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Beyond the Spectacle:

Slow-Moving Disasters in Post-Haiyan Philippines

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"At the mass grave, girl" said my key informant, when I asked her where she wanted to meet one Tuesday afternoon in Tacloban City, Philippines. She sounded blasé when she said this, as if she asked me to meet her in the market or the town plaza. Nothing in her tone indicated that it had been only two years since, on November 8, 2013, more than 6000 people perished from Typhoon Haiyan – one of the strongest storms to make landfall in recent history. Two thousand two hundred of these casualties are buried in the Holy Cross Memorial Park where she wanted to meet.

For ethnographers, this seemingly mundane encounter provides a window into disaster-affected communities' everyday experience years after a spectacular tragedy. While international media and humanitarian organizations have not fallen short in drawing attention to Typhoon Haiyan's devastation, little is known about how everyday life unfolds once journalists and humanitarian workers parachute out of a disaster zone. Do disaster-affected communities "build back better," as the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction envisions (United Nations Office for Disaster Reduction 2015)? Or do citizens get accustomed to forms of suffering caused by dispossession, abandonment, and collective trauma?

These lines of inquiry inspired this thematic focus on "Slow-Moving Disasters in the post-Haiyan Philippines." We hope to shift the gaze from spectacular disasters to ones that are "neither spectacular nor instantaneous but rather incremental and accretive" (Nixon 2012:2). While there have been scholarly investigations on the causes of Typhoon Haiyan as well as the global community's immediate response to the tragedy, [1] Haiyan's legacies warrants a closer look.

Slow-Moving Disasters

Slow-moving disasters, of course, are not unique to the Philippines. Scientists have raised alarm bells over environmental catastrophes that cause widespread hunger such as droughts in Ethiopia and displacement among coastal communities in Bangladesh due to rising sea levels. Unlike monster meteorological events such as hurricanes, tsunamis, and earthquakes that qualify as "breaking news," disasters that occur gradually are often left invisible from the gaze of global media. Rob Nixon problematizes this in his book *Slow Violence and*

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[1] On digital media use in the typhoon, see: Madianou 2015; Takahashi, Tandoc, and Carmichael 2015; David, Ong, and Legarda 2016 and Curato 2016a. On government and humanitarian responses, see: Alcantara 2014; Cranmer and Biddin- ger 2014 and Saban 2014

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Environmentalism of the Poor:

> In an age where the media venerate the spectacular, when public policy is shaped primarily around perceived immediate need, a central question is strategic and representational: how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world (Nixon 2012:3)?

Nixon offers various ways to respond to this call. He foregrounds the role of the huma- nities, particularly writer-activists from the global South whose imaginative writing can "make the unapparent appear" (Nixon 2012:15). To do this, one must be sensitive to the voices that have been muted from the narratives of a nation, those who belong to the "unimagined communities" that have been considered expendable and, often, literally driven out of sight through violent forms of displacement (Nixon 2012:150).

This collection takes on this challenge from the perspective of sociological research. The starting point of our analysis is a spectacular disaster, with a focus on the less visible aspects of its aftermath. The articles cover a range of topics, from humanitarianism to bourgeois environmentalism, from the politics of resilience to the economics of remittances. These authors expose the insidious legacies of what Vincanne Adams calls a "second order disaster," or post-disaster outcomes that exacerbate existing inequalities, which, in turn, render the poorest communities vulnerable to conditions of chronic distress (Adams 2013:7). These kinds of disasters are folded into everyday life and do not make it to the 24/7 news cycle.

How exactly do slow-moving disasters take place? What are their precise characteristics? The articles in this thematic collection point to three aspects of slow-moving disasters: (1) everyday quality; (2) political economy; and (3) temporality.

Everyday Quality

Scholars of disasters in the Philippines has long recognized the everyday quality of these events. Greg Bankoff, among others, has engaged in this conversation. Bankoff describes disasters in the Philippines as "frequent life experiences" instead of abnormal occurrences that disrupt the flow of everyday life (Bankoff 2003a). So common are disasters that the country's histories are "shaped by the interrelationship of the natural to the human, of the physical to the social" (Bankoff 2003b:3. Also see: Dalisay and De Guzman 2016). For example, Bankoff traces the "intriguing relationship" between a seismically active landmass and exposure to extreme meteorological events with the vigor of civic engagement in these areas. While the

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rise of Philippine civil society is often associated with contemporary political upheavals, Bankoff makes a case that the country's civic ethos is rooted in a centuries-long experience of people left to their own capacities to deal with hazards and attendant problems (Bankoff 2007). To say that the Philippines as a nation-state is defined by cultures of disaster, therefore, is also a way of saying that the Philippines is defined by cultures of coping.

