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Historical Violence and the Child: Normalcy and Familial Relations in Children's Books on the Marcos Dictatorship

Mary Grace R. Concepcion*

The Marcos dictatorship remains a contested period in Philippine history. Children's books on this period of martial law narrate how children confronted the violence that disrupted their families. Using Clémentine Beauvais' concept of the "mighty child," I analyze the depiction of politicized children in Augie Rivera's *Isang Harding Papel* (A garden of flowers) (2014) and *Si Jhun-Jhun, Noong Bago Ideklara ang Batas Militar* (Jhun-Jhun before the declaration of martial law) (2001) and Sandra Nicole Roldan's *At the School Gate* (2018). I interrogate how the child protagonists established normalcy and exercised their agency during the dictatorship. I also examine the adult-child relations that could affect such politicization. By defining normalcy and structuring their lives, these children from activist families maintained order despite the political chaos. However, in some of the texts the adult characters are passive and evade discussion of the causes of violence. Hence, the characters' familial problems are not elevated to the country's struggle. Rather than the characters confronting the structural defects that give rise to despotic governments, these familial problems are resolved with the downfall of the Marcos dictatorship, with the celebratory narrative of the 1986 People Power Revolution undermining both the characters' and the people's agency. This study is important since children's books may mediate a remembrance of the past, especially for the generation with no memories of the period.

Keywords: Marcos dictatorship, children's literature, children's rights, childhood, 1986 People Power Revolution

Shortly after the 2022 national presidential elections in the Philippines, the multi-awarded children's book publisher Adarna House was accused of destabilizing the government. In a Facebook post on May 12, 2022, Alex Paul Monteagudo of the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency "red-tagged" Adarna House as "subtly radicaliz[ing] the Filipino children against our Government" by selling discounted copies of children's books on the Marcos dictatorship. Similarly, National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed

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Conflict (NTF-ELCAC)[1] spokesperson Lorraine Badoy in her Facebook comment alleged the books "plant hate and lies in the tender hearts of our children" (Cabalza 2022; Magramo 2022). Immediately after this Facebook post and comment became viral, the books were sold out.

Such pronouncements are indicative of the power of children and children's books to pose a threat to authoritarian rule. Children's books are vehicles for the continuation of historical memory, for depictions of the past have implications for the future. The martial law declared by Ferdinand E. Marcos Sr. in 1972 and lasting until his ouster in the 1986 People Power Revolution was mired with media censorship and human rights violations. Amnesty International documents that 3,257 people were killed, 35,000 tortured, and 70,000 imprisoned during the regime (McCoy 2012, 119). In May 2022, fifty years after the declaration of martial law, Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr.—the dictator's son and namesake—won the Philippine presidency by 31 million votes, more than 50 percent more than those garnered by his closest opponent, Vice President Leonor "Leni" Robredo. However, Bongbong Marcos's campaign machinery relied on social media disinformation and fake news.[2] Many educators and historians feared the systemic whitewashing of martial law in school textbooks and social media through disinformation and historical revisionism (see Ardivilla 2016; Curaming 2017; Bautista 2018; Ong and Cabañes 2018; Aguilar 2019; Uyheng *et al.* 2021).

Censorship, communist red-tagging, and the erasure of the history of Marcos atrocities were real concerns in the production of children's books about the period. However, there is a need to investigate these children's books: What stories do they tell

1) As a counterinsurgency measure since 1969, the Philippine government has "red-tagged" or accused staunch critics of being members of the Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the New People's Army. This became more systematic under the Rodrigo Duterte administration through the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC). Made up of former military officials, the NTF-ELCAC "red-tagged" activists, journalists, intellectuals, celebrities, and politicians who were vocal in their opposition to the Duterte administration. Those who were "red-tagged" were subject to political harassment and could become victims of extrajudicial killings. Various human rights groups have demanded the abolition of the NTF-ELCAC (Human Rights Watch 2022).

The National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, which oversees the government's counter-intelligence and anti-terrorism operations, is part of the NTF-ELCAC (National Intelligence Coordinating Agency 2022).

2) According to the fact-checking group Tsek.ph, social media posts on Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. during the 2022 presidential campaign contained mostly misleading but positive information. Marcos Jr. earlier denied, but later admitted, having a "troll army" (paid organized keyboard warriors with false identities) to promote his image. The whistleblower Brittany Kaiser disclosed that the Marcos family had approached the now nonoperational political think tank Cambridge Analytica to "'rebrand' the Marcos family's image on social media" in time for Marcos Jr.'s vice presidential candidacy in 2016 (Tomacruz 2020; Buan 2022; Parry 2022).

of this period? How do these books portray children as main characters? How do they depict Philippine society under martial law? Most important, how does the family act as the locus of early political awakening in the child's world? These questions are important since children's books fill in the imagination of child readers who have no memory of the period. By interrogating how these child protagonists confront the violence and disruptions of family life caused by state fascism, I examine the texts' relationship with history and society, and their intervention in the present and past. In doing so, I also raise ethical considerations in the rendering of violence in children's books.

In this paper, I analyze how the child characters establish normalcy and exercise agency in children's books on the Marcos dictatorship that depict historical and political violence. More specifically, I examine the representations of the politicized child and the family dynamics that may influence such politicization. I study the literary devices of these texts, and the paratexts that would situate these books within their discursive milieu.

Normalcy and Children's Literature in the Philippines

Studies have been done on the construction of normalcy and middle classness in children's literature in terms of addressee and marketability. These works also analyze the concept of childhood in the Philippines, the uses of children's literature, and the language use in these books that reveals attitudes toward children.

Eugene Evasco (2011, 110–112) notes that while there may be no universal concept of childhood, dominant notions of childhood are rooted in the West. In a traditional setting, children are deemed as inferior and obedient to adults instead of capable thinking individuals. Hence, stories in textbooks are instructional materials to teach "moral lessons" (Evasco 2011, 122). While children are regarded as "unfinished" or "incomplete" adults (Evasco 2011, 117; Fechter 2014, 143), treating children as "inferior to adults" emphasizes the need for "correct behavior." It promotes a way of thinking that is static and hierarchical rather than contextual, cultural, and changing (see Fechter 2014; Eaude 2017, 19). The child—and consequently the future adult—view problems as being resolved with "simple solutions" and not with creative judgment that can confront the complexities of everyday life (Eaude 2017, 19).

Literature for children is "defined through its intended readers" (Aquino 2013, 146) and is categorized by reading levels and other similar metrics (Sunico *et al.* 2016). Children's literature is also intended to impart values to maintain the existing social order (Tolentino 2008, 5–6). It portrays a childhood that is "ideal—creative, happy, different, optimistic, productive, and having other positive characteristics that would create an

obedient child" (Tolentino 2008, 5). Moreover, writers and publishers of children's books face various gatekeepers (such as parents, educators, critics, and award-giving bodies), potential economic volatility, and the restrictiveness of government policies on education (Sagun and Luyt 2020, 634).

Children's literature in the Philippines is not limited to folklore or fantasy but also tackles the modern experiences of childhood (Tolentino 2008, 4). There is a robust production of stories depicting the "culture of childhood," which is the unique and everyday realities of growing up, rather than the "culture of children," which packages legends, myths, and folk traditions as children's tales (Sunico *et al.* 2016, 75; Villanueva 2016, 32). Part of this "culture of childhood" is the difficulties children face. In her study of Philippine children's books from 1990 to 2018, Lalaine Aquino (2020, 293–297) enumerates these difficulties as illness, family issues, poverty, and abuse. These books still replicate the current ideology of the child as "lower," "less privileged," and "less powerful" despite the child protagonists exhibiting resilience and courage (Aquino 2020, 306). Philippine children's books rarely establish the social connections of the country's problems with familial life. The child's complicated reality is instead rendered simplistically through simple language (Evasco 2011, 113).

From the abovementioned studies, it appears that children's literature in the Philippines is primarily pedagogical: for reading comprehension and for learning about the community. However, the portrayal of historical violence and societal injustices in these texts should also be critically examined. These texts may insinuate the complexities of memory, trauma, and unequal power relations in the hope of producing a generation of readers who are more questioning of abusive relations and despotic governments. With this, I turn to ethical criticism to elucidate the sensitivities in portraying historical violence in texts targeted toward young readers.

