

Photography and the Biopolitics of Fear: Witnessing the Philippine Drug War

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Whatever it is I see, only my eyes are seeing it.
—Elderly female resident of Bagong Silang, Manila

A Landscape of Death

“It is going to be bloody,” President Rodrigo Duterte told a group of businessmen in the Philippines shortly after being elected in 2016. Reiterating his intentions to annihilate as many drug addicts and pushers as possible, he continued, “I will use the military and the police to go out and arrest them, hunt for them. And if they offer violent resistance . . . I will simply say kill them all and end the problem” (Whaley 2016; Rafael 2019). Referred to generically as “drug personalities,” Duterte sees them as social enemies—the root rather than the symptom of the drug problem in the country and

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Figure 1 Unidentified body, head wrapped in packing tape with a sign: “A pusher won’t stop till he is killed.” Photo by Daniel Berehulak, *New York Times*, December 7, 2016.

no less than existential threats to society. No matter the occasion or audience, he has encouraged the police to kill as many of them as possible.

Not surprisingly, the number of dead keeps rising—as of May 2020, around 7,000 by police estimates and closer to 30,000 by the reckoning of various human rights groups. The killings have taken place overwhelmingly in the slums of Metro Manila, though they have been increasingly spreading to surrounding provinces (Kreuzer 2016; Curato, 2017; Santos and Ebbighausen 2018; Coronel 2019). Sheila Coronel vividly describes the landscape of death: “The victims’ bodies are found on sidewalks or bridges, their heads wrapped in packing tape, their hands bound with rope. Some are left lying on the streets, bathed in blood, or splayed on the shaky wooden floors of shacks in shantytowns along the river, the shoreline of Manila Bay, or further inland, in the densely packed warrens inhabited by the city’s poorest and neediest” (Coronel 2017; Amnesty International 2017) (fig. 1).

Responding to such gruesome scenes of nightly killings, photojournalists

have amply documented them for the world to see. From July 2016 through much of 2018, a dedicated group of correspondents, known as “night crawlers” for the late hours they kept, went from one crime scene to another to take photographs and write stories about the victims and their families. Serving at the frontlines of the drug war, they have witnessed the bloody toll of Duterte’s necro-politics. Their photographs and stories have circulated widely around the world, showing viewers the extent of the regime’s brutality. In what follows, I ask about the effects of their photographic work—its possibilities as well as limits for critiquing the war it depicts. I do so with reference to the experiences of the photographers themselves and among those in communities most acutely affected by the killings.¹

Photographs of the dead tend to have an unsettling effect. One reason may be that photographs in general are inextricably part of what they show. As Roland Barthes (1981), Judith Butler (2010), and Ariella Azoulay (2008), among others have argued, photographs partake in the very events they depict. They do not simply represent events but extend and project those events across space and time, becoming veritable parts of their existence into the future. For example, our modern concept of atrocity is unthinkable without visual proof. Photographs furnish evidence indispensable for proving that human rights violations and tortures exist, so that without visual documentation it would be difficult to judge whether an atrocity actually occurred. In this way, photographs become integral parts of what they convey. Similarly, photos of extrajudicial killings provide evidence of their occurrence. But by doing so, they become part of the moment of the victims’ deaths. Photographs of corpses, as I discuss below, continue to keep the corpses “alive” in the world as they keep them in circulation within our field of vision. They bring us not just to the scene of the crime but also to the startling recognition of the agency of the corpse. Such agency consists of its ability to act on the world, for example, by bringing the police and onlookers together, driving people to grieve, providing evidence of the killing, moving viewers to horror, and so on. The photographs then represent as much as they constitute the agency of the corpse and so become an indelible part of the death of the victim and its aftermath.

Furthermore, photographs in soliciting our gaze constitute a kind of “invitation to pay attention, reflect . . . examine the rationalizations for mass

suffering offered by established powers” (Butler 2010: 84). They are more than voyeuristic artifacts. As Azoulay (2008) has pointed out, by pluralizing the gaze, making it possible to see through the eyes of multiple others, photographs also open up visual fields that call for an ethical response from viewers—indeed, that call on viewers to continue the work of the photograph, interpreting it and thereby providing it with an afterlife: “The photograph bears the seal of the event itself . . . and anyone . . . can pull at one of its threads and trace it in such a way as to reopen the image and renegotiate what it shows, possibly even completely overturning what was seen in it before” (13–14).

How then do photographs of the drug war represent but also become an integral and inescapable part of what they convey? How do they distance us, yet draw us into the world they conjure? Absent from the scene of the crime, we are nevertheless placed amid the scene of the killings by virtue of viewing their photographs. The first and most privileged viewer, one who enjoys the best vantage point of the crime scene is, of course, the photographer him- or herself. If we look at their photographs and listen to what they have to say about them, can we see a kind of framing of the drug war that sets the terms for our own understanding of events? In other words, to what extent does the photographer’s experience of taking the photograph, of framing and processing its effects, frame our own reactions? In asking about the photographer’s relationship to the subjects of his or her works, can we also discern something of our own capacity for ethical response—for taking responsibility for what we are invited to see? And who exactly is this “we” that views and responds to the photographs? If we admit to a plurality of viewers and responses, can we still speak about a common “we” with a shared responsibility, a “we” held together by what Azoulay (2008) refers to as the “civil contract of photography”? Indeed, what are the limits of photographic intervention? If photographing the victims of a catastrophe, such as those in the drug war, is meant to constitute larger claims for justice, what kind of justice is at stake, for whom and for what ends? Just as photography can succeed in provoking critiques of power, can it also fail? What would this photographic failure look like and what would be its effects?

