

Thresholds

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Abstract

On the reticulated shores of city everywhere, the global urbanization project to rebuild cities as total mediacosmic platforms hosting the capitalizable life of globopolitical citizens, sites of a vitality little reckoned with emerge, hold on, disappear. In this essay, I discuss the thresholds that constitute the liminality of the vitality of the urban poor in Metro Manila, as well as the significance of that vitality for another understanding of our global, urban mode of life.

Keywords

Urbanization, Metro Manila, infrastructure, slums, Duterte, service economy

On the reticulated shores of *city everywhere*, the global urbanization project to rebuild cities as total mediacosmic platforms hosting the capitalizable life of globopolitical citizens, sites of a vitality little reckoned with emerge, hold on, disappear.¹ These are places with particular names and histories and geographies, subject to specific organic and inorganic pressures, though in public discourse and academic writing they are often referred to mainly in the generic as slums, squatter colonies, inner cities, informal settlements, *looban* (interior or “inner city”). The generic terms alone conjure conditions of exceptional privation and peril (“squalor,” “crime”) that demarcate a boundary between these places and the “common” spaces and general order of the city. This imaginary and material boundary delineates the spaces and modes of habitation that constitute urban life proper and those sites it marks off as on the margins of that proper life. More than a line of demarcation physically segregating some from others, the boundary defines what it divides, what it expels, what it holds. It distinguishes what it surrounds. It deems these marginal sites, which it seeks to contain or eliminate, “uninhabitable” (Simone, 2019). As such, the boundary is neither fixed nor stable. It operates rather as a shifting threshold, which, like the notion of standard of living,

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depends on variable criteria for estimating and ensuring a valuable, a properly human, way of life. This threshold serves as measure and means of an ideal of existence, a course and tool of action for the beginning or end (of state of being) that it designates, a marker and maker of seemingly absolute difference or distance from (while at the point of greatest proximity to) a life worth living.

At the farthest distance from a life worth living

Fires erupt often in Metropolitan Manila. Sometimes a whole neighborhood of shanties will burn down to the ground. Or a fire will raze through a district of the very poor, consuming all that is flammable in its path, leaving only charred cement block and galvanized iron structures standing, the furnished interiors and personal effects they had housed now no more than burned out hollows and embers. Almost always they will say the problem was electrical – faulty wiring, illegal connections. Almost always everyone suspects arson. In most such cases, fire becomes pretext for and prelude to demolition. Carried out by a small battalion of hired hands, guns, iron mallets, and shovels, urban demolitions of squatter settlements are as frequent and persistent as the fires that precede them, but more thorough and deliberate in their destruction.

Fire becomes an inherent propensity. It points to the immanent condition of these places, which finds evidence in the aftermath of its uncontrolled eruption – reason and proof that these places are uninhabitable. In the first six months of 2018 alone, there were 2200 fires in Metro Manila, the majority of them erupting in slum areas, neighborhoods said to be “sprawling, unregulated tinderboxes” (De Castro, 2018) – places that are combustible. Poor materials are combustible materials – fuel. The very poor live in houses made of discarded pieces of cheap, thin plywood, cardboard, and plastic tarp, when and where they cannot source or afford cheap cement or scrap metal, even as others manage to build sturdier structures right alongside them. Their houses are tightly packed, the wall of one serving on the other side as the wall of another, the banks of narrow walkways between them used as areas for idling, washing, selling, eating, excretion. Privation creates density, not austerity. Dense quarters, dense encounters. People in the slums are described as being like matchsticks – easily ignitable. Given to spontaneous combustion, while also at the same time festering with all manner of chronic disease (of deviant and illicit behavior as much as bodily illness), the people and the place become mirrors of each other, interchangeable in their reflection of an entire “way of life” of its own – a “culture” and “ecology” – paradoxically untenable and persistent (Jocano, 1984).

This paradox of being untenable and persistent, a condition of disaster, which is both immanent and chronic (waiting to happen, long-happening), suggests that the slum is not simply or only a real place (multiple, diverse, heterogeneous, peculiar social universes of their own), but also the designation of a point at which urban life, in all its variegated, heterogeneous forms, comes to be seen as no longer viable. Fire is the event, the outcome of a threshold crossed between potentiality and actuality. The threshold marks a break in a continuum, the point at which what might only be guessed at or inferred becomes palpable, evident, *real* – reaching the level of shared perceptibility. Fire is the opposite of durability, continuity, structure, organization; it is entropy, the opposite of organicity, of life itself. It destroys what life would build, what would host life. It thus figures the very condition of unlivability, which is always immanent in, while also being placed at the greatest distance from, a life of value.

As a prelude to urban demolition, as the means of effectively pronouncing a place unfit for human life and making it so, fire foregrounds the expendability of the social and other

life it consumes as fuel. The use of arson to clear slums is well known (San Andres and Viray, 2012). Known as “hot demolition,” it would sometimes take the form of a kerosene-drenched live rat or cat set on fire and let loose in an area of squatters, igniting all that it touched with its body in flames as it ran, setting off a fire strong and rapid enough to raze a slew of homes, while burning to its own death (Berner, 1988). While this particular tactic used by landowners is no longer in much use (replaced by planted resident arsonists), it gruesomely illustrates how arson is a punitive sentence against life deemed urban refuse.

