

Finding One's Stall in Roxas Night Market: Framing the Stories of Women Street Vendors

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Abstract

A number of women street vendors in Roxas Night Market migrated to Davao city to escape poverty and/or violence from their places of origin. In search for opportunities and peaceful communities, these vendors now occupy a space in Roxas Night Market which is provided and regulated by the Local Government Unit (LGU) of the city. This space in contrast to other vending sites is legitimate and has afforded a sense of economic stability for these women in the past year. However, with the changing rules in the governance of the area, this question arises: Can these women street vendors still consider their current spaces in the night market enabling and rewarding? Guided by M. de Certeau's notion of perpetual departures in *The Mystic Fable* (1992) this paper describes and analyzes the stories of women as they transfer from one vending site to another, and continue with their attempt to survive in the busy and precarious landscape of informal vending in the urban city center. Further unpacked by a Marxist Feminist Perspective (Green, 1986), the departures also locate the multiple tasks and difficulties of women street vendors as they struggle with

both reproductive and productive responsibilities. In privileging the qualitative narrative approach (Creswell, 2007), this study concludes that: (1) these women vendors consider street vending as an activity intertwined to their history, (2) their departures from one space to another is a reality that they have learned to accept or adjust with, (3) such departures are indicative of their struggles in finding viable economic options for their family, (4) through these departures, street vending is taken to mean as expressing their readiness to depart and search for new vending sites, and (5) the departures locate how women straddle and struggle with the interfacing reproductive and productive responsibilities.

Keywords: Roxas Night Market, De Certeau, women street vendors, Marxist Feminism

Introduction

Street vending in Southeast Asia is predominantly done by women (Nirathron, 2006, Gallaway & Bernasek, 2002). Although largely recognized as a women's domain, some spaces in this sector have been taken over by men especially during economic crises wherein men position themselves in street vending consequently displacing the most vulnerable women street vendors (Cohen, Bhatt, & Horn, 2000). As a predominantly women space, street vending thus points to insufficient livelihood options for women, and their vulnerability to such space as they compete with men (Ibid.). Is the situation of women street vendors in Roxas Night Market different from such observations? Since specific researches on the situation of women street vendors are marginal, it is to such gap that this paper directs its curiosity.

A classical text pertaining to night market study in the country is that of Milgram's (2014) account of the Harrison Night Market in Baguio City. Since this study focuses on legality issues which vendors negotiate with the

LGU, a gendered approach to such concerns may help tease out how women are affected when rules set by the LGU are changed, and their experiences as a result of such changes.

With the foregoing interests, this study hopes to address the following objectives: (1) To provide a descriptive picture of the narratives of women street vendors in Roxas Night Market; (2) To critically present and discuss the meaning of the night market in relation to such experiences using the frame of De Certeau on perpetual departures, and Marxist Feminism; and (3) To generate points for reflection on the role and significance of the night market in the lives of women street vendors. Given these objectives, street vending in the night market Davao City can be construed as a quest for survival and as a gendered space where the concerns of women are unrecognized as issues in the area.

Methodology

This study makes use of three narratives gathered from my graduate school project on the meaning of the Roxas Night Market as a space of inclusive agency. In such work, narratives were collected from thirteen individuals to describe their experiences before the creation of the night market in 2013, and as they subsist in the area with the evolving rules of the LGU. The study was guided primarily by Lefebvre's (2014) notion of space (as lived, conceived, and practiced).

For this paper, the privileged method follows the narrative approach within the qualitative frame of the Social Sciences (Creswell, 2007). As a project, this is delimited by two key assumptions, namely, critical theory and social constructivism. The critical theory holds that the world is made up of observables and un-observables (Budd, 2001) implying that the task of a critical lens is to make transparent the relation between what is tangible from realities that are hidden from what can be readily observed. Building on this position, the constructivist stance maintains that the world

or reality is an outcome of meaning making intentions, and these meanings derive relevance from the life experiences of groups or individuals (Ibid.).

