

THE SINS AND SONS OF DIMAS: SPATIAL HISTORIES IN VICENTE GARCIA GROYON'S *THE SKY OVER DIMAS*

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History is only geography stretched over time.

—Lee Blessing, *A Walk in the Woods: A Play in Two Acts*

VICENTE GARCIA GROYON'S *The Sky Over Dimas*, although set in Negros after the Marcos regime, shuttles back and forth in time as it traces the lineage of the Torrecarion family. Thus, also found in the novel are events during the Japanese Occupation and the Spanish colonial era. The plot of the novel is quite simple: George, upon the realization that the life he had led thus far is one of lies, murder, and betrayal, has decided to retreat to Dimas to search for and tell “the Truth,” once and for all, about the Torrecarion family; he does this by tracing their ancestry. Rafael, living in Manila after getting his education at the University of the Philippines Diliman, is summoned by Margie back to Bacolod to get his father George out of Hacienda Dimas. The form of the novel is thus the main narrative—Rafael going back to Dimas to rescue his father—alternating with George’s testimony written in italics as fragmented memoirs.

The Sky Over Dimas, however, is not just a personal project of telling the story of a chaotic family. The novel’s tracing of the Torrecarion lineage is firmly rooted in history. It is history that continues to haunt the Torrecarions, and it is the very telling of this history that the novel grapples with. More importantly, *The Sky Over Dimas* deals with the story of the Carol-ans. The novel tells the story of Faustino, a Spanish merchant in

the late 19th century, who was complicit in the massacre of the Carol-an tribe. Faustino also happens to be the patriarch of the Torrecarions, the tumultuous and cursed elite family that is the subject of the novel.

In the narrative present, the Torrecarions are George Torrecarion, his wife, Margie Jarabas, and their son Rafael; Rafael's brother, Rodel Torrecarion, is Margie's son with another man, also named Rodel. The Torrecarions and the Jarabases are the owners of two of the largest haciendas in the island of Negros—Hacienda Salvi of the Jarabases and Hacienda Dimas of the Torrecarions. Both haciendas are located outside the city while the family of George Torrecarion and Margie Jarabas lives in a manor in Bacolod.

In this paper, I argue that *The Sky Over Dimas* interrogates the construction of national history, and that this interrogation is rooted in spatiality. I shall point out the problematic constructions of history that Groyon's novel deals with and show how the novel uses space and place to contest these constructions. The first part will analyze the spatiality of a place which gives rise to specific historical processes, while the second section will locate history in place; the paper will conclude by analyzing notions of history and space/place that emerge when Bacolod is juxtaposed vis-à-vis Manila.

SPACES THAT SPEAK: HISTORY AS RUMOR

In her essay "History as Rumor: The Political Fantasy of the Negrense Elite in Vicente Groyon's *The Sky Over Dimas*," Mayel P. Martin places the novel within the genre of historiographic metafiction. As a novel belonging to this genre, *The Sky Over Dimas* embodies the idea that "history is non-referential but discursive, already an interpretation in its narrativization of events, and therefore, ideological" (13). Thus, there is no way of arriving at an objective historical truth—nor does this truth exist. History, in historiographic metafictional texts, is provisional. In the case of *The Sky Over Dimas*, Martin argues that the novel "assert[s] . . . the impossibility of arriving at fact or truth when its expression can never really prove itself to be a faithful medium" (25). This is the first problem in the construction of history that the novel deals with: a history that claims to be constructed out of objective and empirical material.

For Martin, the novel arrives at a historical narrative (that does not purport to be objective) through rumor: “In the novel, gossip, fabrication, rumors, and telling crowd the narration and are construed to be one and the same provisional operation In fact, the novel constantly refuses to verify things as factual despite its prefatory statements ‘fact is’ or ‘truth is’ and qualifies most of the incidents surrounding the family’s stories as gossip or speculation” (25-26). For instance, in one part of George’s accounts, he tells how Faustino came to Negros:

he was a boy of 18 when he arrived, but he could have been brought here on a prison boat for all we know, and there isn’t much documentation about him until much much later, when at 34 he married a local girl, Genoveva Vadlit By then he had a vast tract of land to his name, how it came to his possession no one knows, and was producing sugarcane for the Empire. This is where the Truth begins if you can call it that. (Groyon 26)

Immediately, George writes a “contradiction” to the Truth:

Stories were told by people, one to the other, this is true, but the stories were all [Faustino’s] own making. All of them. He claimed he had begun working at the docks and worked his way inland, until he got to the mountains. Little anecdotes dropped here and there for everyone’s benefit, embellished with each retelling by admirers, enemies, envious gossip-mongers, *until all of it took on the patina of Truth, by dint of having been repeated for so long.*

Truth is this: no one knows, not even me. (26-27, emphasis mine)

At the end of this account, George Torrecarion adds: “Speculation is the only thing that keeps my family history coherent, I find, in the absence of any truly reliable documentation” (31).