Photography and Trauma

Let us start by looking at the experience of photojournalists as they come into the crime scene. In various interviews, they often speak of being overwhelmed by what appears before them. What they see often outstrips what they can possibly know, much less talk about. Experience and expression are torn apart, the latter exceeding the former. Carlo Gabuco says, “There’s always a moment of disbelief whenever we go to a crime scene and see the victim for the first time, see how they suffered at the hands of their killers” (qtd. in Katz 2017). From Alx Ayn Arumpac: “Recently, I’ve been having mini breakdowns. And I’m wondering, why am I always crying? But then I have to realize as well, actually that this is bigger than me. This is not about me” (qtd. in Katz 2017). And Dondi Tawatao remarks, “You really don’t think about what those images might do to you. It was only later [around] November that I felt ill. At one point, all my dreams were about crime scenes. I was about to check myself into a hospital because I was having coughing fits. . . . We lost something here in the drug war. I am still grappling with what it was we lost” (qtd. in Katz 2017).

Faced with the scene of the crime, photojournalists speak of being struck with “disbelief” and “confusion.” They apprehend more than they can comprehend and so don’t exactly know what to think about what they are experiencing. This radical gap between what one experiences and one’s ability to narrate it is usually referred to as trauma. A chasm opens up between what happened and one’s ability to make sense of it, as in accidents. This failure to conceptualize what one sees and feels results in being struck “numb” or “ill” for days on end. One replays the experience rather than finds a way to frame it and set it aside. Trauma, by making speech difficult, if not impossible, compels the repetition of the event rather than its representation. In a traumatized state, one is unable to distance oneself from what one has gone through, and so finds oneself divided against one’s self. Unable to judge much less think rationally, one is contaminated by the scene one sees and forced to relive its violence again and again (Freud [1920] 1990; Siegel 1998, 2005, 2011).² A nagging sense of loss persists, made worse by the fact that one is uncertain as to what exactly was lost.

Arising from a crisis of experience, trauma disables photojournalists from doing what they are supposed to do: cover the event by rendering it into the true account of what actually happened. This disability, however, is only temporary. Subsequent interviews with photojournalists show a pattern for dealing with trauma and recovering what was lost. In a society where therapeutic practices are largely absent or inaccessible to all but the wealthiest, dealing with trauma comes in different ways. For the night crawlers, they speak about fostering a strong sense of camaraderie. Unlike other professional journalists who may compete to out-scoop one another for a story, those covering the drug war talk about deep horizontal ties analogous to those of veteran soldiers who had fought through many battles, feeling as if they were part of a mutually supportive “tribe” (Coronel 2017: 2).

But, while important, the traumatized self requires more than such friendships to recover. This entails moving from the position of a passive observer to that of an active witness. As witnesses, photographers seek to convert their work into testimonies of injustice, turning photography into a civic act (Azoulay 2008; Linfield 2010; Möller 2017). Seeing photographs as claims for justice and acts of citizenship, however, requires the supplementary work of mourning. Photographers in their accounts invariably turn to the survivors of victims and join them in the labor of mourning their loss. Several forge relations with them beyond the time of the photographed event, bringing them food, helping them with housing, even sending their children to school. Witnessing as a cure for trauma is then retrospectively associated with friendship and grieving in the interest of seeking justice in the face of extrajudicial killings. Trauma, witnessing, and mourning are thus related moments in the emergence of the photographer from his or her initial state of confusion and paralysis. In the context of Duterte’s narco- and necro-obsessions (Rafael 2019), such moments assume considerable significance. It is to these processes that I now turn.

Facing Death

When asked why they do what they do, photojournalists invariably respond with some variation of their responsibility to report what they see on behalf of those who have no voice and those who remain blind to events. Ezra

Acayan, for example, asserts that the photographer “must stand on the side of truth. No man should be killed without due process” (qtd. in Evangelista 2018). From this and similar remarks, it seems that photojournalists are driven by a categorical imperative to do what is right for those who have been wronged. As moral agents, they act as advocates for the victims and their families, turning their photographs into instruments for claiming the rights of victims. Doing so entails assuming the position of a witness.

Becoming a witness, however, does not happen automatically. It comes in the wake of their initial shock at arriving at the scene of the crime. First, they need to interview other witnesses to the crime. This is because, as Jess Aznar tells *Vice News*, journalists are forbidden from accompanying the police during operations. “We only get to cover the event after the fact: when there’s a dead body. After the gun fights” (McClure 2017). To get the story, they need to interview other people in the area who may have witnessed the killing. In short, journalists and photographers can only become witnesses by talking with other witnesses, situating them twice or thrice removed from their narratives. However, unlike their stories, their cameras are able to capture images of the *first* and *last* witness to the death of the victim: the body of the victim itself.

