THE SOVEREIGN TRICKSTER

DEATH AND LAUGHTER IN THE AGE OF DUTERTE

Vicente L. Rafael

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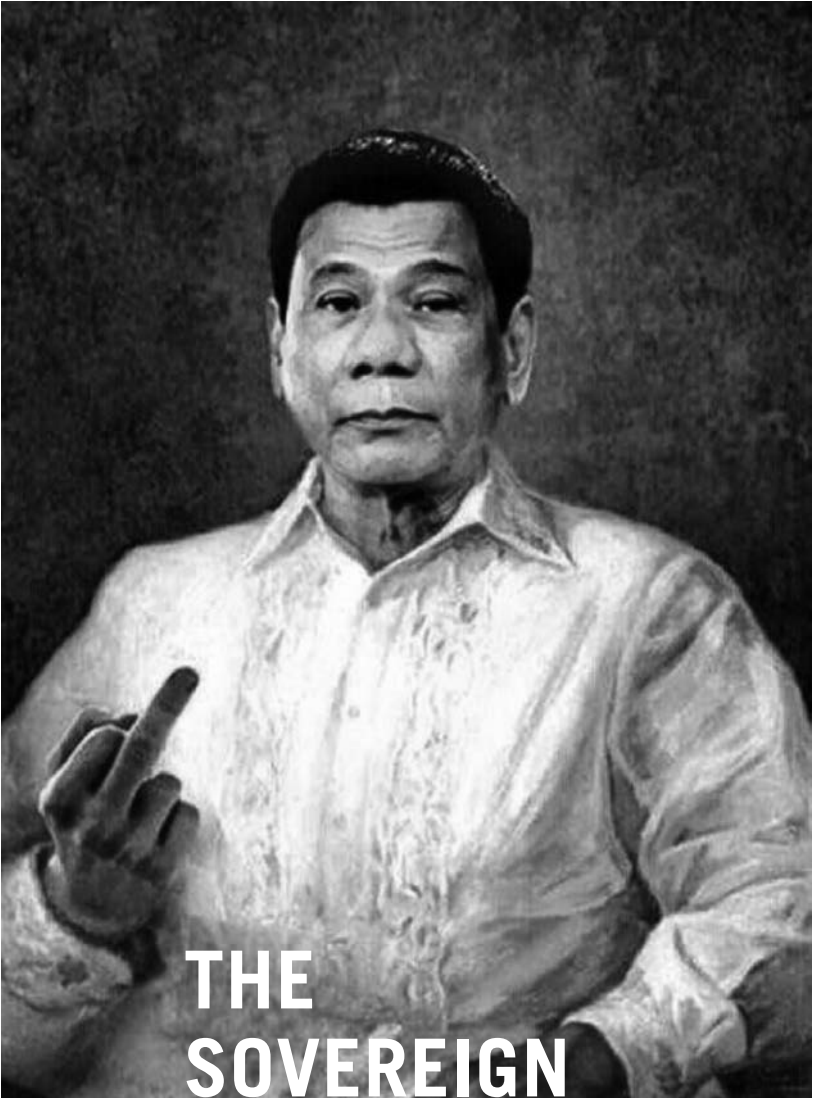

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Frontispiece. Internet meme from a Twitter parody account illustrating Duterte as a sovereign trickster, combining the traditional rendering of presidential figures with a universal image of vulgarity. From "Rodrigo Duterte @DigongDU30, 16th President of the Philippines, The Punisher, Master of Profanity, Great Leader, Parody Account." https://twitter.com/DigongDU30.

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COVER ART: An alleged drug dealer—and Duterte supporter—arrested after a buy-bust operation in a slum area in Manila, September 28, 2017. Courtesy Noel Celis/AFP via Getty Images.

For Lila

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In an ideal world, there should be no need for acknowledgments. One could simply say, "To all those who helped with this book, you know who you are. You know the joys and the hardships you put me through," and then leave it at that. Of course, we live in a world that is far from ideal, where gifts are given but left unreciprocated, obligations are neglected, kindnesses unrecognized, disagreements unresolved, friendships done and undone. A book, like all things made, emerges from these exhilarating but difficult conditions, a repository of ongoing collaborations and unfinished torment. Acknowledgments as a genre for recording the coming of a particular book thus remains unavoidable and necessary. It is also a source of pleasure as it allows one to think back to those times of openness and uncertainty, when ideas were not yet well formed, and, thanks to the unintended intervention of others, anything seemed possible. So here goes.