In the novel, therefore, rumor is not distinct from truth; history is not constructed out of objectively truthful data. One arrives at truth by the proliferation and concatenation of rumors. We must, however, go further and ask: what makes possible the construction of history out of rumors?

The Bacolod in which the novel is set is one that is in the process of transitioning—albeit not clearly delineated—from one economic mode of

production to another: from feudalism to industrial capitalism. In the beginning of the novel, we are told that “the farms that had been left to George and Margie by their parents, which George then had to manage under the supervision of his father Raul, were buckling under the full weight of the Philippine sugar industry’s slow, majestic collapse” (3). Later we find a different Bacolod which materializes through Rafael’s perspective as he drives out of Bacolod city, on his way to Dimas. He “cruised through the streets of Bacolod, marveling again at how much it had changed in just six years” (90). The changes in the city are: “the Philippine Planter Banks, whose preeminence over the Bacolod skyline mirrored its central role in the lives of the island’s residents,” a commercial center, “identical one story buildings that resembled trains,” and many other various businesses (92). This leads Rafael to conclude that “soon there would be little to distinguish Bacolod from Metro Manila or Cebu” (95). Feudalism is crumbling and industrial capitalism is on its way.

This shift from one mode of production to another produces a unique spatial organization of the city. Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* explains that space is actively produced by social relations and is not a simple static entity. “If space is produced,” writes Lefebvre, “if there is a productive process, then we are dealing with *history*” (46, emphasis in the original). This is where the link between space and historical materialism lies:

the passage from one mode of production to another is of the highest theoretical importance for our purposes, for it results from contradictions in the social relations of production which cannot fail to leave their mark on space and indeed to revolutionize it. Since, *ex hypothesi*, each mode of production has its own particular space, *the shift from one mode to another must entail the production of a new space*” (46).

It is the spatial organization of Bacolod that gives rumor the capacity to construct history.

Rumor travels in space; the transmission of information from one person to another entails the question of proximity and distance. It is the physical intimacy of Bacolod in the novel that gives inertia to the rumor mill. Such a physically intimate space may be attributed to the

shift in the mode of production: with the collapse of the sugar industry, the haciendas, located outside the city, cease to be the nexus of social life and the spatial center of the island; the city, in turn, is on the verge of capitalism, thereby becoming a space in which the population is concentrated. This is why all of Bacolod knows of the Torrecarrions despite their relegation to the fringes of Negros society.

Bacolod's microscopic view of the Torrecarions is evident in the establishment of the state of things in Bacolod found at the beginning of the novel. In Bacolod everyone is up-to-date with the Torrecarion drama. Rafael, at this point in the novel, is already living in Manila. He receives news about his family through his friend, Emil who calls him every so often. On one such phone call, Emil tells Rafael of his father's present "condition": "Rumor had it that George was no longer seen in and around Bacolod because he had moved down south to Hacienda Dimas, the Torrecarion plantation, and was living there with a single farm laborer for help. Emil paused before adding, a woman" (Groyon 7). Upon hearing this, Rafael immediately thinks that surely, "all of Negros knew about this latest wrinkle in the Torrecarion saga" (7). As a matter of fact, the status quo in Negros is so distressing to Rafael that his decision to move to Manila was, for him, an act of "rising above the ugliness of Bacolod's rumor mills" (7). But there is no escape. "Bacolod . . . was fully aware of each development as it happened" (8). Therefore, the hacienda (and, by extension, the elite), once the locus of power and history, now becomes an entity whose history is subject to the rumor mill of the entire city made up of the working class.

