A CITY LIKE NO OTHER: URBAN REPRESENTATIONS AND METROPOLITAN MENTALITIES IN ISABELITA ORLINA REYES' *IN TRANSITIVES*

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AS A TOPIC OF LITERATURE, urbanism has received much attention from both literary scholars and creative writers in recent years. Largely because of globalization and the Philippines' continued interactions with Western traditions, most mainstream Filipino creative writers have shifted the focus of their works from the rural landscape to the cityscape. Gémino H. Abad states that "[m]ost of our writers in English come from the middle class and are college graduates; as a consequence, generally speaking, our fiction and poetry in English since the 1950s deal with the life of the urban upper and middle classes" (16).[i] Rolando Tolentino shares a similar argument when he notes that Philippine literature—whether about the city or the regions— is generally influenced by the urban condition. Inasmuch as most writers, critics, and scholars are schooled in or affiliated with organizations in the metro, the works that they produce carry ideologies more or less influenced by urbanism.[ii] As such, the creative expressions of writers may serve as representations of the maladies the city and its inhabitants encounter day per troubling day.

Aware that the urban center is the premier site of power and domination, writers devotedly articulate their own understandings and projections of the metropolis. Primarily through their fiction, poetry, drama, and criticism, they interrogate the city's capacity to lure, sway, and manipulate communities and individuals. According to Ben Highmore, "[t]he current proliferation of books about the modern city,

its literary and artistic productions . . . seems to grow exponentially. Such ceaseless production could well be taken as a sign of the attraction that the creative and destructive energies of the city exert" (xi). It is safe to assume, then, that artists, writers, and critics play a central role in imaging and imagining the city as a locus of various struggles.

One writer who focuses on the city as subject of literature is Isabelita Orlina Reyes. Her poetry collections are largely informed by the occurrences in the urban landscape and consistently depict the textured lives of urbanized subjects.[iii] In her essay, "Neon Lights," Reyes admits her subject position as a member of the urban middle class.[iv] As an urbanite she does not have any affinity for the rural, which makes her unable to imagine anything or anyone beyond the cityscape. She writes, "I cannot return to roots I have no affinity for. I cannot return to roots I do not have, period. I have no experience with what is ethnic, and I have never lived in a Philippine province. So what do I write of? The neon city outside my sliding door" (*Stories from the City* 110). She also reveals that most of her personae "speak from within the city, and almost always, from a vantage point that implies a perspective of the city from a skyscraper" (95).

In this paper, I explore how Reyes represents the city and interrogates the urban condition in her second poetry collection, *In Transitives*. I intend to examine the primary features of the city that Reyes describes. I will argue that Reyes' personae are urbanites whose attitude toward the city is illustrative of what the sociologist Georg Simmel conceptualizes as reserve, individualism, alienation, and indifference. These personae are not only estranged from themselves and their surroundings but also from the actual production of everyday metropolitan life.[v] Additionally, I analyze how Reyes grapples with the anxieties of a middle class background, as well as the inadequacies of middle class perspectives, especially those located in or emanating from a Third World urban environment. Such examination seeks to lay bare the contradictions of viewing the city and its human fragments from this stratified position. It is my argument that while Reyes' middle class personae openly express their class privilege and the troubles of that privilege, they nonetheless can hardly go beyond their recognition of this urban life that is seemingly at a standstill. Although they clearly

make visible the corrupt practices, the impoverished forms of life, and the broken institutions that engulf them, these personae dissociate themselves from the politics of the city and the dynamics of class relations. I further problematize this dissociation as an affective experience premised upon self-extension and self-sustainment amidst a declining, desolate city.

DIM LIGHTS, DARK CITY

For Louis Wirth, "the city is not only in ever larger degrees the dwelling-place and the workshop of modern man, but it is the initiating and controlling center of economic, political, and cultural life that has drawn the most remote parts of the world into its orbit and woven diverse areas, peoples, and activities into a cosmos" (58). In line with this, what the city clearly offers is not a picture of decrepitude but of advancement and modernity. In the city, people witness "the concentration . . . of industrial and commercial, financial and administrative facilities and activities, transportation and communication lines, and cultural and recreational equipment such as the press, radio stations, theatres, libraries, museums, concert halls, operas, hospitals, higher educational institutions, research and publishing centers, professional organizations, and religious and welfare institutions" (61).

In varying degrees, these components are present in our cities; they in fact characterize the structure of the Philippines' urban capital. Inasmuch as it is the consequence of vast networks of production, distribution, transportation, exchange, communication, service provision, and amusement, urbanism is a reality that cannot be denied at present time. It has become the central plot of the nation's grand narrative of progress.[vi] It is with this reason that despite or maybe because of its unappealing connotations such as bureaucratization, alienation, and capitalism, the urbanization of cities in the country remains highly desired and usually sustained by the privileged classes.

