



Disasters are Everyday like the Weather Reflections on Violence in the “Philippine Anthropocene”

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Abstract

This essay offers an urgent intervention from the global South in contribution to this special issue on the Anthropocene. Drawing from Rob Nixon's work on slow violence, the author offers sobering reflections on the everyday realities of what she writes as the “Philippine Anthropocene”: not only is this defined by spectacular freak weather conditions, but also shaped by normalized and state-sanctioned forms of abandonment and terror. Written in the present political context of intensifying state attacks on civil society in the country, the author recasts the light on anthropogenic forces of violence which endanger lives at the front lines of daily disasters, more lethal than the strongest storm in recorded history.

Keywords: Anthropocene, critical disaster studies, Philippines



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“Anthropocenes” are enacted on multiple political stages across the globe: in laboratories and weather stations where scientists track, measure and model anthropogenic changes in climate systems; in UN Conference of the Parties meetings where geopolitical battles debate how to save a planet in peril; and across geographies of disasters where the vocabulary of earth sciences may remain unintelligible yet where violent forces repeatedly reinscribe vulnerabilities along familiar fault lines of grotesque inequalities. In present-day postcolonial Philippines, I claim that anthropogenic climate change is not a singular, external, existential force threatening the future fate of an archipelagic nation ranked most vulnerable to disasters by the World Risk Index; instead the nature of this violence unfolds through and compounds catastrophically with chronic poverty, ecological degradation, racial and gendered violence, militant terror, and an emergent authoritarian state.

Disasters figure prominently in our popular consciousness across the Philippines—from cataclysmic events such as the Mt. Pinatubo eruption in 1991 and super typhoon Haiyan in 2013, to yearly earthquakes, El Niño warnings, and the chain of typhoons entering from the Pacific Ocean during the annual monsoon season. Despite the normalization of such meteorological and geophysical hazards, my current doctoral research project inquires: how may questions of well-being and survival be de-naturalized and re-politicized in this age of intensifying weather conditions and state terror? Since serving as a former emergency relief worker at the wake of Haiyan, I have sustained scholarly and activist commitments among colleagues in various civil society organizations in the Philippines to understand how the discourse of disasters and the practices of disaster response can re-center questions of power. In this paper I offer ongoing reflections on the nature of this work in the present political context in the country, wherein intensifying socio-ecological changes are heightened by an authoritarian state which endangers the very bodies working at the front lines of various disaster events. In contributing to this special issue on the Anthropocene, I wish to offer an intervention from the global South which could perhaps temper Northern anxieties over an uninhabitable future with sobering reflections on the everyday realities of slow and chronic violence in the “Philippine Anthropocene”. This piece is dedicated to the many collaborators, friends and family who I join collectively in the Philippines and transnationally in resisting a life of normalized tragedies, forecasted for us daily on the weather channel.

The Weather and Slow Violence

In a daily broadcast on primetime Philippine television, a celebrity host ends his weather report with an iconic motto exclaiming cheerily, “*Ang buhay ay weather-weather lang!*” In a chirpy kind of fatalism, the weather forecaster reminds his viewers that “life is just like the weather”—like the coming-and-going of storms, the cyclical alternating between wet and dry seasons, and the rising and falling of tides, life too has its good and bad times, and one must simply learn to flow along (noting that the word “*panahon*” means both “time” and the “weather” in Filipino). I grew up in Manila immersed in this pervasive culture of disasters (Bankoff 2001), wherein catastrophes have become so deeply entrenched into the schema of daily life that both the political organization of Filipino society and people’s beliefs, behaviors and responses to such normalized violence shape

one another in a tight dialectic. I remember the Payatas trash slide in 2000 that buried over 200 in the mountains of garbage they scoured everyday for a living; the Ormoc flash flood in 1991, likened to the Biblical tale of Sodom and Gamorrah by my grade school teacher, where deforested lands drowned over 5,000 overnight; and super typhoon Haiyan in 2013 that left ships stranded inland crushing entire cities to the ground. Yet PAG-ASA, or the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Agency, is still commonly ridiculed by the public for complaints ranging from miscalculated storm signals to power outages and cheered by students whose classes are cancelled. The National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Commission¹, formed only in 2010 under the Office of Civil Defense and mandated to protect people during emergencies, still remains largely unfamiliar to the greater public. These ordinary tragedies remain at the peripheries of a growing discourse of the Anthropocene on the global stage and the electrifying rise in climate justice movements across the global North in recent years. The chronic violence of daily disasters in the Philippines continue to be understood as the “weather” – their violent disruptions are all too familiar, and therefore questions of justice and inequality are irrelevant; whether “natural” or “human-induced” these are resolved by a patchwork of slow bureaucracy, a weak and anti-development state (Bello et al. 2005), the military, local and foreign humanitarians, and incessant calls for volunteers, donation drives, and endless pleas to acts of charity by and for disaster-weary peoples (IBON 2015).