Framing Children's Agency and Politicization amidst Historical Violence

In stories portraying historical violence, writers and publishers exercise extra caution to protect the vulnerable child. This affects the representation of politicized child characters and the depiction of disturbing events. Niall Nance-Carroll (2021) writes that children and young people in politics are met with suspicion because of their "supposed naivete" and their interference in adult affairs. In this view, children do not have their own agency and are instead manipulated by adults for their own political agenda (Nance-Carroll 2021, 6, 16). Critics may argue over the supposed "age appropriateness" of such political topics, but as Rick Salutin (2006, A17) succinctly writes, "the world our kids live in is

age inappropriate, but they have to live there." Julia Mickenberg and Philip Nel (2011, 455) articulate the need for writing about such issues despite the contradiction: "Books advocating international understanding and criticizing abuse of authority are implicitly promoting peace; books that explicitly argue for peace are inevitably about war."

Lydia Kokkola (2003) mentions that with respect to ethical considerations, there is a tightrope to be walked in disclosing complex historical details. Revealing too much may upset children who are not prepared for such a magnitude of information. Revealing too little may mislead readers and whitewash history. In addition, language may not fully capture the enormity of human suffering, as in stories of the Holocaust. Kokkola borrows Leona Toker's concept of "eloquent reticence" to navigate sensitivity in narrating disturbing details. Moreover, "framed silences" also presuppose an adult intermediary reading alongside the child to supply gaps in information (Kokkola 2003, 26–28). In children's books on the Chilean dictatorship, for instance, some strategies of "framed silences" tell the stories of political violence through allegory and fable, or juxtapose innocuous words with images subtly suggesting marks of torture and slogans of protest (Garcia-Gonzalez 2020, 175).

With these concerns, I examine representations of the politicized child and the portrayal of historical violence that affected the family during martial law in the Philippines. Historical violence includes state violence during and after the period of martial law, such as militarization, incarceration, and political disappearances. Violence could also be due to structural inequalities, leading the child to confront class differences or live in poverty. The "politicized child" may mean someone who experiences, comprehends, and/or confronts these acts of violence. However, even if the child is seen as subverting the dictatorship, it does not necessarily mean that he/she has become more politically conscious. In the case of children's books on the Chilean dictatorship, Bernardita Muñoz-Chereau (2018, 238, 243) criticizes the idealized yet unbelievable child "superheroes" whose cunning outwits the encroaching military but whose political understanding and motivations are not explored in the texts. I also probe whether the texts in this study suggest that the injustices ended alongside the collapse of the Marcos dictatorship or exist up to the present.

This paper examines the family dynamics and the construction of normalcy in three children's books portraying life under the Marcos dictatorship: Augie Rivera's *Isang Harding Papel* (A garden of flowers) (2014) and *Si Jhun-Jhun, Noong Bago Ideklara ang Batas Militar* (Jhun-Jhun before the declaration of martial law) (2001) and Sandra Nicole Roldan's *At the School Gate* (2018). These books have children as protagonists and narrators who face political persecution because of the political involvement of their family members. I argue that in the three texts, the protagonists' struggles for normalcy—

i.e., constructing their own ordered world or reclaiming their "everyday lives"—are ways for the child characters to survive or even fight back against the dictatorship. Though absences may protect children from overwhelming information, some of the texts limit children's powers through silences that do not fully explain the historical situation of martial law. Instead, these absences may create a different understanding of history and may elide the historical forces that created authoritarian governments and structural inequalities.

Will Ortiz (2008, 279) writes that as historical fiction, children's books on history articulate the "political, ideological and nationalist aims" of the period, though they may not be concerned with "exactness in historical facts" (see also Oziewicz 2020, 522–524). Thus, these texts are fictionalized accounts based on stories about the milieu and framed within a nationalist project (Krawatzek and Friess 2022, 6). While Ortiz examines the bigger nationalistic aims, I analyze the intimate world of the child characters and their familial relations. Though my study is situated within the period of martial law in order to delineate an era, I am more concerned with the portrayal of historical violence and societal oppression that persisted beyond the Marcos dictatorship. For instance, *Si Jhun-Jhun* shows the problems of poverty and child labor that still exist. *At the School Gate* centers on the father's torture and arrest after martial law.

There are children's books on martial law in the form of fables (such as *The Magic Arrow*, Banal 2021), picture books (*EDSA*, Molina 2013), explanations of political systems (*Ito ang Diktadura* [This is the dictatorship], Plantel 2017a; and *Mga Uring Panlipunan* [Social classes], Plantel 2017b), or fragmented accounts of methods of torture (*Silent Witnesses [Mga Tahimik na Saksi]*, Alampay 2019). I am more concerned with books that have plots and delineate story progression, conflict, and resolution. Moreover, fictionalized accounts with a recognizable narrative show the perceptions of the characters and the construction of the child in the textual world. Paradoxically, this child is created by an adult author for his or her intended child audience and must live in the world with injustices created by adults (Beauvais 2015, 156).[3)]

Studies in Philippine children's and young adult literature problematize the portrayal of children as inferior to adults and their depictions as "active" or "passive" characters (see

3) I have excluded biographies in the form of children's books such as Ed Maranan's *Edjop: A Child of the Storm* (2009), Lara Saguisag's *Ninoy Aquino: A Courageous Homecoming* (2010), Jose T. Gamboa's *Brocka: The Filmmaker Without Fear* (2013), Luchie Maranan's *A Voice of Hope in a Time of Darkness: The Songs of Susan Fernandez-Magno* (2014), and Luz B. Maranan's *Lakay Billy: Defender of the Indigenous People* (2018). These construct the heroism of notable personalities and not the everyday life of an "ordinary" child during martial law. Also not included is young adult literature such as Cyan Abad-Jugo's novel *Salingkit* (2012) because the narrative is longer, more sustained, and intended for a teenage audience.

Ortiz 2008; Evasco 2011; Aquino 2020; Faire 2021). I go beyond such dichotomizations on the child's superior or subordinate status and add further to these concepts on the child's agency. Informed by Beauvais' concept of the "mighty child," I examine the child's strength in their future potential. In a play on the word "might," which could mean "power" and "possibilities," Beauvais locates the temporality of adult-child relations both within and outside the text:

> Because the implied child reader of children's literature *might* be taught by the children's book something that the adult *does not yet know*, that child is powerful in some sense of the word power—a sense that I call "might." (Beauvais 2015)

The child's and adult's powers are "time-bound," for while seen as an authority, the adult is faced with limited time and is expected not to live through the future. In contrast, the child, who is usually considered to be "less," may gain power through the text written by the adult (Beauvais 2015, 3). By focusing on the family dynamics and construction of normalcy in these texts, I look at how adults justify or challenge the society that they create, and how children struggle to comprehend this world and later shape the future.

I also examine how the child characters establish "normalcy" amidst the historical violence that affects their families. Shifting family structures may result in differing views of what is "normal" (Morillo *et al.* 2013, 24–25). As an indicator of "normalcy," one may look at the aspirations of families since they are also tied with the concept of an "ideal family" (Grant 2023, 117; see also Bantang *et al.* 2022). In relation to political violence, normalcy may mean wanting to lead "ordinary lives" that are free from persecution and oppression (Hrckova and Zeller 2021, 105). Does normalcy mean guaranteeing a carefree and innocent childhood, and the preservation of the family unit? Is it the acceptance of the new social order ushered in by the dictatorship, and thereby the construction of the "new normal"? How do the characters in the texts assert structure, order, and control despite state intrusions into both their private and public lives?

In relation to the concept of the mighty child, I interrogate how children exercise their agency in processing their family's situation and surroundings. In this sense, agency means the capacity for children to think and act "whether to ensure their own interests or to modify the world that surrounds them" (Pufall and Unsworth 2004, 9). By so doing, children create their own social realities as well as their identities. I examine how children comprehend the overlapping worlds of family, school, and the bigger society and the creative ways in which they push the limits of dictatorships.

I analyze how paratexts and literary devices such as metaphors and symbolism frame the narrative, characterize familial relations, and construct normalcy. I also probe how the celebratory narrative of the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution punctuated the

turmoil experienced during martial law.[4] *Isang Harding Papel* undermines the narrative of the child Jenny Cortes, who waits and structures her days around the cultural markers of the dictatorship. The text presents an ordered world of the dictatorship, while the mother's activism is treated lightly. *Si Jhun-Jhun, Noong Bago Ideklara ang Batas Militar* may depict political violence and poverty as depriving the child of a carefree childhood, but the paratexts resolve such political and societal conflicts. *At the School Gate* describes the tension of state surveillance in addition to the typical school problems of teenage girls. The text also draws a contrast between "normal" non-political families and activist families. I conclude by elucidating how children as political actors are presented in the texts, and the effects of silences in the texts. Through these texts, I study the implications of martial law and the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution for children with no memory of the period.