There was no way I could have written this book without the courageous coverage of Duterte and the drug war by a number of dedicated journalists, photographers, and filmmakers. I am especially grateful for the generous friendship and insightful accounts of Sheila Coronel. Ramona Diaz furnished me with much food for thought regarding the biopolitics of reproductive health in her closely observed film *Motherland*. Many others provided me with rich sources for writing this book. Their stories and images have been indispensable for compiling an archive of many facets of Duterte's regime. Given the current political conditions of fear and the repression of journalists, I have decided not to mention them by name lest their association with this book prove awkward. Rather I have cited them in the notes and references that follow. I do not know what they will think of this work, but I hope they will find in it some vindication of their difficult task of witnessing the crimes of this administration.

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In writing this book, I found myself revisiting the works of James T. Siegel. His writings on violence and the sublime provided me with ways to think about encounters with death and defacement. His books on the Suharto regime prodded me to consider the authoritarian imagination in relation to extrajudicial killings, trauma, corpses, photography, and what he calls the "nationalization of death." While Indonesia and the Philippines differ in many important respects, they share a history of colonial and postcolonial dictatorships reliant on the technologies of mass killings, deep-seated corruption, and counterinsurgency that sustain the biopolitics of fear.

Ken Wissoker, as always, offered valuable advice, unstinting support, and generous friendship. Like all my previous books, this one would have been impossible without his help and encouragement. I was fortunate to have two enthusiastic anonymous readers who convinced me that there was something much more interesting in the manuscript than I had originally seen. Their patient and informed engagement were valuable in shaping the final form of this book. In particular, I owe Ralph Litzinger a special *utang na loob* for carefully reading various versions of the manuscript. I also thank Ryan Kendall and Susan Albury for their unflagging editorial assistance in helping me prepare the manuscript for publication.

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Lila Ramos Shahani's contribution to this work has been manifold and difficult to enumerate. She provided both intellectual and emotional support while offering many sharp observations and timely corrections. Long conversations with her and her mom disabused me of my state-phobia and provoked me to reconsider many of my assumptions about the Philippine government. Lila never failed to push back so I could push forward, and it is to her that I dedicate this book.

Shorter versions of chapters 4 and 5 were published, respectively, in the *Journal of Asian Studies* 78, no. 1, February 2019, and *positions: asia critique* 28, no. 4, November 2020. The versions that appear here have been substantially revised and expanded. Some of the pieces that make up the section "Sketches" first appeared in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* ("The Dream of Benevolent Dictatorship" and "Duterte's Hobbesian World"), *Rappler* ("Death Squads," "Comparing Extrajudicial Killings"), and in *Bulatlat* ("Fecal Politics"). They have also been extensively revised and expanded for this book. The rest of the shorter pieces are published here for the first time.

If you lose your job, I'll give you one. Kill all the drug addicts. . . . Help me kill addicts. . . . Let's kill addicts every day.—PRESIDENT DUTERTE, addressing returning overseas Filipino workers, 2017

Crime is glorified because it is one of the fine arts, because it can be the work only of exceptional natures, because it reveals the monstrousness of the strong and powerful, because villainy is yet another mode of privilege.
—MICHEL FOUCAULT, *Discipline and Punish*, 1977

INTRODUCTION. Prismatic Histories

Duterte and Me

The one and only time I ever met President Rodrigo Roa Duterte was at a funeral in Manila on March 22, 2017. It was not, fortunately, for one of the victims of his drug war but for the late Senator Leticia Ramos Shahani, sister of former President Fidel V. Ramos and mother of my partner, Lila Ramos Shahani (see Jett 2018 for an account of her remarkable career). During the wake, we were told that he would drop by at around 10 p.m. But his return from a trip to Bangkok was delayed, and we got word that he wouldn't be there till midnight. At 1 a.m., we saw him on a live TV broadcast on the airport tarmac holding forth. This was typical of the president, who was always hours late for his appointments. Finally, at around 4 a.m., he began to arrive. His arrival was long and drawn out, signaled by a sudden flurry of activity among his entourage (consisting mostly of cabinet members) that woke us up from our sleepy vigil. About a dozen security personnel in white barong shirts with walkie-talkies did a sweep of the funeral home. A caravan of vehicles followed, and he emerged from one of them, flanked by his assistants and assorted flunkies. Finally, the king had arrived.

He strode in slowly, waving at those who remained at the wake and shaking hands with the family. Noticeably subdued, he approached the coffin, looking at the corpse with quiet respect. His mother had been a friend of Senator Shahani. The latter was among those who had been appointed by former President Cory Aquino to oversee the transition from the dictatorship to democracy in 1986 after the overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos. Cory Aquino had asked Soledad Duterte, a staunch opponent of Marcos, to serve as mayor of Davao during the transition. Soledad demurred, suggesting instead someone else, while her son Rodrigo or "Rody" became vice mayor and eventually mayor. Later, he briefly served as a congressman, then vice

mayor and mayor once again for the next two decades, before finally becoming president in 2016. Thus did the overthrow of one dictator pave the way for the rise of another.

