

# Post-national Family/Post-familial Nation: Family, Small Town, and Nation Talk in Marcos and Brocka

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Under martial law, everything is relative. You have to be related.

Manila joke, circa 1978

Permit me to make the following preliminary points concerning the family, the community, and the nation, and the interconnections between them. The family figures prominently in Philippine business. In 1992, a mere eighty out of the country's top one thousand corporations were publicly listed; the rest were "glorified family corporations," a fact that prompted Securities and Exchange Commissioner, Rosario Lopez, to remark: "Filipinos seem to prefer relatives as partners and shareholders."<sup>1</sup> The family figures even more prominently in Philippine politics. Under Ferdinand Marcos, an abundance of terms relating to the family found its way into Philippine political discourse: the "conjugal dictatorship," nepotism, godfather, godson, "First Family," "father and mother of the nation," etc. With a view to laying the foundations for the institution of a Marcos political dynasty, the "First Couple" catapulted even their then underaged children to political visibility: "When the First Lady launched her Green Revolution, she took the children with her to plant vegetables. And when a fish scare hit the country ... the First Family had a meal consisting of seafood, thereby

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<sup>1</sup>Rosario Lopez, *Manila Chronicle* (Jul. 23, 1992); quoted in *An Anarchy of Families: State and Family in the Philippines*, ed. Alfred W. McCoy (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1994), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>*Marcos of the Philippines* (Manila: Department of Public Information, 1975), p. 92.

calming the people's fears."<sup>2</sup> "Bongbong often open[ed] athletic meets and usually [threw] the first ball in the little leagues. Imee and Irene frequently act[ed] as hostesses in important charity affairs."<sup>3</sup> Driven by their need to secure long-term hegemonic prospects for themselves and for their progeny, they established a ruthless dictatorship, which wrecked the economy. In this manner did the Marcos family bring about the generalized fragmentation of Filipino families — a consequence of the migration overseas of countless Filipino workers desperate for foreign currency. Today, the family, like the nation itself, has ceased to exist as a coherent entity, subsisting, at best, upon the edges of abstraction and fantasy.

### *Incestuous Love: Family, Small Town, Nation*

I must confess that once upon a time his family and my family were oligarchs. But we are reformed oligarchs ... The Romualdez family has been in office for many years, and thank God there is a family that is willing to serve the country ... Thank God they know how to make money. Otherwise, if Marcos did not have money before, what experience would he have to make this country prosper? The United States is ashamed it is rich. Why should we be ashamed? We have some gifted members of the family. Good. They want to serve the people. Wonderful.

Imelda Romualdez Marcos,  
interview in *Newsweek* (Sept. 13, 1982)

I told [them] the situation in which we are — the fact that we are now fighting for survival; that whether I retire or not our family is in danger of liquidation from either the communists or our political enemies; that if I retire I would be forced to fight for our lives because the communists are growing stronger and would be much stronger without me as President; rather than fight a defensive or losing battle later, I would rather fight now by taking over the government by a proclamation of Martial Law; but that such a proclamation would succeed if the people are with us and the people will be with us if the new government is a reform government and

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

we are all exemplars of the new society; so they, the children, must so conduct themselves that they will not antagonize the people.

Ferdinand E. Marcos, diary entry on talk with his children before declaring Martial Law, 1972; quoted in William C. Rempel, *Delusions of a Dictator* (Boston: Little Brown Co., 1993), p. 166.

The primordial value invested in the family by the Philippine state must never be underestimated. In the words of the 1986 Philippine Constitution, "[t]he State recognizes the sanctity of family life and shall protect and strengthen the family as a basic autonomous social institution."<sup>4</sup> It is within the family, after all, that children and adults are first harnessed to institutional and national objectives, including that of "[holding] class antagonisms in check."<sup>5</sup> Under the impact, however, of late capitalism, the family has come to be fragmented, the sexual and gender positionalities of its members eroded, the nation-state's privileging of it obscured. The pressure to increase levels of overseas migrant work to fill local foreign currency requirements,<sup>6</sup> for example, has not only "feminized" labor, as increasing numbers of Filipino women leave the national space for work overseas, and increasing numbers of their male compatriots take on such traditionally "feminine" jobs as nursing and midwifery, and "sexualized" labor, as increasing numbers of Filipinas become involved in the foreign flesh trade, but has also put severe pressure on traditional family structures, as wives, and sometimes older siblings, take over from their foreign-bound husbands or parents

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<sup>4</sup>Quoted in *An Anarchy of Families*, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup>For if, as claimed by Friedrich Engels, "[t]he first class antagonism which appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamian marriage, and the first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male," it is also in marriage, by means of the institutionalization of male dominance as well as of its indissolubility, that the potentially destructive fallout from such inequities is held in check. The term "family," Engels tells us, is derived from the Latin term *famulus*, meaning "the totality of slaves belonging to one individual." See Friedrich Engels, "Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd edition, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), pp. 750, 739, 737.

