Necessary Fictions
Philippine Literature
and the Nation,
1946–1980

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In the mid-1950s, nearly sixty years after his execution and seventy years after the publication of *Noli me tangere*, José Rizal became the subject of a political controversy that pitted the Philippine state against the Roman Catholic church over the issue of including this national hero’s life and works in the curricula of public and private schools, colleges, and universities (Constantino and Constantino 1978, 296–98; Totanes 1987, 22–25). The eventual compromise, Republic Act No. 1425 (the so-called Rizal Bill) (1956, 2971–72), was a piece of landmark legislation that brought literature and nationalism together in the state’s attempt to decolonize the “culture” of the Philippines; the bill was an important example of the state’s effort to use literature to foster national consciousness among the Filipino people and make “good” citizens of the Filipino youth.

By singling out Rizal’s two novels, the *Noli* and its sequel, *El filibusterismo*, as “a constant and inspiring source of patriotism with which the minds of the youth, especially during their formative years, should be suffused,” the Rizal Bill attested to the existence of a disciplinary space, an ensemble of discourses and practices constituting the field of literary education over which the Philippine state sought continually to extend the scope of its nation-building projects.

More than that, by commenting this way on the novels, the Rizal Bill laid down a set of instructions on how to read the *Noli* and *Fili*. Rizal’s novels were described as “a constant and inspiring source of patriotism,” which must be read in their “original or unexpurgated editions...or their
English translation." Conjuring up a newly independent Filipino people whose "national character" is "shaped" by literary works and the act of reading these works, the Bill accorded Rizal and his novels a central place in the state's nationalist project, and recognition of their vital role in enabling Filipinos to grasp the ideals of freedom and nationalism.

In fact, by stating that the heroes' lives and works were responsible for "shaping the national character," the bill suggested that the heroes, especially Rizal and his novels, originally represented, if not embodied, the nationalist ideals of virtue, patriotism, and self-sacrifice. These ideals formed the "content" of their lives and works. Thus, by reading Rizal and his novels as symbols of these nationalist ideals, and above all as exemplary, inspiring stories that could be "applied" to everyday life, the Filipino was presumably inspired to live by these ideals. The bill therefore made the act of reading literature an act of (re)discovering the nation's origins in ideals embodied by the life and works of the nation's heroes.

An equally important assumption of the bill held that present and future generations of Filipinos could remake the national character, which earlier generations of Filipinos had "shaped" in the past. Such a notion of Filipinoness, of a Filipino culture that was fixed yet flexible, historical yet history-making, had the advantage of being attuned to social and historical processes, to development and change. Yet the very distinctiveness of this malleable national character served only to render its instability as a concept more apparent. It is one thing to assume that the nation is the most widespread and significant political phenomenon of the modern age, and another to subscribe to the idea that specific "cultures" are embodied and particularized as "nations," each endowed with its own "national character."

Given the linguistic diversity and social heterogeneity of the "Filipino people," it would be simply impossible to take the link between culture and nation for granted. Which culture? Whose culture? Whose history, for that matter, do we consecrate and celebrate? The vexed question that is the core of the Rizal Bill is ultimately a question of and about the link between nation and culture: What is "Filipino" culture? And how do we go about preserving or reshaping its? The answer offered by the Rizal Bill was: Literature. Literature came to occupy a mediating position between the "universal" ideals of freedom and nationalism, on the one hand, and their realization within a specifically Philippine context, on the other hand. Literature assumed a mediating function precisely because Rizal's novels served as artifactual, concrete examples of a "Filipino culture" that was conceived as the sum total of all the products of a society's creative labor and aspirations. At the same time, these works were the means by which other (later) Filipinos could acquire, preserve, and reshape such a culture. In this manner, the relationship between literature and Philippine nationalism was cemented through the paradoxical notion that literary works both embodied culture and helped create that culture.

