

Retailing and Retelling: Capitalism and Nature in “A monk walks along Orchard Road”

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Abstract

Analysing Rodrigo V. Dela Peña, Jr’s poem “A monk walks along Orchard Road,” this paper argues that Peña’s work characterises Singapore’s Orchard Road as an example of what Edward W. Soja refers to as “Thirdspace.” Contradictory in nature, “Thirdspace” questions the epistemic boundaries between binaristic categories. With Orchard Road, these include ostensible dichotomies such as nature and capitalism, urban and natural, asceticism and desire, and past and present. Such questioning is also reified through formal poetic techniques, including polyvalent images and enjambment, which in turn lead to ideological ambiguity. Focalised through the persona of the monk, this multiplicity of meanings paradoxically embodies both a Buddhist abstinence from desire and a hyper-capitalistic yearning after such desire. Thus, Peña’s poem ultimately depicts the very nature of city space as a realm of epistemic and cross-temporal flux. In Orchard Road, the contemporary, cosmopolitan landscape remains possessed by—and tied to—the imagistic residues of its agrarian past.

This paper examines Rodrigo V. Dela Peña, Jr’s poem “A monk walks along Orchard Road,” published in 2015, in a Singaporean interfaith anthology of nature poetry titled *From Walden to Woodlands*. My paper argues that the poem enables a re-imagining of the relationship between capitalism and nature, between Singapore’s past and its present, disrupting any notion of perceiving these categories within the framework of a simple binary. On the one hand, the poem seeks to reclaim the Orchard Road of the past as an agricultural landscape associated with nature, with this historical trace of nature coming to shape the poet’s perception of Orchard Road’s contemporary urban landscape. This bridging of the past and present, of nature and capitalism, also prevents these phenomena from being defined against each other. Rather, just as the poem’s monk persona observes how one transitions into the other, so are these entities re-perceived as mutually constitutive or even synonymous. Thus, Peña seems to advocate a sustained reinterpretation of how, we as ecocritics, read nature within urban spaces. The poem suggests that the Singaporean city is characterised by the dissolution of categorical boundaries between nature and capitalism, as well as past and present.

A brief historical note about Orchard Road might be useful for my interpretive purposes. Orchard Road is located in downtown Singapore, near the center of the island. As its name suggests, Orchard Road used to be an agricultural area in Singapore, known in the 19th century for its nutmeg plantations and fruit orchards (Cornelius n.p.; Hee 53). Today, as Singapore’s premier luxury shopping belt, Orchard Road is known for its many malls that sell global branded goods. Now, Orchard Road is also an incredibly

cosmopolitan space, populated by large expatriate, tourist and migrant worker gatherings on weekends and rest days (Hee 54). The point here is that Orchard Road is associated with rapid urban development—an agricultural past has given way to a capitalist present.

With this history in mind, I begin with how Peña's poem reimagines Orchard Road's past and present as interwoven with each other. Through the poetic persona of the monk, Peña introduces Buddhism as a worldview. By "worldview," I mean that the monk's view of his own religion functions as an episteme or a mode of knowing—his religious perspectives shape how he perceives Orchard Road. More specifically, he "meditates on how a graveyard/in its past life is transformed/into a teeming bastion/of commerce" (1-4). Here, Buddhist cycles of reincarnation become a metaphor for how spaces can change over time, but also how the past life of a space can inform the present. Limin Hee similarly posits that the landscape of Orchard Road also catalyses such blending across separate stages of urban development. She writes, "As a channel or conduit through different urban moments, the street itself has been able to provide a narrative that strings together a series of temporally disjunctured pieces, conflating their images and projecting them into the present" (56).

