

THE MANY FACES OF ASWANG

Monsters, Morals, and State Violence Under the Duterte Regime in Alyx Ayn Arumpac's *Aswang*

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Abstract

In this paper, I critically examine Alyx Ayn Arumpac's documentary, *Aswang*, which follows the campaign of extrajudicial killings carried out by the Duterte regime against alleged drug users through the stories of its victims and their communities. In its provocative usage of a metaphoric device—the titular aswang—primarily associated with Filipino folktales, tabloid gossip, and local horror films, *Aswang* challenges the boundaries of documentary as a genre and its associated truth claims. The paper begins by situating *Aswang* within two genealogies—those of Philippine cinema and of Philippine folklore. As a cinematic work, *Aswang* is interesting because it is a documentary which draws from the tropes and techniques of horror; however, *Aswang's* tendency to treat Metro Manila as an unproblematic synecdoche for the Philippine nation obscures the ways in which communities outside Manila have imagined the aswang differently. In the sections that follow, I investigate how the documentary's varied depictions of the victims of extrajudicial killings both characterize and call into question the neoliberal moral economy by which the Duterte regime positions some citizens as deserving of death and others of life; how themes of grace, redemption, and sacrifice as articulated through syncretic practices like *penitensiya* place the film in conversation with the Catholic cosmologies introduced by Spanish imperialism; and how the film explores potential avenues of dissent against the Duterte regime through its depiction of protesters who, through obscuring their faces, challenge a politics based on positive identification with a moral community.

Keywords

aswang, drug war, Duterte, extrajudicial killings, Filipino cinema

About the Author

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INTRODUCTION

Aswang, a documentary directed by the Filipino filmmaker Alyx Ayn Arumpac, opens with the flashing red and blue of police sirens, then a shot of a line of caution tape, which marks a thin division between the viewer and a group of cops gathered in the distance. It is nighttime, and darkness envelops the harborside buildings of Metro Manila, as the camera tracks a boatman, his face dimly lit. A voiceover narration by a woman speaking in Tagalog begins: “For as long as the city has existed, a creature has roamed this land. They call it aswang. A shapeshifter that preys on humans....These days, the myths and old tales seem to have come to life.” As if playing a conjuring trick, the non-diegetic narrator’s evocation of old tales coming to life corresponds with the beam of a flashlight tracking, in its luminous arc, a dead body—arms tied behind its back, face covered completely in masking tape. The opening monologue of the film leaves the narrative referent of the aswang ambiguous, to chilling effect; this monster is not a literal character whom we can see on screen, but rather a spectral presence suggested by a voice out of frame. A viewer might wonder: is this body we are seeing the aswang, or one of its victims? It is hard to know, not only considering the literal darkness of the *mise-en-scene* into which we are plunged, but also because we’re told that the aswang, by its very nature, is a shapeshifter. Following this shapeshifting power of the aswang, we might aptly refer to it as a metaphor in Christopher Bracken’s sense of a sign that has “the capacity to discover ‘similarities’ between things that are not manifestly ‘the same’” (69), inasmuch as it draws together a variety of potential, dissimilar referents (the murderer and their victim, the predator and its prey). Additionally, in this early sequence, the aswang assumes a magical potency that Bracken also associates with the power of metaphor—although a non-diegetic presence, it seems to exercise a conjuring power which affects what happens within the documentary’s diegetic frame, mirroring “the theory of magic [which] works on the premise that physical forces can be deployed by discursive means” (3). The metaphoric slipperiness of the aswang in Arumpac’s film corresponds to its status in Filipino folklore studies as a figure with a complicated provenance, whose guises can be traced to multiple traditions, regions, and systems of belief. As recounted by folklorist Maximo Ramos, the aswang is not one thing but many—a “congeries of beliefs” that Ramos sorts (somewhat arbitrarily) into five different types, including that of “a blood-sucking creature disguised as a beautiful maiden,” and of a weredog said “at night to turn into a ferocious beast” (238).

Aswang the documentary is, on its surface, about the very literal phenomenon of the campaign of extrajudicial killings carried out against alleged drug users since 2016—both by official state actors and extra-state delegates of violence such as vigilantes and terror squads—under the regime of Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte, one which has potentially claimed at least 30,000 lives (Coronel et al.).

Duterte's war on drugs was the fulfillment of a campaign promise by a dark horse presidential candidate who declared, in his inflammatory speeches, that drug use was the fundamental root of the immiseration of the vast majority of the *Philippines'* population. The drug war, though deterred somewhat in its momentum by the particularly controversial killings of South Korean businessman Jee Ick Joo and Filipino high school student Kian de los Santos, was the flagship accomplishment of Duterte's six-year presidential regime, and maintained a striking level of popular support throughout its brutal execution ("Rodrigo Duterte's Lawless War"). *Aswang*, which follows Brother Jun, a human rights defender and Redemptorist bent on securing justice for the victims of these extrajudicial executions; Jomari, a boy who was close friends with the slain Kian de los Santos; and the lives of various Filipinos affected by the war on drugs, from the proprietor of a funeral home to the family members of the deceased, is a multivocal account of the drug war's tragic consequences. Yet, in its provocative usage of a metaphoric device—the titular aswang—primarily associated with Filipino folktales, tabloid gossip, and local horror films, *Aswang* also challenges the boundaries of documentary as a genre and its associated truth claims.

A persistent phrase repeated by the narrator throughout the film goes: "People grow old but their fears do not. Whenever they say an aswang is around, what they really mean is—be afraid." This voice-over situates the aswang, suggestively, in a deeper genealogy than the contemporary moment—perhaps a genealogy of specters which "[rise] up ... from the history of the nation ... [with each] act of large-scale violence" (Siegel 2), as well as gesturing to the fundamentally indexical quality of the aswang as a sign which moves fluidly between contexts, seeming to stand for one thing (a monster) but encompassing another (the injunction to "be afraid"). This essay is an initial attempt at untangling the complex provocations of *Aswang* as a film which, in moving between genres, also seems to move between what Bliss Cua Lim calls, in her work on the fantastic in cinema, "immiscible times"—"traces of untranslatable temporal otherness...discrete temporalities incapable of attaining...full incorporation into a uniform chronological present" (*Translating Time* 12). The film does so by gesturing at particular semiotic possibilities as to what the aswang might stand for—the limits of the moral community, the conjuring power of violence, or the coercive net of the state under the Duterte regime—while also contending that the definitive closure of this metaphoric suture is not only unproductive but beside the point. What, I wonder, can *Aswang*—and the multiple aswang within *Aswang*—tell us about criminality, community, and the state both within the specific postcolonial conjuncture of the Duterte regime and beyond?

