ruling clique,” another component of nation-formation (Brennan 66). The traitor is Agustin, who eagerly offers the American army his assistance. Interestingly, Agustin’s betrayal of the revolution is fueled not only by his rivalry with Isio or his own determination to rise above the elite, but also by a desire for *nationhood*, through the establishment of the Cantonal Republic of Negros. His idea of nationhood both echoes and contradicts Isio’s conception of it, at least in terms of its relationship with the United States. Isio naively believes that, for being “born of the same womb” (Gamalinda 276), the United States will both recognize the sovereignty of the local government and offer it protection. Agustin, perhaps just as naively, believes that his collaboration with Smith will merit an acceptance of Negros as a member of the American federation (344-45).

The other elements of mythmaking that Brennan enumerates are, however less pronounced, also documented in *My Sad Republic*. While the newspaper is not a key factor in the narrative, the circulars stealthily distributed among the peasants function in the same way as “the consolidating force of the national press” (Brennan 66). These flyers help the people not only to imagine themselves as a community, but also to act as one in the name of Pope Isio. Ironically, the circulars are later used against Isio when flyers maliciously attributed to him are found with a murdered American soldier, for which the United States declares war against Isio’s republic.

In any case, the “republic” that Isio establishes is a paradox: while Isio’s title as the “Supreme Power of God’s Kingdom on Earth” suggests the rule of one, Isio’s own command to share everything equally (Gamalinda 171)—a command undoubtedly inspired by the experience of inequality and injustice under colonial rule—exhibits “the proto-socialist coloring of the guerilla opposition” (Brennan 66).

The last of the components that Brennan refers to, “the misplaced and naïve solidarities of the fellow traveler” (66), is demonstrated through the young American soldier who lets Martinez, Isio’s right-hand man, escape from his torture cell. While this unnamed character technically belongs to the “enemy” camp, the letter he writes his mother demonstrates the simultaneous connection and contradiction between the themes of exile and nation. The young man writes: “Mother: My duties here are over at last, and I shall be glad to be home for Thanksgiving, far away from this wicked land, where a white man seems to forget that he is human” (Gamalinda 351). On the one hand, the letter is a declaration of his necessary identification with his home – his own nation – the United States. On the other hand, it is also a

recognition of his alienation from his own nation and the necessity of nationhood (cf. Brennan 63), the alienation being a product of his experience as a carrier of violence when he, an American, participated in the torture of Martinez, a Filipino.⁴

Two things must be said about the “components of nation-formation” (Brennan 66) as they appear in *My Sad Republic*. First, while the mere *use* of these components may demonstrate how nationalism is mythmaking, the components *by themselves* already show how the imaginings of the people, whether individually or collectively, play a role in constructing the nation. Second, the components not only emphasize that the nation is imagined, but also show *how* it is imagined to be. Taken together, they illustrate how the various actions, decisions, aspirations and relationships of characters, whether from “inside” or “outside” the nation, come together to form a consciousness of the nation and a desire for its freedom.

THE NATION AND THE FORM

Incidentally, the idea of one nation being constituted by a diversity of elements is also reflected in the novelistic form. The novel exhibits what Mikhail Bakhtin calls *heteroglossia* or the “internal stratification of any single national language into social dialects” (1192). In this sense, the language in the novel is never “standard”; several versions of one language are used, depending on the situation or the social group, e.g., in reading a poem in class, in talking with neighbors, or in praying in church. This idea of diversity within one whole is demonstrated, not only in the distinctive voices of characters, but also in the multiplicity of styles present in the novel. One implication of this is that the novel, as a whole, cannot be identified with a single variant of the language or an individual style. Instead, “the style of a novel is to be found in the combination of its styles; the language of a novel is the system of its ‘languages’” (Bakhtin 1192).

Another important concept for Bakhtin is the dialogic relationships of words, languages, and ideas. These dialogic relationships are best described in the way that the word, for example, is only “individualized and given stylistic shape” through its “living interaction” in an environment of other words, other objects, and other speaking subjects (1202). Uniqueness or individuality is paradoxically made possible only through dependence. The idea of dialogism is also demonstrated in Bakhtin’s explication of the act of understanding. According to Bakhtin, “[u]nderstanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other” (1206). It is therefore important to understand that for Bakhtin, heteroglossia does

not merely involve diversity; it also necessitates interrelationships between variations in order to make this very diversity possible.

