Genealogy as National History in Jun Cruz Reyes's *Etsa-Puwera*

Emmanuel V. Dumlao[1] and Laurence Marvin S. Castillo[2]
University of the Philippines Los Baños

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Abstract
This essay analyses Filipino writer Jun Cruz Reyes's Centennial Literary Prize-winning novel *Etsa-Puwera* (2000) as a historical novel that makes use of genealogy or family history as a way to contest the historiographic foundations of official, i.e. elite-centred, nationalism. It first embarks upon a discussion of the significance of the novel as both a discursive unit in the state's official regime of the nation-formation narrative, and a creative project that overtly intends to foreground the limits of, and mystifications by, official nationalism. The essay then discusses how the discursive invocation of the family shapes ideological conceptions on nation and nationalism. Finally, it closely reads how *Etsa-Puwera* employs the expansive genealogical narrative of the Balinghasay clan to interrogate mainstream, elite-centred historiography and its influence in the construction of Filipino nationalist discourse, and foreground the historical agency of the unjustly excluded *etsa-puwera* of Philippine society.

Keywords
Family, genealogy, historical novel, historiography, nationalism, Filipino literature

Introduction
As a novel that purports to narrate the story of "mga taong hindi pang-history, kasi laging nasa laylayan o tagiliran lang ng poder" [people who don't belong to history because they are always in the margins or in the peripheries of power] (Reyes 2), Jun Cruz Reyes's *Etsa-Puwera* (colloquial Filipino for Outcast) occupies an interesting position in Philippine letters. A sprawling tragicomic chronicle of Philippine history from the pre-colonial period to the decades that followed the declaration of the Martial Law under the dictatorial President Ferdinand Marcos,

[1] **Emmanuel V. Dumlao** (Ph.D.) is associate professor at the Department of Humanities, University of the Philippines (UP) Los Baños, where he teaches courses in literature and creative writing. He earned his PhD in Creative Writing from UP Diliman. Email: evdumlao@up.edu.ph.
[2] **Laurence Marvin S. Castillo** is assistant professor at the Department of Humanities, University of the Philippines Los Baños, where he teaches courses in literature and cultural studies. He is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in the Arts at the University of Melbourne, Australia. Email: lscastillo@up.edu.ph.

the novel received the Grand Prize for Novel in Filipino in the Centennial Literary Prize, a competition launched by the Philippine Centennial Commission (PCC) to commemorate the centennial of the 1898 Revolution in 1998. As PCC stipulated that the entries be situated around Philippine historical events and highlight the proclamation of the Philippines as the first republic in Asia on June 12, 1898, the competition demands to be understood as an institutional gesture that aims to locate literature within the discursive ambit of the Philippine nation-state's official nationalism. In particular, the recognition is founded upon the premise that the winning work serves to memorialise what Caroline Hau signified as a "national fantasy of origins" (3).

The state-sponsored competition is an expression of the government's recognition of the role literature plays in constructing the nation as an imagined community. Embedded in *Etsa-Puwera*'s position as a creative intervention in the complex process of imagining the nation is the novel's generic specificity – "its spectacular possibilities for the representation of simultaneous actions in homogeneous empty time" (Anderson, *Imagined Communities* 194) – that works to construct the nation as an ontological imaginary disseminated among, and affirmed by, national subjects within a specific temporal and spatial frame.

For Timothy Brennan, "[i]t was the novel that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the 'one, yet many' of national life, and by mimicking the structures of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles" (173). Here, what Mikhail Bakthin identified as the "prerequisite for authentic novelistic prose" (264) – heteroglossia – enters the novel in a "multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships" (263). By expressing how various social voices interact in a dialogical manner within the textual universe, the novel enables the construction of a sociological imaginary founded on the dialectical constitution of sameness and difference.

What needs to be problematised is the constraining and exclusionary strategy that disrupts heteroglossia and in effect, stratifies subjects, from the process of imagining of the nation. For nation-states like the Philippines, whose formation is encouraged and even sponsored by neocolonial powers through the interventions of the native elite, an official conception of the nation has been produced and deployed by, and through, state apparatuses, thus unjustly obstructing the participation, and inhibiting the agency, of the broad masses in the procedures of nation-formation.

