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## **Metro Manila: City in Search of a Myth**

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# Metro Manila: City in Search of a Myth

*Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo*

## The Invisible City in Our Fiction

It has grown to mammoth proportions, this Metro Manila sprawl, stretching from Valenzuela in the north to Alabang in the south. With its diversity, its density, its multi-leveled culture, it must surely be one of the most interesting cities in Asia. But it has not produced what is generally called "city fiction." For all that most of our writers in English are Manila-based, Manila does not play a central role in our fiction in English.

I am using the term "city fiction" to refer not just to fiction whose setting happens to be the city, where the city figures as a kind of backdrop against which the personal drama of the characters are enacted. I am using it to mean that type of fiction in which the city breathes and throbs, fiction in which the city might be said in some way to shape the destiny of the characters, to propel the action and, to a certain extent, determine its outcome. I am speaking of myth-making about the city, fiction that contributes to the city's mythology.

In many of our stories in English, the city remains on the level of setting. It is dismissed with a few perfunctory lines, always either steaming in the noonday sun, or drenched in monsoon rains, clogged with traffic and suffocated by fumes. This paragraph, for instance, might be considered almost generic:

When Tony reached the street, the traffic had swelled. Early dusk was approaching from the rooftops, promising to wash down the glare that still clung in sharp, ragged blotches to the window panes of the buildings along the street. Everywhere the rush hour was spewing large numbers of people into the sidewalks. The indistinguishable noise of their laughter and speech stirred the air like some grotesque hum, broken only now and then by wheels screeching around a corner. (Tuvera 1997, 122)

Passages of this sort serve as setting. The author, content that he has located his characters, moves blithely on, hardly ever again alluding to the physical milieu, except in the sketchiest fashion.

Thus, the city in most of these stories is just a place where things happen. It might be any other city. It does not really come alive in all its distinct, multifarious details. And even when some details do emerge, very rarely does the author sketch them with a loving hand.

This is not to say that there are no memorable stories of the city. I shall mention briefly five short stories and two novels.

"Old Favorites" by Bienvenido Santos is a sad little story of an encounter between a peddler of cheap perfumes and a former history teacher of his, which takes place beneath the Quezon Bridge. The younger man, Benito, invites his former teacher for coffee at a nearby restaurant, and as they sit there, Mr. Gatbonton, the retired teacher, tells Benito about how Marcelo, Benito's classmate and Gatbonton's favorite pupil, tried to extract a bribe from him before releasing his pension check. Here, although one still gets the "confusion of the market place" and "the clatter of traffic overhead," and although the tale is full of pathos, the city itself is not depicted in unequivocally harsh tones. There is even a touch of beauty to it, as when the "lights turned on in over a hundred places" (1960, 125).

Francisco Arcellana's "How to Read" is about a person who earns a living through "buy-and-sell," and who tries to raise money for his pregnant wife's impending delivery by peddling his ten well-loved books in Plaza Goiti. He fails, of course, and after taking a meager meal at Estero Cegado, he goes to the Sunken Gardens, stretches out under an acacia tree, reads every well-loved single book over again, and goes home content, convinced that the books are wealth in themselves. Here, again, one encounters the crowds and the traffic. But, as Zaccarias dips into his precious volumes

There was the sun in the afternoon; there was the blue sky clear like God's eyes; there was the tree and its shade; there was the green grass and the feeling of earth; there was the twilight and then the miracle of the afterglow; there was the evening falling like a sable shroud and there was the cape of night. (1990, 109)

And that, too, is the city.

Jose Y. Dalisay Jr. has also produced some fiction of the city, including the short story, "Delivery," where an errand boy drags a gigantic funeral wreath through the steamy, cramped city streets, back to the florist, in order to have it delivered to the joker who sent it as a ma-

cabre joke to his boss. The young man does not dislike the streets he must traverse. He even chooses to walk part of the way, and to take a jeepney the rest of the way, though his boss has given him cab fare. Were he not on a serious errand, the narrator informs us, Protacio "might actually have stopped to marvel at the traffic: the sidewalks were abloom with the clamor and the press of business." It is All Saints' Day, and

had he paused, he would have seen them peering into the turgid folds of roses, brushing the throats of lilies, figuring the preciousness and the unearthly cost of beauty, before settling for cheap nosegays of daisies stocked in gallon cans. (1996, 9)

And that is yet another face of the city.

Barring Nick Joaquin, Amadis Ma. Guerrero is perhaps the most persistent chronicler of the city. "Miss Lily and the Policeman," for example, is about a forty-five-year-old spinster who falls in love with a young policeman on her way to the Quiapo Church one day, and has a passionate but entirely platonic affair with him. She is an English teacher in a downtown university, enjoys walking in leisurely fashion along Quezon Boulevard, envies the men in the restaurants "their camaraderie and freedom" over their beers. The possibility of striking up an acquaintance with one of the strangers around her occurs to her – "a sidewalk vendor, perhaps" but she reminds herself that "it would be foolish to seek friendship in the teeming, indifferent streets of Manila" (1975, 28). She is loath to leave the church, "despite the intense heat and the smell of sweat around her." She stops to listen to the music played by a beggar. In short, Miss Lily does not see the city as a hostile, nightmarish place. And, one evening, she does indeed follow her instincts, and reaches out to a stranger, the young policeman she has been admiring. And her audacity is rewarded, and a friendship blossoms between them, in the cheap restaurants lining the busy Quiapo streets.