In this work, a purposive sampling (Creswell, 2007) was done whereby three from the thirteen narratives are selected, since these are the accounts of women street vendors. As part of the sample, these women have been vending in the area for at least one year, and have seen the shifts in the rules and arrangements in the use of space in the night market. As a group, their stories also qualify since their accounts speak of the balancing act between reproductive and productive responsibilities given that vending has always been a family experience. Hence, the narratives of the three informants may speak of the situation, and challenges that women street vendors in the night market deal with.

With regard to the specifics of research methods, the narratives were gathered via a combination of techniques: field visits, key informant interviews, and observations. The visits in the vending station of Mila, for instance, include eating in her stall, or sitting with Maisa in her mat while waiting for potential buyers of socks and other accessories, and conversing with Sohaya as she un-packs a sack filled with accessories in her vending space whom she shared with a friend. With these interactions, their stories were gradually gathered, woven, and re-presented for validation. The length of time involved in the gathering of each story followed different time frames given the unique working conditions and circumstances – like the number of costumers/buyers per vending stall, and the weather.

From the narratives, themes unfolded and were critically looked into using the lens of De Certeau, and Marxist Feminism. De Certeau's notion of perpetual departures in *The Mystic Fable* (1992) interprets the departures of street vendors as a quest for better working conditions; while the Marxist Feminist frame re-interprets the departures of women street vendors as indicative of their

struggles in straddling with the cultural default-expectation of doing the balancing act between productive and reproductive work. For the interpretative section of the study, the discourse analysis is privileged. With the critical perspective of the selected theories, overt meanings (Estrada-Claudio, 2010) in the stories of the street vendors are looked into to help paint their situation as they subsist in their vending spaces in the night market.

Theoretical Framework

The notion of perpetual departures in *The Mystic Fable* (1992) of De Certeau function as the privileged lens in this study. In such work, he tackles the notion closely with the concept of desire which is interpreted as a movement towards the unknown and the uncertain. As Shelldrake (n.d.) puts it, desire in De Certeau is oriented towards what is not fixed, not final and that which is not possessed. It is this mystical undertone of the perpetual departures that De Certeau underscores as a form of social practice which intends to liven up a quest for meanings. Following his discussions, perpetual departures is to be seen in this sense: "To walk is to lack a place. It is the not so definite process of being absent and in search of a proper." He continues by saying that the city itself is made of endless tiny deportations, dislocations and walk (1984).

With regard to the experience of the three women vendors, their stories of in-migration and transfer of livelihood lots within the city are regulated by this desire for something fixed, which have never been given. It is this elusive goal, however, that have kept them committed to make sense of the precarious conditions that they continuously find themselves in.

While De Certeau's notion magnify the string of challenges and experiences of women street vendors as they deal with the exigencies of forced migration, the Marxist Feminist position of Green (1986) stresses the need to warn

how particular realities of women are lost in undifferentiated categories. In this case, De Certeau's concept of departure may conceal or leave the nuanced experiences of women street vendors hidden. Noting Green's (1986) assertion that gender contradiction is even prior to class contradiction in the Marxist Tradition, the realities and experiences of women must not be reduced to abstractions. In this case, De Certeau's concept of departure is further nuanced as conceptual categories that should not hide but facilitate the unpacking or unearthing of women's issues, challenges, and realities.

Results and Discussions

Narratives. This section presents the summary of the narratives of three women vendors in Roxas Night Market. These accounts provide a glimpse of their migration story, struggles and joy as they transition from a rural landscape to urban living, and their experiences as they continue vending in the streets of Davao City.

Narrative 1. Maisa is 60 years old and is originally from Lanao del Sur (Pavo, 2019). After attending to some queries from a customer, she shared that she has been into street vending, since her family arrived in Davao City. Noting that her family was forced to migrate due to security and conflict issues in their place, she – for a few seconds, searched for words to describe the experience: *“Sa una man gud na panahon, gubot kaayo sa Lanao (Del Sur). Nangita mi og pamaagi na mabuhi mi. Ning-adto mi og Davao.”* (In those days, Lanao was stricken with war and chaos. We tried to find a way to survive and live. It is because of such situation that we went to Davao.) After recalling the traumatic sight of seeing death, hearing the screams and shouts of people as bullets were sporadically fired in their community, Maisa is convinced that their decision to leave the place was right as she no longer worries over their safety in Davao City.