<sup>6</sup>For quite some time, this has been an important source of foreign currency for the Philippines, as Philippine law requires Filipino migrant workers to remit a percentage of their overseas income to financial institutions in the Philippines.

as heads of their families. We are witness, in other words, to the emergence in late capitalism of a "post-family."

I propose in what follows to discuss "incest" as the idiom linking late capitalist operations of family, community, and nation to one another. There are, however, two divergent directionalities in the operations of incest that must be understood before it can be taken as revelatory of the logic of the social terrain. For the hegemonic culture, incest conjures up projects of social perpetuation. Indeed, the hegemonic culture in Philippine society is dominated by such "incestuous" practices as political and economic marriages, mergers, turncoatism, and nepotism, that maintain the elite's hold on land, the economy, and politics and, concomitantly, institutionalize poverty.<sup>7</sup> For those at the margins, incest generates a system of familial, parochial, and provincial knowledges indispensable to their system of retail trade. "Buy and sell," a retail trade involving a single buyer and a single seller of *bakal-bote* (glass and metal recyclables), and based on a one-shot commission, can spell either big bucks or a total waste of effort, depending on how well the buyer knows the householders who are willing to sell their used supplies, and how well the middleman knows the parties involved. His status as *suki* (regular and familiar customer), for example, brings to the seller such benefits as better prices and additional sales, but the seller would not have earned the right to be called that had he not developed a knowledge of the buyer's preference. Half the success in *tawaran* (haggling) or in *utang* (credit) comes from a similarly intimate knowledge. The ubiquitous *sari-sari* store (neighborhood variety store), is an operation invested in the familial: its profitability depends on how well the proprietor knows his clients, their background, who the various members of their families are, how much he can reasonably and flexibly charge for this or that sale item (cooking oil, rice, petrogas, sugar, salt, etc.) and still be confident of turning a reasonable profit. Familiar knowledge in this case goes beyond blood and legal relations; it involves

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<sup>7</sup>The top 5.5 percent of all the landowning families own 44 percent of all arable land in the country. The richest 15 percent of all families account for 52.5 percent of all the nation's income. In 1991, only ten corporations accounted for 26 percent of all revenues: 40 percent of all net income; and 34 percent of the total assets of the top 1000 corporations. A recent study by the Institute of Popular Democracy showed that only 60 to 100 political clans control all elective positions on the national level.

being on some kind of an “intimate” standing with the other. But as much as, for those at the margins, incest might mean fair play and mutual respect, it also means the exteriorization of a deep hatred of the internal familial environment in which, for economic reasons, people are forced to live together under conditions so cramped and suffocating that there is hardly any room for them to breathe.

Drawing from this twofold paradigm of incest, I propose to examine Ferdinand Marcos’ cronies and Imelda’s Blue Ladies as models of the production of post-familial, post-national, families. On the national level, the emergence of both groups completely altered the economic and cultural landscape of the country. While these groups were emblematic of efforts on the part of both Ferdinand and Imelda to gain and perpetuate dictatorial power, they were also marked sexually. Ferdinand’s cronies were affluent henchmen, who covertly cornered the nation’s cash crops and industrial markets; Imelda’s ladies were politicians, military wives, and socialites who provided her with a retinue for gala events, shopping sprees, and other showcase activities. I shall contend that the success of these two groups can be traced back to the conjugal dictatorship’s successful utilization of the cultural force of the post-national and post-familial. Then, given the similarly strong nexus between Philippine film culture and incest,<sup>8</sup> I propose as well to provide a reading of two small town films by Lino Brocka which, in my view, illustrate the notion of “revelation” as a tactic of everyday resistance analogous to the anti-dictatorial struggle.



Martial law provided Ferdinand Marcos with the blanket authority to re-circuit the nation’s political and economic terrain. Exempting himself and his allies from litigation for actions undertaken by and during

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<sup>8</sup>The monopoly of the industry — production, distribution, exhibition — is in the hands of a few families, led by their respective “matriarchs” (Doña Sisang de Leon of L.V.N. Films, Mama Blas of Lea Productions, Mother Lily of Regal Films, and Mother Seiko of Seiko Films), who might, over a game of *mahjong*, decide such matters as casting, costumes, publicity, director, writers, caterers, songs, scripts, film titles, color motif, the priest who will officiate the Mass during the first day of the shoot, or haggle among themselves for the more advantageous play dates or for the ownership of the contracts with the top movie stars and directors.

his regime, he centralized executive power, and arrogated to himself most legislative power. He packed the various judicial and elections commissions with his political appointees (we had a Supreme Court whose principal order of business was to validate his presidential decrees). He politicized the military, making it beholden to him. He shut down media operations, re-opening them only after putting his own people in. He expanded and consolidated the base of his own economic power, with the cooperation and collusion of the old oligarchy and trusted technocrats. Fortune reports that "Marcos' principal economic achievement in 15 years of power has been to help his friends and relatives build giant conglomerates."<sup>9</sup>