This literary paradox was an important wellspring of the state's nation-building project. The state, not surprisingly, claimed a privileged role in the nationalist project of preserving and developing Philippine culture. By making reading the subject of supervision, the state arrogated to itself the role of mediator, the main conduit in the transmission of ideals from their abstracted sources in the nation (i.e., the history of the heroes who "lived and died" for their ideals) to their putative, concrete recipients (the "minds of the youth"). In essence, the state claimed to stand, like literature, between the universal ideals and their particular embodiments, and provided the crucial, institutional relay between them. In so doing, it imputed the nation's origin, and its own justification for existence as a state, to the writing of nationalism. In the act of locating Rizal's texts within a national fantasy of origins, the Rizal Bill established nationalism's origins in literature at the same moment that it claimed to regulate literature in the name of the nation.

This move on the part of the state, however, could not appear as a full bridging of the gap between nationalist ideals and Philippine reality because these positive values of freedom and nationalism always need to be invoked, rededicated, and inculcated in the minds and actions of different generations of Filipinos. Moreover, writings are subject to the working of language, which generates multiple readings over generations. In the face of the destabilizing effects of history and language, each generation can only find itself a potential, rather than actual, bearer of values that have to be reaffirmed, and that can end up being challenged, by intermittent rereadings of the "constant and inspiring source of patriotism." What the law inaugurated was therefore not a single reading, but constant reading, a history of certain kinds of reading.

Furthermore, the bill's concession to the "external" interests the Church represented—which accounted for the provision in the Bill that exempted "students [from reading Rizal's novels] for reasons of religious belief"—was solid evidence of the fact that the law, far from being neutral, was engendered from competing, antagonistic interests. This is ironic given that the entire Filipino nation, and not just factions comprising the
nation, was supposed to “remember with special fondness and devotion" the dead heroes who had lived and died for the ideals.

Memorializing “fondness and devotion" implied a positive evaluation of the present over the past (cf. Koselleck 1985: 233-46); they also envisioned an as-yet indeterminate future for the nation, a future that nevertheless represented an improvement over the present. Yet this optimistic view of the Filipino nation’s present and future was also shadowed by a sense of deep unease about the very promise of transcendence and freedom on which the progress of the nation was premised. The move to institutionalize the reading of Rizal, in fact, quickly became an arena where the newly “independent" Philippine state attempted to intervene in, and shape, public debate over the nation’s status and meaning in the face of the visible presence and power of the Church in Filipino politics; in the face of continued American influence on Philippine economic, international, and domestic policies; and, most tellingly, in the face of the still vivid memories of the direct challenges posed by the popular nationalism of the Huk movement (Schirmer and Shalom 1987: 87-103; T. Rivera 1994: 110-24; Payer 1974: 61; Kerkvliet 1979: 249-68; Taruc 1953: Pomeroy 1963; Lachica 1971).

The Rizal Bill was the legal handmaiden of a Philippine state that sought to regulate education to accomplish its declared task of developing “moral character, personal discipline, civic conscience and... teaching the duties of citizenship." Strangely enough, making Rizal and his ideas compulsory reading seemed at once urgent and superfluous, given a “national" space that was already quite literally filled with signs of Rizal and other objectified “products" of national culture. The government had already spent thousands of pesos building monuments in Rizal’s honor, naming streets and a province after him, declaring his death anniversary a public holiday, and presiding over celebrations in his memory. Rizal’s photographs graced every classroom, and appeared on money, stamps, and buses.

The sad fact was that Rizal was visible everywhere, but largely unread. The Rizal Bill was clearly aimed at closing the last frontier—the “content" of Rizal’s life and works—which needed to be mapped by a state that had filled every space of national life with signs of Rizal (Locsin 1956a: 70). The bill was, in an important sense, the logical outcome of an apparent paradox that underlay, and continues to inform, literary production in the Philippines: Literature has no place in Philippine everyday life and culture, since few Filipinos read it; yet literature is invested with a great deal of social, indeed subversive, significance since it is viewed, and taught in the schools, as a document of the achievements, development, and transformation of Philippine society, culture, and nation. Literature’s “radical" potential is premised on the ability of literary works to offer new insights into a given society, on the power of literature to illuminate a set of issues or questions central to the Filipino people’s experience.

But in extending the disciplinary boundaries of state action into the teaching of literature, Filipino lawmakers had to confront the danger inherent in reading Rizal. This danger lay in two things: to be read meant being read unavoidably in different ways; and different ways of reading are ideological, and therefore political.

