

Text and the City

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I would like to thank the National Book Development Board and the UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies, particularly Dr. Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo, for the invitation to speak today. When I received the phone call from Prof. Hidalgo, it wasn't clear to me if I was invited primarily because of my training in what now seems to be a previous life in the field of comparative literature and cinema, or if it was because I am currently the president of the Philippine Women's University. But when I accepted the invitation, I had to wonder what I could say from the vantage point of either position about the theme selected today. Dr. Lumbera seems more current and hip than I, treating text as a form of mobile communication, while to me "Text and the City" seems to echo a popular television series about independent women in New York.

Speaking of independent women... established almost 100 years ago, and in anticipation of an independent Philippine Republic that was still to come, PWU was founded initially to provide women "useful education for virtuous citizenship." From the very beginning, the experience of gendered exclusion from public life and the full political recognition of women's active participation in nation-building, motivated the school's founders to

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educate women as organizers of civil society, without losing track of their roles in the domestic and familial sphere. The school has always endeavored to balance work and home, the private and public spheres; to bridge the gaps caused by modernity's fragmentation of social life. PWU's founders were acutely aware of the boundaries that created bordered centers and peripheries of power, that segmented and spatialized everyday life into distinct spheres of activity organized and valued differentially, and they sought to cultivate a public reason capable of interrogating, if not intervening, in this inequitable segmentation.

For the Founders and for PWU, families are a primordial site for social intervention and transformation. Civics then was always a core orientation of the school—but a notion of civics that insisted on the interconnectiveness of individual, familial, communal and political life. In retrospect, this experience and insight of PWU into our social reproduction might in fact, be pertinent to today's discussions.

Civics and citizenship are, in fact linked to the etymology of the word “city”—connected as the word is to “civitas,” the social body of the citizens. *Civitas* is related in turn to the ties that bind us as a community and as a society, to the rules and the ordering that organizes us, to the manner by which we recognize our rights, duties, and our obligations to one another and to a body larger than ourselves. Cities are administered spaces where citizens can gather and congregate, and where centers of sovereignty reside. But like all sites of sovereignty, cities are not homogeneous socialized spaces. Cities have heterogeneous elements whose borders are real even if generally socially contingent, such as: differentially ordered populations (Foucault's definition of racism), public policies and planned or unplanned urban development, with infrastructures such as roads and markets, multiple types of demographically differentiated public transportation, malls and places of worship, slums and *esteros* used as sewage alongside expensive green and sustainable skyscrapers. It is made up of political divisions where buses can be blocked at borders, or where taxes are collected by one district one day and then possibly given over to another center of power with a stroke of a court's pen. It is made up of neighborhoods and families—communities and individuals with histories of their experiences with one another, who produce as well as survive, contest, transform, or maintain these conditions and the consequences of this structuration of everyday life.

In this sense, a city *is* a text and a text *is* a city: it is woven from multiple and diverse strands that form patterns with a grammar and a syntax, with rules that dictate the parameters of social practices. Who goes where? Which malls or restaurants do we generally visit? It has a texture—a unique structure of feeling—that arises from the specific histories of and possibilities in the particular configuration of value and conjuncture of forces in a specific moment and place. Our idea of a city is also a text in a second sense, in the sense of being a palimpsest of the accretion of events and moments of its inhabitants’ practices and actions, of their *diskarte* or Greek *metis* (Latin’s *metis* would be of interest here too), as they act and react to changing conditions—from climate change and floods in hospitals, to the exigencies of global commodities and markets, to the transforming political conditions both locally and globally, to the everyday events of the density of their being-with one another. To understand the city as a text is also an attempt to provide a structured spatial identity to a system that expropriates or commandeers value from the fluidity of exchanges and flows of capital, commodities, populations and their labors and desires, in the interest of a specific mode of social production and reproduction that concentrates it in the hands of a few. To paraphrase Henri Lefebvre “cities are permeated with social relations, they are not only *supported* by social relations, but are also *producing* and *produced* by social relations.”