In contemporary times, cultures of coping, as Bankoff also recognizes, unfold unevenly. Take the case of remittances. Remittances are often portrayed as the Philip- pines' lifeline in everyday life and in times of crisis. Indeed, in the first three months after Typhoon Haiyan, remittances grew by US$600 million, leading observers to commend the spirit of *bayanihan* (cooperation) among diasporic communities. Yvonne Su and Ladylyn Lim Mangada challenge this celebratory view of remittances as uniformly helpful to all. Using survey data among communities affected by Typhoon Haiyan, they find that a disaster does not change low-income households' capacity to mobilize resources. Unlike their middle-income counterparts, poor house- holds they surveyed were only able to mobilize remittances once, as their migrant net- works also have limited means. This, Su and Mangada argue, does not only reinforce class-based inequalities, but also creates new forms of discrimination against families that have received help from overseas networks. For example, the "prioritization tool" that nongovernmental organizations use to select aid beneficiaries asks whether a family has received overseas remittances. Families that respond in the affirmative receive fewer points, and therefore get bumped down the list of prioritized beneficiaries, even if they have only received a small amount of remittance just once. Su and Mangada warn against the dangers of designing beneficiary selection criteria based on assumptions about remittances. Remittances, as they put it, do not lift all boats, and, in cases of poorly designed questionnaires, can even sink some people's chances of recovery.

The same can be said of local aid workers in the aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan. Jonathan Corpus Ong and Pamela Combinido challenge assumptions about how hiring local aid workers makes humanitarian work more inclusive toward disaster- affected communities (Madianou, Longboan & Ong 2015). The authors recognize the novel opportunities the digital humanitarian agenda offered to local tech workers in and around Tacloban City, many of whom were coping from the disaster themselves. However, they also raise issues of the "double marginalization" that occurs in aid work, where local residents are hired on short-term contracts and whose voices are drowned out, if not demoralized, by their expatriate

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colleagues. Ong and Combinido draw attention to the paradoxes local tech workers experience, whether it is serving communities while helping themselves or ushering in digital innovations while remaining critical to the hierarchies of inter- national aid work. All these occur in the context of the precarious conditions of digital labor in the Philippines, where local workers endure extractive labor relations   as they keep an eye on the promise of global mobility.

These two examples illustrate cultures of coping in a globalized world. They characterize forms of hierarchies and exclusions, the taken-for-granted ways in which voices are suppressed in a humanitarian regime, and how these result in chronic insecurity. Their seemingly banal character often demotes these issues as nothing more than the micro- politics of everyday life, even though it is these life experiences that immediately shape the uneven character of communities' collective recovery.

Political Economy

The political economy of reconstruction has been an important focus in disaster studies and development circles. Crises, as the story goes, have become "exciting marketing opportunities" for big corporations to administer economic shocks while populations are still reeling from tragedy (Klein 2007; also see Bello 2006). Instead of supporting citizens to rebuild what is left of their communities, disaster capitalism takes over by finishing the job of the original dis- aster, erasing what is left of the public sphere, and quickly putting together profit-driven plans before citizens are able to regroup and lay claim to what is theirs (Klein 2007:8). Engin Atasay and Garrett Delavan refer to this as "wreak-construction" or the practice of profit-making from havoc in already catastrophic spaces (Atasay & Delavan 2012:541).

Naomi Klein cites the case of Sri Lanka's Arugam Bay in the aftermath of the 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami to illustrate how disaster capitalism unfolds in practice. What was once a "hippie-charming seaside town" became a "boutique hotel destination" after the tsunami, complete with $300-a-night chalets, helipads, and floating piers, at the expense of displaced fishermen. Camillo Boano argues that what emerged in Sri Lanka after the disaster is "tsunami geography" that added further tensions to a conflict-based geography. As large-scale, privatized, and expert-driven reconstruction plans come under pressure to deliver results, disaster-affected communities are forced to move to remote and unsustainable locations

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(Boano 2007).

