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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# A Politics and Ethics of Viewing Photographs of Duterte's "Drug War": Towards Reconceptualizing the Political Community

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This paper proposes a framework for a politics and ethics of viewing photographs of atrocities and suffering through an analysis of photographs of Rodrigo Duterte's "drug war" in the Philippines and responses to these images. It situates these politics and ethics of viewing in a context of violent othering and Ariella Azoulay's conceptualization of "regime-made disaster." This framework is grounded on fellow-feeling and imagined identification as well as on the relationality, powers of mourning, and ethical responsibility that Judith Butler asserts and is operationalized through the "civil contract of photography" called forth by Azoulay. Following Azoulay and Butler, this paper directs these politics and ethics of viewing photographs towards reimagining citizenship and reconceptualizing the political community.

**Keywords:** *drug war; regime-made disaster; violent othering; civil contract of photography; fellow-feeling; political community; Philippines*

## ***Nanlaba(n): Using Photographs for Human Rights***

"We didn't know this would happen to us. We didn't know the stories were true."  
—Families of drug war victims (*Nanlaba[n] Exhibit Note*, The Nightcrawlers of Manila, September 2019)

It was a clothesline of a different sort. The t-shirts and shorts hanging on it were not for drying. Instead, the clothes bore photos of smiling young men and children, oblivious to the cruel fate that would befall them. A closer look reveals that they also depict photos of crime scenes, grieving families, and solidarity and protest actions. The clothesline was part of the *Nanlaba(n)* (Laundered Stories) traveling exhibit in seven cities in Europe in September and October 2019. It was organized by Rise Up for Life and Rights, an alliance against Rodrigo Duterte's "war on drugs," in collaboration with *Tao Po*, Mae Paner's one-woman play on the drug war, and The Nightcrawlers, a group of photojournalists and journalists that has been covering the drug war since Duterte became president in June 2016. These groups have been crucial in documenting the killings associated with Duterte's antidrug campaign, publicizing the atrocities, and assisting families and human rights advocates in seeking accountability and justice for the victims. They challenge a policy that has killed thousands with "near impunity" (United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights 6) and that turned the Philippines into "one of the deadliest places in the world to be a civilian" (Kishi and Pavlik 6, 40).<sup>1</sup> Such killings ride on the back of massive public support for Duterte, who has consistently garnered high approval ratings,<sup>2</sup> amid the rising and very visible body count of the drug war and his violent rhetoric that outrightly calls for extrajudicial killings of suspected criminals (Agence France-Press, "Duterte to 'Butcher' Criminals").

*Nanlaba(n)* is a play on the words *nanlaba* (laundered) and *nanlaban* (fought back). Actual and representational clothes of victims are used as the exhibit's main canvas. These clothes, easy to transport and mount in various locations for the travelling exhibit, are suffused with symbolic, rehumanizing, and evidentiary significance and potentialities. One of their inspirations for using pieces of clothing, according to Redemptorist Bro. Ciriaco Santiago III, a member of The Nightcrawlers who co-conceptualized the event, was cases of victims who bore torture marks and were wearing clothes of other victims when their bodies were found. In a case described in the exhibit note, an anguished family rushed to the funeral parlor after seeing a photo of an unidentified body wearing their kin's clothes, only to find out that he was a stranger. Whoever tortured these individuals did not bother putting the correct clothes on them. The clothes thus embody experiences and stories of "torture, of deceit, and of murder" while emphasizing how the killings and the government's justifications are "laundered" or fabricated and sanitized in order to gain public support (The Nightcrawlers, *Exhibit Note*). At the same time, seeing up close actual clothes of victims can engender a recognition that those killed are human beings instead of scums of society; that they are real persons and not just mere statistics.

*Nanlaban*, meanwhile, refers to the police's assertion that deaths classified as drug-war-related are due to legitimate encounters when suspects allegedly fought back against cops during antidrug operations,



Figure 1. *Nanlaba(n)* exhibit during the *Tao Po* performance at the Crea Theater, Amsterdam (October 2019). Photo by Ciriaco Santiago III.

a claim that human rights advocates have disputed.<sup>3</sup> The latter point to evidence that in many of these supposed “legitimate encounters,” victims did not fight back but were, instead, summarily executed (Human Rights Watch, “License To Kill”; see also United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights).<sup>4</sup> Some of these pieces of evidence are contained in photographs of the crime scenes produced by The Nightcrawlers, who explained in the exhibit note, “We hung them on a clothesline to say that this is how killing is being laundered in the Philippines: justified as a necessary evil, and the victims demonized...”

The Nightcrawlers were one of the first to respond to the killings through their nightly work of covering the crime scenes. Some of their members saw their role evolve from reporting news to becoming advocates against the brutality of Duterte’s antidrug policy, sacrificing their careers, security, emotional well-being, and financial stability in the process. They collaborate with other journalists, human rights activists, lawyers, church groups, artists, concerned government officials, and affected families in pushing back against the drug war. Their photographs have been exhibited in the Philippines and abroad and have also been featured in international news and publications. *Nanlaba(n)* was one of the latest iterations of their campaign. The objective of the exhibit, Santiago explained to me in November 2019, is “to expose that the killings are state-sponsored; that it (drug war) is not to get rid of illegal drugs. It is wanton killings.” The aim too, he said, is to generate a conversation about it with supporters of the drug war, particularly in the diaspora, which overwhelmingly supports the president. Hence, they embarked on a European tour that he, officers of Rise Up, the *Tao Po* crew, and two mothers, Katherine Bautista and Marissa Lazaro, who have been fighting for justice for their sons killed in the drug war, joined.