Cities are a particular type of sedimentation of social relations, a particular type of spatialization of modes of *social reproduction*. We often imagine cities as entities that provide a form or a structure, a fixed point where the accumulation of value can be seen in the very cost of capital required for the infrastructure of the city. Or we imagine it as a passive setting, a terrain that we, like characters in a text, simply traverse, a landscape or field we play on. Following urban landscape scholar Dolores Hayden, I would suggest that the increase in the intensity of the flows of information, commodity, labor and capital has made place-specific memories and identities even more crucial and important today. “Places make memories cohere in complex ways. People’s experiences of the urban landscape intertwine the sense of place and the politics of space.”¹ Social history manifests itself in our urban landscapes and part of the function of art and literature is to make legible the terrain of our daily life’s choreography and to disturb what

1 Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History* (MIT, 1995), p.43.

Ranciere has called “the distribution of the sensible.” But this image of the city as a fixed point, or a hub, is itself the freezing of the transformative powers of the practice of everyday life. Cities, as well as the *civitas* of its inhabitants in their day-to-day actions and encounters change the possibilities of the city even as what Michel De Certeau might call their “popular ingenuity” transforms or challenges the conditions of urban survival.

But the city is also a text in a third sense, in the sense of a text’s intertextuality and open-endedness. As sites of social relations and practices, cities are never alone, never absolutely autonomous. Seen in these terms, spaces and spheres, their boundaries and borders, are never completely discrete. They shade off into one another. They are linked by flows of exchange and the regulation of the mobility of populations. An environmental analysis of the city and its relationship to various spaces would reveal an ecosystem, reveal the conditions upon which the city’s very existence depends. Cities belong to a variable geometry of hierarchically ordered locations in continuously changing networks of flows of value and production. Similar to the binary of the domestic and the public spheres with which the PWU founders struggled, the city is always co-constituted and symbiotic with rural spaces, with other cities.

As an example, I’d like to look at a text that deals not with the city directly, but with the rural space. In his short story “Kasalan sa Malaking Bahay,” Macario Pineda presents a small rural town in the middle of preparations for a wedding in the home of the landlord. First published June 12, 1946, in *Malaya* (Free) magazine,² the story is ostensibly about the wedding of Anita, daughter of Doña Isabel the local landowner, and Dr. Arturo, a man she has met while in school in Manila (perhaps even at UST). As the story unfolds, we realize that there is a backstory to the story we are being told by Tonio, our farmhand narrator. By the end of the story, we discover that Kapitán Monang, Doña Isabel’s father and Anita’s grandfather had imprisoned Tonio’s father, Mang Terong, for helping Arturo’s father, farmhand Mang Alfonso, deliver letters to his daughter some forty years ago. Isabel and Alfonso’s *foiled* love story (in both the senses of failed

2 The date of 1946 is given by Soledad Reyes in her “Themes in the Stories of Macario Pineda,” while *Maiikling Katha* of 1957 is the source given by E. San Juan Jr. in his Introduction to *Modern Pilipino Literature* (Twayne Publishers, 1974). As a source for the Tagalog stories, I have used Pineda, M. (1990). *Ang Ginto sa Makiling at Iba Pang Kuwento*. (S. Reyes, Ed.) Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.

and as a figure for contrast) from 1906 has found, according to Alfonso, its fulfillment in the marriage of Alfonso's youngest child Arturo to Isabel's daughter Anita. In fact, Alfonso tells us at the end of the story that it seems his expulsion from the town by Kapitan Monang only served the purposes of destiny to see Anita and Arturo marry. Legible only in retrospect, a prior act of exclusion and class division is thus *figurally* completed in the diegetic present. Like a *figura* in Eric Auerbach's sense, the later marriage fulfills the prefiguration of the earlier love story. Tonio points out that the significance of the event is lost on the guests from Manila who do not understand the importance of a marriage from the *lahi* of the *kasama* with that of the *kapitans'* who have ruled the town for generations. Pineda makes apparent the poignant irony of the peasantry not fully recognizing themselves as the true producers of the social structures within which they labor. The symbol and image of rural accumulation and concentration of value, the Big House does not exist in isolation, but only in relation.