As "the form of nationalism which surfaces as an emanation and armature of the state," official nationalism is enacted systematically in various institutional platforms "to create and disseminate an official nationalist history, an official nationalist pantheon of heroes, and an official nationalist culture, through the ranks of its younger, incipient citizens – naturally in the state's own interests" (Anderson, *Hard to Imagine* 253). In order to ensure the subservience of the national subjects to neocolonial and elite interests, the official nation invokes the ontology of the broad masses, even while it regulates and suppresses contrarian conceptions of nationhood that organically emanate from the people's living labour.

Etsa-Puwera affirms the dialectics of exclusion and inclusion in its critical interrogation of elite-centred and neocolonial historiography endorsed by the official nation. This historiography is one that has long extolled colonial legacies as decisive in steering the course of Philippine historical development, and espoused the heroisms of few elite personages, whose ascent to political power has been the function of their collaboration with colonialist power, as the principal driving forces shaping the society – a mode of historical narration embodied in various post-war popularising pedagogical projects like textbook writing and public school instruction.

As its title indicates, the novel is about those national subjects who are excluded from official narratives deployed by/in colonial and national history, and who nonetheless serve as the material and popular base of such history. As a work entered in a state-sponsored competition, the novel is an interesting case in demonstrating how literature fulfils the possibility of radical discursive insertions within the regulatory regime of official nationalism.

Recognising the novel as both a discursive unit in the state's official regime of the nation-formation narrative, and a creative project that overtly intends to foreground the limits of, and mystifications by, official nationalism, this essay seeks to examine *Etsa-Puwera*'s imagination of the nation. In particular, this analysis intends to foreground the narrative modality which *Etsa-Puwera* mobilises to offer a critical rendering of national history.

The novel opens with the narrator Ebong introducing the novel as "mga kwentong tinutulugan ko sa tanghali noong araw, o tinatakasan kung si Lola Sion ang unang makatulog" [the stories I would sleep through in those afternoons of the old days, or from which I would escape, when Grandmother Sion happened to sleep first] (Reyes 1). This opening line, uttered by the youngest of the Balinghasay clan, succinctly highlights that the ensuing (re)construction of national history in the novel is structured as a tapestry of family recollections – a string of socio-political events woven in the genealogical fabric of the Balinghasay family. Identified by the novel's title as the *etsa-puwera,* the members of the Balinghasay family are construed as victims of exclusion, as exemplary national agents whose experiences, or what Neferti Tadiar called "subaltern subjective practices" (19), fall away from the narratives of nation-formation written and promoted according to elite interests, yet form the very conditions of possibility for such historical episodes.

This essay intends to examine how the novel frames national history as a genealogical narrative. By chronicling the narrative of the nation through the history of a family, the novel deals with issues that lie at the heart of the nexus between private and public, individual and collective, the personal and the political, in the narrative of nation-formation. Before embarking on this analysis, the following portion of this essay will discuss the figure of the family as a national trope.

The Nation as Family

In Philippine national life, the family figures as the foremost institution of sociality, enshrined as "a basic autonomous social institution" (in Tolentino 121) by the Constitution. But, as Simon Susen asserts, "although the family can be regarded as an integral component of the private sphere, it would be erroneous to assume that it is therefore an entirely closed and sealed realm of social life" (Susen 42). Filipino family life is variously entangled with the structures and practices of governmentality. Rolando Tolentino argues that "[i]t is within the family, after all, that children and adults are first harnessed to institutional and national objectives" (121). The family shapes how children imagine the community outside the home by introducing them to the socio-political dynamics of the public sphere. Moreover, since citizens transact with political institutions on behalf of their families, the family also influences the cognitive and affective modalities that condition how people make their political choices.

It is also the deep-seated involvement of family life in national life that forms the basis for frequent characterisations of the country as a weak state, whose public character is undermined by the intervention of the private interests of the economic elite. This structure of elite dominance in the country is likewise given form in and through family relations.

In his introduction to *An Anarchy of Families* which documents how some of the most powerful families in the country engage with government institutions to maintain their grip on political power and amass massive wealth from public coffers, Alfred McCoy highlighted that "elite families can be seen as both object and subject of history, shaping and being shaped by the processes of change" (1). And indeed, throughout Philippine social history, elite families constitute the most influential interpersonal networks of power in Philippine politics. As Dante Simbulan articulates in his groundbreaking study, *The Modern Principalia: The Historical Evolution of the Philippine Ruling Oligarchy*:

> [i]n every province in the whole country, the ruling elite families – the so-called political dynasties – are still very much in evidence and they continue to lord over not only the political life but also the economic and social life of the common people. (xix)

This prevalence of family-based oligarchy in the country is particularly evident in the abundance of terms that directly inscribe family relations within the vocabulary of Philippine political discourse – "nepotism," "godfather," "godson," "'First Family'" (Tolentino 119) – terms that remain in currency until now. Governance is thus clearly ingrained in the political imagination as a family affair, as affirmed by the presence of various political dynasties across the nation.