Within the night market, Maisa chose to sell accessories instead of food and used clothing. She explained that selling accessories only require a small capital, and she cannot afford to invest a huge amount of money for used clothing or food business, since she has no other capital source. Even the capital she used for her business comes from *arawan* (a form of debt which is paid on a daily basis) with the corresponding daily interest. Maisa explained that she can still earn around Php 500.00-1000.00 per day. Although Maisa admits that her daily income is bigger compared to an ordinary worker, she considers her income just enough to address that basic needs of her family. Noting that two of her grandchildren are staying with her, and her husband has been suffering from asthma, Maisa finds herself as the family's sole provider. At the age of 60, these are some of the everyday responsibilities that Maisa needs to deal with. Despite such tasks, Maisa noted how the night market is different from her previous vending experience in another street in the city. Maisa recalled an event in 2013 when she barely escaped from the demolition team of Davao City. While vending in San Pedro Street with her relatives one afternoon, the demolition team suddenly arrived. She recalled: "*May na lang nakabantay mi. nakaahipos mi dayon.*" (It was fortunate that we saw them from a short distance, and we were able to quickly pack-up).

Narrative 2. Mila is 42 years old and hails from Marawi City (Pavo, 2019). At a young age, her family already migrated to Davao City in search of better working opportunities. Vending in the streets of Davao City for the past 30 years, Mila regards street vending as a reliable source of income for her family. In her food stall in the night market, her daughter assists her and thinks that if her daughter decides to also go into street vending, it is a decision that she will gladly support. The only time that Mila had doubts if street vending is still dependable as economic activity was when the night market was bombed in 2016. The incident made Mila re-think of the future of street vending. She explained that her income from her food-

vending stall decreased from Php 1,000.00 to Php 2,000.00 per night to Php 500.00.

Having no real options, Mila decided to stick with street vending and did not seriously consider transferring to another site. Although the government may be pleased with Mila's courage, her explanation is actually double trimmed: "*Wala ko nahadlok kay wala man koy laing maadtuan.*" (I was not afraid of the incident, since I also have nowhere else to go.) This means that even if Mila felt terror and trauma, she has decided to continue vending in the area, since she does not have better options to begin with. She is also reminded of her debts which she needs to pay-off each day. Mila added that she also survived the city-wide demolition of vendors in 2013. In narrating the story, her facial expression changed and her happy mood shifted: "*Ningkalit lang sila (Demolition Unit) niabot. Gikuha ang amu paninda ug mga gamit. Nawala pud ang usa namo ka bike ato. Sa amu kasuko kay nakig-away mi ato nila.*" (The demolition unit suddenly arrived. They took all our goods, even the bike. We were so angry that we also fought back.)

Despite such difficulties, Mila treats vending as part of her life. "*Mao na ni ako digak-an nga pagnegosyo. Normal na sa ako maninda.*" (Vending is something that I grew up with. It is an activity, which is so normal to me.) With these words, Mila's daughter smiled as if saying that she agrees with her mother.

Narrative 3. At a young age of 19, Sohaya is one of the vendors in the night market (Pavo, 2019). Her stall is in the accessories section where she displays socks, combs and other items. Coming from Cotabato City, Sohaya shared that her grandmother invited them to try their luck in Davao City. With the invite, her family grabbed the opportunity and decided to migrate. She recalls that in their town, they could hardly eat three square meals a day. The situation made it easy for her family to make the decision.

