

## Rivers as Counter-monuments in Manila and Singapore:

The Urban Poor's Remembrance in Liwayway Arceo's *Canal de la Reina* (1972) and Suchen Christine Lim's *The River's Song* (2013)

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### [ *Abstract* ]

Southeast Asian cities like Manila, the Philippines, and Singapore have witnessed economic, political, and cultural changes over the years, especially after periods of colonization. States control their urban fabric—that is, its organization, planning, and design of cities—and thus dictate the flow of capital and forces of labor. Urban poor settlements, an offshoot of capital accumulation, are (re)moved around these cities in accordance with governing visions of development. For populations that are forced into changes brought about by urban development, practices of remembering are also controlled by dominant powers. These “monuments” are established in/as spaces to oblige an image of membership into a society ruled by such powers. Nevertheless, alternate sites of remembering counter these monumental spaces. This paper takes an interest in two novels that feature such places. Liwayway Arceo's *Canal de la Reina* (1972) and Suchen Christine Lim's *The River's Song* (2013) both figure rivers in Manila and Singapore, respectively. The eponymous river is the central axis of

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*Canal de la Reina*, entangled in class conflict and swift urban change in post-Commonwealth Manila. In *The River's Song*, the famous Singapore River provides a refuge for reminiscing about Singapore before the city-state's independence. Comparing these novels to what Filipino comparatist Ruth Jordana Pison calls fictional "counter-memory," we argue that their rivers remember personal and embodied experiences eliminated from hegemonic accounts of the city. Thus, they function as what we call "counter-monuments" for the urban poor marginalized in the history of the Philippines and Singapore.

**Keywords:** counter-memory, Liwayway Arceo, monumentalism, rivers in literature, Suchen Christine Lim, urban poor

## I . Introduction: Remembering Manila and Singapore

Amid modernity—palpable through the fast-paced commercialization and urbanization projects implemented across the globe, history must struggle against the burden of forgetting. Forms of nationness, after all, "have political and cultural organizing force, even as they carry existential and imaginative meanings and associations" (Hau 2004: 3). Entailed by the need for geopolitical and socio-economic consolidation, the processes that drive modernity are experienced differently across a population written into and compelled to read a single national history, one of such cultural forces that organize the nation. For instance, state-sponsored urbanization projects, which concentrate capital in what would become cities, deliver a boon to business investors, but spell a curse to impoverished communities that supply cheap labor for urban economies.

For decades, the Philippines has been an archipelago of slums in Southeast Asia. Much of the working population continue to face the lack of affordable housing in light of the liberalization of fiscal policies, privatization of social services, and deregulation of market prices that have intensified since the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, Sr. in the 70s and 80s (Sy 2022: 5). Environments designed

by the state cater to clusters of commercial activities like retail, hospitality, recreation, and tourism to quickly produce profits (Arcilla 2018: 79). Attention-seeking infrastructures that stand in spaces where public housing could have been possible express not only the power of the state but also a future completely disengaged from its past.

A neighboring territory swept by the post-World War II drive towards modernity is Singapore. The city underwent major political, social, and economic changes due to the collapse of the British empire in Southeast Asia, eventually gaining independence from Malaysia in 1965. Facing various economic and social difficulties, the government prioritized urban renovation as a key strategy for modernizing the country, aiming at economic growth, societal advancement, and aesthetic enhancement to attain recognition as a leading global city (Dobbs and Loh 2023: 60). In her study on urban renewal in Singapore, Allabashi (2011: 1141) explains that some countries expand exponentially, forcing open new spaces that can cushion the shortage of land in urban areas. Hence, demolition projects—suffice to say, a material manifestation of forgetting—are no longer the subject of news. Keeping up with progress compels us to abandon our sense of historical continuity and memory (Harvey 1990: 54).

Singaporean poet and critic Edwin Thumboo finds it necessary for literature to engage in the dilemma posed by modernity against history, memory, and urban life. In the early 1970s, he claimed that “there must be a commitment in local writing to themes beyond the merely personal and that such alternative topics as the dangers of modernization should be explored” (Means 1994: 963-4). The novels *Canal de la Reina* (1972) by Liwayway Arceo and *The River’s Song* (2013) by Suchen Christine Lim seem to have heeded Thumboo’s call by deconstructing modernity and questioning urban renewal in the Southeast Asian city. This paper is a socio-literary exploration of the modes of remembrance (or the possibility of which) in Singapore and Manila, as they are utilized by Ping in *The River’s Song* and the coterie of characters in *Canal de la Reina*. We contend that each text features a “counter-monument,” or sites where anti-monumentalist practice unfolds and counters “official” memory.

## II. (Counter-)Monuments in Modernity

History, memory, and literature are inextricably linked. Written words immortalize memory and turn it into historical records (Stavans 1998: 88). While this dual power of permanence and ubiquity lies at the heart of any written work, the form of the novel offers a most fruitful site for investigating the interactions of history, memory, and even trauma under the auspices of modernity. Asianist Benedict Anderson (2005: 25) points to how the novel “provided the technical means for ‘re-presenting’ the *kind* of imagined community that is the nation.” Fictional the characters may be, they navigate around and across a “sociological landscape of a fixity that fuses the world inside the novel with the world outside” (Anderson 2005: 30), putting at work the “national imagination” that produces and is reproduced by the reader-subject. As such, we delve into two Southeast Asian novels to understand modern modalities of remembering.