One of the ways in which heteroglossia and dialogism are demonstrated in *My Sad Republic* is in its combination of history, the marvelous, and romance. While Gamalinda has been criticized for the liberties he admits to taking in fictionalizing the life of Pope Isio,⁵ the novel remains significant for providing an alternative account of the Philippine-American War, which remains in relative obscurity due, in part, to the U.S. historians who maliciously mislabeled it a mere “insurrection” against “legitimate” American authority.⁶ The novel’s account is also alternative in the sense that conventional Philippine historiography tends to focus on the island of Luzon, preferring to gloss over the events that happened in the host of other islands that are supposed to be part of “the Philippines.” It is only appropriate, then, for the novel to have used elements of the marvelous in contrast with the realism that historical accounts tend to favor. The marvelous realist approach not only allows the text to depict some of the less conventional aspects of folk culture, but it also functions as a way of opposing mainstream knowledge.

The value of marvelous realism, however, does not lie in the complete overthrow of the realist mode. In fact, as Stephen Slemon observes, marvelous realism is characterized by the inability of the two narrative modes to organize themselves into any kind of hierarchy (11). The result is a “sustained opposition [that] forestalls the possibility of interpretive closure through any act of naturalizing the text to an established system of representation” (12). The consequent tension is especially relevant in a country like the Philippines, where centuries under colonial rule have led to a kind of “double vision” within the culture (cf. Slemon 12). This “double vision” is premised on the notion that language conditions how people “see” the world, and the fact that colonization may involve the imposition of a foreign language on an indigenous population (12). The indigenous already “see” in one way, but learning a foreign language causes them to “see” in yet another way; hence, a kind of “double vision” is initiated (12). Slemon posits that this dialectical struggle between two ways of “seeing” is reflected in the marvelous realist text (12), where the struggle or tension between the two narrative modes can elicit questions about how we “see” and how we distinguish between what is “real” and what is “fantastic.”

Two particular instances in *My Sad Republic* portray how even the notion of a “republic” is fantastic. In both cases, the narrative pertains to the perspectives of the peasant Negrenses: “One believed in vampires and gnomes, because one saw them every day. But revolutions and republics were crazy ideas” (Gamalinda 16). “Some said the

messiah would establish not just a church but a democratic republic . . . But others dismissed this as a fantastic notion concocted by minds deprived too long of alcohol or sex” (126). In a moment of apparent self-consciousness, the novel points out that just as it is based on the real and the fantastic, so is its subject matter, the republic—the nation—which is based in both truth and imagination.

One of the most distinct displays of the marvelous in *My Sad Republic* is Pigafetta’s mirror, which presents Isio with images from his own memory and visions of the future (Gamalinda 108, 278, 390). But, apart from its supernatural abilities, the mirror is also an important marker of two different strains of historical influence. First, it is a probable nod towards the “speaking mirror” in Gabriel Garcia Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*,⁷ recalling the novel’s undeniable Latin American influences. The “speaking mirror” is mentioned in the last scene in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, when Aureliano reads about himself reading: “. . . he began to decipher the instant that he was living, deciphering it as he lived it, prophesying himself in the act of deciphering the last page of the parchments, as if he were looking into a speaking mirror” (Márquez 422). Echoing this, Slemon also uses Márquez’s “speaking mirror” as a metaphor of the marvelous realist text: both make us conscious about our ways of “seeing” (12).

Second, Pigafetta’s mirror keeps the narrative connected to the beginnings of the country’s contact with Spain, when Ferdinand Magellan’s voyage led to the “discovery” of the Philippine islands in 1521 (Constantino 16). Antonio Pigafetta was one of the few survivors of the doomed expedition. Soon after his return to Europe, Pigafetta used a diary that he kept during the voyage to write *Primo viaggio intorno al mondo* (First Voyage around the World), an important source of Philippine historiography (Mojares 20-22). As such, *My Sad Republic*’s references to Pigafetta and his mirror also point to the novel’s own status as another form of historiography, one whose marvelous realist form indirectly challenges Pigafetta’s chronicle of the Philippine leg of the expedition. As Resil Mojares notes, Pigafetta’s account is “distinguished by the absence of the fabulous elements found in his narration of America” (35).

