

BEYOND POPULISM

Angry Politics and the Twilight of Neoliberalism

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CHAPTER NINE | NOAH THERIAULT

Euphemisms We Die By

On Eco-Anxiety, Necropolitics,
and Green Authoritarianism in the Philippines

Death on the roads, no electricity, no food and water, and people walking on the streets like zombies, looking for food.” This is how Rodrigo Duterte described the city of Tacloban to reporters on November 12, 2013, five days after it was devastated by Typhoon Haiyan, known as Yolanda in the Philippines (Lacorte 2013). Haiyan was, at the time, the most powerful land-falling tropical cyclone in recorded history. Its trajectory across the densely populated Visayas region left more than seven thousand dead, some four million displaced, and many millions more subjected to long-term hardship. At the time, Duterte was still mayor of Davao, a city nearly three hundred miles to the south, with no direct authority to intervene in recovery efforts. But it was surely his ambition rather than his authority that took him to Tacloban and led him to criticize then-president Benigno Aquino III’s declaration of a State of Calamity. “It has to be a State of Emergency,” Duterte proclaimed.

Like Hurricane Katrina in the United States a decade earlier, Haiyan would go on to haunt the Philippines’s 2016 presidential election as a liability for the incumbent party. At a March 2016 campaign event in the northern Philippine city of Dagupan, then-candidate Duterte accused his opponent, Mar Roxas, of mismanaging Haiyan relief funds. Roxas, who had served as secretary of the Interior for President Aquino from 2012 to 2015, had overseen the government’s initial disaster response and recovery efforts. From Aquino’s naïve statements of preparedness before the storm to Roxas’s perceived lack of urgency in its aftermath, the administration’s poor handling of the disaster, Duterte alleged, stemmed from its broader corruption, incompetence, and indifference to the plight of ordinary people. Billions of pesos were unaccounted for, while thousands of survivors remained homeless. Mocking Aquino’s *Daang Matuwid* or Straight Path reform program, Duterte asked his audience, “Where will you find the straight path? If you ride on a motorcycle, you will fall down within one meter because the road is not properly paved. If you don’t know how

to ride on a motorcycle, I think you are not a real man. If you can’t handle ‘Yolanda’ well, you are not a real man” (Corrales 2016).

Duterte went on to win the election by relatively wide margins. Since then, he has continued to use Haiyan recovery efforts as an opening to demonstrate his executive efficacy and delegitimize the establishment embodied by his predecessor.¹ At an event marking the three-year anniversary of the storm’s landfall in Tacloban, the president accused officials involved in the recovery of “indolence” and ordered them to fast-track the release of housing to displaced families. (This was, characteristically, also a speech in which he made rambling, sexist comments about Vice President Leni Robredo’s legs.)

Even as a brutal antidrug campaign remains Duterte’s signature policy, his response to Haiyan reveals more than his self-styled brand of nationalist, anti-establishment populism. To be sure, it reflects both the “strongman” authoritarian impulse that has returned with a vengeance to Philippine politics and the role that disasters can play in the broader legitimization of such impulses. But there is, I believe, more to the story.

Beyond the sort of disaster opportunism one might expect from any aspiring autocrat, Duterte’s response to Haiyan dovetails with a broader set of rhetorical and policy interventions that serve to greenwash his authoritarian ambitions. The Duterte regime’s “green” hue may appear anomalous or exceptional amid what is otherwise a sharp (re)turn toward authoritarianism, and perhaps this is why most attempts to account for and theorize his ascent have little to say about the matter. But in fact the environment figures quite centrally in the regime’s consolidation, with climate adaptation, disaster management, and environmental enforcement all key to the promise of “real change” (*tunay na pagbabago*).

Duterte’s engagements in ecopolitics have two principal effects. On one hand, they work to defuse opposition by performing a commitment to cleaning up the environment and punishing those who despoil it. On the other, they help to coordinate collective anxiety about environmental and climatic disruption in service to a broader authoritarian agenda. That such sentiments, in turn, resonate with and amplify the increasingly nihilistic and illiberal mood of global society suggests that perceptions of global ecological crisis may play a greater role in the current authoritarian resurgence than we typically acknowledge.

To understand the greenwashing of authoritarianism in the Philippines, we must first consider the societal context that brought Duterte to power and

the ambivalent, on-again-off-again relationship he has had with the radical, anti-imperialist left. Although Duterte's agenda is not primarily environmental in focus—it is also revanchist, neoliberal, demagogic, and nationalist—we will see how his performative ecopolitics has sought to consolidate his populist, antiestablishment image amid a souring of his relationship with the left, mounting civil unrest, and rising inflation. Green authoritarianism, I will argue, also raises a larger question about how the necropolitical impulses that Duterte and his ilk embody are entangled with a deepening sense of epochal planetary crisis. This is a matter of global concern, but one that seems especially urgent in the current (political) climate of the Philippines, where intersecting socioenvironmental disasters have helped a so-called populist delegitimize democratic institutions and launch a brutal assault on civil rights.

