Flights and Fixations: Displacement and Urban Living in Isabelita Orlina Reyes' *Stories from the City*

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In a world that enables individual or mass migrations, people have become more tolerable to various cultures apart from their own. People's access to technology and transportation has made exposure to and living in other countries a whole lot easier and swifter. Gone are the days when one group was left clueless about what was happening with another group. In this age of cultural and geographical crisscrossing, a group can now share the space that another group inhabits. This reality has resulted in the birth of different breeds of individuals across countries. Some of these individuals effectively work their way into the society in which they are birthed or relocated, while others find the act of confronting their fragmented situation and locating their position in the new environment very difficult.

Most of the time, this new environment is the city. The urban landscape serves as the backdrop, the main location, where private and public histories of uprooting, displacement, and alienation ensue. In the city, dislocated individuals come face to face with the differences they have as opposed to those of the natives of their surrogate country. In the long run, they realize that their body size, color, facial features, names, customs, beliefs, and language neither look nor sound the same as those that surround them.

Isabelita Orlina Reyes' first poetry collection, *Stories from the City*, addresses these concerns. It articulates the contemporary urban life as well as the tensions and contradictions that displaced Filipinos experience. In

this paper, my aim is to discuss how Reyes addresses deterritorialization, rootedness, the concept of home, and identity. I would like to identify the kind of dislocated consciousness operating in her poems. Furthermore, I would want to determine how Reyes depicts life in the city and approaches the subject of alienation.

The Stance of Displacement

According to Caren Kaplan, deterritorialization is the term "for the displacement of identities, persons, and meaning that is endemic to the postmodern world system" (188). In a world where territorial and racial demarcations are blurred, associating realities and identities to just one signifier has become hardly possible. Citing Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Kaplan states that in a postcolonial world, meanings and utterances have become estranged. The self can no longer be idealized in terms of essences. The individual has already been liberated from his or her static familiarities, inasmuch as he or she has been transported to other potential expressions, perceptions, and communities. Because the configurations of power and meaning in which people function are complex and remain in a state of flux, traditional notions of identity, culture, and language have already been destabilized.

People who are deterritorialized experience several identity crises. Since they are in a land that does not recognize nor prioritize their race, ethnicity, or nationality, some of them are forcefully pushed to the margins. But despite the oppressions and repressions they experience as minorities, most of them have no intentions of relinquishing their native selves. As much as possible, they stay true to their traditions. According to Victor J. Ramraj, these individuals are considered traditionalists, since they cling to their past and almost always valorize the memories they have of their native land. However, there, too, are those people who wish to acquire an identity considered not theirs. They are those who fully accept the new culture in which they are caught. Ramraj calls them the assimilationists, since "they have assimilated or integrated with their new environment, at the expense of their ancestral customs, traditions, languages, and religions. They are 'less concerned with sustaining ancestral ties than with coming to terms with their new environment and acquiring their new identity" (217).

Although there are two contradicting approaches to the acceptance of one's self, what binds both traditionalists and assimilationists is their longing for home. To American feminists Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty, "'being home' pertains to the place where one lives within familiar, safe, and protected boundaries" (qtd. in Capili 137). Whereas some immigrants are accommodated in America and enjoy the fact that the majority recognizes them, the strains and pressures they experience on the whole cannot be denied. In fact, the small liberties given to them are mostly tokens that do not necessarily entail confidence about their subject positions. While they live a relatively comfortable life compared to their fellowmen in the homeland, most of these migrants are bereft of a sense of home within. Needless to say, their lack of security and safety is an issue that consistently bothers them.

Reyes shares these sentiments and undertakings. Her impulse to communicate the experiences of deterritorialized subjects is significant because "[she] know[s] what it is to be discriminated against, what it means to be fragmented and hybrid" (98). Fragmentation, displacement, and hybridity are her main concerns. In the poem "Saltwater Blood," the persona embarks on "a pilgrimage/ to the country of [her] childhood." At this stage of the poem, there are still no indicators that would help the reader identify the persona's current site as well as the place she references. Is she in America and just thinking about the Philippines? Or is it the other way around? What is certain is that the persona remains in two different worlds—one physical and another metaphorical—both at the same time. One is situated in current territory, while the other is in a different place and at a different time. The poem states:

Every night,
sleep takes me to *a burning*
beneath my callused soles
I can't walk
and I'm trapped between
the highway that follows
the coast of California,
and Roxas Boulevard
tracing Manila Bay

A pumice stone
appears in my hand—
I know I must scrape off
the dead flesh
I rub too hard
and my heart quickens
as thin blue-green blood
oozes from a cut
I touch the wound and lick
my now sea-colored finger
for the taste of fish
The ocean begins
to pour from my mouth.

