"Jokes are the hardest thing to translate": parodying history and nationhood in contemporary Southeast Asian Novels

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**“JOKES ARE THE HARDEST THING TO
TRANSLATE”: PARODYING HISTORY AND
NATIONHOOD IN CONTEMPORARY
SOUTHEAST ASIAN NOVELS**

**PATRICIA KARUNUNGAN
SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
2019**

**“Jokes are the hardest thing to translate”:
Parodying History and Nationhood in
Contemporary Southeast Asian Novels**

PATRICIA KARUNUNGAN

School of Humanities

A thesis submitted to the Nanyang Technological University
in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts

2019

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SUMMARY

Although postcolonial fictions may be classified under modernism and postmodernism for their subversive uses of language, a marked absence of technical innovation seems to persist in anglophone Southeast Asian novels. However, it is more accurate to say that little critical attention has thus far been paid to their narratology, as the region's literature has conventionally been valued for its representations of history and politics rather than how these representations are achieved. The novels *Ilustrado* (2008) by Miguel Syjuco and *Beauty Is a Wound* (2002, translated into English in 2015) by Eka Kurniawan challenge this paradigm through diegetic play and political irreverence. They employ postmodernist strategies in parodying their national legacies – that of the Philippines and Indonesia respectively – and by doing so offer an effective means of re-engaging with the static narratives of history and nationalism. Although the parodic mode is not exclusive to the realm of the postmodernists, its execution through postmodernist narrative techniques legitimises parody as a meaningful form of cultural expression. Focusing on the aesthetic strategies of these novels works to overturn the regional homogenisation brought on by colonialism; at the same time, this focus coheres political history with literary theory innovatively. By choosing their national histories as the targets of their jokes, *Ilustrado* and *Beauty Is a Wound* urgently present the redemptive possibilities of postmodernist fiction and parody to reconceptualise the past in order to renew meanings in the present.

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

What is the state of literature in Southeast Asia today? This is perhaps an unfair question to ask, considering the sheer diversity present in the region – linguistic, ethnic, cultural, economic, religious, and even political. In the absence of a common currency of thought, one unifying label that may suffice is the “postmodern”. This observation exists for two main reasons. Firstly, recent critically-acclaimed novels produced by writers from the region demonstrate a shared impulse to interrogate national histories, narratives, and legacies through arguably postmodernist aesthetics – these interrogations occur through the narrative techniques of metafiction, intertextuality, parody, and self-consciousness, among others. Moreover, they happen in the language of English. The novels that suggest the emergence of such a pattern include Tash Aw’s *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005) and Tan Twan Eng’s *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2011) from Malaysia; Jeremy Tiang’s *State of Emergency* (2017) from Singapore; Jose Dalisay’s *Soledad’s Sister* (2007), Miguel Syjuco’s *Ilustrado* (2008), and Gina Apostol’s *Insurrecto* (2017) from the Philippines; and Eka Kurniawan’s *Beauty Is a Wound* (2002) and Laksmi Pamuntjak’s *The Question of Red* (2013) from Indonesia. The second reason is that the postmodern is, in many ways, the logical outcome of history in the region, caught as it is between what critics identify as the “local” and the “global” (Chin and Daud), or “tradition” and the desire for “modernity brought by” global capitalism (Patke and Holden 10). Southeast Asia therefore falls neatly into Fredric Jameson’s conception of postmodernism as “the cultural dominant of the logic of late capitalism”, or as a cultural form born from the socioeconomic order of capitalism (46, 49). This particular definition of postmodernism also provides insights into the conceptual pattern that appears to have materialised in contemporary Southeast Asian novels in English: perhaps it is only now that Southeast Asian writers have acquired the

vocabulary they need for meaning-making of a specific kind. That vocabulary consists of postmodernist narrative strategies.

Perhaps because postmodernist and experimental writing are relatively new in the region, very little research on Southeast Asia's contemporary fiction is currently available. In many ways, scholarship remains 'stuck' along the broad strokes of postcolonial studies, while being unable to discern the unique shape of Southeast Asian postcolonial fiction. What I mean by this is that texts from the region have often been studied for their representations of colonial and postcolonial histories, politics, and identities, but little critical attention has been paid to how these representations are achieved. This seems to hold especially true in the narratology of Southeast Asian novels in English, where technical innovation is often attributed to Western mimicry in lieu of a legitimate contemporary tradition (Patke and Holden 64-65, 76-77, 88). This gap in scholarship is, to an extent, unsurprising. It can be identified as another logical corollary of history – English writing in the region, after all, developed largely as colonial projects and by-products. However, the gap cannot remain unaddressed.

The problems with leaving the gap open begin with the continued treatment of Southeast Asian fictions as mere significations – or 'symptoms' – of national conditions and 'afflictions' in the region. The Philippines presents itself as a cogent example for illustrating this issue, and will be delineated later on. For now, it is important to understand that the current state of literary scholarship on Southeast Asia's contemporary fiction relegates the techniques of representation to mere decoration – artistry is left in the shadow of social realist concerns and political agendas.¹ The result is a regional 'canon' of literature that is valued more for its cultural contexts

¹ As we will see, postcolonial studies tend to characterise the narrative particularities of Southeast Asian literature as products of the sociopolitical circumstances in which they were conceived. For example, during the Marcos era, magical realist fiction in the Philippines was read as allegorical criticism of the government (Patke and Holden 82-87). In other words, magical realism was designated as a political choice rather than a primarily artistic one.

rather than its cultural achievements. Does current scholarship then, in actuality, discount or underestimate the value of literature from the region – especially contemporary literature? A continued failure to attend to Southeast Asian narratology is akin to assuming that history remains neatly ‘over there’ in the past. This is contrary to how contemporary novels treat it: that history is a kind of poltergeist which badgers the present. Even for Jameson, who declares postmodern reality as an age of “historical deafness” (xi), history is still alive in the form of capitalist, commodified nostalgia, where “the history of aesthetic styles displaces ‘real’ history” (20). The impetus to interrogate national histories and narratives through new, innovative ways of expression in contemporary Southeast Asian fiction is but one indication of history’s reality, if the truth of it can even be grasped at all.

In addition to leaving Southeast Asian fiction undistinguished from other postcolonial bodies of literature,² the continued neglect of Southeast Asian narratology throws the region’s own ‘postcoloniality’ into doubt – the regional homogenisation brought by Western colonialism still persists. The aim of this project, therefore, is to first highlight the urgency with which the scholarly gap must be filled. Secondly, it is to legitimise postmodernist narrative strategies – or, to be more accurate, the postmodern as it manifests in Southeast Asian fiction – by drawing attention to the ways in which these texts are constructed. I contend that the ‘new’ “history of aesthetic styles” does not “displace ‘real’ history” (Jameson 20) but is just as legitimate, because

² Southeast Asian literature tends to be taught with a ‘comparative’ approach – hand-in-hand with postcolonial theories that originated in other postcolonial regions, under different political circumstances. Vyvyane Loh’s 2004 novel *Breaking the Tongue* demonstrates how an Anglo-Chinese Singaporean identity can correspond with W.E.B. Du Bois’ notion of African American double consciousness. However, the novel also shows the ways in which Singaporean identities cannot be adequately characterised by existing schools of postcolonial thought. Brian Bernards’ 2016 monograph, *Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature*, also demonstrates the tendencies in postcolonial studies to group Southeast Asian writing (in this case, Singaporean, Malaysian and Thai) with broader categories of Asian postcolonial writing, often due to the large diasporic populations present in many countries in the region. Not all of these approaches are reductive, however – some twentieth-century Filipino writers, for example, looked to American postmodernism to find ways to express what they saw as their fractured identities in writing (Patke and Holden 86-87).

it points to systems of meaning-making that may have been impossible to access in the past. The narrative techniques associated with postmodern – both as products of the postmodern age as well as the aesthetics associated with postmodernism as a cultural designation – are what allow writers to question static national legacies not just finally, but most effectively.

Two novels best suited for accomplishing these aims are *Ilustrado* by Miguel Syjuco and *Beauty Is a Wound* by Eka Kurniawan. Although they both belong to the list of Southeast Asian novels that utilise postmodernist aesthetics given at the start of this introduction, what makes them more suitable to analyse as a pair over the other titles is that both are parodies of their respective national – Philippine and Indonesian – histories. Although parody is not a mode restricted to the realm of the postmodernists (Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* 1-2), its execution through postmodernist strategies legitimises it as a meaningful, and even efficient, means of re-engaging with the narratives of history. Furthermore, *Ilustrado* and *Beauty Is a Wound* approach the parodic mode in vastly different ways technically – the relevance of which will be a point of discussion later on. By engaging with the legacies of history, these texts may also be interpreted as works of historiographic metafiction because they open up “the objective and disinterested recording of the past” to the question of whether history “discovers” or “invents” the totalising narrative (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 61). The implications of these ideas will also be explored in further detail elsewhere.

Besides providing an overview of the analysis to come, the purpose of this introductory chapter is to chart the exact parameters of the project, beginning with a summary of the development of anglophone fiction in Southeast Asia. Understanding the origins of English writing in Southeast Asia will also lead to a more nuanced awareness of how and why critical scholarship on regional contemporary literature is ‘lacking’. In other words, knowledge of

literary production in the region is crucial to comprehending the motivation behind this project as a whole. Once the brief history has been traced, the formal and theoretical boundaries of analysis will also be drawn, and significant questions such as why novels – and in particular these two: *Ilustrado* and *Beauty Is a Wound* – parody, and postmodernism inform the scope of this project will be addressed in greater detail. Lastly, the theoretical framework will be reasoned out – what definition of postmodernism is this project operating on? *Whose* postmodernism, anyway? So far, it should be evident that the work of Fredric Jameson and Linda Hutcheon on postmodernism and parody respectively are integral parts; however, I will also be relying on other theorists – such as Brian McHale for his studies on narratology – throughout my analysis, for reasons that will require some negotiation in the relevant section of this chapter as not all of them agree with one another. Chapters Two and Three will be dedicated to Syjuco’s *Ilustrado* and Kurniawan’s *Beauty Is a Wound* respectively, and the ways in which they fulfil and advance the impetus behind this investigation.

1. The development of anglophone fiction in Southeast Asia

The history of English writing in Southeast Asia begins as an import, the language having been brought by European and American imperialists to the region. Other languages brought by European colonial powers – Spanish, French, Dutch, and Portuguese – have waned in influence, but English has continued to flourish “amidst a plurality of cultures expressed in a variety of languages”, in both standard and multilingual permutations (Patke and Holden 11, 1, 42). In fact, “English is the only language introduced to the region under colonialism to thrive, and it is now taking on a role in trade, regional political contexts, and – in some nation-states – cultural production” (26). Historically and currently, the bulk of anglophone literary output is

concentrated in three nations – Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines (2), as the first two were once British colonies and the third an American one which replaced Spanish rule. Brunei presents itself as an emergent example, which will be elaborated on later as its publishing climate reflects an interesting relationship between tradition and modernity. Works translated into English – most notably Kurniawan’s *Beauty Is a Wound*, one of my key texts – are included in this project’s concept of anglophone writing as they demonstrate aspects of Southeast Asian fiction that are different, but nonetheless important, from what ‘natively’ anglophone texts achieve.

Before continuing with this brief history of Southeast Asian writing in English, I must draw attention to another gap in scholarship which seems to correspond with the lack of work on Southeast Asian narratology currently available. Majority of research on Southeast Asia’s literary history at present focuses on periods prior to decolonisation and the years immediately after, while studies charting the development of English writing in particular are still burgeoning.³ Most of these studies also tend to specialise in the literary history of one country, such as Meg Wesling’s *Empire’s Proxy: American Literature and U.S. Imperialism in the Philippines*. Kathrina Daud’s records of contemporary Bruneian literature in English, which I cite later in this chapter, are crowd-sourced and still in the midst of being compiled; other such chronicles of anglophone writing in Southeast Asian countries where English is not a primary language are either scarce or unavailable in translation. As far as I have been able to discern, the most comprehensive body of work pertaining to anglophone literary history in the region at large is Rajeev S. Patke and Philip Holden’s *The Routledge Concise History of Southeast Asian Writing in English*, published in 2009. Patke and Holden’s text covers literature from the early

³ For example, Brian Bernards’ acclaimed *Writing the South Seas: Imagining the Nanyang in Chinese and Southeast Asian Postcolonial Literature* (2016) charts the literary influence of the Chinese diaspora in the eighteenth century.

twentieth century until 2008, offering an incisive consolidation of English poetry, fiction, and drama from Southeast Asia, as well as the historical and political circumstances from which they emerged. Other texts which attempt to offer readers a thorough survey of Southeast Asian literature are fiction and poetry anthologies. One example is the Heinemann *Writing in Asia* series, which helped bring Southeast Asian creative writing to a global audience between 1966 and 1996; a more recent example is *The First Five: A New Collection of Southeast Asian Writing*, edited by Chan Wai Han and published in 2018.

Due to a lack of research charting the developments of writing in both English and Southeast Asia, it will appear that I am relying too much on Patke and Holden in my attempts to illustrate the state of English literature in Southeast Asia. However, while I do draw connections between history and literature throughout my work, this project is primarily a work of literary analysis rather than historiography. Where possible, I have furnished relevant historical and literary episodes with studies from literary researchers and historians specific to the country being discussed.

The introduction of the English language to Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines began at the level of schooling. The British were selective about who were permitted to learn English in Malaya (Patke and Holden 43), which was the name of Malaysia prior to independence and, when referring to British-occupied Malaya, often included the island of Singapore. Although the British presence in Malaya dated back to the eighteenth century, it was only in the late nineteenth century that “a small minority of the Malayan population gained access to English” – almost exclusively through schools, colleges, and universities – “to the jobs and professions that were opened up by English, and to the Western literary canon that was rapidly disseminated through these institutions in the colonies” (49). The literature produced by

the majority of these students was considered by Patke and Holden to be “derivative”:

Colonial education reproduced in the Malayan an admiration for the Western canon, which was transmitted with earnest enthusiasm by numerous British teachers. Colonial dependency fed on the illusion that there was little cultural distance between Britain and its colonies, while colonial diffidence fed on the opposite delusion, that to imbibe British culture diligently in the colonies was a sufficient end in itself. This double bind lasted until perceptions about Western imperialism changed during and after the Second World War. (49)

The Americans, on the other hand, implemented systematic English-medium education policies in the Philippines in the early twentieth century (62). As a result, there was “an explosion of English-language writing from the 1920s to the beginning of the Second World War” (62).

Widespread literacy also created a large English-reading population, along with a ready market for locally-produced literature in English – particularly short stories (63). However, this early writing was imitative of European and North American literary forms and models as well (64).

Although English gained currency as cultural capital, or as a marker of education, class, and cosmopolitanism, the language did not completely displace the language systems that had been established before. Literary production in indigenous languages continued, but the success writers in these languages enjoyed diminished as English grew in value and usage (Patke and Holden 48, 63). Then, a curious – but logical and perhaps completely obvious – phenomenon took place: English, the coloniser’s language, became the medium of choice for imagining postcolonial nationhood and identities (50, 62, 65). In the 1930s, English-educated Malayan students began believing in the “notion that a national or regional consciousness had to be invented – rather than simply being represented” (50). The late economist and lawyer James

Joseph Puthucheary wrote, as a student at the University of Malaya in the early 1950s, that “the stress on English literature has curbed the growth of our literary sense ... Malayan literature should present accurately this country and its people” (qtd in Patke and Holden 50). Another student, Beda Lim, who was a contemporary of the famed historian and poet Wang Gungwu, identified the problem as such: “[if] a student in Malaya writes about flowers and trees and lakes, or things like that, he is doing no more than echoing the English poets he has learnt at school ... The great difficulty in a place like this is that we do not have a tradition of poetry [in English] to fall back upon” (qtd in Patke and Holden 50). Lim’s proposed solution was “to try and make something new out of the bits and pieces that you could point to and say: That is Malayan” (qtd in Patke and Holden 50). This was a mission that early Malayan poets took up, perhaps literally, through writing verses that amalgamated English with the local languages of Malay, Chinese, and Tamil (Patke and Holden 51-52).

In the Philippines, locally-produced writing in English followed a “developmental” trajectory: although early writing was, like in Singapore and Malaya, derivative of European and North American influences, many critical accounts note that Filipino writers “read widely in contemporary American literature” with the express purpose of “[appropriating] movements in English to represent and intervene in the society in which they lived” (Patke and Holden 64-65). The explosion of English short-story writing in the 1920s reflected not solely or necessarily colonial mimicry, but efforts to “escape an anxiety of influence from a non-native tradition featuring, successively, Maupassant and Poe, Sherwood Anderson, Ernest Hemingway and William Saroyan ... to consider in positive terms what a Philippine short story in English might be” (65). Later on, with the publication of works like Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart* (1946), Filipino writing in English – novels especially – matured as “the site for recuperating

from [the] failure” of colonial promises (Wesling 156), as well as for articulating a unique Filipino identity. The development of anglophone fiction in twentieth-century Philippines follows a precedent – even during Spanish colonial rule, literature was the medium through which Filipinos imagined a national consciousness (Rafael, *Motherless Tongues* 13; Wesling 156). This earlier literature was also written in the then-coloniser’s language, Spanish, and instrumental to these nascent dreams of nationhood were José Rizal’s novels, *Noli Me Tángere* (1887) and *El Filibusterismo* (1891). Despite being published half a century apart, and under different circumstances of politics and social class, Rizal’s and Bulosan’s books share many formal similarities; these will be discussed in relation to Syjuco’s novel, *Ilustrado*, in Chapter Two. In addition to foregrounding the centrality of literature to Filipino identity and imagination, the Philippine’s history of the development of anglophone writing, along with that of Singapore and Malaya, underscores another facet of reality that is still shaping thematic concerns present in Southeast Asian literature today: the tension between local tradition and global modernity, and that this modernity is Western in conception.

2. Between tradition and modernity

What does it mean to use the coloniser’s language to foster a postcolonial identity? In adapting the English language to their own domestic uses, Southeast Asian writers have moved past the double bind of colonial dependency and colonial mimicry in which the first generations of anglophone writers from the region were caught. On one hand, the continued use of English in the literary crucibles of national consciousness provokes divisive responses, as proficiency in the language still denotes higher education, cultural capitalism, cosmopolitanism, and even privilege (Patke and Holden 1). This is especially true considering the linguistic plurality of the region,

where literatures in national languages “represent the dominant form of literary expression” (3). Writers using English as a creative medium was – and to an extent still is – a rare phenomenon in Southeast Asia (3). The language was institutionalised only in Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines, after all. The choice to write in English therefore connotes participation in a discourse that deliberately excludes sociolinguistic groups ‘at home’. At the same time, this discourse is capable of travelling beyond national and continental borders, as a *lingua franca*, while also retaining an ‘essence’ of its home culture (80).

On the other hand, the choice also perpetuates the belief of colonial diffidence that colonial languages are a superior form of expression. At the very least, it underscores how Southeast Asian states had to convince their colonial masters that nationhood was a valid dream worth fighting for,⁴ and using the coloniser’s tongue to do so was surely the most compelling tactic (Anderson 116-117). However, Benedict Anderson contends in his seminal work *Imagined Communities* that it is not language itself that forms the basis of nationalism: “it is always a mistake to treat languages in the way that certain nationalist ideologues treat them – as *emblems* of nation-ness, like flags, costumes, folk-dances, and the rest” (133). Rather, Anderson values language for “its capacity for generating imagined communities, building in effect *particular solidarities*” (133). While Anderson’s concept of the imagined community is complex and worth discussing further, it will be elaborated on in a later section related to the novel form, and why the novel is the literary form most fecund for exploring and interrogating nationalist ideas and sentiments. For now, it is important to understand that the choice to write in English assisted the formation of national consciousness because of the intellectual and imaginative access that “bilingualism” – the term which Anderson uses – grants. Regardless of different attitudes

⁴ Nationhood is in many ways a Western conception; I explore the idea further on the next page.

towards writers' decisions to 'dream' in English, the greater implications that the brief history of English writing outlined earlier yields are these: firstly, "literacy and bilingualism" permitted the intelligentsias to play a "vanguard role" in the formation of a nationalist consciousness (116).