(Neo)Liberalism and Its Discontents

Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte is among the current crop of populist, revanchist authoritarians to take power amid rising discontent with neoliberal policies, systemic corruption, and extreme inequality.² He is often compared to Donald Trump for his blatant misogyny and disregard for norms. But in fact Duterte comes from a political family and served as mayor of Davao, the Philippines's third largest city, for more than twenty years before he ran for president. In that role, he garnered notoriety—some would say infamy—for his brutal pursuit of “law and order,” including his well-documented use of paramilitary “death squads” to target alleged criminals and his admitted direct involvement in extrajudicial executions (Curato 2017). Like Trump, Duterte knows the cynical power of rape jokes in the age of hypermediated politics-as-entertainment; he knows the power of social media to disseminate misinformation and intimidation; and he knows the power of dehumanizing marginalized populations and then scapegoating them for societal problems. Recall that his campaign promised to “fatten the fish” of Manila Bay with the corpses of criminals, even if it meant killing as many people as the Nazi regime had done (Gomez 2016).

Unlike Trump, however, Duterte has faced few constraints in a context where the president of the Republic wields considerable constitutional powers, controls vital patronage networks, and has so far faced limited political opposition. As a result, his administration has delivered on its promise of mass murder while projecting an image of strength in matters of governance, foreign policy, and national security.³ Under Duterte's Operation Tokhang—a Cebuano

portmanteau for “knock” and “plead” (Rafael 2019, 147)—the Philippine National Police have unleashed a reign of terror, primarily in impoverished slum communities, as they have confronted suspected drug users and dealers in their homes, places of work, and on the street. At the start of the campaign, so-called Tokhang boxes began to appear in municipal buildings. As if leaving feedback in a chain restaurant, citizens were encouraged to fill these blue fiberglass boxes with anonymous tips on suspected “drug personalities” so that the police could knock on their door.

Since 2016, Duterte's violent, deeply classist war on drug users has claimed by some estimates more than 20,000 lives, including some 5,000 who have been murdered in encounters with the police (Billing and Cabato 2019; Sa-dongdong 2018). Thousands more have been compelled to “surrender” themselves as addicts or dealers and enroll in dubious rehabilitation programs. Jail and prison populations have swelled and, given the prominent role that penal institutions often play in organized drug trafficking, there is reason to believe that this campaign will actually strengthen the criminal networks that Duterte claims to despise (Gaviria 2017).

Faced with growing opposition due in large part to outrage over the violent deaths of minors like seventeen-year-old Kian delos Santos, whose sadistic murder by police was recorded on CCTV footage, the administration announced in October 2017 that the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) would take over control of narcotics investigations and enforcement from the Philippine National Police (PNP).⁴ Since the PDEA had reported few violent encounters with suspects, this change was supposed to stem the tide of killings and mollify so-called bleeding hearts (Mogato and Morales 2017). Less than two months later, however, the PNP resumed Operation Tokhang under the guise of better oversight by and coordination with PDEA. The steady stream of bloody “encounters” and lurid headlines resumed accordingly, with thousands more killed by police, vigilantes, and unidentified assailants in the months since.⁵

How did we come to this moment in Philippines? What of the People Power Revolution that overthrew the Marcos regime in 1986 and what of its promises of reform? To make a long story short, the so-called EDSA Republic, named for Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, where the momentous but peaceful demonstrations were held in February 1986, did not result in a substantial redistribution of wealth or power. Even as spaces opened up for critical journalism and oppositional politics, most of the same oligarchic families remained

in power and continued to violently suppress dissent through the use of state security forces and private paramilitaries. Rates of extrajudicial assassination have remained high year after year. Laying the groundwork for this continuity was a period of neoliberal restructuring that has exacerbated inequality and further weakened the redistributive powers of the state.

In the lead-up to the Marcos regime's collapse, the Philippines underwent one of the first rounds of structural adjustment and became a proving ground for a host of the fiscal, trade, and social policies that we shorthand as neoliberalism. Since then, efforts by successive governments to attract foreign capital and liberalize trade have further eroded domestic industries and increased reliance on the export of labor and raw materials (Bello 2016). Scholars have described neoliberal governance in the Philippines as the "anti-development state" in light of what often seems like an elite conspiracy to disrupt inclusive development of any kind in the interest of perpetuating social dependency (Bello et al. 2004). Rather than prioritizing investments in education, health-care, or food security, successive governments have focused on debt servicing, on attracting extractive and offshore industries, and on promoting remittances through migrant labor.