The Philippine case shares similarities with the Sri Lankan experience. Dakila Yee uses the term "bourgeois environmentalism" to describe how the government has used Typhoon Haiyan as justification to "clean the city of the slums." It is bourgeois because this rationality prioritizes the elites' perspective of what counts as aesthetically pleasing urban spaces, but it also invokes the language of environmentalism by assigning blame on the poor living by the coast for degrading the environment. The outcomes of this rationality, Yee argues, are gentrification strategies masked as green-belting programs. Like Sri Lanka, marginalized coastal residents have been pushed out of their spaces in urban centers and forced to relocate to the northern part of Tacloban City, far from livelihood opportunities available downtown. "Biopolitics of disposability" is how Henry Giroux describes this phenomenon, in which some citizens' rights to the city are deemed unworthy of protection by the state (Giroux 2014).

The Philippine experience, however, has two major departures from how Klein and others describe disaster capitalism. First, unlike the case of post-Tsunami Sri Lanka or post-Katrina New Orleans where big multinational companies took over disaster-affected areas, Tacloban – the city worst hit by Haiyan – did not immediately witness "privately organized, publicly funded bureaucratic failures" (Adams 2013:7). While downtown Tacloban today is teeming with boutique hotels, hipster cafes, and shiny shopping malls, these are not comparable to the scale of privatization and roll back of state involvement in the reconstruction process. The peculiarities of the Philippine political economy have remained, manifested in the grip of local elites in the construction and retail sectors (Porteria 2015). Some contractors inevitably have benefitted from the massive new housing projects in northern Tacloban, but these projects, for the most part, are driven by the state and philanthropic organizations.[2]

Second, as both Yee and Colin Walch argue in their respective articles, the characteristics of dispossession households have experienced after Haiyan are a logical extension of existing patterns of landlessness and insecurity. Walch argues that long before Haiyan, poor communities in Tacloban had been suffering from insecure land arrangements. This deterred them from investing in sturdy housing materials and evacuating before the disaster out of fear of being evicted once they left their houses. It is not surprising that families living in illegal settlements are not only the worst impacted by Haiyan but also the least able

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[2] Cultures of clientelism also map on to post-disaster contexts, not only in relation to voters and politicians, but also between disaster-affected communities and humanitarian agencies. See Eadie, Atienza, and Tan-Mullins, 2016.

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to recover in the storm's aftermath, as insecure land tenure has pre- vented them from accessing state support in the form of loans or insurance.

For Yee and Walch, political economy lies at the heart of slow-moving disasters. Technocratic discourses of resilience, risks, and disaster preparedness may be productive in generating awareness of natural hazards, but could also serve as smokescreens for lingering issues of economic insecurity and marginalization.

Temporality

The term "slow" in slow-moving disasters does not only refer to its attritional character. It also points to the concept of time. Those who have power can defer action that can put an end to others' suffering, while those who do not are left uncertain about their future (Bourdieu 2000). In other words, disasters can be slow-moving, because the powerful are taking their time. Unless disasters reach a spectacular quality, responses to everyday disasters are often muted.

Caroline Compton brings this character of slow-moving disasters to the fore. Compton unpacks the politics of time in which humanitarian organizations have inadvertently taken part. She finds that framing Typhoon Haiyan as a climate emergency demanded an adjustment in the temporal character of humanitarian work. While international NGOs (INGOs) continued to provide immediate relief such as tents, food, and clothing, they also abided by the state's decision to prohibit the rebuilding of informal settlements in hazard-prone areas. The solution the state has offered is a massive relocation program of slum communities to permanent houses on safer ground in the northern part of Taclo- ban. This project took at least two years to be completed.

Compton finds that humanitarian organizations' support for this discourse caused further marginalization among vulnerable communities. While she recognizes that humanitarian organizations must follow international standards in ensuring that houses are not rebuilt on dangerous land, she also argues that an orientation toward the future serves to further expose poor communities to risks in the present. She cites the example of an INGO that complied with the state's ban on rebuilding settlements less than forty meters from the shoreline. As a result, those who suffered the most casualties in Typhoon Haiyan remained living in tents instead of sturdier transitional shelter during the monsoon season. "The absurdity of leaving households in tents rather than houses, allegedly for their own safety, is manifestly self-evident," Compton argues. While there were tents provided for the emergency

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phase of the disaster and future relocation sites to respond to climate emergency, the practical needs of poor communities at the present have been rendered invisible.