The mirror thus forces questions of truth and representation, questions which are also reiterated by the author after the narrative’s conclusion. In a section entitled “Acknowledgments and a Note on Historical Accuracy,” Gamalinda, as previously mentioned in passing, admits that he “took the liberty of fictionalizing [the Pope’s] life as well as his meeting with General Smith [because he] found the obscurity of the Pope’s life an interesting parallel to the obscurity of the Filipino-American

War" (391). However, he also lists down the historical publications that aided his "research" (391). So which aspects of the Pope's life, in particular, are "historical"? Which scenes are "fictionalized"? Most importantly, however, for a person and a war so "obscure," who says which is "true" and which is not?

Late in the story, an answer is offered. "What is true is what we believe," Isio claims (Gamalinda 325).

While my own research has not yielded any information about a specific mirror that Pigafetta could have given to the Queen of Homonhon (cf. Gamalinda 18, 384), the mirror still carries yet another implication. It may be interpreted as a reference to Magellan himself, whom Pigafetta eulogized as "our mirror, our light, our comfort, and our true guide" (Mojares 39). The mirror, then, becomes a symbol of the dubious "gift" of colonialism that marks even the glimpses into the future that it can afford.

Adding another dimension to the novel is the element of romance, which is set in contrast with and at the center of the historical and the marvelous. The love triangle between Isio, Asuncion, and Agustin highlights the "personal" aspects of broader conceptions such as the nation, the historical, and the fantastic. The desires and consequent actions of the three characters arguably drive the revolution as much as the revolution affects the decisions they make. Agustin's determination to destroy the Pope is, for example, motivated by his jealousy of Asuncion's affair with Isio and, at the same time, only made possible by his position as a military officer of the newly installed American government.

The romance, in a sense, shifts the focus from the "whole" to the "parts." This tendency of the narrative to shift from "grander" concerns to more "trivial" ones is not lost on the more scathing critiques of *My Sad Republic*.⁸ On the one hand, it is ironic how the first place winner of a contest that supposedly promotes nationalism can emphasize, possibly in excess, "personal" issues. On the other hand, the construction of the nation as being constituted by a diversity is bound to be problematic. The complex relationship between the nation and its constituents thus lies at the heart of the narrative. This relationship is, incidentally, best explored through the novel's romantic themes, particularly in the depiction of love as inseparable from violence, death, and loss.

THE NATION AND THE INDIVIDUAL

One of the key scenes that reinforces the conflation of love and death occurs early in the narrative, after Isio discovers that Asuncion was raped and impregnated by

Agustin. The narrator describes how Isio reaffirms his love for her: “In the vertigo of confusion everything he said with love came out in a language akin to grief” (82). The bout of lovemaking that follows is mixed with traces of violence and pain, which are also reflected in how the tryst concludes: “He fell exhausted, weeping, and she did a strange thing: she lifted her head a little and bit the hard, firm muscle above his collarbone, gently, prolonging the gesture as though she wanted to remain connected with his body, infinitely” (84).

Moreover, the trysts are repeated over a period of nine nights as a way of conducting a *pasiyam*, the local custom of praying the novena for nine days for the dead, for the unborn child that Asuncion attempts but eventually fails to abort. The child, who grows up to become Felipe, meets his end in yet another demonstration of the correlation between love and death: distracted by days of nonstop lovemaking with his newly pregnant wife, Felipe, along with many other love-stricken peasants, is killed in a surprise attack orchestrated by American soldiers.

A sense of longing and loss, in fact, pervades the entire novel. Love is depicted as an all-consuming force, one that can even drive a person to insanity, as in the case of the American soldier who falls in love with the beautiful Santa Regina. As love for another consumes, so the individual must “die,” sometimes metaphorically, sometimes literally. Death becomes a form of sacrificing one’s self—of giving up one’s most valued possession, the self—for something even more valuable: the beloved (cf. Hau, *Subject* 148).

