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# Where I Come From

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Panel: Sense of Place

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## Where I Come From

I will begin with two stories, both of them myths from the Philippines, plucked from an ancient tradition of oral tales largely unknown, and untold, to the rest of the world. One is a creation story and the other is a kind of adventure story. The reason why I am sharing them with you is that I believe they will help explain, the way mythology often elucidates, why “a sense of place” is often necessary in our writings. They will also illumine why I happen to write in the first place.

But let me put forth my thesis first: the idea of “a sense of place” for me goes beyond the expected catalogue of sensory details, rendered in literary magic-making, that evokes home. While a travelogue through geography-specific nostalgia is a big part of the process, a writer’s “sense of place” ultimately contributes to a bigger project—that of laying the geography of imagination for one’s country. In my stories, I concoct an embracing image of the city where I come from—Dumaguete, in the heart of sugar land that is Negros Island—knowing full well that it is part of a project to flesh out an idea of the country. I shall try to explain this later on.

According to the Bagobo, the world came into being with the cosmos in chaos. All the heavenly bodies—the sun, the moon, the stars—were in such close contact with the earth that the world proved inhabitable: it was scorching, and the mythic beings that came before men had no choice but to scatter into the shadows of the earth’s caves and crevices to cool themselves from the steady broiling. One day, Tuglibong, the female leader of this band of mythic beings, went out of her abode to pound rice with her mortar and pestle. And while she went deep into the rhythm of her pounding, Tuglibong looked up and began to scold in a sing-song the nearby sky and the heavenly bodies. She chided them in song, and called them names—and in response, perhaps to get away from Tuglibong’s tirade, the sky (the sun, the moon, and the stars with it) began to rise higher and higher, up into the appropriate distance where they could still give light without making French fries out of everybody else.

If one thinks about it, Tuglibong’s angry song—which can stand for my native tradition of literature—put order to the universe, and gave her people a sense of habitable home, a kind of a sense of place.

Here is another story. According to the Manobo, there was once a prince who went by the name of Baybayan. The prince, who abhorred war and loved to only sing and dance, was soon sent on a peculiar exile by his grandfather the king. He was given the specific instructions to circle the world seven times, and en route was told to sing and tell the stories of his kingdom’s greatness. Prince Baybayan did as he was told, and circled the world seven times, where he prospered in his long journey by singing the old stories about his ancient land—and I am overstretching this now—to the peoples of Bhârat, Uyashima, Ur, Egypt, Nubia, the Middle Kingdom of Ch’in, Hellas, Vinland, and Mesoamerica.

In his travels, Baybayan sang perhaps of the hero Lam-ang, who was swallowed by the giant fish berkahan, which perhaps became the Hebrew story of Jonah and the whale. He sang of the kidnapping of the sea maiden Humitao by Lord Aponi-to-lau, a depraved act which unleashed the wrath of the sea god Tau-mari-u who proceeded to let loose a great deluge on all the land, which perhaps became the story of Noah and the Great Flood. He sang of the virgin birthing of gigantic heroes, which perhaps became the Babylonian story of Semiramis and her son Nimrod. (Or Mary and Jesus.)

If one thinks about it, the Manobo could very well be the origin of world literature—and explains why, all over the world, we share similar motifs and tropes in our stories.

I like how I see these two ancient stories as metaphors for how I understand the workings—at least some of it anyway—of literature, and more specifically, of creative writing. In this particular context, these are the best stories I can begin with to understand, in my terms, what “a sense of place” means for me, especially in my writing.

In Tuglibong’s story of singing away the chaos of the universe to put order to things, I see writing as that magical song that carves out a definition of home—we make sense of where we live, of where we come from, by rendering the chaos of the details that surround us—the texture of geography, its smell, its sounds, its tastes—into the realm of the familiar that can be accessed only by the exquisite rendition in literature.

In Baybayan’s story of seven journeys in song, I see this literature of evoking home as having two meanings: that writers become architects of how where we come from can be imagined by the rest of the world, and that the exercise of telling about home can best be done as an exilic endeavor.