Some of the most arresting and oft-reproduced images of the drug war are those of corpses. Bathed in the light of street lamps and police cars, corpses appear as the most dramatic manifestations of the drug war. They testify to the violence of the regime as they represent the fulfillment of Duterte’s most cherished wish of annihilating addicts. Indeed, this is the point of wrapping many of them up in packing tape and leaving cardboard signs saying “*Pusher ako, huwag tularan*” (I am a pusher, do not imitate me). Displayed in public, they are meant by the police to be discovered by the people and the media. The corpses become texts testifying to the power of the police acting as “petty sovereigns” (Butler 2010: 122) not only to get rid of those it considers socially dead but also to extract their capacity to access a realm beyond the living. Thus is the corpse indentured to serve as a sign for the state’s ability to overcome and appropriate the power of criminality for itself. Bound, packaged, and labeled with signs, the victims’ displayed remains are reduced to instruments with which to enact and transmit sovereign power. It is a familiar tactic, as old as public crucifixions, hangings,

and the display of decapitated heads on spikes along roadways from classical antiquity to the early modern period. The body of the addict is the figure, which, as Giorgio Agamben (1998) might say, can be killed, but whose death would amount neither to murder nor to sacrifice (see also Siegel 1998). The exposure of the corpse to public view is a way of including what has been excluded by the state. It marks not just the boundary that separates the social from the antisocial. The corpse, from the perspective of the state, is also a concentrated point from which radiates sovereign power. It is thus used as a stage to perform the basis of the president's authority—which is perhaps akin to the power of all other leaders of modern states: the power to kill from which comes the sovereign's power to let others to live.

But is this the only way the corpse can serve as a witness? Is it simply a prop for announcing the terrible power of the state? Or does it also function in ways that can undercut the state's claim to instill fear? Do photographs of the corpse also bring out a different and more unsettling power? The images and accounts of photojournalists indicate a different relationship to the dead. The strange agency of the corpse—that is, its capacity to testify to its demise and act on the world despite having escaped from it—is evident in various interviews. Take, for example, two stories told by one of the best-known photojournalists in the country, Raffy Lerma. In the first, he talks about the first time he first encountered a corpse, its head wrapped in packing tape, on the second night of his shift. “I remember this as something that had a real impact on me.” Once the police arrived, they cut the tape just as Lerma was focusing on its face with his zoom lens. The camera suddenly brought up the excruciating sight of the corpse's face. “I saw the expression on his face. He was staring at me, his mouth was open. I was terrified. Really terrified because it was like I felt his last moments. How he died, like he was gasping for air, the feeling you get when you're being buried alive, that at first you lose all light, then all air. I felt that, so for a time, I didn't take any more photos like that, or if it's an extrajudicial killing, I don't focus my camera on the faces” (qtd. in Coronel 2017).

The sight of the corpse simultaneously invites and repels the gaze of the photographer. At once living and dead, it is as much a compelling object as an impossible subject of photographic interest. It appears as something that is on its way to disappearing. As the materialization of death's arrival,

the body of the victim is the something becoming nothing that nonetheless continues to be in the world. Decaying and decomposing, the corpse exceeds life yet continues to live after a fashion. It exercises an uncanny power as it occupies the radically undecidable border between the living and the dead. As such, it is the embodiment of the inhuman in two senses: as the recipient of a deadly force and as an envoy of what remains outside of the social. It is precisely this uncanny power that confronts Lerma. Seeing the face of the corpse emerging from the packing tape, he is seized with terror. He sees on its face its “last moments.” Seeing the corpse’s face, he is seized by its uncanny difference from his own. Traumatized, he turns away from the corpse and vows not to take any more photos of their faces.

But such a move is not sufficient to cure oneself of trauma and secure one’s place as a witness. Something else is required that entails identifying with the sorrow of the victim’s families. This is the work of mourning. The photographer, in order to reclaim his or her humanity from the traumatic exposure to the dead, turns to the living survivors and joins them in their grief. Such a turn is made possible by the photographer’s harnessing of the camera’s mechanical power. He or she converts the photographic image of the corpse from a horrific reminder of the individual’s death to an icon of collective suffering and sacrifice. The corpse is reframed thus not as a victim of state violence or as an envoy of one’s own deadly fate, but as a martyr destined for memorialization and devotion.

To see how this process unfolds, let us turn to the second story told by Lerma. He describes how he took what is probably the most iconic picture of the drug war, which President Duterte himself scornfully dubbed the “Pietà,” a reference to the famous Michelangelo sculpture of Mary cradling the dead Christ in her arms (Lerma 2016) (fig. 2).

Lerma recalls arriving at the scene of the crime where he could see from “afar that this was a picture. This was a very strong picture” (qtd. in Coronel 2017). He remembers being struck by the way the victim, a tricycle driver named Michael Siaron, was being tenderly held in the arms of his partner, Jennilyn Olayres. Enclosed by yellow police tape and surrounded by a crowd, the couple was lit up by television lights and police headlights so that “it looked staged,” Lerma says. “But what is imprinted in my mind,” he continues, “is Olayres screaming for help. I felt like we were vultures. She



Figure 2 Jennilyn Olaryes and Michael Siaron, July 2016. Photo by Raffy Lerma, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*.

was screaming, ‘Help us, we need to bring him to the hospital,’ and we were there just clicking and clicking” (qtd. in Coronel 2017).

Indeed, other photojournalists and videographers often speak of being haunted by the keening and crying among the relatives of the victims. It is the sound of grieving as much as the sight of the dead that stays with them, reminding them of their responsibility to their photographic subjects. At the same time, they find themselves driven to carry out their task to find what Lerma refers to as “those strong pictures . . . those photos that would really make an impact” (3). Confronted by the cries for help, the photojournalist instead keeps working. He or she finds him- or herself confronted by an ethical dilemma, torn between the imperative to convey the truth of the killings, on the one hand, and to respond to the urgent cries for help from the families, on the other. Doing one’s task, one must turn away from the immediate needs of the other. One is thus caught between being responsible

and being irresponsible at the same time. In the face of this ethical dilemma, Lerma is assailed by guilt. He confesses, “As photojournalists, we have to take—and it’s sad, it’s sad to say—we have to take advantage of it. We just have to do our jobs and our job is to share these pictures and convey their message. . . . All of us felt so heavy. . . . But still, when we saw the photos, we thought, shit, this is strong” (3).