It was in one such exhibit where I talked to a male Filipino migrant who has been living in Europe for many years. Introducing himself as a long-time Duterte supporter, he proceeded to defend the president and his antidrug policy, asserting that “The drug war is a ‘war.’ Thus, collateral damage is inevitable.” I asked him to elaborate. “If the parents (of the children) are embroiled in drugs and they do not want to surrender, then a gun battle will ensue,” he explained. “The children will be affected because they are in the very area where there is notorious drug dealing.” Continuing, he said,

Why is rape not mentioned here (in the exhibit)? Why is it painful for them (exhibit organizers) that the government is cleaning up (the country) of drug addicts? Before Duterte became president, we were like zombies... Which president got rid of generals who are protectors of drug lords? Duterte. He is an authentic person, *walang kabig, walang tulak* (he does not give special favors).

He ended by insisting that “This exhibit is a propaganda of the Liberal Party to destroy the government.”

I informed him that the mothers of two of those killed in the drug war are standing a few meters away from us and asked him if he would like to talk to them about the circumstances of their sons’ deaths. He declined.

Despite a survey showing that 76% of Filipinos believe that there have been many human rights violations in the drug war (Social Weather Stations, “Fourth Quarter”), this man’s reaction is not uncommon among the supporters of Duterte and his drug war that I and photojournalists whom I interviewed talked to. Some of the common reactions are that the president is doing a good job of ridding the country of drugs, that those killed deserve the fate that befell them, and that a war has inevitable collateral damage. Furthermore, supporters blame parents for endangering their children and accuse critics of the drug war of not giving attention to victims of drug-related crimes such as thefts, murder, and rape. The photos are also frequently dismissed as part of the campaign of the political opposition in the Philippines to smear the reputation of the president and the country. And despite the high death toll and belief that human rights are being violated, the drug war was considered a success by eight in ten Filipinos in a 2019 survey (Flores, “82% of Pinoys”).

One can say that such reactions to the photographs of the drug war and the continued support for the policy may be an indication that the photographs failed to achieve the objectives of their photographers and exhibit organizers. Yet, I suggest that the responsibility to these images lies not only on the photographers but *also* on the spectator of these photographs. In this paper, I will propose a framework for a politics and ethics of viewing photographs of the drug war in a context of violent othering and “regime-made disaster” (Azoulay, “Regime-Made Disaster”). I will discuss

this framework as grounded on fellow-feeling and imagined identification as well as on the relationality, powers of mourning, and ethical responsibility that philosopher Judith Butler asserts and operationalized through the "civil contract of photography" called forth by Ariella Azoulay, a photography and visual culture theorist. Following Azoulay and Butler, I direct this politics and ethics of viewing photographs towards reimagining citizenship and reconceptualizing the political community.

### **The Emergence and Sedimentation of a Differential Body Politic**

Duterte, long-time mayor of Davao City, rose to national power in the 2016 presidential elections on a tough stance on law and order and a narrative of crisis centered on illegal drugs. For him, the latter is nothing less than the "root cause of so much evil and suffering that weakens the social fabric and deters foreign investment from pouring in" (Holmes, "Duterte Vows"). Accordingly, he has referred to drug personalities as "sons of whores" and "do-nothings" who destroy children and falsely equates drug users with rapists and murderers (Simangan 76). They are, most of all, not human beings. Barely two months into his presidency, Duterte retorted in response to international criticisms of his drug war, "Are they (suspected drug offenders) humans? What is your definition of a human being? Tell me" (Ramos, "Duterte Threatens").

Appropriating the persona, moral claim, and burden of the father of the country who will protect his children from the scourge of drugs no matter the cost, Duterte pushed for the violent elimination of illegal drugs and suspected drug personalities (Ramos, "Junkies"). He encouraged not only the police force but also village officials and ordinary citizens to shoot suspected drug offenders while, at the same time, attacking and delegitimizing local and international human rights institutions as abetting the proliferation of illegal drugs in the country (Human Rights Watch, "Duterte's 'Drug War' Claims"; Ranada, "Duterte Warns"; Worley, "Duterte Tells People"). Moreover, he praised and promoted policemen involved in the killings and likened himself to Hitler for the millions he would "slaughter" in the drug war (Holmes, "Duterte Vows").

The bloodbath that has since swept many urban poor communities in the country

has been referred to as a "war on the poor" and "a textbook case" of genocide (Simangan 87),<sup>5</sup> with the International Criminal Court (47–48) finding "reasonable basis to believe that crimes against humanity" were committed in the context of the drug war. It is also, I suggest, a "regime-made disaster." Regime-made disasters, according to Azoulay, "take(s) place as a structural part of democratic regimes" ("Regime-Made Disaster" 29, 31). That is, democratic regimes produce this disaster while, in some cases, being constituted by this disaster (29). This is made possible by the regime's creation and preservation of a "differential body politic" where the body politic is differentiated between citizens on the one hand and "flawed citizens" and "noncitizens" on the other (Azoulay, "Regime-Made Disaster" 30). Flawed citizens and noncitizens are classified as such by the regime due to categories like gender, class, religion, race, political beliefs, and ethnicity, among others. They are governed differently from those classified as citizens in that citizens are accorded protection, while flawed citizens and noncitizens are not protected. Consequently, "The disaster that strikes such groups is conceived as part of the routine, not as an exceptional event, and the situation is emptied of any dimension of urgency" (Azoulay, *The Civil Contract* 34). In other words, Azoulay asserts, they are not the subject of emergency claims. Nor are their lives considered worthy of public mourning (Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics"). The public ungrievability of their suffering renders their lives dispensable (Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics"). Yet, despite the disaster's visibility and inherence in the reproduction of the regime, citizens do not recognize it as produced by the regime because it has been normalized as part of the workings of the regime, is oftentimes supported by moral and humanitarian claims, and is justified as necessary (Azoulay, "Regime-Made Disaster" 30–31).<sup>6</sup>

