

WHEN SHE STARTED ACTING QUEER

A Queer Gothic Reading of Nick Joaquin's

The Woman Who Had Two Navels

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Abstract

This essay reads Nick Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* using the critical templates gleaned from gothic studies and queer theory. The essay explores the idea of doubling and monstrosity and demonstrates how these two gothic tropes are deployed to activate the queer potential found in the character of Connie Escobar. The essay builds on an existing interpretation of the novel—that the narrative is an account of regeneration—and extends this by arguing that this narrative of transformation is mobilized precisely by a rejection of heteropatriarchal narratives encoded in the novel's postcolonial world, mobilized in a particular way by the creation and undoing of an imagined bodily monstrosity performed and sustained through a gendered worlding.

Keywords

Nick Joaquin, Philippine novel in English, postcolonial Gothic, queer theory

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INTRODUCTION

Nick Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* (1961) is, as early critics (Garcia; Galdon; Davis; Crisostomo; Gonzalez) have often posited, a story of spiritual regeneration. The novel chronicles the physical and existential journey of Connie Escobar as she undergoes a personal exile to Hong Kong after feeling betrayed by the moral foundations of her life—her parents, Manolo and Concha Vidal and her husband, Macho. Her self-imposed exile disrupts not only the lives of her family in Manila but also the Hong Kong-born immigrant community of Filipinos, Paco and Mary Texeira, Rita Lopez, and Pepe and Tony Monson. Connie's inner turmoil is articulated by her pronouncement that she has two navels—a statement which metaphorizes, among other things, her rejection of her humanity in favor of the monstrous template of her childhood idol, the carnival god, Biliken. Towards the end of the novel, through a poetic and symbolic mode of spiritual transformation dramatized through the four deaths (by earth, water, air, and finally fire) Connie rejects this monstrous form and accepts her humanity albeit by running away with the married Paco Texeira.

Somewhere near the conclusion the novel, Concha Vidal, upon hearing news of her daughter's supposed death in the mountains, remarks that Connie Escobar had already started acting "queer" back in Manila. To quote, "When I saw this coming – she started acting queer – I felt there was only one thing I could do for her: go away. And so, I went away; I came here, to Hong Kong, though I had no need, no desire to do so, I did it only for her sake. So why should I blame myself now?" (283).

I preamble my piece with this seemingly overlooked remark of Concha La Vidal (relative to her other pronouncements) as it foregrounds the significant issues that I wish to discuss. While her use of the word "queer" may simply refer to Connie's strange behavior, this strangeness, as I would argue, is characterized and sustained by two interfacing elements: Connie's apparent "monstrosity" and how her queerness ultimately interrogates and subverts the ordered world of the novel's characters sustained largely by heteronormativity. In this essay, I explore and mobilize the way in which the word "queer" interfaces with the notion of the gothic to function as a viable interpretative tool in the reading of the novel.

Existing scholarship on the novel situate their analyses along the interpretative axes of nationalist and postcolonialist frameworks. Gabriel Jose Gonzalez SJ's dissertation for instance interprets the novel against the backdrop of a crucial historical moment where the imagination of the Philippine nation is one founded on a tension between the imaginaries of the elite and the actual lived experience of the common folk (7). E. San Juan's psychoanalytic explication in *Subversions of Desire* (1988) enriches this mode of contextualization by utilizing Lacanian

discourse with the frame of an Oedipal drama to account for the restoration of the humanity of the novel's chief protagonist. San Juan concludes his rich Lacanian-oriented analysis by arguing that:

[what] afflicts Connie is... the threatening Law of the Father... Connie's desire to sin, to shatter the illusory equilibrium of Hong Kong and provoke 'hysterical' asymmetries and imbalances among the exiles, may be interpreted as the workings of desire, the unconscious which prompts her attempted suicide as the nodal breach and the dream sequence as enactment of the flow. (167)

The dual queer gothic reading I wish to enact builds on the ideas foregrounded by the existing scholarship and invites scholars of Nick Joaquin to consider the role of sexuality in our varied appreciation of Joaquin's works. Specifically, it extends in a way San Juan's Lacanian reading by locating the ways in which such a transgression of the Law of the Father is enacted precisely by a kind of performative queering within the frame of gothic poetics. This reading also does not seek to discount the analyses deployed through nationalist and postcolonial paradigms as it is the goal of this essay to also identify the ways in which the sexual politics generated from elite power relations participate in this interface between the queer and the gothic.