Within the poem itself, the graveyard metaphor reclaims and gives voice to the past of Orchard Road on two levels. First, the line may also be taken literally: the "graveyard" in the poem refers to actual Buddhist graveyards which were once present in the area (Hee 63). Secondly, the depiction of the dead "graveyard" as a "past life" comprises a symbolic act of resurrecting a past that was previously thought of as dead. In other words, seemingly dead and buried histories, symbolized by the graveyard, have been given fresh significance. The poem's mention of graveyards also superimposes Orchard Road's historical landscape onto the present one, modifying the space within the monk's mind. Another example of this occurs when Peña writes about the "buzzing/hives of stores and restaurants" (5-6). Just as the graveyard morphs into "a teeming bastion/of commerce" (3-4), so have the beehives from the agricultural past been replaced by shops. Yet, even after the changes caused by urban development, history is never fully erased. What is enacted is therefore not just a disappearance of the past but also its reappearance in the present. As per the Buddhist doctrine of rebirth, the poem establishes a temporal continuum between the past and present lives of Orchard Road. Rather than the past and present being distinct, Peña conceives of the present as a composite entity that embodies both contemporary and historical moments. This blending of the past and present into a single instance also destabilises any clear boundaries between the two categories, nor can they be defined *against* each other any longer. Instead, the past becomes a *necessary precondition* for the present to exist. This contradiction is embodied in what Edward W. Soja terms "Thirdspace": "a space of extraordinary openness" that "can be expanded to encompass a multiplicity of perspectives that have heretofore been considered by the epistemological referees to be *incompatible, uncombinable*" (50, emphasis added). Thus, Buddhism in the poem does not only reclaim the lost past, but also opens up a space of ambiguity, wherein the past and present are literally both present (Eliot 3).

In fact, this blurring of definitions also extends to the relationship between nature and capitalism, as Peña reimagines it. Just as the past blends into the present and vice versa, so does capitalism build on nature, and natural elements exist as an echo in the capitalistic goods sold along Orchard Road. As with the nuclear bomb in Jon Silkin's poetry, capitalism in Peña's work functions as "a continuation of, and distortion of, nature" (Beckett 219). For instance, the poem describes how the monk "reaches/out to touch, to taste the green/tea macaron at a crowded stall" (18-20). The clause before the line break can be read as an attempt by the monk to locate empirical signs of nature within Orchard Road—"he reaches/out to touch, to taste the *green*" (emphasis added). Yet across the line break, the image of the "green" morphs into that of "green/tea," then finally into the "green/tea macaron at a crowded stall." Reading the poem also transforms the image in the reader's mind. Hence, linguistic and formal ambiguity

in the poem also renders the definition and location of 'nature' as confusing—the "green" also exists as "green tea," and "green tea" also exists as the "green tea macaron." To put it simply, it becomes difficult to define the "green tea macaron" as either a capitalistic product or a sign of nature in the city; it exists as both. Indeed, due to this slipperiness of physical and linguistic definitions, both the "green" and the "green tea macaron" are literally and symbolically out of reach for the monk. As Peña writes, he "*reaches out* to touch, to taste" but he never actually touches nor tastes the "green," the "green tea" or the "green tea macaron." His inability to apprehend the macaron physically also mimics an epistemic paradox as the macaron slips between the categories of natural and manmade. Rather than being able to grasp any stable notion of "green-ness," we are confronted with a disorienting mix of images and after-images of nature, or echoes of nature that are present even within the hyper-capitalistic realm of Orchard Road.

In fact, the monk's reading of the urban space is also a hermeneutic issue, or an issue of textual interpretation. More specifically, the monk's spatial perception of Orchard Road can also influence how he reinterprets past instances of nature-writing in the form of the Buddhist mantra. These issues of reinterpretation and recontextualisation are depicted in the lines "The jewel is in the heart/of the lotus, he chants over/and over, and so it is, here" (21-23). Interestingly, the line may be read and reread in several ways. So, the act of "chant[ing] over and over" is also a constant repetition and reinterpretation of the mantra, continually giving rise to new meanings through these multiple frameworks of reading. As a quotation, this line is the English translation of a well-known Buddhist mantra in Sanskrit: "*om mani padme hum*" or "the jewel is in the lotus" (Keown, "Om Mani Padme Hum" n.p.). Thus, taken its original context, this mantra may be interpreted as a religious search for self-actualisation: "the lotus symbolizing the ordinary human mind with its inherent jewel-like potentiality for enlightenment (*bodhi*)" (Keown, "Om Mani Padme Hum" n.p.). Notably, this symbolism of the lotus is directly rooted in its physical form: rising above the mud and water, the lotus or *padma* commonly emblematises detachment from worldly desires in Buddhist philosophy (Keown, "Lotus" n.p.). Hence, in its original form, the mantra is also a kind of nature-writing, insofar as it is an observation of natural phenomena, an image of the lotus that has been rewritten into a didactic message. If we interpret the poem in light of the mantra's original meaning, then the monk attempts to free himself from capitalistic desire, evoking sacred images of nature that symbolise an eventual triumph of austerity over material desires.

