HISTORY AS RUMOR: THE POLITICAL FANTASY OF THE NEGRENSE ELITE IN VICENTE GROYON’S THE SKY OVER DIMAS

Mayel P. Martin
Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines
mayel_27@yahoo.com

Abstract
This ideological critique reads Vicente Groyon’s The Sky Over Dimas in its appropriation of historiographic metafiction. The paper argues that its two borrowed modes, historiography and metafiction, function as a symbolic act following Fredric Jameson’s Marxist interpretive ground of the political. In The Sky Over Dimas, historiographic metafiction is a symbolic act that articulates the political unconscious/fantasy of the landed elite while repressing their role in the perpetuation of the feudal system of sugar in Negros. This provisionalizing or bracketing of history in the novel, unlike other historiographic metafictional texts like Great Philippine Jungle Energy Café, State of War and Empire of Memory, does not foreground any “alternative histories” of the marginal or the ex-centric. Instead, the novel withholding narrative (and historical) truth, reduces most of its narrative circumstances to gossip and speculation to humanize its protagonists—the hacendero class in Negros. It is this displacement or deviation from the emergent form of historiographic metafiction, its generic series, which engenders a diachronic differential reading that allows the novel to be construed as a symbolic act—an ideological reply or imagined solution to an actual social dilemma.

Keywords
historical novel, historiographic metafiction, Negros, political unconscious, postmodernism

About the author
Mayel P. Martin teaches at the Ateneo de Manila University where she finished AB Humanities and MA in Literary/Cultural Studies. The present paper is based on her MA thesis “The Persistence of the Feudal: Generic Discontinuities in Vicente Groyon’s The Sky Over Dimas/The Political Fantasy of the Landed Elite,” which attempts to historicize the ideological functions appropriated in the narrative mode of historiographic metafiction. Aside from teaching core curricular English and literature classes, she has taught elective courses in Western Literature. Her research interest engages the intersection of Marxist critique and genre studies, focusing on the works of Mikhail Bakhtin and Fredric Jameson.

In Georg Lukacs’s landmark analysis, the historical novel is said to have developed into its full-fledged classical form in the novels of Sir Walter Scott. Deviating from the socially-realistic novels being written in England in the eighteenth century, Scott’s historical novels displayed an awareness of history as a process, as emblematic of change and directionality. Lukacs attributes this shift in perspective to the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, which enabled European states to perceive history as a mass experience, affecting everyone, and not just a natural or innate event. The many wars that were fought in resistance to Napoleon likewise brought about a surge of nationalist sentiment, and
along with it a longing for national independence and identity (23-24). More significantly, the defeat of Napoleon also altered how men came to view progress which, for the first time, was understood as wrought by social forces in conflict and not, as the Enlightenment put it, a result of the triumph of humanist over feudal-absolutist values. At this juncture, men also came to a realization that human nature is not permanent or essential but is shaped by man’s activity and his participation in history (27-28).

This historical consciousness of mass movements finds its way into Scott’s delineation of characters in his novels as “historical-social types,” motivated in activity and action by their class affiliations and concerns, which situates them in a position of conflict with another class. Moreover, the heroes are not the great historical figures that dominated the socio-realist works of the Enlightenment but are average, typical, ordinary men, who in their middle-class status function as a neutral ground on which the struggles between the elite and the masses are enacted (33-36). In making the historical human, Scott confers on his middle-class heroes the “narrow-mindedness” which is emblematic of their social group. Lukacs is quick to point out, though, that such a representation of the middle class can very well be explained by Scott’s ideological limitations; Scott after all is not without aristocratic and conservative biases. For Lukacs, what makes the historical novel distinct from the older social-realist form is that the hero and the other typical characters of the period are unique individuals inasmuch as their individuality is shaped by historical necessity. As a result, reality is rendered as socially discriminate, depicted according to how men relate with their social environment in a broad sweep (46-47).

Lukacs’s discourse on the historical novel illumines how form or genre embodies a way of thinking, a particular consciousness about history. Fredric Jameson expands Lukacs’s insight in asserting that genre is essentially a symbolic answer to a socio-historical contradiction; as such, it is not a mere category or slot that locates and identifies literary texts; form carries an ideological charge in its inception such that a new appropriation of an old form registers a change in function (Jameson, The Political Unconscious 99). Thus, history is not only an unfolding of punctual events but also, more importantly, an understanding of it is a condition of possibility which influences the emergence of certain genres at a particular moment.

HISTORY AND THE NOVELISTIC IMAGINATION

It is probably the merging of history and the novel that has produced what has become a valorized form in Philippine literature as evidenced by the number of titles
under this form that have won in awards such as the Palanca (Bamboo in the Wind, The Great Philippine Jungle Energy Café, The Sky Over Dimas), National Book (Killing Time in a Warm Place, Empire of Memory), and Centennial Book (My Sad Republic, An Embarrassment of Riches). This phenomenon can perhaps be explained by how Philippine literature, from Jose Rizal’s Noli Me Tangere, has canonized novels that deploy history in the narrative not only as setting or context but as a means of re-inscribing the narratives of the Filipino nation as well. Rizal himself stated that the Noli contains the last decade of the country’s history (Daroy 257). Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo confirms this belief when she says that “any Filipino who wanted to write the big one turned to history for his/her material” (117). This is the sense in which the paper will use the term “historical novel.” This form of the novel, in its inception, purports to be a genre in which historical time and place are evoked. Soledad Reyes in Nobelang Tagalog declares the subject matter of the historical novels to be an imaginative effort that extends or intensifies history (29).

At present, the subgenre continues to be privileged by both novelists and literary critics alike although the cause célèbre has become another object altogether: history as a fact, as a verifiable progression of events that has institutionalized the reception of most novels has given way to an understanding of history as a system of representation, as discourse. Nothing is more indicative of this shift in knowledge than Ruth Pison’s Alternative Histories: Martial Law Novels as Counter-Memory. In the book, Pison analyzes seven Martial Law novels from 1972 to 1992 as attempts to interrogate Philippine colonial histories while proposing ways of countering hegemonies via a way of reading which, borrowing from Foucault, she calls counter-memory (1). Martial Law refers to the nine-year period (1972-81) in Philippine history when dictator Ferdinand Marcos suspended the civil and political rights of the Filipinos in the interest of creating a “New Society,” which supposedly heralded social and political reforms but in reality, neutralized Marcos’s economic and political enemies and prolonged his stay in office. The Martial Law novels’ re-inventing and rereading of history in order to bracket its referential quality are devices of what Linda Hutcheon calls “historiographic metafiction.” A self-conscious mode of writing, which is one of our current cultural dominants given the postcolonial agenda of recent Philippine novels in English, historiographic metafiction questions the possibility of objectively knowing the past since our access to it (its written variety) is emplotted as a narrative. This narrative mode posits that history, like literature, uses literary techniques like figurative language and these tools are not mere medium that transmit meaning. Given this corrective view, written histories can now be “closely-read” and interpreted like any fictional story and thus are subject to the same motivations and ideological closures. Such
interplay between fiction and history is the motor behind Groyon’s *The Sky Over Dimas*, winner of the 2003 Palanca Award and the 2005 National Book Award.

Groyon’s is similar to the novels in Pison’s critique in that it celebrates the confusion between what is fictional and what is historical. That this historical novel is unabashedly metafictional in its treatment of Bacolod history is articulated by one of the main characters: “It is more difficult to fabulize what’s there in front of you, as opposed to something in the past, which is so much more malleable and receptive to fabrication (Groyon 32). Such overt self-referentiality resonates in almost every other page.

