



Unweaving Basey: A Poet's History of Home (Rethinking the Sense of Place in Local History)

Dinah T. Roma
Department of Literature
De La Salle University Manila
dinah.roma@dlsu.edu.ph

Abstract: This paper interrogates the field of local history and the idea of place central to it. What is 'local' in local history? Does 'local history' betray the interconnections a place embodies? If 'local history' were to be a paradigm arguing for a place as representing the global, at which point in the continuum could a place be located? My ongoing book project on Basey (a small island in Western Samar, Philippines) rethinks 'place' apart from the usual notion of history writing. While Basey sits on the path of the Pacific Ocean, it has been on the fringes of historical awareness. I attempt to reclaim it—through its complex riverways—by retracing its role in the ancient trade between East and Southeast Asia; revisiting it as an escape route of US soldiers who survived the 1902 Balangiga massacre; and, its ruin by the historic typhoon Haiyan (Yolanda) on 13 November 2013.

More importantly, I attempt to reclaim Basey through my own relationship with it as my birthplace. A further question hence: How does the personal become historical? In the process of answering the question, it is the goal of this study to cross the threshold of history so as to explore the intimate linkage of place and memory.

Keywords: local history; sense of place; memory; memoir; writing

INTRODUCTION

The traditional idea behind the work on local history adheres to the writing of a concrete place. Carol Kammen, in her widely useful book *On Doing Local History: Reflections on What Local Historians Do, Why, and What It Means* (1988) defines the discipline simply as "the study of past events, or of people or groups, in a given geographic area" (6). Its narrative can be a straightforward account of a town, region, or state. It can also be cast as "pioneer" studies that explore the lives of individuals or families who had great impact on the beginnings of a place.

MAIN CLAIM

My book project "Unweaving Basey: A Poet's History of Home" veers away from the conventional method of local histories to align itself with recent innovation in the writing of historical narratives. The project's crucial stance mines local histories' sheer distinction—that is, the writer's "close, personal connection with the subject under study" (Auge 108). This affinity has allowed for creative ways as stories are invested with a more affective and imaginative quality while observing the rigors of historical inquiry, using as supplementary materials personal artifacts such as memoirs, diaries, family histories, local lore, and photographs.



MAIN ARGUMENT

The growing creative approach to the writing of local histories owes to how “place” as a key aspect to a local history has gained a certain resonance over the decades with its significance now extending beyond its physical and geographical attributes. “Place” can function more as a referent rather than a concrete place itself, and may speak more of human networks and the intangible rather than the material world.

It is from this idea—“place” as referent—that I take off in writing Basey’s history as a scaffolding to my own pursuit of a personal history. Basey is my birthplace. I was born there in 1968, and only spent four years on the island, while the rest of my years have been spent in Manila. I was educated, forged my career, and began exploring the world in and through this metropolis. I do not possess any distinct childhood memories of Basey, but the island and everything of its history, culture, and heritage has served as the metaphoric world of my poetry as someone writing in English. Basey, in this regard, is the geography of my writing.

Within this context, I heed as background to this undertaking sociological studies on an individual’s varying relations to place—or what is commonly referred to as the ‘sense of place’. Among the type of relationships identified, my relationship to Basey can be described according to the following categories: (1) *biographical* (historical and familial bond)—Basey as my actual birthplace; (2) *spiritual* (emotional and intangible bond)—Basey as giving me a sense of belonging, a sense of community; and (3) *narrative* (mythical)—Basey as providing me with the island’s history, stories—fictional or otherwise—which also inspire me into writing.

The questions I ask that central are to this undertaking are: How is Basey’s history intertwined with those of its inhabitants and those who have left it? How does place exist in memory? When does place become home? How does one write of a home that exists only through stories; or, a home whose devastation one gets to read about in newspaper articles?

In attempting to further answer the questions above, I also refer to the studies on ‘space’ and ‘place’ undertaken by the various streams of geographers: from the humanistic geographers to the more current cultural geographers. The humanistic geographers, the pioneering of which is Yi Fu Tuan, assert that what lends a place its significance is human experience. In the following passage of his something is clarified in my relation with Basey:

....we may say that deeply-loved places are not necessarily visible, either to ourselves or to others. Places can be made visible by a number of means: rivalry or conflict with other places, visual prominence, and the evocative power of art, architecture ceremonials and rites. Human places become vividly real through dramatization. Identity of place is achieved by dramatizing the aspirations, needs, and functional rhythms of personal and group life.

(178)

The above paragraph is instructive in how it catalogues the many ways a place can be embodied in one’s life. Of the choices above, it is “the evocative power of art” that comes closest to my personal claim over the significance of Basey to my writing and, thus, to my very person. That the images inhabiting many of my poems are resonant of the folkloric charm of the island reveal how its

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presence has been an intrinsic part of my life. But has imagining Basey rendered it 'static' or in this regard 'local'?

For cultural geography, 'place' is examined in the complexities of its contexts, of the human practices that give place its textures. In the quote below from Nedra Reynolds, author of *Geographies of Writing* (2004), 'dwelling' emerges as an offshoot of the consideration of space and place—the local—and the many ways by which an individual may inhabit the two, separately or simultaneously. As a poet, this has an influence in how I may regard the creative practice of writing as a way of 'dwelling', writing as predicated on the act of "inhabitation."

...since dwelling is not only about where but also about 'how'—a set of embodied spatial practices—then learning to dwell can carry over into imagined geographies: into discourses, acts of writing, and/or in written texts....re-imagining the work of writing through both the places and practices of dwelling...(158)

Against the above notions, Basey as a locality will be examined according to the key historical periods of Samar in which the island figures prominently. These are the ancient trade between East and Southeast Asia as found in the Sohoton area; as an escape route of the US soldiers who survived the 1902 Balangiga massacre; and, its ruin by the historic typhoon Yolanda on 8 November 2013. Among the islands hit by Yolanda, 90% of Basey was levelled off by water and wind.

It was the damage to Basey that ignited in me a visceral connection with my birthplace. It was also the thought of how the world's ecological problem would repeatedly ravage the island that urged me to take up a personal mission to write a local history of it.

The appearance of Yolanda as a harbinger of future catastrophes augur well in the study of an individual's 'sense of place'. How are we to confront the threats to a place while not also considering the ways by which we can preserve our sense of identity and our sense of mooring to this world? The moment I saw the images of Basey's destruction was a reckoning with my history to a birthplace that has become metonymic of home.

CONCLUSION

With my pursuit of a more personally invested writing of a local history of Basey, I hope to revitalize the role of the discipline not lonely as strictly belonging to the domain of academic writing often embellished with thick scholarly annotations and references. In line with Carol Kammen's urgings in her book *On Doing Local History*, the writing of local history can be done by everyone as long as the fundamental methods of historical inquiry are in place. This is a means by which we can all be involved in making ourselves familiar with the cultural wealth that each place has to offer and, hopefully, make ourselves appreciate the diversity of Philippine culture and nation.

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