This legitimisation of the family-based oligarchy in the Philippines takes effect through the use of the family as the framework through which the official nation is imagined. It is important to take note of Anne McClintock's assertion that the nation – derived from "natio," which means to be born – is given form through the "iconography of familial and domestic space" (63). The nation is frequently identified as the home and the place of one's birth, and in Philippine nationalist discourse, as the "Inang Bayan" [Motherland].

In a society like the Philippines where economic disenfranchisement among the broad masses is obscured in and by official nationalist pronouncements, the family-as-nation metaphor legitimises social hierarchy as natural and integral, not only to the maintenance of unity within the domestic space, but also to the continuation of the unifying national historical narrative. The presence of social hierarchy and stratification within the national space and across historical time is given the "alibi of nature" through the validating trope of the family (65). It is within this view that the discursive regime of the family has been repeatedly invoked to endorse the political leadership of wealthy figures, as manifested in the use of paternal and maternal signifiers (e.g. Mother of Democracy, Father of the Nation) by Philippine political leaders who commonly hail from elite families.

McClintock elaborates that the potency of the family trope in imagining the nation lies in its naturalising capacity as a biological reality. Through the biologistic discourse that constructs the family as a natural and essential fact, the family becomes a powerful trope for "sanctioning social hierarchy within a putative organic unity of interests," and an effective "metaphoric figure by which hierarchical (and, one might add, often contradictory) social distinctions could be shaped into a single historical genesis narrative" (63).

An important point raised by McClintock is the paradoxical relationship of the family trope with national history. Instrumental in formulating and shaping a national historical narrative, the family's conventional construal as a biological unit entails that it be understood as having an organic existence outside of history – a transhistorical institution isolated from economic, political and social conditions of possibility. This mystification of the family is enforced by bourgeois modernity's dichotomy of the private realm and the public sphere – a dichotomy that reinforces the detachment of family life from the complex operations of historical totality. Thus, while serving as the "organizing figure for national history," the family also serves "its antithesis" (McClintock 64) – an entity deemed to be outside and independent of history.

It is relevant to discuss here the enabling mediation of literature in remedying the alienation of the family from history and in suturing this divide between the public and private. Describing texts emerging from Third World formations as national allegories, Jameson asserts that "[t]hird-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory" (Jameson 69). As "the literary artist in the developing countries, whether he or she is aware of it or not, is inextricably enmeshed in the manifold contradiction of historical reality" (San Juan 4), writing about the private sphere in the Third World inevitably involves transcribing, and even responding to, socio-political conditions within a particular historical milieu.

In particular, the historical novel, which chronicles how family and personal dramas shape, and are shaped by, history, has a very important role in historicising the lives of people and enabling them to "to comprehend their own existence as something historically conditioned… to see in history something which deeply affects their daily lives and immediately concerns them" (Lukacs 24). This historicising function allows the literary work to forward an alternative history – that of the common people whose lives are commonly made the subjects in Third World historical novels – to disrupt official histories that are disseminated to promote elite interests. The subsequent portions of this essay will now demonstrate how *Etsa-Puwera* performs this radical task through its genealogical critique of national history and its unsettling of the question of heroism.

The Author(ities) of National History

Etsa-Puwera is a story of stories, a reconstruction of the reconstructed memories of a family. The novel is based largely on the memories woven by the narrator Ebong's grandmother Sion who is illiterate or *no read, no write*, the researches and stories of his historian father Ruben, and Ebong's own experiences and views of the world. Through these interwoven stories that make up the genealogical narrative of the Balinghasay clan, the novel is shaped into a narrative of the collective experience of the titular *etsa-puwera* – the excluded, the outcasts, the people outside of history – of the Philippine society.