The destruction that “hot demolition” achieves is the fate to which expendable, consumable life is condemned, a form of capital punishment from which life-worth-living is proposed and promised to be exempt. Not just a globally touted ideal (a social value), life-worth-living is after all the “product” of global enterprise, the predicate of global, urban capitalist “production” and subject of globopolitical protection. A form of commodity capital that also functions as a political right. While mass evictions and urban demolitions have been carried out in the national capital since the early 1960s as part of the state’s project of authoritarian modernization (under Ferdinand Marcos), since the 1990s, when the post-dictatorship government of Fidel Ramos began aggressively “globalizing” the economy, mass evictions and urban demolitions have been carried out with greater frequency and on a greater scale by the state (in partnership with corporate capital) to clear and enclose these lands for the exponential growth of capital life. In 1993–1994, 80 demolitions were recorded as having displaced around 80,000 people (Dizon, 2019). By 2008, 31,171 families (or around 155,000 people) had been evicted from their homes (Shatkin, 2008). From 2011 to the middle of 2017, a recorded 2045 demolitions demolished the homes of 65,704 families, displacing an approximated 328,520 people (1:5).²

Numbers

The numbers of people, families, and households forced into homelessness through demolitions are many and fluctuating, varying across different measures (how many in a family, what constitutes a household). But overall they provide a picture of increasing displacement and dispossession of those with no “right to the city.”³ At best they render the accelerating devastation wrought by new urbanization projects, which mandate the removal and relocation of informal settler communities living in proclaimed danger zones or zones targeted for business real estate development. Maps and graphs attempt to show the dramatic progression of this contemporary urban enclosure movement, a violent war of dispossession and land reclamation that forges the ground for Metro Manila to realize the fantasy of city everywhere (Ortega, 2016).

Graphs, maps, and numbers are often criticized for making general and abstract, purely analytical, the otherwise concrete lives of humans. They are charged with making those lives *unreal*. Undoubtedly, these are the very representational tools wielded by urban planners, economists, and battalions of technocrats, not to mention financial advisors, traders, fund managers, international lending institutions (banks), and international organizations overseeing the global monetary system (the International Monetary Fund) and global financial stability more generally. They are tools that have in fact crucially made people into populations, aggregate statistics that can figure as information for dominant actors who are not them, while derealizing peoples’ own roles and capacities as subjects in the world (Barker, 2004). It would seem, from this critique of abstraction, that these representational means only exacerbate the liminal humanity to which displaced, dispossessed, and disenfranchised Global South populations – figured as an unwanted excess that poses a criminal threat or

inordinate liability to nations as well as cities – are already consigned. Such abstractions would appear to only further place them beyond the threshold of human feeling and regard.

And yet this opposition between numbers and human is sorely inadequate, repeating the upholding of human values as the object of war to protect. Even as this war is waged by algorithms and demographics, by the hard, cold facts of data and metadata, the humanities, with their warmth and depth of feeling, have long been part of the soft war of humanization that accompanies the conquest. They too become measure and proof of life worth defending, protecting, honoring – techniques for rendering, reading, and feeling the sentient being of others as lives of value, on a par with those already human. In this way, like numbers, the affects and sentiments of human stories can also draw the bounds of life-enabling regard.

As suggested in Bryan Costa's poem, "Isang Libo, Isang Buwan" (A Thousand a Month), which searches for this seemingly small figure's significance ("What value or use does this have for the nation?"), numbers are nevertheless also parts and forms of people's daily life experience: one's monthly rent, the money owed to the store, the cost of electricity or water, the school's tuition fee, the increase in a mother's pension, and so on. Although "a thousand a month" is revealed to be the rate of sanctioned murders carried out by the police under President Duterte's "war on drugs," the poem's rummaging for this number's meaning in everyday concerns demonstrates that there is also a mathematics of survival in the midst of a hanging death sentence for the urban poor, an everyday social calculus in which numbers, as practical and propitious signs, do play a crucial part.

Numbers as well as sentiments, quantities as well as qualities, are the terms with which we understand the world and manage our lives. They can tell hidden as well as explicit stories. They can paint portraits and landscapes. A number too can be felt ("In truth/a thousand a month is very scary"). While numbers are precision instruments of control, seemingly unlike the raging fires let loose through "hot demolition," numbers, stories, and fires can all be employed to enhance as well as destroy life. What matters here are the rules animating them, how they are arrived at and what they effect – the thresholds they maintain or create.

Liminalities, shifting, and holding

A threshold is a limen, the limit-point beyond which a phenomenon ceases to be perceptible or sensible. A threshold is also a magnitude or intensity that must be surpassed for a certain reaction – a material transformation or sensation – to occur (Oxford English Dictionary). There are many thresholds that prevail in city everywhere. Some are never crossed; some are crossed every day. Some thresholds lead to other thresholds, each one depending on the effect of the previous one having been traversed. For the slum dwellers, squatters, and other bearers of tenuous life, subject to willed, state, and structural, environmental devastation (including flooding), one threshold has been crossed while another remains, shifting yet continuing to hold.

During the post-authoritarian period of the 1990s, the flyover strategy of urban development promised to resolve the contradictory, bulimic relation of the metropolitan government to its own feminized body of informal, illicit labor.⁴ As the unchecked pace of demolitions would suggest, that strategy has reached a limit. While this flyover network strategy for liberalizing capital life flows continues to obtain, and in fact has been scaled up nationally and globally to create a global urban archipelago, the current Philippine state has resolved its "gender trouble" (its contradictory binary gender identifications with global capital and global labor) and now no longer abides by its alternately purging and indulging approach to the slums and the informal life of the urban excess.⁵ Instead, it engages in a project of unmitigated annihilation of those sites of informal settlement and their

communities, in projects of reclaiming public land for the installation of entire urban systems or environments (what I have elsewhere (Tadiar, 2016) called *city emulants*) as capitalist platforms.⁶

For these informal settlement communities, some of them established during the Second World War by war victims fleeing the decimation of their homes, a threshold has definitely been crossed. That this is so, is harrowingly expressed in the unfathomable devastation of social life accomplished by the murders of tens of thousands under the cover of Duterte's "war on drugs" and by the countless acts of violence that accompany them (extortion, kidnapping for ransom, theft). The killings devastate entire families, often targeting more than one member for assassination while targeting others for the other forms of auxiliary violence. Carried out in unpredictable and uncontrollable ways and on an unprecedented scale, instigated by rumors and telltale information about suspected drug users and dealers, the killings have also further torn asunder the already fragile and frayed social fabric and everyday informal economy of these communities to a point of possibly permanent disrepair and irreparable destitution (Jensen and Hapal, 2018).