The distinction between the italicized and the non-italicized texts is an evident feature of the poem. The non-italicized part shows the current situation from which the persona speaks, while the italicized part determines the dream-state where she transitions, albeit hazily, into becoming Filipino. In her sleep, restlessness dawns on the persona. She feels a burning feeling beneath her callused soles, which means, by mythical implication, that the persona has to begin her journey in order to reach her destination. However, the persona is quick to admit that *"[she] can't walk/ and [she's] trapped between/ the highway that follows/ the coast of California,/and Roxas Boulevard/ tracing Manila Bay."* These lines fully explain the persona's fragmentation and hybridity. Victor Turner calls people who are trapped in between two worlds as "transitional-beings" or "liminal personae." They are in the process of moving from one cultural state of existence to another; such individuals are emotionally involved in the "centrifugal homeland," but this attachment is countered by a thirst for a sense of belongingness to the current place of residence (qtd. in Ramraj 216).

Indeed the poem's persona is at the threshold of exiting the old and entering the new. The pumice stone and the dead flesh that appeared in the dream are devices that signify the persona's vague acceptance of her identity. Rubbing too hard, the persona scrapes the scab off, causing the wound to bleed once again. But this, to her, is not a reason to panic; instead, it is an incident that makes her heart quicken. Without any tinge of discomfort,

she touches the wound and licks her "*now sea-colored finger/ for the taste of fish"* until *"the ocean begins/to pour from my mouth"*. These images' points of reference are quite unclear in this part of the poem. While *sea* and *fish* are usually taken as native images, one can never be sure; after all, the poem ends on an ambiguous note.

Snapping out of her reverie, the persona says: "Slim fingers of Manila sun/ prompt me to open my eyes/ but I think I wake where the sea/ brushes the sand of Sta. Monica." In these lines, the persona is positioned both in Manila and in Sta. Monica. To the persona, it is possible to be in two places at the same time. Cultural duality makes this possible. But while the persona fully knows where her homeland is, it seems that she cannot or does not want to stay there. There are certain images she misses in her motherland, but she can't surrender her affinity for her surrogate home. Ramraj elucidates on this condition: "Displaced individuals are 'caught between two allegiances, two countries, two landscapes. Many try to turn their fractured psyches to their advantage, coping with their environment by constantly modifying and shifting their identities" (223).

In "Still between Two Cities," Reyes' persona is caught in between the culture she has been told about her native country and the tradition that actually welcomes her upon returning to the Philippines. The persona's homecoming is replete with contradictions. In the first stanza, the persona recollects the New York terrain she knows:

> My image of our neighborhood
> in New York remains colored
> by the burnt tones of autumn
> that were backdrop to brick walls
> and picture windows.
> Across the street, the stationary
> sold candy bars, fountain pens,
> ice cream and comic books.
> Most of the people I knew
> were white and pink and cold,
> so I'd take a bus to the library
> where *I borrowed a language*
> *and imagined conversations.* (emphasis mine)

Amidst these Americanized activities and urban images, the persona stays at a distance and positions herself in the middle of resisting and accepting the landscape. Despite being familiar with the nooks and crannies of New York's busy streets, the persona is aware that this is not the place where she belongs. By merely referencing the traits (white and pink and cold) of the people she knows, the persona distinguishes herself from them. Singling out these features is establishing a point of comparison. The physical differences between the persona and the Americans are conspicuous. This is emphasized even more when the persona refers to a language she borrows from the library. I suspect this is Filipino, and the "imagined conversations" are her attempts at understanding and practicing the twists and turns of the language.