In "The Drowning" by F. Sionil Jose, the city becomes more of a presence. Francisco Buda, a retired teacher and one-time writer, rescues a young woman who tries to drown herself not far from his favorite perch by the seawall. He takes her home to his seedy apartment and coaxes her back to life. In Buda's eyes, beaten and broken as he is, the city is not always a dismal, ugly place.

It was Friday, the rainy season was over and the afternoon was cool and dry. Even the air seemed to have a fresh tang, unlike the foul odor of decay which it often exhaled at midday. (1995, 39)

The neighborhood is described in some detail—the children racing tiny wooden boats in the gutters filled with sewage or flying kites which get snagged in the tangle of electric wires overhead, the rattle of mahjong chips, the taxis taking hostesses to their clubs, “the glow of that dream world along the Boulevard and the spires of Baclaran Church” (42). He has long since been abandoned by his wife and children, has long since stopped writing, and now lives only a life of “dulled resignation.” But as he slowly convinces the girl that life is worth living, he acquires the need to take up life again himself, to make money so he can see her through the delivery of her child. He asks her no questions, only generously offers her everything he has. In gratitude, the girl revives, and soon transforms his shabby apartment into a pleasant little abode. He buys her a cheap blue dress and a vinyl handbag in Baclaran, takes her to a small restaurant to eat fried chicken, brings her to his refuge by the seawall.

The girl, Emily, gets a job as a salesgirl in a Chinese grocery near Baclaran. Buda, for his part, goes to see a former student who edits a magazine housed in a surprisingly dingy building in Sta. Cruz, and is offered an advance on a short story by the editor, a former student. Buda then forces Emily to resume prenatal care, even if she has to go across town and over the river “to the abattoir called Maternity Hospital.”

Her coming to term coincides with the onslaught of summer, but also with Buda’s completion of, not one, but two stories, and with his being given a job by his old university which is located near the noodle houses of Claro Recto. But poor Emily dies in childbirth, leaving her baby girl to Buda. The story ends, as it began, by the sea.

Jose’s novel, *Mass*, is more ambitious. This account of the making of a revolutionary—his odyssey from a small village in the north to the slums of Tondo—is a true parable of the city. And it contains passages where the city is evoked with power. The most gripping of these passages is probably the account of the demonstration, which results in the death of the protagonist’s friend, Toto.

We were marching again, intoxicated by our numbers, uncaring about the traffic that we had knotted all around Quiapo. As the head of the demo reached Recto, an explosion rocked our rear. A massive surge forward separated the head of the demo from the rest, but the marshals were very skillful. *Makibaka! Huwag Matakot*. They chanted, and we repeated the chant...Past seven; the neon lights along Recto were glittering, but all the shops were closed. The merchants, the people were afraid. (1984, 113)

Unfortunately, the novel is flawed by relationships not convincingly constructed, awkward syntax, persistent oratorical flourishes ("Manila—here I am at last, eager to wallow in your corrupt embrace and drink from your polluted veins. Manila, Queen City, Pearl of the Orient, Jaded Harlot, and cheap, plastic bauble, luminous with the good life..." [11]). But this is another matter.

The point I wished to make about these five stories and one novel is that they do not contain either the neglect or the rejection of Manila that may be found in many of the other stories set in the city, and in at least two of them, Jose's short story and Guerrero's, might be gleaned a kind of affection for it.

Now, I wish to consider two other texts.

*Killing Time in a Warm Place* by Jose Y. Dalisay, Jr. moves back and forth across Metro Manila, the "warm place" being both the military camp where the protagonist is detained and must therefore "kill time," and the city under martial law, which, in fact, is a time for killing. As in Jose's novel, the plot here unfolds during the tumultuous martial law period. And Noel Bulaong, like Jose's protagonist, is a transplanted *provinciano*, who is swept along by events. It is a fine portrayal of an intelligent, sensitive young man who, being far from rich himself, understands and empathizes with the downtrodden, but is also powerfully drawn to the good life and to the circles of power that make it possible. So he chooses to survive...

The twists and turns of his life take Bulaong to different parts of the city, each one vividly evoked, from the U.P. campus ("soaked in green: sharp days in June, the sharpness of wet leaves, of acacia branches riven at the core by lightning, the tang of broken grass" [1992, 25]) to an underground "safe house" on a "gouged and knotty" earthen road carved out of rice fields, to Cubao with its Chinese noodle shops and "smoky lanterns of the *siopao* and *balut* vendors" squatting outside the Araneta Coliseum, to the raunchy girlie bars of Timog Avenue, to the military camp where he is held prisoner for a time, to a quiet apartment near V. Luna. But the most vivid descriptive passage in the novel is that of the shantytown in Tambakan.

And so the low-slung city, in a gesture become familiar to victims and observers alike, floods up and vents itself on its own poorest, who squat on the crumbliest earth. They stream in from the provinces in hot ships and buses, and stake out their claims to unattended yardage along the *esteros*. With scraps of plywood, galvanized iron, used lumber, and rubber tires (to weight the roofs down), they erect a dwelling in less time

than it takes to digest a supper, and they bring in their straw mats, their cardboard boxes full of clothes, their gas lamps, and their saints; they tap into the nearest water mains and power lines with the instinct of the suckling, and so connected become members of the babylonian City, whose newest parts at once look like its oldest. (60)

On the other hand, its most lyrical passages are about Michigan.

I had never stepped into a forest of red and gold before, and for the first few minutes I trod carefully on the layered ground, as though disturbing it would hurtle me back in a swirl of pretty leaves to prison camp. We let ourselves be taken in and covered by that new season: we watched the squirrels shimmy up the trunks, and, coming into a patch of pure, delirious yellow, I persuaded Estoy to pose for a snapshot. (38)

Bulaong's return to his homeland seems motivated by guilt, rather than by love. And his thoughts, as his plane touches down at NAIA, are of snow.

The first time, the very first, it caught me in the open grass, and I too, was all dry leaf and twig, thrilled to be stung. Five winters there, and I still marvel at the turning of the earth: how it seems to snow right up to the ruffled neck of spring, and then it's over. (128)

The result is an emotional ambivalence which, of course, is a large part of the novel's meaning.

"Weight" by Lakambini Sitoy, is a rare example of a story that one cannot imagine happening anywhere else but in its chosen setting—Quezon City. Its protagonists are Ami, a junior editor at a newspaper who sidelines as writer for an NGO and Jayme, a layout artist who plays for a band, drives a bike, loves comic books and smokes joints. Their relationship is tenuous but curiously compelling, and comes to a head when he decides to drive all night in order to spend a weekend in Baguio, and she, almost against her will, decides to go with him. As they drive, she is sharply conscious of the city around her, a city rendered unfamiliar by its being seen in the middle of the night and through the eyes of someone so sleepy as to be in an almost mind-altered state.

Quezon City in the wee hours of the morning was another country, the buildings she saw every day from a jeepney obliterated by blackness, patches of neon and fluorescence whizzing past on either side as the car sped over asphalt. (1998, 162)

This is her turf ("She had been over these roads a hundred times before, in college and in the years after. She knew every landmark by

night as well as day") and yet it is only now, that she is about to escape it, that she sees it clearly—movie houses, automatic tellers, morbid monument to dead boy scouts, bars, nightclubs, motels, "the great white memorial to Manuel L. Quezon: three marble spears each topped by a hefty angel, head bowed in mourning, permanently flightless, frozen in stone" (164).

But the point of this story is the need to get away from the city. Jayme says to Ami: "'I've got to get out of QC. I need to see some mountains. I'm sick to death of this place.'" And in her decision—a decision she slips into almost imperceptively, never quite acknowledging that she is making it—to go with Jayme, Ami achieves a kind of liberation, as the heightened prose suggests:

"Tell me when to stop," he said. The speedometer needle was climbing; they were sweeping now onto the Kamias Flyover, farther and farther from Cubao. She caught her breath as they rocketed over the stretch of elevated asphalt; they were flying, she thought, flying over a road rain-slicked and golden from the reflected light of the mercury lamps, high up enough in the air to see the top of the Quezon Memorial and its three earthbound angels." (167)

Only as she leaves it behind can Ami afford to look on the city with what might be interpreted as a kind of fondness:

The Quezon Memorial was behind them, growing smaller and smaller by the second. It looked now like a warm little heart pulsing with secret life. They were passing vacant lots overgrown with weeds. The little golden heart glowed in the ever-widening distance." (168)

The seven texts mentioned above were selected because of two reasons: unlike most other stories set in the city, (1) they go beyond using the city as mere backdrop; and (2) they depict the city in terms other than the conventional and thoroughly predictable, i.e., heat, crowds, traffic. However, these stories by Santos, Arcellana, Jose, Guerrero, Dalisay and Sitoy are the exceptions rather than the rule, and a meager harvest when one considers the body of fiction in English by Filipinos.

### **The Visible City in Our Creative Nonfiction**

It is when we turn to our creative nonfiction that we encounter, not just the intimacy with the city that is missing from much of our fiction, but an actual affection for it.



Three types of personal narratives immediately come to mind: First, there are the memoirs of childhood: for example Carmen Guerrero Nakpil's *Ermita* in "A Christmas Memoir" and "I Remember Ermita" (1963); Kerima Polotan's *Santa Ana* in "This Way to the Museum" (1977); Gilda Cordero Fernando's "A Quiapo Childhood" (1994); Marra Lanot's *Sampaloc* in "Never Dull or Sleepy, Sampaloc was Home to a Child of the Fifties" (1985).<sup>1</sup>

Then there are the war narratives, most of them set in the Ermita-Malate area, which suffered the brunt of the "liberation," for example, Carmen Guerrero Nakpil's "The War" (1973); and two full-length books—Pacita Pestaño-Jacinto's war diary (1999); Lourdes Reyes-Montinola's *Breaking the Silence* (1996).<sup>2</sup>

And third, there are the chronicles of EDSA, of which Quijano de Manila's *The Quartet of the Tiger Moon* (Joaquin 1986) is perhaps the most significant. Another—shorter—example is Alfred Yuson's "Sure I Was at Edsa" (1997, 147–50). There are also the pieces that do not deal with the actual events of February 1986, but with subsequent celebrations of EDSA, like Rosario Garcellano's "EDSA Dancing" (Garcellano 1991, 170–73) and Conrad de Quiros's "A Revolution in Search of an Author" (1990, 9–12).

But a cursory glance at the collections of essays and nonfiction narratives published recently will reveal a prodigious number and variety — tales of the city, told in an unmistakably urban tone: witty, gritty, sophisticated, sometimes dry, sometimes wry, sometimes lyrical, often ironic.

A little-known slim volume titled *Little Reports* by Juan T. Gatbonton (1986) devotes a whole section to "City Life." In his foreword, the author writes:

Most of us who ran the magazine then were college classmates—recent graduates or dropouts from journalism school. We all admired *The New Yorker* and copied its prose style with much zeal, if little skill. Our idol was of course E.B. White, whose elegant essays for 'Notes and Comments' led off every *New Yorker* issue. In "Little Reports," the *Chronicle* magazine's unsigned editorials, we tried to echo his halloos, which certainly bear repeating. (ix)

The elegance he admired is obvious in the pages of Gatbonton's book, an elegance which strikes the contemporary reader as almost quaint, so remote does it seem from what fills newspaper pages these days.

But there are other voices. Sylvia Ventura writes of her forays into the used-clothes shops in Kamuning in "Ragtime in Kamuning." Barbara Gonzalez's recounts her initiation into the Makati disco scene, in "One Fragmented Disco Night," shortly after returning from what she describes as "a quiet life in San Francisco." Danton Remoto plays tourist guide into the gay night scene in "Gays: From the Underground to the Mainstream" and chronicles the triumphant coming-out in "Lesbian and Gay Pride March '96: Only Clothes Belong in the Closet."

In the essay collection, *The Best of Barfly*, Butch Dalisay describes sundry adventures through the city's streets in his Volkswagen beetle and an impromptu walking tour of Chinatown ("a streetcorner joint with steamy windows, thick drinking glasses, orange lamps as large and as bulbous as pumpkins, gritty floors and even grittier customers sucking on toothpicks for desert") (1997, 150).

In "Stopping by a Public Library," Conrad de Quiros describes his delight at discovering a little public library, tucked in a corner of San Francisco del Monte, looking like "a lighthouse on a dark night beckoning to floundering ships in a wind-swept sea" (1990, 132). Of course he also rails against the pollution on EDSA in "Journey Through Wasteland" (122–24) and against the hazards of commuting anywhere in the city in "Underclass and Nouveau Poor" (141–44). Randy David recounts his brother's harrowing experience at the airport, and the kidnapping of his daughter's friend on the "well-lit shopping center" just outside the U.P. campus in Diliman at 7:30 a.m. (David 1998, 115–17; 163–65). But even when they are figuratively tearing their hair over the city's ugliness, these writers are not blind to its beauty.

Rosario Garcellano's *Mean Streets: Essays on the Knife Edge* focuses mainly on the cruelty of the city streets, as in the book's title piece ("children . . . lying supinely on cardboard, lost to moonshine and the biting cold"). But it offers, also, the delicately evocative "A Night Full of Rain," in which she describes seeking temporary shelter from the rain inside a shabby restaurant, and finds one of those unexpected surprises that the city sometimes hands to its inhabitants, as a kind of reward perhaps.

For all its local color, the scene could have been straight out of a German film set on the eve of the Nazi era, where the singer in a cabaret, luminous in the garish spotlight and rendered surreal by the clouds of cigarette smoke, croons of despair. The audience is frozen as though in some intaglio, and the words slip and slither in the electric air, dispensing messages ambiguous and pained. (Garcellano 1991, 119)

Alfred Yuson's essay collection, *Confessions of a Q.C. House-Husband* (1991) is full of engaging views of the city, ranging from the hilarious "Tips for the Metro Motorist" ("Pepper your curses with the most personal of insults. Don't just yell "*estupido*" or "*gago*" or "*walang konsyensya!*" Make sure you trace the jeepney driver's genealogy all the way to his sorest spot"[245]); to the nostalgic reminiscences of the old Peco, off Quiapo, the Roman Garden in San Beda, Asia Chicharron down Azcarraga, and other boyhood haunts ("Ma Mon Luk on Quezon Boulevard, off Raon, where the life-sized airbrushed portraits stared down with deep inscrutability as you shook up the toyo" [106]); to whimsical reflections on his wild and wooly days as a habitué of the cafes of the sixties; to humorous accounts of the pleasures and travails of running a household in U.P. Village in the eighties.

Sylvia Mayuga's *Spy in My Own Country* takes us close to the city's core and allows us to feel heartbeat. These pieces chronicle that turbulent period of the sixties. Several are focused on Ermita, which the author describes as having "acquired the mongrel look of a merry college campus growing into a Greenwich Village or Left Bank as it upheld the colors of Sherwood Forest, Camelot, Castalia, and the magical traditions of Tibet" (Mayuga 1981, 56).

But she knows the rest of her city well. Here, for instance, is the paean to Avenida Rizal:

The wilds of Divisoria are represented here, and so are the innards of customs, the sidewalks of Hongkong, the publishing houses of New York, the shoe villages of Marikina, the printing presses of Quezon City and all the countless small dingy rooms all over the city wherever some budding businessman shrieks: *May gimmick tayong bago. . . !* And so this diurnal torrent of *butingting*—spirographs, lights laminated with wild-flowers, shoelaces, flints, lighter fluid, nails, locks, fake tarot cards, equally fake college rings molded from melted down bronze trophies and polished to the sheen of yellow gold. (*Sinong magsasabing P3.95 lang 'yan kung suot ng disenteng tao? HEP, bili-bili, HEP, bili-bili na kayooo!*) Strollers, plastic desk calculators, neckties, headlines (NORA'S HOUSE HAUNTED? OPEC RAISES OIL PRICES AGAIN) lining the sidewalks like a poor man's red carpet, an obstacle course of colorful perishabilities. Nail files, erasers, rubber bands, greeting cards that proclaim: LOVE NEVER GIVES UP! (105)

Finally, in the pages of Jessica Zafra's many volumes, we meet a self-proclaimed "city dweller."

Let me tell you something about myself. I am a city-dweller. My lungs are filled to bursting with car exhausts, factory emissions, and other

noxious gases which in time shall kill me. My daily diet consists of artificial substances, empty carbohydrates, and saturated fats which clog my arteries and lay siege to my overworked heart. My stress level is—how shall I put this—similar to a frayed piece of rope with which a piano is being lowered down the side of a ten-storey building. My idea of exercise is getting up and switching TV channels manually instead of using the remote-control clicker. When the building elevator is on the blink, I don't heave a sigh of resignation and take the stairs—I find the person-in-charge and yell at him to fix it. (1995, 109)

For all its self-mocking tone, one knows Zafra is okay about all this. She's not about to change herself. Nor is she about to pack her bags and move to the province. The reader is in the presence of a yuppie, a child of the Manila of the eighties and the nineties. Leafing through any of her *Twisted* series, the reader finds himself following her in and out of her apartment, into and out of jeepneys and taxis, in and out of restaurants, movie theatres, bars, malls. She likes it here. She likes it because it's interesting. She likes it because it's where things happen. This is palpable in her every line, even when she seems to be really down on it.

One might also mention here, the quintessentially urban *The Milflores Guide to Philippine Shopping Malls*, edited by Antonio A. Hidalgo (2000), which, while it purports to be a guidebook, is in fact a collection of essays and personal narratives by fictionists and poets (among them, Yuson, Dalisay, Doreen Fernandez, Clinton Palanca, etc.) about malls, the mall culture, and sundry other matters.<sup>3</sup>

The composite picture that emerges from these various texts (and from the many others not mentioned here) is closer to the immense variety and complexity of Metropolitan Manila, taking in both squalor and elegance, and, in chronicling both in strong, resilient, powerful prose, investing both with a kind of grace, the grace required to survive in our sometimes incomprehensible time.

## A Sense of Time and Place

Why do the writers of nonfiction do so naturally what the fictionists seem to manage only with difficulty? Or why do writers, in their nonfiction, readily do what they don't seem as inclined to do in their own fiction?

Most of the creative nonfiction cited here was originally written as newspaper columns or feature articles, in other words, as journalism.

Journalism deals with facts, with the tangible, with the concrete, with the here-and-now. So, perhaps, it seemed to the writers the only way to write. (Not so with fiction, which deals with imagined worlds, even when it purports to draw its material from this one.) Whether they are doing straight news or an interview with a bold star or a trek up the Cuernos del Diablo, they know they must produce something that is of this time and of this place. (If it turns out to be also good for forever and a day, that's a bonus. It's worth collecting in a book!)

All the texts mentioned here have, in fact, been collected in books. Which means that by their authors' own judgment, though they might have been accepted as assignments and written against a deadline, they deserve a second look. And this, not just because they deal with issues and ideas that continue to arouse fury or delight or amusement, but because they do so through devices borrowed from the fictionist's art: interesting characters, a compelling plot, a powerful sense of time and place.

Why, then, is this vivid sense of time and place missing from our fiction?

Nick Joaquin offers an explanation.

When I started writing in the late 1930s, I was aware enough of my milieu to know that it was missing from our writing in English. The Manila I had been born into and had grown up in had yet to appear in our English fiction, although that fiction was mostly being written in Manila and about Manila. The place-names were familiar enough but they conjured up no city to trigger a shock of recognition in a Manilaño like me. It seemed as if the city itself, the Manila I knew, had become invisible to our writers in English. Something in their upbringing, in their schooling, had made them unable to see what had been so apparent to their grandfathers. These young writers could only see what the American language saw." (In Fernandez and Alegre 1993, 1)

For example, Paz Latorena, in "Desire," describes her protagonist as walking "by the shore of the Manila Bay," and leaves it at that (1928; 2000, 65).

Joaquin recounts that Lydia Arguilla had once remarked to him that she had lived in Intramuros for ten years (this was in the 1930s), and had not once noticed the feast called La Naval de Manila. "For the young Lydia, it had become invisible because she had been trained to ignore such things as backward and irrelevant" (Joaquin 1993, 1).

But if that was true for the writers, that in the thirties, the choice of English as a language for fiction had rendered certain things invisible,

surely this no longer holds true for the writers at the turn of the century.

I would suggest four possible reasons for this continuing absence, adding that they are very tentative, requiring a much more thorough investigation before they can even be proposed as a theory.

First, perhaps most fictionists, though now residing in the city, are really transplanted *provincianos* and *provincianas*, who have left their hearts in whatever town or barrio they grew up. This may explain the power of such descriptions of the countryside as are to be found in Estrella Alfon's "O Perfect Day" and "Compostela" (Alfon 1960 and 2000); and of the quiet little town plaza of Tayug in Pangasinan as opposed to the "high airless room of the Sampaloc apartment house" in Kerima Polotan's novel, *The Hand of the Enemy* (Polotan 1962, 53). And hardly any novel of the city can match the richness of description, the evocative power, with which Edith Tiempo recreates Surigao in *A Blade of Fern* (1978 and 1998), Antonio Enriquez recreates Zamboanga in *The Surveyors of Liguasan Marsh* (1981), Gregorio Brillantes captures the provincial towns of Tarlac in *The Distance to Andromeda* (1960 and 2000) and *The Apollo Centennial* (1980) and *On a Clear Day in November Shortly Before the Millennium* (2000), and Manuel Arguilla captures Nagrebcan in his stories in *How My Brother Leon Brought Home a Wife* (1940 and 1998).

The second reason is related to the third. Perhaps our writers are still held captive by the traditional city vs. country dichotomy, which romanticizes the latter and demonizes the former. Thus we can wax lyrical over a waterfall, a field of sunflowers, the scent of wood smoke, the chirping of crickets, but not about the sights, sounds, and smells of the asphalt jungle.

Thus, Manuel Arguilla's story "Caps and Lower Case," which is very much a story of the city, contains a most disaffected view of it, a decided contrast with the view of the countryside contained in stories like "Midsummer" and "How My Brother Leon Brought Home a Wife."

In the tiny bedroom where he and his wife slept on the second floor of a two-story accessoria in Santa Cruz near the Dulongbayan Market, it became stiflingly hot at night. The occasional breaths of wind that found their way through the bedroom window, which opened on a bleak prospect of quarreling rooftops of rusting corrugated iron were like torrid emanations from the throat of a giant furnace. (Arguilla 1940, 176)

A third reason might be that—with the exception of certain portions of Makati and Pasig—most of what we call “the city” is not really urban, but “rurban.” Behind every building-lined avenue is a shanty town, with laundry flapping from clotheslines, fighting cocks crowing and strutting about in the dust, and an improvised basketball court in the middle of the road. Perhaps this split-level development and the resulting sense of dislocation and disorientation cannot produce a firmly grounded fiction of the city.

Jose Y. Dalisay, Jr. has said of the contemporary generation of fictionists that “their locales and sensibilities are overwhelmingly urban, even cross-continental,” being “generally well-schooled, well-read and well-travelled” (1998, 150). And if one thinks of the most prominent among them (i.e., those who have published their own collections and earned the most number of national prizes)—Lakambini Sitoy, Clinton Palanca, Amado Lacuesta, and Luis Katigbak—that observation is accurate. Of these four, only Sitoy has provincial roots. Palanca, Lacuesta and Katigbak are Manila-born and bred (Lacuesta was born in Cebu, but was very soon after transplanted to Manila), have been educated at the Ateneo and the University of the Philippines, are employed in the city (in Media, Advertising, and, in the case of Palanca, in the restaurant sector), and do their share of traveling outside the country. That theirs is an urban sensibility is undeniable. And yet their stories—while set in the city—are still not imbued with the fully imagined *physical* reality of it. Several of Palanca’s stories and some of Lacuesta’s are fairy tales, set in imaginary landscapes. Katigbak’s characters, while they inhabit what is apparently the city of Manila, live mostly in their own minds.

What these younger writers lack is possibly a sense of their city’s history. And here is the fourth—and perhaps the more compelling—reason behind the lack of what I have been calling “city fiction” in our literature in English.

To quote Joaquin again:

If the Manileño seems, of all Filipinos, the most developed, it is because he is informed by a city soaked and drenched in history, a city where every spot of ground is encrusted with memories, where every place-name has emotional value, and where people consequently feel and think and live more intensely than anywhere else in the country. When a Manileño speaks, he speaks—whether he knows it or not—with all his past behind him, which is why his voice rings with such authority and pride. He is no cultural parvenu—or was not, anyway, in the days

when every sign post, every street, every annual public ritual assured him of the antiquity of the traditions to which he was heir. The rest of the country may be willing to shed the dark past and start clean, but the Manilaño is a creation of the baroque and should not be content with anything less than the totality of his city's experience—Malay, Spanish, American, and whatever else there may be, including the latest invaders. (1980, 87–88)

In the end, perhaps what matters is not so much whether Metro Manila is urban or "rurban," or whether the writers are transplanted from faraway fishing villages or spawned in the city's dark alleys or chic, tree-shaded suburbs. Perhaps what really matters is how deeply steeped the writers are in their city's history, how much of its culture (and this includes its pop culture) they have absorbed. For if they have no awareness of their city's mythology, how can they possibly contribute to it? And if they do not, how can that mythology possibly survive?

A city's mythology is created, as much by the people who actually lived in it, as by the artists who have imagined it.

A newcomer to New York City is excited by the Manhattan skyline (now irrevocably altered, of course), by the Museum of Modern Art, by Greenwich Village, by Rockefeller Center and Carnegie Hall, because he has seen them in the movies, and read of them in stories and poems, long before landing at JFK. Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, Mary McCarthy's *The Group*, Walt Whitman standing in the Brooklyn Ferry, Holly Golightly taking breakfast at Tiffany's, *To Catch a Thief* and *Guys and Dolls*, *Funny Girl* and *Barefoot in the Park*, Frank Sinatra belting out "New York New York," Simon and Garfunkel singing "The Sound of Silence" in a concert at Central Park—these are part of the landscape of the newcomer's imagination.

In 1853, the seventeen-year-old Samuel Clemens (who later became Mark Twain) wrote to his sister in St. Louis:

I have not written to any of the family for some time . . . because I have been fooling myself with the idea that I was going to leave New York, every day for the last two weeks. I have taken a liking to the abominable place, and every time I get ready to leave, I put it off for a day or so from some unaccountable cause. It is just as hard on my conscience to leave New York as it was easy to leave Hannibal. (cited in *The New Yorker* 1989, 38)

And those words are part of the myth of New York City.



More than a hundred years later, in an essay where he described himself as a "city rat," Edward Hoagland wrote:

Long ago we outgrew the need to be blowhards about our masculinity: we leave that to the Alaskans and the Texans who have the time for it. We think and talk faster, we've seen and know more, and when my friends in Vermont . . . kid me every fall because I clear out before the first heavy snow, I smile and don't tell them that they no longer know what being tough is." (127)

And those words too are now part of the myth of New York City.<sup>4</sup> A city without memories, a city without myths, cannot inspire affection. Nor can it inspire art.

It is, finally, to Nick Joaquin again that we must turn to find the most "fully imagined sense of the city."

### Quijano de Manila

In both his creative nonfiction and his fiction, Nick Joaquin is the true chronicler of Manila. In fact, he considers it to be his main contribution to fiction in English—restoring to fiction the city's past, its customs and traditions, as well as its present sights and sounds and smells.

It is hardly possible, in a paper of this length, to discuss the tremendous body of his creative nonfiction—the feature articles, interview stories, profiles, essays, memoirs, most of which pulsate with the lifeblood of what the author has called "the city of his affections." To mention just a few, we might recall "Anding Roces Plays James Bond," an account of the rescue of the original manuscripts of Rizal's two novels and the "*El Ultimo Adios*" by then Secretary of Education Roces, a tale which reads like a spy thriller (Joaquin 1977, 111–30). Or "Take-Over in Manila," a blow-by-blow account of the celebrated feud between Arsenio Lacson and Antonio "Yeba" Villegas (Joaquin 1981, 90–109). Or the edifying tale of the honest taxi driver, who returned the wallet a passenger left in his cab in "The Man Who Found Christmas" (Joaquin 1977, 201–15). Or the hilarious—but also immensely informative—history of the local "motel culture" in "Short-Time' Checks Out" (Joaquin 1980, 157–70). Or the fascinating tour of Manila's brothels, massage parlors, strip joints, gambling joints, and other dens of iniquity, in "Manila: Sin City" (Joaquin 1980a, 255–71). Or the wonderful history of Calle Azcarraga (Joaquin 1980b, 85–100). Or the modern

real-life love stories, which include the tragic tale of the Filipina ballet dancer and the Yugoslavian refugee, a romance which began in Madrid and ended with his plunge to his death from atop the Main Building in the UST campus on España Street (Joaquin 1977, 11–20).

This is not even to speak of the volume on Intramuros which Joaquin edited (1988); or the beautifully evocative history of Manila, *Manila, My Manila* (1990 and 1999); or the amazing *Almanac for Manileños*, which the author himself described as “A calendar, a weather chart, a sanctoral, a zodiac guide, and a mini-encyclopedia on the world of the Manileño” (Joaquin 1979, viii).

But let us now consider Nick Joaquin’s fiction. It is only in the stories and novels of Nick Joaquin that the city not only acquires character, but *functions as* a character.

In most of his short stories, it is Hispanic Manila that we see. Who can forget the marvelous opening of “Guardia de Honor”?

In October, a breath of the north stirs Manila, blowing summer’s dust and doves from the tile roofs, freshening the moss of old walls, as the city festoons itself with arches and paper lanterns for its great votive feast to the Virgin. Women hurrying into their finery upstairs, bewhiskered men tapping impatient canes downstairs, children teeming in doorways, coachmen holding eager ponies in the gay streets glance up anxiously, fearing the wind’s chill: would it rain this year? (But the eyes that long ago, had gazed up anxiously invoking the Virgin, had feared a grimmer rain—of fire and metal; for pirate craft crowded the horizon.) The bells began to peal again and sound like silver coins showering in the fine air; at the rumour of drums and trumpets as bands march smartly down the cobblestones, a pang of childhood happiness smites every heart. October in Manila. (Joaquin 1972, 123)

But, contrary to the popular view, Joaquin is as much at home in modern Manila. His first novel, *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, is mainly set in the Manila of the fifties. But it moves backward and forward in time, as its characters struggle to find their place in its tumultuous history. And we get unforgettable scenes like these:

They went walking along the narrow cobbled streets rutted by generations of carriage wheels, past grilled windows and ornate doorways opening into filthy courtyards with broken fountains—the homes of the great long ago, the garrets now of stevedores and poor students. . . . At a sidewalk stall, squatting on low stools, they drank smoky coffee and ate a stack of rice cakes, hot off the fire, nutty and crusty, fragrant as

morning fields, while church-bound old women and pier-bound laborers and Spanish friars and American sailors gaped at this lady in a blud shawl, with gem-encrusted ears, eating breakfast at a rude stall on the sidewalk. . . .

From the ramparts where the Spaniard had watched for Chinese pirate and English buccaneer, the younger taller city beyond the walls seemed rimmed with flame, belted with fire, cupped in a conflagration, for a wind was sweeping the avenue of flametrees below, and the massed treetops, crimson in the hot light, moved in the wind like a track of fire, the red flowers falling so thickly like coals the street itself seemed to be burning. (Joaquin 1960, 72)

It is, however, in his second novel, *Cave and Shadows* (1983) that Joaquin tries to integrate legend, history, current events, mystery and magic, with his own images and memories of what he has called the city of his affections, and his vision of what might save its people.