Even as these communities have been forced to suffer beyond a certain threshold of pain and violence, they remain below the threshold of national, civic concern and sympathy. In an ocean of publicly available photographs, videos, articles, social media postings, only two particular visual representations induced moments of national uproar, breaking through the bounds of widespread civic acceptance. The first was Raffy Lerma's famous photograph of a murdered tricycle driver, Michael Saron, cradled in the arms of his partner, Jennilyn Olares, evoking Michelangelo's *Pieta*; the second, a CCTV recording of Kian De Los Santos, a 17-year-old high school student, being dragged to his execution by two plain clothed policemen. Despite these moments of uproar, Duterte's popularity remains at a record high, with a trust and approval ratings pegged at 85% (Ranada, 2019). In the context of a country that has had a century-long tradition of mass demonstrations of radical bereavement, spurred by similar sacrificial images of slain Filipino victims, the failure of these two particular moments, as well as the mounting war-on-drugs related deaths in slum areas more generally, to *move* the nation, if not to protest, then at least to withdraw support for the Duterte regime and the war on drugs, would suggest that for the nation at large, a certain other threshold of human sentiment and care has *not* been reached.

Put differently, for the nation, despite the mounting demolitions and mounting death toll afflicting these communities, despite the increasing magnitude and intensity of suffering that they sustain (which, in an attempt to stoke political collective mourning, protesters render through the translation of the number of dead into symbolic artifacts of grief such as candles and mourning pins), these communities continue to remain liminal, that is, beyond the point where their plight and suffering might be perceived, made sensible to others as a pain that might be shared.

But what constitutes this liminality? It would seem, to many, including to the victims of this ongoing spectacular and everyday war, that it is their humanity that is liminal. Indeed, family and friends of the murdered repeatedly express the violence inflicted on the victims in precisely these terms – they cry in protest, it was as if they were animals, as if they were not human. "My son just turned 16, and they killed him like a chicken, as if he were an animal," Maria Isabelita said when her son and six other people were killed by masked gunmen when they opened fire at two shanties in Bagong Silang in search of a drug suspect (See, 2016). She and other relatives of the murdered were pleading with the employees of the police-accredited funeral parlor, where the bodies of their loved ones were being held hostage for exorbitant fees, to release their dead.

Ideological boundaries are continuously drawn around the victims of the drug war, the way drug users and dealers (*adiks* and *pushers*) are figured as *salot* (rot, pestilence), zombies so crazed they would rape their own grandmothers, deadbeats already dead and dying who proffer nothing but destruction, figurations that place them outside the bounds not only of the nation but also of all that is regarded as human. As the secretary of justice countered, against the accusation that the drug war constituted crimes against humanity, “I already said that is not true. The criminals, drug lords, drug pushers, they are not humanity” (Evangelista, 2017).

Elsewhere I discuss the killings less in terms of these ideological representations than in their effectivity as practices of making the object of a “just war” – that is, their material figuration of the drug user/addict as the embodiment of absolutely expendable life.⁷ This “just war” is traceable to colonial legacies of racial and sexual wars of punishment, which served to inscribe through physical and psychic force what is disposable, free for the taking, worthless and yet also a gift and slave of nature. Now as then, what is disposable acts as the negative defining boundary-object and means for value-making life, or in the contemporary lexicon, of life as labor (which is, ultimately, human). These historical colonial legacies have shaped the contemporary deployment of punitive violence as an expanding and generalized mode of value-extraction. As I argue, in fact, today, the financialized expenditure of such absolutely expendable life fuels a deregulated, lucrative derivative economy where extrajudicial capital punishment has become a financial instrument authorized by the state, with dead or potentially dead bodies as underlying assets whose experiences of states of variability can be priced, and every act of auxiliary violence, including funeral parlors holding dead bodies hostage, finds compensation in multiple opportunities for cash rewards/kickbacks/rents/protection money/ransom/promotion.

A dominant response to the sheer instrumentality with which such lives are reduced is to bring them to the level of perceptibility as humans, by uncovering and representing their suffering, desires, emotions, and subjective lives, to tell their stories in human terms – and in this way, to restore or recognize the humanity of those who would be granted none. I do not disparage this work of journalists, scholars, writers, and filmmakers, which I draw on for my own understanding of the way such lives are made and expended. However, I want to shift our attention to hone in on something else that these zones of disposable lives generate, which is, a kind of vitality that is not quite or simply “human,” nor for that matter the unequivocal negation of the necrocapitalist logic that defines their fate.

Multifarious forms of life

With their sociological protagonists – individuals and the collectives they purportedly represent or exemplify, that is, specific ethnolinguistic groups whose “cultures” pertain to them, even as they might be comparatively related to those of others – “human” stories can eclipse this multifarious vitality – other levels and forms of living and being – subsumed in the object-category called “life,” as a condition or attribute of all individual organic being, and principally, universal human being. In the new global political economy, such “life” can be enhanced, improved, made more efficient, more valuable, more productively spent – in a word, capitalized – as well as protected, guaranteed, specified, and regulated – in a word, politically recognized and enfranchised, to the diminishment and at the expense of other forms of life, as the continuing histories of imperial, bourgeois humanisms amply show. While they appear to counter the dehumanizing abstraction created by numbers and other instruments of analytical thought, to represent the deaths as “unjust,” to make them grievable and elicit sympathy for the slain, “human” stories may also inadvertently buttress the

very portals through which some life can pass into valued being, while others not. In this way, they further make liminal what I see as equally vital, inextricable aspects of those lives that such stories seek to redeem by “humanizing” them.

Part of what such “human” stories eclipse is the forms of shared, transpersonal, morphing being as well as the partibility, elasticity, convertibility, and fluidity of personhood, their substances and faculties, which are characteristic of the most ordinary lives of those who serve as the means of reproduction of valorizable life. I have written of migrant domestic, care, and low-level service workers in host countries as well as urban excess populations in their own countries in such terms, foregrounding their function as human machines and media for other humans (Tadiar, 2004, 2016). In the temporary, repeated, on-demand lending of their bodies, capacities, social relations and coordinated practices and routines to the ever-changing and moving needs and demands of employers and patrons, they function as “all-around” domestic instruments and utilities for the reproductive and productive life activities and enterprises of others.