The next day, his photo appeared in the front pages of several newspapers and was widely printed abroad. Vindicated by the results of his work, Lerma nonetheless feels something amiss. Haunted by the cries for help that he could not respond to, he is compelled to visit the wake of Siaron four days later. At first, the family turns him away. But then he shows the father a newspaper with the photograph he took on the front page. “I was the one who took that photo,” he tells the father, who then welcomes him in. Introduced to Jennilyn Olayres, he apologizes profusely. “I told her sorry for how we behaved that night. Please understand what our work is.” Jennilyn remained quiet, “but she held my hand, she nodded and cried. I think she got it. She saw the public reaction to the photo. I felt my heart grow lighter” (3).

Note the contrast in the two stories. In the first, Lerma relates how he has a foretaste of his own death when seeing the face of the corpse. As with the experience of the sublime, he looked death in the face only to realize his time had not yet arrived. He escaped to tell the story of his fear and subsequent recovery.³ In this second story, it is not a matter of facing the corpse. Unlike the first story, the victim here is named and given a social identity. When Lerma arrives at the scene, it is already cordoned off and spectacularly lighted, as if it were being staged. Even more important, the body of Michael Siaron was being cradled by his partner, Jennilyn Olayres. Whatever menacing potential the corpse may have had was now safely contained by both the police cordon and the arms of Jennilyn. As a scene, its aesthetic qualities as a “strong picture” were readily apparent and needed only to be recorded.

In another account of this story, Lerma, in fact, alludes to the scene as if it were a picture of the sculpture *The Pietà* (Lerma 2016). The man-Christ laid out on the lap of his mother is an image of “bereavement and tenderness.” Its composition is remarkably simple yet effective: the figure of the victim laid out horizontally evokes suffering and abjection. It is counter-posed to the

vertical figure of the mother who acts as the healer and mourner. Together, they form the sign of the cross (Berger 2013: 111). The murderous verticality of the police is thus replaced by the caring and pity of the mourner. And in the absence of the mother, there is the girlfriend, joined by the photographer and the viewer, vertically bent and agonized as she looks upon the dead with a mixture of horror and compassion.

Such elementary formal qualities recompose the corpse into the pose of a martyr. The photograph not only alludes to the dead Christ. It also is saturated by a Filipino historical consciousness shot through with Christian narratives about martyred national heroes from Jose Rizal to Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino (Ileto 1979). Shot from a particular angle, it appears as if its abject body had been sacralized by death. Other photographs of victims similarly draw from the iconography of Christian martyrdom, showing them cradled by loved ones or mourned by family members. Others are shown laid out with their arms spread as if they were being crucified. In nearly all cases, the images are bathed in the harsh light of police and television lights set against the deep black of the night in ways that bring out their chiaroscuro quality. The effect is to frame the victims and their survivors in a kind of sacred space surrounded by darkness while embraced by a halo of light reminiscent of Renaissance paintings (figs. 3 and 4).⁴

In the Abrahamic tradition, martyrs are, of course, synonymous with witnesses. The word *martyr*, from the Greek *martus*, “signifies a witness who testifies to a fact of which he has knowledge from personal observation.” (Carson [1967] 2002). Martyrs are commemorated precisely as models of fidelity and courage. Depictions of martyrs are integral to the design of churches, starting with the crucified Christ in all His bloody glory. Other grisly images of martyrdom are common, from decapitation to burning at the stake. But these images of death, meant to inspire the faithful, are all artfully rendered. Whatever horrible death the particular martyr may have suffered is softened and shaped by colors and lines that lend to them a specific identity, distinguishing them from other angels and saints. To be devoted to such martyrs is to emulate the power of their witnessing.

By composing, wittingly or unwittingly, the photographs of corpses as if they were martyred, surrounding or supplementing these with photos of their grieving survivors, photojournalists set up a kind of sacred tableau that



Figure 3 Unidentified men killed during a police encounter, 2016. Photo by Daniel Berahulak, *New York Times*.



Figure 4 Unidentified drug suspect killed after allegedly fighting back at police during an encounter in Caloocan City on September 16, 2016. Photo by Carlo Gabuco, *Rappler*.

tames the trauma induced by the crime scene. It turns the nightly occurrence of violence into a narrative of injustice meant to indict the powerful. Such photographs make legible death as sacrifice, and the families' suffering as mourning is meant to commemorate the dead. We get a sense of the conversion of the uncanny force of death into a narrative about martyrdom in the texts that accompany the photographs either as captions or as more extended narratives (Evangelista and Gabuco 2016–18). Such texts focus on the singularity of the victim, beginning with his or her name, age, and occupation, recounting his or her relationship to family and community. "I try to rebuild the person. I take the corpse and reimagine the man," the journalist Patricia Evangelista says (qtd. in Coronel 2017).