I thus read the novel in two interfacing ways. First, I position the novel as a postcolonial gothic piece. I build on the Philip Holden's notion that the postcolonial gothic is not only about horror and terror but more so about the complexities and inherent contradictions of modern life and the bodily experience of excesses (Holden). I zero in on how the issue of bodily monstrosity is hinged on the idea of ownership, an important trope in gothic studies. In this section, I argue that at the core of Connie's perceived monstrosity is a rejection of ownership of the body which translates to her supposed moral abdication.

From there, I turn to my second reading which links the notion of the ordered world in the novel and heteropatriarchy. I argue that the supposed ordered world which Connie Escobar escapes from is sustained by heteronormative codes which not only "guarantee" social stability but more importantly provide vital generational linkages and transmission and appropriation of cultural codes. Connie's queerness brought about by her monstrosity in this respect is not just a rejection of these heteropatriarchal codes but what these codes imply. In the spiritual regeneration which occurs at the end of the novel's penultimate chapter, "The Chinese Moon," Connie does not shed her queer character. What happens at the end of the novel, however, is a shift to a more positive queer signification. Connie's running away with Paco Texeira is not just a moment of contradiction, a humanity affirmed by infidelity, but a queer moment which offers a radical mode of moral regeneration and sexual resignification.

THE NOVEL AS GOTHIC

In Western literary scholarship, the gothic form is often read against and alongside its binary opposite and double, the realist novel. As the twin genres produced during the Victorian Age, the gothic and the realist problematize the interface between the emerging white middle class and early capitalist modernity. Robbie Goh for instance alerts us to how the concept of property is utilized as a critical subject in both realist and gothic traditions. The retention of property and all that property implies (physical and social security, retention of class position, class mobility) are a recurring theme in both realist and gothic novels. While such realist novels deal with ordinary, everyday daytime affairs such as propriety and marriage, gothic novels such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) focus on the Unconscious and the repressed consequences brought about by capitalist modernity. At the core therefore of the gothic's horror is a particular monstrous anxiety about ownership (Goh). From this anxiety comes a host of other issues central to Gothic studies: the doubling of the Self and the Other, the transformation of the city as a site of human and existential gloom, and the body as a corporeal site of contestation and the (re)inscription of meanings.

The use of the gothic, I would argue, is not just Joaquin's tendency but part and parcel of the range of his poetics. There will always be two Manilas for Nick Joaquin: the glitter and glamor which dominates much of the narrative tenor of say *Manila, My Manila* (1999) as well as its mythical unconscious as exemplified in *Tropical Gothic* (1972). Both representations do not exist in a binary. In fact, his later characterizations of wartime and post-war Manila in *Manila, My Manila* reveal that he is very much aware of the kind of urban decay and degeneration that have occasionally fogged through the city. Taken as a whole, these varied representations of Manila cumulatively articulate Joaquin's poetics of nostalgia: a re-visioning that is not fully grounded on historical fact (if there is such a thing) but one that is inflected by mythic make-up suspended in mythic time. In his analysis of Lee Kok Liang's and Nick Joaquin's short fictions, Philip Holden argues that postcolonial gothic eludes the convenient reading that allegorizes fictional bodies as metaphors for the nation (368). Characterized largely by excesses and incompleteness, fictionalized postcolonial bodies resist the utopian nationalist dream of coherence and closure advocated by nationalist writing; instead, and precisely through imagined incompleteness, these bodies "[register] the contradictions of new national governmentalities" (368-369).

It is along this critical matrix that I will be reading *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* as a gothic piece. The novel opens itself up to possible gothic readings not just because of its characterization of Connie Escobar as a “monstrous female,” which I will get to later on, but because of how Joaquin deploys significant gothic tropes to advance the novel’s central themes. As in most of Joaquin’s short fiction in *Tropical Gothic* such as “Summer Solstice” and “The Mass of St. Sylvestre,” the suprarrealist tenor of the novel adds a kind of gothic mystique to the narrative. My reading of the novel seeks to activate the critical potential of the gothic by alerting us to the various ways in which these gothic tropes are mobilized to function as a kind of modernist critique vis-à-vis Connie’s perceived monstrosity. The ensuing analysis focuses primarily on the tropes of doubling and the concept of the monstrous female to not only bring out this potential for a gothic critique but also to prepare the reader for the queer analysis which, I will argue later on, is essential to the Connie’s concept of monstrosity.