The debate over Rizal’s readability arose from the Church’s insistence that Rizal’s satirical jabs at friar abuses, simony, Purgatory, and other practices and beliefs were the rantings of a heretic. One of the ways in which advocates of the Rizal Bill managed to curtail this attack was by arguing that Rizal’s novels belonged in the past, and spoke essentially about the past. Wrote journalist Teodoro M. Locsin:

Many of the passages in Rizal’s novels which the Catholic hierarchy finds so shocking, so objectionable, would take on a new, a more comfortable meaning if read in the context of the novels, against the background of the life of the hero. “These are the conditions that estranged Rizal from the Church," a Catholic instructor might begin a course on the writer. “These conditions no longer exist. The abuses are gone. In his place you might have felt as he did, written what he wrote.” (Locsin 1956d: 63)

(A “radio wit" was quoted as saying: "Rizal is dead. Why should he be roused from his sleep? Let him rest in peace" [see Locsin 1956c, 70]).

The Filipino reader was asked to identify with Rizal by relocating herself, and Rizal, in the distant past: “Rizal, after all, is not so dangerous to read; he is not as overpowering as he seems. He wrote of other times, other things...No man, reading the novels of Rizal, would confuse the humble missionary laboring among the heathen or comforting the lepers with the degenerate friars of Rizal’s time” (Locsin 1956d, 62). These remarks were clearly intended to neutralize the more upsetting strands of thought in Rizal’s novels and locate the "real" Filipino (now viewed as an ethnic—“cultural”—entity) outside the ambit of criticism and satire, which are now reserved for degenerate foreigners and former colonizers. Yet the memorializing impulse inevitably came up against the issue of Rizal’s continued relevance, for how would his novels remain a “constant and
inspiring source of patriotism" if the degenerate foreigners and friars were no longer around?

Where Locsin would seek to dissociate Rizal from the disquieting present, Manila mayor Arsenio Lacson imagined “a new breed of Filipinos”—the “descendants of the frailes and the guardia civil” (Locsin 1956b, 71), “colonial-minded people who, fronting for their alien masters, would shackle the minds of our youth with the fetters of artificial prejudice, of artificial ignorance, and of artificial imbecility...The evils that Rizal denounced exist very much to this day, though it [sic] may be in a modified form, and those countrymen of his who set such a high premium on their animal comforts are very much alive and with us today, together with their alien masters still as bigoted and intolerant as of old” (Locsin 1956b, 34). The idea here was to underscore continued foreign domination, in however “modified” a form, and its threat to national sovereignty.

The controversy over how to read Rizal points up the salient but problematic coupling of literature and nationalism because it discloses the antinomies of the national attempt to memorialize, and at the same time engage with, Rizal and his works. For to admit the continuing relevance of Rizal and other national heroes to the present is to admit that the vicissitudes of the nation's history necessarily complicate the ideals of freedom and progress to which the nation aspires. In attempting to locate the origin of the nation, the Rizal Bill only testifies to the impossibility of memorializing the “beginning” of a Philippine nationalism that, like the writing of that nationalism, is haunted by Philippine history.

This book deals with the problem of freedom in postindependence Philippines, and with the role played by “culture” in positing social change as a historical possibility and imperative. In particular, it is concerned with the ways in which Philippine literature formulated and worked through the historical legacies of the colonial past and historically determined problems of the present.

_Necessary Fictions_ argues in favor of a long-standing affinity between literature and nationalism on the basis of a common fund of ideas and concerns dealing with the possibility and necessity of social change. It also examines the intimate connection between literature and nationalism through the notion of “excess,” a term that will be used in this book to refer to the heterogeneous elements—“the people,” “the indigenous,” “the Chinese,” “the political,” and “error”—that inform, but also exceed, nationalist attempts to grasp, intellectually and politically, the complex realities at work in Philippine society.