“Mao na ni akoo nadak-an nga trabaho sa akoo ginikan” (This is the type of livelihood that I grew up with, with my parents). This explains why Soyaha is already into street vending and is managing her own stall. The only times that Soyaha was seriously worried about her family's situation was during the 13-day closure of the night market in August 2016, she remembers how her mother got worried, since vending in the night market is the family's primary source of income. Soyaha further shared that if the situation will not improve, she might need to give up her studies to ease the economic burden of the family. The other incident that got Soyaha worrying was during and after the bombing incident in the massage area of the night market in September 2016. Thinking of the possibility of the night market's permanent closure, she decided to return to her stall after advised by the LGU that the night market will remain open for street vendors. Bracing fear that the incident may happen again, she and her family went back to the night market after five days.

Looking back at their troubled lives in Cotabato City, she is committed to graduate and eventually earn a college degree so she can find other forms of work. But despite such possibility, Soyaha shared that she will still find ways to vend even to her future office mates, or still vend in the night market if there is an opportunity. On this note, Soyaha will not stop from street vending, since it is a practice which has always been part of her life. *“Sayang pud ang kwarta kung dili ko maninda maskin naa nako trabaho sa umaabot”* (It will be unfortunate if I will stop selling some items or goods and possibly earn simply because I am already working in the future).

Unfolding Themes. From their stories, specific themes on struggles, resilience, and hope for better living conditions unfold. Here is a discussion of such nodes:

(1) *A Peaceful Place for Economic Activity.* Finding an enabling place where one can live peacefully and have

options for economic activities is a common thread that connects the three stories. This is expressed in the informants' quest for a place where conflict is no longer pervasive or areas where poverty or the lack of economic options has been addressed. Following Carr, Chen, and Jhabvala (1996) (in Kantor, 2002), conflict is a women-intensive constraint given that it is conditioned by poverty and powerlessness. Also, deciding to migrate, depart or transition from one place to another was treated as a family decision. This is where the family as a unit is presented as other equally important consideration in making the decision to migrate final. As a role intertwined to women's reproductive responsibility, the women street vendors are also expected to help the family find its way in cities where street vending is treated as informal work. As a livelihood option it remains tied up to precarious conditions (Cohen, Bhatt, & Horn, 2000) which presents challenges especially where women are treated as marginalized urban dwellers (Beebeejaun, 2016). Hence, with extended notions of the family, the decision as to where the family will go – based on the narratives of Sohaya and Maisa, consider the presence of relatives in Davao City as crucial to decisions. In hindsight, knowing that the uncertainty in their transfer will be cautioned or mitigated by the presence of their kin, the decision to move somehow became less daunting.

(2) *Difficulties from Changing Rules.* The next theme from the narratives revolves around their difficulties conditioned by the changes in the rules and governance of the night market. This is a common concern among vendors in night market as observed by Milgram (2014) in his study of the Harrison night Market in Baguio City. Having no clear option for work, these women migrants go into street vending as primary economic activity. In the absence of Plan B in case vending becomes difficult as instanced by the 13-day closure, and the demolition of vending stalls in 2013, the women vendors are somewhat pushed against the wall with no clear options in sight. This is what Maisa, Mila, and Sohaya

experienced and reflected as they were pressed by the rules and decisions of the LGU.

(3) *Gendered Roles*. The three informants, although coming from different age groups – Maisa is in her 60's, Mila is in her early 40's and Sohayá is still 19 years old, share similar struggles with regard to the uncertainties of their livelihood space, and how such uncertainties interface with the gendered roles that they play in their respective family. For instance, Maisa shared how her space in the night market has helped her take care of her sickly husband, and her two grandchildren. However, the economic assurance that the night market affords to her quickly dissipated when the LGU decided to enforce the three-month rules which means that she can only vend for three-months each year. Where will Maisa vend after her three-month stint in Roxas Night Market? Similar to Maisa, Mila was confident that her earnings from her vending space could easily pay-off her debts when suddenly the LGU decided to enforce the closure of the area which lasted for 13 days. At that point, Mila got worried-sick that the goods she purchased will perish, and she was at the end of her wits if she will be able to raise enough money to pay her debts in time. Will the sudden closure of the night market bring her debt tally to a level which outweighs her capacity to pay? Also reminded by the presence of her daughter in her stall, Mila needed to do something so she can take care of her family.

