
URBANITY AND SUBJECTIVITY IN CONCHITINA CRUZ’S “DEAR CITY” AND LAWRENCE YPIL’S “THE NATURE OF A CITY”

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Abstract

This study is a postcolonial and postmodern reading of Conchitina Cruz’s “Dear City” and Lawrence Ypil’s “The Nature of the City” using Neferti Tadiar’s “Metropolitan Dreams”. The poems are examples of critiquing the political, economic, and cultural consequences of urban expansionism and development that started in full swing in the late 20th century and continue well into today. The study concluded that the critique comes as a result of the imagination being shaped by the expansion of urban architecture in the pursuit of political and economic development at the expense of various factors.

Keywords: urbanity, Metropolitan Dreams, late-stage capitalism, Philippine poetry

Introduction

It is arguable that the concept of the city in the imagination of postcolonial societies around the world retains traces of the rural (McPherson, 2016), though in certain cases, instead of the “rural” being associated with tradition, religion, and simplicity, it would instead be associated more with nature and people’s perception and relationship of it. The migration of people to cities has been the subject of many works of literature within the past century as well as today, and the resulting fragmentation of relationships between communities as well as with nature is highly evident in these works (Serquina Jr., 2016). The concept of the city in Filipino imagination and reality has since been transformed by colonialism and capitalism, and it should not come as a surprise that the depiction of the city in the imagination, as well as its execution by urban planners in reality, remains to be founded, fundamentally, on social reality (Gomez Jr., 2013).

The city as the “place of opportunity” is a trope that continues to be perpetuated as a myth that is broken once the character spends enough time in it (Demir, 2016). Examples such as Edgardo Reyes Jr.’s novel, *Sa Mga Kuko ng Liwanag*, and its subsequent movie adaptation, *Maynila sa Mga Kuko ng Liwanag* all show that this is the case, and share a

common history in the backdrop of Manila's rapid rise of urban development in the later half of the 20th century. The perception of the individual towards the space they move into and eventually inhabit gradually changes, and this portrayal of space and cities in media, especially in literature and, in particular, film, show a degree of complexity in the relationship between cities and their inhabitants. Quiling, Jr. (2016) argues in his analysis of space in the 1985 film, *Scorpio Nights*, that occupants tend to mimic the ambiances they inhabit.

Neferti Tadiar (2004) echoes a similar sentiment in how "the new metropolitan form" shaped through Western-style architecture and urban planning impacts subjectivity:

The desire articulated by this new metropolitan form... doesn't emanate from a subject outside of that articulation; rather, the articulation itself helps to produce the effect of subjectivity... the liberalized "flow" or "drive" allows one who is afforded the privilege of overseeing the city to occupy a self removed from facial confrontations with its social contradictions, which are heightened in congested moments. (pp. 89-90)

It is arguable that this lens can also extend to the individual's perception of the city, especially in poetry. With the rise in flyovers and concrete structures obscuring one's vision comes the desire to possess the means to go above the structures for the privilege of experiencing a certain degree of "freedom", although this, too, is ultimately manufactured. The infrastructure of the city in reality shapes the individual's perception of what a city is, and the imagined city returns to reality further warping the individual, going beyond Walter Benjamin's argument on how social transformations induced by technological changes in production, in turn, alter how the individual perceives (1935).

Alongside the importation of Western infrastructure, architecture, and notions of progress, Virgilio Almarino also share a similar sentiment in the context of the importation of foreign, predominantly Western, media: "the corrupted obsessions of the popular imagination are translated, and made worse, by misplaced government policies" (2010). By understanding the individual's perception and, therefore, imagination as a form of work, Tadiar argues that it is work that "is incorporated into a system" of producing universal value" (p. 5). Both the city, real and imagined, are worth exploring in this regard: how the city shapes the perception, imagination, and expectations of the individual, how individuals situate themselves in relation to the city, and how they question and interrogate its existence.

Methodology

This research paper will analyze Conchitina Cruz's "Dear City" and Lawrence Ypil's "The Nature of the City" through the lens of Neferti Tadiar's "Metropolitan Dreams", as well as other relevant chapters from her book, "Fantasy Production: Sexual Economies and Other Philippine Consequences from the New World Order". This paper will analyze

the poems' imagery and tone, as well as their forms and poetic techniques.

Results And Discussion

This chapter comprises and compiles the results and discussions utilizing Nerfert Tadiar's "Metropolitan Dreams", as well as other relevant chapters in her book, "Fantasy Productions: Sexual Economies and Other Philippine Consequences for the New World Order".

Elements of Poetry

It is worth noting that the two works chosen are prose poems. While they are written in prose form and not broken into verses with a structure, they retain the techniques utilized in poetry, such as symbols, metaphors, and figures of speech.