To address the burden modernity levied upon history, governments across the globe resort to the construction of monuments and museums. Monuments, according to Henri Lefebvre (1974: 42) in *The Production of Space*, modify the city's spatial textures, as an ideological project imprinted in a spatial context. Lefebvre argues that monuments are shared spaces, and although their possession and consumption cannot be privatized, these spaces are appropriated and dominated (Lefebvre 1974: 57, 165). Despite its claims of expressing collective will and thought, monumentality conceals the arbitrary nature of power and is fundamentally repressive in character (Lefebvre 1974: 143).

The proponents of “anti-monumentalism” claim that museums and monuments do not suffice to materialize the collective memory of a people, and the dominant power's emphasis on these modes of remembrance may even complicate the problem. The Mexican-born artist Rafael Lozano Hemmer explains that the anti-monument is “an alternative to the fetish of the site, the fetish of the representation of power.” This fetishization takes the form of monuments, museums and the like sites, which “selects a piece of history and tries to materialize it, visualize it, represent it, always

from the point of view of the elite” (Hemmer qtd. in Gutorow et. al. 2010: 3). The alternative models of remembrance championed by anti-monumentalism figures “an intuitive inclination towards a lived practice of remembrance” (Carr 2003: 36). Memories of places are reiterated in the everyday relations of people who live in and change space.

While this movement garnered a following in artistic and intellectual circles in Europe and North America, one could question the efficacy of anti-monumentalism in countries like the Philippines and Singapore. The Martial Law period prompted the disruption of Manila’s cityscape through an influx of infrastructure projects such as the Manila Film Center and the Cultural Center of the Philippines. Singapore, which used to be “a poverty-stricken country with people living packed together in a slum along a river that doubles as a sewer” now vaunts “tourist boats on a river against a backdrop of glass-faced skyscrapers sparkling in the tropical sun,” after only a couple of decades (Abshire 2011: 1).

Anti-monumentalists seem to reiterate Lefebvre’s assertion that the production of space is a process dominated by the ruling class that silences or smothers multiple voices. The struggle against forgetting must not be crystalized into specific monuments—whether as statues, places, or even narrative form itself—that are assigned and commissioned almost always by the state (and thus, whoever pulls its strings). What the proponents of anti-monumentalism find problematic with the crystalized representation of history and memory is its aporetic nature: memory is frozen in time, diverting attention from history’s ongoing consequences to a limited site- (and even time, if we include holidays) specific commemoration (Carr 2003; Gutorow et al. 2010).

For a traumatic experience to be healed, history must be loved; it must be returned to the practice of everyday life through the construction of an “environment of memory,” divesting a government of its monopoly over the representation of history (Gutorow et al. 2010: 3). The return of memory to the practice of everyday life is one of three characteristics of anti-monuments listed by Carr (2003). Besides this practice of creating an environment of

memory, anti-monuments must involve individuals in sharing and preserving memory, and favor vernacular expressions over official rhetoric. In the words of Filipino comparatist Ruth Jordana Pison (2010: 153), counterpoints to official memory “celebrate the multiplicity of voices.” Truth made official by dominant powers is questioned in what she calls “counter-memory” (Pison 2010: 151). This paper locates these sites of remembering alternative discourses of history.

### III. The City in *Canal de la Reina* and *The River’s Song*

Though far apart in milieu, both Arceo and Lim witnessed swift changes in their respective cities’ urban fabric, with their novels functioning as sites of their own remembrance. Born in 1924, Arceo’s writing career in the Philippines began in 1941, spanning fifty-odd years. She is read widely in the Philippines for her fiction—short stories and serialized novels—and won multiple awards for works that usually revolve “middle class concerns such as love, career, ambition, and most especially, the solidarity of the family” (Lacuesta 1994: 58). That her literary production beheld major socio-political changes—from the quasi-independence of the Philippines from the United States to the Marcos dictatorship and its neoliberal regime—invites readings anchored on the postcolonial nation and history.

The central axis of Arceo’s serialized novel *Canal de la Reina* is the titular estero, Canal de la Reina, and the narrative revolves around the dispute over a parcel of land between the de los Angeles family and Nyora Tentay,<sup>1</sup> the local despot of the slums. The members of the de los Angeles family each have their encounters with the residents of the slums along Canal de la Reina, all of which affect them in different ways. The novel comes to a head with the arrival of a typhoon in the country, submerging the city of Manila

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<sup>1</sup> “Nyora” is a shorthand for “senyora,” which originates from the Spanish word “señora.” “Señora” is a title or form of address for a Spanish-speaking woman, corresponding to “Mrs.” The use of the title “nyora” in the novel illustrates how Tentay holds power in the urban poor community as a usurer despite belonging to the lower-middle class herself.

in floodwater and in the process, washing away the urban poor community by Canal de la Reina. The text maps urban class relations particularly during Arceo's time, where affluence and flamboyance mask the economic vulnerabilities of the middle and upper-middle classes.

Much like Arceo, Lim has lived through the key socio-political changes that shaped contemporary Singaporean society. Born in 1963, she spent her younger years in a highly tensioned landscape determined by the formal separation of Singapore from Malaysia in 1965. Besides a number of novels, Lim has also written short fiction in English extensively (Eustace 2011: 139). Interestingly, topics like love and family backgrounded by issues of national concern also figure in her works not unlike Arceo's. She grew up in what she calls an "emerging modern Singapore" where *The River's Song* takes place (Jayaraman 2014: 210). Given that loss and renewal are inseparable from the "life of a city," such themes appear prominently in her fictionalization of urban experience (Jayaraman 2014: 212).