Marcos' closed circle of associates was composed mainly of technocrats with graduate training from the U.S., and friends and relatives whom he granted access to huge economic and banking opportunities. He served as a willing godfather to the whims of his wards. The godfather function is of great cultural significance, as noted by no less than the national hero, José Rizal: "One needs a godfather for everything, from the time one gets baptized to the time one dies, to obtain justice, apply for a passport, or to start any business."<sup>10</sup> The technocrats with foreign training he had recruited in the expectation that they would work to legitimize the excesses of his regime. But by so doing he had unwittingly also provided for the return to the country of people who had imbibed American ideals, which they hoped to propagate upon their return. Nationalist historian Renato Constantino remarks of the newer generation of trainees: "Their thoroughgoing American orientation assures their trainers that in making decisions for this country, they will not stray far from the American point of view. They are the Trojan horses within the policy-making bodies of government and local business."<sup>11</sup> Included in this number were: Prime Minister Cesar Virata (M.S. in Industrial Management, University of Pennsylvania), Education Min-

<sup>9</sup> Fortune, (July 27, 1981); quoted in Ricardo Manapat, *Some Are Smarter than Others: The History of Marcos' Crony Capitalism* (New York: Aletheia Press, 1991), p. 87.

<sup>10</sup> Jose Rizal, *El Filibusterismo*, p. 229; quoted in *Some Are Smarter than Others*, p. 98.

<sup>11</sup> See Renato Constantino, *The Nationalist Alternative* (Quezon City: Foundation for Nationalist Studies, 1979); see also his "The World Bank's Trojan Horses," *Far Eastern Economic Review* (Aug. 14, 1981).

ister Jaime Laya (M.S., Georgia Institute of Technology, and Ph.D., Stanford University), Trade and Industry Minister Roberto Ongpin (M.B.A., Harvard University), Economic Planning Minister Gerardo Sicat (Ph.D. in Economics, M.I.T.), Agriculture Minister Arturo Tanco Jr. (Ph.D., Harvard University), and National Economic and Development Authority Director-General Placido Mapa (Ph.D. in Economics, Harvard University).<sup>12</sup> What is more, as Roberto Magdamo of the *Metro Manila Times* has pointed out, technocrats such as Jose Conrado Benitez, Imelda's right-hand person, "typif[y] the prototype of the martial law-bred and trained government official. He grew and developed in government at a time when the climate was designed to develop arrogance, when institutional checks and balances were weak; when the press was docile and the public even more tame."<sup>13</sup>

While the technocrats paved the ground for I.M.F.-W.B. policies to officially take root in the country, the cronies practically dominated the national economy for themselves. Roberto Benedicto controlled the sugar trade, the designated private bank for the industry, Republic Planters' Bank, Channel 9, and had stakes in the shipping, hotel and gambling industries. Together with another Marcos associate, Luis Yulo, Benedicto instigated a "meat cartel" which had virtual monopoly of the importation, distribution, and feed-supply of the cattle industry. Antonio Floirendo was the banana czar, successfully brokering connections with Marcos for contracts with the agri-business giant, United Fruit Company. He was also a sugar broker, and either owned or had interests in mining, shipping, and heavy machinery and equipment industries. Juan Ponce Enrile, Marcos' Secretary of National Defense, and main implementer of martial rule, took over the chair of the Philippine National Bank from Benedicto, and served as director of the Philippine Veterans Bank, Philippine National Oil Company and Petrophil. His Jaka Investment Corporation, a holding company, and one of the 200 biggest firms in the country, has investments in the real estate, coconut, agri-business and manufacturing sectors. Even segments of the

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<sup>12</sup>For a further discussion of technocrats, see "Technocrats — At Whose Service?," *Ibon Facts and Figures* 149 (Oct. 31, 1984). Our listing of U.S.-trained technocrats is taken from this report.

<sup>13</sup>Quoted in Sheila Coronel, "Jose Conrado Benitez Ma'am's the Word," *Coups, Cults & Cannibals: Reportage on an Archipelago* (Manila: Anvil, 1993), p. 165.

