

**Her-story as History: Counter-Memory to Philippine Marcosian History  
in Arlene J. Chai's *Eating Fire and Drinking Water***

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“If a country’s history is its biography, its literature is its autobiography.”

- Linda Ty-Casper

Among all the literary genres, the novel is considered to be the genre that best represents the nation. Like the novel, the concept of the ‘nation’ is an “imaginary construct” that relies “on an apparatus of cultural fictions”. Far from being a corporeal entity and encompassing more than geographical boundaries, the nation can only be imagined and constructed, making it no different to the imaginative construct of fiction. The novel is less structured and more accommodating of divergent perspectives compared to the short story, which is typically more focused on achieving unity. It is in this manner, therefore, that the structure of the novel parallels the imagined construction “of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of language and styles” (Brennan in Bird 3).

The tradition of drawing material from history is not a new and distinctive enterprise among contemporary Filipino fictionists in the post-independence literary setting. In the Philippines, history has often served as a significant material for fiction writers, especially novelists. This is evident from the works of Rizal to the literary productions of many contemporary Filipino novelists. The post-independence period in the Philippines did not deter Filipino fictionists from producing a convergence of the historical and the fictional in their literary works. Primary among the reasons for this is the paradoxical situation the Filipino had found himself in after his liberation from colonial rule: independence served mainly to highlight the oppression and colonialism that had remained prevalent even after foreign domination (Hau 101).

In one of her essays in *A Gentle Subversion: Essays on Philippine Fiction in English* (1998), Cristina Pantoja-Hidalgo asserts that many of the novels produced by contemporary Filipino novelists are of the historical type. However, she clarifies that to say historical novel is not to say that the narrative is simply set in a specific historical time and place. In many, if not all, of these novels, history serves as the “texture” of the narrative and not just its mere backdrop (Daroy in Hidalgo 118). The essay includes brief discussions on twelve contemporary Filipino novels in English and how these novels represent various phases in the nation’s tumultuous history. The assertion of Hidalgo is that these novels have political entities as characters and most of their conflicts are in many ways connected with political circumstances. In this sense, the protagonist ceases to be one of the human characters in these novels; in many instances, in the narrative, the “protagonist is the nation itself” (Hidalgo 118).

Crucial to supporting Hidalgo's contention about the intervening role of history in these novels is her discussion of "discourse" by Michel Foucault and the "historiographic operation" by Michel de Certeau. Since discourse allowed for the representation of certain ideologies as more dominant than others in the same way that the historiographic operation revealed the possible manipulation and inherent subjectivity of a historical report, history is rarely able to present facts that are irrefutable and truly objective. This problematization of historical knowledge accounts for the reason why many historical novels by Filipino writers are not just historical novels; many are historiographic metafiction, wherein the novelist and historian write in tandem with others -- and with each other" (Hutcheon in Hidalgo 120).

This act of writing in tandem allows the historiographic metafictionist to accommodate a plurality of perspectives, without having the burden of privileging any of those perspectives. Given that history shares its nature as discourse with that of fiction, history may serve its function as counter-memory, or the kind of history that assumes an intervening role rather than a passive purpose that simply accounts for events (Marshall 150). It is a postmodern historical inquiry that challenges what has been considered as official memories: social history as a counter to political history, non-Western history to that of European history, and women's history as alternative to men's history (Hutton xxiv). Given the association of history-writing with power, counter-memory aims to reveal which narratives are historically privileged and questions the basis of that privilege. Counter-memory elevates "historical differences and specificities" (Childers and Hentzi 57-58) to a higher plane so that the past may be viewed through the lens of those who are relegated to "ex-centric positions such as women, gays, and people of color" (Hutcheon in Marshall 148-149).