Insights from anthropological works on large-scale violence show that the enactment of violent othering is a product of interacting political, socioeconomic, and ideological processes, where difference based on certain facets of social identity is reified to the extent that it recasts the Other as a target of excision (Hinton 6, 19). The interplay of sameness and difference, recognition, and reciprocity are crucial both to this process of violent othering and to the possibility of social repair. On this, anthropologist Michael Jackson (43–44) notes that "our humanness consists both in



our identity with others and our differences from them.” Violent othering arises when sameness is “played down” and difference is “played up until a polar opposition is made between self and not-self” (44–45). Certain groups of people can thus be excluded from communities to which they previously belonged, becoming the target of suspicion, fear, anger, disgust, dehumanization, and even annihilation (Hinton 6, 13; see also Appadurai 90, 96–97). We see this in Duterte’s rhetoric against suspected drug offenders wherein the “deep sense of badness imputed to the Other” (Suárez-Orozco and Robben 30) transformed this segment of society into the country’s number one enemy. The targets of Duterte’s drug war are therefore misrecognized as “not part of life itself” (Das 16) and thereby unworthy of recognition and reciprocity.

Duterte’s rhetorical style and strongman performance, moral claim, and narrative of crisis grounded on the dehumanization of suspected drug personalities resonated with a public whose top concern was fighting criminality and thus approved of his performance in relation to it (Lamchek 203–204). He also effectively tapped into people’s “latent anxieties” in their communities regarding illegal drugs and those suspected to be involved in it (Curato, “Politics of Anxiety” 98–100). By naming “hardened criminals” as a “dangerous other” who deserves harsh punitive punishments as opposed to “virtuous citizens” who must be protected (94), Duterte was drawing a “moral boundary” on who has the right to state protection and who does not (Warburg and Jensen 6) and whose misery deserves compassion (Curato, “In the Philippines”). Relatedly, Kusaka (89) suggests that neoliberal governmentality and the inefficiency of the state led to the emergence of “moral subjectivities” of “good citizens” marked by self-discipline in antagonism with “evil others” who are lazy and have bad habits. According to Kusaka, this explains why even members of poor communities are in favor of the drug war. The othering is further manifested among the ranks of Christian religious leaders whom Cornelio and Medina interviewed. A pervasive notion among these priests and pastors who support the president’s policy is that drug users are “sinners” who are embroiled in criminality.

The portrayal of illegal drugs, particularly *shabu*, and those involved in it as a danger to society (Lasco and Yu) did not, however, just emerge during Duterte’s regime. Cornelio and Lasco point out that there has

been a moral panic related to drug use for decades in the country. The Catholic Church has played a significant role in this in their “morality politics” where, beginning in the early 1970s until right before Duterte came to power, they attributed to drug use the “destruction of the youth, attack on human dignity, and social moral decay” (328).<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, photojournalists I talked to admitted that the media has likewise contributed to the demonization of the drug addict in the country.<sup>8</sup> They told me that, in the past, they were uncritical of police spot reports that point to a drug addict as a perpetrator of a crime despite the absence of a thorough investigation. They thus merely reproduced in their news reports the trope of the dangerous drug addict, a demonization that is shaped as well by sensationalized crime reporting. Relatedly, another photojournalist lamented how some journalists, already convinced of the guilt of the suspect, would harshly interrogate witnesses and family members.<sup>9</sup> These occur alongside the proliferation of disinformation and rumors in communities and in social media regarding alleged drug-related crimes that further heighten people’s fear of illegal drugs and of suspected personalities involved in it (Alba, “How Duterte Used Facebook”).<sup>10</sup>

Class too plays a role in this violent othering. Violent state policies are not uncommon for urban poor communities where most of the drug war killings have occurred. Even before Duterte’s war on drugs, these communities have been subjected to violent demolitions, vilification, and marginalization, despite the fact that the informal sector among these communities remains essential to the economic life of urban centers such as Metro Manila (Ortega; Tadiar). Yet, although violence is not new in Philippine politics, the extent and style of Duterte’s violence exceed those of previous presidents (Reyes). Not only have the number of extrajudicial killings under Duterte surpassed those during the Marcos dictatorship; killings committed by police in the Duterte era also increased ten times (Peace Research Institute Frankfurt qtd. in Lamchek 207). Furthermore, Reyes (113) argues that Duterte’s violence is set apart for its use of the human body as a “spectacle of humiliation and violence” upon which state power is enacted, made visible, and consolidated. The violence and humiliation inflicted on bodies of victims of the drug war, such as wrapping the face with masking tape and drawing a smiley on it, or putting a placard next to the dead body bearing the words “I am a drug pusher, do not emulate

me," function, on the one hand, to intimidate criminals and, on the other hand, to make ordinary citizens feel protected. Reyes asserts that

The spectacle is "performed" by reducing the body to an object that carries political messages, by politicising the body to boost popularity and as means to acquire votes, and placing the body at the centre by making political decisions on whose life has value and whose does not. (128)

The first step in this humiliation is the drawing up and publication of the "drug watch list" containing the names of suspected drug personalities from the village to the national level (Reyes 119). At one point in 2017, Duterte declared to the public and the press that the sheets of paper he was holding contain the names of those involved in the drug industry in the Philippines, names that number anywhere between 600,000 and a million (Symmes, "President Duterte's List"). Beyond humiliation, however, the drug watch list is also a death list. Oftentimes, those on the drug watch list end up dead, not unlike the Order of Battle list against activists during the time of presidents Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and Benigno Aquino, Jr. that led to hundreds of activists extrajudicially killed or disappearing (Lamchek 214). These lists furthermore destroy the fabric of communities. As Lamchek (214–215) explains, in both the Order of Battle list and the drug watch list, community members are recruited or coerced into providing names and spying on their neighbors and kin. Consequently, the othering and suspicion seep into everyday life and intimate relations within these communities (Warburg and Jensen 12). In the absence of any credible investigation or judicial scrutiny, "These blacklists assume the quality of final judgments of guilt, despite being merely community-sourced intelligence information" (Lamchek 215).