However, the poem also functions as a space that allows us to recontextualise the mantra within frameworks of global capitalism. As T.S. Eliot writes, "the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence" (3). As outlined by Eliot in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," new texts are always interacting with old texts to reshape the past; in this case, Peña's poem restructures the words of the mantra, hence creating new meaning with old words. Accordingly, we might see the monk as a metatextual figure, representing the reader or even the ecocritic negotiating with textual representations of nature. More importantly, he is also the figure of the poet who reinterprets and hence rewrites historical images of nature. On a formal level, the mantra is not only split across the line breaks of the poem, but can be read in more than one way due to this splitting. The line break itself becomes a symbol for a kind of discursive violence: a structural dismantling of old discourses. For instance, if only the first line is read, then the utterance registers as "The jewel is in the heart." The jewel itself is interesting because it slips between two layers of meaning which are antithetical to each other, yet this paradoxical duality coexists in the same image. As mentioned, the jewel can symbolise transcendence, but given the images of luxury goods throughout the poem, the jewel can also be taken as an emblem of capitalism that has crept into the monk's heart. Depending on what the jewel represents—a literal capitalistic jewel or a figurative jewel of enlightenment—this can again be read in an ambivalent light. The split mantra can symbolise either the monk's own temptation or his attempts to transcend it. In this line, capitalistic desire is simultaneously embodied and dismantled, whereas images of nature can symbolise

either the monk's redemption or his corruption depending on the contexts within which they are read. Once again, neat binaries are dismantled. Indeed, we see the same concomitance of natural and capitalistic images when we introduce a third interpretation of the mantra: "The jewel is in the heart/of the lotus." In other words, then, capitalism has percolated into the heart of nature. Similarly, the monk is torn between greed and abstinence, but greed is a necessary precondition for one to exercise abstinence; these phenomena no longer exist as pure opposites but can even be seen as mutually constitutive.

Mirroring this constant struggle between desire and detachment, the poem itself descends into a state of ambiguity and doubt, represented formally in the ending of the poem. Peña writes: "How far does it take to resist this/gnawing hunger? How long is the path/To empty the surfeit of yearning?/And the gleaming lights: aren't they/a vision to extinguish yourself in?" (24-28). Rather than the statements that comprise the rest of the poem, these stanzas constitute a series of rhetorical questions. Quite literally, there are no clear-cut answers to be found since the poem gives way to the uncertainty of constant interrogation and questioning. Indeed, the images in these questions are themselves difficult to grasp on the literal and figurative levels. For example, "gleaming lights" as a phenomena evokes non-corporeality and elusiveness. Moreover, the "gleaming lights" that one "extinguish[es] [one]self in" can be read in two ways: both storefront lamps that illuminate capitalistic goods, but also the possibility of enlightenment via suppressing one's desires. Yet, both promises are ultimately "visions" that have not yet come to pass. We cannot tell if the monk is overcome with capitalistic desire, or if he has overcome desire. The poem thus suggests that the struggle is ongoing—flitting between temptation and abstinence, the monk must also constantly negotiate a middle-ground between the two extremes. However, the conflict is not just one of temptation, but also epistemic revision. Orchard Road in Peña's eyes is not a realm built from a stable set of definitions and binaries; instead, it is a space of paradoxes. It is not reducible to nature, capitalism, desire, abstinence and so on. Rather, the poet presents the urban experience as a continual process of collision between worldviews. This paradox of violent reconciliation destabilises our ideological definitions, but also triggers a sustained reimagining of natural representations within this ambiguous urban landscape.

By way of conclusion, I wish to introduce my own set of rhetorical questions. For example, how can we conceive of nature within the city? Is nature within the urban context necessarily mutually exclusive with capitalism? Is there any meaningful distinction between the natural and the so-called "manmade"? Or, in short, can we distinguish the Orchard from the Road? Rather than presenting any straightforward definitions or answers, Peña's poetry is ecocritical in an epistemic sense: it reshapes our perceptions and definitions of the natural and the human, de-structuring binaries that are of key importance to ecocritical practice. Instead of employing a straightforward urban-nature binary, the poem questions the very feasibility of viewing the world through such lenses. Just as language, poetic images and history can be reinterpreted and recontextualised, so are our definitions of natural and capitalistic discourses prone to being rewritten and reshaped, subject to a constant revisioning as the monk "chants over and over."

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