Laid out in the casket, a framed picture of the person as living is usually placed on top while the corpse is made up to look like an image of the person while still alive. In this way, funeral wakes seek to recuperate a semblance of the dead's dignity denied to him or her by his or her killers. Rather than trigger terror, the corpse on display stirs memories among the living, allowing it to tell stories apart from its murder. Narratives redeem the victim's humanity brought out by the ritual and journalistic memorialization of its victimization. And by joining the family in mourning the dead, photojournalists become related to the relations of the dead. As Vincent Go told another interviewer, "For the government, they are just statistics, they're just numbers. But [we want] to give faces to these numbers; we want to know who these people are" (qtd. in Stein 2017). In giving them faces, photographs conjure the dead in the image of the living. They defy Duterte's call for their torture and defacement. In place of trauma there is pity. "Love is always, among other things, pity," John Berger (2013: 117) writes. "This is the love of the vertical figure. The love of the mourner and the healer; the love of the survivor for the dead."

But is love enough? How widely can it be shared? What are the limits of photographic witnessing and aestheticized compassion?

Seeing by Not Seeing

Attempts at rehumanizing the dead and the living, including among the ranks of the photojournalists, are not definitive. Photographic advocacy,

while compelling the world's attention, has had different effects within the country. Indeed, as of this writing, photojournalistic coverage seems to be at a standstill. The flood of images has not, it seems, mitigated the deadly progress of the drug war. In fact, President Duterte has repeatedly signaled his intention to intensify his campaign, especially on poor drug users, while his popularity and approval ratings remain sky high (Duterte 2018; Ranada 2019; ABS-CBN 2019). Why should this be the case? What might account for the limits of photographic intervention in the drug war, on the one hand, and the continued popularity of Duterte, on the other?

Alongside their capacity to arouse shock and sympathy, images of injury and death, under certain conditions, tend to solicit other kinds of responses. Let me cite one example. On December of 2016, the priests of Baclaran Church, one of the largest parishes in Metro Manila, set up an exhibit of the photos of the killings with the collaboration of the photographers themselves. They blew up the images and transferred them onto plastic tarps held up by steel frames. Arranged along the passageway to the church's doors, the exhibit was meant as a moral rebuke to the regime. The priests expected viewers to be scandalized by the scenes of violence and blame the state (CNN Philippines 2016). However, when my partner and I visited the church, we noticed that it was not uncommon for people to simply walk by the photographs en route to mass, barely looking around. A few younger couples sat on benches seemingly oblivious to some of the most gruesome images of corpses alongside them. Others glanced at the photographs briefly, at times remarking something to the effect that "they probably were addicts and deserved to die." Another viewer seemed to think that such exhibits aided the war on drugs, seeing them from the perspective of the police. "*Para matakot ang mga durugista*" ("so that drug addicts would be frightened"), he was quoted as saying.

For this viewer and others like him, photos of the dead seemed to confirm that the drug war was succeeding (ABS-CBN 2016, 2019; Evangelista and Gabuco 2016). Rather than identify with the victims and the families, a number of the people we saw, most of whom came from similar neighborhoods where many of the killings had occurred, seemed unmoved. It was almost as if they regarded the images of death as stereotypical and thus unsurprising. They seemed immune to the violent images, as the corpses

on display did not appear to impinge on their own lives. Or if they did, they kept it firmly to themselves. Hence, there was no compunction to mourn as the photographs failed to stir moral outrage. Rather than furnish a new civic space of belonging through grieving, images of the drug war seemed to spur merely civil indifference.

Why these reactions? There is no way of definitively accounting for people's responses to such photographs. Let me hypothesize one possibility, that the quotidian catastrophe of the killings has reshaped the way people see death and organize life. We get a sense of this, for example, in a recent ethnographic study by the anthropologists Anna Braemer Warburg and Steffen Jensen (2018) set in the *barangay* Bagong Silang, a dense urban neighborhood in Metro Manila. Situating the drug war within a history of postwar counterinsurgency and militarized policing, they argue that it has converted the affected neighborhoods into "illegible terrains of violence" (5–6). This has to do with the way police and vigilantes target their victims. Local officials are required by the police to collect lists of names of suspected as well as known users and dealers. There is considerable arbitrariness in compiling such lists and there is no vetting of names. Indeed, some on the lists have nothing to do with drugs. Just as no one knows for sure who will be on the list, there is no way to get your name off it. And once on the list, one is liable to be targeted by the police or paid vigilantes. Nearly all those who have been killed are described in police reports by the same word: *nanlaban*, that is, they fought back. And since there have been few, largely inconclusive, investigations of these deaths, one can assume that *nanlaban* is simply a shorthand way for the police to cover up summary executions as "self-defense." Hence, residents have come to distrust not just the police but also their neighbors who, they worry, will give their names to the cops regardless of whether or not they are into drugs. What emerges, not surprisingly, is a mode of governing by fear (Warburg and Jensen 2019; Evangelista and Gabuco 2016–18; *Vice News* 2017; Almendral and Ou 2017; Coronel, Padilla, Mora 2019).

The drug lists are in effect a kill list. They are productive of fear as an essential principle in reorganizing both social relations and the individual's sensorium. This biopolitics of fear is illustrated by one of the informants of Warburg and Jensen (2018), a neighborhood watch leader in charge of

gathering names of suspected users and dealers. When asked about the lists, she says, “We need to make them fear [*sic*] for them to stop using drugs. It is effective, this fear of being killed” (10). From another local official we see how death as the unavoidable by-product of list making can only lead to order: “When the ones on the list of the President are all killed, drugs will be stopped. Naturally! . . . Everyone wants peace, whether you are a drug user or whether you are a big-time [*sic*]. Peace is also for them. What is hard is how can you give them peace if they continue to be drug users? What kind of peace will you give to them? It must be death” (10–11).