The drug war as a regime-made disaster, the classification of suspected drug personalities and urban poor communities as flawed citizens, and, consequently, the violent othering to which they are subjected are thus the result of the intertwinement of several processes and factors such as, but not limited to, anxieties for one's everyday security, a classist attitude among Filipinos that others the poor, the proliferation of rumors and disinformation, pervasive violence in Philippine politics, and the decades of demonization of drug users and pushers by influential sectors of

Philippine society such as the media and the Catholic Church. Aside from these, state inefficiency, frustration at failures of past governments to protect citizens, an overburdened and unequal justice system, and a lack of wider public discussion on drug addiction as a public health issue have contributed to the resonance of Duterte's violent drug war rhetoric and policy.

### Recuperating Recognition

Despite the sedimentation of the differential body politic, it is nevertheless possible to have fluidity between recognition, on one hand, and othering, on the other, as these are shaped by sociocultural, political, economic, and historic conditions. In other words, recognizing that the other is not completely different from the self can be recuperated towards the dismantling of the differential body politic and violent othering. An aspect of this possibility of recognition is the ability to imagine oneself in the place of the other and the emotional, moral, and political weight of this kind of imagining. Imagination can be seen as a form of "embodied minding" in that "when we imagine an object or a scene, our senses get involved...it grabs mind and body" (Andriolo 101). This can engender fellow-feeling, which, as I write elsewhere (294), is "an affective identification with the other whereby imagining the other's plight and/or imagining our self *in* the other's situation plays a central role in a process that involves both emotions and cognition." Involving slippages between empathy, compassion, considerateness, and pity, fellow-feeling is particularly important in "creating affective solidarity or feeling for the suffering of one's fellows, and collective responsibility or doing something to ease their suffering."<sup>11</sup>

Being able to imaginatively identify with the other or to see resemblance, relatedness, or connection with the other is crucial in the emergence of fellow-feeling (Hume; Smith). This is a process that is historically, socioculturally, politically, and economically mediated in that particular contexts can heighten or diminish imagined identification and the fellow-feeling emerging from it. Imagined identification can be cultivated by, among others, having the plight of the other made vivid to us, being proximate to the other, and having awareness of the cause and effect of the other person's suffering (Hume; Sayre-McCord 212–213; Smith 1).

Reciprocity and recognition can also flow from and engender an ethical encounter through a relationality and political community grounded on the notion that human beings are physically dependent on and physically vulnerable to one another (Butler, *Precarious Life* 27). For Butler, this notion of common human vulnerability and interdependency is crucial in humanization. This is not to say that vulnerability is the same for everyone nor that it is distributed equally, nor that there are no boundaries between individuals (31). Nevertheless, she asserts that the recognition of vulnerability, which is normatively circumscribed, is crucial in the process of humanization. She writes,

A vulnerability must be perceived and recognized in order to come into play in an ethical encounter, and there is no guarantee that this will happen. Not only is there always the possibility that a vulnerability will not be recognized and that it will be considered as the “unrecognizable,” but when a vulnerability *is* recognized, that recognition has the power to change the meaning and the structure of the vulnerability itself. In this sense, if vulnerability is one precondition for humanization, and humanization takes place differently through variable norms of recognition, then it follows that vulnerability is fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject. (“Violence, Mourning, Politics” 30, emphasis in the original)

I consider this constellation of the political possibilities of fellow-feeling, interdependency, and the role of images in reimagining the political community and in unmasking the drug war as a regime-made disaster in the next section.

### **On the Power of Images**

We have seen multiple examples of an image sparking a movement and creating “new communities of sentiment” and identification at national and transnational scales (Appadurai 62–63). Highlighting the relationship between images, affect, moral judgement, and action in contexts of large-scale suffering, psychologist Paul Slovic and colleagues note that

Underlying the role of affect in the experiential system is the importance of images, to which positive or negative feelings become attached. Images in this system include not only visual images, important as these may be, but words, sounds, smells, memories, and products of our imagination. (127)

Images can reaffirm existing constructs that people already possess, for instance, that victims of the war on drugs deserve what happened to them despite the absence of due process or that the drug war policy is unjust. As Strathern and Stewart point out,

Media sources, by their very immediacy can greatly intensify and magnify the perceptions involved of events partly by appealing to, and conforming with, basic scenarios in people’s minds, connected to cosmic schemes of ‘good versus evil’ and ‘the lessons of history.’ (2)

Furthermore, while mass media is powerful, it is also selective. Butler refers to some forms of this selectivity as a “refusal of discourse” that dehumanizes certain lives (“Violence, Mourning, Politics” 24). “To control the public sphere,” she asserts, “it is necessary to control the way in which people see, how they hear, what they see” (*Precarious Life* xx). This is not merely about content but also on “what ‘can’ be heard, read, seen, felt, and known.” Mass media, the state, politicians, and ordinary citizens can thus delimit what counts as reality, whose lives deserve attention and protection, and whose lives are dispensable.