I begin this investigation by situating *Aswang* within two genealogies—those of Philippine cinema and of Philippine folklore. As a cinematic work, *Aswang* is interesting because it is a documentary which draws from the tropes and

techniques of horror, particularly Philippine horror cinema, within which the aswang is a constant fixture. Meanwhile, *Aswang* also engages in the folkloric work by which various communities have, over time, imbued the enigmatic creature with new meanings and resonances. In these sections, however, I also note how *Aswang*'s tendency to treat Metro Manila as an unproblematic synecdoche for the Philippine nation obscures other genealogies, from the interesting ways that regional horror films about the aswang interrogate the dialectic between city and countryside, to the ways in which communities outside Manila have imagined the aswang differently, and not necessarily as a figure of evil or menace.

Moving from these sections, I then delve more deeply into close readings of sequences in the film itself. In "The Aswang and the Moral Economy of the Drug War," I investigate how the documentary's varied depictions of the victims of extrajudicial killings, alongside their networks of kin, both characterize and call into question the neoliberal moral economy by which the Duterte regime positions some citizens as deserving of death and others as deserving of life. Following this investigation, in "The Aswang and the Passion," I explore how themes of grace, redemption, and sacrifice as articulated through syncretic practices like *penitensiya* place the film in conversation with the Catholic cosmologies introduced by Spanish imperialism. Finally, in "The Aswang and the Politics of Anonymity," I investigate how the film explores potential avenues of dissent against the Duterte regime through its depiction of protesters who, through obscuring their faces, challenge a politics based on positive identification with a moral community.

THE ASWANG IN PHILIPPINE CINEMA

The aswang lore has long played a key part in the tradition of Filipino filmmaking; in fact, the first ever sound film in the country was a vampire movie called *Ang Aswang* (1933) (Baumgartel 3). Given the supernatural characteristics of the aswang, it has been a mainstay of Philippine horror, perhaps most famously through its multiple appearances in the popular *Shake, Rattle, & Roll* franchise. But Arumpac's *Aswang* is not, on the face of it, a horror film. In fact, as a documentary focused on truth-telling and verisimilitude, the film seems to stand in stark contrast to that of supernatural horror with which the aswang is commonly associated. However, one of Arumpac's stylistic innovations in *Aswang* is the use of horror elements to heighten the dramatic stakes of her film without compromising its investigative

quality. For example, the film's use of light and shadow, which lends many of its nighttime scenes a chiaroscuro feel, emphasizes the horrific nature of the threat of extrajudicial murder. Throughout the film, human figures appear miniscule in comparison to their shadows or are indexed only through the silhouettes they throw on the floor. This use of shadows and darkness to evoke an atmosphere of ambient dread is a typical characteristic of *mise-en-scene* in supernatural horror, but in *Aswang* it is retooled to chilling effect.

The muted soundscape of the film likewise evokes a suspense akin to horror sequences preceding jump scares or monstrous revelations, except in the case of *Aswang*, the horror is the threat of state terror—a terror experienced affectively through sound. Under the Duterte regime, operations in which suspected drug users were executed were known colloquially as *tokhang*, a term drawn onomatopoeically from *toktok*, the sound of knocking (Macapagal 39). Meanwhile, Allan Derain notes how the horror of the aswang also comprises a sonic dimension. In Filipino folklore, many of the names for aswang are onomatopoeia for the sounds of birds—of at least fifty names for aswang from various regions, Derain notes eight which are also names for the sound of birds chirping or of birds themselves, suggesting a spectral association between supernatural phenomena and the soundscape of the natural world (3). The “tiktik” which signals the potential presence of an aswang eerily echoes the “toktok” which announces the violent arrival of state (or parastate) agents.

The subtle soundscape through which *Aswang* articulates the horror of state terror is crafted through deliberate and sparing appearances of state voices. In *Aswang*, Katrina Macapagal astutely notes the absence of commentary drawn from Duterte himself; she argues that this relative lack of the state's voice is part of the film's emphasis on the lived experiences of “victims and survivors of Duterte's war on drugs” (37). When the state does appear via sound, it only does so twice, “through the inclusion of brief radio broadcast commentaries...detached from human, visible bodies” (Macapagal 40). These disembodied voices suggest the threat of state violence without its physical materialization, an apt example of sound's ability to incarnate absent presences in horrific ways. As Derain puts it, “sound is the presentation of presence. Of presence that is still about to arrive, and thus cannot really be called presence” (5). Just as horror films like *Alien* terrify by withholding visual information, instead suggesting monstrous presences by telltale sounds—creaking metal, labored breathing—*Aswang* lifts from the lexicon of filmic horror to illustrate the affective menace of extrajudicial violence.

Though *Aswang* sparks a provocative conversation between the genres of horror and documentary film, demonstrating an awareness of the cinematic genealogy in which it intervenes, there are also ways in which the film does not fully address the

multivalent character of its inheritance. Given the regional variations in aswang imaginaries, the monster has often been employed as a lens through which to explore the unevenness of Filipino modernization. As Jay Jomar Quintos notes in his examination of the oeuvre of horror filmmaker Richard Somes, the roots of many of Somes's films in his home region of Negros Occidental lead to uses of the aswang as an extended metaphor for the “dialectic of opposing discourses of ‘interruption’ [paggambala] between the forces of ‘region’ and ‘nation’” (68). Meanwhile, as Katrina Tan and Laurence Castillo demonstrate, regional filmmakers—in this case hailing from Duterte's hometown of Davao—aptly employ horror to challenge the spatial imaginaries of films where Manila is employed as an unproblematic stand-in for the entirety of the Philippine nation (10). This lack of attentiveness to both regional variations in aswang imaginaries and the immense contribution made by non-Manileño filmmakers to the cinema of aswang do demonstrate an unfortunate elision in *Aswang*, where the use of Metro Manila as synecdoche for the nation is not problematized. The tension between the more sweeping claims of *Aswang* and its focus on Metro Manila to the exclusion of other cinematic spaces complicate Arumpac's undeniable cinematic achievement.