In the narrative of *My Sad Republic*, the beloved and the nation are one. As the act of loving a person necessitates sacrifice—the “death” of the individual—so does the act of loving the nation. As Hau observes, “The notion of sacrifice is an act of generosity that is inseparable from love of country: It is as much an incitement to patriotic love as it is a consequence of that love” (*Subject* 149). Before we can proceed, however, it will be useful to analyze how the nation and the beloved are conflated in the novel. It is important to note that this conflation also occurs in Rizal’s *Noli*.

Widely considered as a masterpiece of Filipino literature—indeed, for all the importance accorded to it—the *Noli* inevitably casts shadows over our contemporary novels (cf. Groyon), particularly over those so entwined in the project of nation-formation. One of the more striking similarities shared by the *Noli* and *My Sad Republic* is the personification of the nation through the central female characters: Maria Clara, for the *Noli*, and Asuncion, for *My Sad Republic*. The two women share

similar characteristics: they both possess an ethereal beauty, symbolize wealth and social prestige, and appear to be more concerned with their private lives.⁹

That both are used to personify the nation is naturally not without problems. As Hau observes, Maria Clara's

. . . feminized, eroticized inscription . . . differs markedly from the public inscription of a masculine disciplined, patriotic body in that the romantic inscription, though undoubtedly politically significant (because it has its political uses), is not itself seen as capable of generating nationalist signification. In fact, such inscription of the female body in the *Noli* is seen as patently antinational becoming a signifier of the *lack* of "nationalist" political consciousness. (*Subject* 161)

Because the character of Asuncion suffers from the same inscription, *My Sad Republic* also faces the same problems. However, to discuss the deeper implications of this comparison would be beyond the scope of this paper. For now, I will be focusing on the representation of the nation through Asuncion.

One of the most significant ways Asuncion parallels the nation is through the passionate devotion that she incites from a variety of individuals, who may or may not have honorable intentions towards her. The desire that she inspires, however, also highlights the illusory aspect of that very desire. For the entire narrative, none of the men fighting over Asuncion ever truly wins. Agustin may have married Asuncion, but she remains distant throughout their years together. Neither does Isio fare any better. His relationship with her is best described by a conversation Isio has with his dead friends, when he asks them about his future with Asuncion:

"She will be yours but not yours," said Mojica.

"Her sorrow will be your sorrow," said San Juan.

"Remember her in love and war," said Nolasco. (*Gamalinda* 107)

Isio, in other words, is doomed to simultaneously share in her pains and experience his own pains from not "having" her. He will perpetually be looking for her in the "labyrinth of rooms" (*Gamalinda* 96) in her grandmother's mansion. Asuncion, like the nation, has become an illusion.

Another scene from the narrative further reinforces the illusory character of Asuncion, albeit from a different angle. The name "Asuncion," as it happens, is only one of a hundred and seventeen names Asuncion was given by her mother. While the multiplicity of names can be a reference to the heterogeneous composition of the nation, the subsumption of the many into one also has other implications.

Convenience is clearly a deciding factor, and yet the particular choice of *the one* name also reveals something else, as is highlighted in the following exchange between Asuncion and Isio:

“Don’t be so presumptuous. Besides, your grandmother calls you after the Assumption, which isn’t even mentioned anywhere in the book.”

“Says who?”

“I say so,” Isio said, puffing his chest out. “The Bible doesn’t talk about the Blessed Mother’s burial or her assumption. We just guess she rose up to heaven, like her son, because her womb carried God. I mean, it’s a special womb. It couldn’t be left to rot on earth. And in the book of Revelations, there’s a woman clothed in the sun, with a crown of twelve stars. We say it’s the Mother of God, and that she ascended to heaven. But we’re just guessing.”

“All right then,” she said. “I don’t exist. All the better for me.” (Gamalinda 40-41)

On the one hand, it seems that in trying to bring the many under one name, Asuncion has ceased to exist. On the other hand, we must also remember that Asuncion is an actual character in the narrative.

Another important aspect of Asuncion’s character, which recalls not just Maria Clara but also Rizal and the *Noli* in general, is the disease that she inherits from the women in her family. The ailment, reminiscent of the social cancer with which Rizal diagnoses the nation in the *Noli*,¹⁰ is inescapable and, as the narrative suggests, continues to quietly exist among us. Asuncion may have succumbed to it, but it has been likely passed on to her anonymous grandchild, whom Felipe fathered through Santa Regina.