While "print-literacy" made possible the idea of a community, "bilingualism meant access, through the European language-of-state, to modern Western culture in the broadest sense, and, in particular, to the models of nationalism, nation-ness, and nation-state produced elsewhere" (116). Secondly, by relying on English as that which propels ideas of national and political progress, the 'West', from which the language came, is upheld as the only possible model for modernity.

Indeed, the Western model was the only model of modernity for most, if not all, Asian countries until the "stupendous economic growth" of Japan in the 1960s and 1970s (Wee 24). Japan is relevant for reconceptualising the idea of modernity because it "threw a spanner in the works of modernisation theory" (24). Asian tradition, that "once reprehensible thing", was validated, in the process permitting other Asian nations to begin dreaming of their own "Asian modernities" (26, 25). In other words, tradition was no longer seen as a stumbling block to modernisation, and modernisation was no longer synonymous with Westernisation (22, 24-25). What do these details have to do with the literature of Southeast Asia? While early anglophone writing in the region was scarcely influenced by 'Japanisation' (27) – different linguistic and literary traditions had been ingrained, after all – the very idea of modernity remained a colonial condition. As Wee incisively puts it:

The sometimes deliberately obscured complexities of tradition and modernity in 'Asian modernities' need to be uncovered and understood as part of and as a reaction to the legacy of European imperialism and as different responses to contemporary global capitalism.

Such developments, I suggest, were the consequence of the attempt among many postcolonial elites to manage the apparent antinomies in their cultural makeup that were themselves the result of the colonial retooling of local cultures. In the colonial era, aspects of ‘native’ life were made over to become more like ‘Us’, though any real belonging to the master race obviously remained impossible. How were newly independent societies to escape from the larger philosophico-cultural logic of European modernity? (22)

Even with the induction of Japanese modernity, the idea of a national, or even Southeast Asian, identity remained contingent on a relation to Western cultural hegemony. For the region, the idea of modernity remains one end of a binary opposition between local and global, ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. Southeast Asian novels illustrate these tensions, and the contemporary impulse to interrogate national narratives suggests that these tensions still exist and remain relevant today, even after decades of postcolonial independence.

No other country in the region demonstrates this conflict as cleanly, perhaps, as Brunei currently does. The country was once a British protectorate and is now an independent Islamic sultanate. The political landscape shapes the nation’s literary production to a large extent – censorship laws restrict the publication of content that could in any way be interpreted as critical of the sultanate. How, then, do Bruneian writers write about Brunei, or ‘Bruneian-ness’? While works of fiction certainly need not be explicitly political, these laws strip Bruneian literature of any potential to represent some kind of ‘Bruneian-ness’ that is organic, separate from the narratives and identities propagated by state ideology, and perhaps more authentic. The reality of the country’s literary output seems to suggest so – between 2009 and 2016, only six novels in English were produced either by Bruneians, or non-Bruneians writing about Brunei (Daud). All

were published *outside* of Brunei, and most were disseminated on self-publishing platforms. The reason why only Brunei's anglophone fiction is of interest here is because writing in English seems to be "a subversive choice" which "resists the national imperative to prioritise [the] Malay [language]" (Daud). In sum, these novels are the products of deliberately working around state censorship – but what does this say about the conception of a national literature, if representations of a country have to be produced in circumstances external to it? For whom are literary representations of Brunei – for Bruneians, or outsiders?

Despite the veneer of rebellion that publishing outside and in English creates, these novels largely and curiously "subscribe to ... national markers and narratives of identity" (Daud). The same is true for genre fiction – where alternative worlds and societies often serve an allegorical function of critiquing the status quo, some Bruneian sci-fi works actually use elements of fantasy to reinforce state propaganda (Daud). Another way these novels affirm national narratives is through a recurring Bruneian literary trope, the *anak derhaka*, or unfilial child, who is punished so that family order may be restored (Chin and Daud). What this phenomenon seems to suggest is that, firstly, "deviant and transgressive behaviour is allowed to exist beyond the borders of Brunei"; at the same time, the very fact that writers work around state censorship laws to 'transgress' only to a limited extent is revealing of a certain desire – that is, to continue "[subscribing] to the morality and ideology which codifies their behaviour as [deviant and transgressive]" (Daud). To be specific, this desire, or "anxiety", is to "maintain local identity and cultural values amid the chaos of external, global pressures and events", but it also discloses a "fascination with difference, or Otherness" (Chin and Daud).

What makes all this information relevant to the analytical project is that, firstly, the postmodern condition of Southeast Asia is emphasised. In particular, Southeast Asia seems to fit

Jameson's definition of postmodernism neatly – “the cultural dominant of the logic of late capitalism” (46) – since capitalism is aligned with the global, and the global is what informs, disrupts, and even ruptures the region's cultural productions and self-expressions. Jameson's definition is a rich one, however, and, qualified, it seems to posit that Southeast Asian literature is full of “[attempts] to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place” (ix). What he means by this is that postmodernism generates the “weakening of historicity, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality” (6). As a result, literary expressions enabled by the postmodern condition “either [‘express’] some deeper irrepressible historical impulse (in however distorted a fashion) or effectively [‘repress’] and [‘divert’] it” (ix). This appears to resonate with Wee's assertion that the pursuit of an ‘Asian modernity’ necessitates a challenge for nations to “escape from the larger philosophico-cultural logic of European modernity” (22). Brought together, these ideas lend insight into why there may be a pattern of concern amongst the contemporary novels of Southeast Asia to interrogate national histories and historicities.

Postmodernism as it manifests in Southeast Asia sees novelists and their works contending with the national narratives born from colonial resistance and assimilation. At the same time, it is what allows writers to reconcile the tangled roots of national identity with the current reality of global flux, where ‘Southeast Asian’ tradition and heritage are viewed as counterintuitive and even antagonistic to the pursuit of rapid modernisation (Patke and Holden 10; Wee 22, 26).

3. All writing in English is political by default

As I have attempted to illustrate with various examples, postmodernism in Southeast Asia

manifests largely as a historical and political tool – this reality is at odds with the “weakening of historicity” that Jameson prescribes (6). Instead of “historical deafness” (xi), the literature of Southeast Asia reflects a renewed attention to relationships with history, enabled by the emergence of postmodernism. Furthermore, this renewed attention emphasises the political dimension of anglophone writing in the region – an idea which also runs counter to the oft-repeated belief in postmodernist theory that postmodernist art is, and should be, free of “political involvement” (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 3). I will address this contrast again later on, as it is tied to the critical notion of parody. The focus of this section is to furnish the idea that, when written in English, even postmodernist literature becomes political by default in the region of Southeast Asia.

The first reason is that the English language remains aligned with the ‘outside’ – with the global, the modern, and, to an extent, the Western. As I have already discussed, English is an exclusionary discourse and a marker of privilege, class, higher education, culture, and cosmopolitanism (Patke and Holden 1, 3). It is also a discourse which travels beyond national and regional contexts (80), capable of penetrating both the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ that is a key tension in Southeast Asian literary expressions. If the postmodern is a symptom of both globalisation and modernity in the region, it follows, then, that English is a ‘postmodern’ language when it is used to negotiate cultural relationships and conditions – any engagement with the language becomes an engagement with the postmodern. A different way of thinking about this is, to paraphrase Anderson, “nothing suggests that [one] nationalism is any less real than [another] because its national language is English rather than [a non-imperial language]”⁵ (133). The value of a particular language, after all, is its potential for creating feelings of

⁵ The original quote is: “Nothing suggests that Ghanaian nationalism is any less real than Indonesian simply because its national language is English rather than Ashanti.”

solidarity, community, and, by extension, ‘nationhood’.

The second reason is evidential – as the cases of Singapore, Malaya, the Philippines, and even Brunei have shown, there is a longstanding and still-relevant relationship between literature and nationhood in Southeast Asia. This is particularly true when it comes to literature in English; furthermore, this relationship between literature and nationalist sentiment is one which continually evolves in form and function. The Philippines once again demonstrates itself to be a compelling example: the social realism that had characterised Filipino fiction in English in the early twentieth century had to be ‘left behind’ when Ferdinand Marcos, whom many considered a dictator, came into power in 1965. To avoid state retaliation, writers who wished to criticise the Marcos regime either went into self-imposed exile, often to the United States of America, or turned to the postmodernist strategies of self-reflexivity, metafiction, and magical realism to allegorically contemplate the Marcos years (Patke and Holden 82-87). These events draw a link between the evolution of a nation’s – or colonial territory’s – literary forms and its political climate, but they also serve as further evidence why writing in English will always be political by default: the uses of English change according to what reality, or political sentiment, demands. In addition to emphasising the political dimension of writing in English, this reason also highlights how the literary traditions and conventions associated with the English language have been assimilated and adapted into ‘national’ expressions.

Several works that were produced in the late twentieth century show that Filipino writers were increasingly turning to postmodernist aesthetics in their fiction to express complex feelings of nationhood, identity, and relationships with colonial powers, both in the Philippines and abroad. As more writers of Filipino heritage published their work in America, where interest in Asian-American writing was growing, a distinction grew between “Philippine literature and

Philippine American literature” (87). However, the two bodies of literature shared an interest in using postmodernist narrative strategies to negotiate their specific concerns (87-88). For example, Filipino-American writing found that “multilayered postmodern” narratives that were polyphonic and bilingual – the American English narration was often accompanied by Tagalog phrases and smatterings of “Philippine Englishes” – were useful for representing and exploring the Filipino-American experience (87-88). Meanwhile, in the Philippines, “formal and stylistic innovations” that included “fragmentary or interwoven and elaborately self-referential narratives”, “postmodern pastiche and parody”, and “unsettling ... frame narrative[s]” were wielded by writers as a way of making sense of the martial law years under Marcos, and the years that came immediately after his fall in 1986 (86-87). The “subversive use of humour” and “satire” associated with these postmodernist strategies offered “powerful forms of resistance” during the Marcos regime (89), while fragmented and self-referential narratives conveyed hope, a “belief in the possibility of radical, even revolutionary, social change ... not yet subsumed by [the] textual irony” often utilised to depict life under martial law (87). Once again, to ignore the techniques of representation in Southeast Asian literature is to perpetuate the misbelief that relationships with the past do not change or get reconceptualised. Moreover, it underestimates the demonstrated power of literature in the national imagination.

One final consideration for why anglophone writing in Southeast Asia is political by default is that even when the English language has been adapted, assimilated, and made ‘native’, using it remains a deliberate choice. While English is used as a lingua franca and a medium of instruction, commerce, and politics, it is neither a ‘mother tongue’ nor dominant language in the linguistically diverse region. To write in English is to choose it over all the other languages available to the writer and the region – that it is the superior mode of communication, or, to

borrow from Anderson again, “vernacular” (133), for a specific purpose. This is an especially compelling point of view considering the ideological significances attached to the English language in this context; anglophone writing is not merely a signifier for a certain type of art or literature, but for an agenda. As we will see later, this concept is even more pronounced in the narrative technique of parody.

In illustrating the robust correlation between postmodernist narratives and politics, there may be a contradiction in claiming that scholarship does not pay sufficient attention to aesthetic strategies. The very fact that such a connection can be made surely means that scholarship is satisfactory – that enough attention is being paid to examining these techniques of representation. Moreover, I have argued that all anglophone fiction in Southeast Asia is political by default – while claiming that narratology needs to be rescued from broad political significations. These may be apparent discrepancies in logic, but the patterns and characteristics of Southeast Asian fiction in English that have been identified are from older examples – and while they are useful in laying the groundwork for critical analysis, these examples and their implications are no longer directly relevant to the current context.

In sum, the ‘lack’ in scholarship I refer to pertains to contemporary Southeast Asian fiction and not the historical, developmental body of literature; this distinction is important because, unlike what has already been discussed, the contemporary context is a postmodern one, where global modernity is constantly intruding upon these local, established narratives (Wee 18, 22). Yet the relationship between national literatures and national concerns – be they historical or political – continues to flourish; it is no coincidence that the novels I identified from different countries at the start of this chapter are similar not just in their methods of narration, but in their interrogations of specific historical moments. For most of these novels, these are moments of

crises – particularly World War II and the Communist Emergency of the 1960s. The problem with current scholarship is that the political implications tied to narrative techniques that have already been identified are taken for granted; it is assumed that these implications remain the same without considering how the relationships they negotiate have evolved and been reimagined in contemporary reality. While it has been made apparent that writers were using postmodern techniques before Southeast Asia was ‘formally’ postmodern (Patke and Holden 10) – fitting into Jameson’s definition of the condition – how effective do these postmodernist strategies of narration remain? More importantly, how have writers further innovated these experimental forms and techniques to suit the new reality? These are the questions that remain central to this project.

4. The status of translated fiction

What is the status of literary works translated into English? Is translation, too, a political act? Furthermore, why are translated works worth including in this purview of anglophone fiction in Southeast Asia? The first answer I can provide is that inclusion creates a more comprehensive vision of how contemporary, postmodernist, and experimental literatures in the region are taking shape – and to what extent the historical and political impulses I’ve been referring to throughout this introduction are attributable to the way English writing has developed in the region. Doing so lets us see what technical similarities exist between translated fiction and fiction translated into English, and whether there is an ‘authentic’ Southeast Asian expression that unifies these different stories.

As Anderson points out, a similar impulse does exist in Indonesian writing, beginning with subversive uses of Dutch – the imperial power in Indonesia until World War II – language

and history. He cites a famous Dutch-language newspaper article written by “the early Javanese–Indonesian nationalist Suwardi Surjaningrat (Ki Hadjar Dewantoro)” in 1913, in which Suwardi criticises the colonial regime’s “massive colony-wide festivities to celebrate the centennial of the ‘national liberation’ of the Netherlands from French imperialism”:

In my opinion, there is something out of place – something indecent – if we (I still being a Dutchman in my imagination) ask the natives to join the festivities which celebrate our independence. Firstly, we will hurt their sensitive feelings because we are here celebrating our own independence in their native country which we colonise. At the moment we are very happy because a hundred years ago we liberated ourselves from foreign domination; and all of this is occurring in front of the eyes of those who are still under our domination. Does it not occur to us that these poor slaves are also longing for such a moment as this, when they like us will be able to celebrate their independence? Or do we perhaps feel that because of our soul-destroying policy we regard all human souls as dead? If that is so, then we are deluding ourselves, because no matter how primitive a community is, it is against any type of oppression. If I were a Dutchman, I would not organise an independence celebration in a country where the independence of the people has been stolen. (117)

What Anderson finds remarkable about this exemplary evidence of early nationalist sentiment in Indonesia is how Suwardi “was able to turn Dutch history against the Dutch, by scraping boldly at the weld between Dutch nationalism and imperialism” (117). Moreover, Suwardi’s “imaginary transformation of himself into a temporary Dutchman” invited “a reciprocal transformation of his Dutch readers into temporary Indonesians” – this, Anderson believes, successfully “undermined all the racist fatalities that underlay Dutch colonial ideology” (117-118). It is apparent that these

connections and techniques are worth including in an analysis of Southeast Asian narratology. As we will see in Chapter Three, this subversive spirit of turning ‘official’ history against itself becomes a significant player in contemporary Indonesian literature, especially in *Beauty Is a Wound*.

A second reason why translated fiction ought to be considered as part of Southeast Asia’s anglophone writing is that translated works operate along different rubrics of logic. As translations, it is difficult to ascertain whether authors’ original messages and representations have been accurately conveyed without informed access to the original texts. Anglophone writing is a discourse which travels. As a result, translated fictions like Kurniawan’s *Beauty Is a Wound* “[circulates] out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin” and enters the sphere of world literature (Damrosch 6). Rather than “suffering a loss of authenticity or essence”, the work of literature is understood as “[manifesting] differently abroad than it does at home” (6). Two significant consequences arise from this – the first is that translated texts can enter a larger literary discussion and help clarify the ‘shape’ of Southeast Asian fictions. By fortifying trends or patterns in concern and narrative techniques, the region’s literary productions may be distinguished from generic studies on Asian postcolonialism. This also helps combat the regional homogenisation brought by colonialism that impacts current literary scholarship. The second consequence, however, is that this very movement into regional and global discourses may be responsible for ‘flattening’ Southeast Asian literatures into their broad political significances.

Kurniawan’s novel is often received as magical realist, due to the equilibrium it establishes between the supernatural and the commensurably real – the story chronicles the violence of historical events in Indonesia such as Dutch colonialism, the Japanese Occupation

during World War II, and the communist purges in the 1960s. The protagonist, however, is a prostitute who dies “from the strength of [her] own will” and rises from the grave decades later to break a curse placed on her family (Kurniawan 451-452), signalling a departure from the temporal ontologies of realist fiction. However, designating *Beauty Is a Wound* as a work of magical realism is the corollary of translation and trans-cultural reception; the prosaic treatment of black magic in the novel might simply be indicative of Indonesian cultural logic. To dismiss this is problematic as it dampens the power this novel has as a work of contemporary Southeast Asian literature. As Brian McHale suggests, the “integration between the historical and the fantastic” invents “apocryphal” or “deliberately anachronistic versions of history” that undermine history as a “record of real human action and suffering” (95). However:

This would be unassailably true, if only we could be sure that the historical record reliably captured the experience of the human beings who really suffered and enacted history. But that is the last thing we can ever be sure of, and one of the thrusts of postmodernist revisionist history is to call into question the reliability of official history. The postmodernists fictionalise history, but by doing so they imply that history itself may be a form of fiction. (95-96)

By legitimising the supernatural aspects of *Beauty Is a Wound* as Indonesian cultural logic, rather than designating it as a quirk of the genre of magical realism, the novel becomes something powerful enough to challenge historical narratives while also demonstrating the effectiveness of postmodernist strategies in navigating relationships between the past and the present. Kurniawan presents a version of history that, despite its fictional qualities, is capable of competing with official records as truth. McHale reminds us that “this is precisely the question postmodernist fiction is designed to raise: real, compared to what?” (96). For all of these reasons,

it is important and valuable to include texts translated into English in our working concept of anglophone Southeast Asian fiction; they continue to mark the urgency with which scholarly attention ought to be turned towards Southeast Asian narratologies.

5. The novel form

This section and the next are dedicated to reasoning why novels are the chosen literary form for analysis in this project, and why Syjuco's and Kurniawan's novels in particular. While Southeast Asian poetry in English, especially the poetry which originated from Singapore and Malaya, also articulate strong relationships with feelings of nationhood and desires for postcoloniality, novels remain the richest area for study for a multiplicity of reasons, foremost of which is that novels impose a unique texture upon literature and reality.

Beyond the historical link between literature and political reality that has already been established in context, novels have a compelling power as a constituent of the realm of fiction more generally. The "special logical status of the fictional text", according to McHale, is its "condition of being in-between, amphibious – neither true nor false, suspended between belief and disbelief" (33). Fiction, moreover, emphasises the "otherness of the fictional world, its separation from the real world of experience" (27), and even in the case of mimetic fiction a crucial difference is reinforced:

For the real world to be reflected in the mirror of literary mimesis, the imitation must be distinguishable from the imitated: the mirror of art must stand apart from and opposite to the nature to be mirrored. A mimetic relation is one of similarity, not *identity*, and similarity implies difference – the difference between the original object and its reflection, between the real world and the fictional heterocosm. (28)

This has interesting implications for fictional texts that seek to include the real, texts such as the Southeast Asian examples that touch on verifiably ‘real’ historical events like World War II and the Communist Emergency. To McHale, the “appearance of [that] which *have* existed in the real world” are “not *reflected* in fiction so much as *incorporated*; they constitute enclaves of ontological *difference* within the otherwise ontologically homogeneous fictional heterocosm” (28).