On a larger, aggregated scale, they serve as a kind of vital infrastructure, like houses and roads and vehicles, facilitating the movement and circulation of the life-forms of value, embodied in individual lives of mobility, around whose value-productive movements city everywhere and the global political economy of life organizes itself. We might say, this vital infrastructure acts as what Gilbert Simondon called the “associated milieu” – the produced condition of existence and viability – of that technical object of global urban circulation, which is human capital life (Simondon, 2017).⁸ As “that through which the technical object conditions itself in its functioning,” vital infrastructure can be considered the coordinated ensemble of conditions that valuable and valorizable life (the lives of globopolitical citizens bearing human capital) requires to reproduce itself. If, as Rosa Luxemburg argued, the non-capitalist social formations of imperial colonies served as necessary milieus for the expanded reproduction of capital accumulation, life-systems environments with which capitalism is in “a constant process of metabolism” and without which it could not continue to exist (Luxemburg, 2016), then I would argue that such non-capitalist social formations have in the course of the postcolonial history of capital adapted and transformed the live forces of their own life-making and survival into providing, in the contemporary moment, an “associated milieu” for capital life that is less territorialized, more globally distributed, and perhaps more fluid in character than in the past. Whether as programmable technical parts in on-demand software-as-business companies, such as ride and delivery service companies, or as domestic “helpers,” care givers, drivers, couriers, hired bodies and hands, rentable extensions, prostheses, and proxies for others in single or repeated use, the “associated milieu” of vital infrastructure consists of the disposable life-times of lesser life put in the service of facilitating the productive reproduction of valuable life. With the late capitalization of movement and life-activity and mediation over “product” or “property” in the mode of platform capitalism, what obtains for these associated milieus of late capital production is necessarily constant flux, rapid turnover, disaggregating movement.⁹

“Human” stories may eclipse this large-scale picture of these lives of liquidity continuously draw upon to lubricate, fuel, and maintain the infrastructural channels of high-value life flows, which make for the content and connectivity of metropolitan platforms, including those of the shadow economy (para-state, violence-based, illicit, organized criminal enterprises), which have proliferated and grown in the wake of decades of Cold War counter-insurgency wars. Humanizing stories also tend to eclipse the intimate, ordinary experiential dimensions of the liquidity of these serviceable lives, which enables them to play mediatic and machinic parts (or in another vocabulary, means of production and means of labor) of both life-producing and life-expending enterprises. By liquidity I mean the ready

convertibility, plasticity, and variability of people's bodily being, capacities, relations, spaces, and times, which can be made into the means of multiple ends. The way people can lend themselves, become the hands, feet, a part – or, whole – body, for someone else, at the disposition of others, in the domestic, sex, and care industries, as well as for each other in the most ordinary efforts of collaborative survival in the slums. In these spaces of innumerable informal transactions through which the urban poor might make a living, people can take each other's places, pass on duties, tasks, faculties, presences, which another can assume; become another's body, substituting for one, or several; or make oneself over to serve as a "medium," a vehicle or channel, to another, a means of transmission of licit and illicit substances, favors, debts, and actions, not only across geographical distances but also across time, where currencies of exchanges are multiple, even potentially infinite, though ultimately dominated and limited by the money-form of value.

These are in many ways familiar modes of personhood and social being in postcolonial life worlds, bearing ways of living and understanding (sense-making practices of life-making) which feminist anthropologists of Melanesia, South Asia and Southeast Asia describe as characteristic of extant gift economies or cultures (Busby, 1997; Cannell, 1999; Carsten, 2004; Francisco-Menchavez, 2018; Morris, 2000; Strathern, 1990; Tsing, 1993). These anthropological accounts describe, for example, how a singular person comes into being as a derivative of plural relations, or how they might behave and be imagined as individuals, composite beings that are divisible or partible, for particular circumstances, social actions, and events (Strathern, 1990).¹⁰ In the Philippine context, such accounts describe a social world in which persons are potentially changeable in every interaction with others; where far from homeostatic conditions, conditions of ambiguity, tension, and uncertainty characterize all exchanges and their sequels, and persons become as it were their own mediatory objects, in a place accustomed to the convertibility and substitutability between persons and things; where forms of social, personal being, which a Western bourgeois property-oriented analytical view might want to call "identity," "is largely conducted through the making and remaking of potentially transformative relationships with others. . . [particularly] asymmetric relationships with human and supernatural superiors, who moreover remain resolutely plural." (Cannell, 1999: 248).

The resonance of such analytical descriptions with descriptions of the posthuman effects of a digital informational and mediatic world seems to me to be neither accidental nor insignificant.¹¹ It foregrounds the broader social conditions and entailments of the experiential and practical liquidity of the lives of a worldwide service/servant stratum serving as vital infrastructure. Those social conditions and entailments include most crucially what I have argued are vital platforms, forces of sociality that are also organizing systems, subaltern forces and means of a global metropolitanist platform economy. Exemplified in the transnational social kin networks of overseas migrant Philippine workers, vital platforms can be viewed as dynamic human-mediatic technologies and institutions of social survival, composed of kin and affiliative connections that act as active mediatic conduits of transmission, transaction, augmentation, depletion, conversion and redemption of values. Beyond acting as "support systems" for migrant workers in their host countries, these transnational social/kin networks are also coordinated channels of information, goods, funds, persons, capacities, faculties, and actions – organized recruitment systems, credit systems, that is, social mediatic systems for the self-replenishing and self-renewal of their transnational communities, which employment agencies and states themselves rely on and tap as mechanisms and means of production their capitalist industries. Even as kinship studies might emphasize systems of "social relations" between and among individuals as members of collectives, they also suggest transpersonal capacities and transpecies,

transexistential transmissions of matter and mind, protocols of sense-making that organize “relations” between the living and the dead, between organic and inorganic existence, spirits and bodies of mutual being scattered and distanced across space and time (Sahlins, 2013).

The fluidity, partibility, convertibility, and coordination of persons and capacities in these networks is a vitality that can be missed in the focus on the urban poor as particular kinds of subjects, whether workers or citizens, men or women, rural refugees, squatters and slum dwellers, in contradistinction to other sectoral subjects such as overseas workers. If we look closely and more broadly at the life trajectories and social scapes of communities of the disenfranchised, the picture we get is not of stable social groups like “overseas Filipino workers” or “slum dwellers” but rather of people flowing through urban channels, transnationally as well as nationally, cycling in and out of sites of temporary work and temporary residence, a constant cycling through jobs, homes, identities, for those placed in conditions of permanent unsettlement and tenuous existence.