Cojuangco family, Corazon Aquino's clan, benefitted tremendously from presidential favors. Ramon Cojuangco had the monopoly of the telephone industry. Eduardo Cojuanco, together with Enrile, controlled the coconut industry and its official bank, United Coconut Planters' Bank. Manuel Elizalde's steel company boomed during martial rule; his tin company had the monopoly of tin plate production. Ricardo Silverio owned car and truck assembly plants, as well as a financing company bailed out by the government. Rodolfo Cuenca, a Marcos golfing buddy, owned the Construction and Development Corporation of the Philippines, which was awarded major public highway contracts. A government take-over became Marcos' recourse when the company failed dismally. Other members of the circle were Geronimo Velaso, Herminio Disini, Luico Tan, Hans Menzi, Campos Yao, Rolando Gapud, Roman Cruz, the Enriquez and Panlilio Families, Bienvenido and Gliceria Tantoco, and of course, the Romualdez and Marcos families. So institutionalized was this closed circuit operation that the term "crony capitalism" was coined to define the Philippine economic system.<sup>14</sup> Marcos' practice of privileging loyal kin and close allies was calculated to secure not only their personal and political loyalty but grateful reciprocation in material terms designed to bolster his own financial standing. By this practice of reaping the harvest of others' corruption, he was able to downplay some of his own. With the nation perennially transfixed by the glitter of Imelda's charity balls, inaugurations, and other high-profile cultural events, etc., Marcos was similarly able to deflect national attention away from the shenanigans of his cronies. Thus, only in the aftermath of the 1983 assassination of Ninoy Aquino did news of their Swiss bank accounts, and investments elsewhere, finally filter into the national consciousness, and instigate a massive outpouring of disenchantment.

For her part, Imelda organized an entourage of socialites, women from prominent political, business, and military households, collectively known as the "Blue Ladies," a reference to the color-motif of their apparel. Initially an auxiliary group in Marcos' first presidential campaign,

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<sup>14</sup>See *Some Are Smarter than Others* for a comprehensive overview of each of the cronies' investment stakes in the Marcos regime. I have culled my information from these discussions.



under the impact of Imelda's tireless planning, they evolved into her personal apparatus. Why it was so important to Imelda to see to it that this happened is supplied by Carmen Navarro-Pedrosa, author of her "unauthorized" biography:

The provincial ways would not suffice for the role that she was to play as wife to Marcos. The people she would have to deal with were politicians and big-time businessmen who knew the game. She had to be knowledgeable, even shrewd, to deal with them effectively. She had to motivate herself to learn the ways of the political world. They taxed her immensely because she was not psychologically prepared for the role.

She must have felt offended to know that the man she married was now asking her to change, to be better than she was. It seemed ironic that he was asking her to be re-educated, as if she were a girl who had not always wanted a better education such as her affluent city cousins.

It was painful to be told to develop taste when she had wanted the good things of life ardently.<sup>15</sup>

Imelda's marriage to Ferdinand Marcos (following a scant eleven days of courtship) was generally seen as good political strategy on the part of a presidential aspirant who was not oblivious to the political hay which he could make being married to a ravishing beauty (she had been a beauty contest winner). An outsider to the high-stakes end of Philippine political and economic life, Imelda, quite unlike Corazon Aquino of the Cojuangco clan, had to struggle to become worthy of inclusion. She began by sending cakes and dishes she herself had prepared to various political personages and their families, in hopes both of winning votes for her husband, and ingratiating herself with them. On a visit to the Manahan farm, for instance, she volunteered to do the cooking, and, one day, as Mrs. Manahan lay ill in the hospital, she paid her a couple of visits memorable for the fact that "she cried so profusely that the nurses wondered whether she was the mother or a sister of the patient."<sup>16</sup> Her effusiveness was all part of the struggle on her part to hide

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<sup>15</sup>Carmen Navarro-Pedrosa, *The Untold Story of Imelda Marcos* (Makati: Navarro-Pedrosa, 1969), p. 191.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 196.

her illegitimate and poor origins. Over time, affluence supplanted effusiveness as the perfect disguise.

"She boasted about her gowns and jewelry to less affluent friends but depreciated their value when she talked to *really* rich friends ... If she was crude, it was only because the game of getting along was new to her; but once she learned it, she would manipulate it with aplomb, as she would later as her husband's presidential campaigner and as First Lady."<sup>17</sup>

But once she had these women in her power, her admiration turned to disdain, the shrillest expressions of which she directed at the members of the traditional oligarchy. The following story is recounted:

[The Blue Ladies] would come over and [Imelda] would talk to them and talk to them and talk to them, keeping them beyond the bounds of their own patience — and only at the very last minute, at the very last instant, would she call out to her aide to bring the things she'd brought home for the girls. Then the aide would appear with an armful of this stuff and dump it on the floor, causing the women to scramble and shriek and grab as Mrs. Marcos watched.<sup>18</sup>

Membership in the exclusive club of Marcos cronies, and in the circle of Blue Ladies, assumed a mythic quality. For by existing in the very space of dictatorial power, the members of both groups had ready access to information and opportunities that lay far beyond the reach of ordinary citizens. Not unlike the pope's blessings, the Marcoses' benevolence — dispensed at tea party, a funeral wake, a friendly golf match — translated into political and social capital as well as economic gains. These groups, however, were part of the larger apotheoses project of the Marcoses. For Marcos, it began at his birth: "[He] was in such a hurry to be born that his father, who was only eighteen years old himself, had to act as midwife."<sup>19</sup> He touted himself as an overachiever who had gone way ahead of his generation. He won his own acquittal from a murder

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>18</sup>Ninotchka Rosca, *Endgame: The Fall of Marcos* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1987), pp. 184–185.