This exilic mode is interesting because we know of so many writers who seem to subscribe to it, believing that we often need to go away, to seek a little distance, in order to obtain some sort of objectivity. The Philippine novelist and national hero Jose Rizal had to leave the Philippines to write his masterpiece about it, *Noli Me Tangere*. James Joyce, too, with Ireland, and so it was with V.S. Naipaul and Milan Kundera and Salman Rushdie and Jessica Hagedorn. It surprised me little that before arriving in Iowa City, I had come up with the fervent resolution to begin here the draft of my second novel—which I meant to be a paean to the loveliness and sinfulness of where I come from. I honestly thought that the distance provided by Iowa City would enable me to see beyond the ghosts I wanted to escape, these phantom obstacles that proximity often brings. I thought it completely impossible to write about Dumaguete if I were still in the middle of all that familiarity. Like Baybayan, I had to go far to be able to sing about the place I call home.

This urge to do a fictional rendering of the story of one’s own place has always been the silent project for many writers, whether they admit it or not. There are easy examples to highlight. Alice Munro’s Ontario, Canada. Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s Macondo. John Updike’s Olinger, Pennsylvania. William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha. Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio. Edith

Wharton's New York. When we think of these writers and many more like them, what immediately comes to us is a sense of a specific world that they conjure in their works. With story after story, they essentially give us the bricks and the seeds and the atmosphere to make up this specific sense of place, which becomes an embracing stage upon which their diverse characters play out their conflict and their drama. The Filipino fictionist Timothy Montes once wrote that a "sense of place" is linked to, but is not necessarily the same as, "setting," which itself is an often "overlooked as an active element" in the creation of stories, always secondary to plot and character, and often scaled down to a "cosmetic role." But he noticed that many writers return again and again to a particular setting that in the end what they have created is a believable world whose "air" blends so well with the characters and their stories that we begin to feel they could only have existed in the very place they occupy. He goes on:

I think most writers, especially those writing short stories, operate from this single-minded creation of a sense of place. They take great pains to make each story complete or self-enclosed, but the sense of place can only be formed by an accretion of stories, the building of worlds that will be more subtle than the alien worlds of science fiction, and sooner or later they will see that the sense of place will loom larger than the individual stories that make them. The impulse may be conscious or unconscious, and one has to drink deep from the well of memory to be able to tap into it.

Needless to say, Dumaguete is my mythical place of roots. In Dumaguete lay the secrets of my blood, my history. Also here is the setting of my mother's bedside stories, of those moments when I was a young child and she'd tuck me to bed and gamely recall a life when she was a young woman and World War II was brewing, or much later when she had returned to Bayawan town as a married woman in the sugar boom of the late 1960s and became, for a while, one of its fairer society hostesses. Those were the heady days, when sugar cane oiled the pockets of young hacenderos on the make, and everybody was rich... Dumaguete means memory—and this word alone means so much in the ways it must mean: as a threshold of recollections both happy and tragic.

In the final analysis, however, the sense of place that I try to cultivate in my fiction eventually comes sidled with a higher agenda—to help create a sense of nation, a sense of the Philippines, with my stories. I apparently am not alone in this "endeavor," as the poet and anthologist Gemino Abad once deftly observed in his exhausting survey of Filipino short stories in English that were published between 1956 to 1972.

But Timothy Montes says it better:

For me, the Ilocanos are fixed in a small town called Nagrebcan in La Union because of the stories of Manuel Arguilla, [the island of] Mindoro in the works of N.V.M. Gonzalez, [the province of] Tarlac in

the Camiling stories of Gregorio Brillantes, and the old Manila in the works of Nick Joaquin. I never believed in a monolithic National Literature because my impression of Philippine literature was that of the variety of particular worlds created by writers I admired, worlds that felt as concrete as the jutting stones in the unpaved streets of my town as well as the smoothness of the streets of the poblacion [downtown] under my chinelas [flipflops]. So the Philippines would be an act of the imagination as different writers so rooted in their regional origins would reveal to me...

I believe that we are forming our literature in the story-telling projects that our writers have made of their particular towns, their particular cities. We are not creating a Nation from an abstract perspective; we are building it town by town, city by city, house by house, character by character. The imagined community is not only formed by a daily newspaper with a national headline informing us what happened in the national center; it is also brought forth by ordinary sights, smells and sounds that a ten-year-old boy in a small, obscure town in Samar would try to convey through stories.