At the same time, despite the potential for political action stemming from the image and fellow-feeling, there are limits to this. For one, with advanced photo editing tools, images can be faked. And in the age of social media where people are exposed to these images of suffering and where they can indicate solidarity by merely clicking like on a post but nothing more beyond it, the question remains: what would lead to action? On this, Susan Sontag notes that

Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our incompetence. (101)



She adds, "The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated." The danger is when one starts feeling one can do nothing. Or when one refuses to look.

In one tandem talk that photojournalist and The Nightcrawlers member Raffy Lerma and I gave, we asked the audience to write down what they felt and thought after listening to Raffy's presentation and seeing the images. Most felt disturbed and angry that the killings are happening, and they wanted to know what can be done and how they can help. Yet, in another tandem talk, an audience member asked why the victims of drug users' crimes were not photographed as well. In this instance, recognition is reserved for crime victims.

The proliferation of images of suffering can also have the effect of desensitizing people to violence, or of shocking them and numbing them, or of scaring people into inaction. Some people have reacted as such to Lerma's photos, with people having told us that they felt shocked and helpless. However, Slovic and colleagues' study shows that the individual can also become numb to suffering when the victims are presented as numbers or statistics, particularly as the number of victims rises. According to them, the larger the number of people suffering, the more apathy. This is because it is difficult for our brains to process one million people killed or fleeing from violence. They suggest that people, instead, care for individuals. Slovic explains that "individual stories and individual photographs can be effective for a while. They capture our attention – they get us to see the reality, to glimpse the reality at a scale we can understand and connect to emotionally. But then there has to be somewhere to go with it" (qtd. in Resnick, "A Psychologist Explains"). He cites as an example the photo of Aylan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian boy who drowned in the Mediterranean in 2015 together with his mother and brother as they tried to reach Europe. The photo of his dead body on a beach sparked global grief and outrage and prompted political decisions on migration and asylum in Europe. We see here that images and stories such as the death in 2017 of Kian delos Santos, who was captured on video being dragged away by policemen in Manila before being killed, leading to massive protests in the Philippines, can be important turning points in a tide of violence. But only when people actually do something about it.

And this leads me back to Azoulay's work.

### The Civil Contract of Photography

For Azoulay, there is a need to identify a disaster as regime made and to lay bare its blueprint and the differential body politic that undergirds it in order to restore the citizenship of those who have been treated as flawed or noncitizens (*The Civil Contract* 17). One way through which this can be done is by developing the "civil skill" to look at photographs of regime-made disasters. Going beyond empathy and compassion, Azoulay (*The Civil Contract* 21) insists that citizenship must be reconceptualized "as a framework of partnership and solidarity among those who are governed, a framework that is neither constituted nor circumscribed by the sovereign." As such, it resists the differentiation of the body politic between citizens and flawed and noncitizens. This necessitates a recognition that the suffering of those classified as flawed citizens is nonroutine and they should thus be protected, and that those categorized as citizens are implicated in their suffering. Towards this end, she calls for a "civil contract of photography" that

assumes that, at least in principle, the users of photography, possess a certain power to suspend the gesture of the sovereign power which seeks to totally dominate the relations between them as governed—governed into citizens and noncitizens, thus making disappear the violation of citizenship. ("On Her Book" 1)

She asks,

What conditions prevent photos of horror of certain type of governed from becoming emergency claims? The association of citizenship with disaster and the characterization of certain populations as being more susceptible to disaster than others show that citizenship is not a stable status that one simply struggles to achieve, but an arena of conflict and negotiation. ("On Her Book" 3)

She insists that we have to develop the civil skill to look at photographs and recognize our responsibility towards the image and to others and in shaping the future. It is a skill that is "activated the moment one grasps that citizenship is...a tool of a struggle or an

obligation to others to struggle against injuries inflicted on those others, citizen and noncitizen alike—other who are governed along with her” (*The Civil Contract* 14). Viewing photographs of suffering is a civil skill because the photograph is an event that is not just determined by the photographer’s intentions and style (Azoulay, “Getting Rid of the Distinction”). The motivations of some members of The Nightcrawlers for using photographs to tell stories of the drug war and gather evidence towards seeking accountability as well as directly assisting survivors and families are explicit in their exhibits and public talks. These motivations and political agenda have shaped the ways in which they present their images, often in collaboration with victims of the drug war, as seen in the *Nanlaba(n)* exhibit. But while one can interrogate photographic intentions and aesthetics, I would like to shift the attention in this paper to the responsibility of the spectator as well, following Azoulay. This is because the photograph, as Azoulay argues, is relational (Azoulay, “Getting Rid of the Distinction”). It is the product of various encounters involving not only the photographer but also the photographed and the spectator, all of whom bring to bear their readings of the image that exceed the intention of the photographer or the image’s owner (Azoulay, “Regime-Made Disaster” 38). The photograph as an *event* also means that it is embedded in histories and conditions that enabled the photographic event to occur in the first place. Following this conceptualization of the photograph, Azoulay argues for a civil view where the spectator gazes “not only at the photographed person but at all those who took part in the act of photography” (“Getting Rid of the Distinction” 259). This includes the spectator themselves.

Relatedly, Azoulay opposes the distinction between the aesthetic and the political in photographs of suffering, arguing that “the aesthetic is a necessary dimension of any image and the political is not a trait but the relations between a plurality of persons...” (“Getting Rid of the Distinction” 250). That is, “the political judgement of taste” where an “expert spectator” makes a judgement on an image for being “too aesthetic” or “too political” ignores the process of co-construction of the photograph between that of the camera, the photographed, the photographer, and the spectator (245–248). Moreover, such judgments of taste direct an image’s worth and meaning, thereby shaping how the audience views it (246). At the same time, it

can deny agency and even potentially inflict violence on those who are photographed (*Civil Imagination* 51). Instead, she calls for viewing photographs of suffering as document and evidence to make visible the regime-made disaster.