<sup>19</sup>Hartzell Spence, *Marcos of the Philippines* (New York: World Publishing, 1969), p. 3.

charge while preparing for the exams. His score in the bar would remain unsurpassed to date. There was also the story of twenty-eight medals of honor earned for leading a guerrilla unit during the Japanese occupation. His rise in politics was phenomenal, only to be topped by Benigno Aquino, Jr., another young political aspirant, who like him was in a hurry to become president.

Imelda's own ascent to power was far less stellar. Dogged by unflattering reports from pesky biographers such as Carmen Navarro-Pedrosa, she found herself needing to cover up her past as much by establishing her affinity with state power as by conspicuous consumption, unmatched by any other. Her own characterization of how power is shared by partners attests to her longing to gain national stature. Referring to the *Malakas at Maganda* myth of origins, she says:

It is said that the birth of humanity came about when a divine whim split a single bamboo and from it there sprang forth a woman and a man, and the woman was Maganda, which means beautiful, and the man was called Malakas, which means strong. They were equal, and in their own way the strong and the beautiful were equal ever since.<sup>20</sup>

At her husband's behest, Imelda entered into the mode of conjugal rule, initially, in 1975, as Metro Manila Governor, possessing virtual control over the lives of six million people, and subsequently as a member of the Presidential Cabinet, holding the portfolio of Minister of Human Settlements. In addition, she served as her husband's proxy in a number of very high-profile foreign missions. Her increased visibility at all state and social functions, consolidated her ascent to and hold on power. Her public "persona" became increasingly "lavish," though it must be kept in mind that the word, "lavish," connotes both plenty and opulence, but also excess, camp, and conspicuous consumption. Indeed, the public spectacles organized and designed to bring ever more awe-struck national and global attention on her operated on the basis of signifiers that communicated, not abundance, but excess. To take just

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<sup>20</sup>Imelda Marcos, "The mystique of the Oriental Woman," in *The Compassionate Society* (Manila: National Media Production Center, 1976), p. 84. This was a speech delivered by her at the International Women's Year Conference, held on June 20, 1975 in Mexico City.

one example, she accumulated a number of authentic world-class objects of art, but, driven by the need to make a “perverse” display of “the Hegelian insight that quantity turns into quality,”<sup>21</sup> quite a number of fakes as well. Indeed, her precipitous departure from Malacañang Palace in the aftermath of the “February, 1986 Revolution” caused quite a global stir when 3,000 pairs of shoes, 2,000 ballroom gowns, and giant bottles of designer perfume were discovered to have been left behind, prompting U.S. Representative Stephen Solarz to remark: “Compared to her, Marie Antoinette was a bag lady!”<sup>22</sup>

Not even the scandals that trailed them, from Marcos’ affair with American starlet Dovie Beams, to stories of their illicit fortune, had the power to impede the couple’s apotheoses. If anything, following show business logic — good or bad publicity, it’s still publicity! — such stories, particularly during their period of exile in Hawaii, had the effect of re-installing them in the national memory. Thus Imelda’s performance in the presidential elections of 1992 can be described as “decent.” She even bested the veteran Filipino senator chiefly responsible for the sequence of events that culminated in the departure from the Philippines of the U.S. bases, following a strong U.S. military presence there of over ninety years.

The mythification of the Marcoses did not, of course, take place by itself, but required the work of a good number of hired hands — of intellectuals, artists, poets, biographers who, if the price was right, were glad to reify imagined origins, invent a life story, create a book-length epic, muralize the pair’s mythical parentage of the nation, paint them in the unmistakable hues of royalty. In a 1974 speech delivered to the Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences, Imelda asserted: “The mission is to project the authentic image of the Filipino .... the timeless dictum of all art [is] the exaltation of the human spirit. We would like to see films of our native epics, portrayals of our native souls.”<sup>23</sup>

Through their patronage of the cronies and Blue Ladies, the Marcoses inscribed into the national political landscape such hierar-

<sup>21</sup>*Some Men are Smarter than Others*, p. 43.

<sup>22</sup>Quoted in Carmen Navarro Pedrosa, *The Rise and Fall of Imelda Marcos* (Makati: Navarro Pedrosa, 1987), p. 220, the author’s sequel to her first biography on Imelda.