Manila in the story is shown to be a site of possibilities, where education can provide class mobility, but the mobility is tracked from within the confines of rural space's boundaries. The story seems to suggest that changes in value, in terms of social and cultural capital, come to the rural space from the "outside," from other spaces where the socio-economic constellation, prospects and constraints are different. Doctor Arturo, the son of Alfonso, comes back to his father's hometown to marry. Arturo has moved class positions from being the son of a *kasama* to being a doctor, something only possible because Alfonso left the confines of the rural town to move to Manila, because in turn of Kapitan Monang's cruelty. The city, unlike in other stories like, say, *Maynila sa Kuko ng Liwanag*, has provided Alfonso's family with the opportunities to climb the ladder to the Big House that the rural space had precluded. Within the confines of the rural space this story uses as a social field, class mobility is in fact circumscribed. The wedding at the big house is the occasion that brings the city and the country—and most importantly the apparent edges of their boundaries—into focus.

In one of the "silences" or oblique references in the story, it turns out that Tonio himself has desires for Anita, aside from his relationship with *kasama* lass Belen. These desires are revealed through a short exchange between Anita and Tonio. Tonio, speaking to his companions confesses that he loves Anita's perfume. Anita overhears their conversation and, touching his arm, promises to give Tonio some perfume. Tonio's joy at this act is

described as second to none. Though the farmers are shown to have their own objects of desire and relationships, Tonio's unrequited desire for Anita shows the continuity of the social structures of the past. The supposed formal resolution of a forty-year-old class divide continues to the present. The laughter at the end of the story resonates with empty promise of a narrative's formal resolution to real social contradictions. The figural completion of Alfonso and Isabel's love story opens up the possibility of an incomplete *figura* in Tonio's desire for Anita—of a fulfillment that is still to-come. The smile of the Big House then can be read as the smile of the continuing class divides in spite of the wedding, it becomes a figure for the continuing social map that constitutes the fields and terrains within which subjectivity gets constituted. The social map of the big house exposes differential valuations for objects of desire, with the lady of the manor, whoever this may be, still the desired object after forty years. Instead then of resolving the social contradictions of 1906, the ending of the short story asks us about the spectral haunting of class divisions in an independent Philippines even after the end of formal US imperial relation. This haunting functions as well in the mode of reading the legibility of the past's injustices for us who now come upon this story and are challenged by the silent structural critique woven into the image of the smiling big house as a structural locus of social relations and the differential accumulation and concentration of value.

I propose that we see the city as a nexus of woven strands of exchange and relations, of a social map with a particular grammar and syntax—an ordering and organization of our social selves, of our community. This nexus in turn is a knot that manifests the accumulation, concentration, and flows of value—of systems, institutions, and practices of *people*. However, as a product of social practices, both individual and institutional, the city is a contested terrain. The very act of navigating the social maps of both the hidden and the overt transcripts of power, has the potential to change the system's conjunctural arrangements. Whether or not such potential changes in conjunctures become changes in structures remains to be seen, but what Ranciere has called a "dissensus" in the ways social maps are produced clears spaces for something else to emerge, it articulates possibilities for an alternative ordering of things, and it is a function of texts and of art to imagine these alternatives, and in some cases even to compel us to imagine otherwise. Let me provide another and last textual example, this time a filmic one.

Filmed in a documentary style, Brillante Mendoza's 2007 film *Tirador* follows a small group of petty thieves who live among the slums of Quiapo. The film is relentless in showing in excruciating detail the conditions of their mundane everyday lives as they struggle to survive in the city and the seemingly arbitrary manifestation of police and political power. Wanting to look tough on crimes more than solving them, electoral candidates set police to sweep the slums and interrupt the everyday lives of the inhabitants. Mendoza's camera articulates public and private spaces and exposes the public and private uses of these spaces. The film contrasts the authority of the state with the practices of the people as components of power as a relation. Treated like an ensemble film, we are shown the various means the slum dwellers use to cope with survival in the city. In a way, the city and its slums become the main protagonist in the film. Set during a campaign season of the 2007 elections, the film ends with a prayer rally for senatorial candidates. By the end of the film and almost prescient with the current outrage over pork and PDAF, the audience is clear that the mark of the *tirador* is the Filipino people themselves and the greatest pathos comes from the promises of politicians, the ways in which they play on our utopic impulses and desires for a better world.