So powerful is this spatial organization that the process of constructing history which it engenders—history as rumor—trumps George Torrecarion's truth-telling. (This however should not be taken as an invalidation of George's accounts; it should instead be read as a way of suggesting the limitations of such accounts.) As mentioned earlier, the novel alternates between the main narrative (Rafael going to Dimas to get George) and George's account of the history of the Torrecarions written in italics. The novel concludes with the italicized part but it does not seem to be written or told by George. An omniscient narrator, instead, tells what happened after Rafael's journey to Dimas and his return to Manila. A few pages beforehand, however, we get a hint at who might be

narrating the novel's end: "The continuing soap opera starring George Torrecarion died shortly after he did, but there remained a motley assortment of Bacolod residents who could lay claim to a "George story" that they retold whenever the topic of the family arose, as it would without fail for years to come" (206). George's accounts, in which can be found part of Negros history, is eventually, as the novel foreshadows, picked up by Bacolod and narrated by them, embedded with new meaning. Is this not a form of agency given to those oppressed by the elite families—such as the Torrecarions to whom George belongs?

The spatial reorganization of Bacolod, therefore, which is the result of the shift from feudalism to industrial capitalism, not only interrogates the "objective" construction of history but questions *who* writes history as well. Rumor as a result of this spatial organization is appropriated by the working class as a means of constructing their own history. It is the laborers, the servants, the spectators that keep the rumor mill going. In the novel therefore, it is the working class that, finally and always, tells history. This shift in power is made possible by the spatial reorganization of Bacolod, which is a result of Bacolod's shift in economic mode of production.

This reading of the novel differs greatly from Martin's essay which I use quite extensively to bridge the connection between space and rumor-as-history. Perhaps, such disparity can be attributed to Martin's framework—a Marxist and genre-oriented approach—that deems the novel a failure for perpetuating an "elitist fantasy" which is "[the] denial and also a justification of [the elite's] historical role in the perpetuation of the unjust feudal dynamics of sugar production in Negros" (Martin 30). A spatial approach, however, shows that this is not the case: looking at the spatiality of Bacolod as depicted in the novel yields an analysis that "redress[es] the balance of the historical record of writing histories of the excluded, those relegated permanently to history's dark areas" (McHale in Martin 8). In addition, it is quite interesting that Martin states historical fiction's goal of rectifying the construction of history while she fails to mention in any way whatsoever the narrative of the Maghats—an extremely crucial part of the novel—in her analysis. This will be the focus of the next section.

BURYING AND UNEARTHING THE PAST: HISTORY IN PLACE

Implicit in the novel's depiction of the spatial organization of Bacolod, is the acknowledgement of what was once an impenetrable hegemony of the landed elite of Negros. A reading of *The Sky Over Dimas* cannot fail to discuss this hegemonic rule which finds its way in the very form of the novel. That the novel tells the history of Negros by tracing the lineage of its most powerful elite family suggests that history is inseparable from class. Furthermore, in George's account of the genealogy of the Torrecarions, he includes Faustino's handwritten book, *A Chronicle of My Life and Works As Occurred on the New and Young Island of the Dark Natives As Remembered and Set Down By the Honorable Faustino Torrecarion y Satander Resident of Said Island*; George describes the book as a journal, a collection of memories by Faustino written in archaic Spanish (Groyon 24). More importantly, George mentions that its contents, especially Faustino's version of his arrival in the island, is one that is known by all of Negros (26). One wonders why all of Negros must be knowledgeable of one Spanish man's story and, subsequently, this man's descendants. This is the novel's way of foregrounding the elite's hegemony: the construction of history of Negros is inescapably framed by socioeconomic class.

George Torrecarion's account of his family—and Negros'—history eventually leads back to a place: Hacienda Dimas. Dimas is the center of gravity of the novel: it is where George, in his search for "the Truth," goes back to, and it is where Rafael, despite his resolution to never return to Bacolod, is eventually pulled back in and discovers the truth about his family. As George aptly puts it: Hacienda Dimas is "where it all began, and where it should all have stayed. Ground zero. [The Torrecarions] had no business leaving this place and exposing [themselves] to the world . . . I've come back and I'm going to stay. Home again, home again" (12). By tying all events to Hacienda Dimas, the novel locates history in place. Dimas is an example of what Philip Ethington calls *topoi* or places where the past is inscribed (483). The novel thus acknowledges that Dimas, one of "the largest tracts of farmland in Negros Occidental" which was "established in the mid-19th century by the Torrecarion patriarch Faustino" (Groyon 142), is

not just “a mere patch of ground, a bare stretch of earth, a sedentary set of stones” (Casey in Ethington 482). Dimas is a place which, to borrow from Ethington, “gathers” and “keeps” history.