In other words, it is necessary that we understand that a literary text always straddles at least two worlds of references – one “internal field of reference, a universe or semantic continuum (loosely, a ‘world’) constructed *in* and *by* the text itself”, and “inevitably ... an external field of reference: the objective world, the body of historical fact or scientific theory, an ideology or philosophy, other texts, and so on” (28). This bears resemblance to the postmodern condition of Southeast Asia, in which reality is constructed by the tension – or, to borrow Benjamin Hrushovski’s phrase, “a dual referential allegiance” – between ‘inside’ narratives and ‘outside’ global cultural flows. More importantly, we see that by interpenetrating both fictional and real worlds, fiction demonstrates a power to ‘equalise’ elements that belong to these different planes of presentation and meaning. Fiction is not simply a mirror held up to reality but an artistic force that can influence it – a text’s internal logic is facilitated by readerly recognition of its external referents. Conversely, the real that is incorporated into the fictional, internal universe is challenged – especially in the ontology of postmodernist fiction,⁶ where what we take to be ‘real’ are often revealed to be constructs themselves⁷ (McHale 4, 10, 26; White 119,

⁶ Critics may disagree on what postmodernism as a phenomenon, movement, or literary–historical designation may be, but McHale contends that postmodernist *fiction* is designed to raise ontological questions of the literary text and of the world itself (10).

⁷ The historian Hayden White reminds us that history is *produced* and has an epistemological relationship with narrative: combined with the ancient sense of narrative as a “knowing” account, what is produced is narrative’s “synonymy with what ‘history’ was supposed to provide” (119). What we get from “any historical narrative worthy

123).

The unique texture that fiction creates between literature and reality should already be evident from the regional examples discussed earlier, from twentieth-century Philippine writing to (as we will see) the critical inquiry into ‘official’ accounts of national history that contemporary Southeast Asian novels perform. In addition to reinforcing the historical links between fiction and nationhood, this ontological characteristic of fiction emphasises why fiction, and not poetry, is more useful for the purposes of this project. Through fiction, both the techniques of literary representation and external references to the ‘real’ are foregrounded, allowing us to view and pick apart internal and external referents as narrative constructions. This is crucial to any project of inquiry.⁸

While we have discussed why the general realm of fiction is a rewarding area of critical interest, Anderson provides reasons why novels, and not other forms of fiction such as the short story, are the best formal considerations for the scope of this project. Similar to the Philippine phenomenon where novels of a specific kind became “the site for recuperating from [the] failure” of colonial promises (Wesling 156), the novel form is, for Anderson, one of the “two forms of imagining” that enable “the birth of the imagined community” (24). The other form is the newspaper. Both the novel and the newspaper “[provide] the technical means for ‘re-presenting’ the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation” (24). The novel, in particular, presents a feeling of “simultaneity in ‘homogenous, empty time’” because it depicts several characters – who may not even be in the same space, or aware of each other – performing acts

of the name” is “comprehension of the ways that traditionally-provided modes of storytelling function to inform us of the ways that our own culture can provide a host of different meanings for the same set of events” (125).

⁸ “Properly used, the term ‘narrative’ denotes an account of something that is known or knowable, or that was once known and has been forgotten and therefore can be recalled to mind *by the appropriate means of discourse* [emphasis mine]” (White 119).

within the same clocked, calendrical time (25).

The idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time is a precise analogue of the idea of the nation, which is also conceived as a solid community moving steadily down (or up) history. An American will never meet, or even know the names of more than a handful of his 240,000-odd fellow-Americans. He has no idea of what they are up to at any one time. But he has complete confidence in their steady, anonymous, simultaneous activity. (25-26)

As we can see from this excerpt, the imagined community is, in a nutshell, a feeling of solidarity forged by the belief a group has that all its members are moving through ‘time’ together. This is what leads to ideas of a ‘nation’ and ‘national belonging’. While this may seem like an abstract notion, Anderson illustrates his point by examining exactly how this feeling is established in and by novels “inextricably bound to nationalist movements” (26).

Unsurprisingly, the first example he chooses is José Rizal’s *Noli Me Tángere*, the seminal work of Philippine literature that ‘sparked’ the revolution against Spanish rule in the nineteenth century. Before sharing Anderson’s analysis, it is worth reproducing the passage, which are the novel’s opening paragraphs, to which he refers:⁹

Towards the end of October, Don Santiago de los Santos, popularly known as Capitan Tiago, was giving a dinner party. Although, contrary to his usual practice, he had announced it only that afternoon, it was already the subject of every conversation in Binondo, in other quarters of the city, and even in Intramuros.¹⁰ In those days Capitan Tiago had the reputation of a lavish host. It was known that his house, like his country,

⁹ Anderson relied on the “instructively corrupt translation” of *Noli Me Tángere* by Leon Maria Guerrero, as he had no command of Spanish while working on the original publication of *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 26-27).

¹⁰ The walled inner city of Old Manila.

closed its doors to nothing, except to commerce and to any new or daring idea.

So the news coursed like an electric shock through the community of parasites, spongers, and gatecrashers whom God, in His infinite goodness, created, and so tenderly multiplies in Manila. Some hunted polish for their boots, others looked for collar-buttons and cravats. But one and all were preoccupied with the problem of how to greet their host with the familiarity required to create the appearance of longstanding friendship, or if need be, to excuse themselves for not having arrived earlier.

The dinner was being given at a house on Anloague Street. Since we do not recall the street number, we shall describe it in such a way that it may still be recognised – that is, if earthquakes have not yet destroyed it. We do not believe that its owner will have had it torn down, since such work is usually left to God or to Nature, which, besides, holds many contracts with our Government. (qtd in Anderson 26-27)

For Anderson, this excerpt captures rather intuitively the imagined community because it describes “a dinner-party being discussed by hundreds of unnamed people who do not know each other, in quite different parts of Manila, in a particular month of a particular decade” (27). The final paragraph quoted here also conjures a “casual” but brilliant progression of time, from the interior time of the novel to the exterior time of the reader’s life (27). As a result, there is a “hypnotic confirmation of the solidity of a single community”, not just within the world of the novel but beyond it; in addition to the characters, this imagined community encompasses the author and the readers, and all of them move onward through calendrical time (27). It is also notable that Rizal’s book, like Syjuco’s and Kurniawan’s, builds its world through references to external reality – a recognisable Manila, for one, and, elsewhere in the narrative, the grievances

that ‘Indios’¹¹ held against their colonial rulers. Again, what does it mean when the real is incorporated into a work of fiction? This is a question that will be explored more fully in Chapters Two and Three.

Thus far we have discussed the merits of working with the genre of fiction and the form of the novel when it comes to examining the associations between literature and nationhood, whether ‘nationhood’ is a sentiment, a political system, or a relationship to official narratives and larger structures of power. Finally, it is worth considering the rationale behind choosing Syjuco’s *Ilustrado* and Kurniawan’s *Beauty Is a Wound* over the other Southeast Asian novels that reflect similar impulses¹² as ‘proof’ that postmodernist narrative techniques are the best strategies for interrogating history and politics. On one level, *Ilustrado* and *Beauty Is a Wound* demonstrate themselves to be more technically innovative compared to the other novels that were initially considered for inclusion. While all these novels utilise postmodernist narrative strategies to varying degrees, none are quite as dynamic as these two – both are diegetically playful, politically irreverent, and clearly postmodernist¹³ in their treatments of Philippine and Indonesian histories. As we have briefly seen, *Beauty Is a Wound* seems to challenge the status of history as that which “reliably [captures] the experience of the human beings who really suffered and enacted history” with its ‘straight-faced’ inclusion of supernatural elements (McHale 95); similarly, *Ilustrado* rejects the historical legacies of the *ilustrado* class and the Philippine literary traditions that it appropriates through its metafictional structure. The wilful game of deception that *Ilustrado* plays obfuscates the truth that history – and even literature – promises.

¹¹ Indigenous Filipinos.

¹² Tash Aw’s *The Harmony Silk Factory* (2005) and Tan Twan Eng’s *The Garden of Evening Mists* (2011) from Malaysia; Jeremy Tiang’s *State of Emergency* (2017) from Singapore; Jose Dalisay’s *Soledad’s Sister* (2007), Miguel Syjuco’s *Ilustrado* (2008), and Gina Apostol’s *Insurrecto* (2017) from the Philippines; and Eka Kurniawan’s *Beauty Is a Wound* (2002) and Laksmi Pamuntjak’s *The Question of Red* (2013) from Indonesia.

¹³ The treatment is ironic, parodic, self-reflexive, and – to an extent – revisionist.

On a deeper level, *Ilustrado* and *Beauty Is a Wound* form a compelling collective for analysis because both are parodies. It might even be argued that *because* they are parodies their technical features are foregrounded; consequently, their treatments of politics and history are emphasised because for parody to function, recognition of what is being ‘attacked’ is necessary. While the effectiveness of how these books carry out their parodies is the subject of evaluation in later chapters, the notion of parody itself ought to be understood in relation to postmodernism. First of all, it is necessary to concede that parody does not belong exclusively to the postmodernists – although it is often considered “a characteristic mode of postmodernist writing”¹⁴ (McHale 145) due to its “narcissistic and ironic appropriation of existing images and stories” (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 3). As we are about to see, parody is, in fact, the aesthetic strategy that is most compatible with postmodernism.¹⁵

6. The ontology of parody

Going against “a dominant trend” that “asserts postmodernism is disqualified from political involvement” because of this signature feature, Hutcheon argues that, actually, postmodernist art “cannot but be political, at least in the sense that its representations – its images and stories – are anything but neutral, however ‘aestheticised’ they may appear to be in their parodic self-reflexivity” (3). In addition to reinforcing the inherently political nature of postmodernism as it manifests itself in Southeast Asia, Hutcheon’s claim here is important because it highlights another reason why postmodernist strategies are efficient in political and

¹⁴ “Parody, of course, is a form of self-reflection and self-critique, a genre’s way of thinking critically about itself” (McHale 145) – this fits, quite precisely, the ontological dominant of postmodernist fiction.

¹⁵ Pastiche is often viewed as the characteristic postmodernist form, but parody takes precedence in this project due to context – postmodernism in Southeast Asia is a particular political and historical era. Unlike parody, pastiche is often seen as imitation without an ‘agenda’.

cultural critique: they inhabit a paradox (13). If, as McHale insists, the function of postmodernist fiction is to ask “real, compared to what?” (96), then it makes sense that postmodernist art forms “believe” that the only way to speak to a culture is from inside it (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 13). Unlike modernism,¹⁶ which advocates a “deliberate separation of art from mass culture and everyday life”, postmodernism does not occupy a didactic or moral role outside of its ‘target’ culture, which is more often than not mass culture (14-15). Instead, postmodernism is “complicitous” with it, fitting “squarely within both economic capitalism and cultural humanism – two of the major dominants of much of the western world” (13). Only by being within a culture does postmodernism work to “make it question its values and its self-constructing representations” (13).

Parody is the method which takes advantage of postmodernism’s position of complicitous critique best, since parody is reliant on recognition – it only functions as commentary when its audience can recognise the narratives or figures of which it is making fun. In other words, it is already inherently located within that which it seeks to critique. Furthermore, the parody is accessible enough to be recognised as an ‘attack’. Besides these features of intertextuality and self-reflexivity, parody goes hand-in-hand with postmodernism by being aware that there are no longer any ‘new’ narratives – however, this only serves to highlight the power of parody to act on the ‘de-doxifying’¹⁷ impulse in postmodernism:

On the one hand, there is a sense that we can never get out from under the weight of a long tradition of visual and narrative representations and, on the other hand, we also seem to be losing faith in both the inexhaustibility and the power of those existing representations. And parody is often the postmodern form this particular paradox takes.

¹⁶ Of which postmodernism is “post” (McHale 5).

¹⁷ Here, Hutcheon is adapting Roland Barthes’ notion of the ‘doxa’, or public opinion or the “Voice of Nature” (3).

By both using and ironically abusing general conventions and specific forms of representation, postmodern art works to de-naturalise them, giving what Rosalind Krauss has called the strange sense of “loosening the glue by which labels used to adhere to the products of convention”. (Hutcheon 8)

Syjuco’s *Ilustrado* and Kurniawan’s *Beauty Is a Wound* certainly accomplish this – by drawing attention to the narratives that are taken to be national ‘truths’, they ‘loosen the glue’ that affixes these narratives to their status as legacies to be respected and left unquestioned. They interrogate the continued validity of the ideas that the contemporary realities in their countries are built upon by parodying them – history, for example, is treated as a literal ghost that haunts the present in *Beauty Is a Wound*. As we will see in later chapters, these two novels use the techniques of official historiography in order to reveal that official history is a form of fiction as well – they denaturalise the official record. Ultimately, these texts form the ideal bounds for analysis because they place postmodernist aesthetics front and centre in nationalist re-conceptions. In addition to “thinking critically about [themselves]” as loaded fictions and representations¹⁸ (McHale 145), they wield these postmodernist strategies with an incisiveness that commands a recalibration in the way scholarship views Southeast Asian narratology in the contemporary age.

7. Whose postmodernism?

The concept of the postmodern that I have evoked throughout this introductory chapter is very much a constructed one – I have attempted to characterise postmodernism as a set of aesthetic strategies in fiction, but also as an economic state, cultural criticism, the texture of

¹⁸ Keep in mind these novels’ literary heritages and burdens as postcolonial–contemporary and anglophone cultural productions.

contemporary reality, and historical meaning-making. While McHale is right in saying that no single version of postmodernism is ever “unproblematic” or “satisfactory” (3), the state of Southeast Asian literature necessitates a new construction of the term where existing and largely-accepted theories fail to fit in context. For example, we discussed earlier that one of Jameson’s laments about the postmodern condition is “historical deafness” (xi), in which ‘real’ history is “displaced” by the “aesthetic styles” heralded by the “weakening of historicity” (20, 6). However, we now know that the converse has been happening and continues to happen in the literature of Southeast Asia, which has demonstrated strong historical links between literature and nationhood.¹⁹ Additionally, contemporary fiction in the region reinvigorates this relationship through the use of specifically postmodernist aesthetic strategies. In light of this, Hutcheon’s notion of the postmodern is actually more relevant because she refutes the popular assertion that postmodernism is “disqualified from political involvement” (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 3). Nonetheless, Jameson’s work is necessary reference in the attempt to situate Southeast Asian literature as a cultural and historical product born from the vagaries of modernity and capitalism.

While drawing upon these different theorists is my attempt to characterise what I see as the postmodern phenomenon in Southeast Asia as it is reflected in its literature, the slippages and gaps imply that a plurality of postmodernisms is flourishing in the region. Perhaps this plurality occurs because Southeast Asian literature is produced at a remove from the Western cultural dominants with which the likes of Hutcheon and Jameson operate. As a result, there is a conflation between *postmodernity* and *postmodernism*, a distinction which Hutcheon believes is necessary and has accused Jameson of failing to make (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 15). For both Hutcheon and McHale, *postmodernism* is a “cultural notion” inherently related to the

¹⁹ A similar connection emerged in the British postmodern tradition and contributed to Hutcheon’s conception of historiographic metafiction.

modernist movement (23; McHale 10-11); it is the result of the “dynamics of the change by which one system emerges from and supplants the other” (McHale 11). Postmodernity, meanwhile, is “the designation of a social and philosophical period or ‘condition’ ... variously defined in terms of the relationship between intellectual and state discourses; as a condition determined by universal, diffuse cynicism, by a panic sense of the hyperreal and the simulacrum” (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 23). Why is it important to distinguish between the two? Postmodernity might be an inevitable historical condition, state, or outcome, but it is postmodernism – and to be specific, the literature of postmodernism – that prescribes how we ought to make sense of contemporary reality.

It should be apparent by now that the dominant of postmodernist literature is ontological; as a result, the features that we usually take to be characteristic of postmodernist literature are seen as “strategies for foregrounding ontological issues” (McHale 10). McHale explains that it is “the ontological dominant which explains the selection and clustering of these particular features”; it is “the principle of systematicity” (10):

This in a nutshell is the function of the dominant: it specifies the *order* in which different aspects are to be attended to, so that, although it would be perfectly possible to interrogate a postmodernist text about its epistemological implications, it is more *urgent* to interrogate it about its ontological implications. (11)

Is postmodernism the dominant of postmodernity? How this question might be answered along with the nature of the distinction between these two aspects of the postmodern condition in the Western context is of little interest at the moment; what is important is that the conflation between the two that occurs in Southeast Asia and its literature presents an answer that is affirmative. It implies that postmodernist aesthetics and the actuality of everyday reality can no

longer be separated – possibly because these are the only strategies of meaning-making that writers have left to make sense of the current world.

Postmodernism as it functions in this project necessitates a dialectic approach, because how it manifests in Southeast Asia as both a condition and a form of cultural expression is complex. It resists neat and easy categorisation under popular theories of the term, which, more often than not, are Western in origin. Furthermore, a study that seeks to advocate a renewal in how Southeast Asian fiction, particularly contemporary novels, is treated in critical scholarship is to an extent deserving of an innovated theoretical structure as well; to see something new, we must perhaps create a new way of seeing. Arguably, Syjuco and Kurniawan also posit their own versions of postmodernism through their novels, and rather than problematising this polyphony it is more useful to keep in mind that all theories of the postmodern are

literary–historical fictions, discursive artefacts constructed either by contemporary readers and writers or retrospectively by literary historians. And since they are discursive constructs rather than real-world objects, it is possible to construct them in a variety of ways, making it necessary to discriminate among, say, the various constructions of romanticism[.] ... Similarly we can discriminate among constructions of postmodernism, none of them less ‘true’ or less fictional than the others, since *all* of them are finally fictions. (McHale 4)

Furthermore, McHale proposes that “productiveness” may be a “superior construction of postmodernism” – “one that produces new insights, new or richer connections, coherence of a different degree or kind, ultimately *more discourse*” (4-5). And so this dialectic process of postmodernism that I am proposing here is ‘superior’ in the sense that it fulfils my critical interest best.

In addition to relying on the work of Hutcheon and Jameson in furnishing a general framework for postmodernism and postmodernity, McHale's arguments on the narratology of postmodernist fiction have proven invaluable in creating a 'map' with which we may trace and evaluate Southeast Asian permutations of it. Anderson's notion of the imagined community also helps fill in the cultural gaps when it comes to looking at postmodernism in the relationship between the Southeast Asian novel and nationalist sentiments.

So far, I have shown how intertwined the novels of Southeast Asia are with their historical-political contexts and postmodernist expressions. The history of English writing's development in the region and the ontology of anglophone fiction's outcomes as nationalist projects and works of translation are integral to understanding the two aims of this project. The first is to untangle the narratology of Southeast Asian fiction from its Western resemblances and postcolonial generalisations, legitimising it as a powerful system of meaning-making suitable to the contemporary reality. The second is to foreground the techniques used by contemporary Southeast Asian novels in order to reveal the significant challenge these texts pose to the static legacies of their contextual narratives. Both *Ilustrado* and *Beauty Is a Wound* are remarkable in terms of technical execution, and the next two chapters are dedicated to showing what they are parodying, how they parody them, and the significant effects their techniques achieve.

CHAPTER TWO: *Ilustrado* by Miguel Syjuco

“No longer content with invisibly exercising his freedom to create worlds, the artist now makes his freedom visible by thrusting himself into the foreground of his work. He represents himself in the act of making his fictional world – or unmaking it, which is also his prerogative. There is a catch, of course: the artist represented in the act of creation or destruction is himself inevitably a fiction.”

— Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 1987

“Mid-century anti-Realist fiction is replete with gestures of this sort. Borges’ ‘Magias parciales del *Quijote*’ [‘Partial magic in the *Quixote*’] speaks of the king of *A Thousand and One Nights* as one who ‘hears from the queen his own story. He hears the beginning and the end of the story, which comprises all the others and also – monstrously – itself’, so that ‘if the characters of a fictional work can be readers or spectators, we, its readers or spectators, can be fictitious’.”