After ups and downs in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, growth has been more or less steady since 2000 and then quite rapid since 2010 as investors have grown increasingly confident in the Philippines's stability. As Don Robotham suggests (this volume), sustained macroeconomic growth has meant that rates of extreme poverty have declined in the Philippines and other parts of Asia, enabling an expansion of the middle class very different from what we see in most of the Global North. Lest we forget, however, this development remains deeply uneven and dispossessory. As in the Global North, neoliberal policies in the Philippines have further concentrated wealth and power in the hands of predatory elites, particularly but by no means exclusively in rural areas, where decades of failed agrarian reform perpetuate hardship and unrest (Lumibao 2018). Meanwhile, aspiring and actual members of the middle class remain fundamentally insecure about their prospects in the medium and long term—and increasingly frustrated with the failures of governance that underpin their insecurity. Aries Arugay offers a blunt summary: "Widespread discontent caused by predatory elites too lazy to build responsive institutions coupled with the inability of previous governments to address inequality and exclusion provided fertile ground for the rise of populists like Duterte" (Arugay 2018, 7).

Populist Diversions

Filipinos' disillusionment with the EDSA Republic dovetails with the global trajectory of neoliberal restructuring—and with a broader push to channel public resentment away from the oligarchs who have benefited from it. In her contribution to this volume, Preeti Sampat relates how the Modi regime in India uses Hindu nationalism to distract the public from a broader trajectory of "jobless growth" that has enriched elites at the expense of most everyone else. Similarly, the IBON Foundation has observed that, despite rapid GDP growth, real employment and income are declining in the Philippines, and the national debt is ballooning as a result of the "Build, Build, Build" infrastructure program (IBON 2019). Yet Duterte's enduring popularity suggests that his populist rhetoric has so far succeeded in diverting public attention away from the deeply uneven societal structures that remain intact.

In this respect, the Philippines is part of a global political-economic pattern. But there is also a political-ecological dimension to this pattern, as collective anxieties surrounding climate disruption, disaster risk, and environmental degradation stoke a larger sense of planetary crisis and thus help propel an authoritarian project cloaked in a performative shade of green.

Recall how, on the third anniversary of Typhoon Haiyan's landfall, Duterte ostentatiously ordered government agencies to expedite disaster recovery efforts. This coincided with a PR push reminding everyone that he had been the first Filipino official to arrive in storm-ravaged Tacloban and claiming that his order was already having a transformative impact on storm recovery. In a dramatic video produced by the Presidential Communications Operations Office, Duterte's return to Tacloban for the anniversary commemoration was presented as an act of "solidarity" by "the man who is willing to sacrifice his presidency, his honor, and his life to bring about genuine change in the country" (PCOO 2016b). An aide to the president even declared that the "problem besetting the Yolanda resettlement in three years is solved in just 18 days after President Duterte's 'tapang and malasakit' to the Yolanda victims made him to issue presidential directives to finish it without delay" (PCOO 2016a). "*Tapang at malasakit*"—which roughly translates as "courage and compassion"—was Duterte's campaign slogan and has since become the name of an "alliance" that supports the administration.

Not coincidentally, it was also in November 2016 that Duterte announced a reversal of his position on the Paris Climate Agreement: he was, he said,

persuaded to sign it despite his concerns about its impacts on industrialization. In the years since, the administration has repeatedly invoked his efficacy in responding to disasters and his commitment to climate-change adaptation. This propaganda belies the ongoing struggles of Haiyan survivors who remain in temporary housing and/or have lost their land to investors (Uson 2017; Yee 2018a, 2018b). It is also at odds with the government's support for the expansion of coal-fired power plants and oil-palm plantations.

As I detail below, disasters and climate change are not the only domains in which Duterte has sought to add a green inflection to his *tapang at malasakit*. First, though, *why* do environmental concerns seem to feature so prominently in the particular brand of authoritarianism that Duterte embodies? After all, many of the revanchists who have arisen in recent years have adopted a decidedly hostile stance toward environmental regulation—take, for example, the ardently antienvironmentalist platform of Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro (Sganzerla and Palatino 2018). Others, like Narendra Modi in India, have accepted UN awards for solar-power leadership while simultaneously working to dilute environmental regulations (DTE 2018). For his part, Duterte stands on even more ambiguous ground. He is often like Modi in his seemingly duplicitous embrace of environmentalism and aggressive development. But his positions on both social and environmental issues are in other instances in sync with those of progressives and even leftists. This ambiguity, I believe, reflects a broader set of competing impulses that have enabled Duterte to consolidate support from the left at key points in his career.

A Socialist, Neoliberal, “Fascist Original”

For those who know Duterte largely through the international media, it may come as a surprise to learn that he is a self-identified “socialist” who once declared that he wanted to be the Philippines’s “first leftist president” (Palatino 2017). These statements are difficult to reconcile with his deeply classist assault on petty drug users and dealers. And yet, unlike most of the revanchist authoritarians currently ascendant around the world, Duterte has backed a number of progressive social policies over the course of his political career while at times enjoying considerable albeit far from unanimous support from the left.