Fear comes to govern the conduct of all the residents regardless of their involvement in drugs. Everyone is radically implicated and compelled to alter their ways of being and seeing. As Warburg and Jensen note, “It is not uncommon to hear of wrongful accusations between neighbors. This has, of course, increased vigilance and mistrust in the community and changed relations even between the closest of neighbors. As Flores, another long-time resident, explains: ‘Now, almost no one gets out of their house when darkness comes. We used to go outside our house and talk, listen and tell stories even late at night, but we can’t do that now, because we are afraid. We don’t know who can be trusted anymore.’” Other residents have similarly reorganized their behavior, acting more guarded toward their neighbors. An elderly woman known for her gregariousness in the past “has become careful and withdrawn. . . . Most of the time she sits in front of her small house observing life in the street. Here, she sees people buying and selling drugs, but she keeps quiet due to fear of being involved, ‘I am afraid. They might make up stories about me. . . . You have to take care. . . . Whatever it is I see, only my eyes are seeing it’” (11–12).

Fear thus emerges from as much as it induces a perennial state of emergency. It regulates sociality, compelling distance and circumspection in neighborhoods where people are forced to live in extremely close quarters with little ventilation. Under such crowded conditions permeated by acute uncertainty and suspicion, a kind of dissociative looking arises. To say, as the elderly woman does, that “Whatever it is I see, only my eyes are seeing it,” is to suggest that the “I” is split between one who sees and another who is unable or unwilling to register what appears in front of it. Like most of the residents of Bagong Silang—and perhaps, like most of those visiting

Baclaran Church—the speaker dwells constantly on the verge of catastrophe. By instilling fear, the drug war forces people to live on the threshold of death. Every night, gunshots are heard, corpses appear, the keening and crying of survivors pierce the night. Police and photographers converge around the scenes of violence, creating a momentary spectacle. The bodies are then taken away, leaving pools of blood in their wake. The next day, school children casually walk by the spots where people had been murdered the night before while young boys play basketball across the alley where one of their own was gunned down. Life seems to go on with the expectation that death hovers close by (Evangelista and Gabuco 2016–18; Jones and Sarbil 2019).

Where people live on the edge of catastrophe—where that edge defines the very space of civic life the way that the narrow passage ways in slums serve as the predominant public spaces—is it any wonder that they see images by not seeing them, by dissociating what they apprehend from what they comprehend? Whether or not this dissociative experience relates to trauma, it remains difficult to overcome. Among the photographers, as we saw, trauma triggered by the scene of the killings is translated into witnessing and mourning. The work of mourning begins by way of aestheticizing the sights and sites of injury and violation. Such aestheticizing allows photographers and those in their position to forge an ethical stance, as photographs become documents for determining truth and seeking justice. But for the people of Bagong Silang and those in Baclaran Church who live under an unremitting regime of fear and conditions of precarity, things are different. Colluding with the police, neighborhood watch leaders see fear and the dissociation it produces as indispensable elements for establishing “peace” and security. The point is, therefore, not to overcome fear but to allow it to overcome you. For this reason, the conversion of trauma into witnessing among the residents is blocked. Surviving in constant proximity to death, they seek to bracket the images of war. Always vulnerable to sudden violation, they remain vigilant, cultivating indifference to views of violence and suppressing the horror that may arise with encountering the traces of the dead. To see whereby “only my eyes are seeing it” is thus a way of inoculating oneself from the expected but no less sudden arrival of death. It is to signal the failure of the aesthetic.

This is perhaps why, in the case of the exhibit at the church, the pho-

tographs did not seem to visibly shock, much less stir outrage among the people as the priests and photographers had hoped. Perhaps they did, but in ways difficult to determine, much less express. The priests expected parishioners to wake up and rise in indignation. Instead, they seemed insulated, seeing by not seeing; or if they were horrified, they chose not to speak for fear that that they would have no one to address. Some even identified with the forces of the state and less with the fate of the victims and their families. While they may have seen the state as a source of terror, they also saw its agents, the police, as a site of address and a source of order amid a state of emergency (Warburg and Jensen 2018).⁵

Indeed, at the height of the drug war when these photographs began to appear, polls showed Duterte's approval rating higher than ever (Ranada 2016, 2019). The appearance of the photographs undoubtedly had a critical effect, especially on those who already opposed the regime's human rights abuses. But they did not seem to decisively alter the views of the majority as they continued to support the president, who promised to spread more fear—and with it, more security. The kill lists make one the condition for, as well as the outcome of, the other: without fear, no security, and vice versa. (Foucault, 2010).

What about the families of victims themselves? How did they respond to the photographs? Again, responses were far from uniform. As Lerma's account indicates, some shared in the notion of photographic mourning. Seeing the images of the dead aestheticized in martyr-like poses allowed grief to be shared by a wider public. However, as we can aver from Lerma's guilt and from what other photojournalists have told me, others came to suspect the motives of the photographers. Some resented the unwarranted exposure of the violated bodies of their family members in the media. They objected, for example, to having the photos of their relatives identified as "addicts" and "criminals" in tabloids or the evening news, no doubt feeling humiliated by these judgments. The display of such images thus redoubled the violation of the dead while reflecting badly on the family of the survivors. Instead, they preferred to show the carefully composed and framed portraits of their dead while they were still alive, placing these on top of the caskets. Rather than images of state violence, they chose, understandably, to display the dignified appearance of their loved ones.