Cultural Objects of the Dictatorship in *Isang Harding Papel*

Isang Harding Papel, a story by Augie Rivera with illustrations by Rommel Joson, is about seven-year-old Jenny, whose mother, Aling Chit, is incarcerated during the Marcos dictatorship. Jenny's mother gives Jenny a paper flower every time Jenny visits. Despite the difficulties of growing up with an absent mother, Jenny is lovingly raised by her grandmother Lola Priming. After seven years, Aling Chit is released following the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution and finally reunites with her now 14-year-old daughter. This story was published only in Filipino without English translation and is targeted toward children eight years old and above. Hence, the words are relatively simple and the sentences short. Kata Garcia, product development officer at Adarna House, mentioned that the publisher wanted to focus on publishing in Filipino around 2014. Hence, there are no English translations of books produced during that period (personal interview with Garcia, November 7, 2023).

An award-winning children's book writer, Rivera tackles difficult subjects such as dyslexia and sexual and verbal abuse. Though he was sheltered from the horrors of

4) From February 22 to 25, 1986, millions marched along Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA) following the massive violence and cheating in the 1986 snap elections. Ferdinand E. Marcos Sr. was declared the winner over Corazon Aquino, the widow of slain Senator Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino Jr., who was Marcos's top political opponent. The People Power Revolution of 1986 ended the twenty-year dictatorial rule of Marcos Sr. and was celebrated worldwide as the overthrow of an authoritarian regime through a "peaceful revolution." However, the Corazon Aquino government, which took over, preserved the ruling elites and failed to solve the problems of poverty, landlessness, and human rights abuses (see Thompson 1996; Anderson 2004; Curaming and Claudio 2010).

martial law while growing up, he based *Isang Harding Papel* on the real-life experiences of his cousin's mother, who was a political detainee at the time. Rivera acknowledges the challenges in writing about historical violence but hopes that child readers will realize that even children can be part of social change. In both *Isang Harding Papel* and *Si Jhun-Jhun*, Rivera focuses more on character development than historical details in order to make the characters

> more believable, relatable, and child-like, so other children could easily empathize with them. Through their stories, we hope the child reader would get curious and want to know more about history and the conditions and struggles of children during these most difficult periods in our nation's past. (Email correspondence with Rivera, October 12, 2023)

Rivera wrote the manuscript of *Isang Harding Papel* before *Si Jhun-Jhun* (2001), but he revived the former book project in 2014 when he felt that the Marcos historical revisionism was becoming more rampant (personal interview with Garcia, November 7, 2023).

As part of Adarna House's marketing strategy, *Isang Harding Papel* is included in the #NeverAgain bundle with other titles on the Marcos dictatorship and EDSA Revolution, including *Si Jhun-Jhun*. Since its publication in 2014, it is already in its ninth printing, with 45,000 copies released as of 2023. The book is available both in the Philippines and overseas through local and international distributors. It may be ordered through Adarna House's official website and other online shopping platforms. Parents, librarians, and NGOs buy such books, and schools include *Isang Harding Papel* in required reading for History subjects (personal interview with Garcia, November 7, 2023). In 2016 *Isang Harding Papel* was adapted and staged as a musical performed by students from the Raya School, in Quezon City. Though the book does not specify that the story is based on the life of Jenny, a child of a political detainee and Rivera's relative (Bolido 2014), various write-ups, interviews with the author, promotional materials, and book tours have mentioned this detail.

The book was published through the EDSA People Power Commission, which aims to commemorate and preserve the stories behind the nonviolent uprising that toppled the Marcos dictatorship. *Isang Harding Papel* highlights the peaceful aspects of martial law, despite the actual violence during the dictatorship. Since the author focuses more on the child's character than on historical details, the text avoids explanations for the mother's activism and the reasons for the people's uprising that led to the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution. The adults evade the difficult and complex questions the child asks, and the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution is depicted as a glorious, sudden event.

The story is about a child waiting for her mother to be released from prison until

the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution. The blurb explains:

> Napupuno na ng mga bulaklak ang kwarto ni Jenny pero wala pa rin ang nanay niya. Panahon ng Martial Law, panahon ng pinaiiral na disiplina para daw sa kaunlaran. Pero para kay Jenny, panahon iyon ng pagkakalayo nilang mag-ina. Hanggang kalian kaya matatapos ang pagbuo niya ng harding papel?
>
> Jenny's room is full of flowers, but her mother is still not here. This is the time of martial law, a time when discipline is enforced, they say, for progress. But for Jenny, this is the time when she is separated from her mother. When will she finish creating her garden of flowers? (Rivera 2014)

The book depicts everyday life under the Marcos dictatorship in an orderly and disciplined world that exists outside of prison. Jenny observes the clean streets, white walls, painted trash cans, and "metro aide" street sweepers. The giant billboards of President Ferdinand E. Marcos Sr. and First Lady Imelda Marcos emphasize an orderly life with the slogan "Sa Ikauunlad ng Bayan, Disiplina ang Kailangan" (For the country's progress, discipline is needed). Jenny's grandmother affirms this emphasis by attributing it to the New Society under Marcos Sr.: "Panahon ng Batas Militar at ayon kay Lola, ang kalinisan, kaayusan, katahimikan, at iba pang mga pagbabago sa paligid ay bahagi ng pinapangarap ni Marcos na 'Bagong Lipunan'" (This is the time of martial law, and Grandmother says that cleanliness, order, peacefulness, and other changes around us are part of Marcos's vision of the New Society) (Rivera 2014, 5–6).

Through its emphasis on order and structure, the Marcos dictatorship is depicted as normal and not imposed through the silencing of dissent. This normalcy is constructed also through cultural markers of life under martial law such as bell-bottom jeans, the "Bagong Lipunan" (New Society) hymn, curfew, metro aides, Metrocom (military police), and the Nutribun.[5] A glossary of these terms appears at the end of *Isang Harding Papel*. Except for the bell-bottom jeans, which originated from the West, these things did not just contribute to the sights and sounds of the times; they normalized the dictatorship

5) The "Bagong Lipunan" (New Society) hymn was the anthem of Marcos Sr.'s "New Society," with lyrics by National Artists Levi Celerio and music by Felipe Padilla de Leon.

Metro aides are street sweepers of Metro Manila. Their uniform consists of a yellow long-sleeved shirt, red pants, and a *salakot* or cone-shaped hat made from bamboo and rattan.

The Philippine Constabulary Metropolitan Command, or Metrocom, was a police force established in 1967 to operate within Metro Manila. Tasked with augmenting the local police, Metrocom strictly implemented curfew and violently dispersed activists during rallies (Marcos 1967).

A Nutribun was an oversized round bread that was distributed to public school children during martial law. A project of the United States Agency for International Development to address malnutrition, the Nutribun was misrepresented as having been introduced by First Lady Imelda Marcos. Sacks of Nutribun were stamped "Courtesy of Imelda Marcos-Tulungan project" (Dalupang 2016).

because they instilled the principles of the New Society within everyday lives.[6] These projects and cultural markers were impositions to "place social conduct within the purview of state policy" (Espiritu 2017, 53). They reminded citizens of the discipline that was the guiding tenet of the New Society through ceremony, cleanliness, proper nutrition, community regulations, and military presence. The text treats these markers as keeping the order of the New Society rather than objects that promoted or masked the violence and militarization of the dictatorship. Rather, these markers promoted the generational identification (see Krawatzek and Friess 2022, 5) of what was fashionable in the 1970s and late 1980s.

Similarly, activism is treated as a by-product of the era and is minimized to highlight the peacefulness and progress during the dictatorship. In *Isang Harding Papel*, picture collages of the figures of President Ferdinand E. Marcos Sr. and First Lady Imelda Marcos are in color, with their gazes looming over the full-page spread (Rivera 2014, 5–8). In contrast, the newspapers, which are used for the paper flowers, show pictures of political demonstrations that are taken from real-life photos of news headlines. However, these are in faded sepia, recede into the background, and are placed at the sides of the page. Even the slogans in the placards are vague and open-ended, such as "Mabuhay ang kultura ng masa" (Long live the culture of the masses) and "Makiisa sa mga tsuper" (Unite with the drivers) (Rivera 2014, 17–18), rather than about pressing issues such as oil price hikes, militarization, and imperialist aggression. They do not indicate the concrete issues faced by the masses and public transportation drivers. This implies that activism is both a specter and a margin. Though it forms the undercurrent of Jenny's family life, activism is decentered yet hovering. Instead of redefining the center, the pictures of activism in the story are static and unmoving. Therefore, activism is depicted as a marginal ghost that is softened, muted, and waning into oblivion. On the other hand, the paper flower is on the middle of the page, which underscores the yearnings of mother and child to be reunited.