The second stanza gives the readers a different timeframe. The persona now relocates to Manila, where she comes face to face with the city's "scrapers, shanties,/ pollution and burning summers." With wonder, she would often "stare at how the moon/ eclipses the night sky,/ how the rain efface the streets,/ how the wet markets house/ a dozen kinds of rice/ and all manner of fish." It is interesting how the beauty and clarity of New York in the first stanza is juxtaposed with the decrepitude of Manila found in the second. Does this foretell the persona's idea of refuge? When the cultural tensions inflicting the persona are factored in, the answer to this question becomes much clearer. She illustrates:

> I never learned
> the language well
> from elders who waited
> for my forehead on their hands,
> first cousins and best friends
> who came in various shades of brown,
> or classmates who smirked
> at my Queens accent.

Adjusting to another culture is never easy. In the stanza above, the persona pronounces the linguistic and social constraints distancing her from her relatives and friends. The first few lines of the last stanza show how language becomes a barrier to the persona's comprehension of Philippine

culture. She states: "I'm privy to their conversations,/ but miss the idioms." Dazed, the persona is forced to "step out/ onto the street and think [she's] lost." In this case, the persona experiences a double displacement: first in the host country (the US) she has come to know as home, and second in the homeland (the Philippines) said to hold her history but from which she remains alienated.

In the last stanza, the persona calls America "the city where I grew up" and the Philippines as "the city of my body." Between the two, she is not sure which is home. Attempting to find her roots, the persona goes back to the Philippines, only to go through another wave of remoteness. Coming home brings more harm and pain than comfort, as she can hardly ease her way into the life of her fellowmen. So what she does is "[wonder] which language can teach me/ what home means,/ and where it is." This standpoint echoes what Ramraj has noted: "In this state of transition, some respond ambivalently to their dual, often antithetical, cultures or societies. Some attempt to assimilate and integrate. For others the luminal or transitional state is too prolonged or too excruciating to cope with and they may withdraw to their ancestral identity or homeland, which is...both a cage and a haven" (217).

Stuart Hall explains that for most diasporans the return to the homeland is metaphorical (qtd. in Ramraj 215). Remembering home is a way to stay connected to their mother country. It is by speaking of memorable places of childhood, the fond memories of their relatives in the homeland, the delectable dishes they used to cook and eat, and the traditions they tended to enjoy and practice, among other things, that these diasporans keep themselves part of what Benedict Anderson calls an "imagined community." Indeed, recollecting the past becomes a coping mechanism. Most of the time these recollections, impressions, and expressions of home are rendered with deep nostalgia. Jose Wendell Capili says that a heightened feeling of displacement usually produces nostalgia for the homeland and for those left behind (10). For diasporans and displaced individuals, there is a tendency to call to mind the presence of a specific home in spite or maybe because of its absence. Homi K. Bhabha expresses this very well: "Being obliged to forget becomes the basis for remembering the nation, peopling it anew, imagining the possibility of other contending and liberating forms of cultural identity" (qtd. in Ramraj 217).

In the poem "The Price, Conversation 1," for example, the persona thinks of Manila in the middle of America's cold weather. While waiting outside her dormitory, the persona writes: "I stand by myself/ just outside the dormitory door;/ my chest shivers, my face stings./ I can't tell the difference/ between the cigarette smoke/ and the vapor of my breathing/ that condenses in the cold./ But the way the lamp posts light/ the streets and gardens at night/ reminds me of my campus in Manila,/ so I smoke and freeze blissfully,/ until he comes out and joins me." Moreover, the state of absence-presence is also evident in "The Price, Conversation 3." In this poem, the persona walks into a novelty store and plays "a crooked cylinder of wood/ and listening to a sound like rain." She then engages in a conversation with a "very polite and charming" salesman, who persuades her to buy a rainstick. He himself has bought one, "for dry quiet days and nights/ because rain is the sky's music/ and he's writing his own at home." The persona is convinced and "leave[s] the store with a few dollars less/ and rattle[s] [the] rainstick in the mall." Outside, with her new toy that reminds her of the sound and feel of Manila rain, she asks herself, "What did [the salesman] say that sold me?" To which she answers:

> The music of the sky on dry quiet nights—
> and I shake the rainstick a little harder:
> it drizzles and showers,
> pours and floods in Manila,
> where my hours are seldom uneventful.