This sprawling novel covers the entire history of the Philippines from the precolonial era, the three centuries of Spanish colonialism, the subsequent American colonial era, the Second World War and the Japanese invasion, the post-independence era, the Martial law period under the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos and the post-dictatorship period. Two forms of histories form the novel's sprawling narrative – one is oral and the other is written, each representing the diverging historiographic impulses that complicate the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion in the representation of national subjects. The narrative modalities of these histories also point to their different epistemic bases, as Ebong describes the narratives of/by his father and his grandmother, "[k]ay tatay daw ang totoong detalye, kay lola naman ang minadyik na realismo" [father's (version) has real details, grandmother's is the magic realist] (Reyes 22). Beyond the limiting rationality of disenchanted written histories, oral histories represent the voices that are silenced in written, specifically, official histories. The novel thus foregrounds how oral histories exceed while remaining constitutive of, and rendered excluded by, state-sponsored narratives that serve as part of the discursive and institutional infrastructures of the national imagination.

Whether rendered "objectively" or in magic realist fashion, all of these narratives are mediated and recounted by Ebong, who is himself a student of creative writing. Ebong's narrative practice is influenced by the institutionalised doctrines that govern the procedures of narrativising or fictionalising history. Thus, owing to his awareness of the mediating forces that intervene in the processes of narrative-making, he makes the reflexive admission that the narratives he relays are "[r]etokado na...ayon sa bersyon ko" [fabricated… according to my version] (1).

Ebong's story traces the genesis of his clan in a precolonial realm yet unimagined and unimaginable to the narratives of modernity that form the edifying chronicles of official history. The narrative begins with the fantastic account about their ancestor, the skilled huntsman, Carrayyo who is afflicted by solitude in the northern mountain community of Cordillera. Soon, Ekkon, the lord of hunters, deers and wild boars, takes pity upon him, and creates a woman out of a deer to be his companion. She is named Oysang. Carrayyo and Oysang eventually have three children. One day, however, Oysang is humiliated by the community after her deer family visits Carrayo's tribe. She decides to leave her family and turns back into a deer. The two sons each find a wife, and soon leave their community, while the daughter, who is also named Oysang, remains in the tribe to stay with their father whose heart is broken after the mother's departure.

Eventually, Oysang the daughter is adopted by a Spanish friar who keeps her to satisfy his sexual desires. The friar baptises her Rosa. She soon becomes involved in a whirlwind of romantic entanglements – with her neighbour Teban who leaves her to join the revolutionary group Katipunan but soon becomes a cowardly traitor to the nationalist group after being bribed by the Americans, with an undeservingly exalted Chinese general named Paulino, and with the influential and charismatic millenarian leader Apo Dune or Dionisio Balinghasay, "ang kulay lupang papa ng mga katutubo" [the soil-coloured Pope of the natives] who leads an anti-colonial religious community (109). From these affairs, Rosa bears two children – Sion, with Paulino, and Ando, with Apo Dune. American soldiers, through the assistance of the treacherous Teban, soon attack Apo Dune's camp and take with them Ando who is renamed Jhonny Graham-White by his captors. Andoy soon marries Dolores who is turned into a comfort woman by the Japanese forces during the Second World War. She dies after giving breech birth to Ebong's father, Ruben.

Meanwhile, Sion stays with Rosa until the latter dies. Sion marries a widower and gives birth to four children who are all beheaded by Japanese soldiers during the Second World War. While raised in the middle-class comforts afforded against the tumult of the "peacetime" years, Ruben becomes involved in activism and enters into a relationship with a fellow activist who is a member of the radical women's group MAKIBAKA. The two conceive Ebong. Ebong's mother is soon killed, and Ruben is forced to entrust Ebong to priest-friends to join the revolutionary group New People's Army. He is imprisoned, and after being freed, he takes Ebong from the priests and brings him home to Sion to their hometown in Hagunoy. Sion and Ruben thus rear Ebong and regale him with various accounts of their family's history which eventually form the novel's narrative.

The brooding Ruben becomes consumed by the task of writing a historical work commissioned by powerful politicians in their town. Later on, he is salvaged, and in his wake, Ebong pieces together some details of his father's life that are unknown to him. Ebong becomes Sion's sole companion, listening to her stories as she approaches her twilight days. The old woman sleeps for a week and wakes up with no memory of Ebong. Then she closes her eyes and breathes her last, leaving Ebong to contemplate on the need to chronicle, not just his present being, but his future becoming.