What I find interesting in the film however is the manner by which the elections permeate everyday life—the film's *mise-en-scene* is filled with their posters that decorate people's walls in the slums, the shirts the characters wear, the stickers and the tarpaulins that become shades of tricycles, the calendars that become functional artwork on their make-shift walls—these show on the one hand the ubiquity of politics in everyday life, and on the other hand the *bricolage* practice of Filipinos who can transform and take material and use it for survival. The texture of the materiality of their lives is interwoven with campaign paraphernalia as well as with the unequally structured system. The ending of the film seems on the one hand resigned to the lack of confidence in the political system of our *civitas*, but on the other hand stands as an ethical challenge to the audience. In this sense, a city is a text and a text is a city.

If the city is a Deleuzian assemblage of our *civitas*, and of the grammar of our community's ordering, texts are, in turn, like cities: they are socially-symbolic acts that open us up to our community's past, present and possible futures. They imagine possible worlds as well as make legible

our current ones. Texts are images woven into forms, and like cities, they are also social. Even texts not written for readers, texts whose aesthetic intent is to express some inner truth or individual experience takes part in various publics. Texts open us up to exchange and webs of interlocution. Texts like *Tirador*, and I would argue *Kasalan sa Malaking Bahay*, remind us on the one hand of the textual need for a formal resolution to real social contradictions, but also of the enduring ethical challenge such texts make upon our communities and our *civitas*. They invite us to reflect upon our encounters with others and on the ethics of how our relationships implicate us in larger and larger webs of interaction, each with their own effects and generative forces. In this way a city is a text and a text is a city in another sense: it has a performative aspect that directly implicates us in the potential emergence of a Habermasian communicative reason.

The situated-ness of narration, the interplay between the storytellers and their audience, though not formally a part of the narrative, are the conditions of possibility of narrative's circulation and actualization. In many ways, the selection of what to narrate is also the choice of what to exclude or silence in the particular linking of parts and sequences in a narrative, as well as the other narratives (actual or potential) that circulate within the same field that must be silenced. As Seyla Benhabib has argued:

Retelling, re-membling, and reconfiguring always entail more than one narrative; they occur in a "web of interlocution," which is also a conversation with the other(s). Others are not just the subject matters of my story; they are also tellers of their own stories, which compete with my own, unsettle my self-understanding, and spoil my attempts to mastermind my own narrative. Narratives cannot have closure precisely because they are always aspects of the narratives of others; the sense that I create for myself is always immersed in a fragile "web of stories" that I as well as others spin.³

³ Seyla Benhabib, "Sexual Difference and Collective Identities: The New Global Constellation," *Signs*, Vol. 24, No. 2. (Winter, 1999), 348.

The very open-endedness of textuality, its dependence upon a chronotope and upon a relationship with other texts, is like a city—a space of encounter. In this space of encounter, narratives link subjects and communities; while textuality’s performance provides a stage for a narrative’s interruption, its elaboration, and its transformation. How then do we learn to negotiate competing narratives in this terrain of struggle? What sort of social formations and individual stories emerge from this kind of field? How do we create tissues of narrations in the face of dispossession? The treatment here of distinct intersecting or contiguous metonymic spaces, the city and the country, and the continuity of the structural differentials upon which the country or the city as such is constituted, suggests that the spatialization of community and sociality necessitates the imagination of their limits and their boundaries for the purposes of practical reason. I read *Kasalan sa Malaking Bahay* as arguing that the distinctions and disjuncture between various spaces co-existing at the same time, and perhaps most importantly that our movements between them (even if just imaginarily) provide us with a sense of the comparative, and makes legible the structures and forces of our subjectification.

The Big House’s grin at the end of the story opens up the interpretive space to alternative narratives. The last scene in *Tirador* where candles are lit to join in prayer and hope also has a double effect. Like *Tirador*’s last scene, how should we comprehend Bembol Roco’s silent scream at the end of *Maynila sa Kuko ng Liwanag*; or Philip Salvador’s gun at the end of *Ora Pro Nobis* or *Fight for Us*? The “open-ended endings” of these texts foreground the hierarchies and inequities of our current *civitas* manifested in the way our very spaces are organized and segmented, as well as launch an ethical challenge to us readers and viewers. How then shall we contend with the legibility of our everyday life and experience that they have expressed? After we light the candle and pray for change, what other course of action shall we take? I hope the writers and authors, the critics and intellectuals here today will take on this challenge to continue cultivating a public reason and debate that grapples with these questions.

Mabuhay po ang mga makata, manunulat at manunuri. Thank you and good morning.