In Conchitina Cruz's "Dear City" (2014), the speaker addresses the city directly, as if to say that the city, though seemingly inanimate, has a degree of agency:

Permit us to refresh your memory: what comes from heaven is always a blessing, the enemy is not rain. Rain is the subject of prayer, the kind gesture of saints. Dear City, explain your irreverence: in you, rain is a visitor with nowhere to go. Where is the ground that knows only the love of water? Where are the passageways to your heart?
(p. 3)

The speaker personifies the city without necessarily anthropomorphizing it. Through this personification, the speaker is in turn able to interrogate the city and point out its apparent harshness and cruelty: "Dear City, explain your irreverence; in you, rain is a visitor with nowhere to go." Here, the city is hard-hearted; the "ground that knows only the love of water" and the "passageways to your heart" appear to be absent.

In Lawrence Ypil's "The Nature of a City" (2018), the city is less tangible as an entity, rather fulfilling instead a function as a space for other entities to play out their roles:

The nature of a city is that it is built for someone else. Otherwise, a covenant. Otherwise, a show. A script was written for the hero but only on the premise that after a long bout of illness, he would be willing to cut the cost and be someone else. (p. 28)

The nature of the city, for the speaker, is that it is "built for someone else" - it is not a place for "me" or "you", and his use of "someone else" allows the city to retain its nebulousness in both imagination and reality. Ypil's use of imagery similarly reflects this nebulousness, from the lighting in the church to the items sold in the bazaar and the toys peddled in the streets.

The use of tone and imagery in the two poems provides a clear contrast in both perception and imagination. In “Dear City”, the interrogative register and the recurring use of water as a motif further lends to the envisioning the city as an entity that can be questioned through its action or lack of action. In “The Nature of the City”, the speaker envisions the city as a space for different performances and actions and ultimately returns the speaker to it, or the city to itself.

On the City and the Language of Disillusionment

Perception shapes imagination and vice versa, and this feedback loop also extends to how the speaker’s language eventually mirrors their environment. Cruz’s “Dear City” shows one that is both aloof and hardened. Here, the speaker uses water and the transformation of it as the main recurring image, with the city refusing to take in the water and instead warping it into flood.

Through the speaker, it is possible to see the city as a more concrete, tangible entity. The speaker not only attempts to plead with, but also accuses the city. The city, like water, is a body: “Where are the passageways to your heart?” Although faceless, it is capable of action, and its presence is primarily defined, and acknowledged, through consequence: “Pity the water that stays and rises on the streets, pity the water that floods into houses, so dark and filthy and heavy with rats and dead leaves and plastic.” A more literal reading of this interrogation would echo a familiar sentiment that many would have towards megacities like Manila: “dangerous to its citizens - polluted, dense, violent, and poor, with inadequate and badly maintained infrastructure and public utilities” (Hogan, 2012).

In Ypil’s “The Nature of the City”, the city itself is not a body but instead a space for bodies to play out roles, all in the past tense: a script “was written”, five devils “flicked their tails”, and a god “extolled the virtues” of humanity’s diminishment. Here, the city is seen through the bodies and objects that inhabit it rather than as the space itself. There is, in fact, not much about the space in the poem rather than what inhabits it, from the bodies, to the devils, and even the items in the bazaar.

Again, returning to Ypil’s first line: “The nature of a city is that it is built for someone else”. The speaker never specifies who it is for, but it can be read in such a way that the city is not built for anyone in particular, that it always has to be “someone else”. In other words, the city is not “built for you”.

Cracks in the Concrete Facade

Flyovers, according to Tadiar, realize a specific kind of conceptual space that serves as a site of symbolic identification for those with the means and access to the transnational economy (2004, p. 85). They are a means of production in how they connect structures like shopping malls, exclusive residential neighborhoods, and major foreign-invested areas - they

extract and concentrate wealth and value into these specific areas. Additionally, they essentially raise upper and middle-class individuals and families from urban immersion, ultimately at the expense not just of the lower classes, but also of the natural topography on which the city itself is built.

The apparent “irreverence” in Cruz’s poem is a reflection of this. Here, the flooding that occurs during rainfall within the city is a byproduct of these conceptual spaces made realized, but these are instead never seen. Again, throughout the poem, instead of seeing the facade of flyovers blotting out skylines or views of old buildings, the speaker addresses the shape of the city through the effects of flood. The city is defined not through what is present, but what is absent. The effect is done through omission and the utilization of consequence, with the resulting cause of the flooding highlighted all the more.

With the city’s layout and constant service to the production of the fantasy that those with means can “rise above”, the resulting imagination of one that views the city from below would be one that is cold and cruel. “Where are the passageways to your heart?” is a question that is not only literal (the water cannot penetrate the ground level without proper drainage, resulting in flooding) but also symbolically charged.