Where do these purported leftist credentials originate? They begin with Duterte’s mother, Soledad Roa Duterte, who participated actively in resistance

to the Marcos regime and in advocacy on behalf of women’s rights (Ranada 2017). Although Duterte himself has long expressed admiration for Ferdinand Marcos’s authoritarian rule, he has also made many references to his mother’s formative influence, no small part of which was her frequent recourse to corporal punishment (Paddock 2017). Second, as a university student, he studied under Jose Maria Sison, the founding chairman of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), and belonged to CPP-affiliated activist groups (Palatino 2017). While Duterte has since disclaimed any affiliation with the CPP’s armed wing, the New People’s Army (NPA), his distinctly anti-imperialist brand of nationalism very much aligns with that of the Philippine radical left. Finally, during his tenure as a city prosecutor, he witnessed and likely participated in a bloody counterinsurgency campaign in the streets of Davao, where the Philippine Constabulary and armed vigilante squads known as the *Alsa Masa* pursued and summarily executed suspected members of the NPA (Weiss 2017). But then, as mayor, Duterte built a reputation for deescalating tensions with the NPA by allowing the collection of “revolutionary taxes” and shifting the focus of the so-called Davao death squads to the pursuit of “criminals.” Some reports even claim that he helped the NPA “in its purge of urban revolutionaries who had deviated from the party’s Maoist line” (McBeth 2016). What is clear is that he developed some kind of a symbiotic relationship with the NPA while overseeing a number of progressive social policies, including, for example, the provision of healthcare to sex workers.⁶

This history notwithstanding, the Philippines’s sixteenth president is not by any conventional definition a leftist. So who then is he, politically speaking? It depends on whom you ask. Walden Bello, a prominent public intellectual and former member of the Philippine House of Representatives, describes Duterte as a “counterrevolutionary” and a “fascist original.” “Duterte’s charisma,” Bello writes, “would probably be best described as *cariño brutal*, a Filipino-Spanish term that denotes a volatile mix of will to power, a commanding personality, and gangster charm that fulfills his followers’ deep-seated yearning for a father figure who will finally end what they see as the ‘national chaos’” (Bello 2017). According to sociologists Herbert Docena and Gabriel Hetland, Dutertism is simply a form of “populist neoliberalism” that recasts standard-fare neoliberal policies in a mold of federalism, nationalism, and debt-financed fiscal expansion (Docena and Hetland 2016). Historian Alfred McCoy (2017) has argued that while Duterte shares the diplomatic adeptness and cultural charisma of past Filipino populists (Quezon and Marcos),

"[his] mix of machismo and narrow nationalism seems typical of this current crop of anti-globalization populists" (11). And political theorist Adele Webb (2017) puts the accent even more directly on nationalism, citing the rejection of US imperialism as Duterte's defining characteristic and as the source of his mass appeal. "He embodies," she writes, "the scrutinized Filipino 'native' subject of history, subordinated and looked down upon by the 'foreign' outsider; in standing up for 'the people,' he signifies a refusal to continue the indignity of the past" (139). But then again the president's rejection of foreign, especially Western, domination sits somewhat awkwardly alongside his toleration of Chinese military expansion in the South China Sea. As political scientist Richard Heyderian noted in the wake of a November 2018 state visit by Chinese president Xi Jinping, this selective nationalism "seems to have only exposed internal fault lines and widespread scepticism in the Philippines over Duterte's strategic flirtation with Beijing" (Heyderian 2019).

While to some extent these varying assessments represent a sort of disciplinary Rorschach test, they also evoke Duterte's own mercurial performativity. Duterte has himself proclaimed that only two out of his every five statements are true. The rest, he said, are "*kalokohan*"—a term that connotes jest, nonsense, and mischief (Romero 2017). This calculated *kalokohan* is what cultural historian Vicente Rafael (2018, see also 2019) underscores when he likens Duterte to a *pusong* or folkloric trickster:

In taking on the role of the dissipator in chief, Mr. President thumbs his nose at bourgeois demands for discipline and decorum. Instead, he becomes a sort of trickster figure who entertains by veiling his aggression with jokes and obscenities. As a trickster, he plays the role of the *pusong*, a staple figure in traditional komedya and folktales. It is the *pusong* who makes fun of those in power, while managing through deceit or humor to gain power himself.

Indeed, there is a certain cunning if not outright duplicity to much of what Duterte and his advisors say and do, making it risky to impute any stable ideological framework onto his vision or actions. As noted above, I see Duterte and his counterparts as agents of revanchist authoritarianism, a term that centers the resoundingly vengeful if ideologically variable impulses that seem to unite them. But he is also at turns a populist, a proponent of neoliberal policies, and an anti-imperialist nationalist, and in that sense all of the assessments I cited above ring true. Duterte embodies competing forces at work in

Philippine society and in the world more broadly. Per McCoy (2017), he "mediate[s] the contradictions, the structural flaws if you will, in the Philippine polity"—"a recurring tension between a nominally strong central government, headed by an empowered executive, and local elites who control their provincial peripheries through economic assets, political office, and extra-legal violence" (12).