The first concept that I wish to elaborate on is the idea of doubling. The novel’s core metaphor, the two navels, opens the narrative to a discourse on duality and doubling. In gothic discourse, doubling is crucial in that in contrast to a neat binary opposition, doubling establishes both similarities and likeness of the Self and the perceived Other. Doubling identifies inasmuch as it negates.

The illustrations of Manila and Hong Kong alone establish these significant gothic contours of doubling. After spending some time touring Manila, Paco Teixeira perceives Manila as a sinister spatial corpus:

There was no escaping [the evil eyes] in this evil city where rich and poor alike huddled in terror behind their beasts and their guns, where the crowds fled self-pursued and the teeming streets might any moment become stark deserts as the latest victim danced upon his blood: where ghosts were reported and signs appeared upon doors and black headlines swarmed in the air and apparitions waved warnings and a young girl whispered that she had two navels. (60)

It is also crucial to mention that this reimagining of this city takes place after Paco’s long encounters with the novel’s chief “monstrous female” figure. The encounter shrouds Paco with a veiled portrait of a city’s urban decay, a kind of indigo-tinged reminiscent of noir and brutal fatalism. Moreover, what is also interesting to note is how this vision of urbanity is set off by an earlier affair with Connie’s mother:

The heat-dazzling panic-edgy streets darkened in his brains with doom, dirt, danger, disease, and violent death. Some venom was at work here, seeping through all the layers, cankering in all directions... Paco sensed an unreality in both worlds: the people who occupied them did not seem to be living there at all. They denied the locale – but their

denial was not the asceticism of the mystic nor the vision of the performer but merely the aversion of the opium eater. (46-47)

What I wish to alert the reader to at this juncture is not simply how the passage inaugurates Paco's shift from indifference to pessimism as far as his attitude towards Manila is concerned, but to a crucial turn which establishes the novel's gothic sensibility. In his characterization of the streets of Manila, the Hong Kong-born Paco likens the rejection of the locale to the maneuverings of an opium eater. This recognition not only speaks of Paco's sensibility but of the significant connection where Hong Kong is established not as Manila's binary opposite but as its double.

Such a doubling is affirmed not by Paco but his fellow Hong Kong exile, Pepe Monson:

All around the bowl's brim, where twilight still glimmered, Pepe Monson saw the international clubhouses, each one packaged in fog, waiting in locked-up loneliness for Sunday's exiles... The light fog, always a gleaming sheet a step away, made him feel like Alice, stepping through mirrors. But it wasn't I who stepped through the mirror, he thought. It was Father and Paco and the glass broke. They can't step back anymore; not Father anyway. (62- 64)

Thus, in the novel's first chapter, we realize that both Manila and Hong Kong have been spatially activated as haunted and haunting sites. As in Stevenson's London in *Jekyll and Hyde*, this dark illustration of urbanity is not just meant to establish an aesthetic aura of gloom but a kind of melancholia which hints at the existentialist cost of capitalist industrialization. These two port cities, meant to highlight colonial magnanimity of the privileged affluent, have turned unfamiliar, schizophrenic, and sinister.

It is also important to note that this characterization of urban gloom is activated in the perception faculties of Paco and Pepe after their individual encounters with Connie. While Paco's reimagining of Manila was initiated by her encounter with Concha, it is his affair with Connie where the venom that he merely "sensed" transmogrifies into a kind of confirmed evil. By the end of the chapter, the novel confirms this connection between Paco's and Pepe's individual visions of a fallen utopia, with Pepe mentally reiterating the disruptive if not radical entry into their lives:

The mirror's cracked world was safe no longer; was perilous with broken glass, teeming with ghosts; was now the world where Paco waited for the stranglehold and dear good Mary told lies and the cautious Rita was dazzled by dragons and Tony hid in a monastery and fathers took drugs and mothers had lost their dictionaries and young women had two navels. (74)

What is thus established in the first part of the novel is how Connie Escobar functions as a powerful force which disrupts all established and set signifiers.