*The Sky Over Dimas* chronicles the troubled saga of the Torrecarion family, a hacendero clan in Bacolod whose past crimes and misdemeanors, committed in a desperate bid to keep its bloodlines free of working class breed, are deforming its present. George Torrecarion and his wife Marge, if not obsessing about and denying the past, are trapped in a bubble of their own choice. George, the reluctant sugar planter, “fictionalizes the present” by dissimulating madness and entertaining present day Bacolodnons with his quixotic antics; Marge indulges in hack spirituality and the convenience of a split personality. Rafael, the second of two sons, the only survivor, sends himself to college in Manila and manages to escape “the sins of the fathers.” Negros history finds its way into the genealogy of the family which is half-contained by the plot and half-revealed by George Torrecarion’s journals. These sources unravel one dramatic secret after another and they involve genocide, miscegenation, murder, incest, and idiocy from the first Torrecarion settler in Spanish Bacolod to the post-EDSA descendants of the clan.

Historiographic metafiction forwards a provisional sense of history or “reality” given its insight that the past we know today is not a sequence of actual events but is mediated by representations. That Groyon chose to make Bacolod history provisional, a footnote, in the direction of *de-buena pamilya* melodrama and titillation when such a past had been witness to landed oppression and other feudal atavisms is a symptom of and an imagined solution to what has been a long-standing social contradiction. Thus, the novel, in its attempts to denaturalize the conventions of (his)tory-telling and its blurring of fact and fiction, begs to be read as a relativizing of official histories.

Metafictional narrative strategies, in theory, hold that such a corrective view likewise attempts to “redress the balance of the historical record of writing histories of the excluded, those relegated permanently to history’s dark areas” (McHale 99). This is why such theories of narrative are perceived as sharing a host of strategies with feminism. Yet such a resurfacing of hidden, unofficial histories of lost or silenced groups does not seem to be the motivation of the novel when it narrates an apocryphal history of Bacolod.
As a historical novel, *The Sky Over Dimas*'s treatment of the comprehensively-documented history of Bacolod is an overdetermined and contradictory one. On one hand, the novel fictionalizes history but, on the other, insists on showing that same history as a natural cycle, not one impelled by human action. “History” in the novel is neither the recorded past of Bacolod nor an alternative one that surfaces hidden stories about possible “Others,” the losing groups that might have been excluded from official documents. What interpretation of “history” can we then read from the novel given its metafictional treatment of history?

Any theory of history has at one point or another confronted the problem of how the present can represent an absent past. The past it has been held has disappeared and what we have of it are its traces. An acceptance and an addressing of this point is precisely what the Marxist insight into history is: it is an absent cause, resisting representation in its totality but almost always present as narrative. Narrative and genre assume a privileged position since they inscribe complex connections among people, places, and objects and are thus expressive of a perceived totality of real life (Roberts 81). History may be an absent cause but that does not mean that its forces have no shaping influence. In fact, history bears upon narratives in the way our stories mediate experience, drawing social and historical reality into the texture of the work. Narrative is that place where a feeling for or a suspicion about history finds articulation.

When history is textualized, and here the historical novel is exemplary, the ground or subtext such stories embody is not a passive social reality but the more dynamic horizon of social relations, the ebb and flow of which is class conflict. The specificity and the events of the past are different from the present although the former continues to engage the latter in their shared concerns, desires, and struggles (Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* 18). History, Jameson holds, is the collective story of open and hidden class struggles in order to “wrest a realm of Freedom, from a realm of Necessity” (*The Political Unconscious* 19).

This paper argues that *The Sky Over Dimas*'s appropriation and displacement of narrative practices are symptomatic of an elitist political fantasy which naturalizes the dominant position of the hacenderos in Bacolod. It is indeed impossible to represent History but any collective understanding of it necessarily finds expression in a political unconscious, which embodies the social and economic realities that shape the novel’s form.

HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION

Currently, the historical novels that have been in the critical spotlight for a decade or so now are historiographic metafictions. Unlike conventional historical novels, this
narrative form seeks to undermine the hegemonic impulses that have directed the writing of our history. It detects in the linear and teleological representations of history a privileging of the colonizer’s and the elite’s discourses, oftentimes working in tandem. Historiographic metafiction is a postmodernist narrative strategy that manifests the skepticism of constructivist theorists of history regarding the capacity of history to be objective or empirical. Critics like Hayden White have argued that history is not different from fiction since both utilize the same narrative conventions like figurative language and the inscription of subjectivities in a thoroughgoing ideology. Moreover, like history, fiction can “silence, exclude, and absent certain past events—and people” (Hutcheon, “Historiographic” 830). Historiographic metafiction rectifies the imbalance wrought by this conclusive and totalizing stance by dislodging history from its status as objective and disinterested, which authenticates a re-writing or re-presenting of the past that opens up to the multiple views of the present (Hutcheon, “Historiographic” 834).

Umberto Eco identifies three genres that narrate the past: the romance, the swashbuckling tale, and the historical novel (Hutcheon, “Historiographic” 830-32). Hutcheon sees historiographic metafiction as making up the fourth category in this list and as such can be defined in contrast to its predecessor, the historical novel as defined by Lukacs. Unlike historical novels, which enact the historical process by a presentation of character types of “all the humanly and socially essential determinants,” historiographic metafiction casts the protagonist as “the ex-centric, the marginalized, the peripheral figure of fictional history” as a means of undermining the cultural universality inscribed in the personalities of the older form. Secondly, historiographic metafiction makes a ploy out of the “truth” and “lies” found in the historical record in order to foreground the constructedness of and potential lapses in recorded or mainstream history. In contrast to the historical’s novel collection and assimilation of details as a means of rendering historical accuracy, historiographic metafiction includes such details but refuses to organize them into a cohesive narrative order. Lastly, in contrast to the historical novel’s attempts at a seamless joint between history and fiction, which usually trots out historical personalities in order to validate the fictional set-up, historiographic metafiction compels readers to question familiar versions of history (Hutcheon, “Historiographic” 838-39).

Although this postmodern genre has been charged with such excesses as narcissistic fictionalizing and/or trivializing history, its proponents have been quick to defend its agency. Linda Hutcheon, its foremost advocate, points to its denaturalizing, “de-doxifying” critique of cultural representations (The Politics of Postmodernism 3). She admits that this postmodern form is characterized by a “complicitous critique” in that as it problematizes
issues of representation, it also finds itself paradoxically relying on the same devices (language, representation) that it aims to challenge. This paradox, she claims, is typical of discourses that wish to interrogate codes using the articulations found within those codes as their instruments (The Politics of Postmodernism 13). Feminism, for instance, challenges patriarchal systems, of which language is one, although it can only do so by appropriating language.

Postmodernist politics considers the issues of representation such as subjectivity, reference, the intertextual nature of the past, and the ideological implications of historiography in the interplay between historiography and fiction which is strategic in articulating the relationship between the two practices. In its privileging of multiple points of view and an overtly controlling but unreliable narrator, historiographic metafiction addresses the notion of subjectivity, which is held by realist and historical fictions to be stable and coherent. Unlike the characters in realist fiction, the postmodern subjects is poised to deflect the possibility of ever knowing the past with certainty and point to the unreliability of memory, which most recorded histories call upon to guarantee the authenticity of the narrated events. This depiction of the subject likewise dispels the notion of man as a stable fixed point on which he could master the past and thus account for its content and trajectory (Hutcheon, “Historiographic” 841-42).