There are displaced individuals who accept their subjugation and there are those who reterritorialize if only to live their lives anew. The concept of reterritorialization, according to Kaplan, is "where we come to locate ourselves in terms of our specific histories and differences... a room for what can be salvaged from the past and what can be made new" (194-5). This is a process where one acknowledges the things that he or she does not know and unravels whatever he or she has feared, avoided, and ignored for a long time, and writing about deterritorialization and reterritorializion is important in making sense of our fragmented selves and in creating "a world of possibilities out of the experience of displacement" (198).

In the prose poem "Upon Returning to the University at 29," Reyes introduces us to a persona who tries to relocate and reposition herself in her old university. However, no matter how much effort she exerts to salvage whatever is familiar, she still fumbles through the ever-changing terrain that surrounds her. She goes back to the university just "to ask for an address," which implies that the persona is in search of recognizable territory. By relieving her own experiences in the university, the persona reterritorializes herself. In the following paragraph, the persona surveys the landscape, claims whatever little is remembered, and uncertainly confronts what is already new. She writes:

> Numbers pinpoint places of destination for phone calls and mail, visits and any kind of connection. You traverse the grounds at 8 a.m. and note nothing about the campus is familiar except the sky, the road that looks like an abstract painting of shadows because trees and sun got together; nothing is familiar except sitting still for an hour and a half, and maybe or maybe not, learning something.

As the persona articulates her current sentiments in/about the university, her urban middle class sensibilities surface. Simplistic and reductionist perhaps because sheltered from the harsh realities tucked in the fringes of the city, she believes that social classes are only divided into two kinds: students and workers ("when all you understand about difference is defined by whether people wear uniforms or suits to work, and what bars they frequent in the evenings"). Furthermore, the persona finds it difficult to engage herself in talks about class, gender and race, as well as empathize with "everyone [who] is younger, even [with] the instructors who wear thick glasses and rumpled clothes."

In her own native ground, where she expects to find safety and security, she is once again displaced. The images and emotions she sees and feels are not in synch with what she has expected, wished for, or imagined. Certainly, change breeds bewilderment to most returnees. In this poem, what the persona needs to remember is that "the notion of settlement... is a fictional terrain, a reterritorialization that has passed through several version of deterritorialization to posit a powerful theory of location based

on contingency, history, and change" (Kaplan 197). Clearly this is where the poem's persona falls short: she has expected things to remain the same. The address that she's looking for ("You end up explaining, over and over, how you simply returned to ask for an address.") is no longer there; the people she relates to have already been out of the picture.

This is the milieu that Reyes's personae inhabit. Now repositioned in the contemporary city, the personae have found a new location to explore. Corollary to this are the multifarious and multilayered encounters they will have with people outside their fields of experience—that is, beyond their urban middle class sensibilities. It is in the city where plurality is admitted, estrangement is intensified, voyeurism is practiced, and social divisions are highlighted. All of these are recounted in *Stories from the City,* as Reyes's personae, now fully aware of their position as fragmented and displaced members of the metropolitan middle class, risk their way in and out of the urban environment.

The City Emerges and Stays

Now more than ever the articulation of what is deemed urban remains a topic of high interest. From architecture to sociology to anthropology to literature, scholars and critics have tried to understand people's existence in the city by means of surveying the metropolitan landscape and delving into the social dynamics and material forces that distinguish urban living.

In his book *Urban Theory: A Critical Assessment,* John Rennie Short posits the theory that power and difference are the encircling frames for any understanding of the city (3). Cities are sites where a high sense of order and discipline is followed. Within this environment, there, too, is the pressure to uphold freedom in the face of individual and collective resistance and contestation. Power struggles and the desire for authority surely define the urban landscape. The question "Who's in command?" is always raised. The answer to this question shall identify how regulations are made, and for or against whom are they made. Short points out that even the city's layout—the streets, the positioning of buildings, traffic lights, the police interspersed across the terrain—is embedded with authoritarian values, which place and replace urban dwellers in a physical and metaphorical "system of boundaries and transgressions, centres and peripheries, surveil-

lances and gestures, gazes and performances" (6). This is the "geographical plexus" (Mumford qtd. in Miles, Hall, and Borden 211) in which they are trapped.