This necessitates a “change in the field of vision” to seek “the traces of the citizens or other populations involved in the production of the regime-made disaster...” (“Regime-Made Disaster” 30). In other words, the viewer of the image needs to look not only at what is within the frame of the photograph but beyond it as well. Looking beyond the frame necessitates inquiring into the conditions that led to that photographic event and to consider the participation of the spectator who is viewing the photograph (40). These politics and ethics of viewing marked by an obligation and responsibility to others are an enactment of the “citizenship of photography” (Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* 194).

However, the viewing of these photographs beyond the frame and thereby the understanding of how the images are embedded within broader historical, political, social, and economic contexts, are also largely shaped by the captions, narratives, and stories that accompany them. Thus, helping unpack the drug war as a regime-made disaster are the photo captions, social media posts, and public talks that members of The Nightcrawlers and families of the victims, all of whom are witnesses to the war on drugs, as well as human rights advocates and artist-academic-activist-journalist collectives like SANDATA (Art and Data Against Disinformation and the War on Drugs) and RESBAK (Respond and Break the Silence Against the Killings), have provided. Exhibits such as *Nanlaba(n)* also show not only individual stories but also the collective toll and massive scale of the killings. Photojournalists I talked to take pains to name each individual victim and strive to provide information about their lives and the circumstances of their deaths in order to humanize them and not render their deaths as mere anonymous statistics. At the same time, these photojournalists situate the victims’ stories within a broader climate of impunity and violent policy in the country, inviting their audience to scrutinize these policies as well.

See, for instance, photojournalist and The Nightcrawlers’ Ezra Acayan’s 2018 photographs and social media post about DOTA (Defense of the Ancients online game) player Joshua Laxamana that

dives deeper into who he was and his family and how his family grieved for him. His photographs of the family of Laxamana and his caption helped generate condemnation of the killing of the young man and the disappearance of his friend Julius Santiago Sebastian among the global DOTA community. Meanwhile, his and his group’s coverage of the story of Roger Herrero, a pedicab driver shot by police and left for dead, and their call for help for his medical expenses were met with a quick positive response from members of the public. In Acayan’s caption, we learn about the harrowing experience of Herrero in the hands of police, of how he was abducted and forced to admit to a series of robberies, of how he begged for mercy for the sake of his children, and of how the police responded by telling him to pray as the gun was cocked on his head. We are informed too of the manner in which, despite pleas for mercy, Herrero was shot in the head with the bullet shattering his jaw. And of how Herrero survived and wrote his ordeal on a sheet of paper, thinking that he would soon die. Yet, the suffering did not end there. Acayan shares as well the impact of this violence on Herrero and his family. Without this careful contextualization of the photographs, it would have been difficult to enact the civil view.

The arresting quality of the photographs was, however, the first step in drawing the viewer to look. Acayan’s photograph of Herrero, which was included

in the *Nanlaba(n)* exhibit, is striking. Herrero’s head is wrapped in bandages, with a gauze on his right cheek where the bullet entered. He stares straight at the camera, his eyes seemingly teary, weary, and fearful, emotions that are heightened by the beads of sweat on his forehead. In confronting the viewer directly with his gaze, Herrero seems to invite us, nay, to challenge us to see his harrowing experience and to do something about it. In this encounter between photographed, photograph, and spectator, the responsibility is shifted to the latter, who must now read and feel the image as evidence of a regime-made disaster in which we, the spectator, are implicated.

I turn at this juncture to one of the photographs that has become iconic of the drug war<sup>13</sup> and that was part of the *Nanlaba(n)* exhibit. In the photograph, Jennilyn Olayres tearfully hugs her partner Michael Siaron as spectators look on in a major thoroughfare in Metro Manila, the grief on her face highlighted by the TV floodlights and cameras that covered the crime scene. A cardboard next to his body bore the word *Pusher*. Siaron was shot by unidentified assailants allegedly for being involved in illegal drugs. The image became viral and was quickly referred to by the public as *La Pieta* for its uncanny similarity to Michelangelo’s sculpture of the Virgin Mary cradling the body of Jesus Christ. Lerma would explain in his talks about his photographs of the drug war that he never gave the name *La Pieta*

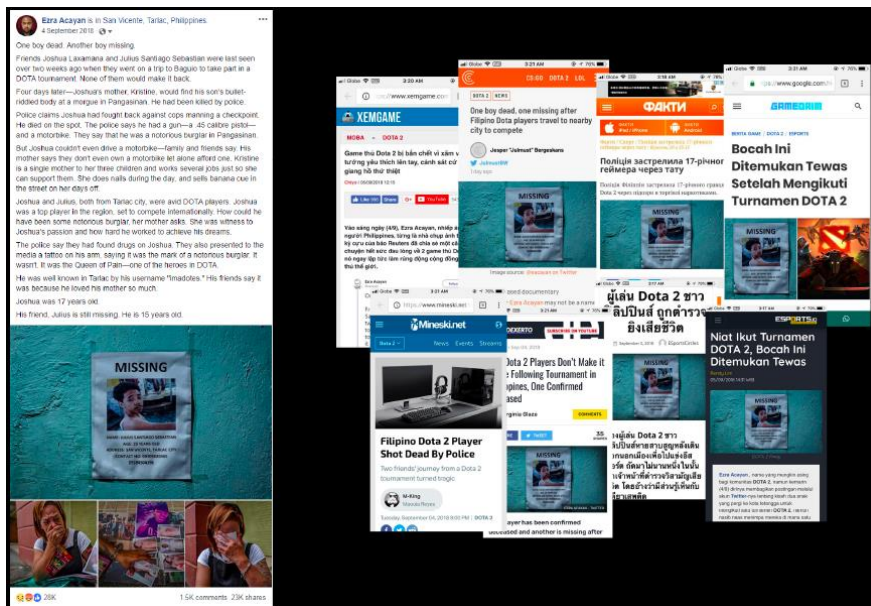


Figure 2. Ezra Acayan’s Facebook post about Joshua Laxamana and screenshots of the response of the global DOTA community (September 4, 2018). Image from Ezra Acayan.