In its confronting the past of both literature and historiography, historiographic metafiction insists that this past is derived from texts and documents that refer to other texts. As such the past is not an essence, handed down and preserved from some wellspring of truth. Metafictional strategies emphasize this point by its playing with the intertextual bases of history in order to allow the present to re-inscribe the past in new contexts (Hutcheon, “Historiographic” 842).

This mode of historical writing also addresses the issue of reference in its assertion that our knowledge of the past’s reality is problematic, since we have access only to its textual traces/remains which are represented in language, a reliance shared by both fiction and historiography. It is not external reality, that something did happen, which is questioned here as much as our ability to know it “objectively.” This inadequacy of knowledge about the past immediately situates the status of written histories as provisional. Since historiography resorts to language, a non-porous semiotic system, historiographic metafiction suggests this reflexively in its demonstration that the referent is not a given, not “natural” but is always a product of discourse, inscribed in culture (Hutcheon, “Historiographic” 843).
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In its emphasis on the discursive nature of the referent, historiographic metafiction strategies foreground the ideology behind versions of history that are validated and made operative. Given its insight that fiction is historically-conditioned and history is discursively structured, the issue of whose history is read is of utmost urgency to the mode inasmuch as historians impose a process of selection in retaining certain textual details and discarding the rest which do not fit their intention. Postmodern theory holds that history-writing has been known to privilege certain discourses and subjectivities while marginalizing or silencing alternative identities as a result of cultural biases and hegemonic ideologies. The narrative strategies of historiographic metafiction thus liberate both history and fiction from their former actantial status as “truth” or “fact” and “invention” or “imagined,” respectively, unto an understanding of both as narratives. As their shared structure, it is narrative and not the quibble between which is historical and which is fictional that should become the proper focus of critical inquiry in that narratives are conditions of possibility, embodying a mode of coherence and sense-making which renders the knowing into the telling (Hutcheon, “Historiographic” 843).

Most historiographic metafictions produced by Filipino novelists and short-story writers have been lauded for taking up the postcolonial or Marxist task of demystifying and countering hegemonic discourses in their re-imagining of Philippine history and reconstitution of Filipino subjectivities. Such postmodern narrative strategies recognize the fact that our history has been written for us by those whose politics have been complicit in Othering marginal or subaltern identities. This narrative practice, it seems, guarantees “alternative” versions of the past that acknowledge the plurality of discourses given the constructedness of history.

Yet, the creative practice of historiographic metafiction can fall off from its theoretical high-horse. Hutcheon asserts that such a mode of writing is not narcissistic or apolitical. It is not, though not in any a priori or automatic manner. This paper contends that such a mode of re-writing of history can be appropriated to defend and further dominant class ends. Since history is “just another story,” open to a multitude of discourses, then the power to “re-represent” becomes open to abuse as well. Our access to reality is indeed mediated by representations; such a realization, though, is necessary but not sufficient in proposing a means by which excluded groups can assume agency and be allowed to articulate their own discourses. It is impossible to know the past but this should not imply that “history” is to fall casualty to indulgent fictionalizing. The rationalizing histories of the ruling class, the victors can return with a vengeance despite the form.
PHILIPPINE HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTIONS


These novels, with the exception of the last one, have been valorized in that they are read as postcolonial interrogations of canonical/colonialist historiography and other narratives, which open up spaces for inscribing alternative stories of the colonial experience, martial law, and other aspects of Philippine history. In Pison’s study of these novels, she locates in each of the seven the discourse of “counter-memory,” which is the Foucauldian “process of reading particular events against the grain of hegemonic histories” that articulates the silences in authorized versions of history (Pison 1). Foucault’s counter-memory echoes the critical assumptions of Hayden White and the politics of postmodernism discussed by Linda Hutcheon. All three theories converge on the idea that history is non-referential but discursive, already an interpretation in its narrativization of events, and therefore, ideological. Aside from this stance, counter-memory also projects critical uses of history as the parodic or farcical, the dissociative, and the sacrificial, all three being strategies that subvert official and authoritative history. The first dislodges history from its status as authorized reminiscence or recognition, and enables a focus on forms that signal a departure from reality such as the carnival; the second undermines the accepted notion of history as the homogeneous continuity of a tradition or empire by a demonstration of plural discourses that constitute a nation’s past and its people’s identities; the last refers to the sacrificial use of knowledge, which debunks the notion of history as knowledge and truth and reveals how knowledge-formation is predicated on violence and injustices (Pison 1-19). Lily-Rose Tope recognizes the same postcolonial recuperation in her critique of Great Philippine Jungle Energy Café, one of the seven novels in Pison’s analysis. Tope sees in Yuson’s novel a similar narrative re-inscription which surfaces the subjugated discourse of the millenarian in the history of the Philippine nation.
HISTORICIZING GENRES

Fredric Jameson, in *The Political Unconscious*, posits that cultural forms perform a social function, owing to their emergence and evolution in specific historical moments. This is apparent when one considers the social needs addressed by rituals and other collective practices in agricultural or tribal society. The same social needs persist, although in an entirely different degree, when one advances to the era of capitalism. Such a relationship presupposes that from the very start, cultural forms and their social milieu contribute to a total process, an interrelatedness of experience, the activity of one sharing in the impulse of the other; and this context, where art coincides with the movements of society, grants such forms immediate meaning (Jameson, *Marxism and Form* 165). At this historical moment when a connection was felt among the different spheres of human existence, between private and public domains, now compartmentalized, there was yet no need to symbolize and thus to “interpret.” With the loss of such concerted quality between art and its social ground in the capitalist age and its later developments, when artistic works are reified while the social ground descends to the level of base, art has come to develop or “behave” in a way that captures this vanished completeness. That art stood in an organic relationship with society—its emergent historical situation—is then the starting point for the interpretation of cultural forms. Thus the history of a thing, whether it is sexuality, a literary work, or a musical composition, conditions the way it is interpreted (Roberts 112). Such is the process in which the past engages the present.

Such an intuiting of the historicity of forms is especially useful in the study of narratives and, in particular, the novel. Genres establish and sustain a necessary relationship between an aesthetic or author and its public or audience (Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* 106). Not a neutral category, genre is receptive to changes or movements that occur in the larger contexts of the social and the economic. The novel, for instance, which is “an attempt to give meaning to the outside world and to human experience (Jameson, *Marxism and Form* 173) in its full-fledged form is attributed to the rise of the middle class as a social group distinct from the nobility and the proletariat. In this manner literary texts, despite their detached or “experimental” quality, come into being as a response to certain dilemmas or situations. Such an argument finds its theoretical basis in the Marxist work of Jameson, who sees narrative as the “central function or instance of the human mind” (*The Political Unconscious* 13) and defines it as a *symbolic act* (*The Political Unconscious* 20). For Jameson, “the will to read literary or cultural texts as symbolic acts must necessarily grasp them as resolutions of determinate contradictions” (*The Political
Not a simplistic model of reflection between base and superstructure, the understanding of a text as a balance of tensions between the conjured and the real finds further basis in Kenneth Burke’s notion that it is a “play of emphases, in which a symbolic act is on the one hand affirmed as a genuine act, albeit on the symbolic level, while on the other it is registered as an act which is merely symbolic, its resolutions imaginary ones that leave the real untouched, suitably dramatizes the ambiguous status of art and culture” (Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* 81). In effect, literature is imaginary but it possesses a kind of potency as well: it does something to the world by its very representation of society, in its host of characters, places, conflicts, as a total scheme of things.