— Christopher Nash, *World Postmodern Fiction*, 1987

What does the Philippine novel *Ilustrado* parody? In a nutshell: nostalgia. In Miguel Syjuco’s *Ilustrado*, which was published to critical acclaim in 2008,²⁰ the protagonist shares his name with the novel’s real-world writer, producing a curious overlap between the internal world of the text and the external world of modern-day Manila to which the novel refers. While these

²⁰ It won the Man Asian Literary Prize, amongst others.

incorporations of the ‘real’ in fiction are an area of critical interest, *Ilustrado* engages with these elements and history not so much to challenge the veracity of ‘official’ records, as Kurniawan’s *Beauty Is a Wound* seems to do, as to expose the materiality of nationalist sentiment. How Syjuco accomplishes this is by ridiculing two aspects of Philippine history and literature that have enjoyed hallowed, institutional status: the *ilustrado* class and the fictional autobiography, both of which have been instrumental in forging nationalist and postcolonial sentiments and identities.

1. *Ilustrados*: the first nationalists

To understand the relevance of Syjuco’s attack, it is necessary to first understand what each of his ‘targets’ signifies. The term *ilustrado*, firstly, means “enlightened”. It was the name given to an elite class of Spanish-speaking indigenous Filipinos that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, towards the end of the Spanish colonial period.²¹ The *ilustrados* were marked by wealth, cosmopolitanism, and European education; perhaps ironically, they were also “the first generation of nationalists” (Rafael, *Motherless Tongues* 13), returning from their studies in European cultural centres to work towards gaining, if not independence from colonial rule, equal status and political reform (10-11). For example, in the absence of a common language in the Philippine archipelago,²² the *ilustrados*

were particularly captivated by the possibilities of the Castilian language for furnishing a lingua franca that would reach across linguistically diverse regions of the archipelago. It would also draw together rulers and ruled, integrating the colony as a full-fledged

²¹ 1521–1898, after which it became an American territory until 1946, with the exception of Japanese occupation during the World War II years.

²² Before the systematic introduction of the English language in schools during American imperialism; also prior to designating Tagalog as the Philippines’ official language in the 1930s.

province of Spain. The spread of Castilian promised, so the *ilustrados* thought, to make Filipinos equal to Spaniards as citizens of a common *patria*. They thus saw in Castilian an agency analogous to money. (13)

Indeed, the *ilustrados* brought back with them ideas that designated them as threats to colonial authority (10-11). T.H. Pardo de Tavera, one of the first *ilustrados*, observed in 1912 that “on returning ... they took in their hearts and minds the germ of what was subsequently called subversive ideas and later *filibusterismo*²³ ... They were actually becoming insolent, according to the [Spanish] dominators. In reality, they were beginning to defend their rights” (qtd in Rafael, *Motherless Tongues* 10). In line with the desires for nationalism and modernity that were outlined in Chapter One, the *ilustrados* had a double-barrel quality to their social and political aims: even though they sought independence, their ideas – and their access to these ideas – were largely the products of colonial education and Western systems of governance (11-13). The historian Vicente L. Rafael describes this occurrence as nationalism by “translation”:

Nationalism [is] the conjuring of the nation by way of substitution and estrangement[.] ...

To that double process of appropriating and replacing what is foreign while keeping its foreignness in view I give the name *translation*. Nationalism understood as translation revises ... origins for the sake of projecting a new basis of filiation. At the same time, it keeps in reserve something of the alien quality of origins, investing it with a power to explain the past and underwrite the coming of a future. (*The Promise* xvii)

This process of appropriation and replacement is embodied by the *ilustrado* and underscores a further aspect of nationalist consciousness: the national cannot emerge without that which first contests its existence, the foreign. This echoes Benedict Anderson’s position that

²³ Spanish for “filibustering”; also the title of José Rizal’s second novel, which has variously been translated into *The Subversive*, *Subversion*, and *The Reign of Greed*.

“bilingualism”, or at the very least fluency in “imperial vernaculars”, aided nationalist movements because it “meant access, through the European language-of-state, to modern Western culture in the broadest sense, and, in particular, to the models of nationalism, nation-ness, and nation-state produced elsewhere” (116). In time, the *ilustrados* proved themselves to be integral to the project for independence, with the most famous *ilustrado* of all, undoubtedly, being José Rizal. Rizal wrote two novels which encapsulated his ‘dangerous’ beliefs, *Noli Me Tángere* in 1887 and *El Filibusterismo* in 1891. Both novels portray societal ills, exposing the corruption and abuse in religion and politics that Filipinos felt under Spanish colonial rule²⁴ by caricaturing colonial figures and society. Furthermore, these books helped form a united Filipino consciousness as Rizal’s characters resonated with the values and regional identities of many indigenous Filipinos. His writing was considered one of the inspirations behind the Philippine Revolution²⁵ that began in 1896, and later that same year, Rizal was executed by the colonial government for the crime of rebellion. Today, Rizal is hailed as a national hero and his novels remain staples of literature curriculums in schools across the Philippines.

2. The fictional autobiography

The fictional autobiography refers to semi-autobiographical novels that are part of the older tradition in Philippine writing that links the literary to the sociopolitical.²⁶ While the term “autofiction” – a genre of fictionalised autobiography – may suffice, I choose to use the term “fictional autobiography” in order to further distinguish Philippine writing from European literary traditions and trends. In many ways, the fictional autobiography is part of the emergence

²⁴ This was a general concern in the writing of the *ilustrados*.

²⁵ Filipinos rebelled against the Spanish Empire from 1896–1898, and Spanish occupation of the Philippines formally ended with the Treaty of Paris.

²⁶ As discussed at length in Chapter One.

of postmodernist techniques and the significance they took on in the anglophone fiction of the Philippines in the twentieth century. It took on the similar importance of transforming the literary into the “venue” for “participation in the national body” (Wesling 156). Where Rizal made real grievances against the Spanish the subject of his novels, writers of fictional autobiographies plunged their ‘selves’ into the internal world of the text as a technique to conflate the personal with the collective. This proved to be a vital and dynamic way of portraying the new Filipino concerns under American imperialism.

To illustrate this, it is worth acquainting ourselves with Carlos Bulosan’s *America Is in the Heart*,²⁷ which was published in 1946 and is considered an exemplar of the genre. The novel chronicles Bulosan’s “personal history” growing up as the oldest child of a poor farming family in the Philippines, and later migrating to the United States to work as a labourer in the 1930s and through the 1940s.²⁸ In the 2017 edition of *America Is in the Heart*, the writer and academic Luis H. Francia offers an incisive introduction to the ‘novel’, beginning with the dissonance that Bulosan felt between his “American dream” and the reality of being a Filipino in America in 1930, when it was still the Depression Era and racial discrimination against Filipinos were rife (xvii). At the time of its publication, *America Is in the Heart* reflected the wider disillusionment many Filipino migrant workers experienced upon moving to America, where the distance between their difficult everyday lives and the dreams “about American society [their] education in the Philippines had implanted” in their consciousness was stark (xvii).

Furnishing biographical detail with fictional elements, Bulosan uses his text to confront the “cognitive dissonances inspired by the contradiction between the America represented by its canonical literary texts and the experience of Filipino immigrants to the United States” (Wesling

²⁷ Originally published in English.

²⁸ These details are semi-autobiographical.

147). The infusion of the fictional into the real serves the purpose of reconstructing his experience for audiences such that “the function of literature is an equally pertinent concern in the text” (144-145) – a self-consciousness in line with postmodernist narratives and which Syjuco’s *Ilustrado* echoes. Despite this degree of fictionality, *America Is in the Heart* remains a compelling testimony, a flag to wave by parties intent on fighting for social change.²⁹ Moreover, the lived aspect of the text and the social responses to it colour the literary as a “profound ... bearer of [colonial] promises and the site for recuperating from their failure” (145). Certainly, Bulosan’s text occupies a significant position in Philippine political and literary histories by answering an urgent call for “proletarian literature” (Francia ix). Francia traces its trajectory as such:

In the history of Philippine literature before 1972, Bulosan occupied only a marginal corner. The reigning critical orthodoxy and his political views relegated him to that corner in a society where the dominant literary arbiters were creative writers and academicians who had been fanned out by such grant-giving bodies as the Fulbright Program, Rockefeller Foundation, and the Asia Foundation to the ideological [centres] of Cold War culture in the US. Bulosan was considered not “literary” enough for having allowed ideological partisanship to “show” in his writings and worse, for espousing “communistic” ideas³⁰ at a time of US–Soviet Union face-off.

It was the tide of national-democratic ideas brought on by the First Quarter Storm³¹ that broke the wall separating Bulosan from the mainstream of Philippine literature. On

²⁹ Meg Wesling observes that despite being “[v]irtually forgotten after its initial success in 1946, *America Is in the Heart* has been a staple text in the body of American and Asian American literary study since Bulosan’s ‘rediscovery’ by students, workers, and activists in the 1960s and the republication of the text in 1972” (144).

³⁰ Bulosan was heavily involved in labour movements in the United States.

³¹ A period of civil unrest in the Philippines from January–March 1970.

the eve of the declaration of Martial Law,³² the voice of US-based Marxist critic Epifanio San Juan Jr. called attention to the relevance of Bulosan's writings to the ongoing struggle in the Philippines for freedom and democracy. [San Juan Jr. wrote] a book-length account of Bulosan's literary achievement as a significant contribution to the history of the labour movement in America and to the assertion by Filipinos of their presence in US society. (ix)

As *America Is in the Heart* demonstrates, the power of the fictional autobiography is an enactment of "the imagination as social practice": "[n]o longer mere opium for the masses ... no longer simple escape ... no longer elite pastime ... and no longer mere contemplation", the imagination "organised into a field of social practices" gives rise to "a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility" (Appadurai 31). In other words, the fictional autobiography in Filipino literary history and culture is a near-palpable site where colonial ideas can be challenged, and autonomy from ideological power structures can actually be won.

The histories and symbolisms of the *ilustrados* and the fictional autobiography are part of the literary heritage that Syjuco's *Ilustrado* also carries and explicitly engages with, immediately marking the novel as a text which portends social, if not outrightly nationalist, concerns. However, Syjuco treats these legacies with irreverence, as we will see, and by parodying the figure of the *ilustrado* along with the formal ontology of the fictional autobiography he destabilises the narratives that are central to Filipino identity and society. How he accomplishes this and what the implications of doing so are the topics of discussion in this chapter.

³² In 1972.

3. Crispin Salvador: modern-day *ilustrado* mythologised

The parodic aspect of *Ilustrado* comes primarily through diegetic playfulness, where the boundaries between different levels of narration – and, consequently, between fiction and reality – are continually blurred. While Syjuco makes us aware that we are travelling between different narrative levels as we progress through the book, it is not until we reach the end of the text that the ‘shape’ of the fictional world is clarified. This ‘lived’ experience of progressing through both physical time and the book is crucial to how *Ilustrado* asserts itself as a parody – especially if we recall Anderson’s notion of the imagined community³³ and how novels aid the formation of an imagined community that may be called the nation.³⁴ Syjuco hijacks this aspect of the novel – along with its ‘inherited’ potential to influence Filipino society and politics – not just to deceive readers of the book’s truth but also to undermine the symbolism ascribed to *ilustrados*.

The figure of the titular *ilustrado* is reflected in the character of Crispin Salvador, a Filipino writer and academic at Columbia University who died under enigmatic circumstances. He is, or was, the mentor of Miguel Syjuco, the novel’s Filipino student protagonist and narrator who shares the same name as *Ilustrado*’s author. Much like Anderson’s analysis of Rizal’s *Noli Me Tángere*, there is a “hypnotic confirmation of the solidity of a single community” (27) discernible in *Ilustrado*: characters, readers, and even the author himself (who is, in any case, a fictional character as well) are ‘unified’ through recognisable, modern-day settings³⁵ and movements through personal histories and contemporary realities.³⁶ And all, ultimately, are held in thrall to a metafictional game that is revealed only at the end of the book’s ‘time’. This is the

³³ The imagined community can be described as a feeling of solidarity felt by a group of ‘anonymous individuals’ moving through “homogenous, empty time” together – a “precise analogue of the idea of the nation” (Anderson 25-26).

³⁴ Novels “[provide] the technical means for ‘re-presenting’ the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation” (24).

³⁵ Primarily Manila and New York City.

³⁶ The imagined community is “a solid community moving steadily *down* (or *up*) [emphasis mine] history” (Anderson 26).

‘lived’ aspect of Syjuco’s *Ilustrado*, which might also be designated as the process by which readers are lulled into a false understanding of the narrative. To illustrate what I mean by this, it is worth outlining the chronological encounter a reader would have with the text. Although the story begins with news of Crispin’s death, his body found floating in the Hudson River of New York City, the text itself opens with a curious epigraph:

In response to the warnings received while researching this book, the author hereby states that all perceived similarities between characters and people living or dead are either purely coincidental or a skewered nerve in your guilty conscience.

—from the extant title page of *The Bridges Ablaze*, by Crispin Salvador (1)

Immediately, this epigraph accomplishes a variety of things – it draws attention to both the thematic concerns and metafictional qualities of the novel, while also throwing the boundary between fiction and reality into flux. As we begin the story proper, we learn that Crispin Salvador is, in ‘actuality’, a fictional character who belongs to the world of *Ilustrado*; moreover, the manuscript which the epigraph quotes forms a central intrigue in the narrative. *The Bridges Ablaze* is the book that Crispin had been working on before he suddenly died, a “glacial accretion of research and writing” over twenty years (5).

It is a book, we are told, for which Crispin left the Philippines in self-imposed exile³⁷ to write with the intention of “unknotting and unravelling the generations-long ties of the Filipino elite to cronyism, illegal logging, gambling, kidnapping, corruption, along with their related component sins”:

³⁷ “The people who love you,” [Crispin told Miguel], “will only see their deficiencies in your work. That’s the strength of good writing and the weakness of the human ego. Love and honesty don’t mix. To be an honest writer, you have to be away from home, and totally alone in life.”

The cut ties saw Salvador settle permanently in New York, and inexorably into a period of deep silence. He dropped his newspaper column. He gave up writing. That he became well-known as a teacher attests to his oh-so-very-Filipino resilience. As he said in “War & Piss” [his newspaper column] on many an occasion: “If life gives you lemons, have your maid make some lemonade.” (Syjuco 14)

“The reason for my long exile is so that I could be free to write *TBA*,” Salvador said, that first time, spitting out the bones of chicken feet we [Crispin and Miguel] were eating in a subterranean Mott Street restaurant. “Don’t you think there are things that need to be finally said? I want to lift the veil that conceals the evil. Expose them on the steps of the temple. Truly, all those responsible. The pork-barrel trad-pols. The air-conditioned Forbes Park aristocracy. The aspirational kleptocrats who forget their origins. The bishopricks and their canting church.” (5)

This obviously connects *The Bridges Ablaze* – and, by extension, *Ilustrado* – to an older literary tradition in Philippine writing of employing literature to advance political and social causes; furthermore, this casts Crispin as a modern-day iteration of the historic *ilustrados* for undertaking this mission of reform through writing. However, the realisation that the novel begins with a fictional epigraph inspires suspicion. What does intertextual meaning built on metafictional references imply? Whatever answers there might be, we are quickly encouraged to recognise that the very act of writing is a central motif in the book called *Ilustrado*. In other words, *Ilustrado* is a self-conscious text.

However, the expectation that it will be a ‘social’ book like its thematic predecessors is subverted when *The Bridges Ablaze* fails to materialise.³⁸ Thus the apparent plot is triggered – Miguel, the protagonist and narrator, travels back to the Philippines in search of the missing manuscript. He does not believe that it had been destroyed or that it had never existed:

I was unconvinced. No one knew what I knew. His great comeback was scuppered; the masterpiece that would return him to the pantheon was bafflingly misplaced and the dead weight of controversy buried in his casket. The only remaining certainty was the ritual

³⁸ The epigraph becomes a red herring on hindsight – if the manuscript was truly destroyed or remained missing, how did ‘Miguel’ manage to quote a part of it?

clutter inherited by those left behind – files to be boxed, boxes to be filled, a life’s worth of stuff not intended as rubbish to be thrown out for Monday morning pickup. I just about ransacked his apartment searching for the manuscript of *The Bridges Ablaze*. I knew it was real. I had witnessed him typing away at it at his desk. He had spoken of it, puckishly, on many occasions. (5)

At the same time, Miguel makes it his mission to write a biography about Crispin, using the Philippine sojourn to gather information and interview Crispin’s family members and the writers and critics who knew him. How we encounter this information is how Miguel first encounters it – as newspaper articles,³⁹ blog entries, chat forum posts (reproduced with Internet ‘lingo’, the grammatical errors of colloquial speech, and spam), old literary journal interviews,⁴⁰ and transcripts of speeches he gave at literary award ceremonies. The bricolage of these quoted sources form the texture of the fictional reality in *Ilustrado*; we learn that Crispin is no longer held in esteem in Filipino society – a fallen *ilustrado*? – and the publication of *The Bridges Ablaze* was meant to let him reclaim his place at the ‘table’.

The following excerpt characterises the literary community’s attitudes towards him:

“Literature,” Crispin declared during his acceptance of “the Dingdong Changco, Sr., Memorial National Literary Lifetime Recognition Prize, or, as it is widely known, the DCSMNLLR Prize”⁴¹ in February 2001, the year before he died, “is an ethical leap. It is a moral decision. A perilous exercise in constant failure. Literature should have grievances, because there are so many grievances in the world. Let us speak frankly,

³⁹ From ‘real’ publications such as *The Guardian*, *Le Monde*, *The New York Times*, and *The Manila Times* to fictional ones (*The Philippine Sun*, *The Philippine Gazette*).

⁴⁰ Again, there is an assertion of a fictional entry in a ‘real’ publication – in this case, *The Paris Review*.

⁴¹ Miguel tells us, in parenthesis, that “the DCSMNLLR Prize is historically given to writers at the end of their careers” (15). The prize is also a gold medal that is, in actuality, “an ornately filigreed circle made of sterling silver” – perhaps an accurate reflection of what receiving the prize symbolises (15). However, this DCSMNLLR Prize does not actually exist.

because we're all peers here. Your grievances with me are because you say I have failed. Though I only failed because I extended myself further than what any of you have ever attempted." The boos and jeers came suddenly, then peaked savagely, as at a crucifixion.⁴² "I accept this award," Salvador continued, shouting to be heard, "ahead of what I will achieve. Next year, I will publish my long-awaited book. Then you will see the truth of our shared guilt." The boos and jeers turned into laughter. "History is changed by martyrs who tell the tru—" ⁴³ The microphone was disconnected. (15)

While this and other metafictional references demonstrate Crispin's fall from amongst the Filipino elite, they also highlight the position he once occupied in the pantheon of Philippine writers in the post-Marcos years.⁴⁴ In other words, what makes him a modern-day *ilustrado* is his crusade to expose and bring to justice what he saw as social ills.⁴⁵ We are told that he wrote prolifically – Miguel quotes several of his texts throughout *Ilustrado* – and in a variety of genres, from poetry and novels to essays, crime fiction, travel guides, newspaper columns, and historical surveys (10-11).

Furthermore, he wrote in English and occupied privileged positions as the son of a wealthy *mestizo* family and as a professor in an Ivy League university. These aspects of him resemble the intersections the original nineteenth-century *ilustrados* occupied, fluent as they were in imperial vernaculars and brought up in affluent and cosmopolitan settings. The following passage illustrates the ways that Crispin seems to be an anachronistic but 'typical' *ilustrado*,

⁴² Crispin sees himself as a Christ-like 'savior' of sorts, even likening the scars on his hands to stigmata (Syjuco 50).