This evasion of activism is more telling in Aling Chit's and Lola Priming's explanation of the former's imprisonment, which is told lightly and playfully. It glosses over the political repression that directly affects the family:

6) Compared to other Philippine presidencies after World War II, the Marcos dictatorship was unique in that it created an ideology centered around President Ferdinand E. Marcos Sr. and First Lady Imelda Marcos. Through appropriation of the Malakas and Maganda origin myth, the Marcos couple were mythologized as the "father" and "mother" of the "New Society." Vicente Rafael (2000, 282–304) studied how commissioned biographies of the Marcoses wove personal lives into the fate and destiny of the nation. Talitha Espiritu (2017, 53–83) scrutinized how Filipino values and ideology were reformulated to fit the goals of the New Society.

"Bakit po kayo ipinakulong?" muntik nang mabulunan si Aling Chit sa tanong ng anak niya.

"Paano, pag may rally, lahat ng pinapalabas naming mga dula sa kalye, laban kay Marcos. Hindi niya siguro nagustuhan!" pabirong sagot niya.

"Ang sabihin mo, pakalat-kalat kasi sa kalsada 'yang nanay mo, kaya napasama sa mga 'iwinalis'!" hagikgik ni Lola Priming.

"Why are you imprisoned?" Aling Chit almost choked at her child's question.

"Because whenever there is a rally, all our street plays are against Marcos. Maybe he didn't like it!" she answered jokingly.

"Well, your mother is just messing around in the streets, that's why she was swept away!" Lola Priming laughed. (Rivera 2014, 16)

Activism is treated lightly and talked about jokingly. Not much is said on why the mother is in prison in the first place, nor questioning why staging a street play would be grounds for imprisonment. Aquino (2020, 304–305) observes that in *Isang Harding Papel*, as well as in other Philippine children's stories, the child character asks questions, but "[i]n several instances, the adults do not give a direct answer as if expecting the child to 'read between the lines.'" Aquino wonders whether the adults belittle the child's understanding or shield them from the difficulties of life. Nonetheless, further explaining the circumstances of the mother's arrest could have better exposed the abuses of the dictatorship.

The political struggles of the family are treated ahistorically since the familial situation is not anchored to the specific historical and material conditions that created martial law. Though Aling Chit is humanized as a gentle and loving mother, there are no questions on why she is treated as an enemy of the state. No explanations are given for why she is blindfolded during Jenny's prison visits. The absence of these reasons affects the framing of the narrative. Jenny's problem is when her mother will come home rather than why her mother is imprisoned in the first place.

Without explaining the political implications of Aling Chit's incarceration, the dilemma shifts to mere absentee parenting rather than the cruelties of the dictatorship. The separation of mother and child may be no different from absentee parenting because of economic reasons, such as the parent's migration as an overseas Filipino worker. Jenny's problems are more about growing up without her parents: her sadness in being bullied for having no parents, and being the only child without parents watching her school play. Yet, this conflict is resolved easily. Lola Priming attends Jenny's school program and applauds enthusiastically. Aling Chit simply explains that Jenny's father died when Jenny was a baby and that she herself will be home soon.

Earlier, the order and discipline of martial law are touted despite the incarceration of dissidents, who include Jenny's mother. Jenny forces herself to have order and discipline

to organize the days of the week. Her mother will give Jenny a paper flower in exchange for stories about her weeklong activities. This construction of normalcy—which again is structured through the cultural markers of the dictatorship—serves as a coping mechanism for Jenny. Though there may not be an outright refusal of these cultural markers, there are subtle and comic subversions of their meanings. The whole school laughs when the "Bagong Lipunan" (New Society) hymn recording becomes garbled during the flag ceremony. It is not mentioned how the recording broke. Lola Priming chases their pet dog, playfully named Makoy (a moniker for Marcos Sr. as a tongue-in-cheek reference to him as "tuta ng mga 'Kano" or "lapdog of the Americans," which was a slogan chanted by activists), when the dog urinates on her (Rivera 2014, 19–20).

The most evident objects in this book are the Nutribun and paper flowers. Incorrectly touted as a project of First Lady Imelda Marcos, the Nutribun was distributed to public school children for free and was part of everyday school life for those growing up in that period. At first, the Nutribun was seen as desirable. Jenny mulls, "Baka tinitingnan kung masarap ang palaman!" (Maybe the soldiers are checking if the sandwich spread is delicious!) when even the Nutribun is subject to military inspection before entering prison (Rivera 2014, 10). Jenny excitedly announces that she has brought a Nutribun as a present for her mother. The Nutribun is treated as a source of nourishment that the child happily and excitedly accepts and gifts, rather than a product of the dictatorship that should be treated with revulsion.

In this text the Nutribun is depicted positively despite varying recollections regarding the bread. Some recall it as being filling, milky, and tasty, while others remember it as being bland or infested with *bukbok* (weevils). The disparities in taste and quality were due to the Nutribun being produced in local bakeries with different source materials (Orillos 2018). Whether or not the family members in *Isang Harding Papel* have differing attitudes toward the Nutribun—or life during the dictatorship as a whole—the messaging may leave a positive impact on readers if the Nutribun is portrayed favorably despite the contradictory memories and controversies surrounding it.

Later, the Nutribun, which Jenny initially regarded as desirable, numbs her teeth when eaten with ice cream (Rivera 2014, 20). However, this incident is treated as accidental and not an active rejection of the Nutribun. The Nutribun is afterward transformed into a vessel in which Aling Chit smuggles crepe paper, scissors, a pencil, and wire to create paper flowers. Ironically, the Nutribun—a creation of the dictatorship—becomes a medium to bind the parent-child relationship disrupted by the dictatorship. Yet, Jenny does not acknowledge the Nutribun as a project of the Marcoses that would make the dictatorship palatable and acceptable. Such programs mask gross human rights violations, including the detention of Jenny's mother.

In the end, the titular garden of paper flowers acts as a reminder of the mother's presence amidst the looming markers of the dictatorship that permeate everyday life. In the final page, the garden of flowers has transformed into the masses of people in the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution. This fulfills Jenny's wish, "'Sana, umuwi na ang nanay ko'" (I hope my mother comes home) (Rivera 2014, 29). However, there seems to be no clear explanation for how this plaintive yearning would give rise to a historic event that ended the dictatorship.

Jenny expresses some agency in structuring her life by pursuing her own activities and organizing her world. She attempts to normalize her childhood around the dictatorship that took her mother away from her. But overall, Jenny is depicted as a child who waits and wonders: she grows up as if in a time-lapse. From a seven-year-old child in the moment of the story's telling, she abruptly turns 14 years old on the next page. In the context of the mighty child, both the "might" as future potential and the "might" as strength are depicted as static. Jenny's power is undeveloped because the present is sutured into the future. The implied repetitiveness of her life during the unsaid years suggests a lack of processing of both her personal circumstances and the country's events, which deprives her of the potential to mature in political consciousness. The child's strength seems to be overridden by the EDSA Revolution, which leads to her reunion with her mother. However, the sociohistorical causes of the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution are not explained.

Despite their activism, the adults are depicted not as activists but as parents first. The book could have developed Aling Chit as an activist mother and Lola Priming as a grandmother who mothered an activist mother. However, the text does not acknowledge the agency of people, or their capacity to act and decide for both personal and political ends. The activism of the mother is unexplained. The grandmother merely does the telling. The child Jenny grows up, but not in political consciousness. The thousands who marched in the People Power Revolution just suddenly appear and are not shown as fearless and determined to end the dictatorship.

This kind of narrative resolution may be rooted in the spontaneous, nonaggressive, and festive atmosphere of the 1986 EDSA Revolution, which mobilized even ordinary civilians who did not usually participate in street protests (Gonzaga 2009, 115–116). Because they are not members of political organizations, they are immune to influence from the vanguard party and are not bound by traditional ideologies. The people in the 1986 EDSA Revolution felt they had contributed to the revolution through simple gestures like distributing food, amassing numbers, and praying. Hence, Fernando Gonzaga (2009, 114) described the 1986 EDSA Revolution as "the work of the multitude as grand narratives are abandoned for micro-political tactics." Since the revolution is deemed a

"singular event," and in part because of the influence of the Catholic Church in rallying the people, it is regarded as a miraculous work of divine justice (Gonzaga 2009, 125–126).