The definition of genres and narratives as social contracts and symbolic acts qualify them as forms of mediation by their very ambiguity in structure and function, and thus enable a dialectical reading between the literary text and its social ground. Hence, narratives are mediating structures that surface, as if against themselves, the unseen correspondence between two levels in the overall structure of society. Mediation, in Jameson’s terms, is “the classical dialectical term for the establishment of relationships between, say, the formal analysis of a work of art and its social ground, or between the internal dynamics of the political state and its economic base” (*The Political Unconscious* 39). As a method, mediations demonstrate the working of a subtext, a deeper reality, which is not apparent on the surface of the work but influences it in a way similar to how the unconscious, in its slips, projections, and displacements, breaks into conscious thought. In this process, the fragmented and autonomous qualities of phenomena in human existence such as work, the academe, the household, the legal system, and cultural practices are unmasked as illusions issuing from the rationalization and reification of daily life in the capitalist age (*The Political Unconscious* 40), where such phenomena are apprehended as things-in-themselves, oblivious to their actual status as produced, as moments in a total process. This is not to repeat the commonplace that the essence of the base is simply reproduced in the superstructure but that the literary work, in its status as a symbolic act, exercises a degree of freedom as it compensates for, resolves, or revolts against the situation, contradiction, or dilemma found in the historical moment of the text’s production (*The Political Unconscious* 42).

Aside from fostering a momentary unification between literary forms and their historical contexts, mediation is crucial in tracing the text’s historical conditions of possibility—those available concrete objects and developments in the structures of the economic, the political, and the social—which constitute its subtext. Jameson views the subtext not merely as a passive ground which the text reflects or as a series of determinate
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contradictions but as a “political unconscious.” Such a claim finds its wider relevance in Jameson’s assertion that “everything is ‘in the last analysis’ political” (The Political Unconscious 20). Both statements about the political initialize the point by which Jameson proposes that History is “a horizon encompassing all interpretation” (qtd. in Roberts 50). “History,” in Jameson’s scheme, is similar to Jacques Lacan’s “Real,” which is the reality lying beyond the reach of consciousness. Both are absent causes, apprehended only through their manifestations, resisting the confines of the imagined and the symbolic (Roberts 77). Such an idea is at work, for instance, when postmodern narrative theories refer to the cultural and not “natural” status of historical documents, imputing that the latter are not real or actual but privilege certain groups or subjectivities and are therefore mere effects or versions of History. Thus when we “think of” or “write” “history,” our doing so can only be but an oblique estimation, an effect of an absent cause.

Moreover, for Jameson, the unconscious can aptly be metaphorized as ideological, the vantage point from which a version of History is constructed, since History is “the unity of a single great collective story … sharing a single fundamental theme—for Marxism, the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity” (The Political Unconscious 19). Such a definition of History strongly entertains a class composition or character and anticipates the three concentric frameworks of the political, the social, and the historical by which Jameson interprets literary texts as ideological constructions. History might be unrepresentable but our collective understanding of it as necessity (the sentiment that what happened had to happen) seeks expression in the political unconscious—a vision of history which is nevertheless a desiring, alternative, and a utopian one.

It is from this understanding of history and other narratives as ideological that a text assumes different levels of intelligibility in the gradual expansion of its social ground. Such a process may likewise be seen as the strong rewriting of the literary text that deepens its semantic and ideological registers following the widening of its subtext. Jameson identifies the first of these grounds as the political (The Political Unconscious 75), the interpretive horizon on which this paper reads Groyon’s novel.

NEGATIVE INTERTEXTUALITY

On this level of interpretation, the text is construed as a symbolic act and its immediate period in political history, marked by historical figures and political regimes, as
its horizon. At this point, the narrative is an imagined or formal solution to a determinate contradiction and is outright ideological (The Political Unconscious 77-79).

As with any Marxist analysis of cultural texts, the concept of contradiction and its articulation is vital to concluding both the first and second interpretive analyses and clarifies what Jameson actually means by “subtext.” In contrast to the sociological reading of literature, which grasps mediation as mere reflection of base on superstructures, the Marxist subtext is nowhere announced in the text “but rather must itself always be (re) constructed after the fact” (The Political Unconscious 81). This is the sense in which the construction of the text as symbolic act gains critical import: the text reconfigures an earlier historical or ideological system of relations, thus the text engages the Real by “draw[ing] [it] into its own texture” (The Political Unconscious 81). In effect, the subtext is that which the literary work “brings into being … to which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction” (The Political Unconscious 82).

This recognition of the workings of the text as primarily a symbolic act informs the paper’s analysis of genres and their displacements in a formal mapping of ideology. Symbolic acts are generic forms implicated in literary evolution and the processes of social life. More importantly, they undergo an ongoing strategy of replacement and variation (The Political Unconscious 131) in order to address changing historical situations and assume cultural validity. Jameson proposes this understanding of the genesis of genres:

in its emergent, strong form a genre is essentially a socio-symbolic message, or in other terms, that form is immanently and intrinsically an ideology in its own right. When such forms are reappropriated and refashioned in quite different social and cultural contexts, this message persists and must be functionally reckoned into the new form. (The Political Unconscious 141)

This model of causality between the variable form of genres, their inherent ideologies and the historical context entertains a process of imbrication where the passage from one historical period to the next inscribes a new function in the text. As it transforms and displaces older social messages, the text finds its current ideological charges contending with the former, such that the new generic mode either clashes with or subsumes prior sedimented ideological messages (The Political Unconscious 141). This is how genres, in neutralizing the contradiction/s in the subtextual and formal layers, regulate such diverse signals issuing from different historical moments in order to simulate a uniform, coherent appearance.
The resulting substitutions or displacements that accrue in the development of a genre by its constant reappropriation by discontinuous historical situations have typically been ordered as a confirmation of identities between an original form and its later morphing. Jameson describes the evolution of romance, as mapped out by Northrop Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* to demonstrate a specific instance of this type of generic ideological construct. The frequent re-modeling of romance as a genre adapts itself to different contexts by replacing the original substance of magic with other contents such as religion and the psyche among others as the form approaches the arrival of secular society (*The Political Unconscious* 134). This idealist mode of Frye’s, though, elides the differences that mark the jump from one historical situation to the next as it insists on seeing a smooth continuity from the romances of Chretien de Troyes to the fantastic literature of the modern (*The Political Unconscious* 136).

In contrast, a Marxist account of the same generic series considers the construction as taking the more properly restorative form of a *negative intertextuality* where a differential account is enlisted to register a significant absence in the newer text once it is introduced into its primary generic series (*The Political Unconscious* 137-38). This type of diachronic construct is articulated through the text’s deviation in its formal features or content from its background of generic affinities (*The Political Unconscious* 137). The departure from its formal templates, by way of modifications in the plot structure, the functioning of certain characters, or the shifting of the conflict, signals an important absence and displacement where an element in the incipient form, for some reason, is banished or muted in the text and the text itself transfers its urgencies elsewhere. Jameson considers such a maneuver as performing a necessary operation where the text senses a kind of present societal anxiety in its current generic registers and consequently, does its best to exploit another feature in order to distract the reader from and neutralize such apprehensions (*The Political Unconscious* 138).