⁴³ Presumably: "History is changed by martyrs who tell the truth." This incomplete sentence is a succinct description of the *ilustrado*'s role in Philippine history (José Rizal, for example, was martyred) and also revealing of Crispin's self-ideations. That his declaration was cut off is very telling of how he is perceived – especially since it is by the 'masses' he is meant to do service to instead of an unjust, colonial-like power.

⁴⁴ Significant era for experimental and postmodernist writing in the anglophone fiction of the Philippines.

⁴⁵ Another translation of Rizal's *Noli Me Tángere*, which is a seminal text of the literary heritage Crispin is explicitly engaging with, is "The Social Cancer".

while also underscoring engagements with the fictional autobiography genre:

His autobiography[, titled *Autoplagiarist*,]⁴⁶ read so much like a who's who of artistic and political icons that readers wondered whether it was fiction. "I've lived nearly all my nine lives," Salvador wrote. His work borrowed liberally from and embellished each of those lives: his upbringing as the son of a sugar plantation owner, the sentimental education in Europe, Mediterranean evenings spent womanising with Porfirio Rubirosa⁴⁷ or drinking zivania with Lawrence Durrell,⁴⁸ the meteoric fame from his scoops as a cub reporter, training with communist guerrillas in the jungles of Luzon, the argument with the Marcoses during dinner at Malacañang Palace.⁴⁹ The group of influential artists Salvador co-founded, the Cinco Bravos, dominated the Philippine arts scene for years. Yet it was the internecine intensities of the local literati that gossiped Salvador's life into chimerical proportions. Among the stories: he gave Marcel Avellaneda⁵⁰ that scar on his face during a duel with butterfly knives; he drunkenly, though surreptitiously, vomited in the seafood chowder bowl at a George Plimpton⁵¹ garden party in East Hampton; he danced a naked moonlit tango at Yaddo,⁵² with, depending on who was telling the story, Germaine Greer,⁵³ Virgie Moreno,⁵⁴ or a dressmaker's dummy on casters; Salvador was even said to have insulted conductor Georg Solti⁵⁵ after a performance at the Palais

⁴⁶ 'Published' in 1994.

⁴⁷ Dominican diplomat known for being a playboy who died in 1965.

⁴⁸ British writer who died in 1990.

⁴⁹ The official residence and workplace of Philippine presidents.

⁵⁰ As far as I can tell, this is a fictional critic – Syjuco has published an interview he 'gave' to Marcel Avellaneda on his personal website in which he talks about *Ilustrado*: <http://www.miguelsyjuco.com/Bios.html>.

⁵¹ American writer, literary editor, and actor who died in 2003.

⁵² An artists' community in Saratoga Springs, New York.

⁵³ A still-living Australian writer and public intellectual.

⁵⁴ A still-living Filipino poet.

⁵⁵ Hungarian conductor who died in 1997.

Garnier⁵⁶ (it's alleged he took the maestro's hand and chummily called him "a smidge off at the start of the second movement of Rach Two." Note: I've been unable to confirm that Solti ever conducted the Second Piano Concerto at the Garnier.) (7)

Indeed, *The Philippine Gazette* "argued that Salvador was not 'an authentic Filipino writer,' because he wrote mostly in English and was not 'browned by the same sun as the masses'" (Syjuco 4). Nonetheless, Crispin sought to be representative of everyday Filipinos' moral consciousness. The bricolage that details Crispin's life and writing characterises the climate of Filipino literature and society in the novel, while once again underscoring the reformatory and redemptive possibilities that literature in the Philippines symbolises.

4. Miguel Syjuco: diegetic levels 'lived'

The passage that I've reproduced here is also remarkable for its 'journalistic' quality, drawing attention to that same aspect in the quotations that make up *Ilustrado*'s bricolage. Despite Miguel's personal relationship with Crispin, he offers 'objective' points of view by quoting sources that both revere and disparage him; by allowing readers to see him in different lights, Crispin is 'bodied forth' even though he is dead and physically absent from the present time of the narrative. In other words, the intertextuality makes him that much more real; one might even say that it reanimates him. At the same time, the bombardment of specific detail speaks of a rigorous effort to corroborate Crispin's existence with external reality, and Miguel's personal remarks that he has made efforts to factcheck (for example: "Note: I've been unable to confirm that Solti ever conducted the Second Piano Concerto at the Garnier") only heighten this. These intertextual (and metafictional) details seem to accomplish two things on an immediate

⁵⁶ The famous Parisian opera house.

level – one is that it mythologises Crispin, to, indeed, “chimerical proportions” (7; Wesling 13), and the second is that fiction and reality become impossible to neatly separate in *Ilustrado*. As we progress in the narrative, these threads become even more difficult to untangle.

While Crispin is modelled after the historic image of the *ilustrado*, he is consciously chasing its significations – he sees himself as one of the ‘enlightened’, and his project of sharing his special knowledge with his community is intertwined with his desires to regain the respect and authority that he used to have. Miguel performs a similar chase – in part a literal one, as he travels around Manila and outside of it to piece together Crispin’s life for the biography he is working on while looking for clues that would help him locate the missing manuscript, *The Bridges Ablaze*. Through his writing, Miguel seeks to apprehend an image of Crispin Salvador, a version of him that he respects and believes to be more authentic than what his critics see refracted through their worldviews (Syjuco 16, 23). His project also conflates the social with the personal – he discloses that he began Crispin’s biography because he believed that “the long hours in the library, the idea that his life could help him with his, somehow kept him sane” (18). Ultimately, however, his effort to write the biography is itself an echo of Crispin’s own aborted or inchoate attempt to reinstate himself amongst the Filipino literary elite. Miguel’s intertextual bricolage is also a reverberation of Crispin’s technical expertise, apparently: what Crispin’s critics considered his finest work, *Dahil Sa ‘Yo*⁵⁷, “an epic account of the Marcos dictatorship that included a pointed indictment of the opportunistic cronies responsible for the couple’s rise and fall”, “re-created the tumultuous era through a mixture of press clippings, radio and TV transcripts, allegories, myths, letters, and vignettes from the various points of view of characters, factual and fictional, intended to represent Filipinos from all walks of life” (10-11). The title of

⁵⁷ Tagalog for “because of you.” ‘Published’ in 1987 and banned in the Philippines after only 928 copies were sold (Syjuco 10-11).

the biography-in-progress, *Eight Lives Lived*, is also a simultaneous reference and tribute to Crispin's life and works – he wrote in his own autobiography (memoir at the time): “I’ve lived nearly all my nine lives” (7). Delving deeper into *Ilustrado*, it becomes apparent that these epistemological and technical overlaps are not mere products of a young man’s admiration for his late mentor. They are more matters to distrust, though this is a realisation that only truly comes to the fore at the end.

The prologue ends with a self-conscious signature that throws the status of the book into chaos:

If our greatest fear is to sink away alone and unremembered, the brutality that time will inflict upon each of us will always run stronger than any river’s murky waves.⁵⁸ This book therefore shoulders the weighty onus of relocating a man’s lost life and explores the possible temptations that death will always present. The facts, shattered, are gathered, for your deliberation, like a broken mirror whose final piece has been forced into place.

–Miguel Syjuco, en route to Manila, December 1, 2002 (16)

These words provoke readers into asking themselves if *Ilustrado* is a work of non-fiction or fiction. Furthermore, what is this even a prologue to – *Ilustrado*, truly, or *Eight Lives Lived*? As we encounter more chapters it becomes unmistakable that there are at least two different narratives being advanced in the space of the book. We are treated to excerpts of the biography-in-progress, for one, leading us to believe that *Ilustrado* is a story about the writing of that text. The details deepen and also become more layered – in addition to more excerpts from Crispin’s published work and other sources about him, Miguel discloses his own personal history, details that have nothing to do with Crispin, and jokes that only other Filipinos would understand. We

learn that Miguel had lost his parents at a young age, and that he and his siblings subsequently moved to Canada to be raised by their grandparents, who had migrated there from the Philippines years ago. Miguel's grandfather was a politician who decided to return to his home country after Marcos fell, and the relationship between Miguel and his grandfather is tense. We discover that Miguel had been seeing a woman named Madison in New York, and his relationship was on the verge of disintegrating around the time of Crispin's death.

Clarity remains elusive, however, because even within what we assume to be *Ilustrado* the narrative perspectives constantly shift. At several points, we visit the same events and experiences twice, told in first-person and third-person perspectives. For example, Miguel's flight to Manila is first described in an omniscient third-person narrative voice (20). Later, these moments are revisited, with the same narrative access to Miguel's thoughts and feelings (21-25).

Even within these first-person accounts, however, there are lies – or embellishments. As the plane approaches Manila, Miguel's seatmate talks to him and shows him a wad of US dollars that he worked abroad to earn for his family (41). He accidentally drops the bills and as Miguel helps him pick them up he notices that they “smell like sweaty hands and baking bread. I feel unspeakably happy for him. And guilty for having resented him. And sad that I've come home with less definitive intentions” (41). Mere pages later Miguel admits:

The part about my seatmate in the plane and his wad of falling money didn't happen exactly as I recounted. That last bit about his coming home for his children, that wasn't accurate either. If I had spoken to him, I reckon that's what he'd have said. In a way, I wrote that part for him. He became more than the guy beside me with annoying manners. What I said to him that he said to me, I could see that in him. But no, I didn't talk to him. When he tried to strike up a conversation, I closed my eyes and pretended to be

dreaming.

From this point on, I should promise to tell the truth. (47)

5. Miguel and Crispin: versions of truth and fetishised nostalgia

Why is Miguel encouraging us to be suspicious of him? Or, put another way, why is the narrator telling us that he is unreliable? Which of the many things he has shared are lies? Since the beginning, *Ilustrado* has made explicitly postmodernist gestures, deploying, amongst these, the tactics of pastiche, bricolage, metafiction, and self-reflexivity. By keeping the boundary between fiction and reality ambiguous, the novel engages with the form and heritage of the fictional autobiography, the second target of Syjuco's parody. What qualifies it as a target, however, is the *ilustrado* being depicted utilising the history and ontology of the fictional autobiography. Even though there is a clear attempt to speak of the 'social' through the literary, Crispin dies without reaching martyrhood; arguably, he is more interested in personal gains than the good he could accomplish for society by regaining his old status. As Crispin's proxy, Miguel 'fails' as well: as this passage makes apparent, Miguel's quest for truth is an ironic one; he is interested only in partial truths, or aestheticised truths, and in moments where he could give voice to 'the common Filipino' he chooses instead to erase them.

Miguel seems to attribute his disinterest in his fellow Filipinos⁶¹ to the fraught relationship between him and his grandparents when it comes to his writing – they disapprove of

⁶¹ He is conscious of the ways he is and isn't like other members of the Filipino diaspora, holding himself at a distance from them while also expressing a contradictory desire to get closer. We get a clear sense of this on Miguel's flight to Manila:

A stewardess is speaking Tagalog to an elderly fellow, a man the age of my own grandfather, telling him all the places she's been to. He nods at each, as if he's been there, too. Maybe these people are coming home to make a difference. Maybe I can be like them.

My seatmates glance at me as if I were a foreigner. I save my Tagalog words for the proper time, to surprise them with what we share. (24)

the way he depicts Filipino society in his writing, and accuse him of saying “things that are not yours to say” (38-39). His grandparents’ disapproval exposes the reasons why Miguel gravitates towards someone like Crispin, but it is also significant because they are politicians who once opposed the Marcos regime – and are therefore partially representative of the ‘establishment’, or the very people that Miguel would like to ‘reach’. However, they view him as a fraud because they know the truth of his upbringing: he is closer to ‘the elite’ than he is to the common folk he wishes to represent in his writing (38-40). The same can be said of Crispin, but he seems to have moved past these dissonances to achieve complete confidence in his rightful place in the world, culminating, it seems, with *The Bridges Ablaze*.

Throwing doubt into Miguel’s ability to ‘be’ a writer – specifically, a Filipino writer – and narrator while also drawing attention to his similarities to Crispin reveals another commonality between them: living in the present is not desirable; even expressing the realities of the present moment seems difficult, if not impossible. This is why Miguel chooses to “[pretend] to be dreaming” and “reckon that’s what [the people around him would] have said” instead of apprehending and conveying the truth (47). It is also why Crispin is set on restoring himself to his former glory – and only through the old image of the *ilustrado*. With his life falling apart around him, Miguel’s quest to write *Eight Lives Lived* and find *The Bridges Ablaze* is also a manifestation of his desire to travel back into the past – a past where Crispin is still alive, and where the pursuit of static knowledge might grant him some control over the time and reality of his undesirable present.⁶² In other words, the only thing that Miguel and Crispin are interested in is nostalgia.

This obsession with nostalgia becomes problematic and even dangerous when we get to

⁶² “At six months, I began Crispin’s biography ... the idea that his life could help me with mine, somehow kept me sane” (18).

the end of the novel and learn that it was not Crispin who died but Miguel, not in the wintry cold of the Hudson but in the “brackish overrun of the Pasig River”⁶³ in Manila, and that the true narrator of the book had been Crispin all along. The revelation begins with the moment of Miguel’s apparent death – Manila floods, he tries to save a couple of stranded children on the street, and he is swept away and drowns (279-281). The moment before his “whole body plunges into empty darkness” is the last we get of Miguel’s first-person narration (281). Afterwards, there is the now-expected shift in perspective – but what is new is that the narrator seems to have changed altogether. Playing off Miguel’s last words of “empty darkness”, the ‘new’ narrator begins with: “In the dark emptiness, the light is a rectangle like the corona of an eclipse”; this, coupled with mentions of wetness and rivers, we are led to believe that Miguel has been saved, pulled out of the Pasig River and to a new location (283). But what the narrator utters next shatters the expectation that this is a ‘continuation’ of Miguel’s fate, because as self-reflexive as *Ilustrado* is we assume that it is Miguel who makes these writerly gestures:

I call to him from inside, “There you are, my protagonist.”

He steps gingerly on the sandy floor. I sit in a circle of brightness at my desk. “A dream is a palimpsest,” I say. My typewriter steams before me, the fingertips of my right hand embraced by the keys. My other hand I hold out to him. A bloody hole through the palm where a scar once was. I tell him one of our jokes. “Why can’t Jesus eat M&Ms?” The young man shakes his head. I reply, “Because the M&Ms keep falling through the holes.” (283)

There are things that identify the speaker as Crispin – the stigmata-like wound on his hand (50), a joke that belongs to ‘them’. Considering the significance of Crispin and Miguel’s

⁶³ A river running through the heart of Manila, infamous for its pollution and stench.

shared humour, telling a joke is akin to reaching a common understanding. Throughout the text, humour is prevalent – the different narratives and textual worlds being advanced are regularly interspersed with jokes about Filipino culture, the kind which only those acquainted with the stereotypes and self-deprecating narratives Filipinos tell themselves will understand (35). One of the more accessible examples of this comes from a note that Crispin and Miguel apparently exchanged:

Three male students loiter around Shoe Mart Megamall ... One is from the exclusive Ateneo de Manila University. One is from the rival De La Salle University. The third, named Erning Isip, is from the populist AMA Computer College. The three students spot a very pretty light-skinned girl. Each of the boys takes a turn at trying to woo her. The Atenevista says: “Why, hello there. Perhaps I should text my driver to bring my BMW around to chauffeur us to the Polo Club so we can get some gindara?” The Lasallista says: “Wow, you’re so talagang pretty, as in totally ganda gorgeous. Are you hungry at all? Let’s ride my CRV and I’ll make libre fried chicken skin and Cuba libres at Dencio’s bar and grill.”⁶⁴ Erning Isip, the AMA Computer College student, timidly approaches the girl. Scratching the back of his head, he says: “Miss, please miss, give me autograph?” (36)

The jokes the two of them came up with, we are told, are an extension of Crispin’s obsession “with our oral traditions and [he was] doubly infatuated with translating humour into English.” He called jokes “our true shared history” and that “without them, we wouldn’t understand ourselves” (35-36). These words portend the importance of humour in the novel – jokes allow Miguel and Crispin to reach common insights, and jokes are also what fosters a sense of Filipino

⁶⁴ He is speaking in “Taglish”, a colloquial amalgamation of Tagalog and English. Speaking this way is often attributed to members of the upper middle class, who are often ridiculed for it.

identity. Humour facilitates the recognition integral to parody.

However, the fact that Miguel does not remember the punchline and that Crispin had to finish the joke himself undermines the “shared history” and understanding between them (35). The reason why soon becomes apparent with the repetition of scenes, phrases, and actions that readers first encountered with Miguel in the book’s expository chapters.

My suitcase set down in the hallway, that anonymous morning in February, I leafed through the stack of mail that had arrived during my absence. This particular letter was thin, without a stamp ... Its contents were so striking, I could do nothing but stare at my image in the hall mirror. Such news always reflects our own mortality.

I had seen, you see, something of myself in him. Beyond our coming from the same place and our complicit understanding of what it’s like to be away from it. The news of his death – a drowning – convinced me I had known him better than I did. ... The fact is, I didn’t know him as well as I should. Only from our classes, a few consultations in my office, and the profile he said he wished to write. On two occasions we had stilted conversations over cheeseburgers. That was all. ... So I was surprised that letter had affected me so deeply. The simplicity of random accidents is often too painful to hear, and I began to wonder what had happened. (301)

The true nature of the relationship between Crispin and Miguel comes to the fore, along with the revelation that the whole text – and the texts within it – had been the product of Crispin’s imagination. Like how ‘Miguel’ had thought that writing Crispin’s biography would “somehow keep [him] sane” (18), Crispin believed that fictionalising Miguel’s life would help him “make sense of what was happening to [him]” (302). One more truth that pierces the layers between the metafiction and fictional reality within the world of *Ilustrado* is Crispin’s decline: he

still dreams of a “masterpiece”, his “great return”, his “honest song for [his] homeland” (302). ‘Living’ through Miguel is for him a form of redemption, but whatever insight he may have reached is subverted as the book concludes with the beginning of his return⁶⁵ to the Philippines:

When you’re old and lost, is it really pathetic to search for connections to explain our choices to ourselves?

[...] When I finished writing, spent, after four seasons at the typewriter, I had knotted his being forever with mine. And with this fiction of possibilities, entwined with the possibilities of fiction, I’ve woven in my own unlived life.

[...] —Crispin Salvador, en route to Manila, December 1, 2002 (303)

Much can be made of this ending – if Miguel’s story had meant anything to Crispin, it is that homecoming only results in degeneration or death for the privileged kind of *balikbayan* both of them are. On the one hand, this signals the inevitable fate of the *ilustrado* – that ‘martyrdom’ is the logical and historical corollary of fighting for institutional reform in the Philippines. On the other hand, the self-reflexively cyclical nature of the text marks *Ilustrado* as – as Crispin put it – a “fiction of possibilities”. As we have seen, the intertextual and metafictional construction of *Ilustrado* continually destabilises narrative levels within the world of the text such that we are constantly travelling between different ontologies of prose and meaning. The currency of thought required to navigate and interpret quotations from a variety of genres – newspapers, interviews, blogs, novelistic fiction – also muddles the clarity of the ontological hierarchy as these genres straddle the categories of fiction and non-fiction. In sum, we can never be certain what is real and what is fictitious – and even what we had assumed to be the ‘truth’ of the fictional narrative is revealed to be yet another complex fiction. Yet it is these layers of clarity and deception that

⁶⁵ Another joke.

challenge death as that which “marks the limits of representation” (McHale 228). Both Miguel’s and Crispin’s stories continue after their deaths (‘real’ and ‘imagined’), and the fact that we can identify a pattern that informs or predicts what will happen to Crispin after we turn the last page complicates the very logic of fiction. McHale observes that the life of a character is often associated with discourse, and so “in some sense the logical consequence of equating life with discourse” is that “the end of discourse” is associated “with death” (228-229).