Whatever the precise contours of Duterte's political identity, an important part of what has made him such a deft populist is his ability to consolidate support from state security forces while deferring opposition from the left. This he accomplishes in large part by offering a defiantly independent alternative to the perceived corruption, criminality, and chaos that result from submitting to the hypocrisy of Western liberalism. As he said when faced with US president Barack Obama's criticism: "You must be kidding. Who is he to confront me? America has one too many to answer for the misdeeds in this country. . . . As a matter of fact, we inherited this problem from the United States. Why? Because they invaded this country and made us their subjugated people" (quoted in Webb 2017, 130).

During the 2016 campaign, Duterte's personal history, anti-imperialist nationalism, commitment to federalism, and performative disdain for establishment elites all read favorably to many on the Philippine left. When he then appointed a number of prominent leftist and progressives to his inaugural cabinet, it seemed possible that his administration would coopt at least some elements of what would otherwise be his main opposition. Perhaps predictably, though, this prospect has since proven dead on arrival.

Losing the Red . . .

The first months of Duterte's presidency brought a long-awaited resumption of peace talks with the National Democratic Front and a "wait-and-see" attitude among many on the left. Since then, however, relations have soured. Several of his leftist appointees were rejected by Congress, and several have resigned, including one who was indicted on trumped-up murder charges. In May 2017, Duterte declared martial law on the island of Mindanao after the city of Marawi was seized by an Islamist rebel group, and six months later, the aforementioned peace talks were suspended following violations of the ceasefire agreement and Duterte's decision to declare the CPP and NPA terrorist groups. In February 2018, an array of more than six hundred activists,

including the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, were included on a list of suspected CPP-NPA members and thus labeled terrorists, drawing widespread outrage and condemnation. In September of the same year, rumors began to spread about an alleged Communist coup plot known as “Red October,” stoking fears of a return to a Marcos-style crackdown on dissidents. This was accompanied by calls from the military for a ban of “partisan political activity” on college campuses, said to be “hotbeds” of recruitment for the CPP. It is unclear to what extent Duterte has been pressured into shifting his approach, but as he comes to rely more and more on former military officers and other hardliners, it is likely that his estrangement with the left will continue.⁷

Meanwhile, of course, the drug war has proven bloodier and more indiscriminate than many Duterte agnostics had imagined, and it has fed a further escalation of extrajudicial killing in the realm of electoral and environmental politics. To cite but one grisly figure, forty-eight Filipino environmental activists were assassinated in 2017, according to the NGO Global Witness (AFP 2018).⁸

What is perhaps most troubling about the escalation of violence under Duterte is not its novelty, but its continuity with the past. From colonial times to the present, political power in the archipelago has relied heavily on an “informal devolution of coercive authority,” resulting in what McCoy *pace* Weber calls “a virtual oligopoly on armed violence” (McCoy 2017, 13). And this state (of) terror, while fundamental to the maintenance of power, also works over time to undermine the legitimacy of the state and to engender collective resentment toward the elites who control it. The Duterte presidency increasingly reads as a reprise of Marcos, and this sense of *déjà vu* has not been lost on Filipino activists both in the country and abroad. As a result, resistance has intensified, most notably in the massive protests outside the State of the Nation Address in July 2018 and in the reported surge of rebel activity in Mindanao, as have the state’s efforts to suppress it.

... but Keeping the Green?

But even as Duterte has failed in his attempts to consolidate support on the left, he has managed to maintain a certain degree of credibility among environmentalists. In fact, I would even argue that the environment has become a central dimension of his authoritarian program. It’s not just that he has

promised to “Build, Build, Build” massive quantities of infrastructure, a proposition with major consequences for the politics of land, labor, and the environment. It is, rather, that environmental protection and disaster management have become two of the most important ways in which Duterte performs his commitment to impose public order and discipline. Above I described how this performance operated in the context of Typhoon Haiyan, and it worth noting that this pattern has continued with subsequent disasters, including the one precipitated by Typhoon Mangkhut (Ompong) in September 2018.

Disaster response, though, is only part of the story. To understand the broader workings of this dynamic and their implications for our understanding of resurgent authoritarianism, let’s return to the matter of Duterte’s initial cabinet appointments. Among the appointees—alongside a smattering of military officers, businesspeople, neoliberal economists, and leftist activists—was a woman named Regina Lopez, a self-described “yoga missionary” and environmentalist who was tapped for secretary of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) (AFP 2017). As heiress to one of the wealthiest and most powerful families in the country, Lopez was no radical, but she enacted some fairly radical policies.

Already known for her conservation work and antimining advocacy, Lopez expedited a mining audit initiated by the outgoing Aquino administration and then ordered the closure or suspension of more than two dozen active mining operations. Going beyond Aquino’s Executive Order 79 (EO 79), which suspended the issuance of new mining permits pending the passage of updated legislation, this move against ongoing operations shocked the Philippine mining sector, provoked a backlash among those with vested interests, and led to the eventual rejection of Lopez’s appointment by Congress. But her order also brought praise from environmentalists around the country and around the world, even as it coincided with the bloody initial months of the drug war. Since that time, Duterte has made statements linking mining to poverty and national dispossession, but his administration has moved to reconsider both Aquino’s EO 79 and Lopez’s order while he has claimed that his hands are tied by existing legislation. With the moratorium on mining lifted in July 2018, high-level efforts underway to amend EO 79, and assassinations of environmental activists continuing unabated, this episode seems unlikely to have a major impact on destructive mineral extraction in the long run.