With all their promise, cities lure many people. As people from the countryside and from other parts of the world enter and choose to reside in the city, the urban landscape becomes more open to cosmopolitanism, otherness, and estrangement. Heterogeneity is definitely a metropolitan trademark. The city thrives in the various perspectives and actions that make it emerge and stay.

Without the contradictions people have, the city remains static. This, then, makes the city a site of plurality, where social, racial, and gender relations are witnessed and maintained. To quote cultural and literary critic Epifanio San Juan, Jr.:

> By offering infinite possibilities of chance encounters, coincidences, fortuitous and accidental happenings, Manila generates the conditions for the individual subject disappearing and merging with the interplay of collective forces, social classes, in order to trace the path of his/ her personal identity. This also explains why the city is the principal arena where games, performances, tricks, and illusionary inventions of all kinds can thrive naturally. (157)

Thus, the city's multiplicity serves as a potential symptom and consequence of alienation, oppression, and indifference towards others. The idea of plurality, then, turns into an ugly disguise of the uneven distribution of power and liberties among urban dwellers. Therefore, in comprehending the city, it is imperative to have a perspicacious eye in assessing urban spaces and practices where, according to San Juan, "individuals can conceal private selfish motives through stylized manners, conventional gestures, formulas of speech and thought" (155).

Reyes' personae and poems are undeniably urbanized. In fact, Reyes admits this when she states that the personae of her poems "speak from within the city, and almost always, from a vantage point that implies a perspective of the city from a skyscraper" (95). In addition, her poems bear an "awareness of both the mundane and the startling in what hap-

pens around [her], and outside [her] immediate circle" (93). It is a tall order to examine how the city is imaged and imagined in her poetry collection and to identify what kind of consciousness is hidden or exposed in it.

In "Death in a Bright Red Car," the persona is caught in the middle of a traffic jam between Ayala Avenue and an unnamed church. While inside the car, she finds time to "review her vision" and ponder upon her urban existence. She remembers her spot on top of a condominium unit, where she gets a relatively good view of the metropolitan skyline. She says: "I have a room of my own with a view/ of Manila from the 20th floor/ of the newest condominium building." These enumerated portraits highlight the subject position of the persona. Deep inside she finds herself literally and figuratively above everybody else, as she is elevated from urban grounds and distanced from city's troubles. This physical distance has the tendency to generate individualism and alienation. Michel de Certeau, in his essay "Walking in the City," explains the detachment that such height brings to an urban settler:

> To be lifted to the summit [of condominium units and other types of high-rise buildings]...one's body is no longer clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law: nor is it possessed, whether as player or played, by the rumble of so many differences and by the nervousness of...traffic. When one goes up there, he leaves behind the mass that carries off and mixes up in itself any identity of authors or spectators. (264)

In the poem's second stanza, the frame shifts back to the persona. Now she sees street children doing their daily rounds in the streets. She wonders to herself "how [do] they see the city at night." There is curiosity and condescension in the persona's tone, which seems to emphasize the tension between her class and those of the young kids.

The persona's alienation and individualism are even further amplified in the poem's ending. The line "I puff on my stick of guilt, exhale an excuse" confirms the persona's awareness of the troubles that exist in her surroundings. Despite this consciousness, the persona still prefers to be ex-

cluded from these conditions. Between perception and action, she chooses the former. Therefore, the "guilt" she employs prior to her "excuse" becomes a convenient way of asserting her urban middle class sensibilities. It's as if feeling guilty is a shot at redemption. As much as she tries to sound sympathetic in the last two lines of the poem, the persona fails to grasp the plight of the street kids. By insisting that "they have their view, I have mine," the persona succumbs to passivity and seems to forego reflexivity. In the poem's final lines, the persona accepts her dominant position and, in a trivializing manner, says: "and we'll die of pollution, anyway—/ they'll just die a lot faster."