<sup>23</sup>Imelda Marcos, “Film as Art,” *The Compassionate Society*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>24</sup>The members of the “inside” group came in time to mimic “Marcos-style” arrogance and excess. Conrado Benitez, Imelda’s right-hand person, and one of the

chical binaries as outside/inside, core/periphery, privileged/marginal, official relations/pragmatic relations.<sup>24</sup> They were not content, however, to merely measure up to local yardsticks. Their ultimate desire was to win the approbation and admiration of the west, particularly the U.S. There is an early intimation of this in Imelda's remarks concerning her experience at New York City's Metropolitan Theater's inauguration in 1966: "My, in America when they're rich, they're really rich ... [W]hen I came in wearing my pearls, I was so thankful I chose them because everyone else was wearing diamonds."<sup>25</sup> In the course of time she basked in the limelight of international coverage, as in the December, 1975 *Cosmopolitan* article naming her one of the "ten richest women in the world." As her husband's ambassador of goodwill in foreign missions, she sought to construct upon the global plane a position of legitimacy for herself. Full acceptance, however, was often denied Imelda. Failing to get an invitation to attend the royal wedding of Prince Charles and Princess Diana, she staged her own version of a royal wedding in the 1983 marriage of her youngest daughter, Irene, to the aristocratic Araneta clan heir, Gregg.

[W]hen Irene chose her father's birthplace as the venue of her wedding, Imelda had it transformed overnight into a town of what she imagined to be seventeenth-century European splendor. And all this done between the day Mr. Araneta asked for Irene's hand and the day of the wedding. Two weeks before the wedding the town's main street was strewn with everything from bricks and cement to potted bougainvillea bushes and imported holly bushes and all the rest of the paraphernalia needed to re-create the town for the wedding of the century. Imelda's forty-five-day deadline included the construction of five new buildings, all of them built according to the Spanish colonial style to match the church. Among them were guest houses and a massive reception building to impress Imelda's jet-set friends. A new international airport was built, as well as a five-star hotel complete with swimming pool, Jacuzzi,

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administration's brightest technocrats, was once heard to have arrogantly declared: "I grew up in a family with very well-known people and a very high achievement orientation ... I took advantage of my name and used it. Do I deny my birthright?" See *Coups, Cults & Cannibals*, pp. 161-162.

<sup>25</sup> *Woman and Home* (Oct. 16, 1966); quoted in *The Rise and Fall of Imelda Marcos*, pp. 11-12.

and a lavish casino. In addition, the old stone and brick school-house where Marcos studied was refurbished to look more "European and medieval." The townspeople relate how the entire town worked into the night in preparation for the grand wedding. To landscape the surroundings, more than 3,000 workers were brought in from outlying provinces. From a scruffy, sleepy village, Sarrat became a splendid, magnificent "royal" town with reproductions of Spanish aristocrats' town houses and streets lined with potted flowers.

Just as Princess Diana had her royal carriage, Irene Marcos, too, had a silver carriage from Austria, drawn by seven white horses which were flown in from Morocco.<sup>26</sup>

If attention eluded Imelda, she demanded it. If money could buy attention, she bought it. She flew her "beautiful friends" to her parties and feted them. To feed her penchant for the royal, she commissioned some ten ten-foot-high Cowan portraits of the Marcoses. Two of these were portraits of herself, bearing the titles, *The Triumph of Purity* and *The Triumph of Beauty*. Another one was a portrait of the Marcos family, showing the couple seated regally, sashes coming out of every side, jewelry and medals accenting their generally white formal wear. But following the Film Palace fiasco of 1982, and the Marcos daughter's extravagant wedding in 1983, Imelda's plans to project herself internationally, backfired.

For his part, Marcos catapulted himself into the international political arena with contributions to the campaign coffers of Nixon, Carter and Reagan. What is more, he gladly implemented U.S. policies in the Philippines, and drew deep satisfaction in 1981, the height of the dictatorship, when the then-U.S. Vice President George Bush declared in a toast: "We love you, sir, we love your adherence to democratic principles and democratic processes, and we will not leave you in isolation."<sup>27</sup> Five years later, in February, 1986, speaking to U.S. Senator Paul Laxalt, he asked, "What do you think? Should I step down?" The Senator replied, "I think you should cut and cut cleanly. The time has come." Marcos felt the betrayal keenly. They had to sedate him before they could

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 189-190.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid*, p. 168.

put him on a plane bound, not as he had thought, for his birthplace up in the northern part of Luzon, but for his place of exile in Hawaii.

As a consequence of the Marcoses' need to gain international acceptance, the management of the nation itself was put on the back burner. Marcos' announcement in 1986 to his host at a U.S. news talk show of a "snap polls" caught everyone in the Philippines by surprise. It was an index of how much they had lost touch with the nation.

### *Overstating and Overhearing: The Postfamilial/Postnational Small Town*

Ricardo Manapat, author of *Some Are Smarter Than Others* (1991), the most comprehensive guide to crony capitalism writes: "The pillage started with the silencing of opponents."<sup>28</sup> But precisely because it was never possible for the Marcoses to totally silence their opponents, we are faced with the challenge of examining some of the everyday sites of "noise," or resistance, during the Marcos dictatorship. The "political joke" and "gossip" — *parinig* (overstating) and *padinig* (overhearing) — exemplify such sites.