The self-reflexive quality of historiographic metafiction challenges its very nature as fiction. While the aim of a fictional narrative is not to draw attention to its fictionality as a way to recreate reality, a historiographic metafictional work will make constant references to its nature as fiction, as well as to the act of writing itself, as means to remind readers that even history-writing is a form of story-telling. The defining project of historiographic metafiction is to make "readers question their own (and by implication, others') interpretations" (132). Hidalgo concludes her essay by assigning a role to the contemporary Filipino writer:

The writer must protest; he must resist his own alienation, his own marginalization. For he is the conscience of his race. And the writer must remember. For s/he is its memory (132).

Nowhere is this effort in resisting and remembering more pronounced than during the Marcos years when fiction writers turned to their pen and paper to voice their dissent against an unwelcome dictator. Ferdinand E. Marcos assumed his position as president of the archipelago in 1965 and, seven years later, declared martial law until 1981. During this period in Philippine history, the nation confronted an enemy that is not of a different race but resembled more closely the patronizing and underhanded character of her foreign colonizers. Not unlike the foreign oppressors, Marcos and his false brand of democracy had demanded subservience and silence, but not everyone in the country could be influenced and suppressed. Fiction writers and poets, albeit in a covert manner, managed to voice their dissatisfaction at a regime that failed to

follow on its promises. Leonard Casper's *The Opposing Thumb: Decoding Literature of the Marcos Regime* (1995), talks about "open concealment" as a strategy used by fiction writers during the time of Marcos. The government suspended publications and incarcerated writers and journalists so that during the Marcos years "Philippine reporters had the highest fatality rate in the world" (9). However, this was not the case with the fiction writers, playwrights, and poets of that turbulent period, even though they had sought to reveal the injustices and atrocities of the regime in their creative yet critical works. The use of the English language in these works of fiction, the use of "coded subtleties" (7) as means to hide their real intent, and the general unavailability of these materials had prompted the government to consider these fictional works inconsequential and devoid of impact. What the powers-that-were failed to consider, however, was that the use of English in fiction allowed their authors to conceal their real sentiments at a time when the threat to civil rights and human rights was at its worst. In fact, it was literature that revealed the currents of subversion already rippling on the surface, because in the words of Linda Ty-Casper in her speech *Protest Literature: A Cry of Expectations*, "good literature... is always subversive -- not in that it advances ideologies or is politicized..., but that it observes and tells the truth of what it sees" (qtd in Casper 5).

In many ways, the colonial language that was English served as a tool for concealment during the martial law years. This language was adapted and appropriated to the themes and concerns of the nation at the time; for the fictionists and poets to write on behalf of the oppressed, the marginalized, and the ones rendered voiceless by the totalitarian rule of a president whose power fed off the powerlessness of the nation's citizens. It may be presumed that the Marcos government considered these literary works as beyond the reach of the throng of masses that had placed the overstaying leader in power, unlike the newspaper articles and columns that lambasted him openly, albeit also in English. Thus, for the fiction writers, playwrights, and poets of English, the "language of opportunity became also the language of outcry" (Casper 22).

At a time when the press was robbed of its role and function to criticize the regime and to expose its varied, almost innumerable injustices, it was fiction that served to act in behalf of the press, although its strategy was one of concealment rather than outright censure. In this way, literature remained loyal to the interests of the people at a time when their government could not and would not represent them. It is through fiction's "invisible arrows" that the nation under Marcos sought to reveal what was hidden and almost irretrievable, prompting Casper to surmise:

Could it be that Marcos considered such works irrelevant inventions, temporary entertainments: gnats, not *anay* (termites)? Surrounded by the opposition's symbolic words and spears, who could notice the flight of invisible arrows? Invisible because of literature's custom of revelation by concealment [glossing mine] (5).