To understand exactly what makes these gothic encounters, we must take into account these two men's professions. As a traveling musician and a "horse doctor" respectively, Paco and Pepe serve Manila's and Hong Kong's respective cosmopolitan dreams. Horse races in Happy Valley have long been part and parcel of colonial life in Hong Kong (Carrol 63). They serve not only as a mode of entertainment for Hong Kong's British elite residents but also articulate in a spatial way the enduring presence of European culture in one of the island gateways to the Orient. As a horse doctor, Pepe Monson is tasked to guarantee the healthy continuity of such an important cultural practice. Similarly, Paco's task is to incorporate and articulate this cosmopolitan sensibility in his craft:

He had been given the Manila contract because the two night clubs they were to play at were being opened by a Chinese millionaire (with Filipino fronts) who wanted to cash in on the swelling tourist trade in Manila by giving its night club set two places – "Manila- Hong Kong" and the Boulevard Shanghai" – which would be reminiscent of night life in those cities; and who therefore wanted dance bands fresh from Hong Kong and Shanghai to accentuate an atmosphere to be created by the Chinese prints, lanterns, and mirrors on the walls, Chinese cigarette girls on the aisles, White Russians hostesses on the dance floor, and armed Bombay bouncer under the tables. (33)

Paco's charge is more interesting in that his artistic and commercial mandate is to provide, through his jazzy fizz, a variety of urban flavors that articulate Manila's post-war cosmopolitan dream. I shall expound more on the significance of Paco's character within the context of being Connie's double later in this piece. For now, I wish to return to a point that I just made in that it is precisely these encounters brought about by labors of a cosmopolitan charge that transform these into gothic moments, leading to a mystification of the vision the labor is meant to establish. As Pepe and Paco go about their routine in serving, in varied ways, Manila's and Hong Kong's cultural industries, they encounter a woman who has not only renounced her humanity but carries with her a kind of unique cultural code that neutralizes if not negates the urban narratives they were charged to help deploy. Here now is a *mestiza*, similar yet different from them, whose capacity to travel and haunt spaces for the affluent is enabled by the same class conditions that she rejects. Liminal and a free floating signifier in every way, the disruptive code she carries brings about a kind of gloom that does not just initiate melancholia but also and more significantly an introspection into Pepe's and Paco's exiled states. By transforming these visions of urbanity by way of encounter, Connie implicitly invites both Pepe and Paco to examine the ruination of their exiled states and the farce of the shelled utopia they seek to build.

Paco's experience of doubling goes beyond his linking of Manila and Hong Kong. At the end of the novel, he runs away, from his secure and safe married life, to run away with Connie. What accounts for this? A potential explanation for this has to do with the possibility that Paco may in fact stand as Connie's double. In classical Western gothic, this can be seen in the doubling of Dr. Jekyll/Hyde and the novel's focalizer, the lawyer Mr. Utterson who, while insisting professional distance, also leads double lives. Another fine example is Dracula and Van Helsing who share similarities as father figures. In Philippine literature, we find similar maneuvers in a much later novel, *Smaller and Smaller Circles* (2002), where it is precisely the mirroring of Fr. Lucero and Alex Carlos that allows the Jesuit priest to effectively pursue the killer.

As mentioned earlier on, doubling differs from binary opposites in that doubling functions as a mirror rather than a wall: to encounter one's double is to enter into an anxious experience of difference and similarities. In reading *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* as gothic, one encounters two prominent instances of character doubling: Concha/Macho and Connie/Paco. In the novel, the love affairs of these two pairs are given detailed attention. Another curious similarity that they both share is the fact that the novel is particularly silent about their final encounters. One ends in death while the other "escapes" alive and well, albeit sinfully but Joaquin allows us only to speculate on the actual dialogue that ensued in these crucial turning points. I shall first discuss Concha/Macho as it is this characterization that allows us to appreciate the gothic and more importantly, queer potential of the Connie/Paco doubling.

The difference between Concha Vidal and Macho Escobar are certainly obvious. They are a generation apart with Concha having had to deal with and enjoy the affluence brought about by the American occupation. Concha comes from the metropolitan center while Macho comes from the Philippine South which the novel describes as "unlike the American South" in that it "has had no war to abolish its feudal splendors" (103). What brings the two together as doubles is that, even until the end, they were concerned primarily with appearances and matters of propriety. Concha's affluent realm is described a world where "even animals were ceremonious and shared men's ancient pieties" (160). Her conversation with the priest Tony Monson elaborates on this personal reverence for class theatricality:

I have never parked my conscience outside, Father. Oh I clothe it in furs and feathers, I bury it in jewels, but though I try to hide it I never tried to discard it. I have lived with it day and night these many, many years. Every night is Chinese moon for me. The great sin would be for her to think that God didn't care whether she was beautiful or not. *That* would be insulting the Holy Ghost, *that* would be the unforgiveable sin. And I have not yet committed it. (155; 157)

Thus, for Concha, her encounter with divinity and all that divinity implies—spiritual “transformation” and “renewal,” and acceptance of grace—must be enacted precisely by a gluttonous parade of power. The conflation of Christian and Chinese traditions is central to this personal deification brought about by affluence. In likening her lifestyle to a nightly Chinese Moon, a crucial if not the most important date in Chinese cosmology, in direct interaction with the Holy Trinity, Concha asserts the preserving power of commodity and property articulated through theatricality.