Figure 3. Ezra Acayan's Facebook post about Roger Herrero's ordeal and his appeal for help for Herrero's medical expenses (November 15, 2018). Image from Ezra Acayan.



Figure 4. The crowdfunding page for Roger Herrero, exceeding by almost 60% its funding goal (November 29, 2018). Image from Ezra Acayan.



to the image. And yet, he notes, the name is apt. *Pieta* is Italian for "pity," Lerma would say. "I think this is the message of the photo. Pity for the victims and their families." This braiding of meanings was cemented when the *Inquirer* published the photograph on its front page, headlined with the Catholic Church's statement on the unfolding drug war: "Thou Shall Not Kill."

The photo defined the tragedy of the war on drugs, humanized its victims, provided a powerful religious evaluative frame for resisting the killings, received national and international attention, and galvanized public outcry. But the photo was also contested and drew massive negative attention, including from Duterte, who belittled it as melodramatic during his first State of the Nation Address (Cayabyab, "Duterte Hits"). Furthermore, Lerma was accused on social media of faking the photograph despite evidence to the contrary.<sup>14</sup> In the years since, he and The Nightcrawlers have been bombarded with criticisms. "Our group has been called different names," Lerma shared in his acceptance speech during the 2020 Ka Pepe Diokno Human Rights Awards.

Those who hated what we do called us EJK [extrajudicial killings] journalists...others politicized our work and called us Yellow; many questioned our credibility and called us 'presstitutes,' destabilizers, *mga bayaran* or paid media, paid by drug lords. But these were empty words because we stood our ground, continued our work...[W]e have covered hundreds of killings and attended hundreds of wakes and funerals of victims...I remember many of them. I remember their names, their faces, even their families.

One of those victims whose wake he attended and whose name he remembers was Michael Saron.

As with any image, Lerma's *La Pieta* has multiple readings and affects. But as Lerma and I write elsewhere ("Regime-Made Disaster in Metro Manila"), in extending Azoulay's civil view, one can direct one's attention to the spectators *in* the photograph, those who stand behind the police tape looking at the crime scene, and what their gaze might embody. This could be the spectator who sees Saron as deserving the fate that befell him. Or the spectator who sees the scene as a spectacle and therefore does not feel any responsibility to Saron and Olayres. Or they could be the spectator who is shocked, feels helpless, or

refuses to look. Or one who thinks that such killings are wrong. At the same time, the civil view calls upon the spectator to inquire into the drug war policy and rhetoric of violent othering and killings—whether in the context of police operations or vigilante-style killings, which Duterte himself has sanctioned—that led to the death of Saron and that exposed him and his partner to this event of photography. That is, without this broader climate of impunity enabled by the drug war and Duterte's rhetoric, this photographic event might not have occurred.

A civil view asks too how we are, as part of the governed, responsible for this event as well. Furthermore, how do we comprehend our interdependence and imagined identification with those who have suffered so that we ask, as Butler does, "What is it in the Other that I have lost?" (*Precarious Life* 30). Thus, to acknowledge a commonality of loss so that we grieve and have fellow-feeling for those who have been classified as flawed and noncitizens. This is a reconceptualization of the political community towards one animated by relationality, codependency, and ethical responsibility (Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics" 13). Adapting a civil view of photographs of suffering and having a fellow-feeling response to these images is, I suggest, a step in building this political community.

Realizing this political community is however a challenging endeavor. During the *Nanlaba(n)* and *Tao Po* tour, there were tense moments when the group was confronted by supporters of Duterte. In Iceland, for instance, Santiago recounted that a group of ten Duterte supporters noisily arrived at the exhibit venue. One of them mockingly commented while looking at the images, "These pictures? These are just people who died from diabetes and hypertension and yet they are included in the exhibit!" Another person kicked the exhibit stand, pretending to trip. Santiago approached them and told them that they can ask him questions because he took some of the photos. But, similar to the man whom I talked to in the opening of this paper, these individuals refused to engage in a conversation with Santiago. Meanwhile, during the roundtable discussion in Iceland with Marissa Lazaro, who lost her son Chris to the drug war, Lazaro was repeatedly interrupted by an audience member as she painfully shared how Chris was killed and how she fought for justice for his death. She was accused of being fake and overly dramatic.



Figure 5. Raffy Lerma's photo of Jennilyn Olayres cradling Michael Siaron on the front page of the Philippine Daily Inquirer's Sunday edition (July 24, 2016).