This paradoxical treatment of revelation via concealment is precisely what allowed martial law novels, which are novels written about Philippine martial law during and after this repressive regime, to offer alternative histories. The despotic landscape of the Marcos years

forced many intellectuals, some of whom will write about the dictatorship in their fiction and poetry after the lifting of martial law, to leave the country and seek better promise elsewhere. This is the socio-political landscape that Filipino-Chinese-Australian writer Arlene J. Chai confronted before leaving the country and migrating to Australia with her family. Her second novel, *Eating Fire and Drinking Water*, published in Australia in 1996 and in the United States 1998, is the subject of the analysis of this paper. By presenting a divergent perspective in looking at Philippine history during the Marcos years, Chai's historiographic metafiction, *Eating Fire and Drinking Water*, challenges readers to examine the past with a critical eye, to be familiar with the events of history often left unmentioned in textbooks or history books. It presents a counter-narrative to Marcosian history, or the 'history' constructed by Ferdinand Marcos and his government during his regime. This paper will specifically look into the manner by which the novel alludes to the Marcos regime in the Philippines and fulfills its project of counter-memory, thus presenting a divergent standpoint on arguably one of the most tumultuous periods in Philippine history.

### **A Critique on Marcosian History**

True to the tradition of revelation by concealment, Chai's novel mentions neither the Marcoses nor the Philippines. Nevertheless, it is this particular silence about the characters and the setting of the narrative that rings the loudest, for the novel alludes, from all sides, to the protracted rule of Ferdinand E. Marcos in the Philippines and some of the most crucial events prior, during, and after his declaration of martial law. The narrator of the story, Clara Perez, works as a novice newspaper reporter in a city where the presidential palace, which is "blind to everything happening around it" (Chai 34), stands gloriously next to a murky river that "coughed up the unexpected" and served as "dumping site for the bodies of the victims of gang wars and political killings" (37). This description of the setting is one of the novel's most palpable allusions to the Marcos rule in the Philippine history. For twenty-one years --- as president of a democracy for the first seven years and then as dictator for the next nine years --- Marcos and his family had occupied the presidential residence, Malacañang Palace. The palace is literally a stone's throw away from the Pasig River, an expansive body of water and waste that is more of a sewerage system than a tributary. After the imposition of the martial law, Malacañang Palace closed its doors to the public, much in the same manner that a dictatorial regime turned its back to democracy.

The novel, told entirely from the first-person point of view of Clara Perez, opens with a chapter that narrates her nascent career as a newspaper writer for the *Chronicle*. Clara's work as a journalist makes her privy to the latest news and happenings in the socio-political scene of her city thus placing her at an advantageous position in terms of story-telling. Taking off from her account of the presidential palace and the river that cuts the city into north and south, she proceeds to a description of two of the most prominent characters in her narrative: El Presidente and Madam. Clara's physical sketch of El Presidente is evocative of the observable physical features of Marcos, the sixth president of the Philippines: "small man of solid build... eyes... small and slanted, betraying an Oriental strain in his blood" (40). Madam's description, on the other hand, creates a spitting image of the First Lady Imelda Marcos: "a statuesque woman, nearly half a head taller than her husband... walks with the bearing of a queen" (42).

In *The Untold Story of Imelda Marcos* (1969), Carmen Navarro-Pedrosa relates how the First Lady's physical beauty invited the envy of women within the political circle, mostly wives of politicians themselves. Navarro recounts that "before entering a room, she always stood for a moment at the door in silent announcement of her presence". After all, "she easily stood out as the tallest, the fairest, and the youngest of them all" (194). However, this imperial beauty is a political strategist no less. As depicted in the novel and known throughout Philippine history, Imelda Marcos was responsible for her husband's electoral success in his first bid at presidency in 1965. In Marcos' own words, Imelda "was responsible for at least a million votes" (2), and that number was needed for him to eclipse his rivals. So intent was Imelda on securing his husband's presidential seat that "it was no exaggeration to say that she used plane, motorboat, banca, and even crawled on her hands and knees" (204) to assure her husband's slot as the presidential candidate of the Nacionalista Party. On December 30, 1965, when Ferdinand Marcos was sworn in as the president of the Republic of the Philippines, he also took his very first step towards becoming the only Filipino president to have ruled for more than twenty years.