It is also worth noting that her marriage with her second husband, Manolo, did not just return her to the course of affluence. Manolo’s stature as a doctor who specializes in abortion is also connected to the notion of scandal. As the characterization of Manolo states, “he used his old skill to advance the other, that well-born girls in trouble could avoid a scandal by making a lewd bargain with him” (179). Macho Escobar replicates this same insistence on propriety, this time, through the idea of saving face. This is especially seen in a conversation with Pepe in his hotel room: “Politics in the Philippines, Mr. Monson, is ninety percent scandal mongering. Mr. Vidal has heard that his daughter is running around here in Hong Kong making a spectacle of herself. I have, therefore, come to fetch her home before she causes any more talk” (99).

Macho’s (and to some extent, Manolo’s) initial misreading of Connie’s actions reveals the classed nature of their anxiety. Scandal is a classed kind of shaming as it seeks to undo a reputation sustained by fronts and performativities. Connie is threatening not because she has run away but because of the scandal she is making out of the “spectacle.” To Macho and the Vidals, her monstrosity lies in the threat she is posing to the socio-political spheres they occupy.

The doubling of Macho and Concha go beyond their fixation on performances and theatricalities. Their abject emphasis on maintaining appearances is linked to the material realities of their class-based histories. Macho and Concha are doubled by the fact that they represent the twilight of affluence indulged by and through the structure of colonial politics. In a nod perhaps to a character from his short fiction (Don Badoy Montiya) in “May Day Eve,” Joaquin associates Macho with flame trees as a metonym for summer and symbol of youthful delirium:

He was young, it was summer, and the flame trees were in bloom. He was young and healthy and happy, and the city lay at his feet... Yet the bliss of that morning on the walls haunted him; in the midst of merriment a sudden ache in the bones, a blaze of flame trees in the mind, would make him stop and look around winder: Why was I so happy then and what was it I wanted? (107-108)

The sustained linking of Macho to floral imagery can be seen not only in the repetitive use of flame trees throughout the novel’s second chapter but in the use

of other images of nature to color the affair between him and Concha. In a Sunday afternoon walk, Macho “[fishes] flowers and fat green worms down her neck” (113). Moreover, this association with the floral does not just metaphorize Macho’s metaphysical state; it also returns and reminds us that the man is a *hacendero* who draws his phallic power from the wealth and stature generated from the lands his family owns in the South. As such, unlike Badoy Montiya, to speak of the flame trees past their bloom means not just to signify the end of Macho’s youthful period of feverish delirium; it speaks as well of the waning economic power of his class position—a stature he may have sought to reclaim first with his affair with Concha, and then much later on, his eventual marriage with Connie.

This doubling of Macho and Concha is further enhanced by the fact that Concha too likens her world of affluence to a period spent in a harlequinade of glitter and glamor. Whereas the delirium implied by flame trees is associated with Macho, Concha, in a curious linking to her daughter’s metaphysical state later on, is linked to the carnival. However, unlike Connie whose association with the carnival has to do with a rejection of reality, Concha’s version has to do with a particular nostalgia for bygone class position she has since reclaimed. This sense of nostalgia is first activated by her examination of her state as a wife to Esteban Borrromeo, a revolutionary who has since been left out by the pace of time: “Conchita Gil who, one carnival evening on the azotea, among potted plants and bird cages, had so confidently embraced the future, was now Conching Borrromeo, an increasingly haggard woman with four sons and a dying husband” (175). This is later on overturned when she marries Manolo Vidal, who in contrast to Esteban Borrromeo, knew how to compromise with the rising imperial power:

Afterwards, when Conching Borrromeo had become Concha Vidal, she would try to believe that she had cried out at that moment, that she had burst into tears even as the young Conchita Gil had once burst into tears in that room, scattering salt and mangoes one carnival evening long, long ago. (184)

The affair of Concha and Macho thus becomes an erotics of incest and narcissism. The result is a kind of in-breeding aimed at preserving their fallen world at the turn of the nation’s narrative. I ventured into this thorough discussion on how Concha and Macho function as doubles to illustrate how it is precisely this doubling that the pairing of Paco and Connie challenges. My discussion in that succeeding section extends the gothic reading that I enacted, focusing this time on how Connie’s monstrosity is in fact doubled by Paco Texeira. This doubling, which contrasts the fatal end of the Concha/Macho affair, is precisely what produces the novel’s queer moment.