If the status of mining remains somewhat unclear, the pollution of tourist destinations has provided a clearer read on the role of environmental politics

in Duterte's authoritarian agenda. Upon Lopez's removal as DENR secretary, a retired general named Roy Cimatu was appointed to the post, and he has since found ways to enact a version of green authoritarianism that is less politically contentious but no less performative. For example, after describing the country's most popular tourist destination, Boracay, as a "cesspool," Duterte declared a State of Calamity on the island and ordered its closure to tourists for a period of six months (Ranada 2018). Backed by riot police, General Cimatu pursued the ensuing cleanup effort as a mission to "search and destroy" illegal sewers, unpermitted structures, and other regulatory violations. Hundreds of businesses were ordered closed or fined, and many buildings were demolished. As the demolitions unfolded, many speculated that the cleanup, particularly the newly opened beachfronts and widened roads, would ultimately benefit large developers (Tayona 2018). These suspicions were only reinforced when Duterte proposed using agrarian-reform measures to distribute land to Boracay residents so that they could then sell it to developers (Hutton 2018).

In addition to the closure of Boracay, a number of other popular tourist destinations have been subjected to regulatory crackdowns and threats of closure. While the long-term benefits of these operations remain to be seen, the short-term costs have been borne most acutely by the many low-wage workers who were displaced, while the short-term gains have accrued largely to Duterte's image as a decisive law enforcer and to the contractors hired to undertake the work. As Mark Thompson noted, "the shutdown [of Boracay] played well to his fan base as another demonstration of his iron will to cleanse the country of its social ills" (Thompson 2018).

Environments of Anxiety

Duterte is by no means the first revanchist authoritarian to show an interest in environmental regulation, nor are his interventions in environmental politics unprecedented in the Philippines.⁹ As Kristian Saguin has shown, the administration's attempts to resolve conflicts between fishing communities and large-scale aquaculture in Laguna Lake echo those of Marcos, who also promised to "return the lake to the people" (Saguin 2019). Unlike Marcos, however, Duterte has approached the lake as a crisis of environmental quality as much as one of social distribution, and he has relied on it to shore up his environmental credentials even as his attempt to crack down on mining has faltered.

In the end, Duterte's environmentalism is like his socialism: performative, selective, and often contradicted in practice. From the highly controversial reclamation project in Manila Bay to China's exploits in the South China Sea to the expansion of monocrop plantations in Palawan, his administration has supported or tolerated many of the same ecologically destructive practices as its predecessors did. Even so and even as his relationship with the left has collapsed, spectacles of authoritarian environmental protection have become an important part of his approach. This makes political sense in a context where people feel profound anxiety and resentment not just about social inequality, corruption, and the legacies of colonialism but also about environmental degradation and climate change.

Put simply, the dispossession of working-class Filipinos has not been an exclusively political-economic process—it has also been a political-ecological one. The Philippines has undergone rapacious deforestation, resource extraction, and ecological degradation over the past century, and this has come at the expense of workers, peasants, and the environments that sustain them. Faced with what seems like a constant string of landslides, floods, typhoons, and other disasters, the Philippines is not just one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world, it is also one of the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change. Surveys have found that some 72 percent of Filipinos say they are "very concerned" about climate change, and some 85 percent report they are feeling its effects (Ranada 2015; Yeo 2013).¹⁰

Under these conditions, Duterte has channeled collective anxiety and resentment not just into a classist drug war and a nationalist assault on liberalism but also into a performative green authoritarianism that promises to punish polluters (especially poor "squatters") for subjecting the nation to environmental risk. Similarly, he has co-opted the rhetoric of the climate-justice movement, as, for example, when he said during an Al Jazeera interview: "Who's responsible for the climate? Who's responsible for Haiyan? Who's responsible for the monsters of tornado? It's industrialized countries. We had nothing to do with it" (Punzalan 2016).

By focusing on discrete, often remote places and "others," these moves serve to channel collective angst away from structural conditions. In typical reactionary fashion, Duterte claims that he alone can avenge the people's grievances while simultaneously embodying and amplifying the very forces that aggrieve them. Results from the May 2019 midterm elections suggest that this strategy is working: the President's allies now occupy a majority of seats in the

House of Representatives, Senate, and Supreme Court, suggesting that his administration may yet oversee a redrafting of the 1987 Constitution (Calonzo, Jiao, and Heijmans 2019).