The displaced/subdued moment or feature and the diversionary one are the intertextual constructs that engender a reading of the text as the “coexistence, contradiction, structural hierarchy, or uneven development of a number of distinct narrative systems” (*The Political Unconscious* 138), owing to the changes in the socio-historical situation. This diachronic differential reading permits the text to be construed as a symbolic act, an ideological reply or resolution to an actual dilemma. This is the process by which the text can be made to surface, after repressing the appearance of it, its political unconscious—an imagined and desired “solution” given the determinate contradictions in a historical moment. More importantly, such a plotting of narrative registers or traces
“restore[s] our sense of the concrete situation in which such forms can be seized as original and meaningful protopolitical acts” (The Political Unconscious 148).

The materialist basis of Jameson’s Marxism constitutes the ultimate conditions of possibility of any genre and this is especially true of the novel whose constant metamorphosis makes it exemplary a form for revealing such a symbolic act at play, muting, subsuming, unifying, and displacing narrative paradigms which are all ideologically-charged in contradictory ways, themselves originally symbolic acts. In this manner is how Bakhtin considers all utterances to be only “relatively stable” speech genres of which the novel or any literary work is one. As speech, literary works do not really “create” original expressions or messages but instead exhibit a process of assimilation where the text is charged with “others’ words” in varying degrees. These words, which the speaker or author attempts to own or shepherd into his/her work, are derived from different epochs, social circles, or family and intersected by the various fields of human activity like law, journalism, and the sciences. In its embodiment of a world and an evaluation of it, these words which the author assimilates is re-worked and re-accentuated in the literary work (Bakhtin 89).

HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION AS A SOCIALLY SYMBOLIC ACT

It is to this generic sequence or diachronic construct of historiographic metafiction that The Sky Over Dimas finds itself positioned as its most recent addition. As demonstrated in the critical reading of a number of historiographic metafictions above, the form has always been read as relevant and corrective, although not uncontested, given its postmodernist and postcolonial denaturalizing critique that provisionalizes and pluralizes history, and resurrects subjugated knowledges and stories that may have been casualties of written historical records.

Despite the textual-political hermeneutic that a synthesis of postmodern and postcolonial strategies projects in order to locate the agencies of individual works of the form, it glosses over the fact that the genre itself, historiographic metafiction, is a socially symbolic act, marked by its emergence in a particular period of history (it replaces the dominant form of the historical novel in the late-capitalist era) and situated in a co-existence of mode of productions (feudal capitalism-late capitalist). In Jameson’s critical insight, the history of any genre—its semantic conditions of possibility and its emergent social function—should be a necessary ground for its interpretation, not as a replacement of other reading strategies but as a vital precondition for adequate literary
comprehension (The Political Unconscious 17). Amidst the dilemma about the status of historiography and other texts that deal with history in one way or another, which the above set of readings and counter-readings of historical fiction evokes, it is Jameson’s Marxist hermeneutic, in itself a “genuine philosophy of history,” that settles the issue. This understanding of history, Jameson claims, is “capable of respecting the specificity and radical difference of the social and cultural past while disclosing the solidarity of its polemics and passions, its forms, structures, experiences, and struggles, with those of the present day” (The Political Unconscious 19). History, as invoked in this definition, is neither a referent nor a mere construction but an absent cause, invisible because it is the ever-continuing narrative of class struggles that have marked a range of historical periods from the prehistoric to late capitalist (and thus cannot be directly accessed), which has nevertheless the capacity to make itself manifest in its effects. History is also, in Jameson’s critical scheme, simultaneously the mode of production, not to be reduced to the economic base but understood as a structure that synchronizes the system of social relations between and among different levels as a whole. Monopoly and/or late capitalism, for instance, are modes of production that regulate the functional synchronicity of culture, the political, and the economic. This is the sense in which the mode of production is an absent cause, since it is nowhere visible and discrete as an element; it is not one of the levels in the mode of production, but rather “the entire system of relationship among those levels” (The Political Unconscious 36). This is not to fall back on the vulgar base-superstructure model that plagued other sociological criticisms since, as Jameson demonstrates in his hermeneutic apparatus, each level in the structure does exercise a relative autonomy. The present writing of literature, for instance, is determined by a capitalist mode of production and yet it is also a reaction or a revolt against the social system.

Modes of production have usually been understood as stages of human society: tribal society, hierarchical kinship society, Oriental despotism, an oligarchical slaveholding society, feudalism, capitalism, and communism (The Political Unconscious 89). Although this progressive series seems to imply that the movement from one stage to the next signifies a clean break or transition, Jameson claims that realistically, there has yet to be a historical society that typifies a mode of production in its pure state. What Jameson observes, instead, is that social formations or societies have consisted in the synchronicity of several modes of production at any given historical moment, structured according to the order that reinforces the rule of the dominant (The Political Unconscious 95). Thus, it is possible to survey any point in a society’s existence and discover that residual traces of older modes like feudalism co-existing, albeit marginally, with the new dominant, capitalism, both
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anticipating the emergence of a mode which has yet to articulate its difference or autonomy from the current dominant.

Resil Mojares’s “The History in the Text” articulates this thinking about history. Mojares summarily states the essay’s point at the very beginning: “Any literary text is a point of entry into the historical world” (Mojares 1). Rejecting the category of historical literature, Mojares counters that all texts are historical since they are inevitably “permeated, determined, or compromised by history” and qualifies what this means in four statements, which echo Jameson’s notions of History. First, literary texts are told or narrated within a certain historical consciousness, an awareness of the manner in which experience is shaped by ideological forces. Second, history is produced or enacted in the totality of the text, when events are bound to a specific time and place. Mojares sees this demonstrated in Benedict Anderson in Imagined Communities that draws attention to Capitan Tiago’s dinner gathering as an instance of Rizal’s modern consciousness that informs the construction of the collective life in that historical moment in the novel. Third, it is likely that history is what the text represses. A novel may not deal with a punctual historical event but its writing unconsciously finds itself drawing historically-specific notions of time, space, subjectivity, for instance, which is nowhere explicit in its content. Mojares illustrates this point by a simultaneous reading of F. Sionil Jose’s The Pretenders and Kerima Polotan’s The Hand of the Enemy, both written in 1962, which points to the novels’ being circumscribed by a common sense of cynicism that is grounded on the ideological climate of the 60s. Lastly, Mojares cautions that the concept of history should not be reduced to that of empirical or objective events like wars, revolutions, and the like. Instead, history is that which happens in common, everyday life, which nevertheless is marked by hidden transformations of “ideas, emotions, consciousness.”

As Jameson’s formulations and Mojares’s statements reveal, texts are negotiations of history in their being written in a specific ideological environment or social milieu of the time. Cultural and literary works are always historical, regardless of their declared content, in that they draw history into their textual fabric. This understanding of a literary form’s imbrication in history is a vital pre-condition in the interpretation of any genre. Historiographic metafiction in this historical grounding can be made to yield an account of its narrativizing impulses and motivations by situating it against the period of postmodernism.
POSTMODERNIST HISTORY

Postmodernism, whose narrative strategies inform historiographic metafiction, first and foremost is not merely a description of an aesthetic but is more significantly, a periodizing concept. For Jameson, postmodernism is the “cultural logic of late capitalism,” replicating, reinforcing, and intensifying the “deplorable and reprehensible” socio-economic effects of postmodernity (Jameson, Postmodernism 85). Postmodernism expresses the “inner truth” of late capitalism’s emergent social order and is marked by pastiche or the transformation of reality into images, schizophrenia or the death of the individual subject, increasing commodification, borderless socio-economic systems or multinational capital and a nostalgia that colonizes the present in its blurring of immediate contemporary references (Jameson, The Cultural Turn 1-20).