During his visit, I stayed outside the circle of family and friends that had formed around him, engaged in quiet conversation. I was reluctant to get drawn in. As he was about to leave, there was the usual call for a group photograph. I tried to hide in the back so as not to be part of the picture. Too late: Lila's uncle, who had earlier endorsed and later criticized Duterte, called for me to join them. Reluctantly, I posed in the back of the pack. In every photograph with Duterte, everyone is expected to do the "fist salute," a symbol of his campaign and his supposed strength. It always seemed to me like a warmed-over fascist salute. I refused to raise my fist, distancing myself from him. But, like all slight gestures of resistance, it was easy to overlook and largely ineffectual. Inevitably, I was folded into the scene, unable to extract myself from the grip of his authority. Remaining silent, and then compelled to shake his hand out of politeness at the end, I felt as if I had become complicit in the crimes of his regime. Despite several articles I had written criticizing his policies, especially his drug war, I reluctantly grasped his hand and felt contaminated by the bloody history of its brutal commands.

As he walked out of the chapel where Senator Shahani was laid out, he was greeted by resounding cheers in the lobby of the funeral home. Like a celebrity, he was approached for selfies. While I was deeply reluctant to shake his hand or even be pictured with him, everyone else seemed agog at his presence and wanted a photographic souvenir of their encounter. Watching all this put me in a quandary: How to explain the wide gulf between them and me? Knowing what we all knew about his drug war and penchant for violating human rights, especially those of the poor, why would so many celebrate him, or at least willingly accept his authority, while I would remain critical and disdainful—indeed, afraid—of him? Did my fear bear any relationship to the majority's approval of him? Or could it be that it was this widespread fear that was the basis of his power and therefore popularity? Given his eagerness to kill and imprison all those he perceived to be his enemies, could his remarkable popularity—last polled at over 91 percent in October of 2020—as well as the relative fecklessness of the opposition, be an outgrowth of this government by fear?

These are some of the questions I have been asking myself, and what follows is a modest attempt to address them. Like my refusal to raise my fist in

the picture, I hope these pages will allow me to distance myself from Duterte's hold, even as I admit to being infected by his rule.

The Authoritarian Imaginary

This book offers a kind of prismatic view of the age of Duterte, and so, as with a prism, it is "a medium which distorts, slants, or colors whatever is viewed through it" (Merriam-Webster). Rather than provide a clear, unified account of his regime and its historical precedents and global variants, it weaves together a set of topics ranging from the drug war to neoliberal citizenship, from the presidential phallus to the photographs of corpses killed by the police, for example, distancing these, then bringing them up close for scrutiny. I am much less interested in determining what Duterte is—a fascist, a populist, a warlord, a *trapo* (traditional politician), or all of the above—as what he does—the technics of his rule, the rhetoric of his humor, his administration of fear, and the projection of his masculinity and misogyny. And if there is a thematic thread that runs through the book, it is a series of recurring questions: What is the relationship between life and death under Duterte? How does he, like all modern rulers, use one to contain, exploit, and deploy the other? In other words, how does he manage to instrumentalize life to allay death, and how does he weaponize death to control life? What are the conditions that allow him to succeed, as well as fail? How does Duterte's authoritarian imaginary[1] feed off, even as it disrupts, the vernacular articulations of community and intimacy, especially among the poor? What is the role of obscenity in the making of his grotesque persona, and how does it feed the formation of fear among those he governs? How is an "intimate tyranny," to use the phrase of Achille Mbembe (2001), produced by the play of conviviality and coercion between the ruler and the ruled? Or, to put it on a slightly different register, how do the technics of what Michel Foucault calls "biopower" (Foucault 2010)—the control and management of all aspects of life to ensure and foster more than life—inextricably combine with what Mbembe refers to as "necropower" (Mbembe 2019)—the power to control death, to decide upon who must die so that others might live—in the age of Duterte?

Along with this introduction, five chapters plus a brief conclusion make up this book, interrupted and reconnected by a series of shorter pieces, which I refer to as sketches. They deal with a series of related topics such as the biopolitics of reproductive health, Duterte's view of history, his abilities

as a storyteller, incomplete histories of extrajudicial killings, death squads, fecal politics, and more. The longer essays—touching on the history of electoral dystopia, the rise of neoliberal citizenship, Duterte's phallic power, the hybrid figure of the absolute sovereign and wily trickster as a defining feature of Duterte's persona, photography, trauma, and the biopolitics of fear in the context of witnessing the drug war, and intimacy and the autoimmunity of community—extend and elaborate upon the sketches. The sketches were written mostly on the fly in response to the events of the day, most of them appearing as social media posts or opinion pieces in Philippine newspapers. We can think of the sketches as rehearsals or drafts for the chapters. While the latter are meant for an academic audience, the former seek to reach an informed "general reader"—whatever that fictional construct might mean. Unlike the sustained arguments of the longer essays, the sketches function as a kind of decalage, marking the temporal and spatial differences between the minor and major pieces (Edwards 2003). They set things out of alignment, forcing one to see the gaps between and within the arguments of the essays, showing their hesitations, overlaps, revisions, and repetitions, thereby inviting further interpretation, correction, and critique. Thus do the longer essays begin to feel like displacements of the shorter pieces, even as the latter anticipate and defer to the former. Both come across as bits and pieces of an assemblage whose parts do not necessarily amount to a unified whole. Rather, they are more like shards awaiting excavation in the future to help puzzle through this current moment.