THE ASWANG IN PHILIPPINE FOLKLORE

Just as Arumpac's film elides the tensions between the regional and the national which horror films featuring the aswang have often explored, it also sidelines, in similar fashion, some of the more complicated debates around the genealogy of the aswang. This is particularly the case when it comes to the film's use of voice-over. When the film's narrator declares, “Whenever they say there is an aswang around, what they really want to say is—be afraid,” who is the “they” that is being spoken about?

This “they” cannot unproblematically stand for members of the Filipino national community, for throughout the archipelago, both spatially and temporally, the aswang has meant many more things than just the injunction to be afraid. Ethnographic explorations of aswang lore provide a glimpse into the sheer regional variation surrounding conceptions of this entity. Among the Bukidnon Manobo, one belief regarding Talagbusao, a possible regional variation on the aswang, is that they are members of a faction of “warring gods,” representing a particularly bloodthirsty deity (Dadole qtd. in Quintos 71). Jesus Cyril Conde, Maria Aurora Conde, and Ramona Renegado, in their ethnographic exploration of Agta healing rituals, note how the Agta use different plants “[to oppose] an evil supernatural

being called *aswang*" (149). Zeus Salazar, examining Filipino traditions of faith healing, notes a Bikol ritual where "an emplaster of *buyo* leaves [was placed] on the head of the patient [believed to be plagued by the aswang]" alongside the invocation of the deity Bathala to exorcise the creature (37). Meanwhile, in Panay, Alicia Magos speculates that aswang beliefs may originate from characters in *sugidanon*, local epics; in one of these *sugidanon*, the aswang is, in fact, "an upright person in the community known for their bravery in warfare who has tasted or eaten human flesh" (qtd. in Quintos 72). The example from Panay is particularly noteworthy since, in this case, the aswang is not an unambiguously evil or socially othered creature, but rather an honored warrior and member of the community.

With examples such as that of the aforementioned *sugidanon* in mind, many Philippine folklore scholars have suggested that the ostensibly malevolent character of the aswang may in fact be the result of a colonially introduced binary. As Quintos suggests, it is possible that the horrific connotations underpinning the aswang figure emerged from Spanish colonial ideologies, which rendered the aswang as a terrifying creature outside the fold of what was permitted in a Catholic cosmology; such a rendering then obscured more sympathetic conceptions of the aswang in indigenous belief systems, placing the creature "between two colliding discourses" (73). Cua Lim, meanwhile, points to a "perhaps unexpected link between aswang and queer subjectivities," wherein Spanish colonial sources demonized both "native female priests called *baylan* (in Visayan) or *catalonan* (in Tagalog)" and "male priests dressed as women...known as *asog* in the Visayas and *bayog* in the Luzon area...first as witches...then as aswang" for their opposition to Spanish colonial rule ("Queer Aswang Transmedia" 185).

Given these alternative genealogies for the aswang, the univocality of the "they" in *Aswang* who refers to the creature as a source of fear should be brought into question—who are "they" who see the aswang as a terrifying entity, as opposed to, say, a figure of gender nonvariance, anti-colonial rebellion, or martial bravery? Such an elision in *Aswang* is of a piece with the unquestioned Manila-centrism of the film, which unproblematically treats the metropolis as synecdochic for the entire Philippines; not only does this elision obscure other potential readings of the aswang, but it also occludes the importance of non-metropolitan politics in Duterte's rise to power and his use of extrajudicial terror once in power. As Patricio Abinales notes, the majority of works in what he terms the "Duterte studies industry" seem to display "no interest in Duterte's local beginnings" as mayor of Davao City (1). Yet it was in Davao City where Duterte cultivated his strategy of empowering local militia, most infamously the "Davao Death Squad," to extrajudicially execute suspected communists alongside drug dealers and political rivals (McCoy 37-38). Subsequently, the "they" who are deictically referred to in *Aswang's* voiceover

presumably excludes many of those subjects in the Philippines who do not call Metro Manila home.

THE ASWANG AND THE MORAL ECONOMY OF THE DRUG WAR



Fig. 1. A corpse, its face covered with masking tape from Alyx Ayn Arumpac's *Aswang*.

Having explored the cinematic genealogies in which *Aswang* participates, I now return to a close reading of the content of the film, beginning with the image of the corpse in the documentary's opening sequence. The corpse is a figure of what Julia Kristeva terms the abject—not quite the other, not quite the self, but something that upsets the boundaries between the two (125-126). The corpse, while visibly different from the living body, rests uneasily on the border between the living and the dead with its ghostly presence, its continuing ability to conjure and disturb. The sight of the corpse disturbs precisely because it renders the dichotomy between life and death briefly permeable, as the living who gaze upon it see themselves in it—as its possible successors, as the next possible victims in a series of corpses laid upon the streets of Metro Manila—even as they might rush to disidentify themselves from whoever it was whose life was so recently claimed. Like the titular aswang, the corpse is thus also a sign that draws together “similarities’ between things that are not manifestly ‘the same,’” troubling as it does the boundaries between life and

death and between self and other (Bracken 69). The power of the corpse-as-sign to transgress these boundaries is on display in a shot that juxtaposes the revelation of the dead body with a line of police tape (see Fig. 2) that is so thin as to be barely discernible, next to a group of figures—among them policemen—whose shadows far outstrip them in size. Here, the bright line of yellow police tape is literally crossed by the shadows which run over and under it.



Fig. 2. Line of police tape from Alyx Ayn Arumpac's *Aswang*.