This book argues that the importance Philippine nationalism accorded to literature, and vice versa, is founded on two presuppositions: the capacity of literature to represent history truthfully, and the capacity of literature to intervene in history. But there is also something about everyday life and experience that is always in excess of the systems of thought and sociopolitical action that seek to apprehend and organize it. In this sense, we can speak of life as contingent, as being subject to chance and circumstance. Yet the contingencies of everyday life neither vitiate the need for decision-making and political action, nor disable us from having to deal with what can happen and what actually does happen. This excess, rather, is the condition of possibility of both literature and politics because no writing or political program can exhaust the possibilities of the social reality it seeks to engage. The nationalist project is always unfinished because literature and politics can only generate more writing and action. The space in which writing and action unfold is opened up, if not necessitated, by the excess that slips their grasp. Because the excess exists, writing and action cannot end.

Although nationalist thought and practice generate “excesses” that necessarily complicate the project of theorizing literature as an important means of representing and realizing Philippine history, this book goes against the grain of “poststructuralist” disavowals of the nation - (Bhabha 1990, 1–7), because its main arguments entail the recognition that these excesses are not just engendered by the “productive violence” of the nationalist project in the sense that they are the necessary by-products of different nationalist projects of imagining and making community. Instead, these excesses are a constitutive feature of nation-making, an irreducible component of the nationalist project of making community.

Theorizing this excess demands nothing less than looking into the conditions of possibility of the nationalist project and the ethical imperative toward social change that is its core principle. Transcribing the logic of nationalist “excess” enables us to plot the career of various intellectual and sociopolitical projects undertaken by Filipino nationalists after the Second World War. The term “excess,” therefore, does not simply refer to the contradictions or ambivalences at the heart of nationalist discourse. Rather, these conceptual “failures” (often taking the form of contamination of one idea by what it excludes), point to irreducible claims exercised on us by our history and our implication in a world, both of our making and not of our making. This, in turn, demands a more rigorous examination of the Filipinos’ capacities and limits as subjects of history and a
more nuanced conception and analysis of the shifting material forces within which the Philippine nation-state takes shape.

The concept of “excess” has important implications for literary production, not least because for a country that has lived through nearly four centuries of Spanish rule, fifty years of American “tutelage,” and five years of Japanese occupation, formal independence makes the question of social transformation a real theoretical and practical problem. Moreover, it is a theoretical and practical problem in which “culture” plays a crucial enabling role. That is, the multifarious meanings of “culture” provide a way of talking about the problem of effecting social change and, more important, “culture” itself is often held to provide a potential solution to that problem.

What is and what should be the basis of political action that aims at transforming society? How does culture (and literature) formulate an account of political action and help to actualize it?

Two things can be said about the way in which the question of social transformation has been understood in the Philippines. First: this question is usually conceived in terms of a specific ordering of the relationship between truth and action. The imperative for social change is often posed as a “problem of national(ist) consciousness,” that is, it posits a nation that can be actualized by a subject whose capacity to transform society is informed by her knowledge of her country’s “true” history, condition, and course of development. Second: social change is premised on powerful norms of freedom, self-determination, and development, most often encapsulated in the pedagogical associations surrounding the term “culture.” These two, interrelated ways of conceiving of political agency are fairly common motifs in nationalist discourses (Bennett 1991; Eagleton 1988, 28–29).

Anticolonial nationalist literature, in fact, yokes together two powerful imperatives—the imperative to truth, and the imperative to action. These twin imperatives informing nationalist literature also circumscribe nationalist understanding of history. Not only is history a matter of representation, of how to write and construct the country’s past; history is also a matter of action, of making that history and constructing the country’s future. The relationship between literature and history is from the beginning more than just a matter of congruence—theirs is a mutually determining relation, one taking shape in and through the other.

But, for that very reason, theirs is also a relation that is fraught with considerable anxiety and ambiguity, for how, precisely, does one move from knowledge to action? How does truth relate to action? Elaborating the link between truth and action has important implications for theorizing the connection between literature and history. What is the relationship between the real and fictional? the historical and literary? historical truth and fictional truth? This book is itself an attempt to specify the link between literature and history. It focuses on literary texts because literature crystallizes the above issues, because its “content” often explicitly deals with or works through these questions, and because literature itself has been historically deployed in various ways to organize and interrogate the relationship between thought and action in contemporary Philippines.

