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"WORST OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS": DISENTANGLING FROM DYSTOPIAN SPACE AND DEHUMANIZATION IN ROY ARAGON'S "GANAGAN"

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Abstract
The war on drugs in the Philippines, despite President Duterte's rhetoric of saving the country, has killed alarming numbers of people. This article analyzes a dystopian text titled "Ganagan" ("Fertilizer") by Roy Aragon which is about the Duterte administration's war on drugs. Deploying close reading and semiotics, it shows that the story portrays the punitive and vindictive nature of the war on drugs as a totalitarian project which resulted in dehumanization and collapse of human values. It further argues that the text suggests a possible future in which Duterte's utopian pursuit of "the best of all possible worlds," which has done away with dangerous drugs, is driven less by the search for happiness than by a determined faith injustice. Lastly, the analysis focuses on the vegetable garden which Castañas, the main character, has cultivated. Launching off from Edward Soja's trialectics of spatiality and Thirdspace and conventions of dystopian fiction, the article shows that the garden is an ambivalent position, negotiation, and critique of the war on drugs. Hence, the garden, as a lived space, though imposing a desired order, could also be a site of disentanglements and resistance.

Keywords: dystopian fiction, lived space, war on drugs

Introduction

The war on drugs of the Rodrigo Duterte administration in the Philippines has generated praise, and at the same time criticism, from every sector of society, especially human rights groups. Despite the president's rhetoric of saving the country from dangerous drugs, the number of killed people, particularly the poor, the invisible victims, is alarming. Since taking office on June 30, 2016, the drug war has led to the deaths of over 12,000 Filipinos to date, mostly urban poor—2,555 of which have been attributed to the Philippine National Police (Human Rights Watch Official Website, 2018). This alarming number could amount to crimes against humanity. As such, this project, like its versions in other countries, could be considered a war on drug users, not a war on drugs. Drug users are subjected to a process of stigmatization, marginalization, and social exclusion. As

such, they are hindered from being reintegrated into wider social and economic circles (Buchanan & Young, 2000).

Such a phenomenon creates fear in people's minds. The imagined downward spiral, if not collapse, of society which is caused by this war is hard to handle, hence the need to relegate these fears to fiction, to create diffraction of these fears. Like zombie fiction which functions as an embodiment of people's fears on the uncertainty of today's modern society (Barber, 2013), dystopian fiction is also worth considering.

This article is about a dystopian short story entitled "Ganagan" (fertilizer), a short story by Roy Aragon on the Duterte administration's war on drugs. Roy Aragon (born 1968) is a fictionist and poet having won numerous awards including the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature, perhaps the most prestigious award in Philippine letters. He writes both in Ilokano (the lingua franca of northern Philippines) and in Filipino (the national language). His major works include the first Ilokano poetry e-book *Napili ken Saan a Napili a Dandaniw ken Dadduma Pay a Riknakem* (*Selected and Not Selected Poems and Other Musings*, 2000), his poetry anthology *Bagi: Dandaniw* (*Body: Poems*, 2016), and *Bannuar ken Dadduma Pay a Fiksion* (*Hero and Other Fiction*, 2018).

I will show in this article that the short story portrays the punitive and vindictive nature of the war on drugs as a totalitarian project which resulted in the death of a lot of people and the collapse of human values. I will focus my attention on the vegetable garden which Castañas, the main character, has cultivated. Launching off from Edward Soja's trialectics of spatiality and Thirdspace and conventions of dystopian fiction, I will show that the garden is an Ilokano's ambivalent position, negotiation, and critique of the war on drugs. As such, as a Thirdspace, the garden in the short story exists not only as an idea or a place or an action but as "a complex ecology of spatial reality, cognitive practice, and real work" (Francis & Hester, 1990, p. 7). I will point out that the garden, as a structure, though imposing a desired, pre-determined order, could also be a site of the exercise of human agency.