With the gendered difficulties that Maisa, and Mila shared, their accounts speak of the crucial role of Roxas Night Market in their lives. Also, their narratives reveal how they are easily affected when changes take place or when circumstances unfold. This sense of vulnerability is still conditioned by the “low cost of entry” and “schedule flexibility” which are the primary reasons why women are gravitated towards street vending (Cohen, Bhatt, & Horn, 2000). A similar observation is made by Gallaway & Bernasek (2002) for Indonesian women who go into informal vending to balance household responsibilities,

livelihood, and care for the children. Thus, when changes unfold, options are also only treated as viable options when the next vending site will not be capital intensive, and will provide flexibility in terms of managing one's time as women juggle both family and work responsibilities (Ibid.).

(4) *Hope in Street Vending*. The next theme from the stories of the informants is the hope that they attach to street vending and the night market. This sense of hope may sound optimistic but it can also be taken to mean as reflective of their lack of choice given their limited skills thus treated as their "last resort" (Cohen, Bhatt & Horn, 2000). This is where the disenfranchising influence of the neoliberal economic policies also figure as globalization contributes to the feminization of poverty (Moghadam, 2005), which in this case refers to the unpreparedness of women to compete and participate in the structures of modern economy (Ibid.). For the women interviewed, vending as an everyday exercise of optimism is more contingent to their daily sales such as getting items sold, earning something to defray costs in the household, contribute to the family's savings, having the ability to pay-off one's debts, and vending in the night market for extended or longer periods. Like Sohaya's account, she interprets hope when the family can still vend, or continue vending in the night market. This also means that if the vending enterprise of her family is guaranteed, she finds hope that her dream of continuing her studies. For Maisa, hope is seeing some of her items getting sold before the night market closes so she has something to her family food, or ensure that she can continue making small coin-banks which she can sell the following evening. In the case of Mila, hope is having the right mix of circumstances which will allow her to continue vending. Noting that vending is the only type of work that she knows, and that it is something which has been doing while growing, finding herself in situations which permit vending operations means that she can earn, pay her debts, and still affirm the enabling conditions that are present in Davao City especially for vendors like her.

(5) *Working for the Well-being of Families.* As women street vendors, an overlapping concern in their narratives is the primacy of the well-being of families. Maisa, Mila, and Sohaya all engage in street vending so they can help address the needs of their family. Reflective of Nirathron's (2006) observation that many women in Southeast Asia go to street vending as their sole choice of work, the narratives affirm the role of street vending in particular, and informal work in general, in the lives of the three women street vendors: Maisa, for instance, considers vending as her remaining option as she contemplates on her future as a senior citizen. Sohaya also thinks of vending as a viable option to help the family survive, even sharing that she will still take advantage of street vending even if she has a professional job in the future. And Mila recommends street vending to her children, an advice which Cohen, Bhatt and Horn (2000) acknowledge as one reason why mothers bring their daughters to their vending stalls. In the case of Mila, such advice is heeded is given that her daughter already helps her in the daily grind in the vending operations.

Critical Analysis. The foregoing themes present a story-line which connects the three narratives, namely: (1) a break from the past, (2) the struggle with unfolding circumstances in the night market, and (3) a sense of hope that the conditions in the night market will help them stay afloat or survive for their family's well-being.

The thematic nodes when considered from De Certeau's reflection on the meaning of departures speak of the interplay between situations and the need to make decisions. This is how events and emerging circumstances help unravel and locate the struggle of the three women street vendors with regard to uncertainties, the precarious nature of their work, the lack of options (Cohen, Bhatt, & Horn, 2000), and the necessity of providing financial support to the families (Ibid.). These struggles when further gleaned from the Feminist Marxist lens also conflate the often-neglected experiences of women in the informal

arrangements of the night market. This means that as these women work hard to ensure their family's well-being, their responsibilities towards their husbands, grandchildren, children, and parents are assumed as necessarily part of their concerns. Notwithstanding the challenges of aging, as in the case of Maisa, she is still juggling her concerns in taking care of their two grandchildren in the household.