Lim's *The River's Song* tells of the intertwined life of Ping and Weng, whose adolescent romance and early music careers get entangled with the deluge of modernization projects in Singapore in the 1970s, only a few years after the country's unprecedented cessation from Malaysia. The Singapore River is the site the narrative primarily fastens on. The slums surrounding it used to house Ping before her newly rich mother (whom she calls Ah-ku or auntie) reclaims her under her wing, and Weng, who leads the protests against the community's relocation from the River in lieu of his father. In an ill stroke of luck, it is revealed that the brothers Chang, one of whom is Ping's eventual uncle, are behind the eviction of the squatters.

On the personal and community level, these intertwining arcs spawn tensions in both texts. Both novels display the political organization of space in the city and the class contradictions embedded within it. Anchored on memories of rivers, the texts also reflect the function of the city as a palimpsest through its depiction of the effacement of the slum areas by these rivers. These erasures loom over the narratives of Arceo and Lim which explore the

struggle of communities against development aggression. This panorama of loss and renewal marks what Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee (2010: 13) calls the uneven environment of a “postcolonial” nation: “By viewing ‘postcolonial’ as a specific phase within this process, one must acknowledge that distinct manifestations arise within certain environments—namely those affected by colonial legacies. Such unique expressions significantly influence both the tangible realms inhabited and reflected upon by authors and the literary interventions made therein.” “Uneven” captures not only the experiences of people living in or even expelled out of places undergoing urbanization, but also the singular national history that cannot accommodate modalities of remembrance deemed unacceptable in the straightforward march to modern progress.

Returning to the assumptions of the anti-monumentalism movement, the only effective way to remember history is through the lived experience of memory and its expression through literature. Here, history *in general* refers to the transmission of a chronicle of disparate events into recognizable verbal artifacts (White 2001: 1714). It is, in other words, a rendering of the past for the sake of comprehensibility. Memory then refers to the occasion of history at the personal and collective level, specifically as a collation of past experiences. We take remembrance to mean the invocation of memory and history into the act of narrative.

#### **IV. Rivers and Remembrance**

Canal de la Reina is a prolongation of the estero in Binondo, Manila, and is one of the many water tributaries of the Pasig River. In “The Esteros and Manila's Postwar Remaking” (2019), Michael Pante outlines the history of the water networks in Manila, and how these characterize the shape of the city, giving it access to intracity, regional, and international linkages, and thus resulting in its undisputed commercial centrality to the country (Pante 2019: 237). Likewise, the Singapore River was crucial to the development of Singapore as a port city. Stephen Dobbs’ “‘Tongkang, Twakow,’ and



Lightermen” (1994) argues that the Singapore River’s history is inseparable from that of the city. It signifies the island state’s rapid economic growth and in the early establishment of the settlement on the island was the physical center of the town and its trade (Dobbs 1994: 270-271).

Both Ping and Caridad have been geographically dislocated from the rivers. Caridad’s family left after a fire destroyed the area, while Ping was uprooted after her mother married Chang, a wealthy businessman who would, later on, initiate the demolition of Ping and Weng’s community alongside the river. Ping eventually leaves Singapore to study in the United States. Both women have fond memories of these rivers but are forced to confront the change that has crept into the spaces of their childhood. Ping recalls the places where she used to play with Weng, while Caridad remembers Canal de la Reina effusively:

“A canal for a queen,” she gushed, “that’s why it’s such a lovely place! It’s only a few meters long, but it was beautiful. And I was born there!” She exclaimed with pride. Her memory teemed with images of the moon as its rays playfully peeked through the leaves and branches of the camachile tree that stood in front of their house. (Arceo 1972: 14)

When Caridad returns to the Canal de la Reina, she finds it polluted and crowded by the slums. She laments the degeneration of the river she remembers in her childhood:

As she carefully took her steps, she would occasionally throw a glance at the row of makeshift houses that lined either side of the street. She could not see traces of the images and memories retained in her memory as she took in the depressing scene. (Arceo 1972: 5)

Ping observes the proliferation of high-rise buildings on the streets and finds it beyond recognition, in contrast to her memories of Singapore — “She knew every street with its smells, shops, and different kinds of dirt and flies” (Lim 2013: Chapter 7). Weng, her childhood friend and lover, fetches her from the airport as she arrives for her two-month sabbatical. As they rode through the city,

her mind questions:

Where are the familiar landmarks of my childhood? Has his car gone past Rochor Road? Nothing looks familiar to me... Where are the tall, majestic raintrees that used to tower above the road and two-storey townhouses like open-armed benevolent kings? (Lim 2013: 233)

Lim depicts the Singapore River as a fluid frontier that evokes and ties together various historical periods. *The River's Song* alternates between three timeframes: (1) Ping's youth and adolescence in the Singapore River community, (2) her late adolescence under the wing of Chang, and (3) her life in Berkley and eventual return to her homeland, around 30 years after the events in the other timeframes. The temporal division of the novel can be recategorized based on the relation of a timeframe with the characters in the novel.

On the other hand, *Canal de la Reina* has a straightforward structure, with characters remembering past events in relation to the present. Its narrative is divided into two main parts: (1) the struggle between the de los Angeles family and Nyora Tentay, as Caridad attempts to reclaim the land that belonged to her late father now occupied by Nyora Tentay; and (2) the aftermath of the flood which washed out the slum community and its inhabitants.