This book is structured according to a set of intertwined questions: How does reading literature operate as part of an “ethical technology” for making proper historical subjects out of the Filipino people? How does literature “represent” (in both artistic and political senses of the word) the “true” Filipino national community? How does literature address, and resolve, the problem posed by the foreign, especially colonial, “influences” on Philippine national culture? How does literature imagine the “foreigner” within the Filipino nation? How does literature forge the link between the personal and political? How does literature rethink the relationship between revolutionary theory and practice?

Since each chapter will explore one question or aspect of the issue, this book does not pretend to offer a genealogy of modern Philippine fiction. The literary chronology of this book begins with Rizal’s Noli me tangere and ends, almost a century later, with Posadas’s Hulagpos. Hulagpos’s reformulation of the relationship between nationalist consciousness and transformative action represents both a culmination of the literary tradition, of which Rizal’s novels are considered the founding work, and a significant departure from the mode of literary production and reception hitherto obtaining in the Philippines.

It should be noted that with the possible exception of the underground novel Hulagpos, the literary texts under discussion were written by people whose works enjoyed canonical status in the Philippine literary and educational scene. The longest shadow is no doubt cast by José Rizal, whose two novels, required reading in every high school and college in the country, occupy a privileged position in the popular imagination as the progenitors of modern Philippine nationalism and literature. The other writers, though not as universally exalted as Rizal, have solid public reputations: Amado Hernandez and Nick Joaquin enjoy official recognition as national artists, while Kerima Polotan, Carlos
Bulosan, Edgardo Reyes, and Ricardo Lee, are critically acclaimed Filipino writers who are often anthologized and taken up in literature classes.

The importance of these writers’ works, though, does not rest on their canonical status but on their ability to illuminate, even define, some of the central concerns and motifs of the so-called Philippine literary tradition—among them the confluence of literature, history, and nationalism; the need for transforming consciousness and society; and the truthful, realistic depiction of Philippine society. This is not to suggest that all Philippine literary works are preoccupied with these questions, or that they formulate these questions in the same way. Nevertheless, there exists an influential critical tradition of reading Philippine literature in terms of its nationalist “content” and its “realistic” depiction of Philippine society. This book should be read as an intervention within that tradition.

The idea that literature is necessarily shaped by social processes and has a social function is as truistic as it is unexamined. Chapter one looks at the mechanisms regulating a concept of literature that links the “national(ist)” literary text’s truth-telling capacity to its political efficacy. Literature is deployed in the field of public and private education for the formation of a “Filipino” subject whose ability to act in, and transform, her society is dependent on her acquisition of knowledge pertaining to her nation’s history, present condition, and future course of development. One of the central issues in Philippine literature has been the question of whether literary texts, their producers, and their consumers, are able to fulfill the practical social function of rewriting Philippine history by transforming collective consciousness and spurring political action aimed at social change. This notion of literature’s role in representing and making history draws its main impulse and rhetorical charge from the foundational premise of nationalism, which builds on a “grand” narrative of moral development to posit a self-determining subject of history. Such an assumption charts the nation’s development in terms of the progressive perfectibility of human faculties and abilities, and the transcendent of nature and naturalized constraints, whether material, historical, or cultural.

In the Philippines, however, the positing of a self-determining, sovereign, and transcendent subject of history is, from the beginning, complicated by the country’s postindependence history, which renders the rhetoric of freedom and sovereignty especially fragile and dubious. The recalcitrance of Philippine “history” and the material constraints that such a history poses on the Filipino national subject’s capacity for trans-

formative thought and action haunt the literary texts under discussion—José Rizal’s *Noli me tangere*, Amado V. Hernandez’s *Mga Ibong Mandaragit*, Nick Joaquin’s *A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino*, Ricardo Lee’s “Huwaq! Huwaq Mong Kukuwentuhan ang Batang si Wei-fung”, Edgardo Reyes’s *Sa Mga Kuko ng Liwanag*, Kerima Polotan’s *The Hand of the Enemy*, Carlos Bulosan’s *The Cry and the Dedication*, and Mano de Verdad’s Posadas’s *Hulagpos*.