The point is that reactions to the photographs were varied. As in the exhibit in the church, these ranged from indifference to guarded but silent assent, from outrage at the photographers and the media to muted criticisms of the police. Various human rights organizations have sought to mobilize the families of victims, hoping that their loss would stir outrage among others in the community. Such shows of defiance, however, have been sporadic and short-lived. Polls have shown that there is a general preference for rehabilitating rather than executing drug users (ABS-CBN News 2019). Nonetheless, such responses have not translated into a sustained critique of the president. As of this writing, the killings have continued unabated, moving beyond Metro Manila to other provinces. One difference, however, is that circulation of the photographs of the dead, published widely from July 2016 to January 2018, have leveled off. They now rarely appear in the local or international media, though they are still archived in the social media accounts of photographers. With the exception of a few, most of the photojournalists—a number of whom have won highly prestigious international awards in recognition of their work even as they continue to help out the families of victims—have themselves moved on to other subjects of interest.⁶

It would seem then that rather than read into the photographs instances of gross injustice, viewers from the most affected areas tend to see them by not seeing them, for if they looked, they would only see what the police themselves wanted to show them: the fearsome power of the state delivering a kind of justice as cruel as it was inescapable. Why should this be the case? Why would Duterte's popularity increase with the photographic revelations of the killings among the very poor who were most intimately affected by the war? What else is at stake in seeing images of the dead? Could it have something to do with the sense that, far from being unjust, the killings, produced by and productive of fear, are in a way also seen to be just? Could Duterte's populist appeal in part lie in his ability to tap into the popular wish for a kind of swift justice, especially in a context where the criminal justice system is notoriously corrupt and dysfunctional? While photographers appealed to viewers to mourn the dead and demand their rights, could other images of the dead—for example, as returning spirits—conjure a different and more direct notion of justice fed by the desire for vengeance?

Dreams, or Phantasms of Revenge

With so many deaths happening on a nightly basis, we might expect there to be a proliferation of ghosts as well as ghost stories. This is the case with the families of victims. In some accounts, they talk about expecting the spirit of the dead to come back, usually three days after their death. They look forward to its return with great anticipation. Families want the spirit to reassure them that they are in a good state someplace else. There is, for instance, the story of Ericardo Medina who was killed in Pasay in the early part of 2017 as told by his sister Joy to the journalist Aurora Almendral (2017).⁷

During the wake, Joy had waited for Ericardo's ghost to make its presence felt. She posted on Facebook asking if anyone had had contact with him. No one had. "I was so annoyed with him," she said, "it had been six days and he still hadn't made himself felt." It wasn't until the day before his funeral that she felt him at the convenience store near the intersection where he worked, the last place he was seen alive, climbing onto the back of someone's motorcycle.

That night, Ericardo visited Joy in a dream. "He was smiling," she said. When she consulted the local *spiritista*, she told her that Ericardo did not want the family to suffer. She felt relieved to know that Ericardo was not an angry spirit, lingering in this world, unable to accept his own death and demanding vengeance. "It was just like him," Joy said, "He was always so easy-going."

Almendral (2017) continues, "Still there is one more dream Joy craves. 'I want to dream about the night he was killed,' she said. 'I want to stab the person who stabbed him. So I can finally defend him,' even if just in her dreams. A dream of vengeance may be the nearest thing to justice Joy and others can hope for. Few of the killers are ever caught."

Here, the dead returns not to ask for something but to fulfill the wishes of the living. In other contexts, spirits usually return to possess the living, causing them to fall ill. Curers are asked to speak with these spirits and give them a voice. Hence do spirits come across as disembodied desires. They come precisely in search of a body to allow them to speak and fulfill their wishes. Once heard through the medium, the spirit leaves and the person possessed is cured of their affliction (Cannell 1999; Siegel 2000). But in the

context of the drug war, spirits come by way of dreams to assure those they have left behind. The living thus look on spirit returns as benevolent rather than malevolent. Spirits come back to grant a simple wish: that of relieving the living of their worry as to the former's state in the afterlife. Spirit visitations are conventionalized in dreams and announced by local *spiritistas*. In this way, their arrivals are drained of anything uncanny. Unlike the sight of corpses that trigger trauma, the visiting of spirits, like that of a family member working abroad, generates expectations of comfort. Such returns help complete the work of mourning and give the living the sense that the dead are truly dead, located in another and better place apart from the living.

But while spirit returns may alleviate the grief of the living, they leave the latter with another kind of desire. As Joy's account shows, she wants to have another dream—not one about Ericardo, but about his killer. She wants to see the last thing Ericardo saw: his own death at the hands of the murderer. "I want to dream about the night he was killed," she says. "I want to stab the person who stabbed him. So I can finally defend him." Here, the living is left with a sense of lack. She wants what the dead no longer cares for: revenge. Her dream, she hopes, would let her become a witness to her brother's death. In this way, her dream acts as a kind of camera, allowing her to see the corpse as it registers the image of its killer and the moment of its death. Like photojournalists who see their task as one of witnessing, Joy sees her dreaming as a way of seeking the truth about her brother's demise.