### **The Novel as Historiographic Metafiction**

One of the most significant manifestations of postmodernist literary development is the self-reflexive kind of historical novel which Linda Hutcheon has termed as historiographic metafiction. Related to but in many ways separate from the historical novel, historiographic metafiction claims its position within historical discourse but does not abandon its identity as a work of fiction (Hutcheon, "Historiographic Metafiction" 4). Since this novel genre may be used to critique the past, the traces of which are available to modern-day readers and interpreters only through literary and historical texts, it is considered as "a potentially powerful mode of fiction" for "to change the way one reads or perceives may be the first step to changing the way one thinks and acts" (Hutcheon in Marshall 36). Many historiographic metafictional narratives have succeeded in their interrogation of the past through the coming together of the factual and fictional in their respective narratives (Marshall 156). In the Philippine setting, some contemporary historical novels have been labeled as historiographic metafictional narratives. These novels are categorized this way due to their project of critiquing the past, thus presenting a counter-narrative that challenges official history or mainstream historical knowledge. One of the means by which these novels are able to present alternative histories is to delegate a central role to the main character or the narrator, a position that is no different to the position of the history teller or the historian.

Although history and the writing of history are perceived ideally as objective and unbiased, this alleged objectivity has been challenged by the argument that historicism is "always a matter of positionality" (Tope 24). In fact, according to McCullagh (1998), even philosophers of history themselves have questioned the "idea that history can present a true and objective account of the past" (2). A historian may be subject to his own beliefs, prejudices, and desires, as well as the prevailing practices and principles of his time when producing an account of the past. This makes the determination of a single and absolute historical account of any event quite dubious. While the writing of history may present actual events that have taken place, Barthes (1986) contends that "they are really about the historian's ideas or concepts of the past" (qtd in

McCullagh 138-139). Tope (1998) warns, moreover, that if “a history were written for hegemonic purposes, then it would tell not the story of the nation but the story of hegemony” (25).

Since history is often accounted for by the prevailing power, historiographic metafiction endeavors to question this prevalent practice in both a hegemonic and patriarchal sense. In particular, it seeks to present the perspectives of women in the “critical revisiting” (Hutcheon qtd in Marshall 158) of the past. Typically, women and their perspectives are left out in historical accounts as history is usually about the achievements and conquests of men, from the European colonizers of old to overstaying presidents after national independence. A patriarchal culture naturally leads to a patriarchal pattern in the writing of history. By contrast, historiographic metafiction, through its goal of counter-memory, shifts its perspective on women so that they, too, have a role in the recounting and the making sense of past events. In *Eating Fire and Drinking Water*, Chai assigns a privileged role to the narrator -- the fledgling newspaper reporter/writer who has no previous knowledge of her own history -- so that her narrative, which makes up the novel, becomes the privileged text. Clara Perez, the narrator, acknowledges her marginal position at the start of the story when she acknowledges that she was a “child with no name, no history... no clue to my identity” (105). Thus, her perspective as a young female reporter narrating the events of a burgeoning revolution before the fall of El Presidente is a perspective from the sidelines or that of an ex-centric. It is precisely from this ex-centric position that Chai’s historiographic metafiction presents a counter-memory.

### **Her-story as Counter-memory**

The beginning of the novel opens with the narrator Clara writing a story and reconstructing the events of this story from her memory: “I only have to close my eyes to return to the beginning of it all, to the precise moment when I ceased to be a reporter of events, becoming instead a part of them” (Chai Prologue). This very first line in the novel’s prologue traces Clara’s shifting roles -- from someone who is reporting from the sidelines to someone who assumes a role front and center as an active participant of events. These ‘events’ refer to the social unrest and political instability that mark the beginning of the downfall of El Presidente, whose position is finally being challenged after sixteen long years. Not even the maneuvering of the palace and the brutal force of the military could deter the students of Loyola University and the poor of Milagros from staging demonstrations, calling on El Presidente to listen to the voice of the majority and leave his seat of power. At the helm of these protestations is the young and plucky Luis Bayani, who later becomes the victim of a ‘salvaging’ operation -- another term for political killing -- by El Presidente’s military. Bayani’s corpse was never recovered from the river that runs by the palace. His words to Clara before his death usher in the first chapter of the novel: “Who knows Clara, you may write about this one day” (xiv).