Evocative of the logic of late consumer capitalism, postmodernism marks the “disappearance of a sense of history” that is illustrated in the manner in which we have lost our capacity to retain our past and exist in an eternal present. Jameson sees this phenomenon as buttressed by the informational activity of the media whose exhaustive delivery of news encourages a quick consignment of recent historical experiences to the past, thus facilitating some kind of amnesia (The Cultural Turn 1-20).

It is to this ideological climate of late capitalism and its cultural expression, postmodernism, and its conditions of possibility that this paper now locates Groyon’s novel as a symbolic act. That historiographic metafiction emerged from this distinct historical period is a significant precondition of its interpretation whereby the function of this genre construes it to be a symbolic act carrying two pronounced ideological charges: it projects the postmodern condition and articulates the postcolonial discourse of recuperation.

THE TELLING AND THE TOLD IN THE SKY OVER DIMAS

The Sky Over Dimas makes it a point to trouble its narrating of the Torrecarion family saga to the extent that its plot, which resembles the twists and delays of detective fiction, its shifting points of view, setting, images and symbols are structured to dramatize the distance between (historical) truth and its telling. Of these formal devices, it is the symbols of “ground” and “sky” which dominate the story, shaping and prodding the other elements in their marked opposition.

In the novel, the ground, which is one term in the binary opposition, is associated with derogatory qualities. To it are conjoined notions of “truth”/“essence,” “the past,”...
“family secrets,” “filth,” and “corruption.” These meanings overlap in several instances in the novel.

In the beginning of the novel, George withdraws from the peering eyes and voluble tongues of Bacolod and holes himself up in Hacienda Dimas, which is by itself a symbolic gesture. George writes in his journal that he will unbury the past by telling “all of the things … driven out of sight into the dark until everything grew over it and hid the signs that anything have ever been buried there to begin with” (12).

Such a figuring of truth, and the past as hidden and buried likewise appears in George’s journal as a comment on the Negrosanon’s penchant for digging and burying things. In disclosing such a habit, George then proceeds to exonerate himself from guilt by announcing that he will tear down the lies surrounding his family.

These three references to “hiding” confirm a meaning of “ground” as a mass or receptacle of unearthed truth and skeletons in the closet that have yet to be disclosed. The ending of the story, of course, makes the skeleton a literal one. The trope of hiding is likewise used to refer to Faustino’s journal, which George describes as “emerge[ing]” from hiding.

Another connotation of ground generated by the story comes from its affinity with land. Land and its attendant connotations in Negros are deplored by the characters in the novel, but most especially so by Rafael who scorned the trappings of hacienda life and relates anything close to the ground with working class life, primitiveness, and vulgarity. In explaining why he prefers Manila, Rafael reveals his dislike for physical labor and its connections with land and dirt. It is this aversion, he professes, which fuels his choice to live in high-rise condos, “as far away from the smog and filth of the earth as possible.”

A similar use of the idiom of distantiation, which straddles the symbolic registers of sky, appears in Rafael’s description of the plaza in Bacolod. In observing how the underbelly of Bacolod society has taken refuge on the stone benches, Rafael notes that even prostitutes, the jobless, and the homeless desire to be “lifted” away from the earth, which confirms his penchant for distancing himself from anything associated with the earth to be “a natural human instinct.”

This aversion towards things associated with the earth finds its way in Rafael’s picturesque memory of the workers in Hacienda Dimas. In his observation of the workers’ routine during payroll time, it is their tough feet and nothing else that attract his attention. He describes their feet as “broad, solid, like the roots of an ancient tree, creased, and cracked, chalky ridges limning the whorls and calluses, skin the texture of guava tree bark” (110).
The condescension that whittles down the workers’ identity to the appearance of their feet extends to the manner in which walking in Bacolod is said to be a social stigma for the affluent. Rafael observes that, in Bacolod society, only the obreros and lower classes walk and recalls an incident when he had to take a jeep going to a classmate’s house in a subdivision that doesn’t allow public vehicles entry. In his five-minute walk from the stop to the subdivision, a group of colegialas driving by in a car jeered at him, asking if he was on his way to the market. Since that humiliating scene, Rafael has always taken a taxi until he learned how to drive.

Curiously enough the symbol of ground is further particularized to accommodate suggestions of “dirt,” shading “truth” to mean not only “what happened” but also the more loaded insinuation of indiscretions and peccadillos. It is used in such a context in this substitution. An entry in George’s journal narrates how George just listened to Marge’s confession that her first son was actually Rodel’s and not George’s. Marge admitted to fooling George into thinking that that son was his. George made noises to indicate that he forgives her but later on reveals that he was fuming and admits that “I wanted to throw the real Truth back at her, and the real truth was out here so I had to go get it so I could push it in her face” (58). “Truth” in this passage is couched in terms that make it seem as if it were dirt or muck being hurled at someone’s face. The strong verbs used indicate less an unburdening of guilt or a correction of lies and more a mudslinging match. Moreover, the three contiguous expressions of ground in the novel, referring to the workers’ feet, the stigma of walking, and truth as dirt, resonate with the melodramatic Filipino derogatory expressions hinugot ka lang sa putik and hampas-lupa.

In contraposition to “ground,” the symbol of “sky” in the novel is invested with more desirable and privileged values. It is conflated with ideas of distance, release, layering, and “telling.” Among the characters in the novel, it is Rafael who stands for the wish-fulfillment registers of “sky” in the novel. As can be gleaned in an earlier excerpt, Rafael disdains things close to the ground, and as consequence, lives in Manila, in high-rise condos, away from the messy affairs of his family in Bacolod.

Because he didn’t want to “get his hands dirty,” a running euphemism in the novel which means being involved or implicated, Rafael was unaffected when support of the EDSA revolution was in full swing in Bacolod. The narration attributes his forgetfulness to “his tendency to pass judgment from a distance, or a great height” (132).

In the last chapter of the novel, written curiously in italics and from the point of view of an omniscience different from the existing one in the novel, Rafael sits in his apartment, pondering the contents of both George’s and Faustino’s journal, which he has
read over and over. As he is about to sleep, the narration turns to a contemplation of his figure:

Still the question arises. It’s always the last thing he remembers before he drops off to sleep. His gentle snoring—an inherited trait, naturally—releases it as an invocation to the sky, which remains unmoved and doesn’t answer. (258)

This last paragraph of the novel establishes a connection between the sky and the idea of release in transforming Rafael’s question about his family’s story into a prayer thrown at something incapable of responding.

Another passage in the same chapter makes a similar reference although the import of the symbol has now shifted somewhat in significance.

He’s alone in his apartment, and he feels it especially in the way that the noise of the unseen traffic below wafts up to him, disembodied and ephemeral. High above him, the Pleiades trace their arcs with stately grace, as invisible to him, as vehicles on the streets below. (257)

Aside from the suggestive description of traffic noise as disembodied and ephemeral, adjectives that seem too ambitious to refer to something as banal as traffic and are clearly correlatives of the sky, the quoted lines take the focus of the narration to something as ridiculously high up as the Pleiades, a nebulous star cluster predicted to have dissolved some 250 million years or so. This particular and conspicuous articulation of the sky through the specter of the Pleiades as hazy and indeterminate is suggestive of the novel’s dominant narrative gesture of fabulizing or “telling,” which is only to be expected from historiographic metafiction. In the novel, gossip, fabrication, rumors, and telling crowd the narration and are construed to be one and the same provisional operation.