Interestingly, the disease is shrouded in mystery and never conclusively identified. It is sometimes referred to as a curse, although it may as likely be madness or depression. What the narrative frequently suggests, however, is that the disease is one of the mind or the heart. Near the end, Asuncion believes it to be “not being able to love” (Gamalinda 368), which is, in short, apathy. The diagnosis is particularly appropriate if we consider the novel’s nationalist leanings. In implying that the nation is “sick” because of apathy—the apathy of the people—the novel also reveals the cure, perhaps, for its seemingly untenable and contradictory existence: love for country.

But does not Asuncion actually suffer from an overabundance of love, from too many men who love her? Perhaps not quite, if we refer to our earlier discussion of

how love entails sacrifice. Neither Pope Isio nor Tomas Agustin completely surrenders his own will for Asuncion's happiness. In fact, while both may have been initially driven by desire, they eventually become more engrossed in their own rivalry than in their love for Asuncion, the very reason of their conflict. The patriotic love that the novel calls for, thus, is qualified by the notion of sacrifice, the ceding of the individual will. This, however, always begs the question: *whose* will is surrendered to *whose* will?

On a related note, the theme of "saving," as it was previously discussed, also applies to Asuncion. Isio, in particular, alternates between the torment of not being able to save her and the hope that he can heal her. In the end, however, Asuncion is destroyed not just by her sickness, but by the war engendered by the men who desire her. In the same way, the formation of the nation is hampered by the very same diversity of individuals who so strive for its actualization.

According to Hau, "nations and nationalism often rely on the ideology of the unique, free, self-reflecting, and self-determining individual" (*Subject 6*). In other words, the nation is not only dependent on the agency of the individuals who constitute it; it is, in itself, envisioned as an individual, an autonomous organic unity. The construction of the nation, then, is inherently problematic. The nation cannot achieve a perfect unity of individuals precisely because of the *independence* that so defines these individuals. As Hau points out, "oppositional forms of nationalist struggle actually call into question the coherence, autonomy, and sovereignty of the individual" (6).

Here lies the paradox of nationalism: it promises the people freedom from foreign domination in exchange for their own individual liberties, for the willingness to relinquish individuality in favor of national interest. But what is national interest? As the fates of the "messiahs" of *My Sad Republic* demonstrate, whatever the definition of national interest must be, it cannot be exclusively based on a single agenda.

Tomas Agustin survives the war and, to some extent, succeeds in acquiring power through his collaboration with the American government. But he also ends up the unhappiest of all: his ambition has driven his own family to abandon him. Felipe does not fare any better, dying before his child is even born. On the surface, Felipe's chief flaw appears to be his naive belief in the possibility of uniting the warring factions of Agustin and Isio. However, as the novel reveals that he joins Isio's army primarily because of Santa Regina, it becomes clear that Felipe, like his father, is mainly concerned with himself, his abilities, and his loves. Felipe mirrors the *Noli's*

Crisostomo Ibarra, whose patriotic plans also fail due to his preoccupation with his personal life (Hau, *Subject* 153-57, 163-64).

While Pope Isio's aspirations may have been for a collective, his crusade remains marked by its exclusivity. In his quest for "ethnic purity," Pope Isio winds up isolated from the rest of society. The "devil of industry" (Gamalinda 171) which he attempts to banish, banishes him instead, to spend many of his last years up in the mountains with the few comrades he has left. Later, he is captured and imprisoned. Lastly, Captain James Smith may have succeeded in colonizing the island; however, he also fails in that his own loyalties, as an officer of the American army, leads him to fight *against*, instead of *for*, the people of Negros.

THE NATION AND THE WORD

Ironically, Smith's agenda is propelled by the commitment to justice and equality expressed in the United States constitution, a document which strangely inspires both Isio and Agustin. I say "strangely" because the constitution is written in English, yet appears to be comprehensible to the uneducated Isio. Isio, in fact, sees through a friar's intentionally skewed translation of it and even makes the appropriate corrections himself (Gamalinda 177-79, 226-27). The constitution, in short, appears to transcend even the barriers of language.