This book, then, is far from being a definitive history of the age of Duterte. It is impossible to write such a work given the fact that Duterte is still in power as of this writing and, barring a coup or his falling ill to cancer or the COVID-19 virus currently raging across the planet, he will likely remain in place until the next election in 2022. Barred by the Constitution from running for a second term, he will have been on his way to retirement by the time this book reaches print, even as elements of his governing style, what some have called "Dutertismo," will continue to be emulated by his followers. Anachronism will thus be unavoidable. Neither does the book offer policy alternatives or pathways toward reform and revolution. It is diagnostic rather than prescriptive, and even then is far from being an exhaustive examination of the state of play. It registers a history of the present that is already past even as its traces continue to survive, exercising effects on the future as far-reaching as they are contingent.

Still, readers might find something useful here, whether they are primarily interested in the Philippines or in comparing authoritarian forms in other parts of the world. In the pages that follow, I try to recast Duterte from the unforgiving authoritarian and over-masculinized figure that many see him as into a more complex, fragile, and ambiguous character in a political drama he cannot fully control. The journalist Sheila Coronel gets at these multifaceted, one might say prismatic, aspects of Duterte. She relates one of the stories he often told on the campaign trail about shooting one of his classmates in law school who kept making fun of his provincial accent. "I waited for him," Duterte recalled some forty-five years later. "I told myself, I'll teach him a lesson." The classmate survived, but no one ever messed with Duterte again. And then the punch line: "The truth is, I am used to shooting people." The audience, as they invariably do, laughed. Coronel observed that "it was a typical Duterte story, with Duterte cast not as the aggressor but as the aggrieved. . . . He took the law into his own hands, but by doing so, he earned the grudging respect of his tormentor. The telling, too, was classic Duterte: boastful while also being self-deprecating. It was crass, hyperbolic, transgressive. And its conclusion—'I am used to shooting people'—could be construed as a joke, a fact, or a threat. Its power and its beauty lay in its ambiguity" (Coronel 2012; see also Rosca 2018).

It is precisely the "power and the beauty," which is to say the political aesthetic of Duterte's rule, that interest me the most. Seen in the context of post-Marcos history characterized by the conjunction of counterinsurgency and neoliberalism, the formal qualities of his discourse can provide a key to understanding the brutal logic and deadly effects of his rule. By appreciating the tendentious ambiguity that allows him to dominate his listeners, we can begin to map the contours of his authoritarian imagination that at once repels and attracts his followers and detractors alike.

NOTES

INTRODUCTION. **Prismatic Histories**

1. By "imaginary," I mean something midway between "necessary fictions" and "real abstractions" that allows one to function in daily life. To speak about an "authoritarian imaginary" is to ask how someone like Duterte imagines himself when addressing other people, what others imagine him to be doing when he addresses them, and what they imagine themselves to be when confronted with him or his image. The fictional texture of the imaginary makes it unstable and fundamentally ambiguous, open to different interpretations subject to conflict and up for control (Johnston 2018).

CHAPTER TWO. **Marcos, Duterte, and the Predicaments of Neoliberal Citizenship**

1. There are numerous accounts of EDSA and People Power. Some of the more illuminating works can be found in Abinales and Amoroso (2017); Anderson (1988); Claudio (2014); Kerkvliet and Mojares (1992); Mazanilla and Hau (2016); Stuart-Santiago (2013).

2. On Ferdinand Marcos and martial law, there are surprisingly few studies and not a single book-length work that treat the entirety of the regime. Some of the more useful ones include Abinales and Amoroso (2017); Anderson (1988); Bonner (1987); McCoy (2009b); Mojares (2016); Seagrave (1988); Thompson (1995); Wurfel (1988). For a highly compelling family memoir of the Marcos years, see Quimpo and Quimpo (2012).

3. Along similar lines, see the other short film by Mendoza, *Father TVC*, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?t=3&v=1428333113863012.

4. See Duterte's campaign ad from 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HjEg83ATfuQ.

SKETCHES II. ***Motherland*** **and the Biopolitics of Reproductive Health**

1. According to World Bank data, maternal mortality rates as of 2017 are at 121 per 100,000 live births, compared to the United States at 18 and Finland at 3 per 100,000.