By robbing the characters of their agency, the narrative resolution in *Isang Harding Papel* may decentralize focus and encourage passivity where the historical outcome is celebrated, rather than connecting the outcome to political processes. Though Beauvais (2015, 177–178) cautions against placing impossible demands on children or shaming them, a more empowering narrative is to present child characters with the agency to try to solve the problems they face (Muñoz-Chereau 2018, 243), or children "who are willing to question the status quo" (Mickenberg and Nel 2011, 467).

Nonetheless, *Isang Harding Papel* contains an optimistic message of hope, which not even the dictatorship can take away. This hope functions as an abstract concept that propels the narrative forward. But ironically, the characters just optimistically wish that history would work in their favor without actively taking part in it. A text that seemingly normalizes growing up with an imprisoned mother should raise more questions on the injustices that led to the mother's imprisonment. There may be a happy resolution to the story since the Marcos dictatorship ends and the family is reunited. But despite this arbitrary closure in the textual universe, one may wonder whether the reader has become more cognizant of the importance, and even the failures, of the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution. Without delving into the social, political, and historical beginnings and end of martial law, the text merely highlights the fashion and objects of the Marcos dictatorship. Hence, Jenny's predicament is simply treated as one child's personal problem since the narrative is not elevated to the story of a people.

Paratexts and Play in *Si Jhun-Jhun, Noong Bago Ideklara ang Batas Militar*

Also written by Augie Rivera, with illustrations by Brian Vallesteros, *Si Jhun-Jhun, Noong Bago Ideklara ang Batas Militar* (2001) is about Jhun-Jhun, whose brother Jamie becomes a *desaparecido*, or a victim of forced disappearance. Intrigued by his brother's activities, Jhun-Jhun follows him to the shoe factory where he works. There, Jhun-Jhun finds that Jaime has joined the workers on strike. Jhun-Jhun furtively marches with them toward Mendiola and witnesses the violence between the military and the rallyists. After the dispersal of the rally, Jhun-Jhun looks for Jaime but only manages to retrieve his brother's left slipper. Jhun-Jhun and his mother unsuccessfully look for Jaime in the military camps. Jhun-Jhun later works as a street vendor and secretly attends political demonstrations wearing his brother's left slipper.

UNICEF and Adarna House commissioned Rivera to write the *Batang Historyador*

(Young historian) series, of which *Si Jhun-Jhun* is a part. Aside from highlighting children's rights, the series aims to portray the lives of Filipino children in different eras of history. The *Batang Historyador* series was envisioned as an "alternative way of teaching history through stories," Rivera explained. "Though the child's life is fictionalized, the historical backdrop, events, places, where and when the story might happen, are real. To make history 'come alive' is through stories and personal accounts from primary sources, and even historical fiction" (email correspondence with Rivera, October 12, 2023).

Initially Rivera offered *Isang Harding Papel* to depict the martial law years as a *Batang Historyador* installment, but he ended up writing *Si Jhun-Jhun* instead. The inspiration for this story came from a photo of the aftermath of the brutal dispersal of a political rally that was "full of broken bottles, stones, and slippers." Rivera asserted that it was important to write about harsh realities in children's books, especially during challenging times in the country's history. However, he emphasized it was important to handle violence appropriately. For instance, Jhun-Jhun is shown hiding under a banner during the rally's dispersal so that there is a "filter" to "minimize the violence from the child's point-of-view" (email correspondence with Rivera, October 12, 2023).

Aside from being part of the *Batang Historyador* series, *Si Jhun-Jhun* is also included in Adarna House's #NeverAgain series. As of February 2023 it was already in its 11th printing, with 55,000 copies released. The Department of Education orders copies in bulk since the *Batang Historyador* series is required reading for Philippine history classes. NGOs and local governments also buy these books en masse. The sales of both *Si Jhun-Jhun* and *Isang Harding Papel* increased dramatically in 2022 after the election of Ferdinand Marcos Jr. as Philippine president and the NTF-ELCAC red-tagging of the #NeverAgain series. Parents from both the Philippines and diasporic communities buy the books not only to teach Philippine culture and history but to educate their children about the atrocities of martial law (personal interview with Garcia, November 7, 2023).

The story of *Si Jhun-Jhun* shows how state violence permeates Jhun-Jhun's private world. The paratexts emphasize the historical conflicts surrounding the child during martial law and how these tensions are simply resolved with the end of an era. A short historical note describes the first three months of 1970, before the declaration of martial law in 1972, as a time of protest against the Marcos Sr. administration. However, this historical note refrains from labeling the period as the First Quarter Storm of 1970—a series of anti-government marches, demonstrations, and protests, which was a historic event in itself. Though the note explains that this civil unrest was the pretext for the declaration of martial law, the focus is on martial law rather than the First Quarter Storm. If the First Quarter Storm had been named, the inquiring adult or child reader may research on that period and analyze the key actors and historical forces that gave rise to

the event that would lead to martial law. The causality of history would then be established. The story of Jhun-Jhun may have taken place at any time during martial law, and not necessarily during the First Quarter Storm. The historical note emphasizes the suppression of dissent through the closure of Senate, the control of media outlets, and the imprisonment of the administration's critics. These protests, the historical note also explains, culminated in EDSA 1 People Power. In contrast to not labeling the First Quarter Storm, the note explicitly points to the end of the dictatorship as EDSA 1 People Power. Though the historical note justifies the rallies during the Marcos Sr. presidency, it nonetheless emphasizes the historic end rather than the beginning of the Marcos dictatorship.

The 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution is viewed as an idyllic time that continues up to the present with respect to children's rights. Since the *Batang Historyador* series is jointly published with UNICEF, the book's paratexts contain a brief introduction to UNICEF and the simplified version of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1), which was adopted on November 20, 1989.

The historical note affirms the right of the child to free expression as stipulated in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (2). Because of these conventions, the notion of child's rights has spread in the country since the late 1980s and has entered academic and popular discourse (Evasco 2011, 114). With the book's paratexts, readers may be assured that children are protected through an international entity and will no longer suffer state violence as during the Marcos dictatorship. Normalcy is situated by highlighting the abnormal: order is restored in the present day because what is proper and just is being enforced in the present era, compared to the imbalance of powers in the past. This implies that children's rights are safeguarded now, as if the political repression of children ended along with the Marcos dictatorship.[7)]

The world of *Si Jhun-Jhun* is permeated with objects and events referring to protests, such as slogans, placards, factory strikes, and Mendiola rallies. This contrasts with the

7) While there has been some progress with respect to children's rights after the ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1990, many Filipino children still do not live decently. The 31 percent of children living below the poverty line do not have access to good nutrition, potable drinking water, and education. Moreover, children across socioeconomic classes experience cyberbullying as well as physical and emotional violence (Coram International 2018; UNICEF Philippines 2018).

Children have also been reported as casualties in the "war on drugs" launched by President Rodrigo Duterte. Several NGOs have reported that 101 children were killed from July 2016 through December 2018 (Human Rights Watch 2020). Children experience police brutality, since drug raids happen inside their homes. They may also witness the extrajudicial killing of their parents. These children are forced to stop schooling because of the loss of a breadwinner, and they leave their communities for fear of further violence. They become child laborers or are prone to sex trafficking and other criminal activities (Human Rights Watch 2020).

ordered and disciplined world of *Isang Harding Papel*, which is defined by the cultural markers of the New Society. Readers are also confronted with inequalities due to social class. While his older brother Jaime works in a shoe factory, Jhun-Jhun sells newspapers and boiled bananas instead of playing on the streets. His childhood is lost not only through political violence but also due to poverty.

The story is told in the language of play to foreground childhood simplicity and imagination and the later destruction of the carefree world of the child. The symbolism of the brother's slipper and the meaning of the streets signal the childhood loss of innocence. The story opens with Jhun-Jhun playing *tumbang preso* (a game in which an empty can is hit with slippers) on the street with his playmates. To Jaime's annoyance, Jhun-Jhun's favorite weapon is his brother's slipper. Jhun-Jhun naively reasons that his brother's slipper is imbued with magical powers. In reality, the slipper is just bigger and can easily topple the can.

Later, Jaime scolds Jhun-Jhun for sequestering his slipper for play since Jaime needs both slippers to run his "errands." The slipper is a symbol of mobility for Jaime, which Jhun-Jhun laments since this also signals Jaime's bourgeoning adult independence. The brothers no longer enjoy childhood activities together (Rivera 2001, 11). The mother explains to Jhun-Jhun that growing older is the way things are: "It's really like that, *anak* (child). Your *kuya* (big brother) is working. . . . And besides, he's getting older, so he's busy with other things now" (Rivera 2001, 12). Finding one's individuality is construed as normal as growing up, which may sadly lead to growing apart. Later, political involvement is revealed as forming the bigger and more adult world of Jaime, which causes the rupture of sibling bonds.