The ascribed transcendence of the word carries several implications. First, it allows Isio to formulate an even stronger vision of what *his* nation should be like, by virtue of comparison to another one (cf. Hau *Fictions* 94-99). Next, it functions as a portent of the imperialist power of America that will come to work through the infiltration of the consciousness of the educated and uneducated alike. Lastly, the transcendence of the word is one of the novel's many conscious attempts to validate its *own* importance in the project of nation-building.

Related instances of self-reference are found early in and at the very end of the novel. In the first chapter, the narrator recounts that Isio "always believed, until the age of sixteen, that he had no beginning and no end" (Gamalinda 11). The import of his sixteenth birthday is told two pages previous: it is when Isio begins to see *signs* of the end of the world (9). Everything, then, begins and ends—indeed, exists—in signs. The novel closes with an echo of the same pronouncement, but focuses on a particular kind of signification:

...[Isio] saw one last figure looking back at him, at the history he was about to close – he looked and he saw you, and in the darkness that was fast enclosing

him he was filled with joy, because life is endless, its mysteries will never entirely be revealed, and *in the beginning and in the end is the word*. (Gamalinda 390, emphasis added)

Thus does the novel set the word and, by extension, itself, the novel, above all. In referencing John 1:1,¹¹ the novel uses the same appeal to divine association that its characters make in order to acquire legitimacy. Moreover, by speaking directly to the reader, the narrator ably blurs the line between the fictional text and the “real” world—the two now belong to the same plane, and the reader is no more “real” than the text is.

The importance of the word can also be deduced through the association made between silence and death. “Silence: a boneyard of words,” Gamalinda describes (281). “The universe of words always seemed to him a fascinating, forbidding territory, open only to a privileged few. And silence: what other world was that, and who lived in it? The dead” (284). On the same note, Isio gains recognition in the sugar plantation after he apparently raises Martinez from death, a miracle he accomplishes through words: he grants Martinez forgiveness and commands him to live (27). The effect on the farmers and their families, as well as on Isio himself, is described in the following excerpt:

Days later they started referring to [Isio] as “the healer.” He realized that they clung to any little thing he said like gospel truth. Soon, he got used to [the] idea of dispensing among them little nuggets of comfort, small tokens of hope. He became confident, articulate, even sometimes glib. He found himself telling them, “Yes, I will ask the Father for His help on your behalf.”

He told them this was all he could do, and this was what healing meant. It was not the healing of the body, which willed itself to heal if it so desired. It was that which happened afterward, for which none had words: the mending of the soul shared by all those who witnessed the possibility of forgiveness, and therefore of redemption. Maybe he even started to believe his own words. (Gamalinda 29)

Healing, then, comes with the word, because with the word comes hope and forgiveness. The final scene between Isio and Asuncion also describes the healing power of words:

There was not much time and only one medicine, the medicine of truth and words, could cure her: not her body, but her spirit. It was the one medicine for which there was no explanation and no guarantee, but it was the only miracle he had left and he had always wondered how it could save others but never himself . . . Now he was surprised to discover how easily he found it to say

them, and surprised also at how the words conveyed such a dark and irremediable melancholy.

"I have always loved you," he said, his voice shaking.

She closed her eyes and let the words sink into her blood and she didn't speak but the words seemed to mollify her. She smiled, remembering.
(Gamalinda 369)

The excerpt implies three things about words. First, in order to heal, words need to be spoken by one person and heard by another, as is also expressed in an earlier scene where Isio asks Martinez to hear his confession (Gamalinda 148). In order to heal, connections between people must be made. Second, words cause us to remember. A separate scene in which Isio cures a young girl actually shows how healing comes through "the act of remembering" (135). But the "act of remembering," the act of recollecting and knowing the past, also happens to be the reason behind the third point: words that heal involve "a dark and irremediable melancholy" (369).

The narrative, in fact, frequently associates sadness with knowing. Isio meets a group of farmers who traveled the world and "came back with more knowledge, and therefore with more sadness" (Gamalinda 15). Martinez also makes the same connection when he tells Isio, "That's why you're sadder than us all. Reading does that. Look at me, illiterate as a cow, but happy" (148). The sadness is inspired, in a sense, by the comparisons that arise from knowing more about the world "outside" and comparing it to one's own reality (cf. *Hau Fictions* 94-99). The sadness also appears to be unending, considering the seemingly unstoppable desolation rooted in a continuing history of conflicts engendered by self-interested individuals.