In grappling to understand the compounding violence experienced by my colleagues in disaster response in this time of freak weather conditions and growing state terror, I turn to Rob Nixon’s *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011) to think about the intersecting forces of endangerment in the Philippines. In a combined commitment to postcolonial scholarship and social justice activism, the powerful poetics of Nixon’s prose shifts an understanding of violence from the realm of the spectacular to offer “slow violence” as one that can be out of sight, delayed, attritional, incremental, accretive, and invisible. Casualties are sanctioned, normalized and naturalized. Such a conceptual lens, formed out of Nixon’s focus on activist writers across the global South, holds much potential for reimagining what defines a disaster in the Philippines: not only is it the staggering destruction caused by 300 kilometer per hour wind speeds and storm surges, but it is also the long and quiet dyings caused by hunger, urban poverty, of farmers’ flooded rice fields and fishers left without a catch from barren ocean floors; it also includes state-sanctioned forms of abandonment and terror. Slow violence also allows me to witness sights previously unseen, including the toll that has long been accumulating in the labouring bodies of front liners, humanitarian workers, and social-climate justice activists who are threatened not by freak weather conditions alone but also by armed, militant and state forces.

Postcolonial scholars have challenged an uncritical view of the Anthropocene as constituting a planetary existence with no ontological dimension (Chakrabarty 2012), claiming an Earthwide

¹ As of July 2018, President Duterte announced his Cabinet’s approval of establishing a new Department of Disaster Resilience to replace the NDRRMC. Once approved by the Senate, the proposed department may function in parallel to the Department of National Defense. This poses growing concerns among civil society organizations on the possibility of a heightened top-down, militarized state approach to disaster response.

vision for survival while denying the brute fact that much of the postcolonial world is most vulnerable to a global climate crisis it is least responsible for. This includes a grim reminder that the majority of the world's endangered river systems and its poorest populations are in Asia (Ghosh 2016). Aware of the persisting preservation of the universal white liberal human subject through border imperialism and the manufacturing of racialized threats (Caluya 2014), feminist and Indigenous scholars also caution us that the colonial moment has not passed, and that anxieties over the climate must not continue to deny centuries-old struggles for resurgence, self-determination, and sovereignty (Todd 2016; Simpson, Helander and Mustonen 2004). Who is this "we" that constitutes a geophysical force altering Earth's climatic systems? Or in the case of the Philippines, who is this "we" that have long endangered lives among marginalized, racialized and neglected communities-ecologies? While critique from feminist and critical race theories alert us to the wholly unnatural global political economic order upon which the Anthropocene unfolds unevenly across the world, perhaps another radical intervention offered for a nation such as the Philippines is to paint human faces on its otherwise abstracted representations of violence: to anthropomorphize the meteorological form of climatic hazards, remove them from the realm of "Nature" or the weather, that we may be able to see the lethal ruins of anthropogenic climate injustice in our very own lands, waters and bodies. In doing so one day the weather forecaster may instead remind his Filipino viewers that: "there is no such thing as a natural disaster" (Smith 2006).

Philippine Civil Society and State Terror

While the strongest storm in the planet's recorded history left the Philippines with over 10,000 missing and dead, in an atrocious contrast an estimate of 30,000 have been killed in only over three years of President Duterte's ongoing "war on drugs" (Human Rights Watch 2020). While the global climate justice movement calls for adaptation and mitigation measures to combat intensifying weather conditions, and have been filing lawsuits against the "Anthropos" of fossil fuelled economies in industrialized countries, civil society organizations and activists in the Philippines have long posed the critique that state terror is an equally lethal 'hazard' in the country – and I would add, is another "Anthropos" in a misogynistic form of male, armed violence wielding its destructive forces on its own citizens. As part of a series of matrices published by the Department of National Defense to identify "communist terrorist groups", the military released a list in November 2019² red-tagging³ activists, humanitarian agencies, priests and faith-based organizations, non-government organizations, people's organizations, academics, human rights workers, journalists, and even the UN special rapporteur on indigenous peoples' rights as enemies

² "Philippines targets Oxfam, other rights groups, as 'communist fronts'" (Deutsche Welle, November 2019): <https://www.dw.com/en/philippines-targets-oxfam-other-rights-groups-as-communist-fronts/a-51473662>

³ This propaganda tactic has been used by the Philippine government to publicly brand and accuse individuals, groups and institutions who are critical of the state as "terrorists". It was first used by late dictator Ferdinand Marcos during Martial Law in a crackdown on his critics.