Usually taking the form of one-liners, the punch line in the political joke consists of an inversion, a reversal, a play between foreground and background, of historical and political conditions. It is constituted, as such, not mainly to elicit laughs, but to address political exigencies. The epigraph at the beginning of this paper illustrates this play. Other examples:

Q: For Imelda, what is the biggest industry in the Philippines?

A: Mining. That's mine, that's mine, that's mine.

Q: What happens if death takes the Chief from our midst?

A: The President would have to run the whole thing himself.

What is striking about them is the mode in which current events configure the punch lines. Thus, they call attention to daily life, the site of a regime of oppression and repression. The punch line ruptures the regime, calling into focus the prohibited. Through advertences to crony and familial capitalism, Imelda's kleptocracy, Marcos' illness, and the

<sup>28</sup>*Some Are Smarter Than Others*, p. 84.

First Lady as the real seat of power, the political joke subverts both hegemonic knowledge and language.

Gossip provided another way of "talking back" to the dictatorship. Recognizing the danger to the dictatorship posed by gossip, Marcos issued a decree prohibiting rumor mongering. Gossip was classified as a threat both the nation's security and the hegemonic culture of law and order. It was understood to be Janus-faced: getting people to listen to the dictatorship attentively, it at the same time surreptitiously undermined what the regime had just said. It allowed for the articulation of the individual take on official matters. It permitted an assault, however awkward, on the policies of the dictatorship. As with the political joke, a the subversive value of gossip roots in one's knowledge of the various ruptures that were potentially undermining to the regime. In gossip, there is a literal translation, a movement of words, from one condition into another. "Relativity" under normal conditions is "relative" under the dictatorship. Such a literal translation can be effected in two ways: by conjuring up a movement from one space to another (say, from "official" to "practical," or vice-versa), or from one social being to another. Gossip is operationalized through *parinig* (overstating), the act of spreading rumors, and *padinig* (overhearing), the act of entertaining rumors. Both acts involve a reading of excess — of dictatorial excess transmuting and translating itself heterogeneously.

Through *parinig*, or gossip, excessive dictatorial signifiers are deployed in spaces of signification — the area fronting the neighborhood *sari-sari* store, the area around the community water pump, the beauty parlor, barber shop, cafeteria, coffee shop, couturier's lounge, dress shop, university discussion groups — that offer a stark contrast to Marcos' rubberstamping legislature, the "friendly" media, the captive judiciary. Within these alternative spaces, official codes and channels are re-circuited and re-signified, bringing to surface claims of counter-authority in the affairs of the nation. Depending on who is being spoken to, of whom the conversation is about, the substance of and reason for the conversation, *parinig* plays on the register either of *padaplis* (the indirect assault) or of *patama* (the direct assault). In *padaplis* the one being spoken about is subjected to a tactics of subversion, the one being spoken to is somehow implicated in this tactics, the reason for the conversation is never made crystal clear. In *patama* there is forthrightness, the



articulations do not come disguised. Gossip characteristically alternates between the direct and indirect assault, depending on the emotive capacities of the persons involved, as well as on conditions as they exist in the nation.

What political jokes and gossip ultimately broker is a specific movement, a crossing over, of public truths into the sphere of privatized knowledge. Such a privatization is different, of course, from individualization. For, while in the case of individualization, knowledge is confined to the individual, in the case of privatization, knowledge is converted into local knowledge, and disseminated tactically. The condition of possibility for this, of course, is a familiarity with historical context and with syntactical usage. By means of political jokes and gossip, the individual citizen negotiated a relational position between himself and national power, interrogating hegemonic meanings instead of merely experiencing them as a threat. Utilizing film as a kind of *pakita* (overseeing), the late Filipino film director, Lino Brocka, imparted a visual aspect to the aforementioned tactics. A scene in *Maynila Sa Kuko ng Liwanag* furnishes us with an example of this:

Overheard in the frame's right hand-corner, barely within the camera's range of focus, is a palmist's sign with its intriguing come-on looming large. *May problema ka ba?* (Do you have a problem?) it asks; and almost as if in answer, we notice next a hastily scrawled piece of graffiti to Julio's left — one word: *Makibaka*. (Struggle).<sup>29</sup>

In two Lino Brocka small town films, *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang* and *Miguelito: Batang Rebelde*, the film director deploys once again the tactics of everyday resistance, establishing the connections between the dynamics of power play in a small town, and the operations of power within the context of the nation. The film *Tinimbang Ka* recounts the story of the carefree life of Junior in a small town. His family is comprised of a nagging and religiously devout mother and a philandering father, who is also the town mayor. Shunned by his girlfriend, he is taken in by Berto, who is starting a family with Kuala. Junior learns about life and sexuality through the simple ways of the marginalized couple. In