The isolation that the persona feels is a symptom of urbanity's notion of freedom. According to Georg Simmel, being in the city is having the chance to break with traditional society (qtd. in Shorts 35-36). In order to enjoy this opportunity, one resorts to self-entitlement. One also asserts himself or herself amidst the sea of anonymous faces. In the poem "2:45 P.M., 3rd St. Promenade, Sta. Monica," Reyes gives us the image of an urban dweller who resigns herself to the fact that: "Along this promenade/ in the middle of the city,/ everyone is a passerby/ and no one cares/ about my habits." Citing Simmel, Heinz Paetzold explains this standoffish attitude among urban settlers:

> Metropolitan environments produce also the emotional reserve. Reserve is necessary for the metropolitan man to bear the anonymous crowds around him. The reserve against the others is paradoxically the basis for the individual's freedom. Reserve does not mean that metropolitan man does not experience all the nuances of emotional life—sympathy, empathy, antipathy, etc.—but he has to hide behind a protective screen of reserve in order to survive. (213)

"Among the Signs" also carries this detachment from the urban space. In this poem, the persona serves as a mere spectator to all the gruesome signs of poverty and abandonment found in the lengthy streets of Manila. Like the persona in "Death in a Bright Red Car" who gets a glimpse of the happenings and inhabitants crowding the city outside her

car's window, the persona in this poem glances at the small portraitures that the metropolis cradles.

The reader is provided with various figurations of street-dwellers (vendors of tabloids, blind men with child guides, women with naked babies) who would "tap on [the persona's] tinted window,/ [and] trade blank stares with [her]." Apart from the previous lines, the poem's persona no longer says anything about these people. My hypothesis is that she has already reduced them into mere objects of the streets, whose life cycle revolves around the idea of mendicancy. Pity can no longer be accessed from the persona's emotions, nor can sympathy be handily expressed. In the eyes of the persona, the city is dispersed in a constellation of gratuitous images that signify nothing but alienation (San Juan 163).

Only "a boy's empty eyes" forces her to open the car's window and buy "*sampaguitas* to hang/ on my car's Sto. Nino." Maybe out of superficial guilt or irritation, the persona then gives in to the insistence of the child. But this action—arguably a false sense of concern from the middle class, which assumes that the pain and predicaments of the poor may be alleviated through donations or other superficial forms of altruism—can hardly qualify as a significant contribution of the privileged to the less fortunate ones. Certainly, the persona's comprehension of the city's dynamics is limited and limiting, and her main response to other people's agonies is dismissive and individualistic. While the persona's buying a string of *sampaguitas* from the vendor assures the little boy of a modest meal during lunch time or a small amount of money to give to his parents, this act still cannot deny the persona's conflicted attitude toward the kid and his ilk. Even the persona's choice of words contains the imprints of her dismissal. Pertaining to the *sampaguitas* she bought, she says: "In the high noon heat,/ the whole flowers will wither/ and *mess up* my carpet.//" (emphasis mine). Indeed, such pejorative usage casts in doubt the sincerity of the persona's actions.

In the poem's second stanza, the traffic light turns green, signaling the motion of the various transportation vehicles that populate the road. At the flyover's crest, the persona finds herself "held up/ by cars slowing down/ because some man/ is shuddering in a puddle/ of his blood." After witnessing the numerous images that preceded this harrowing instance, she barely feels anything towards the dead body, nor does she even bother

to feel the gravity of the ghastly goings-on in the city. Instead of taking part in the locomotion, the persona minds her own business and continues with the routine, now briefly disrupted, she subjects herself to daily. The persona expresses: "I curse,/overtake and watch/all of them covered/ by a gust of summer smog/ as they fade into/ my rearview mirror.//"

This indifference is only understandable in light of city dwellers' frustration towards occurrences that plague the city day per embittered day. These horrifying realities that unfold right before the very eyes of people dwelling in the city may yield two possible effects. First is the conception that the streets or roads are dangerous places where individuals of varying social classes —from the petty bourgeoisie to the proletariat to the lumpen—meet but not necessarily interact with one another. The streets may also be perceived as sites of killings, accidents, and other crimes. This notion definitely intensifies the dichotomies between the inside and the outside, the individual and the group, the self and the other(s). To remain safe, then, one has to avoid entering the public sphere, where unknown groups share a restricted space to move about, compete for survival, and employ variegated tricks and techniques for and against one another just to get by.