In Transitives is a collection of poems about and for the city. Rooted in the urban environment, Reyes' collection maps out the city's social environment. It does not only make detailed descriptions of the urban experience but also illustrates the city as what James Donald calls an

"imagined environment" (qtd. in King 1) that shapes and is shaped by opposing experiences and narratives. Caroline S. Hau states that "Reyes discerns, above the concrete hollows and highways of the city (Manila, Pasig, Antipolo, Kyoto, New York) the elusive, evanescent wisps of lives lit by memory, desire, loss, and words."[vii]

In her often-cerebral urban meditations, Reyes depicts the city as a corrupted and fragmented physical space. Her metropolis is the "city of sudden starts" and the "space/ between form and the formless," where the "scene collapses" and where "you might forget/ what it means to mean." Reyes becomes site-specific as she enumerates examples that illustrate the crime and grime in the urban center, particularly Metropolitan Manila. In "Where it resides" (46), Reyes poses the question, "Where does the city's corruption reside?" To which she answers: "in our faces, actually." This leads her to a catalogue of harsh realities one encounters in Metro Manila: the city's financial problems ("in the disappearing// peso and our mounting debt, /our mounting death toll of labor"); the glaring distinctions among different social classes ("the ride between this ritzy bar/ and that carinderia"); and the city dwellers' dishonest deeds ("the bribe between his and hers") and obsession in the ways of their colonial masters ("and how we fawn/ over blond hair and brand names,// and how we dream to escape/ everyday"). Furthermore, Reyes writes about its stifling atmosphere, which produces among urban dwellers an intense desire to escape the suffocating city ("and how we dream to escape/everyday, we inhale it// and it doesn't always have to be/ drug-induced, murderous,// heinous . . . "). In the following lines, Reyes portrays Metro Manila as one diabolic trap.

> these days, you don't have
> to look too far, it's there in the garbage
>
> laced with maggots, at the back
> of the mall where scavengers scrounge
>
> for leftovers, the naked
> *taong grasa* in the middle of the road,

at the back of the FX,
the knife in your side,
your stolen phone,

the muddy floor of the
public rest room,
you can't make much

for yourself
or anyone
on edsa . . .

Contradicting the promise of urbanism, these lines show Metro Manila's lack of progress and civility. They bring to the fore the habitually neglected fact that the urban center does not directly equate to progress. More than anything else, it is largely defined by people who "live in carts, hide/ and collide, hold their breath,// closing their eyes, stop their ears/against the metal//passing overhead." Considering that it is both witness and cradle to such realities, Metro Manila is a place that "doesn't sing or roar" but drone.

Reyes also touches on the issue of class and the problem of modernity. For if one is exposed to Metro Manila's Third World urbanity, the images in Reyes' poem may easily be perceived as wounds and scabs on the urban center's skin. Because the urban center always pretends to be a space of/for progress, any "urban excess" (Tadiar 80-81) is considered aberrant and automatically falls under the category of surplus population, whose "unusual" forms of livelihood are considered the cause of Metro Manila's chaos.

The stagnation of the city becomes more manifest in "Too many movies" (45). The poem describes what the urban center is at present and what it can be in the future. In pointing out the city's current status, Reyes singles out the big infrastructures and other skyscrapers (which she calls "urbane concrete shoeboxes") that house urbanites; the unmanageable filth that breeds despicable creatures like maggots and cockroaches; and the city dwellers who indulge in consumerism ("a civilization/ where padlocked boxes are stolen, and pasty faces,/ overcooked hair, pork-born bellies, cigars of civil/society"). In predicting

the future, she forwards that the city will be buried deep in water and will be transformed into the "new ocean's unfathomable bottom,/ [while the] attempt at global scrapers [is] playing corals// to scorpion fish." Trying to stress the inevitable disasters the urban landscape will have to face in the future, Reyes produces a credible reimagining of both the city's recent and impending shape.

Reyes' remarks on the current generation's ahistorical mindset are also harrowing as they are true. She writes: "History will take form/ in a downloadable blue pill students can pop." Taking her cue from sci-fi movies, she hypothesizes that people will desire to compensate for their own lack of knowledge about the past. And just like in the movies, this becomes possible by consuming "a pill" that can "blow their blank minds on seeing the life cycles/of roaches, maggots, and ugly poisonous fish." These lines illustrate not only the youth's dependence on technology but also their apathy toward the society.

In her city, this is the predominant mindset. At present most people from Third World cities are subject to a certain kind of modernity, which is essentially characterized by globalization and capitalism and which result in the fragmentation of communities and the dispossession of people. Urbanism operates on this ambivalence: maintaining the dominant center, on the one hand, and concealing and further diminishing the periphery, on the other. This holds true in Metro Manila's present condition, where the state patronizes gentrification and colludes with capitalists in the establishment of malls and condominiums, for example, at the expense mostly of the lower class.