<sup>29</sup>Rafael Ma. Guerrero, "Lino Brocka: Dramatic Sense, Documentary Aspirations," *Readings in Philippine Cinema*, ed. and introduced by Rafael Ma. Guerrero (Manila: Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, 1983), p. 232.

the climactic scene, Berto seeks the help of the town doctor when the moment arrives for Kuala to be delivered of their child. The doctor refuses to help, despite Berto's entreaties, and is taken hostage by Berto. This development ignites gossip and speculation among the elite families of the town, as well as among the lesser folk, such as zealously religious elderly women, the farm tenants, the village idiot, the village whore, and the village *bakla* (gay person). They piece together the recent events, and then track Berto and his hostage down to the shack. Berto is shot by the police, Kuala dies in the act of childbirth, with Junior left to comfort the victims as they approach death. With the newborn child in arm, he approaches the members of the town elite who stand, heads bowed, in acknowledgment of their complicity in the terrible tragedy. When his father attempts to touch the infant, Berto shoves him away. In the final shot, with the townsfolk massed in the background, and a white crucifix hovering in the foreground, Junior slowly exits the frame. The film is a morality play, with Junior in no uncertain terms aligning himself with the dregs of the town, the newborn baby a beacon of hope to them all.

In another film, *Miguelito: Batang Rebelde*, in which Brocka reworks the theme of small town morality politics, Miguelito, the film's eponymous hero, comes to the epiphanic moment when his bodyguard-friend disobeys the order to kill Miguelito's mother, because he understands the just-ness of her struggle. The trio escape to the place of the bodyguard's sister, who is also the mayor's mistress. In the ensuing shootout, the bodyguard as well as the mayor are killed. Miguelito comforts his dying father; his mother consoles him as they walk out of the scene.

Jokes reify the privileged young male position as the bearer of future good. In both films, the male protagonist is cajoled by his male peers into doing something about his lack of sexual experience. Sexist jokes provide him with a sense of moral superiority. He is doubly righteous: he stands against both the evil of small-town politics, and the evil of men in general. Patrick Flores writes: "the ideological operations make it appear seemingly easy for rich kids to turn their backs on privilege

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<sup>30</sup> Patrick Flores, "The Slum and the Town: Reassessing the Brocka Paradigm in Philippine Progressive Cinema," *Diliman Review* 39:4 (1991), p. 46.

and betray their class, in the same way that it becomes seemingly natural for them to sympathize with the oppressed.”<sup>30</sup> The young man’s action — the principled betrayal of, in contradistinction to blind loyalty to, the social class into which he has been born — remains outside filial but remains within familiar grounds. His twofold act signifying alignment and disavowal operates along familiar levels: he chooses the morally right thing to do because he is all too familiar with the figures of evil and their negative impact upon the social topography of the small town.

In both films, which center on the town mayor’s family, the mayor’s adolescent son is faced with making a choice between the corrupt system epitomized by his father, and the alternative but more just order emblemized by some marginal figure. In *Tinimbang Ka*, the marginal figures are Kuala, the mayor’s mistress who goes insane as a consequence of a failed abortion that she is forced to undergo, and Berto, the leper who falls in love with, and causes Kuala to become pregnant again. In *Miguelito*, the marginalized figure is the estranged mother who returns to the town following her wrongful imprisonment. It is through the instrumentality of political jokes and gossip that the young man in both films is faced with the choice between a life of privilege and the demands of justice, and chooses justice. What is more, it is jokes of a crass sexual nature that reify his position as the bearer of future good. They have the effect of building up in him a sense of moral superiority (over his peers certainly), which causes him to rage against the evil of small town politics, and the evil, generally speaking, of men’s unbridled sexual passions.

In the first film, the figures of historically marginalized individuals die, but only to pave the way for their epiphany as heroes. Kuala in her person is the stuff, precisely, out of which gossip is made, being one of the principals in a liaison between the Mayor and his mistress that has gone terribly wrong. Her death is invested with even greater positive value when despite it, her infant is successfully brought into the world. In the second film, death claims both the town’s principal authority (he was head of the town’s male elite) and the prospect and promise of individual mobility (the bodyguard had ambitions to work abroad). In both films, the deaths make possible the decision on the part of the privi-

leged adolescent male to foreswear replicating the ways of the "bad" father.

The small town in both films is the locus of a morality play with implications for a correct understanding of the national life. Indeed, through the ubiquitous portraits of the Marcos family, on the walls of the towns' administrative offices, the films draw attention to the nexus between the operations of monopoly capitalism and feudal relations in the small town, as well as to their wider operations in the theatre of the nation. The citizen-audience, in consequence, is faced with the spectacle of the seamless continuity of filmic with lived reality. ↪