The body of the city, in Cruz’s poem, is one that has forgotten, or perhaps has never known, the kindness of water. Rather, the body of the city is one that is in constant contradiction with itself:

...while capital demands an 'open-economy' — meaning a feminine, permissive and porous metropolitan body, a national identity based on masculine ideals of power and selfhood demands a centrally-controlled, self-protective economy — meaning a contained and disciplined metropolitan body. In other words, the metropolitan state is hailed to be this body at the same time that it is hailed to possess (and control) this body, to be a pliant, porous feminine people, or a strong-willed, self-disciplined masculine nation-state... (p. 96)

The resulting congestion and chaos beneath the flyovers are a consequence of the contradiction between the need to impose both the masculine and feminine national identity on the city. That said, “Dear City” goes beyond this: it is an interrogation of a body that does not care, that pursues only the fantasy of “rising above” at the expense of everything else below. The concrete structures that support this fantasy for those who can afford it are also likely to drown out all else that does not, or cannot: “We walk home in the flood and cannot see our feet”. The structures, in this regard, are both alienating, and alienated - the “urban excess”, as Tadiar describes the collective action of pedestrians, passenger jeepneys, street hawkers, etc. - are left to their own devices. The speaker ends the poem with an accusation: “There is no other culprit.”

In contrast, “The Nature of a City” initially appears to be more nebulous and vague. A city is “built for someone else”, meant to be viewed as a space for different entities to play out their roles. The city as “covenant” can either refer to the city as a series of endless agreements between its different citizens, or the individual’s unspoken agreement with the more nebulous force of an urban environment. Meanwhile, the city as “show” can be read as a reference to the more spectacular aspects of the urban dream: flyovers, billboards, and neon lights can easily dazzle the viewer from afar, while the urban complexity underneath - the congested traffic, poor urban planning, etc. - can be easily ignored.

The usage of the “hero” is particularly noteworthy here - a “script is written” only for the hero to play the role in exchange for becoming “someone else”. The “hero”, in this case, is the martyr, intended to fail in their role for the sake of spectacle, but it is the only role they can accept. It is arguable that many citizens living in cities would have a similar experience: that they could “play the role”, but ultimately they are not allowed to fully exercise the degree of freedom afforded to the role: they are more “martyr” than “hero”. The seemingly out of place “devils” and “god” in the middle of the poem are not simply an audience to this performance, but complicit in the construction, the “nature” of the city as it is and as it has become.

The city’s borderline apathy and malice, which can at times appear to be personifications, are the result of the intention and the execution of its design that feeds into the imagination and vice versa. Again, from Tadiar: From this suspended pathway the city looks greener because the foliage of walled-in neighborhoods become visible, and the roofs of shanties look like variegated pieces of mosaic or a collage, especially because movement blurs marks of decay and makes details of the corroding urban landscape and its trash disappear into a 'postmodern' spectacle of the heterogeneity and fragmentation of its pronounced uneven development. (p. 84)

“Outside, the bazaars gave and gave” but in Ypil’s poem, the Filipino *tianggé* does not have enough space for all the goods it produces, the showcase of surplus value either imported or extracted from the surrounding provinces outside the city. The space itself is absent, even to hold value.

Summary, Conclusions, And Recommendations

This study aimed to explore two poems about cities through the lens of Neferti Tadiar’s “Metropolitan Dreams”, applying the cultural and the postcolonial context to analyze the poems’ utilization of poetic techniques, such as persona, imagery and form.

The poems are a critique of 21st-century urbanity, where the concept of the city has become an ever-expanding marker of “progress” that caters only to those who have the means to do so. The city is the realization of political, economic, and cultural processes that actively feed into one another, with the existing structures in reality shaping the imagination and critique of the city. The systems that result from the extensive creation of flyovers at the expense of the citizens that already reside in the city, being further disenfranchised through what Tadiar calls the “conflicting articulations of space” (p. 87). The fantasy that the

architecture of flyovers imposes and directly feeds into not only becomes increasingly inaccessible, but also ends up shaping the imagination of the citizens residing in the said city.

It is recommended that more studies are conducted analyzing a wider selection of 21st century urban poetry in the Philippines. It is also recommended to compare the different styles and poetic techniques utilized by different poets from the 1960s to 2020s to analyze how specific changes in the progression of urban expansion have shaped both imagination and critique of increasing urbanization. Additionally, following that same thread in research, it is recommended that more studies are conducted comparing urban and rural poetry in the Philippines from the 1960s to 2020s to document and analyze the different changes in worldview in line with the changes in the physical landscape of both urban and rural environments.

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