Compton's argument travels well to other aspects of slow violence in the aftermath of disaster. Waiting has become a main preoccupation for many disaster survivors – from waiting for emergency shelter, to waiting for cash assistance, to waiting for permanent homes on safer ground. Javier Auyero's ethnographic work on the politics of waiting suggests that people's frustrating encounters with the state – the "daily labor of normalizing waiting" – transforms poor citizens into passive "patients of the state" (Auyero 2012:4). The trouble with waiting, of course, is its routine character. Queuing, staying put, and waiting for advice come across as banal. The injuries in esteem waiting creates are often misrecognized and not subject to political and ethical responses.

Strong-Moving Disasters and the Strongman

There is no talk about the Philippines today without talking about its controversial President Rodrigo Duterte. Elected almost three years after Typhoon Haiyan, the strongman has vowed to rush the rehabilitation of Tacloban. He made this vow at the mass grave– the same site where my respondent wanted to meet – after he laid a wreath to honor the victims of the tragedy. This happened on November 8, 2016, the third anniversary of Typhoon Haiyan. He assigned a "presidential assistant" to look after Tacloban and its neighboring towns, and threatened to shoot the assistant, perhaps in jest, if he does not deliver. A month after this speech, I visited Tacloban again, and saw houses in the resettlement area ready to be turned over, with signs fronting these villages that say "Duterte Speed." The imagined future that Compton identified, it seems, has arrived.

What can the study of slow-moving disasters tell us about the rise of the controversial leader? I offer a modest conjecture: that Duterte was able to lay bare what used to be invisible injuries caused by slow-moving disasters. While this collection focuses on the after- math of Typhoon Haiyan, there are many other slow-moving tragedies that occur in   the Philippines. Whether it is the precarious labor conditions of female migrant laborers in the Middle East or the everyday miseries of middle-class Filipinos queuing for an hour to catch the next train, Duterte's rise to power hinged on his capacity to capture the frustrations of a society known for its patience. It is therefore not surprising that no amount of expletive-ridden speech can discredit the status of Duterte as a credible political leader, for he only says what a lot of

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Filipinos have had on their minds for years.

The problem of illegal drugs is certainly one of these slow-moving disasters. In another publication, I referred to this as "latent anxiety"– a sense of collective distress that remains in the background (Curato 2016b:99). It is a banal concern but nevertheless worrisome, often publicized in crime beats of tabloids and on primetime news but not politicized. When I reviewed my two years' worth of interview transcripts among disaster-affected communities after Duterte came to power, I was surprised to find a number of my respondents identified drugs as one of the main issues in their communities. Whether a mother who is worried her son might "get in trouble" with the addicts on the street corner, or a local aid worker complaining about the undependability of his neighbors because they are always high, anxieties about illegal drugs have folded into anxieties about recovery, just like the rest of the nation (see also Lasco 2014 for an ethnographic study of methamphetamine drug among young men in the Philippines).

For good or ill, the strongman has been able to masterfully give voice to what is often unspoken. His aggressive approach to slow-moving disasters, particularly his heavy- handed policy on drugs, is a dangerous game to play, for evidence is not on his side (Lasco 2016). If the death toll counted by human rights organizations is to be believed, the bloody spectacle of Duterte's war on drugs has already doubled the death toll of Haiyan (Smith 2017). But if there is one lesson that this collection underscores, it is that as long as exclusionary political and economic structures continue to take root, disasters – whether slow-moving or spectacular, man-made or natural – will continue to cost lives.

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Disclosure statement

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Nicole Curato is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance at the University of Canberra. She is the author of the forthcoming book *Democracy in a Time of Misery: From Slow Violence to Deliberative Politics* and editor of the *Duterte Reader: Critical Essays in Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency* – the first scholarly book on the strongman's rise (2017, Ateneo de Manila University Press/Cornell University Press). She is currently the Associate Editor of the journal *Political Studies*.

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