Method

This article focuses on the short story "Ganagan" as a representative of a dystopian text that critiques President Duterte's war on drugs in the Philippines. Deploying close reading, I aim to focus on the text itself and the messages it purveys. At the same time, I follow a semiotic lens as an attempt of examining the "patterns and the arrangement of signs and symbols and their significations and meanings, interrogating their entanglements, gaps, fissures, symptoms, and meanings […] unraveling the mutual constitution of texts and contexts on each other and their ideological underpinnings" (Perez, 2018, p. 17)

Findings and Discussion

The punitive nature of the war on drugs

While this article will not deal with empirical data on the invisible victims of the war on drugs, it is worth mentioning that the story does so in great detail, thus foregrounding the collapse of values this war has caused. Castañas, the main

character, is in charge of cremating the thousands of corpses of people who perished in the war on drugs.

The story begins with ominous imagery. Fog engulfs the physical setting of the story; its thickness is emphasized with the use of hyperbole, "*sapasap a sangkadagaan*" (throughout the face of the earth). This fog, even compared to the ash spewed by Mt. Pinatubo in 1990, comes from the giant ovens which are used as crematoria of a multitude of drug users who were killed in the war on drugs. Additional details are given through the use of staccato in paragraphs: "*pagpuoran ti bangkay…bangkay ti tao…rinibribu a bangkay…a nasken a mapadapo…a panagpadapo kadagiti di agsarday a mapempen a bangkay"* (where corpses are burned…corpses of humans…thousands of corpses…which need to be turned to ash…ceaseless heaping of corpses which are turned to ash).

In addition, the text even says that when the government had not yet thought of the crematoria as a solution to the huge number of killed drug users, its agents even used Manila Bay as a mass grave after cemeteries overflowed with interred drug users. The government even planned that these corpses be transported to the South China Sea or Benham Rise which already belonged to China. When examined within its real-world context, this passage suggests that the author critiques Duterte's alleged diplomatic relations with China as regards territorial dispute.

The collapse of human values: ash from corpses as fertilizer

The third-person omniscient narrator then bombards the reader with a startling fact in the dystopian world of the story. Human corpses are never cremated to be stored in urns that will be kept by the family. Their ashes, which ought to be memorialized remains of their humanity, are rather turned to fertilizer, hence the title of the story.

In this dehumanizing project of apocalyptic proportions, the protagonist Castañas plays a huge part. He is called "master cremator," which for him is a huge honor because the prime minister even awarded him a gold medallion for his ability and contribution to the national war against illegal drugs. He received such an award because he was adept at regulating the right amount of heat to pulverize well the corpses. With the fear of being cut off from work before because of "endo" (end of the contract in a job common among the Philippine working class), he was thankful he mastered his craft of turning the corpses to ashes. The mentioning of 'endo' is again a reminder to the Duterte administration. The text says contractualization had not been removed because big companies prevented this end—proof of the unabated perpetuation of neoliberal capitalism, indeed. These ashes are then distributed to farms and fisheries because these will be used as a mixture of what domesticated animals and fishes eat. Some are even exported to other countries, particularly China and Russia.

In these sketches of the story's dystopian world, I argue that the text satirizes the political structure which the author finds himself in, which is known for its instability, flipflopping, uncertainty, and totalitarianism, which are represented by the "double" murders of thousands of people, neoliberal capitalism in terms of no end to "endo," and giving away disputed territories. On another note, what is forwarded as a political satire could be a projection of fears of not only the author but also of Filipinos in general. These political satires are also put forward by

earlier dystopian texts such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four*, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (Gottlieb, 2001).

Discussing the dystopian fiction of the West, Erika Gottlieb (2001) claims that there is a push and pull of utopian and dystopian perspectives.

> If we begin with *We, Brave New World,* and *Nineteen Eighty-four,* it becomes obvious that each dystopian society contains within it seeds of a utopian dream. These are articulated by the ruling elite's original promise when its new system was implemented, a promise that was then miscarried, betrayed or fulfilled in ways that show up the unexpected shortcomings of the dream.
>
> (Gottlieb, 2001, p. 8)

Although there is no push and pull of utopia and dystopia in the text, these perspectives on Western dystopian fiction also hold to *Ganagan.* Such a push-and-pull mechanism does not exist because the text itself is already a collapse of utopian ideals. Of course, there might be seeds of utopia in the President's discourse on the war on drugs when the real-world context is consulted. As he said when he was campaigning, "If I make it to the Presidential Palace, I will do just what I did as mayor. You drug pushers, holdup men, and do nothing, you better get out because I'll kill you" (Human Rights Watch Official Website, 2018).