This act of writing is taken up by the narrator Clara in a two-fold manner; first, as the writer of her own narrative (which makes up the novel); second, as the writer of the pamphlets that have allowed the students’ revolution to flourish long after Bayani has disappeared and has been presumed dead. Her role as the writer of the narrative places her in the position of a historian who is writing the history of her nation from her perspective. However, this position is a precarious one. Clara acknowledges that she is writing from her own experience and from the

experiences of others as recounted to her, but most of her narrative is written out of memory, as exemplified by her use of the words “I imagine” and “in my mind’s eye”. She even apologizes for the disorderly upwelling of memories in the middle of her story-telling:

“Yes, there are memories here, and if I jump about in recounting them, you must forgive me. There is little order in memories. They do not come in sequence, following some strict chronology; rather they surge forward, several at a time, as though having been confined in a recess of the mind for so long, they are in a hurry to escape into the present, rushing in great numbers through the little opening the act of remembering offers them” (107).

The decision to write down everything that has been stored in the “recesses of her mind” allows Clara to preserve her memories and to keep them from surging in different directions. The rendering of past events in written form transforms them into “places of memory” or the “particular recollections” that will eventually earn the label of history, a consequence that is rarely achieved by “oral culture” (Hutton xxii). Clara’s act of narrating the events through her writing is an act of defiance, in the same manner that her acceptance of the role left by the enigmatic Bayani is also a gesture of revolt against an unseeing government. However, this is also an act of remembering, for Clara is writing a narrative that runs counter to the bigger narrative that has been drawn up by the palace, considered official by those who are intent on preserving the impeccable image envisioned by El Presidente from his first day of power. A chunk of this official narrative is Madam’s seamless life story, which was later countered by a woman who knew her from her humble beginnings. Nonetheless, the official version of Madam’s life narrative — released in the form of a biography — eventually assumes a solid, incontestable position as the woman disappears and is never found again by anyone who dares to investigate the First Lady’s past. Even the poor of Milagros, whose “famous monument to poverty” is a garbage dump known as Smoky Mountain, are “herded together and kept from view” (Chai 66). After all, poverty has no place in Madam’s “beautification” advocacies and cultural projects which include the “reclaiming of land from the sea” to “build a sprawling center for the performing arts in a hundred days and a film center resembling the Parthenon in twenty-eight weeks” (44). There is no way, moreover, to verify the truth behind the rumor of El Presidente’s illness near the conclusion of the novel, when he has been reduced to a “mere shadow of his former self” (341). Even Clara herself cautions her readers against believing everything she has written: “You must remind yourself that it is hard to tell where the truth ends and a lie begins. So listen all you like, but disbelieve all you hear. You are in the city of lies” (343).

This caution echoes one of the challenges posed by a historiographic metafictional work, wherein the narrator invites the readers to “participate in creating the picture. ... in the attempt to make sense of the text” (Marshall 153). The readers of Clara’s narrative are invited to interrogate their knowledge of history and history-writing, about the power associated with the production of historical texts and the unalterable truth that they propose. In a city “given to telling of lies,” whose version of the truth will be considered as Truth? Whose story becomes the privileged story and, ultimately, earns its stamp as history? The novel, *Eating Fire and Drinking Water*, calls attention to “the manipulation and caprice behind any story presented as ‘truth’”

(155), as Clara confesses at the beginning of her narrative: “Where there were gaps I have filled them with my imagined truth. This is a writer’s privilege” (Chai xiv).