Recounted in the rough, informal language of the ordinary that has long marked Reyes's oeuvre while employing an epic narrative structure that integrates folkloric storytelling, the Balinghasay clan's narrative painstakingly navigates the course of Philippine history in a manner that foregrounds the narrative of the excluded in Philippine society. This is in contrast to conventional and dominant historiography in the country that tends to privilege the names of colonial personalities and political elites in tracing the national historical trajectory. A cursory reading of the novel's sprawling plot in fact reveals how the nation's history steers, and is steered by, the familial narrative of the Balinghasay clan. The foregrounding of the Balinghasay's genealogy is indeed crucial to the novel's merciless interrogation of the History of the Philippines, particularly its authorship, telling, mediations and dissemination within the social landscape.

The presence of the supernatural is particularly integral to the novel's critical stance towards historiography. The novel shows that part of the reality and history of the Filipino people are the legends and folk stories, and personal experiences of the supernatural – experiences that have endured despite being derisively regarded as the province of the irrational, unscientific, illiterate minds of the common people, especially in light of the oppression of folkloric narratives by Catholic dogma and, subsequently, by secular, Westernised education. These stories, which derive from oral narratives, are interruptive of the official historiography endorsed by those in positions of power, especially those that espouse Eurocentric conceptions of rational modernity. The clan has several encounters with the supernatural -- from the Balinghasay clan's genesis from the union of man and deer, Apo Dune's millenarian faith, Rosa's mystical death in the large stone where Apo Dune's treasure jar is buried, to Ebong's own experience of the supernatural in which he sees an apparition of a group of people congregating under the Sampalok tree. The reality espoused by colonialist history is thus interrupted by the supernatural and the marvellous narratives produced by the popular imagination. The novel's assertion is clear about the supernatural – it is not mere embellishment but is an integral part of the reality and movement of history. The supernatural represents the popular imagination, which despite being misunderstood and thus derided by the colonialist episteme, enables the people to actualise the limits of the exploitative rationality of their oppressors, and realise their capacity to write and live their own history.

It is by integrating the narrative of the Balinghasay clan in the history of the Filipino nation that the novel erases the divide between family history and History. The novel thus constructs a history composed of, and framed by, the various modes of everyday socialities – from the day-to-day intrigues and scandals, the family feuds, the behavioural crudities, the irrationalities and emotional outbursts, the grassroots existence, to the oral lore and gossips. These modes constitute the ordinary people's experiences of, as well as their responses to, the various political and social upheavals, the multiple colonialisms and class war that rage in Philippine society. The lives of common people, in all their passion and pathos that are unwritten and ignored by the author(itie)s of official history, are made heavier and more decisive, their sense of historical agency emphasised, in steering the course of national history. Thus, we see the members of the Balinghasay clan deeply involved in revolutions, activisms and wars; history is made alive through and in the daily grind of the *etsa-puwera*.

In privileging the narrative of the underprivileged, the novel demonstrates concretely how the historiographic imagination is severely stunted by the ideological manipulations of those who are in the seats of political power. Indeed, the narrative design of the novel, which consists of multivocal constructions of the unglamorous everyday existence of the *etsa-puwera*, is supplemented by digressive articulations by the narrator about the anomalous authorship of official history by the native elite whose colonial complicity does nothing but forward their private interests. Thus, for instance, in referring to the collaborationist perpetrations of the wealthy Filipinos who earlier participate in the anti-colonial revolution only to abandon it out of convenience, the novel muses that "ang kasaysayang sinasabi ay kasaysayan lamang sa punto de bista ng mga duwag. Sila kasi yung natira, kaya sila ang natirhan ng boses. Hindi kolaborasyon ang tawag sa pagbali-baligtad nila ng loyalti kundi pragmatismo" [the history recounted is history from the point of view of cowards. They are the ones who survived, so they are the ones who retain their voices. Their shifting of loyalties is not collaboration but pragmatism] (174).

But this history of collaboration and betrayal has not just inflicted damage upon the national memory, but has also laid bare the deep-seated intra-national divisions along regionalist factionalism and class lines that have undergirded Philippine history and politics. The novel establishes how, for instance, the