This corpse, however, does not signify the abject all on its own, but within an affective economy of other corpses, other victims of extrajudicial killings under the Duterte regime. These corpses appear at night, as if by brutal sleight of hand, within the narrow byways of shantytowns and sprawled underneath busy overpasses. Often, these other bodies are displayed with cardboard signs that read “Pusher ako, huwag tularan” (I am a [drug] pusher, don't follow my example), situating their victimization within the drug war's economy of moral judgment, one intimately tied to the imputed criminality of the victim. Like the abject corpse, not quite the dead other or the living self but something that transgresses the easy boundary between the two, the criminal is “always on the edge of...society but never outside it, never the foreigner” (Siegel 3). The phrase “Pusher ako, huwag tularan” signifies the corpse as a criminal, containing to an extent its semiotic force in a narrative that ties the exercise of the sovereign power to kill with the sublimation of justice. That narrative might go: this corpse was killed because he was a pusher. Justice is executed when pushers are killed—pushers are deserving of death, draw death upon themselves by virtue of their criminality. The display of the corpse has its

limit form in a tautology: he is dead because he is a pusher; he is a pusher because he is dead.

Just as the corpses of tattooed bodies in Indonesia signified criminality in the 1980s under Suharto's regime (Siegel 111), and just as, under Ferdinand Marcos's regime of Martial Law, "corpses [were] written upon and read as texts [in a] low politics of performative violence" (McCoy 11), these corpses exist in a signifying economy that makes meaning out of their similarities (the appearance of masking tape around the face, or the telltale cardboard sign warning of their transgressions) to situate them on the edge of a community's moral boundaries as the wasteful, unproductive, and dangerous drug-addled other whom upstanding people should not emulate. If the aswang, as in Ramos's telling and in Richard Somes's films, often appears as a hidden outsider who has managed to infiltrate the community through its shapeshifting powers, then the aswang in Arumpac's documentary also stands as an effective metaphor for the menace of the drug user, whose incorrigible habit marks them off from the rule-obeying community yet who cannot be easily identified until they lie, splayed on the street. As Wataru Kusaka argues in "Disaster, Drugs, Discipline, and Duterte," an essay drawn from his ethnographic work among Filipino communities building lives in the wake of supertyphoon Yolanda (which struck the country in 2013; internationally known as Haiyan) and their relationships with the state under Duterte's regime, the widespread popularity of Duterte's drug war can be understood as a consequence of the proliferation of a "neoliberal governmentality" in disaster zones (72). In the wake of Yolanda, NGOs and state actors provided aid to affected community members conditionally, depending on the moral performance of recipients according to a standard of good citizenship typified by actions like spending thriftily and regularly attending meetings. The proliferation of microfinance as a particular form of conditional aid further subjectified poor Filipinos as entrepreneurs-in-the-making, rewarding those who managed to eke a profit from small loans with not only more access to cash but also social capital. The effects of these forms of governmentality at the community level was the proliferation of a dichotomy between "good citizens" and "evil others," the latter existing across class lines as both "the elites who abuse...state power and resources, and drug users who endanger their families" (Kusaka 72). Thus, just as good, entrepreneurial citizens are deemed deserving of greater access to livelihood and capital, evil others who waste their time on drugs and threaten their community through the sale of illegal substances are similarly deserving of death.

Philippine studies scholar Neferti Tadiar makes a similar argument in *Remaindered Life*, contending that "the moral calculus...of a just war infuses and permeates not only the wide support of...Duterte and his war on drugs but also the very world that the regime of Duterte is widely presumed to oppose (sometimes

characterized as global liberalism or even neoliberalism)” (230). In Tadiar’s rendering, extrajudicial killings are a form of neoliberal value production, one where poor drug users are subject to a “racializing devaluation through violence” that ostensibly secures “the modicum of privileges and enjoyments” of other citizens (230, 235). Kusaka’s and Tadiar’s interventions complicate the arguments of Philippine studies scholars such as Richard Heydarian (2017) and Lisandro Claudio (2019) that Duterte’s rise to power can best be understood as resulting from a populist backlash against liberal democratic politics, inasmuch as the moral logic of Duterte’s drug war itself rests on neoliberal valuations of some lives as more deserving than those of others (Heydarian 220; Claudio 1). As such, one way to read the aswang is as precisely that figure of the devalued other—the drug user, the criminal—who supporters of the drug war evoke to justify the extralegal violence aided and abetted by the Duterte regime.



Fig. 3. Interview with the brother of a victim of extrajudicial killing from Alyx Ayn Arumpac’s *Aswang*.

Yet such a reading only begins to gesture to the monstrous power of the aswang, which rests precisely in its ability to blur boundaries and transgress contexts. For, it turns out, it is not so easy or simple to draw lines between good and evil, inside and outside, foreigner and neighbor. In fact, the criminal’s death is frightening precisely

because of their proximity to and kinship with members of their local community. Much of *Aswang* follows Brother Jun, a Redemptorist and “nightcrawler” who photographs the aftermaths of extrajudicial murders in Metro Manila, as he interviews the bereaved family members of victims. In one particularly moving interview, Brother Jun talks with the brother of one of the deceased, who can barely hold back tears as he describes the death of his sibling in a vigilante murder, saying: “I am for Duterte but what they did to my brother was wrong.” The deceased, far from being the symbol of an outsider on the very edges of communal life, returns as an intimate, someone who is kin. With his recognition of the deceased as his brother, Brother Jun’s interviewee reroutes the moral circuitry of the drug war, declaring that the vigilante murder of his brother was “wrong” and thus shifting the blame from the (alleged) drug user to the executioners as the real “evil others.” Yet this reconfiguration of the moral economy of the drug war is shot through with ambiguity, because the brother is still “for Duterte,” and thus implicitly still supports the president’s ongoing campaign against drug users. Then there is the ambiguity of the pronoun “they”—who are “they” who have committed the sin against the interviewee’s brother? Are they individuals or members of a more organized group? Are they state agents or vigilantes? Are they members of one of the death squads newly empowered by the Duterte regime, or private militia members of the kind employed by politicians to secure electoral victories? Thus, just as the murder of a loved one seems to potentially give rise to a critique of the predatory state, the shapeshifting aswang rears another of its many heads.