### **The Need to Remember**

It was during the Marcos years in the Philippines that the country saw a leader who “declared himself servant of the people” only to “advance the people’s permanent servitude” (Casper 8). As this leader pledged servitude to the Filipino people, he was also laying out plans towards the re-writing of the history of his nation, albeit in seemingly innocuous ways. One of these vehicles was his patronage for Philippine arts and culture, a project he spearheaded with his First Lady, Imelda R. Marcos. In one of his presidential speeches, Marcos had explained his commitment to culture and the arts by reminding the Filipinos of the consequence of long years of colonial rule, which was the obliteration of all the stories and ideals of the country’s forebears. He responded to this challenge by “... organizing the materials for a history which we hope we will be able to write before long” (qtd in Baluyut 11). This patronage positioned Ferdinand and Imelda into “icons of devotion... recasting themselves as the origin and apotheosis of the Philippines, its people, and its history” (1).

That the novel, *Eating Fire and Drinking Water*, depicts Clara as a reporter during a period of grave political unrest is telling. A year after the assassination of Ninoy Aquino, the staunchest rival and critic of Marcos, on the tarmac of the airport that now bears his name, “Philippine reporters had the highest fatality rate” (Casper 9). Anyone writing a seditious article against the Marcoses, by presidential decree, could be censored permanently --- through a death sentence. On the other hand, Marcos’ government invested huge amounts on “propagandists and ghostwriters... with no expenses spared” (10). After more than twenty years in power, Marcos was ousted from Malacañang by the EDSA People Power Revolution of 1986. It was only then that writers, critics, and journalists who were exiled to other countries during his regime began to reveal the real horrors of his New Society. In a colossal effort at remembering, well-known Filipino writers such as Bienvenido N. Santos and Ninotchka Rosca published works that alluded to the Marcos years. This reinforces the fact that many Philippine novels in English that deal with martial law were written and published not during the martial law years, but years “after the formal lifting of martial law” (Pison 17).

As historiographic metafiction, *Eating Fire and Drinking Water* accomplishes its project of counter-memory by highlighting the position of its ex-centric narrator, Clara Perez, who has been given the privilege of telling the story of her nation and the ‘small stories’ surrounding El Presidente and Madam, the First Lady. Through the function of its narrator, the novel accomplishes the role of the contemporary Filipino writer as put forth by Hidalgo, and this is to remember and become the memory. At the start of the tale, Clara is a mere spectator of events, a reporter of small stories and, as an orphan who grew up in the convent of Santa Clara, someone without a traceable history. This lack of a history determined her choice of a career as she “developed a curiosity about other people’s lives” (Chai 3). Nevertheless, she confesses that her role in this story will be far from insignificant, especially when she says that “she ceased to be a reporter of events, becoming instead a part of them” (Prologue). Clara’s central role in the story, a shift from her earlier position as mere spectator or reporter to an actual participant of events,



and later to a writer of a history that ventures beyond personal boundaries, illustrates the insistence of small stories --- recounted through memory --- to be acknowledged in the face of violence and power.

The novel, through the strategy of revelation through concealment interrogates the many truths (or non-truths) perpetuated by the Marcos administration, their perpetuation made possible through the machinations of history-making because, after all, “history is the fruit of power” (Trouillot xix). Chai’s novel, through its narrator Clara’s recollection, is a narrative of memory, but one that runs counter to the official memories effected through hegemonic history. By assigning her the role of a reporter in the novel, Chai highlights the marginalized position of the silenced reporters and journalists during the Marcos years. Clara, as a historian of memory, acknowledges the fluid nature of recollections and, thus, echoes the postmodernist stance that counter-memory is just another way to remember. However, when rendered in written form, memory may acquire the established position of mainstream history, as “history does not begin where memory ends; ... the historian should recognize the interchange between history and memory” (Hutton 25). *Eating Fire and Drinking Water* highlights this interchange, illustrating the subtle interstices between memory and history and the manner by which these two interrogate but not negate each other.

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