The innocent childhood world of Jhun-Jhun is shattered as depicted in the violent rally dispersal. In the commotion, Jhun-Jhun hides under a red banner and counts to ten, like playing a game of hide-and-seek. He retreats from state aggression through play, almost a tug-of-war between childhood and adulthood. Amidst the debris, he marvels at the slippers left behind by the rallyists. He observes, "All that was left were stones, broken glass, placards, banners, and slippers! Lots of slippers—as if a thousand people had played *tumbang preso*!" (Rivera 2001, 25). This strikes the reader with the bitter realization of the material remains of one's existence. Like the shoes that are frequently displayed in Holocaust memorials, these slippers mark absence, with their owners lost and presumably annihilated. Much like Kokkola's (2003, 25–26) "framed silences," this "abyss of silence" that contains "informational gaps" and withholds overwhelming details may resonate on an emotional level. With Jhun-Jhun's right slipper missing, he wears his brother's left slipper, which he miraculously locates in the sea of slippers.

In the end, this story portrays the subversion of the child who secretly goes to rallies

despite his mother's objections. Wearing his brother's left slipper symbolizes Jhun-Jhun filling the role of his brother and continuing the fight. This contrasts with the passivity of the mother, who waits, prays, and hopes. Unlike *Isang Harding Papel*, where the mother is reunited with her child amidst the triumph of the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution, *Si Jhun-Jhun* does not end happily. Jaime is never found, and his whereabouts remain uncertain: "They did not know where he was. Maybe he was in prison. Maybe he was in hiding. No one knew" (Rivera 2001, 26).

Jhun-Jhun bears the consequences of his brother's disappearance and is suddenly thrown into adulthood because of poverty. He struggles both as a child working odd jobs and as a child whose family life is disrupted by state violence. The child earns a living as a street vendor and has no more time to play. The streets are no longer his playground and safe refuge but a battlefield where he lost his brother and where he now must make a living. Despite Jhun-Jhun's abrupt transitioning to adulthood because of political repression, the story is not defeatist and ends with a glimmer of hope through the continuance of the brother's fight.

At first glance, Jhun-Jhun might be considered a mighty child because of his agency in attending political demonstrations without adult approval. But despite this, one wonders at his political maturity. A mighty child's potential lies in the child's understanding of the social world, which may translate into political commitment in the future. Jaime's left slipper may be symbolic of leftist ideology, but is Jhun-Jhun's political consciousness raised by his continuation of his brother's fight? Is there an understanding of what the child is fighting for? Jhun-Jhun may engage in political participation—i.e., participating in collective actions to enact social change (termed "critical action")—but it is unclear whether he has grown in political consciousness or in his ability to make meaningful connections on the nature of societal inequalities (termed "critical reflection") (see Godfrey and Grayman 2014; Diemer and Rapa 2016, 222). Hence, one also wonders whether Jhun-Jhun will sustain his political activities into adulthood.

While the text does not delve into Jhun-Jhun's political consciousness, the illustrations, which depict placards, may hint at the nature of the demonstrations during the rule of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. The historical note which foregrounds the story describes broadly the tense political climate and repression during the Marcos Sr. presidency. However, the historical note and the illustrations are not specific about the social and economic dilemma of those times. The illustrations may depict the slogans "FM [Ferdinand Marcos] Busog sa Pera ng Bayan" (FM devours the country's money), "Buwis ng mamamayan nasaan na" (Where are the taxes of the people), "US-Imperyalismo Salot ng Mundo" (US-imperialism curse of the world) (Rivera 2001, 18–19). Yet these calls are not easily discernible since they are blocked or cut from the frame. The picture

spread at the end of the book contains the slogan "Para sa Demokrasya" (For democracy), which is vague and open-ended. What is democracy in this sense? The other slogan, "Marcos Diktador" (Marcos dictator), though a common slogan and chant, seems to be stating the obvious (Rivera 2001, 30). While these slogans may point toward government corruption and anti-imperialism, they are toned down and do not capture fully the economic and political crisis nor the concrete demands of the activists.

Photographs can anchor the fictive world of the text to historical events. Yet, the historical importance of the photographs in *Si Jhun-Jhun* is diluted. The front and back covers contain pictures with slogans from the First Quarter Storm, but they are arranged in a collage and difficult to read. Moreover, these pictures are not in the original black and white but in faded purplish pink. Hence, the original photographs are glazed with more subdued hues of red, as if the anger and violence associated with the color red have receded in memory.

Si Jhun-Jhun illustrates how the tension of the narrative is resolved in the paratexts. Despite the seemingly explicit description of the violence that Jhun-Jhun faces, the martial law period is depicted as a repressive yet bygone era where societal conflicts belong only to the past. Hence, Jhun-Jhun does not need to develop his political consciousness—why would he, when his struggles end after the dictatorship? Though the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child may help reassure readers of the idealized world where children's rights are protected, it does not address the structural defects that cause the continuing political repression and poverty.

Resisting State Intrusion in *At the School Gate*

At the School Gate (2018) is about a 15-year-old schoolgirl who must deal with the arrest of her father and the surveillance of a military agent years after martial law. Written by Sandra Nicole Roldan and illustrated by Nina Martinez, this is a semi-autobiographical account of the author's own experiences as the child of an activist father who was politically detained during martial law. The martial law activist and political detainee Bobby Roldan, Sandra's father, was arrested for the second time in 1991 while working for an NGO during the Corazon Aquino presidency (Peña 2021).

Compared to *Si Jhun-Jhun* and *Isang Harding Papel*, *At the School Gate* has a longer narrative structure since this is aimed at an older, teen audience, as hinted at by the age of the protagonist. Stories targeted at teenagers 13 to 18 years old include various individuals and institutions that influence the child, such as parents, peers, teachers, school, mass media, church, and government (Evasco 2011, 109). In addition, the main

plot is set after the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution to show that the problems and political repression continued after the end of the Marcos dictatorship.[8)]

The story begins with 15-year-old Ella Cortez rushing to finish her column for the school paper as her Aunt Em arrives to pick her up from school. When they stop by the canteen, the aunt reveals that Ella's father, Buddy, has been arrested for the third time despite being no longer part of the underground movement. As Aunt Em and Ella are leaving the canteen, an unknown man "with bullet teeth" (Roldan 2018, 21) who is assumed to be a military agent follows them around. In the coming days, this man trails Ella at the school gate. Courageously, Ella confronts the man and tells him to leave her alone.

Roldan created this story "to question the very pastness of Martial Law, and to show that human rights atrocities affect not just the activists but also their families and their children" (Unlocking the School Gate, 2023). As a trauma response to being put under military surveillance at the age of 14, Roldan wrote various iterations of this story for over twenty years. The story appeared first as high school diary entries and then as requirements for fiction, non-fiction, poetry, and young adult fiction workshop classes while the author was working on her undergraduate and graduate degrees in creative writing. Roldan crafted Ella "as a stand-in for myself" but directed the narrative as a wish fulfillment for actions she wished she had been able to do differently:

> In the story, she was able to do the things that I could not do in real life, like confront the perpetrators of state violence. It was very important for me that Ella would feel empowered at the end of the story. It was precisely because I did not feel that way, not even now, 30 plus years after that traumatic event. (Unlocking the School Gate, 2023)

Though Roldan acknowledges that the story is "dark and terrifying," she made sure that "there were moments of light" by portraying the "possibility for hope, for fighting back, for being brave, even in the darkest and most difficult times" (Unlocking the School Gate, 2023).

In 2016, Rodrigo Duterte was campaigning for the presidency and there was the threat of a return to authoritarian rule. To warn against the horrors of dictatorship, the publisher Bookmark included *At the School Gate* in a martial law anthology but later (in 2018) released it as a stand-alone illustrated children's book. Five thousand copies were first printed, of which Roldan estimates that around two thousand to three thousand were

8) Human rights violations continued in the succeeding presidencies after the dictatorship. The US-sponsored low-intensity conflict under the Corazon Aquino administration continued Marcos Sr.'s program of deploying vigilantes in the countryside for counterinsurgency activities (Curaming and Claudio 2010, 11).

sold. The book is available both locally and overseas, mostly through small independent bookstores and online sellers. Roldan mentioned that there was a demand for this book especially during Christmastime as well as the anniversary of the martial law declaration and 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution. The book was also included in numerous best book of the year lists (personal interview with Roldan, October 20, 2023; Unlocking the School Gate, 2023).