One potentially fruitful way to think about the ambiguous “they” of this interview—a “they” who is identified, by juxtaposition, with the figure of Duterte but who is not quite Duterte himself—is as that monstrous power of the other which the state appropriates to justify its own monstrosity. In this regard, this “they”—which I’d like to think of as yet another dwelling place of the aswang—is comparable to what Siegel calls the menace of the corpse in Suharto-era Indonesia. He writes:

the power attributed to the corpse is made to seem a menace not for a certain set of villagers...but for the nation as a whole. It is the government’s own resort to extralegal violence that gave it this status...when the government explicitly abandoned legality in its actions, it did so by claiming the necessity of acting against a force that it posited was otherwise uncontrollable. It acted against a strength that was inhuman. (109)

According to Siegel, the Suharto-era state could only justify its abandonment of legality by pointing to a force outside of its control. Alfred McCoy makes a similar point about the Marcos regime, deliberately situating Duterte as the latest in a genealogy of populist strongmen in the Philippines who seize power by appealing to the specters of monstrosity and crisis—an apt comparison, considering Duterte’s

own reverence for the Marcos dynasty, signaled by his choice to bury Ferdinand Marcos, Sr. in the Libingan ng mga Bayani (Heroes' Cemetery) upon his assumption of office. According to McCoy, the Marcos regime "staged a spectacle of extralegal violence" in response to "major political and economic crises of the early 1980s," including a nationwide communist insurgency; just as, under Duterte, corpses were marked with signs declaring them as drug users, under Marcos, victims' bodies were found "scarred by stigmata of torture, in public places so passers-by could read a transcript of terror in the wounds" (34).

In order for the Duterte regime to justify both the mobilization of state violence (through the organs of the police and the military) and the conscription of a wide swath of "petty sovereigns" (Butler qtd. in Rafael 109) scattered throughout the archipelago, the state also needs to constantly suggest the possibility of its dissolution, evoking a crisis that always threatens to slip out of its control. Take this excerpt from President Duterte's inauguration speech in 2016:

There are many amongst us who advance the assessment that the problems that bedevil our country today which need to be addressed with urgency, are corruption, both in the high and low echelons of government, criminality in the streets, and the rampant sale of illegal drugs in all strata of Philippine society and the breakdown of law and order. True, but not absolutely so. For I see these ills as mere symptoms of a virulent social disease that creeps and cuts into the moral fiber of Philippine society Erosion of faith and trust in government – that is the real problem that confronts us. ("Inauguration Speech")

This speech, which apart from literally inaugurating Duterte into the presidency, also symbolically inaugurates the discursive reasoning behind his brutal campaign of extrajudicial killings. In order to justify his broad expansion of executive power, Duterte cannot appeal to reasons of state alone. Instead, he must conjure up the specter of "a virulent social disease" that threatens the breakdown of faith, trust, and morality. This evocation of a state of emergency is a kind of magic act in Bracken's sense, inasmuch as it is a discursive move which not only reflects but enacts that which it claims to merely describe. Consider, for example, that the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates that the Philippines has an estimated prevalence of drug use rate of only 1.69%, compared to the overall global rate of 5.2% (Diola cited in Quimpo 150). Of course, while these statistics do not account for any non-reporting drug users and do not necessarily reflect the affective reality of communities, I bring them up to gesture to the way that Duterte's condemnation of the nation's drug problem draws its power not only from a literal sociological referent, but also a broader climate of state abandonment, structural poverty, and severe immiseration.



Fig. 4. Children sleeping atop coffins from Alyx Ayn Arumpac's *Aswang*.

Thus, whether in Kusaka's illuminating ethnographic account of a post-Yolanda society, in the historical precedent of Martial Law under the Marcos regime, or within the rhetoric of Duterte's inauguration speech, the trope of the Philippines as a space of ongoing disaster proves both mobile and durable. As the context within which the more personalized moral discernments between good citizens and evil others unfold, disaster is also a suggestive chronotope of contemporary Metro Manila as depicted in *Aswang*. Following Mikhail Bakhtin, the chronotope is a literary genre's orientation to and evocation of a specific conjunction of space and time (85); in *Aswang*, one might speak of a time of emergency sutured to a space of abandonment, or a time of crisis sutured to spaces of living death. The film's introductory voice-over alerts us to this reading with its narration of a nation in crisis: "Night after night the darkness unravels bodies. Sprawled face down on the streets. Death flows down the rivers and the sea." But a more specific instance in which *Aswang* unspools the chronotope of emergency occurs in the second half of the film, in an extended sequence which follows a community of street children who live out of a gravesite. As a group of these children gather around the scene of a burial, they make jokes that the corpse being buried is moving: "It bumped. It bumped." "They might wake up." "The dead spoke up, he said "Ouch!" Again, we have

a scene suggesting the permeability between life and death, alongside later shots of the children sleeping atop the same coffins used to entomb corpses, some of whom are presumably victims of the drug war. In their everyday proximity to death, the film seems to suggest, the children are themselves a kind of living dead. They can be read as the “refuse” of state-sponsored neoliberal development, “neither ascending the ladder of progress nor going underground, whose experience of suspension is perpetual ... who just get by” (Tadiar, *Things Fall Away* 159). Scavenging for a life among piles of garbage, making a living from the habitat of the dead, these children are abandoned by the state in a regime of slow violence which acts in uncanny conjunction with the quick violence exacted upon alleged drug users. It is this state of emergency—of a day-to-day existence cut off from the rudimentary requirements of life—which the state, in its rhetoric, mobilizes as justification for the execution of drug users, evoking a chronotope of crisis that corresponds to the lived experiences of so many of its citizens. Yet, as *Aswang* makes painfully clear, there is no direct link between the killing of drug users and the ending of poverty and immiseration for the various characters that it follows. If anything, as Vicente Rafael argues in *The Sovereign Trickster*, the killing of drug users and the proliferation of zones of state abandonment might be understood as existing within a similar discursive logic of outsourcing—for just as the state outsources the violence of extrajudicial killings to non-state actors, it outsources its welfare policies as well to a variety of private institutions, international actors, and NGOs, even as it devotes an ever increasing amount of its budget to the maintenance of security and order through internal policing (16).