Reyes further presents the urban center as a site of inefficiency and incompetence. In "Till Death Do Us (Or the Uses of Clichés)" (48), the agencies of the government are the markers of scrupulousness and inefficiency precisely because people who lead them are not only underpaid and exploited, but also inept and anomalous. To her, the distinction between the employees inside the halls of government agencies and the fixers prowling in the streets has already been elided, since the former has already fallen under the treacherous category of the latter.

From an editorial: "Numbers summarize
our lives, clever plastic cards our
identities,
here you lose time rewriting yourself
when you lose your wallet, here in the
backyards you chase license or Social
Security,
haggle with fixers, gaggle like geese, stand in queues,
the clerk typing away at an antique Underwood,
after gossip
and banana chips, glaring at you so
you know your life's
in his hands,
be grateful, he's having a
bad day
and underpaid misery loves company."

The urban environment is certainly not a clean and well-lit place, for its inhabitants are miserable in the same way that social institutions that should supposedly be supporting them are in shambles.

The urban center becomes more appalling when one surveys its "horizontally fragmented" and/or "vertically compressed" territory, part of which are the streets. As "sites of intersubjective as well as intercollective encounters that produce conflicting articulations of space" (Tadiar 87), not only do streets serve as the quiet spectators to the circulations, rhythms, and movements of the city's inhabitants; they, too, play a vital role in forming people's attitudes and behaviors. Most of the time, urban centers are described based on the kind of streets they have.[viii] For Jane Jacobs, "streets and their sidewalks, the main public places of a city, are its most vital organs. Think of a city and what comes to mind? Its streets. If a city's streets look interesting, the city looks interesting; if they look dull, the city looks dull" (111).

In "Meeting Places" (73), Reyes shows how the streets witness the immoralities of people in the metropolitan area. In this poem's depiction of a rendezvous between a priest ("yellow lights hide marks/ deepen eyes/ take on a flicker/ behind him/ a halo") and a woman ("she kisses him/ for healing"), the city's pathways become the place where the

sanctified is blasphemed. Reyes suggests how these individuals bring their affair to the city, where their desire for each other is consummated.

> they fly
> apart into the city
> find a path between buildings
> round corners from street to street
> travel
> settle
> on asphalt
> hapless dinners

In the poem's final lines, Reyes describes the priest through the symbols regularly associated with his vocation: "people's cheeks/ a freshly laundered white/ shirt fluttering against the skyline/a neon cross guides one/ into a niche of bas/ relief." Her juxtaposition of the holy images and the city streets brings to the fore the dichotomies of private-public, inside-outside. Unlike intimate spaces that purportedly civilized citizens of the city occupy, streets and alleys are viewed as irreverent spots in the urban landscape, where aggression, transgression, trickery, and paranoia transpire. In the case of the priest, who is taken to signify society's weakening religious institutions, he fears of being seen and identified by what Jacobs calls "the proprietors of the streets." This makes him more conscious of his conduct as he, with his woman, explores the watchful corners and passages of the city: "a priest steps outside/ his cassock/ flapping/ he thought some-/one whispered his name."

In her version of the city, Reyes does not wholly subscribe to Wirth's definition of urbanism. For Reyes, the cityscape is at the edge if not right smack in the middle of collapse. In the poems cited, Metro Manila is bereft of security, beauty, and growth. Apart from the deteriorating social institutions like the government and the church, various personae that come from a similar middle-class background inhabit the poet's city. In the next section, I will explore the kind of city dwellers found in *In Transitives* as well as scrutinize their responses and attitudes toward the environment of which they are part.

METROPOLITAN MENTALITIES

Reyes' personae are born, immersed in, and shaped by the metropolis. Their consciousness is reflective of the city's foremost psychosocial features of alienation, indignation, and fragmentation. Their primary concern is themselves—the individual included and excluded in society at the same time—as they almost always shun both the social and emotional aspects of their lives, if only to survive everyday life in the urban space. Simmel states that this anxious attitude stems from the desire to assert and maintain "independence and individuality . . . against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life" (30). For the sociologist, the metropolis creates the sensory foundations of urban dwellers' mental life, reliance on difference and plurality, and penchant for the private amidst the public.

In "Perimeter Wall" (39), Reyes renders the mindset of the citified dweller. The poem's title itself hints at the urbanite's compulsion to claim her own private space and wall herself from strangers and public events. The opening lines exemplify the manner by which a city dweller normally assumes in her dealings in the everyday. Instead of socializing with people, she shrinks away from the personal and interpersonal, almost always wanting to preserve her individuality. As she puts it:

> we build ourselves: pick the hollow
> blocks, trowel the mix,
>
> afraid of the question, of exposing
> the most repelling thing about us—
>
> what our real motives are
> or that we've missed the point
>
> forgotten the whys
> in our impulse to make.

In the process of distancing herself from any possible relationship, an urban dweller also becomes distant from and resentful of society.

She learns to content herself with places where "[she] recognize[s] nothing,/[and where she is] not found." It is this consciousness that gives her the license to "deny ideas/ of beauty, [and stay] true only so far/ as [she] can throw [her] lines."

Exposed to the transitory nature of the city, Reyes' personae are devoid of any emotional attachment. Rather than establishing deep relationships with people, they choose to block themselves from interaction and kinship. They are secluded and cold, surefooted and exacting in their dealings with others. Simmel explains, "Instead of reacting emotionally, the metropolitan type reacts primarily in a rational manner . . . [because] all emotional relationships between persons rest on individuality, whereas intellectual relationships deal with persons as with numbers, that is, as with elements which, in themselves, are indifferent, but which are of interest only insofar as they offer something objectively perceivable" (32).

In "To Begin With" (13), the persona contents herself with the superficiality of the city's social relations. She does not seek affection from the people she encounters daily. In fact, she is drained and jarred by their company. Aware that being together in a crowded and hassling city is asking too much from her urban sensibilities, the persona blurts out with exasperation: "but don't/ you just want to say/ I don't care, I tire of this confection. The truth of it is/ we're all killing each other little by little,/ I'm not looking/ for anything phenomenal, the o.k. is perfectly fine./ Sometimes that's asking/ for too much."

In rendering urbanism as a way of life, Reyes also writes about the social relations—all the subjective features of urbanized inhabitants—that are not only shallowly grounded but also easily effaced. Wirth adds that "the juxtaposition of divergent personalities and modes of life tends to produce a relativistic perspective and a sense of toleration of differences which may be regarded as prerequisites for rationality and which lead toward the secularization of life" (71).

Reyes' "Circadian Rhythm" (5-6) indicates this kind of urban phenomenon. The poem's title refers to "changes in mental and physical characteristics that occur in the course of a day."[x] These biological shifts are indeed representative of the general mood of the urban dweller.

You go to the party for people you don't talk to,
find the structure of a touch and swivel is hollow,

console yourself with the once in a while—
you're an expert in the intoxication

of the now. Understand how things arrive
and leave—they have to, they want to:

The persona describes how parties in the metropolis are sites of both the fleeting and the impersonal. It is important to note how the persona's vocabulary indicates lack of warmth, for even a touch is "structured" and a swivel is "hollow," while one must find consolation in both the "once in a while" and the fullness of the "now." And in the course of everything urbane, one must "understand how things arrive and leave."

In the following lines, the persona underlines the regular concerns of the urban middle class individual. She enumerates: "they believe in the perpetual newness/of roses, death and resurrection in flight, / mobility in the metro rail passing/under the arched bridge, against a giant wall/ of toothpaste, instant noodles, backpacks, /two radio towers rise." The movement of the metro rail, the billboards of various products, and the two radio towers looming large on the horizon are very telling of the urban condition. Putting them side by side is not an empty attempt, for such gesture alludes to capitalism and consumerism in the city, which give urban dwellers elusive diversions from their own practices of the everyday.

You weren't listening last night,

steeped in Hollywood and household chores—
that morning rush—the day's to dos fell in

while each other until they were lost
like white sugar in mountain strawberries and milk,

so you forgot to throw the dead things away,
smelt the pall lingering about the house.

In the second part of "Circadian Rhythm," the persona gives a rundown of topics usually discussed in social gatherings ("In this evening's milling, hors d'oeuvres become talk/of distant wars, poetry, the problem with parties"), which "draw the living from out of [their] hiding places." Needless to say, they, too, become the loci for passing fancies, for within them "stranger[s] call [them] by name, offer a gaze,/some art, a glass of cabernet." In these last lines, the persona shows how urban dwellers attempt to open up and mingle with others from time to time.

> Too private
> for such disclosures, you wish for sweet dreamless sleep.
>
> That's what you're reduced to in isolation. But look now,
> love is on the table and it's time to say grace.

In the metropolis, Reyes' personae follow a fixed framework of time. Activities and relationships are homogenized, while their subjective experiences are collapsed. This tendency to seek exactness generates the highest impersonality, which is called the "blasé outlook." According to Simmel, "just as an immoderately sensuous life makes one blasé because it stimulates the nerves to their utmost reactivity until they finally can no longer produce any reaction at all, so, less harmful stimuli, through the rapidity and the contradictoriness of their shifts, force the nerves to make such violent responses, tear them about so brutally that they exhaust their last reserves of strength and, remaining in the same milieu, do not have time for new reserves to form" (35).

This attitude is evident in "Losing the Trivial" (19), for the poem shows the lethargy that city dwellers feel within the urban space.