Spaniards manipulated the indigenous Betwagen, Sadanga, Taluhin and Berlig tribes to conquer the Changyasan people – the tribes of Ebong's ancestors, as well as how the people of Macabebe allow themselves to be manipulated in order for the colonisers to infiltrate and subjugate various territories to their control. This history of treachery is constructed concretely by situating the family members against specific historical scenes. For instance, an episode in the novel recounts Teban's experiences as part of the company of the controversial President of the first Philippine republic, Emilio Aguinaldo. Here, he observes that the President, retreating from the revolution, takes with him luxurious food, and is welcomed by band musicians and rondalla in every town he visits despite the devastating conditions brought by the colonial war in many provinces (130). It is also the very presence of characters like Teban – who eventually abandons the revolutionary cause and betrays Apo Dune – that highlights how class divisions render the country more vulnerable to the violent perpetrations of the colonial projects. Manipulated by the wealthy members of the revolutionary forces, Teban thus muses, "Ang labanan ng mahihirap ay pinamumunuan pala ng pinakamayayaman at impluwensyal na mga kababayan" [The battle of the poor is led by the richest and most influential fellow citizens] (127-28). This class struggle takes the form of the struggle for land ownership which marks the conflict between Mafissoray tribe and the Changyasan tribe, the violent intrusion of colonial powers who are "bisitang naging amo" [visitors-turned-masters] (136), the collaborationism of the members of the ilustrado class like Aguinaldo and Tan-yan to defend their economic interests, and the contemporary eviction of informal settlers and agricultural workers from their lands as part of the developmentalist initiatives of neocolonial profit-driven bureaucracy. The genealogy of the Balinghasay clan thus demonstrates how class interests drive historical opportunism and pit fellow against fellow.

Through the narrative of the clan, the novel clearly offers a rendering of Philippine history that directly relates the changes in the social landscape, particularly to the changing configurations of the family as social form, to political and economic changes – from communal tribalism, colonial feudalism to the present-day semi-colonial, semi-feudal order. The Balinghasay family thus does not emerge as a transhistorical unit of sociality, but one that is absorbed in the socio-economic dynamics of Philippine history; the novel traverses the family's transformation from the communal life in Cordillera, its (extra)marital linkages across the colonial periods, its communal expressions of revolutionary comradeship in the various struggles against the Spanish, American and Japanese colonialisms, its consolidation into domestic units of kinship that often extend beyond the traditional zone of the nuclear family, up to the triumvirate of Ebong, Sion and Ruben within a petit-bourgeois domestic sphere in the post-independence era. Against and within these political and economic developments, the socio-historical agency of the members of the Balinghasay clan as national political subjects is foregrounded to unsettle the canonical figurations of those whom official history has recognised as heroes.

The Question of Heroism

The question of heroism – the ideological privileging of personages in terms of their individual commitment and contribution to nationalist causes – occupies an important concern in *Etsa-Puwera*'s narrative. The novel relates minor accounts of heroism that are obliterated from official national history, yet occupy the popular memory through the disseminating capacities of oral narration circulating within and through the family. Aside from performing a searing critique of famous personages in history like Aguinaldo, it allows for the foregrounding of the lives and heroisms of those who are in the margins of history and in the process, asserts that the history of the Philippines is significantly the history of the struggles of these unknown, oppressed people. For instance, Sion single-handedly kills Japanese and American soldiers as a form of personal vendetta after the death of her children. Ando, despite being mute by choice, also has his own tale of courage, as he serves as messenger to guerrilla forces during the war.

Thus, the novel dissects the "great man theory of historiography" – the idea that exceptional personages are decisive in the creation of national destiny – that has long afflicted, not just the historiographic production, but the teaching of history in the Philippines. This is a brand of historiography scathingly described in the novel as condensed in "demographic record," a mode of historical narration in which "ang ideya ng bayani ay kung kailan ipinanganak, kung sino ang napangasawa, ilan ang anak at kung kailan namatay" [the idea of a hero is when he is born, to whom he is married, how many children he has, when he dies] (176). Against the grand claims of this discourse of heroism that have dominated mainstream historiography, the common people, as represented in the novel by the members of the Balinghasay clan, are shown to be the real heroes in Philippine history.

The artificiality of elite-sponsored heroism is scathingly criticised by the novel in the chapter about the monument of Paulino Heneral Tan-yan. Commissioned by his descendants during the American period, the statue is supposed to edify the respectable personage of the Chinese general. Ebong, who is assisting his father in his research to write a commissioned work for the municipality's centennial celebration by one of Tan-yan's powerful descendants, Mrs. Meyor, discovers through various informal sources that Tan-yan does not deserve to be regarded as a hero. Tan-yan is an opportunist who indeed takes the side of the Katipuneros but only to safeguard his family's business interests. Spinning yarns to impress Aguinaldo, Tan-yan is conferred the title General despite not having been directly involved in battle. Perhaps in retribution for the falsity of his heroic fashioning, the statue is weathered by decades of wartime tumult and peacetime tempests, has its head even vandalised, and is relocated several times until finally erected in the most undignified of spots, a messy corner of the town market, with not a trace of its previous respectability. Popular memory thus triumphs over official memory.