Contrary to McHale, these neat categories of meaning seem to be something that Syjuco rejects in *Ilustrado*; arguably, however, these entanglements can be attributed to the potent symbol and genre of the fictional autobiography with which he engages and ultimately satirises through his parody of the *ilustrado*. What all of these points of analysis indicate is the joke that Syjuco is trying to make – we rely too much on the past, fetishising nostalgia in the process. If it is only through the past that a nation or society can reach new understanding, *can* any new meaning even be created? *Ilustrado* as a postmodernist text demonstrates that the danger of fetishising nostalgia lies in what it does to reality and truth. Crispin’s pursuit of his former glory is akin to a pursuit of the historic image of the *ilustrado*; what he seeks to accomplish are the things that the *ilustrados* have historically symbolised. Earlier in this chapter, it was mentioned that the term *ilustrado* means “enlightened” in the English language. In a display of profound irony, the metafictional game Syjuco plays in his novel reveals the ways in which the process of enlightenment only serves to obfuscate truth.

6. The irony of enlightenment

In their seminal work of social criticism and philosophy, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, published in 1944 right before the end of World War II, Theodor W. Adorno and Max

Horkheimer describe enlightenment as a quest to “liberate men from fear and establish their sovereignty” (3). What they refer to as enlightenment is both the eighteenth-century Enlightenment movement as well as a process of cultural repetition that shapes economic and social realities. To them, “the [programme] of the enlightenment was the disenchantment of the world; the dissolution of myths and the substitution of knowledge for fancy” (3). This disenchantment – primarily with nature and myth⁶⁶ – laid the foundation for the technological rationale that gave rise to the culture industry. Since “[m]an imagines himself free from fear when there is no longer anything unknown”, science and technology came to be viewed as nature’s direct opposite (16). Elaborating on the key notions of liberation and sovereignty, Adorno and Horkheimer assert that the enlightenment process consists of repetition over reality: by establishing new cycles of narrative and meaning, men can continually ensure their freedom while commanding their own reality (12). Ironically, however, this means that enlightenment takes on the quality of myth – men continue to be trapped in myth even as they think they are setting themselves free. Mass communication and mass culture are therefore the embodiments of science and technology – by reproducing “only the lives of [the] faithful members” of society, reality is created and perpetuated through repetitions of standardisation and mass production (136, 150). The endpoint of enlightenment is “mass deception” – the freedom that enlightenment grants is only “freedom to choose what is always the same” (167); individual consciousness is lost along with, finally, criticality. Although Adorno and Horkheimer were critiquing how mass communication technology was instrumental to the fascist propaganda that allowed the Nazis to rise to power in Germany, we can see that Crispin in *Ilustrado* employs the same culture industry

⁶⁶ Mythic narratives that fulfilled didactic functions in place of ‘rational’ knowledge, such as that of the Olympic deities and Homer’s *The Odyssey*. Prior to the “scientific calculation of occurrence”, nature was explained by myths: “Myth intended report, naming, the narration of the Beginning; but also presentation, confirmation, explanation. ... Narrative became didactic at an early stage” (8).

tactics to monopolise truths in order to stay relevant in a present that no longer values him.

In light of Adorno and Horkheimer's ideas, Crispin's quest to salvage his declining status as an important writer in the Philippines takes on a sinister quality. His hiding behind the persona of the narrator "Miguel Syjuco"⁶⁷ and the repetitive shifts in narrative perspective are now merely disguises; they permit Crispin to wear what Adorno and Horkheimer call the illusory authority of the radio – the danger in 'listening' is that the singular voice becomes omnipresent, and its recommendations become orders (159). Similarly, the bricolage of quotations now performs functions beyond texturing reality and blending internal and external references. By attempting to give a comprehensive picture of the 'objective' reality in which Miguel and Crispin exist, these intertextual references present readers with the freedom to choose what, and whom, to believe. But this is a freedom that is ultimately illusory as well: "Something is provided for all so that none may escape" (Adorno and Horkheimer 123). Thus Syjuco creates an ideological trap through the techniques of metafiction and intertextuality. While we may not have known we were being deceived as we read *Ilustrado*, the ending casts us as 'victims' of Crispin's machinations, along with Miguel, his critics, and the other characters that are ciphers for the Filipino public. Similarly, the enlightened man knows he is being deceived, but is resigned to the dominant social order: he chooses to remain in thrall to the culture industry because to choose otherwise is to lose completely the delusions of sovereignty and escape from fear that enlightenment promised (Adorno and Horkheimer 167). The narrative compels us to choose as well – to believe in Crispin and the remainder of his potential, or to reject the validity of the fiction, knowing that to reject his "unlived life" is akin to acknowledging that the liberating and redemptive promises of the *ilustrado* and fictional autobiography have now been lost?

⁶⁷ It can also be argued that for *Ilustrado* to be considered a parody, Crispin needed something to 'hide' behind to give the text necessary critical distance (Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* 18).

The importance ascribed to salvaging and repeating the past while legitimising nostalgia also illustrates the extent to which nostalgia has been commodified. The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai asserts, as Jameson does, that reality is shaped by the global cultural economy, where domestic identities often fall below “global cultural processes” in national agendas (31). This translates to complications in the Philippines’ “politics of memory” (30) – we have entered a ‘postnostalgic’ phase in which the past is no longer simply “another country” and Western cultural centres, which have for so long been held up as the ‘endpoint’ of modernity and development,⁶⁸ are now but “one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes” (31). These imaginary landscapes shift contemporary conceptions of nostalgia as they signify, firstly, an erasure of national borders. Countries now share a “synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios ... to which recourse can be taken as appropriate, depending on the movie to be made, the scene to be enacted, the hostages to be rescued” (30). Secondly, this means that social imagination as a whole, regardless of country, is manufactured around “reruns” – nostalgic desire has been commodified to the point that aesthetics of the past are the only cultural offerings left for consumers to choose, aesthetics which largely tend to be Western in origin (30, 35). Especially considering the omnipresence of media and mass communication technologies in everyday life further blurring the “lines between ... realistic and fictional landscapes” (25), nostalgia has become fetishised as the building blocks of reality. The world of *Ilustrado* is certainly a postnostalgic one in which Crispin’s explicit desire to return to the past is entangled with the reproduction of the identity and symbol of the *ilustrado*.

⁶⁸ We must recall that the *ilustrados* were in many ways imperial by-products.

7. Simulacra and the limits of nostalgia

However, *Ilustrado* deviates from Appadurai's vision of the postnostalgic since its representations are not "nostalgia without memory" (Appadurai 30). As the 'lived' experience of reading Syjuco's novel that I have tried to reproduce in this chapter shows, the symbols of the *ilustrado* and the fictional autobiography are not reduced to scenarios in a cultural warehouse. Their political and historical aspects continue to be emphasised⁶⁹ through Crispin's and Miguel's quests, as well as through the promise of *The Bridges Ablaze*, although it remains unfulfilled by the end of the text. The reliance on nostalgia to create direction and meaning instead emphasises the unsuitability of using narratives of the past to construct meaning in the present. In other words, Syjuco imitates the *ilustrado* and the fictional autobiography in order to demonstrate that the legacies they enjoy in Philippine society cannot continue to go unchallenged. We see this in his modern-day *ilustrado* corrupting the space of the fictional autobiography. Where the 'originals' conflated the personal with the collective in order to expose the ills of society, Crispin hijacks the relationship between the social and the literary in Filipino history and culture only to reveal the tyranny with which he manipulates the truth. In doing so, the *ilustrado* ironically transforms the fictional autobiography from a site of enlightenment into a realm of mass deception.

The other insight that Syjuco's parody of these two institutional narratives yields is that the sole vision of the contemporary lies in the past. In other words, present reality is a simulacrum of pre-existing images and symbolisms – or, in Appadurai's words, "reruns". While I have briefly discussed why this might be problematic, paying close attention to how Syjuco constructs *Ilustrado* also emphasises the hyperreality of the postmodern – or in Southeast Asia's

⁶⁹ Another challenge to Jameson's assertion that the 'new' history of "aesthetic styles" displaces 'real' history (20).

case, contemporary⁷⁰ – world. The self-reflexive techniques create constant spillovers between fiction and reality; as a result, the critique present in the text does not refer to only the world within *Ilustrado* but also to the external planes of reality to which it refers. For Jameson, this is part and parcel of the postmodern condition, with which Adorno, Horkheimer, and Appadurai resonate critically: “If there is any realism left here it is a ‘realism’ that is meant to derive from the shock of grasping that confinement and slowly becoming aware of a new and original historical situation in which we are condemned to seek History by way of our pop images and simulacra of that history, which itself remains forever out of reach” (Jameson 25). Furthermore, Jameson argues that the “peculiar function” of the simulacrum lies in “the derealisation of the whole surrounding world of everyday reality” (34). This is analogous to what Crispin accomplishes in *Ilustrado*, from the false reality he creates for readers to the culture industry tactics he employs to do so. By making us confront the simulacrum, Syjuco encourages us to question the importance of the narratives that construct reality.

While postmodernist fiction “may be antirealistic ... antirealism is not its sole object of representation. Indeed, two of the favoured themes to which it returns obsessively are about as deeply coloured with ‘traditional’ literary values as anyone could wish. What could be more traditional than love and death?” (McHale 222). As themes and character impulses, both love and death power the heartbeat of Syjuco’s text. Aside from the epistemological investigation into Crispin’s death and Crispin’s ontological experiment with Miguel’s own death, love for family and country are central sources of tension in *Ilustrado* that also facilitate the formation of an imagined community that encompasses author, characters, and (Filipino) readers. McHale explains that this is because love “as a principle of fiction” involves violations of ontological

⁷⁰ While postmodernism as a datable time period began in the mid- to late-twentieth century, I argue that Southeast Asia only became “postmodern” recently; contemporary fiction apprehends this still-present postmodern reality.

hierarchies: the text which “seduces its reader reaches across an ontological divide to become a force to reckon with in the reader’s real world” (223, 222). Similarly, “love as a metaleptic relation across ontological boundaries is evoked ... whenever characters change ontological levels, or show an awareness of the ontological hierarchy, or even when ... they are made to confront the boundaries between worlds” (223). Love, in Syjuco’s hands, is another strategy of postmodernist fiction that enhances his metafictional game of deception and realisation. *Ilustrado* is a novel that does not propose solutions for the ills of Philippine society as much as it is a lucid dream – what McHale calls “being aware that you are dreaming in the midst of a dream itself, *while* you are dreaming it” (221). Syjuco traps readers: we all become complicit in the reproduction of nostalgia – “older realities” (Jameson 46) – to make sense of present reality (Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* 92). In other words, *Ilustrado* partakes in the logic of the simulacrum, which, according to Jameson, does more than “merely replicate the logic of late capitalism: it reinforces and intensifies it” (46).

This is perhaps the reason why *Ilustrado* is comprehensively and masterfully a parody: it fulfills the function of complicitous critique at every level of its construction (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 13). The simulacra, in particular, signals the strength of parody to be “more synthetic than analytic” in its criticism, permitting parody to reach its “more serious function ... to allow for a wider pragmatic range besides ridicule” (*A Theory of Parody* 51). Even the realisation that we had been deceived by Crispin all along comprises a “participatory hermeneutic activity”, which, Hutcheon reasons, is an essential part of parody accomplishable through a variety of tactics that include aggression and seduction (92). Part of Syjuco’s game, however, is that “being made to feel that we are actively participating in the generation of meaning is no guarantee of freedom”; as the analysis of ‘Crispin’s’ narrative reveals,

“manipulators who make us feel in control are no less present for their careful concealment” (92).

What does this bode for the meaning that *Ilustrado* ultimately presents, especially considering its political status as a work of Filipino literature and a contemporary Southeast Asian novel? The metafictional game it plays seems to transfer the ‘responsibility’ of problem-solving to us, the readers, who have by turns been deceived and enlightened. It seems that the text is compelling us to make a choice by exposing the importance we ascribe to the past while simultaneously showing how our only vision of the contemporary is couched in nostalgia. If history is truly the only way to make sense of the present, as inadequate or prone to corruption as it is, then perhaps reality is no less real than the simulacra – and Crispin’s lies are no less ‘true’ than any other kind of fiction. It seems that in the end, the big joke that lets us understand ourselves is this: since the narratives we lean on to build our lives and places in society are themselves fictions, freedom lies in the knowledge that we, too, can be gloriously and monstrously fictitious.

CHAPTER THREE: *Beauty Is a Wound* by Eka Kurniawan

“In postmodernist revisionist historical fiction, history and fiction exchange places, history becoming fictional and fiction becoming ‘true’ history – and the real world seems to get lost in the shuffle. But of course this is precisely the question postmodernist fiction is designed to raise: real, compared to what?”

—Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*, 1987

Eka Kurniawan’s novel *Beauty Is a Wound* was originally published in Bahasa Indonesia in 2002 as *Cantik Itu Luka* to very little fanfare – and even disappointment. Many Indonesian critics, Kurniawan shared during a 2015 interview with *The New Yorker*, “didn’t know if it was an absurd work, realism – they could not name it. They thought maybe it was just a failed novel” (Terzis). *Beauty Is a Wound* enjoyed success only when the American writer and translator Annie Tucker discovered it in a bookshop and decided to translate it.⁷¹ The English version circulated out into the world in 2015, catapulting its author to global fame in the aftermath of critical reception. Given the “paucity of well-known Indonesian literary voices”, Kurniawan has been hailed as the next Pramoedya Ananta Toer, the pre-eminent voice of post-independence Indonesian writing (Terzis). However, unlike Pramoedya,⁷² Kurniawan steers clear of social realism and political stances in his work in favour of “a knowing ambivalence” (Terzis): *Beauty Is a Wound* covers an astonishing swath of modern Indonesian history, from Dutch colonialism to the communist purges of the 1960s, without favouring or valorising one form of governance

⁷¹ Kurniawan believes that Tucker managed to capture his dark humour: “for the most part I think Annie did a great job of ‘creating’ my novel in English” (Q&A).

⁷² “Though he considers Pramoedya an influence, and a master of the historical novel, he is quick to point out the radical differences in their approach to fiction: ‘I don’t think Pramoedya would write about an undead woman rising from underground,’ he said. ‘It’s not his style’” (Terzis).

over another. Moreover, Kurniawan eschews realism for elements of the fantastic, supernatural, folkloric, and grotesque. These are some reasons why his novel was not well-received on home ground – the “literature establishment” in Indonesia tends to take “a didactic approach” to books (Terzis). Moreover, the collective events and personal experiences that Kurniawan’s fictional characters undergo challenge the official version of history enforced by Suharto’s⁷³ New Order orthodoxy from 1966 onwards (Hoadley 1-2).

Although *Beauty Is a Wound* is about a mixed-race prostitute named Dewi Ayu, who dies “from the strength of [her] own will” at age fifty-two only to rise from the grave twenty-one years later to break a curse that has been placed on her family (451-452), it is also about twentieth-century Indonesia. It chronicles the revolving door of authorities that tussled for control during this period, with representative figures of each power faction reduced to men in thrall to their lust for Dewi Ayu and her beautiful daughters. The curse that is placed on Dewi Ayu and her children, and which propels the narrative events, is revealed to be history itself, turned into a literal spectre that haunts the present (442, 450-451). The violence which characterised the era also finds expression in the sexual and physical brutality inflicted upon Dewi Ayu, her daughters, and the other inhabitants of the coastal town of Halimunda, the novel’s fictional setting that is reminiscent of Márquez’s Macondo.⁷⁴ Within the seventy-three years that Kurniawan’s novel accounts for, Indonesia is accurately depicted as a political space that continually transforms, hosting Dutch colonialism, the Japanese Occupation of World War II, independence, and the communist purges of the sixties. For these reasons, even though ghosts

⁷³ The second president of Indonesia, whose name is sometimes spelled as “Soeharto”, held office from 1967 until 1998. He ousted the first president, Sukarno, in 1966. Suharto was a military leader who has often been dubbed a dictator.

⁷⁴ The fictional village in which Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a seminal novel of magical realism, is set. Kurniawan’s novel shares many similarities with Márquez’s – in addition to the use of magical realism, the story follows many generations of a family cursed with incest.

are commensurably real, a princess is impregnated by a dog, and people jump off hills and vanish, *Beauty Is a Wound* can be cast as a work of historical fiction as much as it is an achievement of magical realism. Moreover, it is historical fiction in two senses: Linda Hutcheon's and Brian McHale's.

The term that Hutcheon uses to describe works like Kurniawan's is historiographic metafiction, for there is an "opening up" of the genre and historiography to "material once excluded from the genre as impure ... in an attempt to comprehend and master it by means of some working (narrative/explanatory) model that, in fact, is precisely what grants a particular meaning to the past" (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 61). The "genre", in this case, might be the de facto version of history that is taught in Indonesian schools and left unquestioned in society (Hoadley 2). As a result, historiographic metafiction questions "whether the historian *discovers* or *invents* the totalising narrative form or model used", and throws suspicion upon historiography as "the objective and disinterested recording of the past" (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 61). With regards to McHale, *Beauty Is a Wound* falls into what he calls the category of postmodernist revisionist history because the "integration between the historical and the fantastic" is a strategy of postmodernist fiction (95). Even though the novel is a "flagrant violation of the realistic norms of historical fiction" (94), such strategies – as Hutcheon would agree – encourage us to question the validity of official records; postmodernist fiction "[fictionalises] history" to imply that history, too, "may be a form of fiction" (96).

This is one aspect of the joke that Kurniawan plays on history through his novel, but the most obvious is probably his treatment of beauty. In Halimunda, beauty is not a gift but a curse that drives men to madness and incites violence. As a side-effect of her sex work, Dewi Ayu

finds herself pregnant many times with no idea of who the fathers might be;⁷⁵ she gives birth to three girls, “all of them ... gorgeous, practically like triplets born one after another. She was bored with babies like that, who according to her were like mannequins in a storefront display” (6). When she becomes pregnant with her fourth child, she makes many attempts to abort it for reasons beyond ‘boredom’: possessing legendary beauty herself,⁷⁶ she believes that “[t]here’s no curse more terrible than to give birth to a pretty female in a world of men as nasty as dogs in heat” (5). So she swallows “extra-strength paracetamol pills ... washed ... down with half a litre of soda, which was almost enough to cause her own death but not quite, as it turned out, enough to kill that baby”; she calls “a midwife who was willing to kill the baby and take it out of her womb by inserting a small wooden stick into her belly”, and after experiencing heavy bleeding for two days and two nights “the small piece of wood came back out in splinters, but the baby kept growing” (6). The child survives six other abortion attempts and Dewi Ayu finally gives up and lets the child grow to term and be born. Instead of the exquisite loveliness that was expected, the baby, yet another girl, is born with ugliness of horrific proportions, “like the result of randomly breeding a monkey with a frog and a monitor lizard” (6). Ironically, Dewi Ayu names her Beauty.⁷⁷ Shortly after giving birth to Beauty, Dewi Ayu purchases a burial shroud, sprinkles the “corpse preserver” borax on herself (11), and sleeps until she dies. She remains buried in the village cemetery until “[o]ne afternoon on a weekend in March, [she] rose from her grave after being dead for twenty-one years” (1).

⁷⁵ “She had never thought of her three (and now four) children as a curse of prostitution, and if the girls didn’t have fathers, she said, that was because they really and truly didn’t have fathers, not because they didn’t know who their fathers were, and certainly not because she had never stood next to some guy in front of a village headman. She believed them instead to be the children of demons” (9).

⁷⁶ The novel attributes her beauty to her mixed race – she is of Dutch and indigenous Indonesian ancestry. Her grandmother, an Indonesian, was forced to become the concubine of a Dutch lord based in Halimunda during colonial times.

⁷⁷ The other women present at Beauty’s birth suggested naming her “Injury” or “Wound” (5).