From a Foucauldian power/knowledge perspective, Duterte's statement is a discourse made possible through effectuating the knowledge that crooked souls are a threat to a utopia, hence the need to execute them. Duterte then is the Grand Inquisitor. The text *Ganagan,* however, subverts this discourse because it suggests the horrendous fate which society has been into since the war on drugs. Duterte's promise was "miscarried, betrayed, or fulfilled in ways that show up the unexpected shortcomings of the dream" (Gottlieb, 2001, p. 8). As such, *Ganagan* is a dystopia aimed to "critique and ridicule a worldview for its adherence to instrumental values, its elevation of functional and collective ends over the humanistic and individual" (Claeys, 2017, p. 278). The text thus suggests a possible future in which Duterte's utopian pursuit of "the best of all possible worlds," which has done away with dangerous drugs, is driven less by the search for happiness than by a determined faith in justice. In other words, the dystopian world of *Ganagan* presents us with a society where the ruling elite deliberately subverts justice. The text, therefore, is a protest against the possible totalitarian superstate which the current administration may morph into and which is the "worst of all possible worlds," a universe of terror and rigged trials (Gordin, Tilley, & Prakash, 2010, p. 5).

Gardens as Thirdspace

In the face of totalizing structures such as the 'worst of all possible worlds' which *Ganagan* presents, how do people fare? How do they come to terms with such horrendous end of human values and of valuing of human life?

The story tells us that so much alteration has been done on the physical geography of the country as a result of the double murders done on drug users.

Amid this barren landscape shrouded by fog is the crematoria where Castañas works. On the premises of the crematoria is a dilapidated van which he already turned into a home. Near the van is a vegetable garden which teems with a lot of green vegetables. Hence, the garden stands in stark contrast to the barren surroundings of the dystopian world, the "worst of all possible worlds," of the story. The main focus of this article is to examine this garden as a crucial site of the story. The book *The Meaning of Gardens* claims the following:

> One cannot examine a garden as a physical place without probing the ideas that generated the selection of its materials and the making of its geometry. One cannot fully understand the idea of the garden without knowing something about the process that created it. Also in the act of gardening reside both ideology and a desire to create a physical order. The garden exists not only as an idea or a place or an action but as a complex ecology of spatial reality, cognitive practice, and real work.
>
> (Francis & Hester, 1990, p. 7)

This passage says that a garden is more than just a physical space. It is a physical entity made possible through various conceptions of people and the result is the arrangements and re-arrangements of objects that constitute it. Most importantly, ideology not only is activated in the garden but also made possible its conception as an entity. As such, what is in the mind of who created a garden, including the ideological structures that interpellated him/her (Althusser cited in Bertens, 2014), is activated in real space. As such, the production of space, from the perspective of Henri Lefebvre (Schmid, 2008, p. 28), is a social practice. Society is composed of human beings who "in their corporeality and sensuousness, with their sensitivity and imagination, their thinking and their ideologies" (2008, p. 29) enter into relationships with each other through their activity and practice that lead to the production of space. These ideas find great support in Doreen Massey's book *For Space* (2005) which pointed out that space (e.g. a garden) is a product of interrelations as constituted through interactions and that it is always under construction.

Massey refers to interrelations as the many ways in which relations are understood as political practices, the relational constructed-ness of things including political subjectivities and political constituencies. As such, she argues that "identities/entities, the relations 'between' them, and spatiality which is part of them are all co-constitutive" (Massey, 2005, p. 32). Meanwhile, on the claim that space is always under construction, Massey goes on to explain that not only history but also space is open. Space can never be that "completed simultaneity in which interconnections have been established…There is a space of loose ends and missing links" (Massey, 2005, p. 36).