Notwithstanding these incidents, organizers of *Nanlaba(n)* also shared with me numerous stories of responses to the photographs during the tour that gesture towards a reconceptualization of the political community prompted by the images and the narratives of the mothers. In Rome, a female Duterte supporter went up to Lazaro after the event, hugged her, and told her that she would not have known what to do if she were in her position. In London, a British ardent supporter of Duterte said during the *Tao Po* talk-back with the mothers that, after seeing the exhibit and listening to the talk-back, he had to admit to himself that the killings were really happening. Meanwhile, in several instances during *Nanlaba(n)*'s tour, some in the audience shared their family's personal experience with the drug war, stories that they have kept hidden from their peers in the diaspora. The exhibit and the discussion with the mothers gave these people the courage to speak up and seek support. Meanwhile, in Berlin, a woman reacted that the exhibit was "very powerful" and "pierced" her heart. "You ask yourself," she told me, "why is this happening like this?"

These indicate the multiple meanings and affects that are brought to bear upon images of atrocities as the images and their accompanying stories travel across multiple spaces and publics. They also highlight the challenges as well as the possibilities of provoking political action through these images.

## Concluding Remarks

One of my takeaways from the works of Azoulay and Butler is that we are responsible for each other, that we need to find, in the words of Butler, "a basis for community" ("Violence, Mourning Politics" 9). That is, we cannot let our political community be determined by the state and other dominant institutions that have the power to define who can suffer and who should not suffer, whose suffering is a cause for alarm and whose is not, whose suffering can be rendered visible and whose is invisible. I envision these politics and ethics of viewing images of suffering that is grounded on fellow-feeling and imagined identification as well as on the relationality, powers of mourning, and ethical responsibility that Butler asserts and informed by the ontology of photography, citizenship, and civil skill called forth by Azoulay as a counterpoint to violent othering and a way to unmask a regime-made disaster and build affective solidarity and collective action.

This is all the more important in light of the profound and transformative impact of this stance of viewing on those whose suffering has been ignored. During an event in Manila in 2019 where I delivered a talk based on this paper, followed by inputs from RESBAK's Kiri Dalena and The Nightcrawlers' Kimberly dela Cruz, two women who lost their kin to the drug war responded. One of them said that the event and the outpouring of support from the audience made her realize that their lives have worth. "I realized," she said, "that even if we are poor, we can fight for our rights."

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> It has been challenging to verify the exact death toll of the war on drugs, with the police categorizing 29,000 deaths as "under inquiry" as of February 2019, of which only under 10% they relate to the drug war (United Nations High Commissioner on Human Rights 5). Yet, a study by Coronel and colleagues ("The Uncounted Dead") indicate that the number of drug-war-related killings is higher than those published by the police, with many uncounted deaths. Meanwhile, the Philippine Commission on Human Rights estimates that the drug war has killed more than 27,000 people between 2016 and 2018 alone (Maru, "CHR Chief: Drug War Deaths"). During the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown from April to June 2020, the number of killings rose by 50% compared to the previous four months (Robertson, "Another Spike").

<sup>2</sup> In his first half year in office, Duterte's approval rating was 83% (Lamchek 201). During the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, it rose to 91%, according to the Social Weather Stations (Calonzo, "Duterte's Trust Rating").

<sup>3</sup> In 2018, police classified 5,000 deaths as due to legitimate antidrug operations. A further 23,000 deaths are officially classified as "homicide cases under investigation" where perpetrators could be vigilante groups and drug gangs (Maru, "CHR Chief: Drug War Deaths"). See also Evangelista's investigative report on how policemen outsourced killings to a Tondo vigilante group ("What Did the CSG Do Wrong?").



<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch furthermore reports that police planted guns, spent ammunition, and drug packets on those killed to justify police's *nanlaban* claim (Human Rights Watch, "License to Kill").

<sup>5</sup> In Dahlia Simangan's analysis, Duterte and his state agents' drug war policy, rhetoric, and actions correspond to Gregory Stanton's stages of genocide, which are classification, symbolization, dehumanization, organization, polarization, preparation, extermination, and denial.

<sup>6</sup> This differs from the common understanding of disaster as linked to a natural hazard.

<sup>7</sup> Cornelio and Lasco, however, also discuss that there are religious leaders who pushed back against Duterte's drug war not only when he became president but also when he was still Davao City's mayor.

<sup>8</sup> See also Lasco and Yu on how members of the media and civil society have contributed to the "state of exception" and justification of killings by "exceptionalizing" *shabu* (crystal methamphetamine) in Philippine political and popular discourse.

<sup>9</sup> This treatment of witnesses and families runs counter to the journalism code of ethics. See, for instance, the Photojournalists Center of the Philippines' code of ethics.

<sup>10</sup> For an in-depth discussion on the disinformation industry in the Philippines, see Ong and Cabañes.

<sup>11</sup> I emphasize the relationship between affective solidarity, collective responsibility, and fellow-feeling to address some of the critical takes on the possibilities and limits of empathy, pity, and compassion vis-à-vis social justice. See for instance the edited volume *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*. See also Clare Hemmings's critique of the limits of empathy in feminist affective solidarity.

<sup>12</sup> Azoulay points out that captions can foreclose other readings of an image. She thus insists on a critical approach to captions, especially for images and captions produced by perpetrators of atrocities. She analyzed in particular the photographic archives of the Israeli Government's Press Office of Palestinians ("Regime-Made Disaster").

<sup>13</sup> Lerma and I discuss this and further details about this photographic encounter in our forthcoming manuscript *Regime-Made Disaster in Metro Manila: Beyond an Aesthetics Reading of Photographs of Duterte's "Drug War"*. Lerma has kept in touch with the family of Siaron as well as with Olayres after this image was taken.

<sup>14</sup> In the digital age and with access to photo editing software, faking photographs becomes easier to achieve and complicates the power of photographs to serve as document and evidence. In one of his talks to fellow photojournalists, Lerma said that "in this age of fake news, you really have to defend your photographs, your stories.

You have to defend the truth." He thus started giving talks in documentaries, public events, and workshops.

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