But unlike what photojournalists produce, Joy's dream images are not a matter of documenting the killings for some future reckoning. They do not entail building an archive for the adjudication of guilt. They are rather about seeking vengeance to "defend him," that is, to respond to the killing of her brother in kind. In seeking justice by means of revenge, Joy is perhaps closer to Duterte, echoing his deadly wish to kill those who have killed others. She understands her dream not as a practice of truth telling, as with photojournalists. Rather, it is about finding a target. In recounting her dream of vengeance, Joy confirms the affective pull of extrajudicial killings as a form of justice (Rafael 2005, 2019). Like Duterte promising to kill addicts, stabbing her brother's killer is how she conceives of her obligation and satisfaction. Justice by way of revenge constitutes a kind of moral economy: she returns with interest the curse of death that she received from

her brother's killer (Mauss 2000; Siegel 2013). In dreams of revenge alongside spirit returns, she imagines regaining and restoring what she lost. In her world where the poor have neither the means nor the energy to go through the legal system, dreams convey the wish for direct justice as the return of that which one receives but did not deserve. Later on, Joy says to another journalist, "It hurt us to know that someone else had lain in that coffin. We kept whispering to [Ericardo], 'Don't let your killers sleep.' We said, 'Make their lives miserable, let them feel your presence, make them feel what a terrible thing they've done.' We don't ask for vengeance, to kill his killers, all those things, no. We just pray" (Evangelista and Gabuco 2016). Pray for what, we might ask? Presumably for her brother's peaceful repose, but by way of seeking that which she disavows but secretly wishes for: vengeance. Phantasms of revenge thus allow Joy and perhaps others like her to dream of justice in the process of mourning, distinct from that of photographers and journalists.

Dream images here differ decisively from photographs. Unlike photographs, they can neither be exhibited publicly nor archived for a future reckoning. Resistant to display and collection, Joy's dreams remain specific to her and her family. Intensely personal, they stimulate the wish for vengeance that cannily reaffirms rather than challenges Duterte's retaliatory logic. Similarly, her brother's spirit escapes the pull of, even as it emerges from, the violence of the state. Coming from elsewhere, the dream pictures afforded by the dead's return remain unseen and unseeable by us even as they generate a wish for revenge that is yet to be fulfilled. Only Joy sees them and holds them in reserve.

For this reason, the return of the spirit, like all returns, leaves Joy unsettled, saddled with a sense of something left undone. This experience of loss, felt like all sudden losses to be deeply unjust, leads her to pray for restitution that in the end only someone greater than her could provide. She looks not to those like her for justice but to someone from above. This is perhaps why Duterte's legitimacy remains unquestioned even among the very communities most victimized by the drug war (*Business World* 2018; Ranada 2019; Philippine Human Rights Information Center 2018). In his vow to annihilate "drug personalities," he promises to fulfill the desire for swift justice among those who, like Joy, exist on the cusp of disaster. For while her

dream may not amount to much, it is not nothing. It amounts to something perhaps impossible to calculate, something that a camera cannot register and that neither you nor I can consume, much less appropriate. But as a kind of intangible reserve, her dream for vengeance is still something that the regime can extract and exploit. As such, vengeance becomes a language shared by Duterte and people like Joy. Thanks to the kill list, the nightly harvest of corpses furnishes a grammar of fear that governs the relationship between the two.

Justice in this context requires the death of the social enemy. The nightly killings show that someone is in charge, that authority works because there is fear, and therefore order. Thus is security mystified. Summary executions seem to deliver justice in the way that Joy and others like her can only dream of. They pray and place their hopes on those above to assuage their loss. For this reason, Duterte, who is known as “the punisher,” remains popular even as the killings continue beyond what photographers can convey and outside of what we can see.

Notes

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- 1 Aside from the few photographs reproduced here, many others can be found by following the links to articles, blogs, and social media sites where the works of photojournalists are archived. Some of the more important photographers include Jes Aznar, www.instagram.com/jeszmann/?hl=en; Daniel Berehulak, www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/12/07/world/asia/rodrigo-duterte-philippines-drugs-killings.html; Raffy Lerma, www.raffylerma.com/blog-1; Ezra Acayan, www.instagram.com/ezra_acayan/?hl=en, www.lensculture.com

- /ezra-acayan; Dondie Tawatao, widerimage.reuters.com/photographer/dondi-tawatao; Carlo Gabuco, www.instagram.com/carlogabuco/?hl=en; Hannah Reyes Morales, hannah.ph/; and Noel Celis, www.instagram.com/noelcelis/?hl=en.
- 2 The literature on trauma is enormous and varied. Examples that were important for this article include Freud (1920) 1990; and Laplanche and Pontalis 1988, where the authors write that trauma “carries three ideas: the idea of a violent shock, the idea of a wound, and the idea of consequences affecting the whole organization” of the organism (465). See also Fas-sin and Rechtman 2009; Ivy 2008; Siegel 1998, 2005, 2011; and Baer, 2002.
 - 3 It is this near-death experience that lies at the basis of the notion of the sublime that argu-ably informs Western aesthetics and the formation of the modern Westernized subject (i.e., both those in the West and those formerly colonized areas where Western notions have had significant impact, e.g., the Philippines). See Siegel 2005; and Hertz 1985.
 - 4 To see other examples of these photographs, visit the links that appear in note 1.
 - 5 In this connection, see Mendoza 2016, a film about a family’s excruciating attempts to nego-tiate with the police who are extorting them for dealing drugs.
 - 6 The waning of interest in photographs of the drug war has to do with their nature as com-modities that allow them to circulate in the marketplace of global media images. Once commodified, photographs of death and disaster become substitutable with other images of catastrophe from different places. Hence the irony: images of the drug war rendered into aesthetic objects makes them legible for the daily consumption of a largely bourgeois read-ership both at home and abroad, but as fetish objects, they soon lose their power to capture attention and thus become commonplace. Editors with their eyes on the bottom line will tend to look for new products to attract more eyeballs and set aside last year’s models, so to speak.
 - 7 A slightly different version of this story appears in Evangelista and Gabuco 2016.

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