With a longer narrative than *Isang Harding Papel* and *Si Jhun-Jhun*, *At the School Gate* tells more about the circumstances of the family through flashbacks: how Ella was conceived in the Camp Crame Detention Center in 1976 during her mother's "conjugal visit" to her father, and how she grew up with her father's comrades sleeping in their house. The story proceeds with the euphoria of the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution. Yet, Ella's familial situation is not as rosy. Shortly after the end of the dictatorship, Ella's parents separate in 1987. Her mother migrates to the United States, while her father remains in the Philippines to become a filmmaker. Ella has to "play grownup" (Roldan 2018, 11) and assume the more adult role of doing household chores and paying bills.

Unlike the earlier texts, *At the School Gate* does not celebrate the end of the dictatorship but sees the continuity of repressive regimes. Ella breaks the naïve illusion:

> I thought that period in our family life ended in 1986 with People Power. Everyone flashed the *Laban* (Fight) sign, Cory had yellow confetti parades, and EDSA became the most famous street in the world. I was so excited because Americans on TV kept saying congratulations to the Philippines. I thought it was like winning the Sweepstakes and all Filipinos would become rich. No more beggars in the street or little kids selling *sampaguita* (jasmine flowers) at night. I didn't know better because I was only nine at the time. I now know things are more complicated. I should have remembered my Grade Four history lesson: Bad presidents like Marcos may come and go but They will always stay in power. (Roldan 2018, 11)

Despite Ella's father's proletarian political involvement, the text hints at Ella's middle class life. For instance, she studies in a Catholic private school, whose tuition fees may be prohibitive for working class families. Her grandmother lives in a house with a garden and lovebirds, and her grandfather drops her to school in a station wagon. Her mother works in the United States, and her remittances may help sustain the family. Her father becomes a documentary filmmaker for nongovernmental organizations after the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution, not a skilled blue-collar worker. However, the family's middle classness is different because it is not marked by material comforts. And though the father attempts to reconstruct his life after the revolution "aboveground," there is a haunting danger that the state may revive trumped-up charges from his underground years. Thus, Ella struggles to maintain normalcy despite the disruption of family life through her father's second arrest.

The attempt to maintain middle class normalcy is parallel to the transformation of EDSA from a site of struggle[9] to a locale of consumerism. EDSA is both highway and historical event since it is the site of the nonviolent 1986 People Power Revolution that ended the Marcos dictatorship. Touted as a "middle class revolution," the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution mobilized the elites and the middle class who were politicized by the assassination of Senator Benigno Aquino Jr. (Curaming and Claudio 2010, 9). Previously called Highway 54, Epifanio de los Santos Avenue or EDSA is a long stretch that connects gated subdivisions (e.g., Corinthian Gardens, Forbes Park, and Dasmariñas Village), commercial areas such as Cubao, and business districts like Ortigas and Makati. However, in the 1990s EDSA marked consumerist excess with flyovers traversing high-rise buildings and mega malls.[10] Within this stretch one also encountered markers of poverty and urban decay such as shanties, street vendors, beggars, and traffic jams (Rafael 2000, 180; Serquiña 2014, 46).

The transition of EDSA from its political to commercial significance affects the private and familial world of Ella. The 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution marks a time when there were changes in Ella's familial life, such as the separation of her parents in 1987. The revolution also hopefully signals the end of the political persecution of her family. As a major avenue, EDSA is also a liminal space of everyday annoyance resulting in school tardiness marked by "traffic at EDSA and asphyxiation while commuting": Ella

9) EDSA as the site of middle class "revolution" figured prominently in the ouster campaign of President Estrada. The EDSA People Power II from January 16 to 20, 2001 was a bloodless protest that demanded the resignation of President Joseph "Erap" Estrada due to corruption and plunder charges. Mostly middle class forces from the coalitions Kompil II and Estrada Resign Movement, and students from elite universities, gravitated toward the Our Lady of EDSA shrine located at the intersection of EDSA and Ortigas Avenue.

On May 1, 2001, Estrada supporters stormed Malacañang Palace in a riot known as EDSA III, which left four dead and almost a hundred wounded. Instigated by three senatorial candidates—Juan Ponce Enrile, Gregorio Honasan, and Panfilo Lacson Jr.—who had close contacts with military officials, Estrada's political party Puwersa ng Masa (Force of the Masses), and the religious groups Iglesia ni Cristo and El Shaddai, EDSA III was carried out primarily by the urban poor (Gloria 2015). Analysts describe EDSA II as "an organized, morally legitimate citizen's movement" and EDSA III as "disorganized, morally illegitimate, and resulting from elite manipulation" (Garrido 2008, 444). However, Marco Garrido (2008, 456) saw EDSA III as the *masa*'s (urban poor's) "departure from a regime of symbolic domination, a departure marked by the *masa*'s sudden and ferocious visibility."

10) Rafael (2000, 180) succinctly writes, "By the 1990s, whatever democratizing promise the EDSA revolt held out has long been extinguished. The return of cacique democracy has also meant the containment of mass politics away from the scenes of its emergence and in the direction of new sites of popular gatherings: the new and enormous shopping malls of metro Manila. Perhaps it is not too far-fetched to suggest that the latter period of Aquino's regime will be remembered as the era of the mega-malls, when a consumerist ethos managed to substitute the privatized, tightly policed, air-conditioned, and brownout resistant spaces of Robinson's and Shoemart for the communal exhilaration and confrontational politics of EDSA and Mendiola, the street that led to Malacañang."

has to endure "a two-hour jeep-bus-tricycle ride home" (Roldan 2018, 2). Ella's irritation over the traffic leads to a realization of the subtle class divide in her private school: "Don't they know not everyone can afford to be driven to school? I was annoyed at the world and I wanted to be out there, fixing it" (Roldan 2018, 2). Stripped of its association with the dictatorship, EDSA has become a battleground for the everyday frustrations Ella faces.

As the title suggests, *At the School Gate* demarcates the boundaries of the private and the public, with the school expanding the child's social domain. Because of Ella's father's political involvement, the personal realm of Ella's family and school life overlaps with the bigger political world. First, political activism forms the identity of Ella and her brothers, who are named after the Filipino military leader Gabriela Silang, the activist Liliosa Hilao, and the German philosopher Karl Marx. That Ella declares her full name Liliosa Gabriela Cortez to the military agent to fight him is an assertion of her identity and an act of defiance.

Second, torture, arrest, and surveillance are state intrusions into the private world by "violating its sense of domestic space" (Reyes 2018, 476–478). These forms of harassment inflict not only physical but also psychological pain by "denying its victims any power over their lives" (McCoy 2012, 117). Military interrogation (and surveillance) is not merely the extraction of information but an assertion of the state's power over the individual (Reyes 2018, 478). In *At the School Gate*, the "enemy" is called "They" throughout the text. The military agent is described ominously as a "tall man wearing army boots" and rendered as faceless except for the "teeth as shiny as bullets" (Roldan 2018, 15)[11]—hence an unknown yet real entity. This threat is likened to the turtle Elvis, who may leave bite marks on the lily pads in Ella's grandmother's pond but remains unseen: "Elvis was real. Just like that man with the bullet-toothed grin. I wished I could pretend he was imaginary" (Roldan 2018, 26–27). The dichotomy between the abstract and concrete shows the networks within the regime's actual military surveillance. Ella's encounter with the military agent outside the school gate is described as "It was us against Them, me against him" (Roldan 2018, 37). The military agent waiting outside the school gate is a manifestation of the state's coercion over an individual.

Third, Ella notes the disconnect between her father being treated as an enemy of the state and the simple father she knows. When Ella's father's arrest is shown on a television news show, her five-year-old cousin innocently asks, "Tito Buddy is on TV! His hands are tied behind his back! Why? Did he do something bad?" (Roldan 2018, 14). The public spectacle of Ella's father's arrest is an intrusion into Ella's private familial life.

11) In her study of martial law memoirs, Portia Reyes (2018, 478) notes how captured activists express the "facelessness of the torturers" when recounting torture sessions. Similarly, the captured activists label these torturers as "they."