Dimas is where history is buried. In George’s accounts the reader towards the end of the novel finds out that the origins of the hacienda is linked to the massacre of the Maghat tribe who lived in the Karul-an Hills. The Maghat is one of the indigenous peoples whom the Spanish friars sought out as part of their evangelical mission. For the mission to succeed the Maghat would have to move closer to the pueblo system established by the Spaniards. For the merchants during this time, one of whom was Faustino, the migration of the Maghats meant bringing closer to the majority of the population what was once an inaccessible and thus desirable source of profit. Therefore, “[the merchants] spread false stories about the Maghat, that they were violent and uncivilized, that their pagan rituals were bloody and barbaric, and hinted at cannibalism and human sacrifice” (Groyon 180). Later on, “[t]wo young girls were violently raped and murdered in the poblacion” but the rapists were never identified; however, “through several eye-witness testimonies, the blame was laid on the Maghat” (180). These eyewitnesses were never revealed either. The sequence of events led Governor Saravia to believe the accusation that it was the Maghats who raped the young girls. “Saravia, true to form, flew into a rage and declared war on the unsuspecting tribe” (180). The Maghats fought until their weapons and bodies allowed them to, but when they saw their leader Manyabog fall, “the Maghat retreated and did the unexpected. All the remaining members of the tribe crowded into their huts, which they set on fire” (180).

George’s account tells us where Faustino fits in the entire murder. Faustino “finally resurfaces in the story” after the death of the Maghats which occurred in the year 1856. George finds a document dated 1857 which is “an official document of the Spanish crown, with the requisite seals and signatures, bestowing a modest tract of land identified only as the plains immediately west of the hills known as the Carolinas, to Faustino Torrecarion in return for services rendered to the crown which are not detailed” (181). Thus, Hacienda Dimas, as George hauntingly puts it, stands on “stolen, bloodied land” (182).

The seemingly personal project of tracing the genealogy of the Torrecarions uncovers the history of Negros which from the outset is already besmirched with murder and injustice. This genealogical act is a device which the novel uses in order to show that it is in and from place where one “can find all human phenomena originally arising” (Ethington 483). By going back to the very first Torrecarion, Faustino, what the novel in fact presents is the unraveling of history in place. Place, once again, as in Cruz-Lucero’s *La India*, holds history. *Placing* history reveals that the history of the landed elite is made possible at the cost of an entire tribe. Since the “legacy” of these hacenderos is one built upon a massacre, as uncovered by placing history, *The Sky Over Dimas*, therefore, undermines history that is constructed according to the ideology of socioeconomic class (i.e., the elite).

Placing history may be considered part of what Paul Carter calls a *spatial history*. This is a “history that discovers and explores the lacuna left by imperial history” (376). It is not enough to identify these lacunae. Spatial history also “recognizes that the spatiality of historical experience evaporates before the imperial gaze” (376). *The Sky Over Dimas* does not stop at *locating* forgotten history in place; the novel resists this “evaporation” of history by *reclaiming* place as well. In a powerful scene towards the end of the novel, the reader is told that “the manor on Dimas continued to stand, along with its attendant structures, in the middle of a property that was gradually *reclaimed by the jungle that crept down from the Karul-an Hills*” (Groyon 211, emphasis mine). This passage may be read as a symbolic reassertion of the spatiality of history. It evinces an important paradox: while time moves along, place and space remember. The land stolen by the elite through massacre does not remain silent in the past; it haunts the present. It is through spatial history that *The Sky Over Dimas* is able to subvert the classist construction of history.

The Sky Over Dimas does not only deal with the history of the Maghats. As a novel set after the Martial Law, the novel also treats at length the EDSA Revolution. It is by juxtaposing these points in history that the novel depicts Negros vis-a-vis Manila. The relationship among Manila, Negros, and history will be the focus of the next and last section.

PLACES AS FRAMES: NEGROS HISTORY/ PHILIPPINE HISTORY

Despite being pulled back into Negros, Rafael's character maintains his staunch belief that he does not belong in the island and that life is to be found in Manila. Rafael's conviction goes all the way back to his childhood: Rafael had always had a "sincere loathing . . . for his family. He felt himself born to the two most incapable parents on the planet" (99). This is what motivated Rafael to get a scholarship in the University of the Philippines Diliman and work in Manila, far away from Negros. As the novel puts it: "Negros had never seen an island son so determined to leave her shores" (99).