Both novels emphasize three interpretations of the "past": individual memory, a community's collective memory, and the nation's history. Remembrance becomes a central act. *The River's Song* is in itself a remembrance of Ping, the speaking (and remembering) subject. What begins with the threadbare existence of Ping and Weng in the country's bustling Chinatown changes pace in its latter half to intersperse the drifting apart of Ping and Weng with the clash between the riverside community and the government (of course, as charged by the elite Changs), almost at breakneck pace, and with the country's history as their backdrop. *Canal de la Reina* delves into the memories of Caridad and other characters, juxtaposed against the estero's present condition of contamination and the moral decay of its community propelled by Nyora Tentay

and her lackeys who profit from usury and selling illegal drugs. The narrative also reveals Nyora Tentay's domestic tyranny which causes her daughter-in-law Gracia to leave, the abuse she inflicts upon her maid, Ingga, and the destitution of the urban poor residing alongside Canal de la Reina who are indebted to her.

The Singapore River represents all three renderings of the past, arguably the most familiar (to the Singaporean) of which is the collective memory of the Chinatown community's eviction from the area. "Noodle Ting showed [Weng] the newspaper headlines: Immediate Removal of Illegal Structures At the Riverfront. Pollutes to be Severely Punished" (Lim 2013: 194). This arc is a myth woven from the true-to-life eviction projects of the 1970s and '80s: "Due to the lack of land and the country's rush to build office towers to house its expanding business operations, most of the traditional appearances of Singapore vanished decades ago, as older buildings were razed after people resettled in improved housing" (Abshire 2011: 8).

Set in the 1970s, *Canal de la Reina* marks two important historical events in the Philippines — the prelude to Marcos's declaration of Martial Law, and the arrival of Typhoon Gloring, which submerged most of Metro Manila and drowned hundreds. The novel mentions state-sanctioned killings, enforced disappearances, unlawful arrests of activists, and the brutal dispersal of protests, all of which were widespread during the time. After the typhoon struck the city, the residents of the slums along Canal de la Reina were either dead, missing, or housed in emergency evacuation centers, with all of their livelihood and possessions lost in the deluge.

## V. The Urban Poor and the Trauma of Urbanization

*The River's Song* and *Canal de la Reina* illustrate the precarity of the conditions of the urban poor living by the river. The texts criticize their governments' urbanization policies, which displace the poor and recast the city's history and geography to serve powerful interests, leaving trauma and inspiring resistance among the affected

populations. In Arceo's novel, Caridad notices the rancid odor of garbage and filthy street urchins congregating in the muddy streets of the slums. Caridad's daughter, Leni, is a doctor; she meets a social worker who brings a patient dead on arrival at the hospital. The social worker exclaims, "I saw people living like animals, almost like they were on the edge of existence" (Arceo 1972: 52). Upon inspection, Leni discovers the fetus was stuck, the placenta had not been pulled out, and that a caesarian operation would have saved the woman's life. She finds out that the woman was a laundrywoman named Paz from Canal de la Reina, and that Paz's family could not afford to go to a hospital. Dado, Paz's husband, asks Nyora Tentay for a loan for his wife's funeral expenses. Nyora Tentay urges Dado to gamble during the wake and to give her a cut of the income: a peso and fifty cents each day. When Caridad's son Junior visits Canal de la Reina, he is waylaid by the drug dealer Bindoy and is forced to swallow a drug which causes him to go numb. His senses are foggy, he leaves Bindoy's drug den and hails a cab to spend the night at a friend's house.

When the typhoon arrives in Manila, the residents of Canal de la Reina rush to Nyora Tentay's house as the floods have washed away their shanties. Her neighbors break down her doors and ransack the supplies of her sundry store. As waves crash against her house, she and her neighbors are swept away by the flood: "her body became a tiny flotsam in the vast expanse of the greyish water" (Arceo 1972: 134). The tempest of the crowd foreshadows the storm and the surge of protests during the Martial Law period. Incidentally, Nyora Tentay's grandson, Geronimo, is also a doctor and Leni's fellow medical volunteer for the typhoon relief centers. He observes:

The horde of people patiently waiting for help since the flooding began streaked through his mind. They were truly the pitiful ones. They were those whose shacks were made of pieces of iron and cans full of holes. They ate twice a day and had to make do with porridge, and clothes they alternately wore and washed. Now, nothing was left they could call their own, apart from bits of galvanized iron and pieces of wood. The floodwater had mercilessly swept everything away. (Arceo 1972: 170)

Life in the slums in *The River's Song* is just as dire. Squatters' huts on the riverfront and footbridges would be washed away every once in a while, and the flooding would cause deaths of workers on construction sites and of those who would fall into the river (Lim 2013: Chapter 6).

Both narratives denounce the atrocities of urbanization mediated by the state against the urban poor. *Canal de la Reina* explains the proliferation of slum housing by the river. Caridad explains that the shanties began to multiply after the war as thousands migrated from the provinces to the city (Arceo 1972: 15). James Warren's "A Tale of Two Decades" (2013) reaffirms this, stating that the country's internal migrants usually belonged to Manila's slum society and were "absorbed into various low-income service occupations" which did not require technical skills such as domestic servants, laborers, hawkers, jeepney drivers, entertainers, or prostitutes (4). These people from the slums "owned virtually no residential property in the city" (Warren 2013: 4).