In countries in Asia, including West Asia, where opportunities and incentives for overseas workers to permanently reside are near zero, the flows are periodic, recurrent, constant. *Memorie Morco* worked at a gas station in Palau, before working as a nanny in Morocco for six years, and then, since 2017, working in the United Arab Emirates, caring for another’s child (Almendra, 2018). In the home country, labor policies effectively support these itinerant flows by increasing contractualization of labor, not only depriving workers of long-struggled for and gained benefits during so-called five-month “probationary” periods but also legitimating their firing or “nonrenewal” after “probation.” *Rose* worked while she was a minor as a canteen “helper” for two months, then on and off as a worker in a garment factory for three or six months at a time, as an overseas domestic worker in Brunei for two years, returning to the Philippines as a factory worker in different companies as each one closed down.¹² *Amira*, a Tausug woman who is sister and wife to imprisoned insurgents, migrated to Manila from Mindanao at the peak of the war between the Moro National Liberation Front and the Marcos government, worked as an overseas domestic worker in Saudi Arabia, and now lives in *Maharlika*, a Muslim majority settlement village in Manila, where she heads a household of other Muslim women who also worked or intend to work in the Gulf for varying periods of time (Jensen, 2020).¹³ When they are not themselves the ones moving and sojourning, overseas workers and their relatives are conduits and host sites for each other’s itinerant movements.

Families are fractured and remade, as members of kin flow in and out of places, seeking refuge and reproduction for themselves in places of violence and hostility everywhere, in lands fought over, seized or surrendered (exchanged for a penance or a ransom), or sequestered and enclosed. These life trajectories demonstrate the continuous transmogrification of what would appear to be bounded social identities in place – the liquidity of minoritized populations forced to live nomadic, probationary lives, which reproduces at a larger scale the liquidity of individuals living what *Abdou Maliq Simone* and others characterize as the ever-improvisatory lives of informality.

Slum dwellers do not experience eviction and demolition once, but many times. They too cycle in and out of these urban sites, the lives they built periodically, wholly destroyed, only to be built again upon their return. As *Elisea Adem* notes, the past and present of life for the urban excess rests on the problem of landlessness (Adem, 1992). After all, it is dispossession and disenfranchisement that has brought them to this place, which is a social condition before it is a geographical place – a form of perpetual unsettlement that becomes a way of life. For the *Carlos* family who migrated to Manila from *Zambales*, after losing their land, life became “a continuous thirty-year search for a home.” Sixteen times they had to move, six of those times as the consequence of evictions, in “oscillating movements towards and

away from the *riles* [railway].” To be a squatter, Adem writes, “can invariably mean being a wanderer in the wilderness of urban living.”

What these oscillating movements evince is that, despite being brutally set adrift, slum dwellers constantly rebound and rebuild. *Tumbalik* they call it, this practice of springing back – the conjoined actions of knocking down (*tumba*) and returning (*balik*), which Kaloy M Cunanan views as part of the urban poor’s *diskarte*, or spatial practicality.¹⁴ They do so by deploying themselves as any resource or capacity whatsoever, finding flexible niches where they can, in ways that depend on the social roles they are both compelled to inhabit and able to craft, and in dynamic, elastic coordinating response to each other’s changing needs.

With the railway upgrading project, the *riles* squatter area has been demolished, yet their lives continue, in ever more difficult circumstances yet in ever persistent ways. Sites may disappear without the vitality which they had hosted itself disappearing. The willed disappearance of communities is an act of dispossession that does not eliminate the disposable life-times continuously drawn upon to create ever more staggering accumulations of capital, but on the contrary only makes more of. For war multiplies disposable life-times, creating through destruction the very disposability of that vitality which, as capitalist enterprise, it requires. But like other “natural resources,” this vitality is not infinite; rather it is diminished and ever more ravaged by such creative destruction – by what is essentially the enforced liquidation of the lives of the disenfranchised. It is this liquidity that has enabled global capitalism’s spectacular rise from the ashes of economic crises in the 1970s, precipitated by worldwide decolonization struggles since the second half of the twentieth century. And as the example of Duterte’s “war on drugs” demonstrates, it is this same liquidity that pretending insurgent regimes attempt to corner, in their own warring bids to take larger dividend shares, if not to usurp the majority power, of globopolitical sovereignty.

The continuous flows of fungible people and the continuous exchange of their convertible capacities fuel and support global industries in the new political economy of life, as component apparatuses (machines) as well as content-matter (raw material) of these industries of circulation (transport, communication, service, social media). With people’s life-times distributed across multiple platforms across the world, it comes almost as no surprise that the Philippines has become central to global social media, with two-thirds of its population (roughly 69 Million people) on Facebook, and the country acting as a global hub for content moderators and internet troll farms (Alba, 2018; Mahtani and Cabato, 2019). But these global capitalist flows are importantly sustained by other transnational flows and forms of circulation – that of sustenance and subsistence (goods, money, affect, connectivity), which some have identified as “care,” and which I would understand as a broader array of life-making practices comprising the social reproduction of communities of the becoming-human. What Geraldine Pratt (2012) and Valerie Francisco-Menchavez (2018) see as the social reproductive labor required to maintain the transnational families of migrant workers, and which Francisco-Menchavez calls “multi-directional care,” I understand as the practices and organizing logic of vital platforms.

Generated and programmed by the “non-noble technics” of domestic kinship protocols, vital platforms are platforms of social reproduction, which are grafted to as well as intertwined and interfaced with capitalist platforms (social media, the integrated mediacosms of urban systems, state apparatuses, including the political-police platform, which preys upon them as revenue-generating mechanisms).¹⁵ As the means of life and the life itself of affiliative/kin networks (that is, as the means *and* the very object of reproduction of *shared life*), whose members are both components and users, the sociality of vital platforms sustains both serviceable life and the absolutely expendable life from which such serviceable life is

drawn, in what would appear to be a temporary reprieve from the capital punishment that is the latter's standing sentence.