Succeeding chapters will take up and elaborate on this “haunting” of Philippine literature by Philippine history. Chapter two focuses on Rizal’s *Noli me tangere*, and how subsequent generations of scholars have used Rizal and his novel to address Rizal’s fictional delineation of a “Filipino” knowable community that became the conceptual basis of the Filipino nation. Critical reception of the *Noli*, both in Rizal’s time and beyond, principally concerns itself with the problem of appropriating a “modern” that is seen as having a “foreign” and “external” provenance. Rizal’s novels, by deliberately destabilizing the distinction between the real and fictional, between literature and history, provided the basis for an influential formulation of the knowable community as an indispensable component, both the means and ends, of radical political imagination and transformation.

Yet Rizal’s narrative project of rendering the Filipino national community knowable was also unstable and tentative, largely because Rizal’s literary project of depicting—representing—the people who inhabit the Philippines compelled the recognition that writing “about” the Philippines always meant writing from a position. That is, the idea of writing from a specific social location necessarily implied the existence of other competing knowledges and perspectives. Furthermore, the existence of heterogeneous perspectives, embodied by individuals and groups of people, could not be fully recuperated by the universalist rhetoric of development and freedom that Rizal invoked in his depiction of Philippine conditions and in his call for action and self-sacrifice.

Rizal’s novels are a kind of “master-narrative” within or against which modern Philippine fiction attempted to work through a set of unresolved issues relating to the problem of truth and action in a society that was split into different, contending groups for whom “independence” had always been a tendentious issue. Chapter three subjects nationalist theorizing of the “foreign” provenance of Filipino culture to closer scrutiny through a reading of Jose Rizal’s *Noli me tangere* and Nick Joaquin’s *A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino*. The exposition in *Portrait* of a theory of art—the exemplary embodiment of culture—that provides the “solution” to the tendentious issue of the “foreign
influences” on Filipino national culture resonates with the so-called linguistic and cultural turns in the field of historiography in the social sciences. The historiographical turn toward increased attention to the study of culture and language—of which Reynaldo C. Ileto’s Passyon and Revolution is an exemplary articulation—was instrumental in proposing the idea of a reinvigorated (and reinvigorating) Philippine “culture” as a solution to the problem of social divisions that haunt Philippine reality and the writing of its history. Historiographical scholarship after the war thus shared with Joaquin an abiding faith in the ability of “Filipino culture” to heal the rift social divisions created and the historical experience of social fragmentation and conflict.

What is especially interesting about the travails of nationhood during the postwar years is the extent to which they were internalized and given a specifically local or “native” cast in literary works such as Nick Joaquin's Portrait of the Artist as Filipino (and Kerima Polotan's The Hand of the Enemy, which will be discussed in chapter five) so that the problem of modern Philippine history consists not only of the Philippines’ continuing subordination to American domestic and foreign policies, but the internal haunting of the Filipino nation by its suppressed “others”, by the heterogeneous elements within the Philippine nation-state that have been excluded or marginalized in the name of the nation. Chapter four provides one such case study involving the “alien Chinese” and offers a historical elaboration and theoretical critique of the discursive construction of the “Chinese” in Philippine literature. It argues that the literary figure of the “Chinese” is fundamentally shaped by a set of unresolved questions—focusing mainly on the conflicted, ambiguous relationship between citizenship and class, between formal political equality and actual economic inequality—that define and organize nationalist discourse and practice. This conflicted relationship, in which the state plays a determining role, is principally expressed, both inside and outside literature, in terms of the nationalist attempt to “fix” the Chinese’s problematic relationship to the Philippine state and their equally ambivalent position within the Filipino nation. This chapter limns the trajectory of literary interventions that seek to work through the “placing” of the Chinese both within and outside the imagined “unity” of the Filipino nation.

Chapter five proffers a critique of authorial discourse and the way it theorizes and organizes the relationship between the individual and society. Through a reading of Kerima Polotan’s The Hand of the Enemy and of Kerima Polotan herself as an author whose career is haunted by her active collaboration with the Marcos regime, this chapter examines the mutual constitution of the personal and political and its implication for reconceiving the boundaries that separate the author from her text, and the writer from the society in which she lives.