THE ASWANG AND THE PASSION

Fig. 5. Flagellants participating in the Lenten ritual of penitensya from Alyx Ayn Arumpac's *Aswang*.

While *Aswang* is immersed in the bloody consequences of a particular political moment—that of the Duterte regime—sections of the film are suggestive of a conversation with deeper colonial histories of power, community, and monstrosity. One of these scenes is the striking juxtaposition of the narrator's voice-over with a procession of flagellants, backs bloody, who are walking through the streets of Metro Manila in the Lenten ritual known as *penitensiya* (Moratilla 149). As the flagellants slowly march forward, the voice of the narrator is punctuated by the staccato beat of their makeshift switches. The narrator declares: "They say this is how to ask for forgiveness. But the aswang doesn't listen to prayers. Such a monster doesn't forgive." The original Tagalog for the final sentence in this quotation, "Wala siyang patawad," is even more suggestive than its English rendering in the movie's closed captions, for it literally reads "They [the aswang] do not have forgiveness," or "They do not have the capacity to forgive." Read alongside a Lenten ceremony associated with a popular interpretation of Catholic dogma initially approved by Spanish friars but later treated with consternation by the Catholic Church (Moratilla 151), the aswang's incapacity to forgive suggests both the monster's

historical framing as demonic within the Catholic cosmology imposed by Spanish imperialists, as well as its existence in excess of this cosmology (unable to forgive, the aswang seems outside grace, beyond redemption). Additionally, the popular character of *penitensiya*—which is practiced in defiance of the Philippine Catholic Church’s subtle disapproval—complicates an easy dichotomy between colonial Catholicism on the one hand and the “indigenous” figure of the aswang on the other. *Penitensiya* is a practice that, while existing within a Catholic cosmology, cannot be territorialized by Catholic dogma; neither fully indigenous nor fully colonial, it might better be described as, after Joshua Bender, “uncolonial” (1), gesturing as it does to multiple immiscible and contradictory worlds unaccountable to the foreign-native dichotomy. In addition, the performance of *penitensiya*, like the practice of reading and participating in the *pasyon* (passion play) analyzed by Reynaldo Ileto in his seminal work *Pasyon and Revolution* (1979), inaugurates a messianic temporality by which the penitent participates personally in the sacrifice of Christ, bringing the ostensibly distant world of the kingdom of God into the affective, embodied world of the present. So it is that the film’s display of *penitensiya*, while seemingly oblique to its subject matter of Duterte’s drug war, resonates with the uncanny power of the aswang, which while having colonial associations cannot be subsumed into colonial (or national) time. “People grow old but their fears do not,” declares *Aswang*’s narrator, suggesting not merely that the origins of the aswang are not empirically traceable to a specific point in time, but that the aswang itself is out of joint with any linear or teleological historicity. The suggestiveness of the *penitensiya* scene, with its evocation of multiple temporalities at cross-purposes, is particularly apt for a film concerning the aswang, which—as Cua Lim argues—is “a deceptively singular name for plural forms of worlding, those of indio, Spanish colonial missionary, American imperialist, contemporary anthropologist, urbanite and provincial, elite and disenfranchised” (*Translating Time* 145).

Just as the *penitensiya* scene complicates any simple binaries between the colonial and the indigenous, alluding to multiple temporalities and multiple practices of belief, it also suggests the uncanny echoes between the moral economy of Spanish-Catholic imperialism and that of Duterte’s contemporary war on drugs. Previously, I have alluded to theorists such as Cua Lim (2015) who see in the aswang the demonized figure of the indigenous priest, cast out of the world of grace for daring to rebel against colonial rule; meanwhile, in her allusion to Duterte’s war on drugs as a just war, Neferti Tadiar situates Duterte’s campaign within an Augustinian tradition of theorizing righteous causes for war against non-Christian others (*Remaindered Life* 229-56). In parallel to these lines of thought, the *penitensiya* is a ritual in which the devotee sheds their own blood in order to participate in the passion of Christ, whose sacrifice and death lead to humanity’s redemption. As such, the rite is a sacrifice which is purifying, a violent act which signifies the casting out of sin and the arrival of grace. Similarly, Duterte’s war on drugs plays

on a logic by which blood is shed for the redemption of the nation's citizenry—but instead of a practice of self-mortification, this war is instead a necropolitical practice by which some members of the body politic are excised from the moral community, marked as undeserving of life and deserving of death.

Who are the others of the nation so excised? Returning to *Aswang*, as I have touched on earlier, these others can be read as those who fail to align with the “good” in a neoliberal moral economy that rewards the entrepreneurial self and punishes the lazy, undisciplined other (as well as condemning, if not quite punishing in the same way, the upper class of corrupt politicians, drug kingpins, and other members of the national bourgeoisie). The *penitensiya* scene takes this reading further by juxtaposing the lazy other of neoliberalism's moral logic with another other—the unredeemable other, the other who is outside redemption's saving grace. In order to elaborate on this, I return to Brother Jun, who, as one of the central characters of *Aswang*, acts as the film's moral conscience. In an early scene Brother Jun, dressed in religious vestments, talks to his congregation about the human toll of the drug war; later, we see him again helping to administer a mass, as the collected congregants sing a suggestive excerpt of the Tagalog version of the Our Father: “as we forgive those who sin against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.” Brother Jun's devotion to his religious duties is mirrored in his devotion to documenting the human rights violations of the Duterte regime, as he moves between zones of death demarcated by police tape, camera in hand.

One of the most nightmarish sequences in *Aswang* follows Brother Jun as he, along with other members of the Commission on Human Rights, uncovers a jail hidden behind furniture in a police precinct. We first learn about this jail through an interview with an anonymous woman who was imprisoned there, as she draws a diagram of the jail in a notebook with blue pen. Her testimony is worth quoting at length:

They didn't say anything. They just took me. They brought me to the back of Precinct One. It was like a cabinet.... Then they told me to go inside. I wondered where to go inside.... When he removed the small piece of metal at the edge, I smelled it immediately. Like pee and shit. There were so many people inside, mixed up. Men and women.... I still can't believe that such a place exists. It's hard for me to think that I was ever there. Every time that door closed, you couldn't see any light. It was like I was buried underneath the ground. As if I were such a terrible person, to have been put there. That's why it's hard for me to talk about this.