Aside from instances of narration, “sky” in the novel encroaches on the articulation of the other elements as the novel’s way of asserting, sometimes in an overstated fashion, the impossibility of arriving at fact or truth when its expression can never really prove itself to be a faithful medium. Details of setting, character, and point of view are animated by this registers of the symbol. One of them is the Jarabas mansion whose architectural history is described as a series of indeterminate re-modellings and expansions which made the original architect’s design impossible to ascertain. This detail about the house that
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depicts its structure as indecipherable in its purpose from its many additions through time approximates the idea of layering as a contiguous expression of “telling,” suggesting the impossibility of discerning which part of the house holds its basic block, core or essence. The manor in Dimas, which is bizarre and asymmetrically-developed, is also described in the same terms.

The notion of telling as fabulizing or fabricating undergirds the narration of both George’s and Marge’s family history. 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. In fact, all three Torrecarions resort to fabrication when the convenience arises. Rafael, for instance, admits to mixing truth with fiction when his girlfriend in Manila starts asking one too many questions about his past.

Writing his own diary, George notes that the statements in Faustino’s journal are speculations and embellishments which accomplish the task of myth-making. Challenging the facticity of Faustino’s memoir of his arrival in Negros, George identifies the many false notes in his great-grandfather’s early life such as Faustino’s being a subject of the Spanish Crown and his earning a plot of land through honest hard work. George scoffs at this, insisting that the proud and illustrious history of Faustino, before he came to cultivate sugar for the Spanish, is a tissue of hearsay and lies passed on from gossip to gossip, “until all of it took on the patina of Truth, by dint of having been repeated for so long” (31-32).

Such a tangential and accidental production of “truth” brought about by an accumulation of inventions, retellings, and hearsay is the novel’s central thematic concern, underscoring the impossibility of knowing the truth or telling it straight. Given this focus, it is understandable why the novel privileges gossip and a collective perspective which attributes the source of pseudo-testimonial statements about the Torrecarion and Jarabas families to “all of Bacolod” or “all of Negros.” In fact the repeated emphasis on fabulizing and telling, whose frequency in the novel inundates the whole story, can be read as an undermining of history’s valuation as that which is “true,” factual, and superior. As a corollary to this sentiment, fiction is not necessarily “false,” feigned, and inferior. Thus the originary binary opposition is deconstructed in the novel in its swapping of signifieds. By marginalizing “truth” and privileging fiction, summed up as narrating a story or relaying what happened or what one has overheard, the novel accomplishes its task of provisionalizing history. Thus after George dies the fact seems to do so, so to speak, and causes a commotion, a celebration in fact among the residents in Bacolod who had their version of a “George story” to tell and re-tell.
In its overdetermined use of the symbols of “sky” and “ground, the novel further invests the pair with meanings related to genealogy in keeping with its subject of a family saga. In its suggestion of truth as something singular and straight and of lies or fabrications as something multiple and warped, the narration strikes a parallelism between truth as genetic normality and “logical outcome” and telling as degeneration, insanity, and class miscegenation. In this permutation of the binary, history, in its linearity, is conflated with the concept of bloodlines, which is illustrated mainly by George, who points an accusing finger at Faustino, so to speak, for bringing in what he perceives as the craziness in his family, his euphemism for the act of murder and other human grotesqueries. Thus Torrecarion, a “tower of carrion” aptly characterizes George’s family as poachers on land, social status, and anything that secures either.

In contrast to this attribution of character to atavistic tendencies, members of Marge’s family who stain the pureness of hacendero pedigree—the adopted Ansing, the illegitimate first son Rodel, the idiot Jan, the stillborn baby of Bernice—is representative of the idea of mutation. Jarabas, if traced back to the Spanish jarabe, is a colloquial expression for a glib talker; it is also informed by the term pang-harabas, loosely translated as “for the rough and ready,” which, when referring to a person, is suggestive of someone coarse and indiscriminate about sexual partners—attributes which describe not only Marge and Aida but the other women in the Jarabas clan.

In fact, in what could only be called an over-privileging of “telling,” George and Rafael’s last moments in the story cast doubt as to whether the latter is actually the son of the former. In their final minutes together in Dimas, George marvels at how Rafael could very well be him when he was young given their striking resemblance. This affirmation of common blood, however, is suspended when George notices for the first time that Rafael has asthma and is puzzled since both sides of the family are not genetically predisposed to it. George wonders “where” his son got it, implying that the disorder could not have been inherited from either parent. The last lines of the novel seemingly make a ploy of the whole matter as it describes Rafael’s snoring as “an inherited trait, naturally.”

THE SKY OVER DIMAS AS A SYMBOLIC ACT

Although Groyon’s novel is a variant of historiographic metafiction, a genre which is by itself already a symbolic act, and manifests its known textual features like multiplicity of stories, unreliable narration, and the impossibility of knowing the truth, its articulation of history is different from the novels in the generic series. More significantly, unlike the
historiographic metafictional novels discussed in the previous section, which foreground recuperative discourses of postcolonial writing, the postmodern narrative strategies of *The Sky Over Dimas* do not take up the task of restoring subjugated knowledge/s or surfacing marginalized or subaltern subjectivities to the frame of history. As such, the novel’s appropriation of the metafictional mode can be read as a deviation in content from its immediate generic background. This departure from the established generic practice, Jameson claims, is instructive in revealing a significant absence in the text and engenders a rerouting of the diachronic generic construct via what he calls a negative intertextuality, which locates a literary text in its generic series in order to track the missing element and its substitute or replacement in the text. This maneuver, Jameson holds, enables an inventorying of the substitutions that occur when a given feature in the incipient or dominant form disappears or is muted by the present text and is replaced by another content or element. Such a replacement strategy is not to be mistaken for a random or trivial switching of details but should be read as the text’s strategy of repressing certain formal contents upon sensing how such former content and its ideological charge, which is a fixture in the emergent form of the genre, has become a source of societal anxiety in the present. The text then shifts the place and urgency emptied by the muted element into some other formal feature or a substitute code that becomes a necessary distraction for the reader whose reception of a particular genre is regulated by its standard set of formal features and content. In *Dimas*, the repressed content, which should have generated the narrative/s of the Ex-centric or silenced voices in Philippine history, themselves already repressed in conventional history, is displaced into the narration of a *de-buena pamilya* melodrama, itself an available semantic possibility, where the elite characters themselves, in their feigned madness and psychological excesses, assume the role of the e(x)ccentric as if the narrative tried to fit into this missing content a highly-stretched characterization of the elite family as hapless and helpless victims of the feudal dynamics of the sugar industry in Negros. There is hence an attempt by the novel to characterize its elite figures as dramatic, larger than life, and yet persecuted and almost marginal in their being fodder for gossip, derision, and entertainment, which comprise the social content of melodrama.

The impetus behind this displacement, which represses the presence of marginal identities, is further pressed into service in the novel’s provisionalizing of history, its postmodern strategy of dissolving the actuality of events illustrated. Unlike the former texts of historiographic metafiction, what the relativization of history in Groyon’s novel actually demonstrates is the improbability of knowing the truth about the crimes and the acts of taboo committed by members of the *Torrecarion* and the *Jarabas* families since the
text at this point had already suppressed what could have been the unwanted presence of class tensions between the landed elite and the working class in Negros as content; hence, such former content had to be replaced with melodrama. Such a substitution in content stands out in relief when Groyon’s novel is slotted in the line-up of earlier historiographic metafictions. These are historiographic metafictions whose appropriation of this genre is motivated precisely by what Linda Hutcheon claims is the denaturalizing or de-doxifying critique of postmodern narrative strategies. As such, these novels provisionalize history in order to foreground its status as a hegemonic construct and thus liberate the repressed stories of those whom traditional history of the nation has excluded. In stark contrast, the textual motivation or rationale for Dimas’s “invention of the past” is invested by a melodramatic impulse which foreground the twists and turns of a family saga.