of the state.⁴ The risk of being harmed by arrests, raids, and extrajudicial killings are today distributed unevenly across Philippine civil society particularly those working at the frontlines of disaster response, grassroots organizing, and leading progressive social movements.⁵

In thinking about slow violence in the Anthropocene, Nixon speaks to the grievous inverse of realities between the global North and South by pointing out the coinciding threats to environmental activists and tropical forests that have proliferated under neoliberalism (Christensen 2018). While climate justice activists in the North labor to raise the alarms for a forthcoming planetary climate emergency, those in the South have long guarded against historical, chronic and direct threats to their own bodies and everyday survival. While the former have increasingly resorted to voluntary arrests for acts of civil disobedience to protest the climate crisis, the latter have long suffered unwillingly for precisely upholding the law. While the former is protected by media coverage and access to legal resources, the latter is literally disappeared in the murderous banality of poverty and lawlessness. Global Witness ranks the Philippines today as “the deadliest country for defenders of the environment” in its latest report (2019): the number of killings rose since the newly elected government came to power, now the highest in Asia, fuelled by the current regime’s acts of emboldening multinational corporations, the army, paramilitias, and local state agencies to use armed violence against community members who lead protests against coal, agribusiness, land grabs, logging, and mining.

My ongoing study of community-based disaster management in the country shows that the seeming apolitical nature of humanitarian response takes on a fatal turn in the country when it involves questioning corporate interests and the state forces which protect them. Women grassroots leaders and their partner civil society organizations who I have worked with do not only distribute relief goods in post disaster situations, but they also face threats when they mobilize against extractive industries or claim their rights to land and shelter from evictions. While the work for “disaster risk reduction and management” or “climate change adaptation” in the age of Anthropocene does not officially include “environmental defense” and “activism” in their scope, these political actions for social-environmental-climate justice cannot possibly be divorced from farmers’ and fishers’ daily struggles for well-being and survival. Such is the environmentalism of the poor (Martinez-Alier 2014; Guha and Martinez-Alier 2013) defining Anthropocenes all across the global South.

⁴ “NGOs slam red-tagging by Armed Forces of the Philippines” (CNN Philippines, November 2019): <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2019/11/6/Gabriela-NGO-slam-red-tagging-by-AFP-DND-.html>

⁵ “Lives in danger as red-tagging campaign intensifies” (Rappler, February 20, 2020): <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/252028-lives-in-danger-duterte-government-red-tagging-campaign>

Conclusion

Climate justice movements led by racialized⁶ and Indigenous⁷ communities across the global North today offer critical frameworks and responses to the calamitous impacts of the Anthropocene as these unfold unevenly across geographies of disasters. While I take hope in the surge of feminist, Indigenous, and anti-racist work in these social movements across Turtle Island (North America), I also offer this piece as an urgent intervention from the global South as postcolonial realities still remain starkly missing in academic and activist discourses of the Anthropocene. In light of the pressing dangers in the present Philippine context, compounded by threats of disasters and state impunity, I propose that the banality of slow violence needs to be anthropomorphized – given human faces and called by their human names in order to be witnessed and for power to be held accountable. It is no coincidence that in this very struggle to anthropomorphize forces of endangerment that the Philippines' Commission of Human Rights backed by its supporting civil society organizations has filed the landmark legal case against 47 of the world's biggest fossil fuel firms for violating millions of Filipinos' fundamental human rights to life; and today the same institutions and their affiliates are also being attacked by the Phillipine state for naming and condemning armed terror against its own civilians.

The "Philippine Anthropocene" is not solely defined by the impending rise of sea levels and intensifying super typhoons; it is not predetermined by the archipelago's geophysical location along the Pacific Typhoon Belt. Neither does the "Anthropos" only stand in for industrialized nations and their global carbon emissions which have unleashed unprecedented loss and damage on island communities least responsible for the climate chaos. But is also embodied in the Philippines by political economic forces of dispossession and proponents of state terror which today have escalated attacks on civil society and the very bodies laboring for social-climate justice in the country, claiming a greater number of lives than a Category Five super typhoon. Indeed multiple Anthropocenes can join a web of connectedness across global systems and social movements in this unprecedented moment, but only if slow violence can be made urgent, despite their daily forecasts on the weather show.

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⁶ The Climate Justice Alliance (www.climatejusticealliance.org) and the People's Climate Movement (www.peoplesclimate.org) are led by frontline communities across the United States and centre race, gender and class in building just transitions away from extractive economies.

⁷ Indigenous Climate Action (www.indigenousclimateaction.com) and Indigenous Environmental Network (www.ienearth.org) are Indigenous-led collectives for climate justice across Turtle Island.

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