The title of the novel may thus be explained. The "republic" finds its beginnings in the word, because only the word makes relationships, connections and communities possible. However, the republic is "sad" because it is haunted by its history of divisions, a history accessible only through the word. And yet the word must perpetually be written, because it is the only way in which we may forgive and be forgiven. In this way, the novel—the word—secures its place, not only in the construction of a "broken" nation, but also in the healing of its people.

THE NATION AND THE WRITER

The primacy given to the word goes back to the author and his personal agenda in writing a narrative that privileges itself and, arguably, by extension, himself. While it would be impractical to reduce the value of the work to whatever its author's

intentions may be, we must also remember that, like Rizal before him, Gamalinda engages in the invention of the “Filipino” nation through the novel (cf. Hau, *Fictions* 49). As Hau points out, the project is ultimately a political decision (49).

In Gamalinda’s case, the idea of purporting to speak for an entire nation is even more complicated by the fact that he is based in New York.¹² Contemporary thought may rarely bother with questions about how “realistic” or “true-to-life” a literary work is but, still, we cannot help but ask: how can someone who lives outside the nation represent it in writing? What—or *whose*—nation is he representing?

Once again, we have to draw parallels with Rizal, who also wrote the *Noli* and the *Fili* while in Europe. Moreover, both Rizal and Gamalinda wrote novels inaccessible to the Filipino masses of their respective times. Rizal’s novels were not only banned in the country when they were published, but were also written in Spanish, a language that most 19th century Filipinos were unfamiliar with. One would think that Gamalinda’s *My Sad Republic*—written in English, an officially designated national language—would have more readers, but outside of the academe and local literary circles, who reads *My Sad Republic*, a quasi-historical marvelous realist text, today? Who is Gamalinda writing *for*, then?

These questions serve to highlight the inevitable weakness, not only of *My Sad Republic*, but also of the novel in general. Any attempt to write the nation will always be incomplete, because the writer will constantly be limited by his or her position. There will always be individuals and groups that will be unrepresented, underrepresented, and/or misrepresented. To successfully signify the nation in its entirety is an impossibility, especially because the nation is, after all, imagined, and imagined *by* a diversity *to be* a diversity. The sheer vastness of such a community is ultimately unknowable to one.

I do not, however, wish to deny the “validity” or the political power of literature, particularly of the novel. While the nation-state, through the Centennial Literary Prize, may have used literature in order to promote nationalism, the relationship between the nation and the novel is not as one-sided as it may initially seem. The nation-state may have relied on the novel to advance its own ideal of what the Filipino national community should be like; however, as the structure and the narrative of the novel suggests, a monolithic representation of it is impossible.

Moreover, as Brennan asserts, “Nations... are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role” (49). It is the imaginative quality of literature—the openness

to styles, ideas and, just as importantly, interpretations—that allows people to envision themselves as one nation. The nation and the novel, as a particularly imaginative kind of literature, are, therefore, mutually constitutive of each other. It may thus be productive to *continually* consider the limitations of one in light of the other, especially because both are involved in the political act of representation, and because every reading and every analysis—my own included—of both nation and novel are bound to elide certain nuances, differences, and truths.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ From the Foreword (xi) of *My Sad Republic* (2000). Cristóbal was the Chairman of the Centennial Literary Prize.
- ² The other winners in this category are Charlson Ong's *Embarrassment of Riches* (2000), which won second place, and Alfred Yuson's *Voyeurs and Savages* (1998) and Azucena Grajo Uranza's *A Passing Season* (2002), which tied for third. The winning works were cited in p. 50 n. 31 of Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo's *Fabulists and Chroniclers* (University of the Philippines Press, 2008). Hidalgo was part of the board of judges for the novel in English category of the Centennial Literary Prize. Notably, *My Sad Republic* also won the National Book Award when it was published in 2000.
- ³ While Gamalinda uses the surname "Magbuela," historical accounts differ on what it really was. Renato Constantino, for example, uses "Magbuelas" in pp. 276-78 of *A Past Revisited*. Vicente Groyon also notes the same inconsistency in accounts about the Pope's name in his review of the Centennial Literary Prize winners.
- ⁴ For a more insightful exploration of the effects of American colonization of the Philippines to the American identity, see Jennifer McMahon's *Dead Stars: American and Philippine Literary Perspectives on the American Colonization of the Philippines* (University of the Philippines Press, 2011).
- ⁵ In p. 607 of his essay, R. Kwan Laurel notes that Gamalinda's portrayal of Pope Isio as "nothing more than a spurned lover" has led to the trivialization of the historical Pope. Groyon makes a similar assertion in his review.
- ⁶ See note 1 of Luzviminda Franciso's article about the Philippine-American War, p. 14.
- ⁷ As an aside, Márquez actually mentions an incident about a mirror in Pigafetta's accounts; however, the incident does not occur in the Philippines. In his Nobel Lecture, Márquez states, "[Pigafetta] described how the first native encountered in Patagonia was confronted with a mirror, whereupon that impassioned giant lost his senses to the terror of his own image." Mojares also cites Márquez in "The Islands According to Pigafetta," p. 21.
- ⁸ See, for example, Laurel.
- ⁹ Hau provides a more detailed discussion of these characteristics of Maria Clara in *On the Subject of the Nation*, pp. 157-58.