The reconfiguration of what were effectively the labor commodities of a warm-body export national economy, into worker-subjects and "migrant citizens" – this process of "humanizing" and heroicizing Overseas Filipino Workers as part and parcel of the Philippine's political and economic transformation as a major global provider of reproductive and service workers worldwide – belies the fact that what are often represented as separate social groups (OFWs and slum dwellers, and among the urban poor, the police and the policed, the killers and the killed) are more intimately related, sometimes of the "same," or deeply intertwined, social networks. Biographic stories as well as "social" feature narratives cannot adequately represent these transnational sinews of connective social tissue (neither unified nor homogeneous, but on the contrary, variable, mixed, and dynamic) that sustain and make possible what would appear to be simply integral, numerable "lives."

Mixed passages

Heart de Chavez was killed on 10 January 2017 by the Philippine National Police, now just one of the 22,983 deaths thus far that the Philippine National Police classify as "homicides under investigation." Three days before, she had been picked up, placed in what the police called "a hold" (rather than an arrest), and then released, only after Heart's mother, Elena, pawned her entire life pension for Php7000 (\$130) to pay for the bail that the police extorted from her in exchange for her child's life, a small sum compared to the Php50,000 they had demanded, but the entirety of Elena's life savings. The outlines of the narrative of Heart's murder are familiar, as Patricia Evangelista, the journalist covering these war on drugs killings, observes: "a threat, a false arrest, police extortion, and a brutal execution" (Evangelista, 2017). Heart was dragged out of the shanty home that she shared with her mother and sister, Arianne, in San Jose Village, Navotas City, by at least seven armed men who barged into the house and held the family at gunpoint, as one of them grabbed Heart by her long hair and pounded her head on the table while another grabbed her by the front of her skinny black sweater to drag her away, Heart screaming. "Ma, she said. Help me." When the men left, Arianne, clutching her five-month-old baby, and Elena ran out looking for Heart, only to find her dead body on the floor of an empty house, a bullet in her cheek and another in the back of her head.

The police report of Heart's murder lists the victim as Alvin Ronald de Chavez, alias Ron-Ron, single and jobless. "The alias, as far as details go," Evangelista writes, "may have been the first inaccuracy embedded in the short spot report filed at the Navotas City Police Station." "Alvin Ronald became Heart de Chavez more than a decade before she was dragged screaming down Quintos Street." The police misidentification of Heart is part of a series of blatant lies they and their paid witnesses proffer about Heart's murder, a symbolic violence which continues and compounds the violence of Heart's brutal abuse and murder, even after she is already dead. This act of violence is further inflicted in Heart's burial. The funeral director insisted that Heart be buried as a man, invoking the Catholic Church's wrath should the family's wishes be respected, which was to bury Heart in the floral purple dress that Arianne brought back from Dubai, along with false eyelashes, red lipstick, and the big round curls, which Heart loved. Although Arianne fought back, the family finally gave in, and Heart was buried in a long-sleeved white shirt and black trousers, the long hair clipped back to give her the proper appearance of a man.

The lead picture for Evangelista's article (taken by Nightcrawler photographer, Carlo Gabuco), which is an overhead shot of the open casket, with Heart dressed as a man lying

inside, visible in the open half of the coffin, and a tarp printed with her picture as a woman draped on the outside, over the closed, bottom part, movingly evokes the pain of this violence inflicted by the police, the Church, and the heteronormative social order they uphold and implement. In its rendering of the impossible contradiction and conflict of claims over Heart's identity, it also crystallizes the subject and tenor of Evangelista's portrait, that is, of the harrowing injustice to which the urban poor are relentlessly subjected – the impunity and sheer power of dominant forces to override the wishes, desires, agency, and subjectivities of people regarded as lesser humans, whose fates is theirs to decide – this sheer power to define, and materialize the disposability of, their lives. All of this is true, and the pain and suffering they speak is keen.

Within this narrative, however, there are other details beside those that expose the lies, and the antagonism emerging or lying in wait in the irreconcilability of conflicting reality claims. Details such as the fact that Heart's father was a former seaman, that Heart worked as a maid for an overseas worker, that Arianne was herself an overseas worker in Dubai, that when their father died, the responsibility for the family fell to Heart, who began dealing drugs as the debts and financial burden of a mother, two single-mother sisters with four children between them, mounted – such details do not only point to the indistinction and intertwining of the categories of slum dwellers and overseas workers, and the social liquidity I discussed earlier. These details also point to the connective social tissue in which Heart's life is embedded – the vital platforms that are the condition and burden of shared survival, which the vertical political-police network both models itself on and preys upon, in derivative enterprises of value-extortion directed at shared social, rather than individual, life being (vital platforms as objects and mechanisms of such enterprises).

In the video accompanying the article, Arianne says,

My sibling was sentenced immediately. . . They killed her like an animal. As if she were just a bird, that even if it weren't sick, just died like that, as if nothing. And them so pleased with themselves that they get money from this. They'll go up in the ranks. They'll feed their families with what they earned from this.

In Arianne's comments, we hear an expression of what it means to be not human, to be a bird, flying free and without intrinsic attachments, without precisely that recourse and obligation of familial bonds or bonds of mutual being, which others can not only continue to enjoy but also feed and grow. The sentence is swift, without personal negotiation, like a bird that is struck down with a fatal illness, "as if nothing," as if without kin and connection, without "help," that code word for gift – money, favor, prerogative – in a cultural economy of "help" (Yean, 2015), all manner of what Lazzarato calls power-signs, asignifying practices that directly create and break alliances, connections, obligations, and indebtedness, comprising the very channels and relations of vital platforms (Lazzarato, 2014).

If I have seized on these details, it is because woven differently they evoke what humanizing stories might make liminal in their constrictive focus on the lives of independent, individual beings, the subject-effects of a specific order of signs. What they make liminal is the forms of vitality that I have attempted to render in terms of the plasticity, mutability, divisibility and liquidity of persons, and more, the forms of transmission, transaction, movement – in a word, passage – for which they might act as mediatic conduits. This is a vitality not of the lives of individuals comprising a group, but rather the vitality of vital platforms, the vitality of precisely the forms of transmogrifying passage that their human components make possible for each other, the vitality of those "non-noble technics" of life-making sociality operating as subaltern forces of production.