It is through the character of Rafael that the novel juxtaposes Negros against Manila, showing the different meanings each place holds. Another important reason for Rafael's desire to leave Negros is "the unshakable opinion held in many if not all provinces in the Philippines that *Manila was the center of the Philippines*" (99, emphasis mine). This dynamic between Manila and Negros is deeply embedded in the novel. One chapter is dedicated entirely to telling the EDSA Revolution as it is experienced in Negros (during which time Rafael was in high school). "Few things were seen to change on the island, even over the most tumultuous decades of Philippine history, probably because Bacoldnon ignored national and international events until they began to notice an effect being wrought on their lives" (103). However, the EDSA Revolution is different: it stirred the island in ways unexpected. History as it was being written was not contained in the capital. "All the radios in the Jarabas mansion were tuned to different harsh loud AM stations" which would bring "the news that "Aquino had been killed!" (106). History coming from Manila rippled throughout the island: "after [the day of Aquino's assassination], the craziness spread and increased in intensity—not just in [Rafael's] house but throughout the city and, as he understood, the entire country as well" (106). The novel, thus, traces history as it travels, not in time, but in space—that is, from Manila to Negros and, eventually, the entire Philippines.

Witnessing history travel from Manila to the rest of the country begs the question: is the opposite true? Does history travel from Negros to

Manila or to the rest of the country? The novel's lengthy treatment of the EDSA Revolution as a historical watershed juxtaposed against its unearthing of the history of the Maghats throws into sharp relief the disheartening truth that not all historical events are valorized and memorialized. The massacre of the Maghats does not inspire a revolution nor bring the country together. While one historical event stretches throughout the country, the other is contained, buried, and forgotten in one place.

The exclusion of the history of the Maghat from Philippine history may be attributed to what Reynaldo Ileto calls the historian's "cutting operation." According to him

a reflection on 'development' has to take into account those things which have stood in opposition to it, those irreducible differences which in the final analysis may be the only way out of the present development bind. In examining historiography, criminality, epidemics, and popular movements, one has only begun to reflect upon those crucial moments when the state, or the historian, or whoever occupies the site of the dominant centers, performs a cutting operation: remembering/furthering that which it deems meaningful for its concept of development, and forgetting/suppressing the dissonant, disorderly, irrational, archaic, and subversive. ("Outlines" 154)

This strategy is the method by which history is constructed according to a progressivist, linear, and nationalist ideology. It becomes clear therefore why the novel describes life in Negros as a monotonous place only waiting for the "most tumultuous decades of Philippine history". It reveals Negros' outsider view of Philippine history, waiting for it to take place and materialize in the island as if the island is not already part of it. However, this is not all there is to this process of writing history. The analysis of *The Sky Over Dimas* adds that this construction of history may be attributed as well to history's spatiality. According to Alan Baker in *Geography and History: Bridging the Divide*: "All phenomena may be seen as having their own geographies at a moment in time" (37). Furthermore, "objects' studied by historians—such as art and alcoholism, boundaries and battles, and cultures and consciousness—each have their own geographical (spatial) distributions" (37).

Baker's spatial perspective on history can be applied to the analysis of *The Sky Over Dimas*. History acquires different meanings as a result of their geographical—spatial—bounds. Different places, as the novel shows through Negros and Manila produce history in different ways: while Negros seeks to unearth history in place, Manila as the “center” of the Philippines “distributes” history throughout the country. Places, therefore, frame history—its narration, production, and remembrance. Because some places are more powerful than others, the distinction between Philippine and Negros history exists. It is by highlighting the spatiality of history—places as nuclei and frames of history—that *The Sky Over Dimas* interrogates the nationalist, linear—and Manila-centered—construction of history.

TOWARDS A CONCLUSION

Analyzing Vicente Groyon's *The Sky Over Dimas* using a spatial framework shows that the novel interrogates history that is constructed: 1) according to the ideology of the elite; 2) on the basis of a progressivist, linear, conception of history; and, 3) upon the claim that history is objective. Bridging the gaps between history, space, and class recuperates the novel from readings such as Martin's which lambasts it for its supposed perpetuation of the ideology of the elite. Furthermore, throwing into sharp relief the spatiality of the novel reveals that: histories are buried in and are produced by place; and spatialities unique to the economic mode of production give rise to different ways of constructing history.

It is the project of postcolonial analyses to unearth and examine these histories and their production. Rectifying the injustices in the construction of history gives agency—no matter how limited—to the oppressed, which, in the case of *The Sky Over Dimas*, are the working class and the Maghats, the indigenous people of Negros. These are the greatest triumphs of the novel.

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