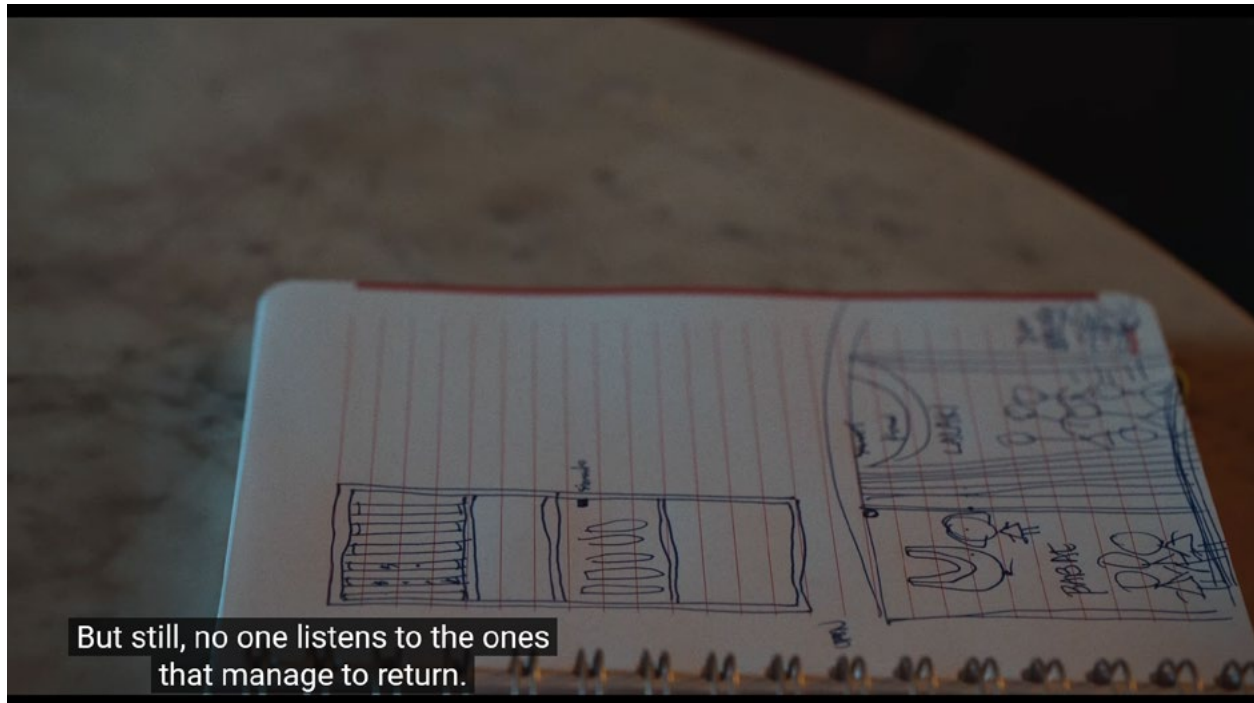


Fig. 6. Notebook sketch of the hidden jail from Alyx Ayn Arumpac's *Aswang*.

After he was tipped about the jail, Brother Jun and other members of the Commission of Human Rights journey to the police precinct in question, where they find multiple men and women detained in a dark space without ventilation or light, held on unspecified charges. The secret jail is a kind of hell—it lies on the boundary between life and death, causing a living death for those trapped within it, such that they feel like they have been buried underground. The interviewee describing her experience in the jail must make recourse to the supernatural or otherworldly to describe it: “I still can’t believe that such a place exists.” The jail is a kind of punishment, but for a crime that she doesn’t even know whether or not she has committed: “As if I were such a terrible person, to have been put there.” But, even more frustratingly, after rescuing the detainees from the secret jail at the police precinct, Brother Jun and his companions can only sit by and watch as the police manufacture paperwork to arraign the detainees with false charges, then transfer them to another prison. *Aswang* thus depicts a journey to hell without an attendant ascent into heaven, the despair of Black Saturday without the coming of Easter. Though freed from the secret jail in the police precinct, the detainees are not absolved of the sins assigned to them by the state, and as the grueling day comes to a close, the documentary follows Brother Jun as he sits alone, pensively, by a crucified Christ whose divine justice seems impossibly remote.



Fig. 7. Brother Jun sitting by a crucifix from Alyx Ayn Arumpac's *Aswang*.

Yet without denying the despair and heartache of this sequence, I would like to suggest that *Aswang's* refusal of a redemptive arc for these victims of the state's punitive authority also suggests the possibility of an alternative politics, one that is not tied to the definition of a moral self against an immoral other. While *Aswang*, through Brother Jun, acknowledges the moral authority that members of religious orders in the Philippines have marshaled to challenge the human cost of Duterte's drug war, the film is also careful not to perpetuate the moralizing way in which many of the victims of that war have been constructed, such that sympathy for the dead is tied to whether or not, when living, they had been upstanding subjects. The redemptive impulse in critiques of the drug war's human cost—the desire to humanize, so to speak, its myriad victims—risks its own elisions, inasmuch as it inaugurates yet another moral economy in which some people don't deserve to die while others implicitly do. The appeal of this redemptive response is undeniable at both the affective and popular level. I will provide two telling examples here. One is the most popular photograph to come out of the drug war, taken by Rafael Lerma, which depicts Jennilyn Olayres cradling her partner, Michael Siaron, after the latter was shot to death by motorcycle-riding gunmen. Duterte himself pointed out the resonances between the photograph and Michelangelo's sculpture, *La Pieta* (Rafael

114); the photograph lends Olayres and Siaron the haunting dignity of a grieving Mary and her dead son. Another is the killing of Kian de los Santos in August 2017, a 17-year-old Grade 11 student who was summarily executed by police. His killing engendered mass public reaction, with a moral response whose magnitude led to the sacking of the entire police force of Caloocan City, as well as the unprecedented meeting between President Duterte and the family members of the bereaved (Fernquest 16-17). Both tragic deaths—those of Siaron and de los Santos—led to incredible outpourings of public action against and moral condemnation of the Duterte regime’s war on drugs. Yet, ultimately, the brutal logic and popularity of Duterte’s campaign ground on.