Bound by poverty, the three women street vendors find themselves forced to work, and make the most of the fleeting benefits which the night market provides. But listening to the stories of Maisa, Mila, and Sohaya, poverty also means dealing with more localized forms of in-migration. Pushed by circumstances to further in-migrate, the stories of the three women street vendors put attention to the relation between city centers and rural communities. Noting Cohen, Bhatt, and Horn's (2002) point that women in street vending have difficulty escaping from such option due to lack of opportunities, the Roxas Night Market may be construed as contrast to two realities: (1) The uncertain and precarious nature of vending spaces of street vendors, which women street vendors face after their three-month stay in the night market, and (2) The lack of options for women street vendors as they find themselves relocating still in other parts of the city. These realities, thus, presents Roxas Night Market simply a temporary stop, or a short break from the perpetual departures of women street vendors.

Hence, De Certeau's notion of perpetual departures helps unravel the meaning of street vending as a history of transitions or departures. With the elusiveness of permanent vending sites, the Marxist Feminist frame interprets such experience as the marginalization of women in the design of formal work in modern urban economies. Requiring skills which women lack or do not have, questions on access, and conscientization/awareness of viable options figure (Longwe, 1991). These are the primary concerns alongside welfare which should prepare women street vendors to

participate in decision-making, and have a sense of control over their lives (Ibid.).

For the women street vendors, the night market cannot function as the permanent site for vending given that their access to the area is short and limited. What remains permanent, however, is their experience and story of departures or transitions as they move from one point to another. Thus, the Roxas Night Market gleaned from De Certeau's stance is a portrayal of contrast between permanent and changing vending sites, between legal and illegal space, and between tension-free and tension-filled vending experience in relation to income stability. With the Marxist Feminist frame in mind, such contrasts are further nuanced when considered within the purview of these questions: (1) Does the Roxas Night Market magnify the frustration of women vendors as they find themselves re-locating and re-establishing in new vending spaces and places?; (2) Is the Roxas Night Market furthering the women vendors' frustrations, since it projects a promise of stable vending sites which the LGU cannot truly provide given that vending in its area is always short-lived?, and (3) Is the Roxas Night Market gradually displacing women street vendors as the influx of migrants continue also mean having more men vending applying for spaces in the site? (Cohen, Bhatt & Horn, 2000). These are important questions to ask as the Roxas Night Market needs to be evaluated as either an enabling or disabling space for women street vendors.

Conclusion

The stories of the three women street vendors account for shifts in place, transfers, and departures. From their places of origin, they moved to Davao City hoping for viable working options and living conditions. But within the urban landscape, more localized forms of migration continue. For instance, the creation of the Roxas Night Market signaled the possibility of having legal, permanent, and accessible vending site. The imposition of the three-month rule,

however, mean that these vendors would need to re-locate or transfer their stalls to other sites in the city once the three-month contract ends. Once freed from the poverty in their places of origin, a familiar face of spatial poverty resurfaces as transfers to other vending spaces continue.

As women street vendors assert their spaces in the Roxas Night Market and are confronted with the pressures from the changing urban landscape, they are developing a familiar disposition to shifts, transfers, and departures – their readiness to depart, or to accept unfolding circumstances. Unfortunately, these women street vendors have accepted the reality that there can be no permanent place and space for them, and their families.

Thus, the Roxas Night Market when gleaned from De Certeau can be construed as a repository of the stories of forced departures or transitions. Coupled by the Marxist Feminist perspective, the night market further means that it stands as a social marker of the stories of departures, and struggles of women whose gendered experiences largely remain invisible or peripheral. Underscoring the need for better social integration (Ngwainmbi, 2004), the Roxas Night Market is challenged to attend to the needs of women, and become more mindful of their situation as they form a big part of the informal sector, and continue to carry the burden of both productive and reproductive responsibilities.

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