Viewing this frozen shot, representative of a world insistent on thorough knowability, dependent on the signs of stable, fixed or fixable, proper being, we might miss such forms of mixed, inconsistent, and dynamic passage, passages that are routes of departure and return, itineraries of living, and rites of experience surpassing bounded and consistent being, of continuity and discontinuity, where Heart, in local language, was and continues to be *anak* (child), ungendered offspring, whose ungendered pronoun before and after “becoming” Heart” is *siya* (translated in the English article as “she,” in a reparative move to honor what would be denied); where self-transformation, that process of becoming beautiful as a process of making and remaking of selves, of adopting multiple names (where Heart is also Barbie – “Barbie is alive,” Heart exults to her friends, after being released), of claiming *biyuti* as self, disposition, life, and power, which Martin Manalansan demonstrates is part of the repertoire of everyday *bakla* and Filipinx queer survival, is not the work of one, but also of others; where becoming woman is a living, a feat of social survival (to be alive!) in a time of war (Barrios 1990) . A dress from Dubai, a plea (Mama, help me), several (im)proper names, give scant suggestion of those forms of sociality through which persons are produced and performed, shared life movements in which a person’s life, desires, and becoming, as well as mortal end, are deeply and messily enmeshed.

There is another detail, the detail that is both the deed and consolation of Heart’s mother Elena. In the coffin, “Every item of clothing Heart wears is cut for a woman, from the stylish slacks all the way to Arriane’s blouse, whose shiny black buttons fastened up to Heart’s chin.” Against the body stilled, the boundedness and consistency of social being seemingly fixed by inflicted premature death, these are details, gestures, and things of womanly care (and womanly resistance) aimed at preparing Heart’s body for another passing – sending them along this existential passage accompanied by familiar accessories of their becoming in life, in the expectation of unknown returns in death. Through the transmissions that the cut of a pair of trousers, the buttons of a blouse, enable, another related transition is made. This is the vitality that I mention at the beginning of this essay – a vitality that emerges, holds on, disappears. But here we see, it is a vitality that also persists, not beyond but rather in the midst of death, indeed, in the abiding passages between the living and the dead.

Perduring across life and death, such vitality can be seen as the converse of the fires of “hot demolition,” modern fires of destruction set to completely lay waste and eliminate the urban excess, to signal and bring about unlivability or immanent death for lesser life in order to host life worth living. As instruments of the state, fires of urban destruction are present-day forms of colonizing scorched earth military campaigns, part of an arsenal for political and economic enclosure and dispossession. Fires make places of living into wastelands and tinderboxes to be cleared, dead ground on which to build things of value like condominiums, offices, and malls, transforming lands of survival into just so much real estate and making the lives they destroy nothing but fuel. It is its deployment as the means of a modern “pyropolitics” (Clark, 2010), in pursuit of the enhancement of valued (human) life above all, that has given fire its modern resonance as destruction, breakdown, and death (understood in capitalism, as John Berger (2007) writes, as elimination), the opposite of order, of organicity, of life itself.¹⁶

And yet in other, older understandings, fire is so much more than a destructive force. It is also the enabling elemental medium and mediator of human and planetary living, a technique and process of transformation vital to the changing worlds of collaborative existence, which modern regimes willfully forget to our present and future ecological detriment.¹⁷ In a similar way, the vitality I write of here is not a property of “life itself” (nor a property of the laboring subject, as Marx surmised). It is rather the activity and power of happening and

making happen also to be found in the mixed passages between the living and the dead, in transformations and transitions across states of impossible being through which the cooperative, shared living of the dispossessed continues, a vitality on which life worth living under the aegis of global capital ultimately depends.

Passages and transitions foreground these forms of life-making and events of liveliness across ordained units and proper forms of life. Despite a tyrannical order of reified normative states obtained through decimating punishment, people's mutational and transmutational capacities for making things happen and transform in their ordinary striving are what enable them to tend to each other's pains and desires. These are mediatic capacities put towards rebuilding and renewing collective life where it is brutally condemned. Rather than disorder or entropy (which is itself a measure relative to a narrow set of variables, exemplified in the order of proper global urban life), what we see is a plethora of life-making activity, plural forms of social survival and care under conditions of anthropogenic, capitalist duress.

This vitality confronts us with the threshold of understanding that makes it liminal. Thresholds are not, after all, simply given; they are established over and over again, instruments of practical measure within a particular order, which place bounds on what we might see be able to see, what may or may not be salient or become so, and what we could ignore, disdain, or esteem. In this context it is the threshold of capitalist life worth living that makes it impossible to see the mediatic function of humans as something more than simply the denigrating consequence of colonialism and capitalism (serving as the instruments of others). It prevents us from recognizing this form of being human (as means, component, and conduit, vitally attached to others) that is not conflated with its opposite – all that is less than or not human (object, animal, slave). And yet, a cultural economy of help and helpers, which does not obey these ontological divisions – that is, an ordinary subaltern mode of life which mobilizes extant and remnant practices of convertibility of selves and things, made possible by the porousness and mutability of personhood and sociality (households, kinship, genealogy), and by the exchangeability and changeability of fates – comprises the forms of activity, cooperation, and exchange within which people move, informing and shaping the life-making practices of the serviceable and expendable.

If vital platforms are the forces of social reproduction of colonized domestic communities that survive the ceaseless assaults against them, then they are also forms of centuries-long historical passage, the kind of passages still being made by their descendants under a global capitalism that would not and could not exist, if not for the vitality of their modes of survival. Embodied in these capacities, faculties, and inventions of shared life, this is the vitality of people's life-making socialities, developed as resources of survival and thriving under colonial and postcolonial conditions of dispossession and depletion, and undergirding the urbanist expansion of capital and our present globopolitical mode of life.