Ruben – "isang historyador na galit sa histori" [a historian who hates history] (173) – thus grapples with such unsavoury details about the life and "popular" afterlife of Tan-yan, which cannot be included in the commissioned work. History, particularly in its commissioned form, requires an emphasis on the good and the beautiful – a strain that recounts the moralistic megalomania of the former dictator's wife Imelda Marcos, who is in fact the object of Mrs. Meyor's admiration. But against this obsession to fashion a narrative that celebrates false greatness, the subversive popular imagination undermines all such claims to heroism, as the common people gather in the communal spaces of the town – in the marketplace, in the town plaza, in the yards that connect house to house – to gossip under the noses of the local elite. The community turns into a family of gossipers who congregate to contest the discursive power of the native elite – memorialised through commissioned monuments and written documents – through the cunning devices of orality.

Conclusion

It is important to note that the novel's multivocal chronicle – a heteroglossic tapestry of memories, gossip, supernatural accounts and interrogated official narratives – is assembled in the house that Ebong shares with Sion and Ruben. It is within this domestic sphere that the nation's history is woven, affirming that the privacy of the family occupies centrality in the imagination of the nation. Here, one can make the observation that the novel seeks to reconstruct the Filipino nation as a family, with the generational biological link among historical subjects functioning as a potent metaphor of historical continuity. It is however this weight of historical continuity that somehow imbues the novel with an ambiguous stance towards the act of salvaging historical memory, as it allows the uncovering of the family's complicity with the various forces that cause the nation great ills. As the Balinghasay clan practically counts among its members Teban, Tan-yan and even distantly, Mrs. Meyor, Ebong thus muses:

> mahirap makita ang sariling ugat. Halimbawang lola mo pala si Dna. Victorina o Dna. Consolacion sa totoong buhay, ikatutuwa o itatatuwa mo? Kung walang nakaraang natatandaan, walang pasaning mabigat sa kunsensya. Yun nga lang, nakaliligaw ng landas ang naglalakad na hindi alam ang pupuntahan. (92)
>
> [it is difficult to trace one's roots. For example, if Dna. Victorina or Dna. Consolacion (two satirical socialite characters in Jose Rizal's novel *Noli me Tangere*) happen to be your grandmother in real life, will you celebrate or deny

> it? If there's no past to remember, there's no burden to the conscience. The thing is, one loses one's way when walking without knowing where one is headed to.]

But against the fear that attends such discovery of a history of complicities, the novel reasserts the value of knowing and chronicling one's family history – and by extension, one's national history – especially because one's family is inevitably entangled in, and even held hostage by, the contradictions of nation-formation. Thus, answering his own question, "[a]no sa palagay nyo ang dapat nating gawin ngayon?" [what do you think should we do now?], Ebong articulates what is precisely an exposition of the emancipatory value of chronicling one's family, i.e., national memory.

> Balang araw, gusto ko ring isulat ang kwento ng buhay ko. Yung buhay na gusto kong mangyari sa buhay ko, hindi ang kasalukuyan kong buhay na walang kabuhay-buhay. Lalagyan ko ng maraming aksyon, punong-puno ng bakbakan. Doo'y ako ang magiging bida, kasama ng iba pang katulad ko, doo'y hindi na lamang kami basta lamang mga etsa-puwera. (408)
>
> [Someday, I also want to write the story of my life. That life that I want to happen in my life, not this present life that lacks life. I will put more action, filled with exciting fights. There I'll be the hero, together with others like me, there we're not just outcasts].

This is, of course, at the locus of *Etsa-Puwera*'s claim as a historical novel. It exemplifies the radical literary imperative of interrupting official historiographic narratives by foregrounding the agency of the marginalised and the oppressed in directing the course of national history, and imagining, by way of writing, a future history replete with possibilities for national liberation and social justice.

As the nation is built upon the toils and miseries, the historical labours, of a family of nameless faces like the Balinghasays, the novel transforms the family – that most alienated and alienating social unit whose existence has been fragmented, disenfranchised and mystified in the modern social sphere – into a nation of historical subjects who rage against the historical conditions of possibility that have cast, and continue to cast, them as the *etsa-puwera* in the painful becoming of the nation.

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