Later on, government employees arrive at the slums looking for the cornerstone of the lot Nyora Tentay lives on, they disclose their search for the natural waterways which have disappeared (Arceo 1972: 40). Nyora Tentay attempts to bribe them with delicacies and cigarettes. The government employees warn her of her encroachment on the river, and of the likelihood of the river flooding and drowning the people residing there (Arceo 1972: 44). They inform her:

"This has been planned a long time ago, grandma," the group leader said. "But it has been postponed several times. Did you know that a number of lots in this area have encroached on the river, what was known as the Canal de la Reina? The river gradually disappeared, and whatever passageway was left had become silted, blocking the water flow. That poses real danger to the people's lives and property." (Arceo 1972: 42-43)

However, Nyora Tentay shrugs off the threat of eviction, thinking:

Even before more squatters descended on the place already occupied by other shanty-dwellers, the government had already made plans to evict them. The shanties were demolished several times, but once things had cooled down among the parties, when a news blackout had been imposed, the families would eventually return. And their number increased, each day, each year. And each time an old-timer came back, he had other homeless people in tow. (Arceo 1972: 44)

In *The River's Song*, the threat of demolition has been eclipsing the narrative since the very beginning. By the river, Weng plays a “forgotten song” only “the dead can hear” to mourn the Prime Minister’s successful Clean River campaign, where “ten thousand tons of flotsam and jetsam, to thousand tons of rubbish and forty-one thousand cubic metres of putrid mud had been removed from this river, along with the squatters and hawkers” (Lim 2013: 13). Weng recalls seeing the news reports in his youth:

Three thousand five hundred and fifty-nine unlicensed squatters and their families, two thousand five hundred and thirteen hawkers would be evicted from the river by next year. Next to go would be the farmyards, charcoal yards, backyard factories, boatyards, bumboat operators, boat coolies, and their families—the culprits who dumped tons of filth into the river every year, the newspapers reported. ‘A National Disgrace’, a newspaper headline screamed. The river had become the city’s sewer, flowing right smack through the heart of its prime commercial district. The stench and filth must be cleaned up and its businesses and inhabitants moved somewhere else. (Lim 2013: 144)

The eviction is described as if the local community is garbage to be discarded, and to the landlord of the riverfront, it is. This project is made necessary by modernization. Lim’s novel reveals how big businesses and the government have plotted to reshape the urban fabric according to their interests: “There’s talk about developing the river. That’s why the landlord wants his land back. You know who the landlord is? It’s them Chang brothers. They own lots of land and warehouses around here” (Lim 2013: 124).

In the Philippines, Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos accused the urban poor of polluting the canals and sewage systems which then,

according to the government, caused flooding during storms (Warren 2013: 5-6). The Marcos administration refused to recognize the agrarian crisis in the countryside which brought desperate migrants to Manila searching for employment and who then built slum settlements by the river. Warren (2013: 6) points out that the government failed to provide “adequate affordable housing and employment for the displaced migrant poor.” In addition, the more culpable parties were the “kingpins of the construction industry, the principal real-estate speculators and the industrial strongmen who ran the local factories” who neglected environmental regulations and created larger ecological footprints in the city (Warren 2013: 6-7).

Furthermore, *Canal de la Reina* exposes the collusion between local despots and the government. Nyora Tentay greases the palms of the police and politicians to maintain her control over the community, showering a Congressman and his wife with gifts:

He never received ordinary gifts from her. For him, she bought the most expensive clothing material for a suit, or a smuggled pair of shoes from the United States or Italy. There was always an envelope discreetly tucked into the gift. Only she and the official knew how much money was involved.

The congressman’s wife also exacted her own gifts from the old woman. Gifts came to her not only at Christmas but also on her birthday. A whole roasted pig would not do. The wife was fond of expensive perfume from Paris, and when no smuggled bottle was available from the smugglers, Nyora Tentay would travel all the way to Escolta to buy it. She gifted the wife with jewelry for no apparent reason. Not bauble from Bangkok, but real diamonds. (Arceo 1972: 43-44)

Caridad’s husband, Salvador, attempts to curry favor with the sheriff in charge of their case against Nyora Tentay. He takes the sheriff out for coffee and cigarettes, telling Caridad, “That is the system in this country; it has sunk to this level. It’s enough to make your stomach churn, but with the way things are, we have no choice” (Arceo 1972: 94).

The oppression experienced by the poor also births resistance. In *Canal de la Reina*, protests ensued as the marginalized grappled

with the skyrocketing prices of basic commodities, while government officials fattened their pockets and lived luxuriously. This reflects the economic conditions of the period. Amado Guerrero (1970: 56) notes in his seminal work *Philippine Society and Revolution* the 150% price increase of commodities from 1960 to 1966. In *The River's Song*, resistance is partaken by the whole community, which includes not only Ping and Weng, but also Chong Suk (Weng's father), Noodle Ting, the aunties and uncles, and the rest of the lot: "The union will write a petition on behalf of the Squatter's Village. There must be a law to protect people like us," speaks Mr. Lee (Lim 2013: 125). The strike had reshaped the riverside in its own fashion:

In the middle of the year, the riverfront was in the news. The lightermen had gone on strike. Undeterred, boat owners and shipping companies like Chang Brothers Private Limited hired non-union coolies to break the strike. Fistfights erupted. One night, a warehouse belonging to the Chang family caught fire. Although the fire was put out immediately, a smouldering resentment billowed like smoke over the squatters' huts and boatyards. Political tracts started to appear in the village. Posters, handbills, pamphlets and dead leaves littered the lanes and roads. The broad trunks of the angsana trees were pasted with all kinds of accusations, announcements and manifestos written in Chinese. (Lim 2013: 160-1)

People's resistance is countered by state violence and repression. Junior joins the protests outside of Congress, until his friend Elmo is shot during a dispersal (Arceo 1972: 88). Dissidents and innocent people "were meted out harsh sentences and were forced to languish in jail for years," including "laborers whose only crime was to fight for their rights against capitalists," while the wealthy committed crimes with impunity (Arceo 1972: 91).

In a similar fashion, Weng is accused of being a communist and of inciting the protests against the eviction:

The prosecutor said I was an agitator. A member of the united communist front. My letters and speeches had contributed to the groundswell of anti-government feelings and caused the riot. But it wasn't a riot. It was a protest march by the people evicted from the river. (Lim 2013: 289)



Modernization projects here in the form of “urban renewal” is paradoxical. When it happens, “someone inevitably will be made worse off despite the inherent implication that ‘renewal’ must be beneficial” (Alhabshi 2010: 1135). In the Philippines, infrastructure projects initiated by the Marcoses during the 1970s to 1980s resulted in the depletion of government resources and the ballooning of internal and external debts (Guerrero 1970: 56). The hasty construction of infrastructure resulted in tragedies such as that of the Manila Film Center in 1981 when 169 workers were buried under quick-drying cement.

While the changes wrought about by modernization are inevitable, Weng asks, “Who decides what to change, when to change? The people who suffered from changes imposed from above happened to number several thousand” (Lim 2013: 289). The interweaving of the personal experiences of Ping and Weng and the arc of the community’s struggle against eviction is not a simple juxtaposition. The *remembrance* of these renderings of the past seems almost causal in nature. The relationship between the two is threatened and ultimately washed away by the modernization of the Singapore River, and the collective memory of the eviction is marked by the presence of the two, with Weng being an aggressor and Ping being complicit to the operation. Indeed, the city is changing, and Ping and the squatter’s experiences are memorialized as a singular trauma of modernity.

The history of Singapore itself backdrops this complex knot of memories invoked in Ping’s narrativization. Weng asserts to his history teacher that “if no Singapore River, no Raffles. Then he couldn’t come. Then British couldn’t colonise [*sic*] us ‘cos they couldn’t dock their sailing ships and land” (Lim 2013: 116). This theme of power and domination, and resistance against which, haunts the politics of *The River’s Song*. Singaporean land has been, and continues to be, fought over since its beginnings; the clash between the Changs and the river community is not the first, as the controversial passage above shows. It is emphasized that history is monopolized by those in power, as later, young Weng is told that he is a Communist and he must leave the class (Lim 2013: 117).

*Canal de la Reina* concludes with Caridad successfully reclaiming her father's land from the clutches of the now-senile Nyora Tentay. On the plot of land, the family decides to build a clinic that would provide free healthcare for the poor. Nevertheless, rumors of the president's plans to declare Martial Law in order to extend his term have circulated. The government also seizes the opportunity brought by the flood to finally evict the squatters from the riverside. In both novels, dominant history and the spatial organization of the city are written and rewritten according to the interests of the state and its master. Urbanization leaves the urban poor a trauma that can best be described as "insidious"—that is, violent to the "soul and spirit" and not necessarily overtly (or immediately) violent to the subject (Brown 1995: 107). However, that the novels identify this as insidious trauma can be helpful in navigating collective ways of healing; "[they] allow us to consider that solutions to trauma can no longer be confined to a therapy of individuals only; it also posits that systemic social change should be part of the solution (Martin 2020: 839).

## VI. The River as Counter-monument

*The River's Song* and *Canal de la Reina* frame the trauma of modernity as a complex knot that binds together personal and collective experiences, blurring the line between memory and history (Gutorow et. al. 2010: 2). The perception of a linear time originates from our ability to narrate experiences, facilitated by our memories (Martin 2020: 838). As critic Caroline Hau (2004: 75) emphasizes, collective memory does not store exact reproductions of past occurrences; instead, it consists of subjectively interpreted selections, rendering it malleable and easily tied to the (re)production of national identity.

There lies an intimate link between individual and collective understandings of history, and comprising this link are different technics of remembering. In both novels, the river is one such technic. The Canal de la Reina and the Singapore River are sites of the collusion of the renderings of the past. Colonization and urban

development have altered the river and the cityscape, but despite and because of the transformations it undergoes, the rivers function as the focal monuments of the texts.

The overarching conflict of *The River's Song* is Ping's confrontation with her trauma of modernity concentrated in the Singaporean River. Ping's experiences living by the River, which comprise bulk of the first half of the novel, "became part of [her] childhood nightmares" (Lim 2013: 41). To recount each and every detail of her struggle is to retell the novel itself. In one instance, Yoke Lan, Ping's "Ah-ku," metastasized her frustration of losing her affluent paramour into physical violence against Ping: "She pulled down my knickers. At the first pail of cold water over my head, I shivered like a drowned rat...My shivering made her angrier. She swung the pail at me. My head hit against the Shanghai jar. She pulled me up and dunked my head into the water jar. Again and again, till I was gasping and struggling" (Lim 2013: 40). These violent encounters between a girl and her mother are an insult added to injury—the injury of being poor, underfed, rejected, and left to fend for herself. Well, almost. Yoke Lan does leave Ping in the hands of Kim Poh, who eventually relocates the girl to a dog cage in their apartment building (Lim 2013: 70). Later, she is accused of falsely testifying against Fatty Chye, the Kims' son, who furtively watches Ping naked in the shower (Lim 2013: 84, 89). Until much later in the narrative, Ping still yearns for Yoke Lan's maternal love and affection (Lim 2013: 228).