This provisionalizing instance in Dimas lends itself to further articulation in the binary opposition between the sky and the ground. As discussed in the previous section, both sky and ground are overdetermined symbols in the novel, the former invested with the privileged metafictionalizing trope of telling (gossip, speculation, freedom, release, distance, and forgetfulness) while the latter is associated with the hidden told (truth, family secrets, land/dirt, corruption, and the past). The projection of this binary that privileges the telling over the told/truth and the displaced generic content in Groyon’s novel at this point may be read as the juxtaposition of ideological codes that disclose the text’s vision of history or political unconscious that comes into being as the text’s symbolic resolution to certain social contradictions or anxieties that mark the historical moment of the novel.

As discussed in the earlier sections of this paper, a literary genre or text is a symbolic act in that it is a response to certain historical dilemmas or situations. As symbolic acts, genres are acts of mediation themselves in that they embody a correspondence or relationship between the formal features of a literary work and its subtext, the result of a text’s contact with the absent cause of History, which the text draws it into its surface while constituting a reaction to it. Hence, although the text’s response to its confrontation with History is imaginary and symbolic, this response is simultaneously an act that represses, compensates for, resolves or revolts against a determinate situation. The text thus at this interpretive level is itself an ideology, a strategy of containment that in proposing a solution to a social contradiction also registers the limit beyond which the consciousness in the text cannot go. This ideological limit that clears symbolic space in the text’s “reading” of History makes possible a fantasizing about history, which is the text’s political unconscious.
In *Dimas*, the main characters are clearly allegorical equivalents of the families of sugar hacenderos in Negros whose protracted ownership and monopoly of the land has assured them of social and cultural power as well. This feudal system of the sugar industry in Negros, which is marked by the abject poverty of its sugar workers, inequitable labor relations, military and NPA violence, and the conspicuous consumption of its landed elite, constitute the socio-historical situation that the novel itself is an answer or response to (Aguilar 2, Billig 1-250, Berlow 63-199). Although it is clear in any history of Negros that such feudal practices are perpetuated by the clique of hacenderos in order to maintain their dominant position in the status quo where all but five percent of the population control the circulation of wealth in Negros, *Dimas* represses this fact in its depiction of George as a reluctant, sugar-weary hacendero and instead explains this iniquitous and volatile situation by stating that “sugar is evil,” a *reification* which naturalizes its operations, as if to say that sugar is self-explanatory or sufficient in itself or that it is bound to cause misery wherever it is planted. This view of sugar is replicated in the novel’s statement about blood, which once again becomes George’s and Rafael’s convenient scapegoat, the former blaming his bloodline for his amoral acts, and the latter, demonstrating that there is no escaping one’s genetic inheritance. These naturalized modes in the novel are not mere metaphorical instances or stylizations but are extensions of the text’s provisionalizing of history. These narrative gestures humanize its elite characters by absolving them of guilt, making them sympathetic figures, and construing their failures as inevitable outcomes of blood and object logic.

These three formal features in the novel—its repressed postcolonial counter-discourse, its provisionalizing of history via a binary opposition that privileges the telling over its object (truth), and its objectification of sugar and genealogical atavisms (which betray an anachronistic modernist explanation of a pre-modern, feudal concrete practice and will likely be a significant element in the third interpretive horizon)—project a fantasy of the elite which is a denial and also a justification of their historical role in the perpetuation of the unjust feudal dynamics of sugar production in Negros. Such a political unconscious may be read as a disavowal that expresses itself in the statement that “it did not happen.” In contrast to the earlier function of historiographic metafiction, Groyon’s text is a symbolic act that had to orchestrate a far more complicated system of displacements and appropriations, in its articulation of a unique solution to the dilemma or contradiction presented by the troubled production of sugar in Negros. It is this social contradiction that the novel finds itself confronted with and symbolically resolving in its reading and textualization of history.
POLITICAL FANTASY OF THE NOVEL

In one of George’s entries in his journal, he relives the circumstances which brought him and his wife Margie together. He wonders whether his marriage to Margie could have worked out differently, whether Margie could have been special and he could’ve grown to love her had the sinister circumstances not happened. In George’s expression of “what could have been, only if,” Groyon articulates the fantasy content of the novel, which is simultaneously a wishing away of history that the imaginative gesture of the novel insists “had to happen.” This moment in the novel distills and illustrates the impetus and function of genres given their determinate position in a historical period. It is to this critical insight that Groyon’s novel functions as a symbolic act in its necessary appropriation of discontinuous and contradictory “already-read” narrative contents.

Melodrama, in its dominant form, is a mode whose “deep structure” expresses the struggle between good and evil beneath its formulaic surface of emotionalism and excess (Brooks 4-6). Although Dimas substitutes this mode for the displaced element, its adoption of melodrama is emptied of its effectual content, which is the moment when virtue and villainy clash. In the novel, elite and working class characters in the novel are not figured forth as ethical polarities and as such, no climactic encounter occurs between the two groups. Secondly, this hollowed out form of melodrama, its insertion in the novel a mere ploy, moreover exposes how the novel’s provisionalizing instances, its privileging of telling, makes “unknowable” not the events of the (constructed) past as they happened, but the crimes committed by the Torrecarion family as if these violations were constructs by themselves. Lastly, the provisionalizing impulse or condition of unknowability is substantiated further by the text’s objectification/fetishizing of sugar and genealogical traits. What these three generic material project is a fantasy of the elite that denies and justifies their role in perpetuating the iniquitous feudal economy of sugar in Negros.

By a reconstruction of the novel’s sequence of ideological assimilation, Groyon’s novel may be read as a symbolic act. The text thus is this process of displacing and selecting pre-existing narrative givens, which themselves contain incipient social charges that the text mutes in some places and accentuates in others. In this process may be gleaned the novel’s doing the work it is supposed to do in delivering what it perceives as its contract with a readership. This contract, regardless of the genre, is that which demands a resolution, a “doing something to the world,” which is expressed in the form of a totalized causality among persons, places, and objects, or narrative, as compelled by the dictates of Necessity. It is inevitable that our knowledge of the past is limited, distorted even and yet
the way in which we propose an estimate of it always takes a recourse to causality, that is we comprehend what happened as necessary. In its projection of elitist political fantasy, Groyon’s novel discloses the moment in history to which the imaginative act is intended as a resolution.

Although Groyon is not himself a member of the elite but the middle-class, he did send himself to college through the auspices of the Dizon Foundation, a charity organization funded by one of the wealthiest sugar families in Negros, which might have been a likely motivation for the kind of allegiance to the elite that his novel is a repressed expression of. That Groyon might have felt indebted to the landed class is compounded by his belonging to an intellectual family. Moreover, although Groyon’s family is of Negrense descent, Groyon himself was born and raised in Manila, a fact, which when lined up with the previously-mentioned points about his background can perhaps account for the glossy and impressionistic version of Negros history in his novel. This history, no matter how entertaining and melodramatic, as the paper has argued, is nevertheless marked by social contradictions, impasses in which the minute and daily struggles of the contending groups are enacted. That these struggles are invisible to us, hidden from our consciousness is a symptom of the literary work’s success in estranging our ordinary lives from our Real existence.
WORKS CITED