Life or, Well, Death in the Necropocene

In his influential essay on necropolitics, Achille Mbembe (2003) offers a corrective to Michel Foucault's theory of biopower, which describes the socio-political forces that produce certain kinds of bodies in order to make them live and others in order to make or let them die. Biopower, Mbembe argues, "is insufficient to account for contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death" (39). Examining enactments of indiscriminate violence, state terror, and collective punishment by (neo)colonial regimes, Mbembe develops the concept of necropower to describe how "in our contemporary world, weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of *death-worlds*, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of *living dead*" (40). In Mbembe's account, these weapons operate as technologies of rule in the hands of late-modern colonial regimes and as part of a larger "concatenation of multiple powers: disciplinary, biopolitical, and necropolitical" (29).

Necropower certainly seems to be at work in the indiscriminate terror and death that Duterte has unleashed and in the violent colonial foundations on which Philippine state power is built (more on this below).¹¹ But this is not the only form that necropower takes in the world today. In an essay titled "Haunted Geologies," Nils Bubandt (2017) argues that the operations of necropower are shifting amid the ecological upheavals and anxieties that we associate with the Anthropocene, a proposed new geologic epoch in which humans have become a dominant geophysical force on the planetary scale. Bubandt writes that "humans, animals, plants, fungi, and bacteria now live and die under conditions that may be critically shaped by human activity but that are also increasingly outside of human control. . . . In the Anthropocene, necropolitics operates under the sign of a metaphysical indeterminacy rather than certainty, unintended consequences rather than control" (G125).

I would add that any large-scale deployment of necropower raises the possibility of metaphysical indeterminacy and a loss of control. Regardless, this

sense of uncontrolled necropolitical agency at the planetary scale is, I believe, part of what engenders collective anxiety and thus carves affective pathways for authoritarian consolidation. But of course not everyone experiences these times of metaphysical indeterminacy and epochal anxiety in the same way. Just as human societies bear vastly uneven levels of historical responsibility for bringing about Anthropocenic conditions, countries like the Philippines bear a vastly disproportionate share of the resulting risks.

Reinforcing this disparity are narratives that foretell an "apocalypse" as a result of climate chaos. Examples of these narratives abound, but one recent and especially clear example is David Wallace-Wells's viral essay, "The Uninhabitable Earth." Writing for *New York Magazine*, Wallace-Wells (2017) declares that "the mass extinction we are now living through has only just begun; so much more dying is coming." The essay, as Audra Mitchell and I have written elsewhere, goes on to "regale readers with graphic imagery of starvation and perpetual war in a coming climate apocalypse" (in press). While critically registering his concerns about human "dominion" over the earth, in the same breath Wallace-Wells embraces the idea that humans have weaponized the earth against ourselves, suggesting that we have "[engineered] first in ignorance and then in denial a climate system that will now go to war with us for many centuries, perhaps until it destroys us." The earth, he writes, is an "angry beast" or, better yet, a "war machine."

Perhaps it goes without saying, but the "we" in Wallace-Wells's account includes all of humanity only up to the point of salvation. Who, after all, would be doing all of the dying he envisions and who would have the means to engineer their survival? Paradoxically, the silences around race, class, gender, nationality, and colonial occupations speak volumes about who survives—and who does not—in the world envisioned by such narratives. It is no coincidence that the "living dead" of Duterte's deeply classist war on drugs are drawn largely from the same marginalized communities whose anonymous annihilation is foretold in climate apocalypse narratives and whose supposed deficits of "resilience" are the subject of neoliberal climate-adaptation schemes (Walch 2018).

And as speculative narratives of eco-apocalypse proliferate, so too do apocalyptic depictions of actual climate-related disasters. In the aftermath of Haiyan, reporters from around the world descended on Tacloban, telling heart-breaking tales of survivors' losses, of their attempts to secure food and medical care, of their psychological trauma. Many reports described survivors

as “walking around like zombies,” and as we saw above this was a term Duterte himself echoed in his account of what he encountered there. As one widely quoted witness put it, “it’s like a movie” (Leon and Demick 2013). Keep in mind here that those most affected by Haiyan—and most likely to be destitute in its wake—were poor communities living in unprotected areas along the seashore. Although different words were used, we saw an analogical dehumanization of racialized survivors in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and, more recently, in Trump’s baldly white supremacist response to the devastation of Puerto Rico. Such imagery resonates ominously with what Bubandt describes in “Haunted Geologies.” What we have here is a planetary necropolitics for the Anthropocene.

Euphemisms We Die By

What, then, are we to make of the resonances between the necropolitics of authoritarian state terror as enacted by tyrants like Rodrigo Duterte and the necropolitics of the Anthropocene as envisioned by authors like David Wallace-Wells? Posing this question neither equates these actors nor diminishes the tremendous gravity, scale, and pace of planetary ecological change. My aim, rather, is to provoke critical reflection on how a growing sense of epochal planetary rupture might both reflect and augment the affective conditions that conduce revanchist authoritarianism. When so many authoritarian regimes take root in narcissism and feed on necropolitics, how might similar impulses shape our anxious fascination with the (necro)power of humans-as-planetary-force? Do eco-apocalyptic narratives, even critical ones, risk normalizing the greenwashed brand of authoritarianism that Duterte represents?