> What arrests: the missing voice,
> the downy skin.
> It isn't the inevitable that's tragic,
> but driving to work everyday,
> pretending conversation,
> music of an unfamiliar generation,
> the sun scorching, the death of love
> for the polite exchange, the simple repast.

The poem's persona hardly finds comfort in what she sees and does each day, since her body has already been automated to the routines of the city. Whatever happens around her, the persona no longer bothers to look or pass judgement; after all, she has already forgotten "what it means to mean." Simmel explains that

> the inner side of this external reserve is not only indifference but more frequently than we believe, it is a slight aversion, a mutual strangeness and repulsion which, in a close contact which has arisen any way whatever, can break out into hatred and conflict .... Our minds respond, with some definite feeling, to almost every impression emanating from another person. The unconsciousness, the transitoriness and the shift of these feelings seem to raise them only into indifference. (37)

If anything, Reyes' personae have been conditioned to protect themselves from the overabundant stimuli found in the urban environment. Instead of allowing the city's stimuli to paralyze their senses, city dwellers go back to their own isolated spaces and avoid the landscape of sudden starts.

To say that one is blasé is to become indignant to the components of the city. Simmel adds that "[t]he essence of the blasé attitude is indifference toward the distinction between things. Not in the sense that they are not perceived, as in the case of mental dullness, but rather that the meaning and the value of the distinctions between things, and therewith of the things themselves, are experienced as meaningless" (35-36). This passage explains Reyes' persona's disinterest in the signs she faces in the city. Why bother, anyway, if "[t]he city [is] pretty/much the same in sun-//light when people steal/small talks and sales/ tax"?

> So will yourself past
>
> exosphere, smog, scrapers, good
> job and good days, and dinners,
>
> So sweet, your dreaming
> family and friends, soft
>
> bed, numb to the cord
> snapping, until you're home. ("To Leave", 51-52)

The same blasé outlook is found in "Spill" (56). Like in her other poems, Reyes offers images that overpower the urban dweller. And like her other personae, the one in here is already numbed by the cityscape. The persona is bored by the trite engagements and contacts that the urban center proffers ("Not the first time—/the parallel exhalations above music,/utter gossip, criticism boring//in someone's ears, lament the routine/ departures that are sad/just the same."). In observing and making sense of her familiar environment, she neither feels surprised nor stimulated. She sees the city and its many "spilled lives" with "eyes filmy with alcoholic//comprehension of the world." The persona then asks, "[What if] Death and Destiny/ [are] reduced to crosshatch until they mean/nothing?" To which she answers: "It doesn't matter."

In the first two sections of this essay, I have examined how Reyes frames the Third World city and depicts the metropolitan mentalities of her personae. In what follows, I problematize the prevailing dissociation of these personae from the intricate lifeways and lifeforms in the city as an affective mode of self-extension—that is, as a kind of agency that interrupts the involvement of the self in the urban disorder, not so much to make onself impervious to a visible, palpalpable environment per se as it is to secure oneself from total collapse or perdition.

URBANISM, CRITICALLY

In Transitives demonstrates that having or making a life in the Third World city is an infinitely fraught predicament. In this regard, the sheer act of locating the livable and snatching any consolation in the humdrum of the everyday is already a form of getting by.

Reyes illustrates the city through personae whose life conditions as middle class subjects are worn out by the activity of making a living, of finding a life worth living, in an environment where life is almost always reproduced in shabby forms, or maintained in their decrepit states. This is to say that the city bears the wear and tear of its age as well as the neglect of its custodians. More significantly, this is also to assert that inhabitants of the city embody these poor conditions, and that they are bogged down by the sheer activity of producing and reproducing life (Berlant, "Slow Death" 759). They exemplify a kind of "slow death," or

in the words of Lauren Berlant, the "physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence" (754). While these personae are constantly worked upon by their environment—that is, continually exhausted by the milieu to which they belong—they, at the same time, remain stuck in a rut, unable to work effectively, and if ever they do so, it is done with so much trepidation, precarity, and stagnation. There is movement of people, happenings, and objects in the city to be sure, but this is carried out in a circular or wayward manner, or better still, in a slowed down or staggering pace. Berlant proposes the impasse as an extended moment that captures how one makes sense of how the world, in its full enigmatic existence, just continues to spin, accrues material weight, takes in sensorial stimuli, but does not take you anywhere (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 4). This impasse, I argue, may be that temporal moment—a moment of between-ness—where Reyes' personae may be absorbed into and from which they cannot move, especially as they are assaulted by one negative experience or negation to another, or as they live their lives across cynicisms.

Although Reyes could have gone beyond merely illustrating how inhabitants experience the urban environment, as well as deepened her poetic survey of the constitutive features of the metropolis, she has nonetheless depicted the fixations of the middle and upper classes and their attendant anxieties as irrefutably important in comprehending urbanism. What I find most compelling is how Reyes places her personae in a sphere where the everyday unfolds its normalized corruption and decay that directly or indirectly implicates everyone, on the one hand, and in a zone where the urban dweller confronts the incongruences and predictabilities of his or her daily life, on the other. It is this banal space of extremes where what Berlant calls the "life building" and the "attrition of human life" takes place and becomes indistinguishable from each other. As the personae in *In Transitives* demonstrate, it is within this complicated, chaotic city that they both suffer and survive, or where they move laterally across getting, losing, and maintaining a life. Like the social institutions on the wane and the dead or moribund human bodies on the streets that they account for and interact with in the day to day, these personae are part of a bigger taxonomy of the city's casualties.

However, similar to those that they see scrambling for their lives and finding various creative ways of making do, these urban dwellers also engage in what Berlant calls "projects of self-extension" ("Slow Death" 758): from distancing themselves from the city's overflowing stimuli, to caging themselves in a preferred, privileged vantage point, to contenting themselves with a spectatorial gaze from a distance, up to experiencing the whole urban landscape as a montage of naturalized, normalized events or even as a blur.

Given that its tone and trajectory are undeniably middle class by inclination, something which the poet herself does not deny, Reyes' collection naturally operates on a one-sided, linear logic about the travails of city living, even as it resurfaces the various images and storylines of the urban environment that implicate the poor, the corrupt, the despoiled, among others. What is curiously interesting, though, is how she depicts her personae not only as impersonal subjects but also as agents who derive their sense of personhood, belonging, and survival from non-normative, non-collective activities of socio-civic life. Laid bare in poem after poem, Reyes' personae neither rely on hysterics or dramatics, nor exercise immersive interactions with people and mass movements, to express discontentment about their city and its human, material, infrastructural, and institutional compositions. Instead, within spaces of ordinariness, whether inside a car, on the streets, from a favorite lookout point away from the hustle and bustle of the metro, or in the privacy of a room, they exemplify a so-called "interruptive agency" ("Slow Death" 759) that allows the detachment of bodies from social conditions, or that diminishes overdrawn logics or embodiments of those logics that seek to find meaning and method to the urban madness. Even more thought provoking is how Reyes typifies her personae as middle class subjects who, in the face of disorientation and displeasure, continue to maintain a life worth keeping. This life worth keeping, this urban existence worth maintaining, is not so much about the production of the new, the modern, the fantastical, and the exciting—much vaunted hallmarks of modernity and development—as it is about carrying oneself on in the midst of daily disruptions in the social fabric, as well as moving along space and time, within states of stagnation and emergencies, without completely losing one's consciousness of self and others and

thereby fully breaking. This, indeed, is what renders Reyes' personae distinct: although they reside in the city and account for what they sense and see in the urban jungle, they are not simply flâneurs or flâneueses whose aim is to relieve themselves of, or emancipate themselves from, impending or worsening crises.[x] Rather, as part of the middle class, these personae feel the weight of their urban existence, witness their dwelling space decline, and get entangled in both personal afflictions and the mass sensorium of the Third World city. Like everyone who keeps their heads up high above the detritus of daily living, they do not succumb to defeat and, despite their ennui and acrimony, continue to figure out how to deal with their habitat and keep their fragmented selves intact from within it.

Beyond their alienation from the landscape enclosing them are these personae' observations and articulations essential in uncovering urban forms and their interconnections with one another. Although not providing prescriptive answers to pressing questions such as Saskia Sassen's "How do we valorize the evicted components . . . in a system that values the center?" (184), Reyes' poems may be considered necessary agitations and her poetic images compelling representations of the city from a certain point of view. They reveal upsetting scenes of life from the margins, as perceived from the center.

Instead of dismissing these views as too bourgeois, I comprehend the different sets of problems they alert us to and the kinds of persons or personalities that they make us recognize further. Though members of different social fractions do not directly share the same sentience or sentiment with one another, they experience varying grades of vulnerabilities and, to a certain extent, find distinctive ways of (dis)locating themselves in the city. This, then, becomes a central proposition of Reyes' poetry collection: the accumulation of urban stimuli, affects, images, and personages on the page is also an affirmation not only of the borders that social class has built but also, and more crucially, of the coextensions among the lives of dwellers, regardless of background, in the urban environment. This is to say that in the domain of the city, persons, places, and institutions of different conditions take up space, show their traces, and make up the city at the same time, in the same place, albeit unequally. Indeed, Reyes provides poetic material in

and through which her readers can make sense of the intersection of people's diminished qualities of life and their slowed down growth and mobility.

At the surface, it is easy to accuse Reyes of elitism, or her collection of poetic privilege. However, I argue that what is instructive in *In Transitives* is Reyes' middle class personae's exemplification of their agency as they know and practice it. What is the agency of the disgruntled, middle class urban dweller, after all? In asking this question, I do not come to the defense of a relatively privileged class; rather, I assert that there is much to learn from different forms of seeing, being, and feeling in the city such as those showed by Reyes' personae, who may not extensively immerse in their milieu and yet are still implicated in it and suffused with its mood and atmosphere. What is more is that the personae strategically activate their senses to absorb the stimuli around them, or suspend all their social engagement, and take a pause from all the chaos as a procedure of self-interruption. Simply put, my insight from Reyes' personae is the way they "float sideways" ("Slow Death" 779)—that is, how they concurrently remain impassive and impassioned—or enact what Berlant calls "lateral agency," "a mode of coasting consciousness within the ordinary that helps people survive the stress on their sensorium that comes from the difficulty of reproducing contemporary life" (*Cruel Optimism* 18). It is through this lateral agency that one might better understand Reyes' personae's detachment from and investment on the city, which is the very locus of their existential flourishing and devolution.

Indeed, if we could for a while hold our judgments and reconsider what may flippantly be dismissed as middle class rant or relief, or perhaps elite power and privilege, in order to take stock of the agitations that the alienation, coolness, detachment, and impassivity that the likes of Reyes' personae can possibly bring to the fore, then we might be able to comprehend more affective forms of engagement and other versions of "living on" in the city. This understanding may hopefully refine existing concepts about the city and perhaps generate more theoretical frameworks that can give light to the configurations of city dwellers' relations to one another and to their society.

CITY LIKE NO OTHER: A CONCLUSION

I have analyzed Isabelita Orlina Reyes' second collection of poems as a work that imagines the city as the seat of corruption, difference, alienation, detachment, and apathy. In the poet's account of Metro Manila, social institutions are crumbling; streets and alleys are identified with hoodlums and illegitimate trysts; people are caught up in capitalism and consumerism; relationships and interactions are short-lived, noncommittal, unaffected; and city dwellers are numb, isolated, and standoffish. Indeed, Reyes' collection puts into paper the Philippine city we know: one that struggles to accommodate and aspire for progress, on the one hand, while trying to deal with a doomed present, on the other.

I have also identified the kind of urban dwellers Reyes sketches in her poems. Most of these avoid feelings and attachments, are independent and isolated, and continually denounce the uneven accumulation of social, political, economic, and cultural forces being imposed upon them and which they continuously negotiate with. I argue that all this is reflected even in the visual aesthetics of the poems *In Transitives*. In terms of their form, the poems are generally fragmented and scattered on the page. These fragmentations show the states of an urban dweller's psyche. If we were to consider the liberal space of the page as the city, then the fragments or breaks might be the urban dwellers' perspective toward it. Perhaps these splits in lines of thought reflect people's segmented understanding of the city. For every space lies a possibility, a moment of disinterest, a longing for privacy, or a preference to assert one's individuality. Maybe these gaps are reflective of how individuals in the city drift away from one another.

While *In Transitives* may be faulted for its limited middle class point of view, its sustained focus on a particular sector of a society and its depiction of that sector's temperament and frames of mind nevertheless provide a springboard for more interesting discussions about the politics of inhabitation and displacement, the fractioning of society, and the many forms of endurance and survival among those whose energies get replenished, depleted, or maintained in the bustle of daily urban life.

Reyes' poetry collection proffers not a well developed but desolate city. It neither recapitulates nor contributes to the urban center's grand

narrative of modern development. It rather shows how the city, in the words of literary and cultural critic Epifanio San Juan, Jr, "is the space where individuals can conceal private selfish motives through stylized manners, conventional gestures, formulas of speech and thought" (155). Its constitutive poems write down the boredom that characterizes life in the metropolis, as well as describe what city dwellers are in relation to the dominant image of the city.

I have also ferretted out the critical possibilities of deferred engagement, suspended interactions, and even those moments when the body just slows down its rhythms, its appetites, its motions amidst the chaos, not to preserve itself and withdraw from view per se, but to find form or transform its old versions anew "in the predictable discomforts of the bad configurations of life" (*Cruel Optimism* 2) witnessed or experienced in the everyday.

Taken from this view, the critical edge of *In Transitives* does not necessarily get blunted by the middle class ideological inclinations that inform or emanate from Reyes' logic of practice. Instead, it is this very middle class subject position that affords us partial, yet still very meaningful, portraits of the city and the particular types of living within it. And perhaps this is the achievement of this poetry collection, all in all: to bring to light a privileged social background and unpack the very instability of that purported privilege. It is to confront, rather unapologetically, the middle class position and render its anxieties not in abstractions or mystifications but simply as they are. In this formulation, the question is no longer: *How can one choose to be individualistic in the face of overpopulation, poverty, capitalism, unemployment, and weakening social institutions in the city and the country?* Rather, it is: *why is one compelled to remain or become so given the aforementioned conditions*? Such shift in inquiry allows readers to clarify "the relation of living on to ongoing crisis and loss" (*Cruel Optimism* 5). This re-angling compels a more sympathetic reading of the undertakings of the middle class whose members may be detached from the greater population of the city, especially the hoi polloi or the urban poor, and in many ways easily coopted by hegemonic regimes of power, but are nonetheless entangled in the socioeconomic problems of the city and the affective, psychological, and corporeal effects that these engender. Such reorientation of our questions about conditions of life in

the city permits the insight that, regardless of class or creed, everyone's involved, no matter how unevenly, in the contemporary urban landscape.