My point here is not to malign the incredibly meaningful activism that followed Lerma’s photo and the circulation of the news of de los Santos’s killing; neither is it to impugn the memory of these two victims of extrajudicial murder. But it is worth pointing out the intensely moralizing impulses that accompany these examples of memorialization, such that a Christlike figure and an innocent schoolchild become the faces, *par excellence*, of the war on drugs’ immense human toll. What, one wonders, happens when the victims of extrajudicial killings are not so redeemable, not so innocent, precisely because of their character as refuse, their immiseration in spaces of state abandonment, structural violence, and social death? Is there a political response that can account for the ways in which moral economies are made legible through the condemnation and exclusion of others—through the temporary exorcism, one might say, of internal aswangs?

THE ASWANG AND THE POLITICS OF ANONYMITY

Aswang begins, as mentioned, with the image of a corpse whose face is covered by masking tape, such that the identity of the victim cannot be placed. The terrain of the film is populated by characters who, similarly, go unidentified, whether their faces are cast in shadow to anonymize them or they deliberately wear masks; they are thus orthogonal to a moral economy of good and evil, since their identities, deeds, and social entanglements cannot be readily ascertained. One example is the unidentified body on the gurney of Eusebio funeral services, about whom the funeral home’s proprietor says little: “The people there said he was walking. Then a motorcycle came. Then they shot him. That’s the story...if his relatives come, we will do an autopsy. Otherwise, not.” Bodies like this one, victims of the same drug war that claimed the lives of Kian de los Santos and Michael Siaron, go unnamed, and in the case of the body in the funeral home, unclaimed.

The trope of the face—or, more precisely, its iterability, occlusion, or even its absence—makes a recurrence during a protest organized by a variety of activist groups, including members of the national democratic front, against the Duterte regime depicted in *Aswang*. The film dwells, briefly, on a few scenes of protestors whose faces are either partially or fully obscured: in one scene, protestors are holding up posters that depict the circle at the center of a crosshair, bisected so as to reveal half the face of its holder while obscuring the other half with the face of a victim of the drug war. In another, protestors have their faces fully covered by white cloth, the features of crying human faces drawn onto the cloth with black marker. In these brief flashes during a public demonstration against the Duterte regime, *Aswang* seems to gesture to a different kind of politics that does not require the redemption of its constituents for their claims to dignity, humanity, or belonging—a politics that, after Vicente Rafael, one might term the politics of anonymity (146). This emergent politics runs counter to the surveilling impulses of the neoliberal state, whose technologies of identification—from the community surveys underpinning conditional cash transfer programs to the kill lists circulated among local government officials—selectively govern the boundary between life and death. Instead of drawing on the entrepreneurial subject of neoliberal governmentality, or on the redeemed penitent of Christian pastoralism, this politics of anonymity is rooted in a shifting collective whose lines of assembly are contingent on logics other than identification.



Fig. 8. Protesters obscure their faces with posters depicting victims of the drug war from Alyx Ayn Arumpac's *Aswang*.



Fig. 9. Protesters hide their faces behind white cloth from Alyx Ayn Arumpac's *Aswang*.

Admittedly, this politics of anonymity is not fully autonomous of the brutalizing logics of the state and its petty sovereigns, who themselves render victims of the drug war faceless through the mutilation of the body, the covering of facial features with masking tape. Instead, its emergence might come from an identification with, as opposed to a disavowal of, the monstrosity that the state declares as its enemy in order to justify its appropriation of a power that is just as, if not more, monstrous. What would it mean for the collective to take on that monstrosity whose menace both underpins and threatens the state as the contingent power of a community (to borrow from Fred Moten and Stefano Harney in *The Undercommons*) that is in the state but not of it?

Aswang ends with a final voice-over, running alongside a shot of the roads of Metro Manila as seen from the front of Brother Jun's car: "Whenever they say there is an aswang around, what they really want to say is—be afraid. This city is its killing field, and it can devour you.... But some refuse to be afraid. They choose to stand up and look the monster in the eye." What might that last, suggestive injunction—to "look the monster in the eye"—mean?

During the aforementioned montage featuring protestors, many of whose faces are masked or obscured, a rallying cry can be heard: “Kayo mga nandyan, sa gilid ng daan, sumama na, sumali na, sa welga ng bayan,” or “Those of you over there, along the side of the road, join us already, join us, in the national strike.” Throughout *Aswang*, Arumpac demonstrates the devastating toll of a moral logic that places the drug user outside the pale of the community, preemptively justifying their death by the state and its subcontracted, petty sovereigns. These outsiders are made into monsters, thus justifying the monstrosity of the violence levied against them, both victims of the state-as-aswang and images of aswang themselves. One can read these outsiders, in their marginality, as those “along the side of the road,” that “particular fraction of the urban poor ... [which] has not achieved a positive social identity on the basis of historical struggle perhaps [making] it difficult for a politics centered on representable identities to cohere” (Tadiar, *Remaindered Life* 245). Yet, as evidenced by the collectivities who gather and struggle on the streets under the sign of anonymity, an other politics, not centered on representation but rather on unrepresentability, even monstrosity (as refusal of the death-dealing moralism of the state), may well be possible on the way to the revolutionary horizon of the “national strike.” It may well be these “worthless beings—zombies—already dead or dying” (Tadiar, *Remaindered Life* 245) who, in their intimacy with the aswang, themselves understanding what it means to be seen as the other, come together in new forms of non-identitarian collectivity to “look the monster in the eye.”



Fig. 10. Painted effigy of Duterte burned at a protest from Alyx Ayn Arumpac's *Aswang*.

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