Such simultaneity in and the openness of space has been greatly emphasized by postmodern geographer Edward Soja in his book *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (1996). Expanding the then-current practice of the social sciences of confining scholarly theorizing to history (time) and society (social relations), Soja elaborates Lefebvre's idea by explaining that what Lefebvre wants to do is Thirding-as-Othering which introduces a critical "other-than" choice that speaks and critiques through its otherness. This is done

through "disordering, deconstruction, and tentative reconstitution of their presumed totalization…an intrusive disruption that explicitly spatializes dialectical reasoning" (1996, p. 61), which are geared towards building further, moving on, and continuously expanding the production of knowledge beyond what is presently known.

This Thirding-as-Othering central to Lefebvre's and Soja's postulations gives birth to the privileging of historicality-sociality-spatiality trialectic and perceived-conceived-lived trialectic of spatiality (Borch, 2002, p. 116). Simply put, historicality-sociality-spatiality trialectic asserts that not only time and social relations but also space is essential to human beings. Besides, space is simultaneously perceived-conceived-lived, a re-affirmation of the statement by Francis and Hester (1990) pointed out above on the meaning of gardens. In this sense, gardens, an example of space, are material and the materialized physical spatiality (i.e. perceived) and are produced through discursively devised representations of space through the spatial workings of the mind (i.e. conceived). Most important is the proposition that space is lived, a Thirdspace. Describing the openness and simultaneity of Thirdspace, Anderson said that it "facilitates new combinations of once dualized elements…offers an epistemology that can respond to changing contexts" (2002, p. 304). The reason behind this is that Thirdspace is a "remembrance-rethinking-recovery of spaces lost…or never sighted at all" (2002, p. 81) and "an endless series of theoretical and practical approximations, a critical and inquisitive nomadism in which the journeying to the new ground never ceases" (2002, p. 82). With Thirdspace, we could analyze spaces as they are:

> [...] filled with politics and ideology, with the real and the imagined intertwined, and with capitalism, racism, patriarchy, and other material spatial practices that concretize the social relations of production, reproduction, exploitation, domination, and subjection…They are chosen spaces for struggle, liberation, emancipation.
>
> (Soja, 1996, p. 68)

The openness and simultaneity of Thirdspace (as altogether perceived-conceived-lived) imply that we can look at space the same way as we look at various institutions and people who constructed it—and what has been constructed or is being constructed. The foregoing, therefore, are the concepts I will use in looking into the garden which the main character Castañas tilled and maintained.

Castañas's Garden as Thirdspace

An in-depth look at the garden cared for by Castañas reveals that it is more than just a physical space where he could harvest good produce to nourish his body. More than a taken-for-granted place, the garden in itself is polysemous, imbued with different meanings, and altogether a perceived-conceived-lived space.

The perceived space of Castañas's garden is that in this barren landscape shrouded by fog is the crematoria where he works. In the premises of the crematoria is a dilapidated van which he already turned into a home. Near the van

is a vegetable garden which teems with a lot of green vegetables. Hence, the garden stands in stark contrast to the barren surroundings of the dystopian world, the "worst of all possible worlds," of the story. The formation of this space, the arrangements, and re-arrangements of objects that constitute it are determined by the dystopian, punitive government. The narrative's privileging of the space which the main character occupies is symptomatic of how the government conceives the place as something very crucial to its programs of executing lawbreakers, namely the drug users and addicts. Castañas having received an award as being "master cremator" catapults space's role in the government program.