Consequently, this leads to an individual's choice to isolate him- or herself from strangers, content him- or herself with the small area that he or she has (often inside a car or in a room), and protect and prioritize his or her own well-being above anyone else. Because of the appalling circumstances around him or her, an individual sets aside his or her concerns for the society and brings the material conditions that he or she experiences to the level of the mundane. It's a kind of automatization—or what Viktor Shklovsky refers to as habituation—that operates here. Since individuals have gotten used to this kind of actuality, they are hardly moved or rattled by such ominous truths.

This is the case of the persona in "Among the Signs." Inasmuch as she is always exposed to the sight, not only of beggars, vendors, little boys who unstoppably tap on her window and beg for alms, but also of dead bodies found under broad daylight, she seemingly could not care less if she encountered something or someone crude on the streets. The poem's ending, however, is an attempt at salvation. She says:

A little guilty,
I make the sign of the cross and promise:
before the 6 p.m. mass,
I will light two candles—
for those who've died
and those of us who haven't.

These lines echo the middle class guilt the persona is experiencing. Like some members of the middle class who cling to the conveniences of religion, the persona leaves everything to the Divine. While this can serve as a compassionate gesture towards those who suffer in their day-to-day battles, this remains a defeatist effort to understand the city's maladies. Deleuze and Guattari state that people have different privileges and different compensations for their positions in the field of power relations (qtd. in Kaplan 191). Though originally pertaining to displaced individuals, Deleuze and Guattari's statement may also be applied to the positionality of urban dwellers. In the poems of Reyes, the various personae would often gawk at the sites, people, and occasions enveloping them. Their gaze serves, borrowing the words of Kaplan, as "a form of theoretical tourism... where the margin becomes a linguistic of critical vacation, a new poetics of the exotic" (191).

The poem "The Company I Keep" articulates the urban dweller's perennial existentialism, where the *I* becomes the universe's central focus. In this piece, the persona's insomnia serves as the source of all her rumination on life, love, and the cityscape. It begins with the persona facing her computer, with the cursor blinking at her, as she waits for the words to gush forth from her. She writes: "The cursor blinks at me, waiting/ for the next word that will signal/ I know the difference/ between what is real—the scent of you/ still hanging upon my sweater—/ and what, a trick of memory." These lines show that the persona is in a private moment where she tries to clarify what to her is true and what is fictive. The compulsion to differentiate between the two is not clear at this stage, though one may ask what constitutes the "real" and what is considered "a trick of memory."

In the second stanza, the persona admits her self-imposed "solitary confinement" and her awareness of the traces of transience, violence, and restlessness outside her sliding door. Her solace brings forth the memory

of "the rituals/ practiced by the night:/ the wordless death of neon lights,/ the fading sputter of cars, a shot/ fired from some distant gun, a siren,/ and then the quietness that always follows." Here once again is the city that does not sleep; the city as a site for all the wickedness one could conveniently dismiss. Once the scene of the crime is cleaned up and the victim is another name added to the list of casualties, while the suspect still remains to be a shadowy character prowling the alleys of the city, there will always be that insistent gap—"the quietness that always follows"—in between the grim certainties of the everyday and the mystified representations being offered by the city. There will always be that tension between what people know about the hostilities happening around them and what seems to be the pretentiously placid countenance of the urban landscape they inhabit.

De Certeau argues that "escaping the imaginary totalizations produced by the eye, the everyday has a certain strangeness that does not surface, or whose surface is only its upper limit, outlining itself against the visible" (265). Such superficiality pushes the urban dweller to problematize and deal with his or her own anxieties first. The movement of one's vision is inward and the main preoccupation is that of individual passage. In the last stanza of the poem, where the virtual space is still as empty as the company that the persona keeps, the urge to be alone remains: "I'm keeping the cursor waiting/ but all I can think of is how/ it takes the evening forever to sleep."

Conclusion

Reyes' poetry collection articulates the situation of individuals who grew up in a culture and society not theirs. Uprooted from their homelands, the personae of the poems encounter problems such as alienation and lack of belongingness. As a hybrid of Filipino and American values, customs, and beliefs, they experience conflicts, tensions, and ambivalences towards themselves and towards other people. Now recognizing their difference, they feel the need to belong to the crowd that speaks to them and with whom they are willing to speak. This then motivates them to engage in a constant search for their identity and home. But this does not come easily; the fragmentation of their psyche and their inability to locate themselves almost always get in the way of this longing. On the one hand, they desire for their homeland, where they wish to meet their relatives and fully blend

with people whose names, skin color, body size are akin to theirs. On the other hand, however, they also want to remain in their surrogate country, where their manners, attitudes, and accent are accepted and never frowned upon. In her essay, "Neon Lines," Reyes puts it quite well: "The [personae of my poems desire] an American lifestyle in Manila" (105).