QUEERING MONSTROSITY

Towards the end of the novel, Connie runs away with Paco, a gesture which the priest, Tony Monson acknowledges as a more desirable outcome, given Connie's inner turmoil. Specifically, Tony acknowledges that "[she] has taken a step which a woman like [Rita] cannot but regard as reprehensible but which, for a woman like her, can lead eventually to God" (313).

In this second section of my discussion of the novel, I build on the gothic reading by adding a queer layer to the doubling of Connie and Paco. The reading is built on how Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick refers to queer as an "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, or anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't* be made) to signify monolithically" (8). In a larger sense, the reading that follows is also an invitation to re-visit some of Joaquin's characters in earlier or later gothic fictions, such as the couples in "Summer Solstice" and Mateo in "The Mass of St. Sylvestre" who continuously challenge the set heteropatriarchal codes of their time as these interrogations are enacted through erotic and play within the frame of the gothic. I wish to argue, using the novel as a sample case, how it is precisely the worlding generated by Joaquin, the disruptive metaphysical force brought about by gothic gloom that enables this queering to be enacted and the varied possibilities for re-imagining Philippine postcoloniality such creative acts open. Of particular interest to this discussion is how certain powerful women—such as Agueda in "May Day Eve" and Lupe in "Summer Solstice"—participate in this process of queering by upsetting these set gendered codes.

The ensuing discussion is a three-pronged one. I first explore the queer potential of Connie's perceived "monstrosity." Next, I proceed by illustrating how such a monstrosity in fact mirrors and doubles Paco's characterization and this in turn accounts for the alliance that they eventually forge at the end of the novel, a kind of partnership which contrasts Concha/Macho's one. Finally, I will argue that the regeneration and the renewed sense of humanity, as acknowledged primarily by Tony Monson, is inseparable from the queer moment that can be gleaned from this final act of normative infidelity.

It should prove useful at this juncture to clarify that when I speak of monsters and monstrosities, I do not just refer to physical or mental deformities. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996) in his elaborate critical study of monsters across cultures insists that beyond the stereotypical images, monsters among other things are, "[cultural] bodies" (4) that bring about "a certain crisis of categories" (6). To study monsters is to explore the various ways in which set categories are interrogated and challenged.

It becomes apparent how Connie's perceived monstrosity fulfills this function. As mentioned earlier on, there is a wealth of dualities in the novel. Connie's monstrosity expressed through her consistent declaration that she has two navels is ultimately not a statement about an imagined deformity but a declaration of liminality activated by a lack of belongingness. Moreover, if we are to go back to the positioning of the gothic earlier on as essentially a class-based expression of anxiety over property and pair it with the notion of the "monster's body" as a corpus of cultural codes, then we begin to see that Connie's declaration is essentially a rejection of the ownership of histories inscribed within her body. This is especially dramatized in the novel's penultimate chapter, "The Chinese Moon," where through the four imagined deaths by earth, water, air, and fire, the forced inscriptions of such narratives are elementally and metaphysically erased.

The monstrous female is an important figure in the gothic. Once more, a brief return to Western forms, specifically to Victorian literature, can help illuminate the discussion. Jennifer A. Swartz-Levine in a thorough reading of female characters of *Dracula* argues that the rather gruesome punishments of women characters, particularly those of Lucy and Mina, are textual methods of disciplining wayward women who operated outside of the codes of "chastity and Angel in the House-like behavior" (360). Another prominent example is the governess in *Turn of the Screw* whose insistence on maintaining a sense of propriety in her employer's household leads to bouts of hallucination and insanity that ultimately led to the death of her young wards. Amitav Ghosh in *The Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), a gothic take on the discovery of the cure for malaria, replicates the same maneuver this time from a postcolonial subject-position in his deployment of Mangala, the female leader of cult that appropriates Western science (associated in the novel with male British scientists) to advance the group's own shamanistic agenda.