It is noteworthy, however, that the government ordered the people to till a garden in their backyard, a great contrast to the morbid, fear-inducing, dystopian setting of the text. This promulgation highlights the government's power to wield its hand in the physical space. As such, the government's ideology not only is activated in the garden but also made possible its conception as an entity. In Althusserian terms, the war on drugs ideology induces people to fashion themselves and transform the spaces they occupy in a way that they do not run counter to the dominant mode of spatial thinking of the government. They are being "interpellated as subjects" in which "[their] imaginary relationship [as] individuals" is seen in "their real conditions of existence" (Althusser in Ryan & Rivkin, 2004, pp. 2693–97). In this case, the government and the people are in interrelations in terms of political practices, political subjectivities, and political constituencies (Massey, 2005). As such, their self-fashioned identities made manifest in the transformation of their bigger surroundings and of the gardens they maintained, ought to be following the grand design of the totalitarian and punitive government under whom they are interpellated as subjects (Claeys, 2017; Cole, 2017). In this case, centralized state power, in a Foucauldian sense, is dispersed throughout society and people's self-fashioning proves that they have internalized the social control that monitors society and maintains the disciplined efficiency of the social system (Foucault, 1971 in Ryan & Rivkin, 2004).

The ubiquitous movements of power in the story imply that the act of gardening—Castañas's gardening, more specifically—implies that the garden is a lived space, a Thirdspace. Seeing it this way enables us to launch ourselves into "a critical and inquisitive nomadism in which the journeying to the new ground never ceases," thus the construction of new bits of knowledge that speak for the concretization of "social relations of production, reproduction, exploitation, domination, and subjection…[in the] chosen spaces for struggle, liberation, emancipation" (Soja, 1996, p. 68). Seen this way, Castañas's experience could thus be described as a particular kind of spatial praxis: "the transformation of (spatial) knowledge into (spatial) action in a field of unevenly developed (spatial) power" (Soja, 1996, p. 31). In what ways is this so?

As said earlier, the crematorium is a special place for the fulfillment of the war on drugs discourse because bodies are ferried from the spots where they were killed and delivered to this place. After several processes that turn these into fertilizer, they are carried away in sacks, ready to be used by different consumers. As such, this very spot where Castañas works is a space where "social relations of [economic] production, reproduction, exploitation, domination, and subjection" (Soja, 1996, p. 68) are deployed over and over again. The movements of people to

and from the space reproduce the ideologies of the war on drugs discourse. Hence, space is a microcosm of the "worst of all possible worlds" which the dystopian text presents. Hence, as Henri Lefebvre limned the profound connection between power and space, "power is everywhere; it is everywhere…in space" (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 86).

The aforementioned facts are the structures where Castañas found himself in. Does he have a choice? Most likely not. It is noteworthy, however, that he gives a more nuanced meaning to the mandate of the government to cultivate gardens. In his garden, he does the following:

> Iti kinaagmaymaysan ni Castañas, dagitoy laengen patpatgenna a mulana ti kakaisuna a pagliwliwaan ken pakaliwliwaanna. No kayatna ti uminum … kayatanna unay a pulotan ti saluyot a namaga a napakbet iti suka-Iloko ken adu a nataltal a laya ken napitpit a bawang sa nalaokan iti nakirog nga aramang. Kaykayatna ti agmaymaysa nga umin-inum ken agpaypayubyob iti dakkel a butakana. Naulimek nga agmennamenna iti tengnga ti nasamek a kanatenganna nangruna iti sardam wenno uray iti tengtengnga ti rabii a saan a makaturog, urayenna ti parbangon santo agipaburek iti kape a barako ket agkapkape kabayatan ti panagpayubyobna agingga nga aglawag. Santo agsibugen … Kasasaona pay no kua dagiti mulana a kasla lattan kameng ti pamiliana dagitoy.
>
> (Castañas in his solitude has only these beloved plants as his pleasure and leisure. If he wants to drink…he would much prefer *saluyot* cooked dry in Iloko vinegar and garnished with lots of minced garlic and sauteed *aramang.* He would prefer drinking and smoking alone in his *butaka*. He would ruminate silently amidst his robust vegetables, especially at early night, even at midnight when sleeping is hard, or when at dawn. Then he'd boil *barako* coffee as he smokes till daybreak. Then he waters the plants…He talks to these plants as though they are part of his family.)