Chapter six discusses an alternative formulation of the same relationship between the personal and political in the discoursed of the “unfinished revolution,” using, as its guide, Carlos Bulosan’s unfinished novel The Cry and the Dedication. Bulosan’s novel provides a richly suggestive rendering of the need for a program of collective struggle for social change that is nonetheless sensitive to the contingencies of concrete practices in everyday life. Bulosan’s novel provides a powerful argument for a context-specific and nonidealized account of the struggle for national liberation and the naturalized constraints and possibilities of thought and action that are the basis of revolutionary struggle.

Chapter seven concentrates on the underground novel Hulagpos, which locates itself within the Rizal tradition and deals with the question of intellectual work and political activism within the historically specific context of collective struggle against the Marcos regime during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Hulagpos's Marxist-inspired reformulation of the relationship between knowledge and political action is couched in the language of a “corrective” theory of pedagogy and political practice not unlike the “ethical technology” at work in classrooms during the postwar period. But Hulagpos can also be read as a critique of the dominant conception of the relationship between truth and action, a conception that presupposes an idealized account of human agency. The question of human error the novel raises and the specific literary practices within the underground movement that produced the novel provide insights into the reconceptualized theory of literature can be deployed in a way that can potentially redefine, by offering a more rigorous account of, the social nature and function of literature.

Analyzing the social nature and function of Philippine literature forces us to attend to the ways in which truth and action are conceived, by specific classes of people. It also traces the contours of various discursive regimes, and the procedures and institutions that regulate literature's mediating role in organizing the relationship between knowledge and action. These determine, in crucial ways, the kinds of action and theorizing available to Filipinos at a given period of time. By advancing these arguments, Necessary Fictions aims to reconstruct the literary text’s place in society and ascertain the difference literature makes in transforming Filipino understanding of the past and present, and in transforming Filipino society itself.
To this effect, I have taken the liberty of expanding the concept of literary analysis by concentrating not just on the study of literary texts but of literary reception, and on tracking Philippine "literary theory" to its sources inside and outside the discipline of literary studies. The intention behind this book's deliberate juxtaposition of textual, theoretical, and historical analyses is to highlight the interconnection between literary studies and other disciplines and show that the writing and theorizing of literature do not take place in a social, political, and theoretical vacuum.

As Raymond Williams has argued: "[W]e need a more than ordinary awareness of the presence of active and general life which is misrepresented entirely by description as 'background'. There are no backgrounds in society; there are only relations of acts and forces" (Williams 1953, 245). Literature can teach its readers much about Filipino society even as it is also a social artifact shaped by the society it seeks to represent. Demonstrating an alternative practice of reading literature that is sensitive to the complex interactions among the textual, conceptual, and historical dimensions of analysis is the inevitable first step of any endeavor seeking to question the assumptions informing the very boundaries that determine what is "inside" and "outside" the literary text.

There is a scene in Amado V. Hernandez's novel Mga Ibong Mandaragit (Birds of Prey, 1969) that provides an occasion for examining the intimate link between literature, pedagogy, and nationalism. The protagonist, Mando Plaridel, and two other guerrillas make their way to the mountains in the closing months of the Second World War. There, they meet up with an old revolutionary, Tata Matyas, who, disgusted by the turncoats and collaborators within the ranks of the revolutionary forces, had withdrawn from the world after the Filipino-American war at the turn of the century. During a late-night conversation, Mando asks Tata Matyas what the latter would do if he were still a young man living in these troubled, but potentially watershed, times. In response, Tata Matyas takes out a battered copy of José Rizal's El filibusterismo and says: "Narito, nasa librong ito ang aking gagawin kung ako'y kasing-edad mo" (Here, here in this book are the answers to the question of what I would do if I were your age right now.) (Hernandez 1982, 6).1

But Tata Matyas, who knows the secrets of the novel and is thinking of revealing the secrets to Mando, first quizzes Mando on his knowledge of Rizal to gauge the young man's social awareness, political readiness, and moral worthiness—in other words, the young man's national consciousness. Mando's reaction to the quiz is, not unexpectedly, one of confusion, a student's confusion: