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## Longings for Manila: Projections of Imperialism and Decline in the Poems of J. Slauerhoff

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# Longings for Manila

## Projections of Imperialism and Decline in the Poems of J. Slauerhoff

The Dutch poet Jan Jacob Slauerhoff (1898–1936) featured Manila in three poems written in the late 1920s. These poems present the city as the decaying remnant of a deceased empire. Manila appears as a memory site of Spain's bygone world dominance, resonates with the discourse of the "decline of the West," and bears parallels to an image of a decaying Dutch empire. The city functions as a screen against which cultural images derived from the author's personal European context are projected: cultural pessimism and colonial decline.

**KEYWORDS: SLAUERHOFF · CULTURAL PESSIMISM · CULTURE AND IMPERIALISM · MANILA LITERATURE · POETRY**

The Dutch poet Jan Jacob Slauerhoff (1898–1936) featured the city of Manila in three poems he composed in the 1920s: “Manila,” “De Kathedraal, Manila,” and “Captain Miguel.”<sup>1</sup> In contrast to later scholarship presenting the “emerging metropolis” (Torres 2010, 72) as a vibrant city full of cultural activity and urban developments,<sup>2</sup> these poems depict the city as the decaying remnant of the deceased Spanish empire. Apart from being a metaphor for the mortality of the human body, expressing the melancholy that resonates throughout the work of this disease-ridden and somber poet, this portrayal of decay projects ideas regarding colonialism and imperialism on the city.<sup>3</sup> Manila appears as a memory site of Spain’s bygone world dominance, an image that idealizes past empires as a means to comment negatively on the capitalist imperialism of Slauerhoff’s time, resonating the interwar discourse of Western decline.

In this article I introduce Slauerhoff’s Manila poems by offering an analysis as well as my own translations of them into English, which are intended to remain faithful to the content of the poems and therefore do not aspire to be poetic. To analyze their relationship to the colonial context, I turn to the notes that Slauerhoff took during his two-year stint, between 1925 and 1927, as a ship’s doctor based in the colonial Dutch East Indies. Finally the poems are connected to Slauerhoff’s 1930 story, “Larrios,” which culminates in Manila.

### A Romantic Roamer

Two of the poems, “Manila” and “Captain Miguel,” are part of Slauerhoff’s 1928 collection *Oost-Azië* (East Asia) (Ravenswood 1928). The third one, “De Kathedraal, Manila,” was published posthumously in the collected poems *Verzamelde Gedichten* (Collected Poems; Slauerhoff 1947), but written in the same period as those in *Oost-Azië*. In the section of the collected poems with the same title, “De Kathedraal, Manila” appears along with the poems from the 1928 publication (ibid., 405). Both the 1928 volume and the more extended section in the collected poems contain impressions and observations that Slauerhoff made during his voyages from September 1925 to September 1927 as a ship’s doctor on the Java-China-Japan-Line (JCJL), a shipping company that maintained regular service to China, Japan, and Korea from Batavia (Jakarta) in the Dutch East Indies (Hazeu 1995, 226), with Manila as a regular stopover (cf. Van den Muijzenberg 2003, 350).

These poems testify to the author’s observations and imaginations of the Far East, where he locates the themes of restlessness, not fitting in, and decay, that run throughout his work. In his review of *Oost-Azië* the poet Hendrik Marsman, a friend of Slauerhoff’s, highlighted the melancholic tone of the poems and their depictions of beautiful images as short-lived patterns, all perishing rapidly or crumbling away in a terrifyingly slow but unstoppable process. Marsman (1979, 467) regarded such images as typical of Slauerhoff’s work.

Slauerhoff is usually characterized as a (neo-)romantic poet (Anbeek 1999, 117–18). Scholars point out his “interest in exotic themes and foreign cultures, the sea, melancholy, decadence” (Van den Neste 2013, 14) and emphasize that Slauerhoff’s “romanticism often ended on a note of cynicism and bitterness” (Meijer 1971, 324). In 1930 his contemporary Victor van Vriesland (1958, 78) noted his “contempt for the world,” “inner loneliness,” “hatred of life,” and misanthropy.<sup>4</sup> Slauerhoff published the volume *Oost-Azië* under the pseudonym John Ravenswood. According to the introduction signed by Slauerhoff (1928, 7), Ravenswood was a Dutch seaman of Scottish descent living in self-imposed exile on a Pacific island. Posing as such a figure showed the romantic longings, escapism, and the idealization of the outsider, which characterize his work. Slauerhoff was as restless as some of his literary characters, continuously being pulled toward exotic places and foreign cultures, on a search for a world free of the obligations and restrictions he associated with being part of Western Europe’s bourgeois society in general and that of the Netherlands in particular, which he regarded as dominated by self-interest and directed toward a comfortable conformity on the intellectual level (“*geestelijk* comfort”) (Vosters 1955, 100). According to his biographer, Wim Hazeu (1995, 663), Slauerhoff went on his many travels to seek (but did not find) refuge from the constricting society of his homeland.<sup>5</sup> His search for an alternative to what the poet regarded as a culture of mediocrity led to a fascination with the cultures of Portugal, Spain, and China.<sup>6</sup>

In the poems and prose works that were inspired by his voyages, he attributed such ideas to the places and persons that populated these texts.<sup>7</sup> As travel writing these poems necessarily relied on their author’s observations, which were conditioned by his ideas and expectations of the places he visited. Slauerhoff projected his “lethargic, fatalistic, pessimistic state of mind” and physical weakness on these places and characters, as Nout van den Neste (2013, 33) has shown for Slauerhoff’s works on Macau and

Lisbon. He perceived these cities “as reveling in their own past and lost glory” (ibid.). Similar projections can be seen in the poems about Manila, but as the following analysis shows, beyond projecting a state of mind, these poems also use the city as a vehicle for cultural pessimist ideas regarding the colonial world.

### Western Decline and Colonialism

What may be obscured by established views on Slauerhoff as a romantic escapist is how his work was embedded in more topical (albeit not unrelated) cultural pessimist discourses that were prominent in European culture during the 1920s, as well as the relationship of his poems to the colonial context in which they were written.

In the aftermath of the destruction wrought by the First World War, visions of a doomed Western civilization were widespread. The international success in the 1920s of *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (The Decline of the West), by the German philosopher Oswald Spengler (1923), inspired many of Slauerhoff’s contemporaries to perceive their age as one of continuing cultural decline. In the Netherlands prominent intellectuals like Marsman and the historian Johan Huizinga brought forward cultural pessimist stances. Although it is unknown if Slauerhoff actually read Spengler (Slauerhoff was notorious for his chaotic style of working and did not keep track of the books he read), he was almost certainly aware of these ideas. The critic Huub Mous (2010), who proposes to view Slauerhoff’s work in the context of cultural pessimism, claims that he must have known Spengler through his friend Marsman and cites sources close to Slauerhoff indicating his affinity with ideas like Spengler’s. Hazeu (1995, 14) points briefly at the relationship between the poet’s motifs of decay and the interwar discourse of Western decline as an avenue of further scholarly inquiry. The only study I could find that takes up this point is by Van den Neste (2013, 110), who relates Slauerhoff’s vision of Portuguese culture and history to Spengler’s visions of doom.

His poems about Manila, I argue, are similarly permeated with visions of decay, which served as expressions of cultural pessimism that he linked to a sense of unease with modern, Anglo-American dominated colonialism. Slauerhoff’s work on East Asia must be seen in the context of Western colonialism in this region: he worked for a colonial shipping company and wrote about colonized places. The Dutch East Indies was marked by a

combination of highly developed commerce and economic exploitation, on the one hand, and the colonial policy of educating the allegedly backward colonial subjects (the so-called Ethical Policy), on the other.<sup>8</sup> Hence Dutch colonialism bore similarities to its American expression in the Philippines, even though Dutch colonial policy makers stopped short of granting their colonial subjects the promise of political independence as their American counterparts did in the Philippines. One of Slauerhoff’s friends and intellectual companions, Eddy du Perron, was born in the Dutch East Indies into a wealthy Indo-European family and was critical of his colonial background. In his novel *Het Land van Herkomst* (Land of Origin [1962]), Du Perron fought “against colonial myths, lies and euphemisms” (Salverda 2004, 90).

Connecting cultural with colonial unease, Slauerhoff’s attitude was a complex, paradoxical, and irrational merger of contempt for the superficial, capital-driven character of modern Western colonialism, on the one hand, and adherence to the notion of Western superiority, on the other. The West appeared as subverted by cultural decline, of which this superficiality was a symptom, whereas his idealization of the East mainly served to dismiss the present state of the West. His negative perception of contemporary colonialism showed in the diary that he kept irregularly during his travels in East Asia. An entry written in the Bornean oil port of Balikpapan portrayed European employees in the colony as joyless, lifeless, and keeping up appearances:

witte schoenen, aan den hals gesloten witte jassen, helmhoeden.  
. . . Is de arbeid even eentonic als hun kuddeverschijning? Hoe opwekkend is het van hen af te zien naar de zwartglimmende, zweetende laskaren met hun hoofd- en lendedoeken, hun gegrijs en gegalm en gewroet. Zij leven, waar de Europeaan . . . van saaiheid sterft en niet weet dat hij sterft. (Slauerhoff 1957, 19–20)<sup>9</sup>

white shoes, white jackets closed at the neck, pith helmets. . . . Is their work as monotonous as their herd-like appearance? How joyous it is to look away from them toward the shiny black, sweating lascars with their headscarves and loincloths, their grinning and laughter and grubbing. They live, while the European . . . dies of dullness and does not know he’s dying.

Contrasting these moneymaking Europeans' lifelessness to the image of a good-natured, lively Asian character showed Slauerhoff's contempt for the Western colonialism and civilization of his time. He was based in the Dutch East Indies during what Frances Gouda calls the "proverbial fat years" of the 1920s. Westerners working in the tobacco, rubber, and oil industries got "accustomed to a life of hard work and generous financial rewards" (Gouda 2002, 83). Slauerhoff's notes indicate his contempt for these colonial functionaries. In another entry he expresses loathing for one of his passengers: "An office hero, elevated to East Asia and therefore to the summit of parvenu-ship, who has a browning in his drawer" (Passagier: een tot Oost-Azië en daarmee tot de toppen van het parvenuendom getilde kantoorheld, die een browning in zijn la heft liggen; Slauerhoff 1957, 21).<sup>10</sup> Slauerhoff thus adds pretentiousness to the list of negative stereotypes associated with colonial expatriates.

Despising the capital-driven character of Western colonialism is tied up in a complex way with national and European patriotism, images of the impending destruction of the West, and a fear of the East with racial dimensions. In one diary entry Slauerhoff called his era the "poorest of ages" (De armste tijd) and went on to lament that people did not suffer for a cause anymore, as his contemporaries were only interested in their personal freedom, which he claimed would ultimately lead to destruction. He continued:

**Maar vernietig dan alles; niet onze oude cultuur, zoodat de gelen op de resten zullen parasiteeren en zich zullen vermeederen, talrijk als sprinkhanen. De keuze: verdedig Europa door alles heen of vernietig alles tegelijk. (Slauerhoff 1957, 17).**<sup>11</sup>

**But then, destroy everything; not just our old culture, so that the yellow race will parasitize on the remains and multiply, numerous like locusts. The alternative: defend Europe at all costs or destroy everything at once.**

To Slauerhoff the imperialism of the declining West seemed unable to keep the Asian "yellow race" at bay. Although Europeans in Asia lived like kings, Asia was not conducive to the intellect, he noted further (ibid., 23).

He went on to condemn the East, capitalism, and cosmopolitanism, in favor of communism, nationalism, and the West, even though it was rotten and bourgeois. In the end he showed awareness of the incommensurability of these three ideas. He claimed that cosmopolitanism caused superficiality, and that property corrupted people. The "arrogance" of "all property owners in the Indies and East-Asia" (natives and foreigners) made him wish for the violent destruction of the "rotten" colonial capitalist system (Alle bezitters in Indië en O.-Azië zijn van een stompzinnige arrogantie die doet wenschen dat de russische sikkel eenmaal door deze rotte aren varen zal; ibid.).

Slauerhoff's criticism of colonialism, which emerged from the cultural pessimist discourse of Western decline, related to his portrayal of Manila, as seen in a 1927 document, which is apparently the introduction to a planned travelogue on Manila and Macau.<sup>12</sup> The text begins with the observation that the South China Sea had two dead cities that embodied the decay of two global empires, which had dominated the "history of these seas for centuries" (de geschiedenis van deze zeeën [sic] eeuwenlang hebben beheerscht)—Spain and Portugal. These empires form a contrast to the present in which two new, enemy powers towered over their remnants: "England in Hong Kong before Macau; America in the Philippines before the Intramuros" (Nu heerschen de beide andere ook verwante doch vijandige wereldmachten hier. Engeland in Honkong voor Macao Amerika . . . op de Phil[ippijnen] voór het Intramuros). Macau, rotting away near the thriving commercial center of Hong Kong, is seen as similar to Intramuros and the surrounding US colony. The author's sympathy lies with the decaying old cities, as can be seen in his comment that Macau remains untainted by modern commercialism and is (unlike Hong Kong) truly China (Slauerhoff 1985, 16). The document furthermore likens Macau and Manila to the once-prosperous Dutch ports around the Zuiderzee (ibid.). As these ports formerly sustained trade with the East Indies—ports such as Hoorn and Enkhuizen had their own chambers of the VOC, the Dutch East India Company (Bosscher 1973, 201)—Slauerhoff likened the Spanish to the Dutch empire. In contrast to the prosperity that the colony was experiencing, the cultural pessimist author presented Dutch colonialism as declining: Manila, Macau, and the old Dutch merchant towns were remnants of idealized Western empires replaced by colonial capitalism.

## Manila

How often Slauerhoff visited Manila in the mid-1920s is not clear based on his diary, but Manila was a regular stopover in his route from Java to Hong Kong and further north, which he travelled four times each year, amounting to a total of eight voyages during his two-year service (Hazeu 1995, 230). The diary also does not give details on the places he visited and the people he met while he was in Manila. There is hence little that we know about the context of his direct experiences and observations on which the following poems were based.

Manila<sup>13</sup>

*Aan H. de Vries*<sup>14</sup>

Plaza d'España, smal driehoekig plein.  
In 't midden spruit een wankelende straal  
Soms voort uit een zieltogende fontein;  
Daarachter, hoogverweerd, de kathedraal,

Anders de urenverre naakte vlakke's  
Beheerschend tot de steenen horizon ;  
Hier nauw benard door palm en stekelcactus,  
Tropisch verlaten, prooi van bloei en zon .

Verzaakt door 't oude moede rijk, teruste  
Binnen zijn randgebergte in starren vree<sup>15</sup>  
Vergeeten dat de zon eens aan zijn kusten  
Nooit onderging dan in een Spaansche zee.  
Op verre eilanden bestaat een stuk  
Dat vreemde overheersching stug verduurt,  
In zich gekeerd en hoog ommuurd  
Verlaten door het oud wapengeluk.

Zal van ons ook, als wij vergaan,  
In de oude grond te rust gevaren,  
Aan de andere zijde een teeken voortbestaan,  
Waar wij eens oppermachtig waren? (Ravenswood 1928, 23)

Plaza d'España, narrow triangular square.  
In the center a stumbling squirt buds  
Sometimes from a moribund fountain;  
Behind it, highly weathered, the cathedral,

Unlike the faraway naked plains  
Dominating unto the stony horizon;  
Here, constricted by palm and thorny cactus,  
Tropically desolate, prey to bloom and sun.

Forsaken by the old, tired empire, to rest  
Amid its mountain ranges in barren peace,  
Forgotten that once the sun on its coast  
Never set but in a Spanish sea.

On far-away islands exists a piece  
That sturdily endures foreign domination,  
Turned inwardly within high walls,  
Abandoned by the old weapons' bliss.

Will of us, too, as we perish,  
put to rest in the old ground,  
Remain a sign on the other side,  
Where we once were almighty?

The poem “Manila” opens with the sorry image of Plaza d'España, the “narrow” Intramuros square named after the former colonial power. Symbolizing the decay of the empire is the “moribund fountain” with its occasional “stumbling squirt,” and the weathered cathedral behind it. (Poetic license may account for the placement of the Manila Cathedral on Plaza d'España, instead of the nearby main square.) The cathedral, constricted like a mighty animal in chains, and the old city are subsequently contrasted to the distant barren plains, as if there is nothing to be found in between—the city surrounding Intramuros disappears along with all its liveliness, diversity, urban and economic developments, struggles, and violence.<sup>16</sup> The

inhabitants of the city are consequently absent from the poem. The modern city, the capital of the American colony, does not fit the presented picture of decay. In the next stanzas the old city seems to be turning inward, looking away from the new.

Manila, even though forsaken and abandoned by Spain's "old tired empire," is still imagined as a piece of it, continuing to exist far away from home and sturdily enduring *against* foreign domination. This "foreign domination" can only be referring to the American colonial regime. As Spain is apparently not foreign to Slauerhoff's Manila, the city is conceived of as essentially Spanish, but forgetful of its past in which the sun "never set but in a Spanish sea." The decaying old city, persisting as a sign of Spain's once supreme power, is "turned inwardly in high walls," seemingly rejecting its present surroundings, the modern city where the American regime dominates the scene. Native Filipino society disappears completely in this dichotomy of a Spanish Manila and American domination. In the same manner the poem presents a barren image of the countryside surrounding Manila, which in reality was teeming with economic activity, but also was the stage of a range of rural rebellions against the colonial state all throughout the 1920s and 1930s (Abinales 2005, 147).

Manila thus becomes a memorial site of the Spanish empire in an American-dominated present. The glorification of Manila's Spanish past is a way for Slauerhoff to set himself apart from Dutch society, as Spain was traditionally seen as the enemy against whom the Netherlands achieved independence in the late sixteenth century. Moreover, the adoration of the old empire enables a critique of the contemporaneous colonial setting, in which the Dutch continental dwarf was able to maintain its status as a colonial giant through the possession of the East Indies (cf. Wesseling 1995, 193).

The final stanza adds another dimension with the theme of mortality and bodily decay, which Slauerhoff explores throughout his work. Manila as the remainder of a dead empire comes to symbolize the existential question of what becomes of us after we are gone. But this identification of the deceased empire with the decline of human beings also connects to cultural pessimism—Spengler likened the cycle of civilizations to human life cycles of birth, youth, flourishing, decline, and death (see Van den Neste 2013, 110). Again the modern city would not fit the presented image and does not appear in the poem that shows Manila as a sign of the deceased empire.<sup>17</sup>

## The Cathedral

Images of decay and glorification of past colonialism are prominent in the short poem "De Kathedraal, Manila" as well:

De Kathedraal, Manila

Tusschen palmenvolt'  
De kathedraal,  
Steenen kristal  
Uit macht gestold.

Door woekerbloei bezeten,  
Hoog begroeid, stil bestormd,  
Muren door wortels gespleten,  
Torens misvormd.

Daarbinnen blijft eeuwen-  
Oud geloof in zwang,  
En stilte, dezelfde, eeuwen,  
Eeuwen lang. (Slauerhoff 1947, 405)

Amid palm foliage  
The cathedral,  
Stony crystal  
Of solidified might.  
Possessed by rampant bloom,  
Highly overgrown, silently stormed,  
Walls cloven by tree roots,  
Towers deformed.

Inside there immemorial  
Religion stays in vogue,  
And silence, the same, for ages,  
Ages long.

The poem testifies to the author's fascination with the old Manila Cathedral. Slauerhoff romanticizes the weathering of its walls and tower, a result of several damaging earthquakes and fires (cf. Cushner 1971, 25–30). A similar fascination with the ruins of an ancient church shines through in a poem from *East Asia* on Macau's cathedral, of which only the façade stands (Ravenswood 1928, 19).<sup>18</sup> It may be because of the similarities to this poem on Macau, which also portrays a waning Asian cathedral, that the one about the Manila Cathedral was not included in that volume.

Slauerhoff's fascination for the two ruined churches lies partly in the images of decay that they convey, as a romantic interpretation of Slauerhoff's work would highlight. But the poem also celebrates the church as a remnant of a declining culture and fallen empire. Just like the poem discussed above, and more explicitly than the poems on Macau, "De Kathedraal, Manila" highlights the Spanish imperial past. Slauerhoff calls the cathedral a "Stony crystal / Of solidified might": the bygone power of the Spanish colonial empire can literally be touched in the cathedral building, where its dominance endures in solid form.

Parallel to the poem "Manila," the final stanza imagines the cathedral as a place where time stands still and the past lives on, notwithstanding the fact that the cathedral had actually been rebuilt several times (cf. Manila Cathedral–Basilica of the Immaculate Conception 2014). Religion and silence have magically survived unaltered in the cathedral, an image indicating Slauerhoff's fascination with Catholicism. Unlike earlier Dutch authors, Slauerhoff does not contrast a Protestant Dutch with a Catholic Spanish culture (see Vosters 1955, 100). Rather, the trope of Western decline leads him to admire Catholicism as an impressive past Western culture of dominance, in contrast to the supposedly decadent ones dominating in his present. His admiration for the Catholic heritage hence has aesthetic rather than religious reasons. Again, Manila's buildings represent an admirable cultural heritage.

Slauerhoff was not the only foreign author to identify the ruins of Manila with the downfall of the Spanish empire. In November 1897, while Spain was on the brink of losing control over the Philippines, the French visitor André Bellesort (1999, 16) contrasted the sorry condition of the city to the splendor of colonial centers like Singapore: "Here, the old Spanish civilization, cracked, decrepit and tottering, is still standing. Its grandeur

leans; its misery spreads." Bellesort (ibid., 32) also contrasted the glorified past of the empire to the feeble state in which he found it:

I have dipped into the history of this colony and what I find fills me with . . . admiration and pity. With what heroism, greed, and religious fervor the Spain of the 16th century hurled itself on new lands . . . ! Never before had any nation clung so desperately to its dreams of grandeur.

The convents Bellesort saw on his train journey from Manila to Tarlac were described in a way that paralleled Slauerhoff's depictions of Intramuros: they once "served as the fortresses of the Conquest," but now appeared as if "Life had gone out of their feudal shadows" (ibid., 58). Slauerhoff's third poem, discussed in the next section, glorifies the Spanish conquest, while it shows deep contempt for colonial capitalism.

### **Captain Miguel**

In the poem "Captain Miguel" the connection between the images of a decaying city and the cultural pessimist discourse of Western decline in the colonial context becomes most clear. The longest of the three poems discussed here ends in Manila, hence only the final ten lines are translated here.

The previous two stanzas introduce the Spanish seaman Miguel, a roaming desperado. Slauerhoff idealizes such outsider figures or exiles throughout his work, creating "his own outcasts who are often enlarged projections of himself and his own life" (Van den Neste 2013, 33). The poem opens with the blunt statement: "His life has failed," and "his scarce chances / he let go by." Not "great disaster," but "continuously repeated ills" filled the protagonist's blood with desperation. He has ended up on a China-based coaster and kept sailing on it. Feeling lost, he has forgotten how to speak his mother tongue—indicating that he is out of touch with his own Spanish culture. He despises the ever-present English language, spoken by a "stupid deteriorated race which rules / through money and mediocre commercialism" (stupied, verwaten ras dat heerscht / Door geld en koopmansgeest). The poem presents the English speakers as a race that "recklessly wasted its semen and blood" in "unrestrained arrogance" (En in een toemeloopen overmoed / Verkwistten roekeloos hun zaad en bloed).

Even though Captain Miguel secretly wishes to exterminate the English speakers from the face of the earth, he has no choice but to drink with them, indicating the hegemonic position of the British and Americans. The other Europeans he meets are equally uninspiring: “Germans, missionaries, and customs officers” (En nergens andere Europeanen | Dan Duitschers, missionaries en douanen). In this hated environment Captain Miguel “prepares for the eternal rest” (traint zich op de eeuwge rust; Ravenswood 1928, 34–35).

The final stanza shifts the focus to Manila, which becomes a crossroads between the main character’s ill-fated exile and the glorified past of his Spanish fatherland:

Soms komt hij, in Manila, tot zichzelf  
 In 't Intramuros, onder de gewelven,  
 De eenige rest van wapenroem en praal,  
 'n Vervallen wal, een poort, een kathedraal  
 Waar het verleden hangt in walm en rag,  
 Waardoor hij ronddooft als een schim bij dag,  
 Stilstaand en mompelend of hij verloor,  
 Zoekt, vond en weer verloor; hij keert bezeten  
 Weer tot zichzelf, zonder het te weten,  
 Op de grafstee van een Conquistador. (Ravenswood 1928, 34–35)

At times he, in Manila, finds himself  
 In the Intramuros, underneath the vaults,  
 The sole remainder of weapons' fame and splendor,  
 A decayed wall, a gate, a cathedral  
 Where the past hangs in smoke and cobweb,  
 Wherein he roams 'round like a daytime ghost,  
 Standing and mumbling as if he lost,  
 Sought, found, and lost again; possessed  
 He returns to himself, without knowing it,  
 On the tombstone of a Conquistador.

The poem about this Spaniard roaming the East Asian seas and ports culminates in Manila, in Intramuros, where the protagonist sometimes

“finds himself.” As “[t]he sole remainder of weapons’ fame and splendor,” the rundown buildings of Intramuros are all that remain of the grandeur of a mighty Western empire, which contrasts sharply to the hubris, recklessness, and mediocre commercialism of the present Western dominance associated with the English language—the language of the present colonial power in Manila. During the European interwar years, such anti-American sentiments were bound up with visions of Western culture going down in the superficiality of mass culture. As Rob Kroes (1996, 81) notes, Slauerhoff was wary of American mass culture, proposing a twenty-five-year ban on American films in the Netherlands, while some of his contemporaries opposed cinema altogether.

Parallel to the two other poems, the glorious past associated with the Spanish empire “hangs” in the cobweb and smoke of the cathedral, where the protagonist roams around, making a ghostly impression. The character of Captain Miguel becomes a specter from the past, now lost in a mediocre civilization, searching for a supposedly superior lost culture. Indeed the closing lines show him to be “possessed,” as he regains consciousness “On the tombstone of a Conquistador.”

This final image implies that the seaman and the conquistador have related lives—the conquistador is an adventurer as well, but more successful than the protagonist. This comparison reflects again the idealization of the past against the supposed mediocrity of contemporaneous Western culture. The ghostly figure suggests that the protagonist is identical to the conquistador. Slauerhoff often casts his literary figures as reincarnations of great past persons.<sup>19</sup> The name of Captain Miguel thus may refer to Miguel Lopez de Legazpi, the conquistador and first governor of the Spanish colony, whose tomb is not located in the Manila Cathedral but in the nearby San Augustin Church (confusion on the side of the author, poetic license, or a more liberal use of the term cathedral could account for this inaccuracy). Discussing Slauerhoff’s collection *Eldorado* (1928), Simon Vosters (1955, 100) states that the poet did not regard conquistadors as tyrants or perpetrators of violence, but rather as adventurers possessed by a passion for life. In a 1931 theater text Slauerhoff (1931) focuses on the Dutch equivalent to Legazpi, Jan Pieterszoon Coen. The founder of Batavia and conqueror of the Spice Islands, who was responsible for thousands of deaths, appears as both a despot and a passionate but tragic hero (cf. Pos 1986, 268–72). In contempt of contemporary Western society Slauerhoff turns toward such

early conquerors. The poem imagines the conquistador as the establisher of a mighty and glorious empire (*wapenroem*), whereas his reincarnation in the present, Captain Miguel, driven by the same desire for adventure, leads an inglorious existence. In this way, the figure of Captain Miguel reflects the discourse of Western decline.

Another outsider character appears in the 1927 draft travelogue cited above. One of the people Slauerhoff describes to have met in Macau is a German who once owned a cigar factory in Manila, but fell victim to a gambling scheme and now makes a “less decadent” (*minder vervallen*) figure. He owns only a suit and sleeps in a cheap hotel, but: “He is a happy man” (*Hij is een gelukkig man*; Slauerhoff 1985, 32). Prosperity is connected to decadence, which precludes happiness. Like the poems, this document pitches a decadent Western civilization against the glory of old cities and outsider characters like the German or Captain Miguel. The figure of Captain Miguel represents the decayed Spanish—and by extension Western—culture returning to the remnants of its glorious past. A great figure of the past—the roaming conquistador—reincarnates into the present only to lead a sorry existence. Slauerhoff creates an antithesis between a passion for life associated with once dominant Iberian culture and the commercialism of the presently dominant Anglo-Saxon world.<sup>20</sup>

### “Larrios”

Slauerhoff’s 1930 story, “Larrios,” shows parallels to the poems, specifically “Captain Miguel,” while it also bears witness to the author’s observations of the city beyond Intramuros. The first-person narrator is a seaman who chases after a mysterious Spanish woman named Larrios—a quest which can be seen as a parallel to the author’s own search for an idealized Spanish culture. The protagonist roams the world in search of Larrios; from Burgos and Malaga to Shanghai, where he rescues her from forced prostitution and makes her escape to Manila. There she would be safe under the American government, as he tells her (Slauerhoff 1930, 124). Slauerhoff thus presents the Americans in Manila as protective of Westerners in a hostile Asian environment. This positive approach to American dominance is soon overshadowed by the protagonist’s realization of his true reason for sending Larrios to Manila. As his comrade Jorgen tells him that she will soon be with her fellow countrymen, he recognizes: “nu weet ik waarom ik dat wilde. Zoolang zij in Sjanghai zit, is ze een prostituée. In Manila is

ze weer de Spaansche vrouw uit Burgos, uit Malaga” (Now I know why I wanted it. As long as she is in Shanghai, she is a prostitute. In Manila she is again the Spanish woman from Burgos, from Malaga; *ibid.*, 127). The first-person narrator’s statement confirms Jorgen’s remark signifying Manila as part of Larrios’s homeland. Although located in Asia, Manila seems closer to the Spanish cities than to China. The idealized European culture is prostituted in China but it is expected to thrive in Spanish Manila, where it is safely guarded by the US—an expectation that is amplified during his journey, which sees the protagonist on deck “staring at Manila like a Hajji at Mecca” (*starend naar Manila zooals een hadji naar Mekkah*), but is shattered when he finally arrives on land (*ibid.*, 128–29). He searches for her in the dance and cabaret bars of Santa Anna; failing to find her “among the Filipinas,” he goes to “ever obscurer places where it is more international” (*Maar nooit zag ik je tusschen de Philippina’s. . . . Ik zocht verder in steeds obscuurder gelegenheden waar het internationaler is* [*ibid.*, 129]). Highlighting the obscurity of the international bars, this statement attests to a negative perception of American Manila’s colonial expatriate society.

During the day he would roam around Intramuros. Making a ghostlike figure in the dark old churches, his wanderings here bear similarities to those of Captain Miguel. He is unable to find the idealized woman among the ruins, while his own appearance decays as a result of his vagabondism. He finally finds Larrios in a modern suburb “where the villas stand on low hills,” possibly Santa Mesa or San Juan del Monte.<sup>21</sup> Larrios lives in one of the villas, apparently as the concubine of a wealthy and powerful American, or a Filipino belonging to the elite of colonial society. The rendezvous—“to which I have sailed over almost all seas” (*de plek waar ik over bijna alle zeeën op aan ben gevaren*)—turns into a disappointment (Slauerhoff 1930, 132). At first she seems not to recognize him, then she asks him to return decently dressed so she can return the money that he lent her: “It lasted no more than two minutes, within a few words, Larrios has been murdered in me, Larrios who lived in me for years” (*Het heeft geen twee minuten geduurd, in weinige woorden is Larrios in mij omgebracht, Larrios die jarenlang in mij leefde*; *ibid.*, 132). The protagonist returns to his miserable tramp-like existence in a world with little space for big dreams. His longing for Manila and for the idealized woman is disappointed by her petty fixation on appearance and money. She has lost her magical aura by engaging herself

with a wealthy man in the American colony. Again a romanticized Spanish Manila contrasts with a despised American one, with the security of the latter subverting the passion of the former.

## Conclusion

In literature cities function as projection screens for visions and imaginations of the author, who highlights those aspects that best fit these ideas. The necessary diversity of the city is hence narrowed down by the author's perspective. But the fruits of the author's imagination can also enhance the image of the city, often beyond recognition.

In Slauerhoff's poems Manila is reduced to Intramuros: there is no mentioning of the city beyond that, the vibrant city of Filipinos and their American colonizers, a far cry from the images of decline celebrated in the poems. In the story, "Larrios," the suburbs do appear, but not in a positive light as they represent the loathed modern world. The poems reduce Intramuros to the decaying buildings and walls; the people living there are invisible. Moreover, the poems do not contain imaginations of Manila as an (East) Asian or Far Eastern city; the focus is on past and present colonial powers, not on native Philippine society. Manila appears as an essentially Spanish city dominated by foreign Americans. The poems present the deceased empire as one inspired by great ideals, whereas "Captain Miguel" (in line with Slauerhoff's diary and notes) shows the British and American-dominated imperialism of Slauerhoff's time as profit oriented and shallow. As Slauerhoff's annotations indicate, this criticism extends to contemporaneous Dutch imperialism. In line with cultural pessimism, he played out an idealized imperial past against an image of superficial, mediocre commercialism of capitalist imperialism.

In the poems this decline is seen as the West being no longer inspired by great ideals and passion, pressing for great deeds, but driven by superficial economic interests resulting in a hollow culture. Western decline does not result in favoring the East, but rather in a glorification of past Western powers capable of dominating Asian peoples in a supposedly better way.

Are the poems just imaginations that tell us nothing about 1920s Manila?<sup>22</sup> They inhabit a peculiar position between the actual city and the author's imaginations projected on it. Slauerhoff located his ideas specifically in Manila and Macau. He did and could not project the same images on other ports he frequented during his travels in East Asia, such

as Shanghai, Balikpapan, or Hong Kong (which even played negative roles in his presentations as sites of colonial commercialism). The imaginations that are kept in these poems necessarily allude to a reality: they reflect the realities that Slauerhoff found on his visits to Manila in a particular way. The ancient city of Intramuros becomes the site where Spain leaves a lasting, impressive memory. The rundown city with its imposing churches appealed to Slauerhoff's notions of cultural decline and bodily decay. The poems thus testify to European perceptions of Manila as the mesmerizing remains of a mighty past in the context of cultural pessimism and colonial capitalism.

## Notes

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- 1 Contrary to the official Dutch spelling "Manilla," Slauerhoff adheres to the English and Spanish spelling "Manila."
- 2 See, e.g., Joaquin 1999, 251–58. This popular history highlights both urban development and the sociability that marked this decade.
- 3 Struggling with asthma throughout his life, Slauerhoff caught malaria on one of his voyages and finally died of a long neglected tuberculosis, aged thirty-eight years.
- 4 Van Vriesland (1958, 77) calls Slauerhoff "a typical romantic" (de typische romanticus).
- 5 Cf. Van den Neste (2013, 33): "Not only is his poetry and prose full of metaphors and images of the sea—from islands to legends of pirates and discoverers—many of his other, more exotic subjects such as his interest in Chinese or Portuguese culture are consistent with a life spent travelling and a general sense of unease with the Dutch culture he was born into."
- 6 In one of his more favorable comments Slauerhoff compared the culture of his homeland with "rye bread: substantial but without grace and inspiration," (roggebrood: substantieel, degelijk, maar niet gracieus; quoted in Marais 2008, 8) mentioned Spain and China as counterexamples, and called them the most civilized countries in the world.
- 7 The writer Gerrit-Jan Zwier (1987, 14) calls Slauerhoff "an impressionist traveler, who . . . alternately looks around and in his books" and claims he "is positioned between a home stayer and a real travel writer" (een impressionistisch reiziger, die aan dek van een passerend schip, beurtelings in de boeken en om zich heen kijkt. Hij neemt, tussen de thuisblijver en de echte reiziger, een middenpositie in; quoted in Marais 2008, 11).
- 8 The so-called Ethical Policy (*Ethische Politiek*), as announced by Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands in 1901, saw colonialism as a national, metaphysical obligation, and aimed at the modernization of colonial society through education as well as civil, political, and economic development, but also through political centralization and suppression of opposition. See Schmutzer 1977, 14; Gouda 2008, 2; Salverda 1997, 2.

- 9 According to De Mul (2011, 70), the boredom of colonial society is a recurring theme in Dutch literature critical of the situation in the colony. See, e.g., Aya Zikken's 1958 novel *Terug naar de Atlasvlinder*.
- 10 Another example of such criticism of the Dutch in the colony is Madelon Székely-Lulofs' 1931 novel *Rubber: Roman uit Deli* (Rubber: A Novel from Deli), portraying the decadent life of Dutch rubber plantation owners and employees on the island of Sumatra. Like Du Perron and Slauerhoff, Lulofs was associated with the journal *Forum* (Kuiken n.d.). The bossy plantation owner from this novel is a never-do-well who is barely able to read and write, but behaves in an arrogant way in the colony (Székely-Lulofs 1930, 23).
- 11 The diary entries are not dated, a result of Slauerhoff's chaotic work habits. The entry cited was presumably written in early 1927.
- 12 His work on Macau is more abundant, with four 1928 poems on Macau in *Oost-Azië* ("De Jonken," "De Kathedraal St. Miguel," "Ochtend Macao," "Camoës"). Macau is the focal point of his most famous novel *Het verboden rijk* (The Forbidden Realm) (Slauerhoff 1932).
- 13 An earlier version of this poem was published in Slauerhoff 1927, 15.
- 14 Slauerhoff dedicated "Manila" to the poet Hendrik de Vries, an admirer of Spanish culture.
- 15 In the collected poems these lines are changed to: "Verzaakt door 't oude rijk, te ruste / Binnen zijn randgebergte in dorren vree" (Forsaken by the old empire, to rest / within its mountain ranges in barren peace; Slauerhoff 1947, 404).
- 16 For example, as Gleeck (1998, 287) shows, in 1923 a US representative reported the high number of killings in the city.
- 17 P. K. A. Meerkamp van Embden, a Dutch businessman who stayed in Manila for decades during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, seemed uninterested in Intramuros. He belonged though to the modern capitalist imperialism despised by Slauerhoff. See Van den Muijzenberg 2008, 45.
- 18 The title of this poem wrongly identifies the cathedral of Macau as "Kathedraal St. Miguel," whereas it is actually dedicated to St. Paul. There is a Saint Miguel's church in Macau, but the poem clearly describes a cathedral of which only the façade remains standing. Although the Macau poems celebrate the colonial heritage of the Portuguese empire as well, the Manila poems put more emphasis on power and domination.
- 19 For example, in Slauerhoff's 1932 acclaimed novel, *Het verboden rijk* (The forbidden realm), the protagonist, another European seaman lost in East Asian waters, turns out to be the reincarnation of the Portuguese poet Camoës.
- 20 Such an opposition, as Vosters (1955, 101) writes, replicates dualisms present throughout Slauerhoff's work, such as despised (Anglo-Saxon) rationality versus idealized (Iberian) emotionality.
- 21 As Pante (2011, 188, 190, 195) points out, the American colonizers favored these elevated suburbs over the unhealthy, cramped, low-lying areas of Manila proper. Santa Mesa and San Juan were the preferred places of residence for colonial and Philippine elites, with the former being almost entirely devoted to residences of Americans and Europeans by 1930.
- 22 Johann Lodewyk Marais's (2008, 2) claim that Slauerhoff's poems contributed to the Dutch-

speaking world's understanding of the Far East cannot be substantiated by the poems discussed here, which say little about the city itself.

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