This passage is poignant, filled with seeming longings for home, for people who once were there. Of course, during the day, Castañas had to perform the ideology which interpellated him, for he is a subject retroactively and performatively "hailed" into the drug war discourse (Althusser 1971 in Ryan & Rivkin, 2004, p. 698). This seems hard to be disentangled by the master cremator Castañas because interpellations/compulsions have real effects on the body and the psyche of the subject due to the iterative act or performativity, which enacts what it names (Rottenberg, 2008, p. 7). At night, however, he morphs into another being, a positive act of regressing to his former self. The passage above is symptomatic of how he recalls his former identity, a process of remembering made possible through space as a memory trigger, so to speak.

In such process of remembering, there is calling to mind his cultural identity, which is being an Ilokano, an ethnolinguistic group in the northern Philippines. Such Ilokano-ness is symbolized by his use and enjoyment of Ilokano material culture, namely: *saluyot* (jute), Ilokano vinegar, *aramang* (dried shrimp), *butaka* (swiveling chair), and *barako* coffee. All these are done in the garden. On one note, food is intimately connected to cultural identity. Pierre Bourdieu said that

"taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier; social subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 6). Also, Roland Barthes said that food is "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of images, situations, and behavior" (Barthes, 1997, p. 21). As such, food embodies conceptual and philosophical frameworks that point to the fundamental ways in which we articulate ourselves, our cultural identity (Gunkel, 2016). For the case of Castañas, we could point out that his choice of Ilokano food harvested from and consumed in his garden is thus a conscious choice, a signifier that stands for his cultural identity no matter what systemic erasure and incorrigible entropy of values he might be subjected to.

Taking these points to another level, I argue that as regards the garden, his efforts of caring for it, reflecting about his life at it, and consuming its produce are proofs that the garden is a lived space. Aside from exposing the ideologies at work in it, the text suggests that Castañas regards the garden as a lived space, a Thirdspace. One source says of space: "[t]he landscape is alive, it is a text in itself, it is a living text…There is a dialogue there between one's internal being, one's psyche, and the nature of place, the landscape" (Harris quoted in Maes-Jelinek, 1991, p. 33). His moments of rumination from early evening to early daybreak suggests that although no words are given, he to some extent takes some opportune time to reflect on himself as "master cremator," a useful asset of a dystopian society. To this process of rumination, the garden as a lived space takes an indispensable role because there happens a dialogue between Castañas's internal being, his psyche, and his space that is the garden.

On another note, during his ruminations at the garden, he reveals why he lives alone day in and day out. His wife and children were also killed in the drug war. The two males were shot dead with the words "Nanlaban! Wag Tularan!" ("He resisted; don't imitate him" [often the words written in cardboards beside those gunned down in the drug war]); the only girl shot dead in a drinking spree with friends; and his wife gunned down while walking after having come from an agency to protest their children's death. These ruminations further make the garden a Thirdspace because it is through the dialogue between Castañas and the space that he sheds more light on his lonely and miserable life, his bereavement beyond proportions. What is wrong with how the government is run, with all its punitive measures of executing drug users who are discursively considered denigrate type, is further ramified. Revealing the malignant fecaliths and poisonous turds that need to be excised, Castañas's garden thus becomes a site of resistance, a space for struggle and transgression against powerful ideologies of the drug war, hence a Thirdspace (Soja, 1996).

Conclusion

Castañas's verdant garden stands in stark contrast to the lifeless, foggy landscape around it. This suggests that as a Thirdspace, the garden is a space of resistance, of launching more specific, local struggles against forms of subjection aimed at loosening the constraints on possibilities for action. Hence, the garden is a site where the agency, or in Michel de Certeau's term "ways of operating", could be exercised despite the drug war's totalizing structures. But as to what extent agency is exercised cannot be determined right away. Or should it be

determined? Big structures are not easily toppled down. In the story, however, Castañas was able to launch more specific, local struggles through his garden as Thirdspace, through remembering his wife and children who are now long gone, and through deliberate choices on food and material culture. These are the ways through which he negotiated his experiences in the face of these totalizing structures and managed to survive the most difficult ordeal. As such, his garden, his Thirdspace, though imposing a desired order, a dystopia, could also be a site where disentanglements and resistance could be done.

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