Although it would be to Reyes' advantage if she could include new voices in her poetry and consider other points of view aside from the comparatively privileged positions, there is much to learn not only from her sustained poetic articulation of an unabashedly middle class position, but also from the political implications of such rendering of the city and capturing of a consciousness and voice. Here, instead of rehashing longstanding critiques of the urban middle class, their embedment in the city, and their affective states of isolation, ennui, and detachment, I have tried to thicken the discussion further by making sense of how this sector makes life bearable, even as its members move across alienations, cynicisms, and impasses, as well as contend with the seemingly ordinary yet incontestably daunting intention of self-sustainment, within a damaged and declining urban society.

ENDNOTES

[i] In the essay "Our Scene So Fair: An Overview of Filipino English Poetry, 1905-2006,"Abad tackles the development of Philippine Poetry in English. According to him, "the course of Filipino poetry in English from 1905 to the present may be said to have passed through three transformative phases or dominant strains: an inveterate Romantic spirit from 1905 to the 1940s; then, an enduring formalist or "New Critical" commitment, from the 1950s to the 1970s; and finally, a kind of open clearing, a poststructuralist or postmodernist temper, from the 1980s to the present."

He also discusses how Filipino poets, through time, have successfully colonized English, the language of their colonizers. According to Abad, they have already come up with their own subject matter that is expressed *from*, not *in*, English.

However, Abad observes that Philippine writing is encountering so many problems at present, such as the decline of quality education in the country and the "erosion of reading competence (in whatever language) among young people today, owing chiefly (in my opinion) to the many audiovisual forms and voids of entertainment that have seriously diminished their *sense of language*". Moreover, he writes that subject of poetry nowadays has shifted from the countryside to the city. To him, this is a source of lamentation because it is in the countryside where one can discover and experience "our own scene so fair".

[ii] According to Tolentino, citification has two aspects: first is the transformation of the individual and the collective through "developmental" and metropolitan ways and thinking, and second, the transformation and incorporation of rural areas and the regions into urban fabric. Tolentino adds: "Ang panitikan ay kadalasang nalilikha sa siyudad, at maging ang nalilikha sa kanayunan ay may bahid ng siyudad. Maaring ang manunulat ay produkto ng akademya o nagdala ng transformatibong ideolohiya na nangaling sa isang sentrong urban sa kalibliban ng probisnya." [Literature is oftentimes produced in the city, and even those produced in the countryside bear traces of the city. The writer is possibly a product of the academe or brings to the farthest ends of provinces transformative ideologies coming from the urban center.]

[iii] At Present, Isabelita Orlina Reyes has published two collections of poetry, namely *Stories from the City* (UP Press, 1998) and *In Transitives* (UP Press, 2005).

[iv] This is the accompanying essay included in Reyes' first poetry collection. In here she discusses her background as an urban middle class individual, her alienation and displacement in the Philippines, and her poetics in writing *Stories from the City*.

[v] According to Tolentino: "Lahat tayo sa siyudad ay tila mga manok na tumatakbong pigtas na ang ulo. Hindi lamang tayo estranged sa ating mga sarili at sa ating relasyon sa kapaligiran, tayo ay alienated na sa mismong produksyon ng mga bagay, relasyong panlipunan at sarili." [All of us in the city seem to be like beheaded chickens running around. We are not only estranged from ourselves and from our relation to our surrounding, but also from the very production of things, from our social relations and from our self.]

[vi] Tadiar writes: "Other experiences and other tastes, say, the experience of a train ride and the taste of strangely smooth, sweet water, have gotten us here and have contributed to the making of Metro Manila in the shapes it has taken. From the metropolitan view, all these beginnings have found their proper ending happy or not, or at least their central plot, in the story of the nation, which the urban capital represents."

[vii] From Hau's blurb for *In Transitives*, printed on the back cover of the book.

[viii] To Tadiar, Manila's streets are the site of both work and residence to what she refers to as the "urban excess." The government tries to regulate the urban excess by "erecting walls to hide slums, relocating squatters, and imprisoning and torturing members of urban resistance movements," all for the decongestion of the streets and roads of the city.

[ix] From Reyes' own notes included in *In Transitives*.

[x] See Walter Benjamin's "The Flâneur" in *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* and Susan Buck-Morss' "The Flaneur, the Sandwichman, and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering."

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