Here is the protagonist Jack Henson at the opening of the story:

His hotel was in downtown Manila, on an alley off Carriedo, so that a few steps down the street brought him to the start of Rizal Avenue, already before seven in uproar. A double stream of jeepneys curving round the corner of Plaza Goiti filled the avenues far as the eye could see, from old Cine Ideal to the Odeon Theatre at the Azcarraga crossing. The massed roofs of the jeepneys formed a sheet of grey stretching towards the daylight, as though this top of the traffic were a highway for the sun, now a growing fire upstreet. (Joaquin 1983, 2)

Henson's investigation into his step-daughter's mysterious death leads him all over the city—through its three-story mansions with their towers and terraces, their marble fountains and fake Greek statuary, its opulent bayside restaurants, its narrow alleys where "every corner is steamy with barbecue . . . and fumey with the ripeness of fruit being peddled off pushcarts," (82–83) and its squalid flophouses where fornicating couples are offered as entertainment. Finally, it leads him to the cult that worships at the cave, a cult led by a priestess referred to as Ginoong Ina, a woman of mysterious origins. In one of this city's suburbs exists a strange cave, built on a hill, its steep slope plunging "in a terrifying cascade of ground, rock, and vegetation apparently hurtling downhill to the river" (22).

This pre-Hispanic cave with a secret staircase cut into the stone, has been uncovered by an earthquake which had dropped "a dead-end slum into the water."

When he first sees the cave, Henson

Thought of this great rock looming over this bend of the river in the days when the rain forest grew down to the water's edge and only the river was road. From amid the dense green, did the rock rise naked, as innocent of lawn and leaf as of road and roof? What eye had first been drawn to its morning dazzle, its afternoon aureole? (23)

The Ginoong Ina, believed by some to be a seventeenth Century miracle worker called La Beata, by others to be a warrior priestess who led a revolt against Spain with a Spanish archbishop riding by her side, and by still others, as the avatar of a pagan goddess (of course she might also be the daughter of a Tiboli datu, a stripper, or a starlet turned neo-pagan activist) now has for her convent a warehouse in Santa Ana, and for sanctuary, a modest nipa hut.

The woman, a striking woman in her forties, almost as tall as Henson himself ("not so much priestess as bishop," Henson thinks), warns him to stop his investigation before it is too late. "You will be spilling blood. The goddess of the cave is dangerous. She is one of the good spirits who can be merciless." (147)

And all this takes place in the blazing heat of August the month before the declaration of martial law.

At the heart of the novel lies the startling idea that "the salvation of the Filipino lies in the restoration of paganism in the Philippines," which can of course be interpreted to mean that the nation will survive only if it can get back in touch with its pre-colonial roots, not just with its history but with its pre-history.

Jack Henson rejects the proposition when it is presented to him by his friend Pocholo at the novel's end, when the mystery of Nenita Coogan's death is no closer to a solution, and the Ginoong Ina's prediction of blood being shed has come true. But he doesn't prevent Pocholo from making his escape, even when the latter has admitted to being somehow involved in the strange circumstances surrounding Nenita's death. In the end, he refuses to "take sides."

But the Ginoong Ina says to him: "Oh, but I think you will, when the time comes and that it will be the right side" (267).

And, if the heightened lyricism of the passage is any proof, the reader cannot have any doubts about whose side the author is on:

It was the first time he had seen her smile and suddenly all these things that had happened were but as the sounds of lyres and flutes.

Hand on doorknob, she stood in afternoon sunlight, in her purple plaid wrap-around and transparent blouse, her long black hair streaming down her back; and it seemed indeed as if from her face smiled four centuries of myth and mystery." (267)

Here is myth-making worthy of a great city!

## Summary and Conclusion

Why has Philippine literature in English not produced great city fiction, when it has produced a powerful body of "city nonfiction"? I have suggested that the strong sense of place and time to be found in our creative nonfiction might come from the fact that most of these texts were originally published as newspaper columns or magazine feature articles, in short, as journalism, which demands this sort of grounding.

Some factors present themselves as possible reasons for the lack of a correspondingly strong sense (and a strong presence) of the city in our fiction: (1) most of our fictionists have their roots in the province and are not truly *of* the city; (2) they are influenced by the traditional binary of city vs. country, which tends to demonize the former and idealize the latter; (3) the city itself is not really "urban" but "rurban," a situation which produces a kind of disorientation or dislocation.

Ultimately, however, the only significant factor may be that writers lack a full awareness and understanding of their own city's rich history, an inadequate grasp of the city's multi-leveled culture. This fourth reason is perhaps the most plausible explanation behind our failure to produce a great city fiction. It would seem that only writers who are deeply steeped in the city's traditions, its customs, its mythology, will produce a literature that will become a part of that mythology.

For this, Philippine fiction in English must look to Nick Joaquin.

## Notes

1. These childhood narratives, or excerpts from them, and other similar narratives, are included in *Pinay: Autobiographical Narratives by Women Writers, 1926-1998* (Hidalgo 2000)

2. These war narratives (excluding Nakpil's) or excerpts from them, and other similar narratives, are included in *Pinay: Autobiographical Narratives by Women Writers, 1926-1998*. Since this paper was written, two more full-length memoirs of the war have

been published: *Manila: A Memoir of Love and Loss* by Purita Echevarria de Gonzalez (Hale 2000) and *It Took Four Years for the Rising Sun to Set* by Joaquin L. Garcia (DLSU 2001).

3. After this paper was written, Gilda Cordero Fernando published the extraordinary *Pinoy Pop Culture* (Bench 2001), another book difficult to classify, but most definitely creative nonfiction.

4. I choose New York City as an example of a city rich in myths simply because it was a city I myself lived in for a time, and with whose art I am familiar, not because I wish to hold it up as a model.

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