Beauty as a kind of ‘wound’ is viewable as the ontological consequence in the world of the novel, considering the historical events and the amalgamation of storytelling genres that Kurniawan utilises to contest official history. At the end of the day, the women of Halimunda are not victims of only circumstance but also of the very logic of the fictional universe in which they exist. If Halimunda is a “[microcosm] of the ... macrocosm” that is twentieth-century Indonesia, then it posits violence itself to be an integral part of the fabric of Indonesian reality (McHale 95; Terzis). Arguably and by extension, the fictional characters in Halimunda must be ciphers for the real people who really enacted and suffered at the hands of history (McHale 95).

Of the various parodic strains present in *Beauty Is a Wound*, the ones I am interested in are those uniquely enabled by Kurniawan’s use of postmodernist narrative strategies. Before delving into what these tactics are and what they imply, it is necessary to first understand what the ‘official’ record this novel seems to be railing against is.

1. History according to New Order orthodoxy

Indonesia achieved independence from over a century of Dutch imperialism on 17 August 1945, shortly before the end of World War II and the dissolution of the Japanese Occupation of the Dutch East Indies. The first president of Indonesia, Sukarno, ruled with a policy of “collective deliberation” (Hoadley 103) meant to bring about “a compromise between three major currents within Indonesian society: nationalism, Islam, and communism” (1). In *Beauty Is a Wound*, these three currents are represented in the syncretic family that Dewi Ayu eventually finds herself with – three men each of whom subscribes strongly to one of these beliefs each marry her three eldest daughters. Shodancho is a rebel soldier who fights in a guerrilla war against the Japanese in the project for Indonesian nationalism. He later becomes a

military leader tasked with ridding Halimunda of communists. Maman Gendeng is a thug⁷⁸ who makes his way to Halimunda after hearing the legend of Princess Rengganis, a mythical woman of astounding beauty who married a dog and founded Halimunda. During the communist purges, Maman Gendeng takes refuge in a cave and meditates until he achieves “liberation and [leaves] this earth in *moksa*”, a level of enlightenment described in Hinduism and Buddhism (440-441). Although he is not Muslim, Maman Gendeng can be said to obliquely represent the ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ pillar in Sukarno’s policy. His link to the Hindu faith is also relevant because many Indonesian myths are rooted in Hindu lore – the Hindu epic of the Mahabharata, for example, persists in popular local imagination.⁷⁹ Finally, there is Comrade Kliwon, a handsome communist youth who inevitably clashes with his brother-in-law Shodancho, much to the anguish of their wives.

During the period of 1965-1966, political power was forcibly transferred to the military general Suharto, “effectively [reversing] President Sukarno’s policy”:

[A]s a result of the army’s ascendancy to supreme power the country’s political life was de-politicised and de-ideologised. The Communist Party was outlawed, Islamic parties restricted to religious and social activities, and the Nationalist Party marginalised. The army’s rise to power in 1965 was followed by [the] massacre of Communists and those thought to be sympathisers, a massacre claiming around 500,000 lives. Another 100,000 persons were interned for up to a decade, some for as long as 30 years without due process of law. Others were summarily executed. As late as the 1990s death sentences

⁷⁸ Maman Gendeng can also be said to represent the government’s historical practice of hiring thugs to coerce citizens; indeed, Shodancho and Maman Gendeng enter this kind of ‘friendship’ (Kurniawan, *Beauty* 265).

⁷⁹ The Indonesian writer Laksmi Pamuntjak explores the horrors and aftermath of the communist massacre and detentions without trial through the characters of the Mahabharata in her novel *The Question of Red* – particularly through the figure of Amba and her romantic ties with Bhisma and Salva.

were still being carried out. (Hoadley 1)

In her survey of social realist Indonesian literature written in the aftermath of Suharto's rise to power, Anna-Greta Nilsson Hoadley observes that the army's account of events became the basis for official national history, called the *Sejarah Nasional Indonesia* (National History of Indonesia) (2). This version, which is institutionalised and taught in schools across the country, consists of "blatant historical falsification and suppression of the facts"; most notably, this "politically correct orthodoxy has not been questioned by the country's historians or its political scientists nor has it been the subject of press debate" (2). One reason for this is the existence of a law preventing criticism of the government that has been inherited from Dutch colonial rule; freedom of speech is curtailed through the "threat of stringent punishments" (6). Communists released from detention without trial faced diminished rights upon re-entering society and their families also suffered from the stigma of associating with suspected communists (10-11). Coupled with the taboo nature ascribed to the subject of the massacre (2), two things begin to become clear: one is the reception to *Beauty Is a Wound* and the other is the role Indonesian literature began to play in the decades immediately after Suharto's rise to power.

Kurniawan once remarked that, even in the contemporary age, there is still the attitude amongst Indonesian readers that "it's all right for [Communist characters] to die. I wanted to write something in my novel where the Communist is a hero, but without glorification" (Terzis). Since historians and political scientists did not interrogate the veracity of the official record, Indonesian writers took up the cause even with the threat of the consequences:

It has not been generally recognised that there *have* been attempts to scrutinise the country's recent past. However it is not to Indonesia's historians or political scientists that we must look, but to writers of literary works. A surprising number of Indonesia's

most distinguished authors have written about the victims of the terror of 1965-66 in spite of the risks this has entailed for their own careers and even personal safety. They have not been content with merely describing the unpleasant facts but have also made a critical examination of the country's past and the outrages to which its citizens were subjected. As pointed out by Keith Foulcher, creative literature concerning the events of 1965 and its aftermath was virtually silent on the subject until the end of the 1970s. "In 1979, however, history began to resurface" and writers started to deal with and communicate issues of crucial social concern. A number of literary works characterised by realism and observations on society began to appear.⁸⁰ (Hoadley 2)

Literature published in 1979 and later became the site where other versions of historical truth emerged. Indonesian writing began to "deal with the disfunction of civil society, leading to among others political killings, disappearance of persons, cruel and inhuman treatment, arbitrary arrests and detention, as well as selective application of the state's obligation to protect its citizens" (19). Literature also addressed "the absence of basic civil liberties, the extremely limited possibilities for individuals to change their own government, and the lack of guarantees protecting property from arbitrary expropriation" (19). What makes these literary works all the more compelling is that they often identify with "victims of political terror" – "[t]hrough study of what the authors are saying, we are to some extent able to see how the events of 1965-66 are perceived by Indonesians themselves, their essence of reality" (5). These are the social realities that the official record of history deliberately keeps in the dark. Moreover, these issues are unresolved even today, and remain relatively unaddressed in arenas outside of the literary (5). The conclusion that Hoadley reaches in her survey is that literature *is* a negation of the official

⁸⁰ Hoadley examines the novels and poems of Ahmad Tohari, Ajip Rosidi, Ashadi Siregar, Nh. Dini, Pramoedya Ananta Toer, Putu Oka Sukanta, Umar Kayam, and Yudhistira A.N.M. Massardi.

view by exposing “the coercion and violence exercised by the state over its citizens which have been neglected or denied in the writing of the nation’s history” (121; 118). In the process, these literary works also raise questions about innocence and the ‘expiry date’ of historical accountability (5, 118).

This is the backdrop against which Kurniawan presents *Beauty Is a Wound*. What does it mean for him to partake in this political and literary heritage – while also veering away from the social realism that characterises it as a compelling challenge to state historiography? What special kind of criticism of the official record, or those who police what qualifies as historically ‘real’, does Kurniawan present by relying on the strategies of magical realism instead? For answers to these questions, we must turn, once more, to the narratological theories of McHale.

2. The ‘requirements’ of postmodernist revisionist history

In *Postmodernist Fiction*, McHale dedicates just one chapter to the ontology of historical fiction. However, the value he ascribes to it is clear: postmodernist revisionist history embodies the pulse of postmodernist fiction to ask “real, compared to what?” (96). He expounds this by first characterising ‘classic’ historical fiction, the rules of which postmodernist fiction tends to flout. Using the term “realemes”⁸¹ to describe historically verifiable “persons, events, specific objects, and so on”, McHale observes three constraints on the insertion of these realemes in “classic”⁸² historical fiction (87).

Firstly, historical realemes can only be introduced to the work of fiction “on condition that the properties and actions attributed to them in the text do not actually contradict the ‘official’ historical record” (87). This, of course, invites the question of which version of history

⁸¹ Originally coined by the Israeli academic Itamar Even-Zohar.

⁸² Nineteenth-century norms.

is or ought to be the ‘official’ one, but a simpler formulation of this constraint would be to relegate the “freedom to improvise actions and properties of historical figures” to the “‘dark areas’ of history, that is, to those aspects about which the ‘official’ record has nothing to report” (87). The second constraint has to do with contradictions of the ‘official’ historical record, or anachronisms. Any contradictions must “[extend] beyond specific *realemes* (persons, events) to the entire *system* of *realemes* that constitutes a historical culture. Just as historical figures may not behave in ways that contradict the ‘official’ record, so the entire material culture and *Weltanschauung*⁸³ of a period may not be at variance with what ‘official’ history tells us about this period” (87-88). The third and final constraint is that of realism: “the logic and physics of the fictional world must be compatible with those of reality if historical *realemes* are to be transferred from one realm to the other; otherwise, the text will be at radical variance with the norms of ‘classic’ historical fiction” (88). Historical fictions that are not *realistic* fictions are anomalies of the genre, falling into the categories of fantasy and the like instead (88). In sum, historical fiction traditionally tries to “[camouflage] the seam between historical reality and fiction” (90).

In contrast, postmodernist fiction tends to make this seam obvious. Postmodernist revisionist histories bring us outside the paradigm of the classic historical novel, and this is not necessarily problematic. Such ‘anomalies’ actually present valuable opportunities to re-verify the official record while also ‘completing’ it with the presentation of facts and events that the official record neglected. Among the ways that postmodernist fiction accomplishes these, there are three common but compelling strategies that McHale identifies: apocryphal history, creative anachronism, and historical fantasy. Writers of postmodernist revisionist histories use a

⁸³ A particular worldview or philosophy.

combination of two or all of these, in addition to others.

The first of these revisionist approaches, apocryphal⁸⁴ history, contradicts official history by either supplementing⁸⁵ or displacing the historical record (90).

In both cases, the effect is to juxtapose the officially-accepted version of what happened and the way things were, with another, often radically dissimilar version of the world.

The tension between these two versions induces a form of ontological flicker between the two worlds: one moment, the official version seems to be eclipsed by the apocryphal version; the next moment, it is the apocryphal version that seems mirage-like, the official version appearing solid, irrefutable. (90)

The immediate effect of this “ontological flicker” is doubt – in addition to throwing suspicion upon the legitimacy of the official record, apocryphal history makes us question what exactly ‘official’ history is the history of – and whose?

The second strategy, creative anachronism, necessitates a mismatch between past and present, manifesting in things such as attitudes, material culture, and knowledge in the fictional world. This tactic exposes that which classic historical fiction tries to disguise “by introducing pure fiction only in the ‘dark areas’ of the historical record; by avoiding anachronisms; by matching the ‘inner structure’ of its fictional worlds to that of the real world” (90). The examples that McHale gives to illustrate creative anachronism include the heroine of John Fowles’ *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, Sarah, who possesses the psychology of a modern, twentieth-century woman even though the novel is set in 1860s England (93). There is also a ‘prediction’ that one of the characters in Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo*, set in Prohibition-era America, makes: “Black American art of the ‘50s and 60s and 70s’ will surpass the Black achievements of

⁸⁴ Or “alternative” history.

⁸⁵ By “claiming to restore what has been lost or suppressed” (90).

the 1920s – a prophecy which by implication includes the Black American artist Ishmael Reed himself. In effect, Reed has enabled one of his characters to prophesy his own coming!” (94). The effects of creative anachronism are as varied as the contexts in which they could come into play. What they certainly do foreground, however, is the temporal distance between different ontological layers that implicate both the fictional world and the readerly reality.

The third and final technique of postmodernist revisionist history that McHale delineates is historical fantasy. Clearly, integrating history with elements of the fantastic is “a flagrant violation of the realistic norms of historical fiction”, perhaps much more explicitly so than the other two strategies that have been described (94). This is because combining history and fantasy intensifies the “ontological hesitation” that McHale earlier describes as the transgression of the “boundary between the real and the fiction or ... between an external and internal field of reference” that historical fiction commits (95, 90). Classic historical fiction tries to make this transgression “as discreet, as nearly unnoticeable as possible” while postmodernist fiction makes “the transition from one realm to the other as jarring as possible” (90). The ontological hesitation that occurs with historical fantasy is exacerbated because “the hesitation is not between the supernatural and the *realistic* but between the supernatural and the historically *real*” (95). This distinction is important because historical fantasy has the capacity to cast official history itself as a type of fiction. To illustrate what he means by this, McHale refers to Salman Rushdie’s work of magical realist historical fiction, *Midnight’s Children*, from which Kurniawan’s *Beauty Is a Wound* also takes cues by treating Halimunda as Indonesia in miniature:

Indian history since independence, according to this text, is supernaturally linked to the fates of the children born at the same time as the state itself, midnight on August 15, 1947. Supernatural beings ... their existence is a secret [and as] supernatural figures,

they are symptomatic of the intrinsically fantastic nature of Indian reality; but more than that, they, and especially their spokesman Saleem, are microcosms of the Indian macrocosm, paralleling or mirroring public history in their private histories. “We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention,” writes Jawaharlal Nehru to the infant Saleem; “it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own.” This is true not “in a sense”, but literally. Thus, for example, according to Rushdie’s secret history of supernatural India, the true motive behind Indira Gandhi’s declaration of the State of Emergency in 1976 was to flush out the midnight children and expunge their powers. This is Rushdie’s version of the world: Indian history as “a struggle of secret societies” – secret and supernatural at the same time. (95)

This opens Rushdie’s text and others like it to the moralising critique, however, that the falsification of history is a betrayal not only of official accounts but the collective suffering of the victims. McHale reminds us that the Emergency “was not a vendetta against fantastic beings, but a real threat to Indian democracy and a source of suffering for many individual Indians. To pretend otherwise is to lie” (95-96).

However, McHale also argues that fictionalising history draws attention to “the essential fictionality of public history” (96); similarly, the historian Hayden White believes that all historical records are narratives structured by cultural beliefs and voices of “knowers” (125, 119). What a culture or society accepts as an official record of history is based on recognition of “a ‘knower’, an account of the facts by one who ‘knows’ what the facts are, an account that is not ‘made’ (factum) or ‘feigned’ (fictum) but rather ‘found’ or ‘discovered’ in the facts themselves” (119). This process of legitimation also produces a corollary that continues to validate the quest of postmodernist revisionist history: since history *is* a form of narrative, it

“denotes something that is known or knowable, or that was once known and has been forgotten and therefore can be recalled to mind by the appropriate means of discourse” (White 119). Are these postmodernist strategies not “the appropriate means of discourse”? By playing with these ontological qualifications of truth, postmodernist fiction asserts itself as competition to official accounts of history as the vehicle of truth.

Beauty Is a Wound utilises the techniques of apocryphal history and historical fantasy in its narrative. The very use of a fictional setting – Halimunda – posits an alternative, or apocryphal, version of history. As a small, unknown Indonesian town, what happens in Halimunda can follow an established historical trajectory; but there is also room for pure fiction to ‘legitimately’ take place as events unique to Halimunda with which the larger establishment of official Indonesian history is understandably disinterested. In other words, the apocryphal history that *Beauty Is a Wound* puts forward is a supplementary history, not a deracinating one: the novel never tries to cast the motivations behind the violence of Dutch colonialism, war, and massacre as anything other than what they are. On first glance, the text seems to conform to the official record as dictated by the New Order, but the presence of historical fantasy complicates this compliance. This is where the novel is a parody – it resembles the official record only to denaturalise it (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* 3).

According to Hutcheon, parody marks the intersection of creation and re-creation, of invention and critique. Parody ... “defines a particular form of historical consciousness, whereby form is created to interrogate itself against significant precedents; it is a serious mode”. It is this ‘historical consciousness’ of parody that gives it the potential power to both bury the dead, so to speak, and also to give it new life.

Parody is, then, an important way for modern artists to come to terms with the past – through iconic recoding, or, in my awkward descriptive neologism, “trans-contextualising”. Its historical antecedents are ... practices of imitation, though with more stress on difference and distance from the original text or set of conventions. (*A Theory of Parody*, 101)

In relation to Kurniawan’s novel, this implies that imitation is essential. Certainly Kurniawan imitates a variety of narrative forms, but in so doing he posits a folk history that is no less ‘alive’ than the official record. It is here that he asserts the “difference” that enables his readers to make the epistemological leap into recognition of the joke that he plays on history. To recall the three narrative strategies of postmodernist revisionist history that McHale outlines, “the postmodernist historical novel is”, at its core, “revisionist in two senses” (90). Firstly, it “revises the *content* of the historical record, reinterpreting the historical record, often demystifying or debunking the orthodox version of the past” (90). Secondly, it “transforms ... the conventions and norms of historical fiction itself” (90). Using McHale’s theory as a map to navigate the lush world of *Beauty Is a Wound*, the remainder of this chapter will examine how Kurniawan’s text fulfils both aspects of postmodernist historical fiction, particularly through what is enabled by its parodic qualities – in other words, how the novel rewrites the paradigms of Indonesian historical narratives.

3. Legitimacy through discourses of history and violence

Historical fantasy in *Beauty Is a Wound* is not limited to ghosts, curses, inter-species pregnancies, and an undead prostitute. It encompasses the narrative systems that produce fantasy – Kurniawan’s novel, after all, is propelled in various degrees by the narratives of myth, epic,

and folklore which are, in turn, structured by *wayang*, or traditional puppet-shadow theatre, performances (“Q&A”). What continues to mark the novel as a work of magical realism is the counterweight of the ‘real’, or what McHale has called historical realemes. The events that take place in the fictional world are beholden to the realities of history as much as they are to the constructive realms of fantasy. But to what extent is the novel truly subject to reality? *Beauty Is a Wound* seems to comply with official history since an explicit question of the official record’s veracity remains absent.⁸⁶ Instead, however, the text seems to vie for a legitimacy of its own, and one of the ways we see this is through the violence of language and history. As we have seen, the value of beauty seems to be reversed in the world of the novel: over time, Dewi Ayu and her daughters become victims of mixed-race fetishism, forced prostitution, rape, and domestic abuse as a result of the real political conflicts that threw twentieth-century Indonesia into turmoil. The following examples are also attempts to ‘revise’ the content of the historical record.

Dewi Ayu’s birth and the curse plaguing her family, firstly, are tied to Dutch colonial rule. Years before Dewi Ayu was born, Ma Gedik, a man who drank a bottle of his mother’s breastmilk every day until he was nineteen, and Ma Iyang, the woman who convinced him to stop, fell in love. They were childhood friends, but their romance was “the kind of love that was too good to last” (Kurniawan, *Beauty* 32). One day, Ma Iyang is summoned to the house of Ted Stammler, a Dutch lord who was already married, to become his concubine. She cannot refuse because of his authority over Halimunda. She tells Ma Gedik: “Sixteen years from now, that Dutch lord will be bored with me. Wait at the top of the rocky hill if you still love me, if you are still interested in some Dutchman’s leftovers” (33). As Ma Gedik waits for the time of their reunion, he descends into vice and madness, raping cows and refusing to eat rice “or anything

⁸⁶ Unlike the late twentieth-century Indonesian literature that challenged New Order orthodoxy.

else except his own shit and the shit that he scavenged from the banana orchards” (35). When he and Ma Iyang are finally reunited on the rocky hill, they make love but cannot forge a future together; the Dutchmen would capture and throw them into a cage of wild dogs not only because they committed public obscenity but also because Ma Iyang ran away from Ted Stammeler (38). Rather than choosing to be imprisoned, Ma Iyang chooses to instead “fly”, jumping off the hill and vanishing as though she really had flown away (39). Ma Gedik, bereft of his love and left behind, lives on in hiding as a fugitive madman. Meanwhile, the child Ma Iyang had had with Ted, Aneu, falls in love with her half-brother, Henri, who was born from Ted’s wife Marietje. To conceal their incestuous relationship, Aneu and Henri elope and are never found or heard from again, until one morning when Ted and Marietje find a baby in a basket outside their front door. That baby is Aneu and Henri’s daughter, Dewi Ayu.