¹⁰ Additionally, Charles Derbyshire's 1912 translation of the *Noli* is entitled "The Social Cancer."

¹¹ "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." (KJV)

¹² In his critique, Laurel goes so far as to accuse Gamalinda of merely using the country "as exotic material to please New York, the center of his world" (612).

WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised ed. London and New York: Verso, 1991. Print.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail M. "Discourse in the Novel." *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Ed. Vincent B. Leitch. New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. 1186-1220. Print.
- Brennan, Timothy. "The National Longing for Form." *Nation and Narration*. Ed. Homi Bhabha. New York: Routledge, 1990. 44-70. Print.
- Constantino, Renato. *The Philippines: A Past Revisited*. Quezon City: Tala Publishing, 1975. Print.
- Francisco, Luzviminda. "The First Vietnam: The Philippine-American War of 1899." *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 5.4 (1973): 2-16. PDF file.
- Gamalinda, Eric. *My Sad Republic*. Quezon City: Philippine Centennial Commission and U of the Philippines P, 2000. Print.
- Groyon, Vicente III G. "Hopeful, Not Happy: The Centennial Literary Prize-Winning Novels in English." *PALH Book Reviews*. n.p., n.d. Web. 16 Sept. 2013.
- Hau, Caroline S. *Necessary Fictions: Philippine Literature and the Nation, 1946-1980*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila UP, 2000. Print.
- . *On the Subject of the Nation: Filipino Writings from the Margins, 1981-2004*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila UP, 2004. Print.
- King James Version. *Bible Gateway*. Harper Collins Christian Publishing Inc. Web. 15 Oct. 2013.
- Laurel, R. Kwan. "A Hundred Years after the Noli: The Three Centennial Novels in English." *Philippine Studies* 51.4 (2003): 599-643. PDF file.
- Lazo, Ricardo S. Jr. "Citizenship and Suffrage (Articles IV and V)." *Philippine Governance and the 1987 Constitution*. Manila: Rex Bookstore, 2006. 137-50. Print.
- Malinowski, Bronislaw. "Myth in Primitive Psychology." *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*. Ed. Robert Redfield. Boston: Beacon P, 1948. PDF file.
- Márquez, Gabriel García. "Nobel Lecture: The Solitude of Latin America". *Nobel prize.org*. Nobel Media AB, 2013. Web. 6 Oct 2013.

---. *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Trans. Gregory Rabassa. London: Penguin Books, 1973. PDF file.

Mojares, Resil B. "The Islands According to Pigafetta." *Waiting for Mariang Makiling: Essays in Philippine Cultural History*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila UP, 2002. 20-51. Print.

Slemon, Stephen. "Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse." *Canadian Literature* 116 (Spring 1988): 9-24. PDF file.

Worsley, Peter. "Introduction: The Creation of the World." *The Third World: A Vital New Force in International Affairs*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1970. 1-20. Print.

Jaimee Faith J. Santos <jaimeefaithsantos@gmail.com> is pursuing an M.A. in Comparative Literature at the University of the Philippines Diliman, where she also graduated with a B.A. in Film and Audio-Visual Communication. She is currently interested in Philippine fiction in English.