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Notes

1. “City Everywhere” is a global investor fantasy and project of global urbanization, which I discuss in detail in an essay of the same title (Tadiar, 2016). Beyond the fixed space–time metrics of “the city,” this vision and plan is of a global metropolitan archipelago or network of total, integrated systems merging infrastructure and media, which serve as platforms for hosting the activities and movements of capital life.
2. Figures drawn and collated from *Eviction Monitor 2017* and *Eviction Monitor 2012, Urban Poor Associates Annual Report* (urbanpoorassociates.org).
3. A phrase from Henri Lefebvre, “right to the city” has become the clarion call of policy-oriented social welfare activists working towards the inclusion of the urban poor in civic and government programs and services as well as economic planning (Racelis, 2015, 2021).
4. I write about this bulimic behavior as the state’s gendered expression of a contradiction between ideal images of national sovereignty and illegitimate desires of global capitalism in its relation to the urban excess (displaced or refugee “surplus” populations from the countryside) (Tadiar, 1993). In the 1990s, a new metropolitan form emerges, figured and enabled by flyovers or bypasses, which strategically allow the bypassing of the urban excess and resolution by transcendence of the contradiction they embody. This new metropolitan form prefigures the global network or archipelago of city–states that characterizes the fantasy of “city everywhere.”
5. Tadiar (1993).
6. “Bypass-implant urbanism,” Gavin Shatkin (2008) calls it, where large-scale property developers have obtained government franchise (so-called public–private partnerships) to envision and implement urban planning and policy, installing entire urban systems or environments in sites that bypass overcongested and high-density areas. What emerged in the 1990s as Manila’s new metropolitan form – an urban archipelago of detached, scattered centers of upwardly, mobile life and business that are connected by a network of flyovers transcending a sea of underdevelopment – has become both model and component of precisely the urbanization fantasy I have called city everywhere (Tadiar, 2016).
7. See my *Remaindered Life* (forthcoming), of which this essay is a part.
8. The evolution of technical objects as “the individualization of technical beings” “is made possible by the recurrence of causality within a milieu that the technical object creates around itself and that conditions it, just as it is conditioned by it” (Simondon, 2017: 59).
9. This logic of platform capitalism can perhaps be seen as superceding what Simondon views as characteristic of the “dialogue between labor and capital,” that is, the prioritization of the end result over means under manufacturing production. Here, where what is produced for consumption is not the result of a production process apart from the means, i.e. the use that the user brings to the platform, but rather is the very condition or state of self-regulated functioning of the machine or platform, where “all causality has a sense of finality, and all finality a sense of causality” (Simondon, 2017: 135).
10. “The singular person, then, regarded as a derivative of multiple identities, may be transformed into the dividual composed of distinct male and female elements” (Strathern, 1990: 15).
11. There is another global (time) fantasy that complements the drive to uber-urbanization in the global (space) fantasy of city everywhere. This fantasy is a history that traces the evolutionary shift away from the liberal humanist subject, constructed on the basis of homeostasis and equilibrium as self-possessing, self-regulating being with agency, desire or will of its own, to the cybernetic posthuman, constructed on the basis of privileging information over embodiment, pattern over presence, as a form of “distributed cognition located in disparate parts that may be in only tenuous communication with one another.” Hayles, *How We Became Post-Human*, 3–4. I want to suggest that there are genealogies that are bypassed in this provincial Euro-American account of how information lost its body and how “we” became posthuman, genealogies already implicit in the global history of colonialism and slavery. In the analytical descriptions of some of the anthropological work I cite here, I read the very conditions of virtuality understood to have emerged as the cultural effect of the information age. Such conditions are to be gleaned in the analytical attention of these scholars to

the way that persons are imagined and behave as individuals, and as derivatives of plural social relations, as fractal entities, terms that have also been used to characterize the posthuman world (see also Wagner, “The Fractal Person”). Cannell’s and Hayles’ books were published the same year. One was writing within the category concept “culture,” the other within that of “cultural production,” both in effect looking for what Gayatri Spivak calls the chains of value-coding underwriting differentiated sites within a broader imperial formation, with the anthropologist seeking the value-coding of a particular (i.e. national, regional area) cultural formation, and the literary–theoretical critic seeking the value-coding of a “general” (i.e. global) cultural formation.

12. Yean (2015: 70).
13. In her account of Amira and other Muslim women who marry prison insurgents, Sif Jensen argues for a notion of “composite agency” as a way to understand the relational entanglements of kinship, political affiliation, and homeland (Jensen, 2020). We might also understand such “composite agency” as reflecting the composite, “joined-up” person produced out of relations sustained across these flows of social movement (Carsten, 2004). “Philippine prison marriages.”
14. Cunanan (2020) describes this spatial practicality in terms of a range of practices of “creative modification and cooperative endeavor,” viewed as alternative: from muddling through what can be done, use and help within the public and private spatial proximity, to extending anything that can be viable outside the immediate community, which include networking and labor flight to foreign lands. Further, these particularities are often done with lowest chance and high risks, and confined in the context and struggle of class-based marginalization. The goal of both practice and practicality amounts for the broadest sense of qualitative improvement of humane living. (Cunanan, 2020: 51)
15. Simondon talks about “non-noble technics” as “a technics related to living beings,” equated with slaves, utility artisans, children, and primitive societies. This is a technical subconsciousness acquired by children growing up in a community fully saturated with schemes of know-how (work and knowledge, inseparable from each other), acquired through participation, which requires “vital conditions” (Simondon, 2017).
16. Drawing on the work of Stephen Pyne, Nigel Clark (Clark, 2011) argues that biopolitics is first and foremost a “pyropolitics,” “centered on the regulation, manipulation and enhancement of fire.” As he writes, “Much of the management of human populations, of energy, of life itself in which the modern West has engaged itself, both at home and abroad, I argue has been premised on the drive to contain or channel fire” (165). In the modern, metropolitan European worldview, fire come to be “an expression of social unrest or breakdown, a mark of excess and disorder,” “a squandering of resources,” inaugurating “the era of proscribed burning” – the suppression of rural traditions of burning fallow, free ranging fire, and indigenous fire practices (177, 178).
17. (Cochrane, 2009) Fire is a process of oxidation and combustion that releases elements and compounds important for the stimulation of biodiverse growth and for maintaining and generating the health of ecosystems.

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