Dewi Ayu grows up being told stories of her grandmother’s disappearance and when she comes of age, she tracks down Ma Gedik with the intention of marrying him to right her grandfather’s wrongs. Ma Gedik, now an old, ugly man, is confused and terrified; when Dewi Ayu tries to consummate her marriage with him, he runs away and jumps off the hill where he had reunited with Ma Iyang sixteen years prior (54). Unlike Ma Iyang, Ma Gedik does not vanish or fly away; his body ends up crashing on the rocks below, becoming like “a pile of chopped beef” (55). He dies – or so we think. At the end of the novel we learn that the ghost that had been cursing Dewi Ayu’s family was Ma Gedik all along, transformed into a vengeful spirit bent on stopping Ted Stammeler’s descendants from attaining happiness (450). He rips lover from lover, causes the murder of innocent children, and slaughters their friends. Since he cannot be defeated by human beings, Dewi Ayu dies and rises from the dead just so she would gain the ability to kill him, finally ending the cycle of hatred and revenge that began with her grandparents (451-452).

In this sense, we can argue that ‘history’ is turned into a literal ghost that problematises the forward progression of time, haunting the present and punishing its inhabitants for ‘crimes’ that are no longer relevant, remembered, or even attributable to them.⁸⁷ Meanwhile, the real transgressors are permitted to get away with impunity.

When the tides of power change, so too does the fate of Dewi Ayu. When Japanese soldiers take over Halimunda during World War II she is imprisoned and later forced to become a comfort woman. She rises through the ranks to become the most-desired prostitute in the town in order to secure her survival and, consequently, her future. She continues her trade even after Halimunda is liberated. What happens to Dewi Ayu’s daughters can also be obliquely read as allegories for Indonesian history. Another example presents itself in the love triangle between Alamanda – Dewi Ayu’s eldest daughter – Shodancho, and Kliwon. Shodancho tries to woo Alamanda but because she only has eyes for Kliwon he is rebuffed. As a nationalist rebel and an army general appointed by the first president Sukarno himself, Shodancho is used to being on the winning side of history; the fact that his rival in love is a communist only makes him that much more determined to win Alamanda over. He drugs and brutally rapes her (215-217), and, feeling like “a cursed woman”, she ends her relationship with Kliwon by lying that she had fallen in love with Shodancho (218). After they marry, Alamanda wears metal underwear with a lock and key to deny Shodancho further sexual satisfaction; driven insane with lust, Shodancho assaults her when she is relieving herself in the toilet, her underwear unlocked and laid aside (231). She becomes pregnant from the rape; upon seeing her again, visibly with child, Kliwon declares that her stomach is “like an empty pot. ... There’s neither a girl nor a boy inside, it’s filled with nothing but air, like an empty pot” (242). His words turn out to be a prophecy as Alamanda

⁸⁷ It might be possible to link this with the difficulties that suspected communists and their family members faced for years even after they were released from detention.

eventually gives birth to nothing (281). Shodancho, who had wanted very badly to have a child, is angry at Kliwon, thinking that he had laid a curse on them. But Kliwon tells him: “There is only one explanation, Shodancho, which is that you had sex with your wife without love – the child that results from sex like that will either never be born, or be born a crazy child with a rat’s tail growing from his ass” (283). Kliwon later marries Alamanda’s younger sister Adinda.

The allegorical functions that these examples can be argued to perform are tenuous, but they highlight the temporal distance between them and the historical events that helped propel them into being. This distance is a critical distance that designates these fictional and fantastical events as parodies of the original, ‘real’ causes (Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* 102). At the same time, the fictional history takes on legitimacy in its own right – it appears to be free from a creative agenda of criticising the New Order, and is therefore more ‘authentic’ by way of being more ‘organic’. Moreover, the graphic descriptions of rape, brutality, and the grotesque⁸⁸ are treated with the same ‘straight-faced’ tone as everything else, both realistic and fantastic, which has become characteristic of the genre of magical realism. As I will try to prove in the final part of this chapter, this is a crucial part of the parody that Kurniawan performs on the genres of both historical fiction and historiography: he imitates, but with difference. These examples also reveal the ways in which characters and their realities are shaped by the discourses of history – *Beauty Is a Wound* privileges the experiences of victims, allocating them narrative authority as witnesses to history as collective memories (White 119-120). In this way, *Beauty Is a Wound* is also liberated from charges of immorality; it may fictionalise history but it also presents itself as a compelling “record of real human action and suffering” (McHale 95).

Above all, the novel performs a supplementary function with regards to the historical

⁸⁸ Such as the bestiality and coprophagia (the consumption of faeces) that Ma Gedik commits.

record by working within the seam of secret or alternative history. Halimunda may be subject to the larger historical events that rock Indonesia – the town is a microcosm of the Indonesian macrocosm – as seen in the violence and political turmoil that continually colour its pages. However, the reverse is difficult to qualify – Halimunda does not explicitly rewrite the orthodox record of history but instead operates according to its own ‘realistic’ logic that legitimises *Beauty Is a Wound* as a chapter in the larger narrative of Indonesian history. This vein of thinking is embodied in the erroneous date of Indonesian independence that the inhabitants of Halimunda celebrate, knowing full well that it is different from the date inscribed in official history (144-146). The reason for this lies in the bitter guerrilla warfare that Shodancho and the other nationalist rebels fought with the Japanese in Halimunda, which is located so remotely in the archipelago of Indonesia that news of independence and Japanese surrender⁸⁹ only reach both forces on 23 September 1945, more than a month late (144).

People began to gather in the soccer field, emaciated and dressed in rags, but still looking radiant. Never in their lives, and never in their grandparents’ or great-grandparents’ lives, had there ever been independence. But that day they heard it for themselves: Indonesia was free, and so of course was Halimunda. ... Starting that year and for many years to come, only schoolchildren and the army commemorated the proclamation every August 17. The citizens still conducted their own private rituals on September 23, and after a while the schoolchildren and the military joined in. ... [If] a stranger asked, or if a teacher asked his pupils when Indonesia gained its independence, they would always say, “The 23rd of September.” The central government made a number of attempts to clear up the confusion about the delay in information in the year 1945, but the citizens of Halimunda

⁸⁹ World War II officially ended on 2 September 1945.

swore to the death that they would always celebrate Independence Day on September 23.

After a while nobody made a big deal about it anymore. (145-146)

This can be read as an instance where alternative history displaces official history, but this is also a restoration of what the official record has neglected or possesses no use for. In doing so, it demystifies official history by de-ideologising it, foregrounding the figural truth by separating ‘fact’ from interpretation (Doran xxv). Since the official record is the military’s account, this is the record of the ordinary people that is no less legitimate. This is because the “idea of history as a linear series of fixed points of reference” is “replaced by the idea of a dynamic system of retrospective correspondences or repetitions” (xxxix). The ‘fact’ that the military personnel stationed in Halimunda eventually joined the non-official celebrations is an act of ridiculing the official record – but it still points to syncretic possibilities where a historical narrative that is both ‘official’ and comprehensive can be achieved. That is, ordinary Indonesians are returned the “inherent freedom of every human community to choose its own past and thereby its present” (xix). This example highlights the “power to renew” with which modern-day parody is endowed: “[It] need not do so, but it can. We must never forget the hybrid nature of parody’s connection with the ‘world’, the mixture of conservative and revolutionary impulses in both aesthetic and social terms. What has traditionally been called parody privileges the normative impulse, but today’s art abounds as well in examples of parody’s power to revitalise” (Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody* 115). This brings me to my next and final area of discussion – how *Beauty Is a Wound* re-examines the Indonesian relationship with history in order to ‘rewrite’ the conventions of historical fiction itself.

4. History that is ‘both’ – the triumph of parodic historical fiction

In his preface to *The Fiction of Narrative*, the collected essays of Hayden White, editor Robert Doran summarises White’s decades-long inquiry into historiography as such: “history exists only in writing”:

The genre of professional historiography has to be written – oral history is a contradiction in terms. If it is not written, it is not history. Information about the past can be conveyed orally. You can carry around in your head all manner of facts and other kinds of information, but you do not have a history until you have brought all of this stuff together and written it up either in a narrative or in an argument of some kind. ... [U]ntil the rules are changed, oral accounts of historical reality will remain at best a kind of raw material for proper historiography. (ix)

This implies that the experiences of victims and ordinary people in twentieth-century Indonesia are not quite the stuff of ‘proper history’; furthermore, historical reality is vulnerable to dispute and even being hijacked. Someone else can assert ownership of a story by utilising “the appropriate means of discourse” to transform an account into a historical record that is, at best, incomplete in its interpretive focus (White 119). But how exactly does history get narrativised? And what does the distinction between ‘history’ and ‘professional historiography’ bode for *Beauty Is a Wound*, which is a history based on oral and folk histories?

To address these questions it is necessary to first identify the different genres that inform the narrative of *Beauty Is a Wound*, genres other than magical realism. The novel is part-epic and also part-*wayang*, and both have different ontological implications on the shape of the narrative. Moreover, by imitating and appropriating these forms, Kurniawan accomplishes another kind of parody that posits folk and oral histories to be as legitimate as ‘official’ records of history. The

first clue we have in identifying *Beauty Is a Wound* as partaking in the epic form is that the story starts in medias res – with Dewi Ayu rising from the grave, untying her burial shroud, and calmly making her way home to resume her quest. Between this beginning and the end, which takes place within the same temporal frame as Dewi Ayu’s resurrection, the chapters work to bring readers up to speed on the events leading to Dewi Ayu’s ‘death’ and what happens in the years between that and her resurrection. Throughout the rest of the novel, it is a common occurrence for the narrative to double back on itself, first telling us readers the ‘future’ and then the ‘past’, detailing the events that lead to the specific outcomes that we have been conditioned to expect. This particular structure dictated by engagements with epics reveals the very structure of historical narrative itself. What we take to be history is “figurally anachronistic, for a later event alters the meaning of an earlier event”; put another way, history consists of ‘facts’ already ‘interpreted’ by “the will to see a later event as if it were intrinsically related to an earlier event, in the absence of any efficient–causal connection” (White 119; Doran xxi).

As discussed earlier, White marks the presence of a ‘knowing’ voice as that which legitimises history as an official narrative in any capacity: “in the concept ‘narrative history’ the literal meaning and usage direct attention not to the ‘story’ being told as a ‘fiction’, but to the knowledge-ability of the person telling the story” (119). In other words, narrative qualifies history in an epistemological sense, implying that historical accounts consist of ‘facts’ that can be found or retrieved, or that narratives themselves can be discovered from these ‘facts’ (119). But White also designates these processes as the practices of professional historiography, which he exposes as ultimately “untenable”:

The ‘facts’ do not ‘dictate’ at all but are subject to the specific choices, inclinations, and prejudices of the historian, which are inevitably moral and aesthetic rather than simply

epistemic. The metaphysical view of history as a story existing independently from our apprehension of it is a misunderstanding of what a story most manifestly is, that is, a specifically human way of creating and conferring meaning through figuration. (Doran xxiii-xxiv)

This is where Kurniawan's appropriation of epic performs another crucial function: it posits a history with the absence of a 'knowing' narrative voice. For White, the epic, along with myth, legend, and folktales, is not organised by a narrative voice but instead projects a collective voice, "which is why we do not waste our time inquiring into their purpose as representations but speak rather of their 'functions' in different cultural situations" (121). We certainly see these qualities in *Beauty Is a Wound* with its impulses towards syncretism and all-encompassing depictions of both public and private histories. Kurniawan may be the inheritor of a rich history of Indonesian writing that opposes New Order orthodoxy, but he eschews political beliefs in favour of political ambivalence. In this way, the joke Kurniawan tells through his novel is that official history is not only just another form of fiction, but one that is even more artificial than fictional history.

Finally, we come to Kurniawan's appropriation of *wayang*. Epics, such as the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, are typically the subjects of *wayang* performances, and Kurniawan uses this ancient form of puppet theatre to structure the dark humour of *Beauty Is a Wound*. *Wayang* demands thematic seriousness but also moral lessons and lightness through humour.⁹¹ Part of the dark humour that Kurniawan presents, of course, is the grotesque, which he explains as another aspect of traditional *wayang* – for example, Semar and Petruk, two 'ugly' characters that appear in *wayang* in comedic capacities that thinly veil social criticism, are "grotesque characters" that

⁹¹ "The puppeteer always tells the story with humour, with joy. That really influenced me, and I tried to adopt this technique in writing my novel" (Kurniawan, "Q&A").

act as “a counterweight to the elite. This is a strategy for culture, for literature, to be more equitable and not only owned by the elites” (“Q&A”). By taking *wayang* and inserting it into his novel, Kurniawan offers a democratic vision of history through cultural tradition, folklore, and collective memory as he populates the pages with characters who resemble the puppets in *wayang*. Additionally, the insertion of *wayang* gives the novel a uniquely Indonesian flavour that colours it as something other than another work of magical realism taking its cues from Márquez and Rushdie. By aligning history closer to the oral and folk narratives that are not quite yet history proper, *Beauty Is a Wound* also aligns itself closer to myth rather than historiography; as a result, the history the novel posits takes on the cultural ‘function’ of myth (White 121). Since myths “come ... from ‘nowhere’” they “resemble the chronicle”, which lacks “the narrative voice that orders the materials syntactically and then directs our attention to the materials thus ordered in such a way as to gain retrospectively characterisable effects, theoretical, moral, or aesthetic as the case may be” (121). What we have with *Beauty Is a Wound* is instead a collective history, an accessible and democratic one that is in many ways the opposite of the static and linear legacy posited by the New Order.

These are the ways that *Beauty Is a Wound* rewrites the norms of historical fiction – through parody. The novel straddles the ‘seam’ that separates fiction and reality without antagonising or conforming neatly to either ontological layer; being ‘both’ official and alternative history is a status enabled only by its construction as a parody. It is complicitous with that which it seeks to critique, offering a new kind of historical fiction in the history of Indonesian writing after independence. The triumph of Kurniawan’s work appears to be a restorative one – if Halimunda is a cipher for the ordinary Indonesians left out of the official record, then *Beauty Is a Wound* empowers these citizens with the freedom to choose their past so

that they may choose a corresponding present.

CONCLUSION

I began this inquiry into the contemporary novels of Southeast Asia with the intention to fulfill two promises. The first is to legitimise the narratology of Southeast Asian fiction as a postmodernist and compelling system of meaning-making in the present context, in the process determining its ‘shape’ as different from its Western resemblances and affiliations in the wider genre of postcolonial writing. The second is to pay attention that has been long overdue to the narrative techniques employed by Southeast Asian writers, as they are what enable regional novels to present challenges to the historical and political narratives that shape their national realities. The best way I have found to complete both aims is through the selection of novels that are technically playful and especially parodic – since parody is a form of historical criticism that is heightened by the postmodern context in which it occurs.

With these intentions came the burden of proving two critical relationships – one is that there is an undeniable link between literature and history; the other is that narrative strategies that are specifically postmodernist *and* parodic enable Southeast Asian fiction to achieve a ‘unique’ kind of expression. In Chapter Two, I examined how Miguel Syjuco’s *Ilustrado* parodies Filipino nostalgia – the images and narratives that Filipinos value – to reveal the attendant dangers of static historical legacies. While Syjuco pokes fun at the illustrious Filipino literary heritage, his ridicule is serious: relying too much on the past to construct the meaning of the present moment indicates a fetishism of nostalgia that exposes reality as nothing more than a simulacrum of ‘reruns’. Leaving relationships with the past unquestioned can portend terrifying consequences – such as letting a singular authoritative voice depict reality. This is evident in the irony of the process of enlightenment, where the secret protagonist Crispin Salvador corrupts the reformatory symbols of the *ilustrado* and the fictional autobiography.

Eka Kurniawan's *Beauty Is a Wound* engages with a similar idea, but from a radically different position. As I have discussed in Chapter Three, the novel imitates official Indonesian history established by the New Order only to undermine its exclusivity by favouring a collective voice. By stretching the ontological potential of historical fiction, Kurniawan challenges the official record not by displacing it but by legitimising an alternative history that can stand independent of proper historiography. Halimunda is both Indonesia in miniature and its own domain – although the town and its inhabitants are shaped by the political conflicts that shake the country as a whole, it also operates according to its own mythic logic where Independence Day is not 17 August but 23 September.

A retrospective synthesis of these analyses suggests that both *Ilustrado* and *Beauty Is a Wound* take the position that, indeed, the only vision of the contemporary we can have is one that is determined by history – and, consequently, our interpretations of history. The power to change the past in order to control the present, then, is the underlying quest of *Ilustrado*'s Crispin Salvador – as it is that of the Southeast Asian writers who parody history. By imitating history but also asserting differences from it, the postmodernist literature of Southeast Asia exposes history as another kind of fiction whose meaning can be transformed from context to context. Moreover, this is a meaning that *must* undergo changes commensurate to the needs of the present reality. The problem with this argument, however, is relativism: to what extent can a community relativise truth? What are the limits and moral implications of a nation being able to choose its own reality? These are questions that *Beauty Is a Wound* raises by going head-to-head with New Order orthodoxy, and yet, in relation to the larger interrogative impulses of contemporary Southeast Asian novels more generally, the answers to these are far beyond my current purview and ability to propose. One way of remedying this is by broadening the concept of

postmodernism and postmodernist literature that informs this project. Rather than limiting the range to politics and history, future endeavours should consider a more nuanced approach to postmodernism by including the works of Brian Richardson, Patricia Waugh, Steven Connor and Ihab Hassan, who have all made significant contributions to literary theory.

Other difficulties that I have encountered in the writing of this text include confronting the possibility that there might not be a “Southeast Asian narratology”. Perhaps as ‘accidents’ of proximity, similarities in culture and political histories exist between nations in the region, but the literary manifestations of their historical concerns are so specific to their national contexts that literature and the particular reality – or ‘unreality’ – it refracts cannot be untangled. This is obvious in the targets of the parody that both Kurniawan and Syjuco perform. This also indicates the probable reasons why there is still very little scholarship available on the narratologies of contemporary Southeast Asian fiction, for asserting a discernible pattern between national literatures is a complex and ambitious project to undertake. Moreover, to categorise these works under the umbrella of regional literature might be akin to continuing the same disservice of subsuming these texts under the generic categories of Asian postcolonial literature. These concerns might be better addressed with the inclusion of newer ideas in postcolonial literature, such as Trinh Minh-ha’s transcultural approach to literature and politics.⁹² At the very least, my attempt to define a Southeast Asian literature, with its rich and nuanced histories and narrative traditions, is one step towards rescuing it from homogeneity and broad political significations.

Moving forward, I am optimistic that this project of inquiry has the potential to address what I have claimed is lacking in current scholarship. In the course of gathering the material that has found its way into this project, I have spoken with researchers of Southeast Asian literature,

⁹² Other thinkers to consider include Jacques Rancière for his work on politics and aesthetic theory, and the African American literary critics Madhu Dubey and Phillip Brian Harper.

history, and politics at various conferences and seminars.⁹³ Literature remains a peripheral concern in the broader field of Southeast Asian studies, and what I have understood from my correspondences with these researchers is that Southeast Asian literature remains studied in ‘national silos’, with very little work currently being done to relate these national literatures to each other, both in the realms of contemporary and classical fiction and poetry. I would like to conclude this work with the hope that my attempt here to cohere political history with literary theory serves to grow a still-nascent conversation on the state of Southeast Asian literature, in order to acknowledge the unique trajectories that both regional writing and reality have taken in the wake of decolonisation and postmodernism.

⁹³ The Association of Southeast Asian Studies–UK conference at the University of Leeds in September 2018; at various seminars at the Asian Research Institute of the National University of Singapore throughout 2017 and 2018; and at a conference on ASEAN policies at Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, in February 2017.

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