In one instance, Ping declares, "I've been a free woman in [the university in] Berkeley these past thirty years. Free from family ties and obligations, free to pursue my art and passion in music" (Lim 2013: 129). This is how the narrator frames her experience of being marooned by Ah-ku in America. Much later in the novel, she recounts that "she slashed her wrists," an attempt at suicide (Lim 2013: 210). "The university's doctor diagnosed mild depression," and it is more explicitly shown that Ping's narrativization is part of the healing process of her personal trauma (Lim 2013: 206). Given that trauma is coalesced in the text, this process of healing also memorializes the collective and even national renderings of the past, beyond the personal level. History seems to be figured as an

internalized trauma in *The River's Song*, a "speech of wounds" to borrow from Gutorow et. al. (2010: 2). It is like "a bad memory, once surfaced, cannot be dismissed so easily. Like a pendulum it swings back and forth. The harder I push it away, the faster it returns to mock me," Ping explains (Lim 2013: 252). As proven by the collusion of personal, collective, and national experiences in the novel, she cannot divest her personal trauma with that of the Squatter's Village and Singapore itself.

Part of this process is her return to Singapore, originally for a two-month sabbatical for musicological research. She finds out that she needs to stay a while longer because Ah-ku perishes only a few days before Ping's arrival. She hears many stories of her mother's compassion and love for the members of her Buddhist circle—the very maternal affection she longs for, pricking her like thorns at every word (Lim 2013: 272). While her personal trauma is affected, her disjunction against modernity is addressed as well: "Her Singapore was the Singapore of dingy shophouses and cramped, dimly lit rooms," not the crowded urban jungle it now is. To readers, the image of the Singapore River and the decrepit shanties it used to house, which occupied the text's field of vision for a long while, suddenly come into view. Ping's disjunction with her changed mother is parallel to her disjunction to modernized Singapore.

After some nights watching over Ah-ku's funeral, she heads to the Singapore River to have some air. She faces the truth of the modernization projects she is complicit in: "the city's hunger for land has eaten up parts of the river" (Lim 2013: 279). She even notes the colonial engineers who built the Cavanagh Bridge, shuttling the narrative's imagination to another kind of memory, that of the national. The memory of Weng, and thus Ping's childhood, and the memory of the eviction, "(return) with such force now that I think I'm seeing his shoes on the bridge" (Lim 2013: 280). She does indeed meet Weng by the River, and after discussing Ping's newfound knowledge of her mixed race, the break—the trauma—in the national history and the disjunction in Ping's identity are resolved together by Weng's words: "please don't get me wrong. Listen. Before 1965, we chose to be Malaysian, right? After 1965, we became Singaporean. As a child, you were mocked as a chap jing.

Today, people are proud to be mixed. So now you have a choice" (Lim 2013: 284). The River, with its monumental function, facilitates this healing and reconciliation by representing memory and history. At the end of the novel, we find Ping more comfortable with the past, remembering the Singapore River's crabs, which "had climbed out of their holes at the river's low tide and touched claws" (Lim 2013: 306). Somehow, she is freed from her traumatic past.

Individuals deal with various personal traumas in *Canal de la Reina*. Inggá, Gracia, Victor, and the residents of the slum community such as Dado, Maring, and Nenita have all been tormented by Nyora Tentay. Maring, pregnant and abandoned by her lover, is verbally abused by Nyora Tentay before offering her a loan at twenty percent interest with Maring's shanty as collateral. Nenita, a prostitute, approaches Nyora Tentay for a loan and pawns her television set after her American lover no longer sends her money for their child. Inggá suffers the abuse inflicted upon her by Nyora Tentay, who taunts her and would rather feed her dog King Kong than the househelp. Victor, Nyora Tentay's son and Gracia's husband, has been unable to stand up to his mother despite his mother's mistreatment of his wife which causes Gracia to leave Victor. The personal traumas of the urban poor of Canal de la Reina are bound together by two things: Nyora Tentay and the flood. The class divide also becomes increasingly glaring in the wake of the typhoon, as Caridad's and Gracia's middle-class families are alive and well, unscathed during the torrential downpour. Ironically, it is also the flood that frees the survivors from Canal de la Reina of Nyora Tentay, who lose her bag of cash and jewelry in the flood. Unable to find her bag when she awakes, she eventually loses her sanity.

The river thus has the power to represent all of the fabrications of history. It functions as a "monument," which mediates history at personal, collective, and national levels. However, it is not fetishized at all. Firstly, because of the multifariousness; the river's length spans from the individual to the community. Secondly, it is not monopolized by an authority, i.e., the national government. To echo Pison's (2010:18) inflection of Michel Foucault's concept, this multiplicity of voices, instead of creating or

adhering to a new “center,” forms a “counter-memory” by remembering history “against the grain.”