As shown in the poems above, Reyes' personae are "transitional-beings" caught in the middle of here and there, East and West, the city where they grew up and the city in which their bodies fit. This makes choosing between these dichotomies not possible at present. But if we were to follow Kaplan's claim, then identifying these personae's notion of "home" is a whole lot easier. According to Kaplan, "a desire to be and feel 'at home' is examined in light of who and what made the conditions of security and contentment possible" (192-3). By juxtaposing her representations of America and the Philippines, Reyes has expressed her more favored location. While the former is portrayed with so much life and color, the latter is depicted with grimness and ennui. While New York is brimming with fondness and excitement, the streets of Manila are teeming with street children, vendors, traffic jams, and numerous incidences of death. The personae of these poems are by all means conflicted by their ideas of home and the harsh realities governing that specific home.

In the Philippines, these personae settle themselves in the city as an inevitable part of the middle class. In the city, they experience another bout of displacement. They have a hard time reconciling what they have expected from their old country and what they actually see in the streets and experience in the company of their relatives and classmates. Such estrangement coming from these personae produces a blasé attitude towards the urban environment. As a consequence, their knowledge of the city is one-dimensional, largely because it is highly contingent on what these personae see below their condominium units, or from the partial view they get from their car's window. This kind of elevation transforms Reyes's personae into voyeurs. In De Certeau's words, this distance that these personae have "transforms the bewitching world by which [they were] 'possessed' into a text that lies before [their] very eyes. It allows [them] to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god. The exaltation of a scopic and Gnostic drive: the fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more" (264).

So if the city were text and Reyes its reader, then the interpretations would be a straightforward pronouncement of middle class sensibilities. In general, the small portraitures of the city presented in the poetry collection are captured through the eyes of urban dwellers whose main fixations are the small lives and bright neon lights found outside their sliding doors. So one has to ask: what has Reyes accomplished as a poet? What has *Stories from the City* achieved, in the short history of Philippine urban poetry?

While the poems have lucidly recorded what the poet and critic J. Neil Garcia calls, in his blurb for the book, "the verities attending contemporary urban existence," I think they have fallen short in communicating a sensitivity and tenderness towards those who are not only displaced but also marginalized in the city. Though Reyes can be considered successful in creatively putting across the lives of the urban middle class, a lot of things still need to be written about the metro's images and scenarios that remain unseen and unexplored. With the poems she presented, Reyes has covered only one aspect of the urban life. She has still yet to enter the city's realm that is, in the words of E. San Juan Jr., "a diabolic snare or trap for innocent, virtuous [people]" (155).

For to be in the city is to roam the streets, to interact with its people of varied classes, to smell and breathe the scent and stench of its landscape, and to immerse in both its pulchritude and decrepitude. Roland Barthes is instructive in this regard: "The city can be known only by an activity of an ethnographic kind: you must orient yourself in it not by book, by address, but by walking, by sight, by habit, by experience; here every discovery is intense and fragile, it can be repeated or recovered only by memory of the trace it has left in you" (qtd. in Miles and Borden 196). Perhaps this is the cause of the displacement of Reyes's personae. Whether in Manila or in New York, they have resisted touching base with the conditions that enfold and characterize their subjectivity. Rather than interrogating the prevailing ideologies that control the city's structure and the psychic patterns of life (San Juan 164), all of which are the very same factors that undermine their position in the society as deterritorialized beings, Reyes's personae have opted to look inward, hermetic and solipsistic as they may seem, shunning or maybe totally severing themselves from the history, culture, and other material forces that constitute the urban space in which they are implicated. Reyes's personae may benefit from what bell hooks calls "a particular way of

seeing reality," that is, a perspective that looks from the outside in and from the inside out, as well as focuses its attention on the centre and the margin (qtd. in Kaplan 187). After all, this arguably is the most viable way to be free and to tell stories in the city, in the nation, and in the diaspora.

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