I offer these questions as a provocation about the potential effects of eco-apocalyptic anxiety in authoritarian projects, for which Duterte offers one compelling archetype. This essay’s title—“Euphemisms We Die By”—riffs on George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s influential book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), which traces how key metaphors (e.g., “time is money”) structure our perceptions and actions in the world. It is my contention that performative environmentalism offers Duterte one relatively effective way to euphemize and thus normalize his administration’s broader assault on democratic institutions and civil rights.¹² Duterte’s environmental politics are not an exception to his revanchist authoritarian project—they are an integral part of it. Just as he exploits the legitimate anger and frustration that people feel about

inequality and corruption, he exploits their legitimate fear and anxiety in the face of planetary ecological disruption. Both of these moves provide cover for the continuation of a necropolitical regime that, since colonial times, has directed state-backed violence at dissidents and other marginalized populations. At a larger scale, I submit, eco-apocalyptic narratives escalate our growing sense of desperation and powerlessness—and thus create an opening for the greenwashing of authoritarianism.¹³

Notes

1. Duterte has himself faced mounting criticism from Haiyan survivors. An advocacy group called Peoples’ Surge described him as “inutile” in a statement released on the storm’s fifth anniversary (LSDE 2018).

2. The term *revanchism* derives from the French *revanche* (revenge) and from a right-wing nationalist movement known as *revanchisme*, which formed in late-nineteenth-century France in reaction to the Paris Commune, the perceived decadence of the Second Republic, and the loss of territory in the Franco-German War. My use of revanchist authoritarianism refers to current political conditions around the world that favor demagogic and/or “strongman” figures—including Duterte in the Philippines, Trump in the United States, Putin in Russia, Xi in China, Erdoğan in Turkey, Modi in India, Orbán in Hungary, and Bolsonaro in Brazil, inter alia—who actively undermine democratic norms and institutions in the pursuit of power. What unites this trend, in my mind, are promises to repel, punish, and/or eliminate corrupting elements from society in order to (re)claim a lost or stolen greatness. These rhetorics and movements scale up and amplify the urban revanchism that Neil Smith (1996) and others have described in relation to the aggressive gentrification and policing of inner cities beginning in the 1960s.

3. This image has notably begun to fray due to the administration’s apparent inability or unwillingness to confront high rates of inflation, China’s occupation of Philippine maritime territory, rampant misconduct by security forces, and basic problems with infrastructure in Manila and other cities.

4. Another important factor was the scandal over PNP officers’ abduction, murder, and posthumous ransoming of a South Korean businessman, Jee Ick-joo (PDI 2018).

5. What international media have largely overlooked is that this was also a test balloon for militarizing the police. Duterte has long speculated about reviving the Philippine Constabulary. As the American colonial regime’s successor to the Spanish *Guardia Civil*, the Philippine Constabulary was a military police force that, until 1991, violently suppressed the radical left, Muslim autonomy movements, peasant resistance, and other internal “threats” to the US colonial regime and its neocolonial

successor. It is worth noting that the PDEA, which has played an increasingly prominent role in the drug war despite the PNP's dominance in street-level enforcement, is widely associated with former Constabulary officers.

6. His support for reproductive healthcare and healthcare for sex workers is especially ironic given his record of sexist and misogynistic remarks, including those calling for the sexual assault of women rebels (Rauhala 2018).

7. This crackdown on the left reflects a larger effort by the administration and its surrogates to suppress dissent. They have, for example, seen to the ouster of Chief Justice Maria Lourdes Sereno from the Supreme Court; they have criminally charged or jailed a number of prominent critics, including two senators and the head of Rappler, an independent news outlet; they have deployed online trolls to attack prominent activists and journalists; and they have made unsubstantiated criminal accusations against public officials who were later assassinated.

8. Although verified counts were not yet available at the time of writing, Mongabay reported that the Philippines and Brazil had the highest number of environmental activists murdered in 2018 (Volckhausen 2018).

9. Preserving "nature" was a central aim of German National Socialism and its vision of a racially and environmentally purified "homeland" (Staudenmaier 2011). And of course the roots of American environmentalism are entangled with those of white supremacy (Purdy 2015).

10. These numbers are from 2015 and 2013 respectively. It is likely they have increased in the years since. For perspective, consider that a "record number" of 22 percent of Americans were "very worried" about climate change in 2017 (Chow 2017).

11. Vicente Rafael (2019) makes a similar point in his remarkable new article, "The Sovereign Trickster." This essay was already in press when his article came out, so I have been unable to give it the attention it merits.

12. I am also thinking here of how terms like *extinction* and *the Anthropocene* euphemize the world-breaking violence of colonialism, capitalism, and white supremacy (Davis and Todd 2017; Mitchell, Todd, and Pfeifer 2017; Mitchell 2014).

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