The family knows the truth of the father being "legal" and no longer "underground" (Roldan 2018, 18) versus the manufactured state lies. Aunt Em surmises, "Maybe this is Their way of raising funds for the elections" (Roldan 2018, 18). Moreover, the family's familiarity and keen attention to detail debunk the state's projection of the father as an emasculated, meek, and bruised high-ranking officer of an armed rebel group. Ella points to the subtle features of his clothing that deviate from his usual style, such as the "sleeves were buttoned at the wrists, not rolled up to his elbows like he usually wore them" (Roldan 2018, 18), concealing the marks of torture on his arms. The questionable circumstances surrounding the father's arrest are further confounded by the news anchor misstating his name as Buggy instead of Buddy (Roldan 2018, 17–18).

After her father's arrest, Ella grapples for normalcy by maintaining order in school. The opening line of the book is telling: "You know things are bad when you're fifteen" (Roldan 2018, 2). Ella feels stifled in her Catholic school and faces the challenges of running the school paper in addition to commuting long hours through EDSA. In the latter part of the book, the school gate acts as a symbol of the worlds that must be maintained. As Ella approaches the school gate, her attention shifts from the familial crisis brought about by political repression to the orderly world of the school inhabited by "normal," perhaps nonpolitical families. The contrast is stark as Ella observes the comfortable and well-groomed children being dropped off by their parents: "Nice, normal families saying their good mornings, kissing their goodbyes" (Roldan 2018, 34). However, the spectacle of her father's arrest on television jars the child's private world, since teachers and classmates ask about it at school. This causes Ella to be a spectacle as well.

Symbolically, the school gate serves as a demarcation of boundaries. The military agent cannot enter the school premises but can only surveil Ella from outside. This may show the limitations of the state's power over the child. Remembering her father's advice, "As long as there's something wrong, you don't stop fighting. You just learn to fight in a different way" (Roldan 2018, 38), Ella uses this as leverage to assert her power. She fights through giving information on everyday details of her school life such as finishing an article for the school paper, studying for an exam, and what she ate for lunch: "They wanted to find out stuff about me? Then I'll tell them stuff about me" (Roldan 2018, 38). By directly confronting the military man, she affirms that the military cannot penetrate her school life and by extension her own world.

The mighty child here is constructed as someone who asserts the normalcy of everyday life despite the abnormal conditions. Ella shows the enemy that she and her family are not defeated and that they are going on with their lives unafraid: "I decided I wouldn't let Them ruin my life" (Roldan 2018, 38). Whether or not her confrontation with the military man makes an impact or not seems unimportant, as Ella observes: "He

didn't say anything but I could tell he was surprised. He wasn't grinning anymore. Maybe he didn't understand a word I said. It didn't matter" (Roldan 2018, 40). She wrests power from the military to the point that the military agent's reaction does not matter. Yet, Ella's assertion is important as it affirms her refusal to be controlled psychologically by state torture. The weight of her father's imprisonment and her military surveillance is summed up in her plaintive words "Go tell Papa I'm OK" (Roldan 2018, 38). Though they may not harm the military agent (Ella even doubts whether he understands the implications of her request), these words are important for her to regain her life.

The mighty child in this story not only shows courage in facing adversity but expresses strength in future possibilities. The ending juxtaposes the uncertain fate of Ella's father vis-à-vis the everyday struggles of a typical high school girl:

> I was glad. I had other things to worry about. Like the strain this event was putting on my family. Not knowing what will happen in the coming months. The possibility I'd never see Papa again.
>
> Like the surprise quiz Ms. Orlina was probably giving right now at First Period! Backpack over my shoulder, I ran through the school gates, and past the nuns watching over students in the lobby. Despite everything, I made it to class on time and got a passing score for the surprise quiz. A small miracle? Not really. I read my notes in the car on the way to school. Traffic has its good uses after all. (Roldan 2018, 40)

The story does not end happily but remains open-ended. The reader does not know whether the father will be released or what will happen to the family. Nonetheless, Ella maintains her agency in her daily life by accepting—but at the same time addressing—the big obstacles and petty inconveniences. Despite the overwhelming environment and uncontrollable situations, she focuses on things she can do, such as reading notes in traffic that would prepare her for a surprise quiz. The mighty child, then, is interested in future possibilities by trying to handle the present to the best of her capabilities.

Though all three texts depict incarceration and enforced disappearances of family members during the Marcos dictatorship, the extent of political violence is elided in *Isang Harding Papel* and *Si Jhun-Jhun*. However, the failures of the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution are embedded in the narrative of *At the School Gate*. The adults in *At the School Gate* explain the circumstances of arrest and state surveillance. The main characters in *Si Jhun-Jhun* and *Isang Harding Papel* are not shown to have further matured politically, since the child's understanding does not extend beyond the family. On the other hand, the protagonist in *At the School Gate* knows the limits of her powers, yet empowers herself by asserting that the state cannot enter her private life.

Conclusion

Fifty years after the declaration of martial law in 1972, the son of the dictator was elected into the highest political position in the country. In the Philippines, as in Southeast Asia in general, this raises important questions about how the younger generations view historical violence they have not experienced.[12] This study on the portrayal of historical violence in children's books set during the period of martial law hopes to contribute to the growing scholarship on literary and artistic works targeted to the young who were not born during that time. By interrogating narratives passed on to the next generation, one may analyze the nature of memory and non-memory not only in the Philippines but in Southeast Asia in general. This study could be a point of comparison between the way children's books treat dictatorships within the region, on the one hand, and the prevailing silences and historical revisionism of despotic regimes on the other.

Many studies approach children's literature in the Philippines as a pedagogical tool. This paper on stories on the Marcos dictatorship instead focuses on the more difficult topic of historical violence and the role of children's literature in mediating our present-day understanding of the past. By focusing on familial relations and the child's construction of normalcy, I analyze how martial law informs adult-child relations. State intrusion and violence may disrupt the family through arrest, incarceration, and disappearance. These extraordinary circumstances as depicted in the fictive world of the text may portray children with the agency to challenge the existing powers, adaptability to societal conflicts, or acceptance of the status quo. Through the concept of the mighty child, I locate the tensions of adult-child relationships: adults may have limited power because of their time-bound temporality, while children are endowed with might because of their future potential. I have also shown how political violence forms the subjectivity of these child characters by looking into how they respond to state repression that directly affects their lives and how they are depicted as having the potential to change their environments.

"Framed silences," or the withholding of gruesome details by suggesting gaps in information, may paradoxically reveal more in a manner that is emotionally manageable.

12) For instance, the present generation of Vietnamese youth distance themselves from memories of the Vietnam War and treat war memorials as spaces for casual strolling instead of sites of remembrance (Schwenkel 2011, 130–134). But in the case of Indonesia, the time, distance, and opening up of "democratic spaces" allowed families (particularly children) of Indonesian political detainees to circulate their narratives countering the state-sanctioned history of Suharto's New Order. The families' efforts to convey the painful memories of their elders parallel Marianne Hirsch's (2008) description of the passing down of the memories and trauma of political violence of the previous generation to their offspring. Through these memories, descendants of Indonesian political prisoners uncover stories and express them through their own artistic endeavors (Leong 2021, 6–7).

However, absences and silences may be a problem when the causes and effects of historical injustices are glossed over, such as the ways in which texts withhold specific details of martial law history to give way to the euphoric narrative of the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution. Though there may be gaps and silences on historical details within literary texts, the emplotment of the narrative can have profound implications in constructing one's view of history, and ultimately of collective memory (White 1984; Temin and Dahl 2017, 906–907). These narrative reconstructions of history—even if written in fictive mode—may have an affective impact on the audience, especially since "stories seem engaging and concrete, rather than abstract" (Polletta *et al.* 2011, 110). Narrative resolutions that connect the past to the present and instill political responsibility and agency empower child readers to see themselves as active agents of social change (Temin and Dahl 2017, 906).

Further debates may arise on what may be construed as "normal" and whether an "unconventional" family unit becomes the child's normal since the child grows up in that context. However, questions should go beyond who or what is considered normal—rather, the more pressing problem is why family life is disrupted so as to distress a child. In the three discussed texts, state violence deprives children of an untroubled childhood and a stable family life. The children's attempts at "normalization" may be mechanisms to survive a dictatorship. Amidst the repressive state power intruding into the domestic sphere, the child characters attempt to "normalize" their situation by continuing with their daily routines in the aftermath of their parents' arrest.

Though these children's books are fictive renditions, their portrayal of the private and public worlds of the child is important to both child and adult readers. It is not enough to simply write stories about martial law; stories that show the causality and connection of historical events, as well as the growth and strength of the characters, may have a more empowering potential. Though there may be limits of representation in depicting historical violence in children's books, "framing silences" more effectively can still reveal what is important. The careful, yet powerful, rendering of the Marcos dictatorship may have a deep and lasting impact, more so since martial law is a contested period in Philippine history.

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