In the three representative texts, we can find that the supposed monstrous female represents a threat to the ordered world set by the male figures and more importantly exposes its fallibility. Governmental and disciplinary measures enacted are meant to neutralize female subjectivity and restore the heteropatriarchal order of the phallus. These gendered relations are not a private matter but, as what these works reveal, are encoded within a matrix of class and power. In the context of *Dracula* for instance, Abraham Van Helsing's (note the name) victory is one that not only vanquishes the novel's antagonist and his female minions but also that neutralizes the threat of the foreign Other in the contaminated female. These are ultimately issues of power relations brought about and sustained largely by heteropatriarchal ideal.

Moreover, what challenges these heteropatriarchal codes are precisely forms of excesses: excessive adventures, notions of propriety, and practices beyond

the codified rituals. It is under this light that we are able to explore Connie's monstrosity and where we can combine Sedgwick's positioning of queerness and Holden's reading of the tropical gothic as bodily excesses whose incompleteness and contradictions reveal possibilities of resisting set forms of governmentalities. Up until the novel's conclusion, Connie's primordial world is the carnival realm of Biliken and all that this world implies—a rejection of the ordered world penned by the phallic power of the Vidals and the Escobars where gendered expectations are neutralized by naiveté of childhood paced and sequenced in mythic time.

In this regard, Connie's claim that she has two navels, a declaration of her monstrosity is not just a rejection of the histories and the power relations that these generate but the gendered codes that enabled such histories to be. Concha and Macho are doubles not just because of how they represented the particular histories and aim to sustain them through their theatricalities; these theatricalities are rendered through hyper-masculine and hyper-feminized shows of power. In choosing to run away and assume a "monstrous identity," Connie rejects the transmission and regeneration of such cultural codes idealized and represented by the heterosexual and symbolically incestuous affair of her mother and her own husband.

Connie however, as mentioned earlier on, as dramatized in "The Chinese Moon" chapter, sheds this monstrous identity. In this respect, does Connie's return to her humanity signal also the return to the realm of heteropatriarchy? I argue that on the contrary it is Connie's return to humanity and her eventual escape to Macau with Paco where we find the most energized queer moment. While part of Connie's monstrosity is a rejection of the heteropatriarchal code, her acceptance of reality does not negate but amplifies this resistance. To understand how this is made possible, we must then turn to the role of her double, Paco.

Like Connie, the Portuguese-Filipino Paco is often associated with fluidity informed by a rejection of any attachment to space. He is characterized as "a guileless cosmopolitan and would have felt at home – or rather, would have failed to notice that he was at the North Pole as long as he had his piano, his drums, a good radio, some people to play football with, and Mary" (35).

Connie's and Paco's marital lives also share certain characteristics. While Mary is far from being as scandalous and as problematic as Macho Escobar, she is very much like Connie's husband in a sense that both of them are representatives of their milieu. This is especially highlighted in her conversation with Pepe Monson in the earlier part of the novel where she makes lucid commentary on Hong Kong's financial state:

I don't mind this sardine can of an apartment – it's cute Pepe isn't it? Just pretend you don't feel my wash dripping over our heads – and we're grateful to have a place like this with housing what it currently is in Hong Kong even if we do have to climb up those four filthy flights of stairs very carefully because they're liable to break down any moment now. (27)

Mary, like Macho, are products of their time merely accepting the socio-economic conditions and submissive so to speak to the lifestyle that is ultimately offered by such a state. With this positioning, it becomes especially apparent how Connie's and Paco's doubling and eventual alliance is formed. Both indifferent from or perhaps even ahead of their time, Connie and Paco share the rejection of the cultural codes that are defined and encoded precisely through gendered and sexualized means. Paco's commitment to this rejection is highlighted in the thoughts that accompany his decision to run away with Connie:

She looked so mild, so placid, so heavy with love, he had a feeling that this was Mary sitting here, that the two women had swapped bodies, for it was Mary's face that he now remembered as haunted. The desire he felt, so irresistible because it was for a new and unknown woman, also seemed less shameful, because she looked so familiar. He had thought himself attracted by evil; he found himself lost by the very qualities he most admired, drawn to this woman because she was so serious and so earnest, so innocent and ruthless. In her face he recovered, the peace his own home had lost. (309)