In *The River's Song*, the alliance of Singaporean officials and businessmen behind the eviction of the River community also become enemies of history, as the modernization projects the Singaporean authorities facilitate lead to forgetting. Fortunately, the “former squatters and coolies” of the River, despite having “neither the skill nor the will to speak the language of prosperous Singapore...know like the back of their hands the histories of lives left of the sanitized history lessons taught in school” (Lim 2013: 156). Weng finds himself one day at the modernized riverfront, playing a song inspired by the River's history, commemorating the protest of the “two thousand nine hundred and fifty-nine squatters and their families” (Lim 2013: 156-7). The “draconian law of peace and order” necessitates the erasure of the collective memory of consolidated resistance by the Singapore River, but it cannot erase the River itself. Ping recounts that every year, “he's here at the riverfront to play his flute” and addresses history. The Singapore River is a monument that counters the representational power of the state.

In *Canal de la Reina*, the river exacts justice. Nyora Tentay, power-hungry and consumed by greed, is conquered by the flood, her amassed wealth rendered useless. Junior, the idealist, dreams of a new community in Canal de la Reina, “free from exploiters like Nyora Tentay... the perfect image of the executioner drunk with power... Free to express their heart and minds” (Arceo 1972: 237). Though Canal de la Reina is finally liberated from Nyora Tentay, its survivors remain lacking decent employment and housing. “I just wish... that this Canal de la Reina could signify an uprising... rising on one's own two feet... I'd like the people to rise up to free themselves from extreme poverty, from oppression,” exclaims Junior (Arceo 1972: 238).

The novels declare a need to remember, especially when the state peddles a narrative that all but erases the existence of those in the city's peripheries—but the river remembers, and we are called to remember with it, the novels seem to say. The river does not only occasion remembrance but is also a lived experience of

remembering, the “environment of memory” sought by anti-monumentalists. In other words, the river figure guides characters across the sociological landscape of the novels, functioning as a modality of remembrance and technic of narration that lay bare “the processes whereby individual bodies are connected to sociohistorical conditions” (Hau 2004: 80).

This third aspect of the river as a counter-monument manifests in the healing process undertaken by the characters of both novels. *The River’s Song* and *Canal de la Reina* introduce to its readers a monument that allows for the collusion of personal, collective, and national memories. To put it in another way, it is

an immediately recognizable cultural landscape that is dominated by an increasing blurring of and convergence between ideas about history, collective memory, and trauma. Such blurring and convergence pose significant challenges to modes of representation because they have the effect of destabilizing cherished and deep-seated antitheses in Western culture such as exteriority/interiority, national/personal, and public/private. (Gutorow et. al. 2010: 3)

The novels challenge not only the forgetting levied by modernity but also authority and its monopoly on history. This monument, however, unlike the anti-monument called for by artists like Hemmer, returns memory to the practice of everyday life by remaining site-specific.

While some believe that history as trauma “freezes time and any possibility of narrative” (Gutorow et al. 2010: 4), Christine Suchen Lim’s *The River’s Song* and Liwayway Arceo’s *Canal de la Reina* demonstrate for us site-specific practices of remembering that “capture the complexity of experience in its variegated mutations and its implications in everyday life” (Hau 2004: 76). History relived as trauma means that it remains open to continued resistance and renegotiation. After all, the politics of memory ultimately “involves the struggle over the meaning and import of the stories told by these memories, and more important the kinds of truths authorized by these stories and the implications that are drawn from them” (Hau 2004: 78). A counter-monument, then, can enable “a revisiting

and a sharing of the injuries” across the personal, communal, and national (Gutorow et al. 2010: 6).

## VII. Conclusion: Counter-monuments in Manila and Singapore

Putting the novels and the anti-monumentalist logic in dialogue, this paper argues that the two narratives configure their featured rivers as a counter-monument (in contrast to an anti-) to modernity, as it builds an environment of memory while being concentrated in a specific area. Three gestures of countering monuments figure in the two novels we compared: the practice of memory in everyday life, the shared creation and preservation of memory, and the use of vernacular expressions to communicate remembering. Instead of demonstrating the "grand narrative of the nation's progress/ion," which Pison (2010: 48) views as the hegemonic writing of history, Arceo and Lim dramatize the complexity of living through urban renewal through a multiplicity of voices that cut across the personal and national.

What can be drawn from this reading of the novels are forms of remembering Manila and Singapore that accommodate the experiences of those barred from their right to the city. The rivers serve not only as metaphors of history's flow but also modalities whereby collective memory takes tangible shape. Counter-monument like Canal de la Reina and the Singapore River interrupt the state-sanctioned narrative of remembering the national history. The novels remind us that "collective memory as expressed in official forms is not enough, and that we have to "scar back" to the source of the injury, perhaps even identify the source in ourselves," the very cry of the anti-monumentalists (Gutorow et. al. 2010: 7). Narrativization itself entails a mnemonic process involving both *mneme* and *anamnesis*, integrating inherent and learned records alike (Stavans 1998: 88).

As if hearing Thumboo's call for politically conscious writing that critique modern urbanity in Southeast Asia, *The River's Song* and *Canal de la Reina* bring into focus the forces, both dominant and alternative, that move the production of the city (Means 1994:



964). Other studies about Southeast Asian literary expressions of urban renewal and memorializing/remembering from below may help compare the varying intersections of history, memory, and trauma across the region. More importantly, these readings can offer fresh and resistant ways of countering sweeping narratives that sustain the nation's circuits of power. It is reassuring to keep in mind that "a memory recalled is a memory snatched from the jaws of defeat" (Lim 2013: 157).

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