As in Connie's decision, the evil identified by Paco here is not so much about evil in the moral sense of the word but as an opportunity to liberate oneself from the conventions of a typified lifestyle. The last sentence of the quoted passage hints at what this escape means for both Paco and Connie. It is ultimately a process of place or even world making: a face which translates to a new space, a relationship which leads to a cultural matrix of new possibilities. Tony Monson, in his attempt to understand and comprehend Connie builds on this:

However repentant [Macho] may be, he would always mean for her the world that almost destroyed her – the lies, the evil, the corruption – a world from which they couldn't have kept running away, in which sooner or later they would have found themselves lost again. (317)

For Tony Monson, the greater good would paradoxically afford Connie the "freedom to damn herself" (320). The damnation that Tony Monson refers to is not so much on the moral and Christian code that he as a priest ascribes to. Neither is it the blind and blanket of careless madness implied by the carnival god's world that Connie has recently denied. It refers to a third space between the world of the Concha and Macho and of Biliken where human creativity is empowered through

a rejection of the heteropatriarchal codes and the ordered yet stifling world they have codified and engendered yet mobilized by a humanity that has on the one hand accepted its apparent sinfulness but also its latent capacity for self-realization beyond the established ideal of womanhood and masculinity in postcolonial and post-Second World War Philippines. It is through this novel's final moment that *The Woman Who Had Two Navels* achieves its queer potential. The metaphysical regeneration of Connie is marked by an escape of a typified heterosexual code and an empowerment that returns to a radical way of performing female sexuality.

CONCLUSION

This essay brought together two viable critical modes of looking at modernity and postcolonialism: the notion of the gothic and queer theory. The gothic here was deployed not so much as a mode of categorization but as an interpretative tool to explore the undercurrents of postcolonial modernity. Indeed, one of the goals of this piece was to invite scholars to (re)consider the role of the gothic in examining issues that underpin the development of capitalism from its early stages to its late/postmodern incarnation. From Nick Joaquin's works to contemporary writings by other authors, Philippine literature has had a consistent influx of works that utilize the gothic sensibility as a mode of modernist critique. The most recent examples would be, as I mentioned in the earlier part of this essay, FH Batacan's *Smaller and Smaller Circles* and then there is *Manila Noir* edited by Jessica Hagedorn (2013). In both, one finds creative and interrogative ways in which the so-called "dark side" of Manila is used to take the effects of capitalism and its later and more sinister form, neoliberalism to task. *Smaller and Smaller Circles* for instance, through the doubling of Alex Carlos and Fr. Lucero explores the dark side of privatization and the rise of private space as this is enacted in Manila, one of the world's most gated communities. Inequality is one of the core themes in Hagedorn's edited anthology as the old elite and the *nouveau riche* confront the macabre effects of the system that has economically empowered them. In this essay, I sought to demonstrate how Nick Joaquin was one of those who led this aesthetic charge through his famous novel.

I paired this use of the gothic with ideas from queer theory. At the core of queer theory is the opening of possibilities as these are deployed and rendered through a play on erotics and bodily politics. The queer potential, as I mentioned in the previous section, is undertheorized but can be quite useful in terms of adding layers and nuance to Joaquin's nostalgic visioning. In my reading of Nick Joaquin's *The Woman Who Had Two Navels*, a novel produced decades before queer theory's institutionalization in the West by feminists like Judith Butler, I sought to locate

how the novel was able to harness the radicalizing potential of queering in the novel's identity politics. The novel in a way anticipated the transgressive clarion call that Butler would make some decades after when she said that to queer is to engage in a performative act that resists signification and participates in the process of resignification (28–29). This was achieved primarily through the use of gothic tropes which helped deployed the novel's tenor in the novel's literal and thematic levels. Through the gothic device of doubling, we can see how Connie's perceived monstrosity exposed and ultimately interrogated the heteropatriarchal codes embedded in the histories and power relations of the elite in the novel's world elite.

One may of course wonder where Joaquin wanted to bring his readers through Connie Escobar and to an extent, Paco Texeira. Perhaps the answer lies in Tony Monson's optimistic attitude towards Connie and Paco's fate: we may never be certain. Queer theory after all relies often on the realm of possibilities brought about by the rapture of certainties in the ordered world. In this respect, there is indeed perhaps grace in infidelity. Not in the moral sense, but in the refusal to capitulate to pre-made worldviews, ordered by histories penned by the phallic ink of class and power.

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