

The Sovereign Trickster

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In our current moment, authoritarian figures loom large. One of them is Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. He seems to embody two notions of sovereignty. One is related to law, the other to norms: on the one hand, the power of taking exception to the former, deciding who will live and who will die; on the other hand, the freedom from the limits of the latter by way of dissipation, irresponsibility, and excess. This article explores the double sources of his power with reference to the works of Michel Foucault and Achille Mbembe. While most of Foucault's work has focused on Europe, Mbembe has written about postcolonial conditions in ways that make critical use of Foucault. Drawing from their writings, this article situates Duterte as a "sovereign trickster" who seeks to dominate death while monopolizing laughter. Finally, this article speculates on the comparative usefulness of this figure of the sovereign trickster with regard to President Donald Trump, whose form of tricksterism derives, the author argues, from the tradition of blackface minstrelsy.

Keywords: death, drug war, Duterte, Foucault, Mbembe, Philippines, sovereignty, trickster, Trump

Justice pursues the body beyond all possible pain.

— Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

Duterte: May Utak sa Bayag, May Bayag sa Utak [Duterte: Brains in the balls and balls in the brains].

— Duterte campaign bumper sticker, 2016

PROVINCIALIZING FOUCAULT

FOR THE LAST FEW years, I have been teaching a course on Filipino histories during the same term that I have been leading a reading seminar on Michel Foucault at my university. Not surprisingly, the two have become entangled in my mind. Whenever I try to make sense of Foucault, I tend to do so with reference to the Philippines, so that I call on the one to answer my questions about the other, much like dialing the number of a distant call center with impossible questions at all hours of the day and night. Somehow, Foucault's focus on Europe (without arguably being Eurocentric) helps me see events in the Philippines in a certain way, just as events in the Philippines permit me to re-provincialize Foucault's historical genealogies of power and knowledge. In this sense, I follow in the wake of others who have made use of Foucault to think about postcolonial conditions

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elsewhere. One of these is Achille Mbembe, whose writings on sub-Saharan Africa have been helpful for thinking about the postcolonial Philippines. What follows, then, is an exercise in historical translation as I move back and forth between Foucault and Mbembe in an attempt to make sense of Duterte's Philippines.

To begin with, there is Foucault's well-known idea of biopower, characteristic of the modern age. Intertwined with, as much as subsuming, earlier regimes of power—what he calls the pastoral, the politico-juridical, and the disciplinary—biopower concerns control over all aspects of life as a whole. It sums up a style of governing that targets entire populations by working through each and every body. As Foucault succinctly puts it, biopower seeks to set the conditions for the “conduct of conduct,” with the state acting as a kind of orchestra conductor to coordinate the movements and behavior of each individual for the sake of ensuring the survival and development of the whole population. Actualized in a wide range of institutional arrangements from social welfare to sanitation, from tax policies to industrial regulations, from public health to policing, from education to housing, biopower is omnipresent in modern social relations. Engineering behavior while educating desire, it seeks to enlist the collaboration of each and every citizen towards the propagation of life as “more than and better than life.” And it does so in relation to the workings of capitalist markets, whether under a liberal or neoliberal dispensation. In the context of the postcolonial nation-state, biopower is precisely what animates the programs usually called “national development.” These are designed as progressive and open-ended projects to ensure and improve the lives of its citizens, conceptualized both as economic and as rights-bearing subjects. Postcolonial citizenship under biopower is precisely what emerges on the precarious fault line dividing and connecting these two forms of modern subjectivity: the economic subject ruled by the forces of the market and the subject of human rights whose universal humanity is, nonetheless, juridically circumscribed and selectively enforced by the state (Foucault 1990, 2009, 2010).

In the face of this tension between two kinds of citizen-subjects, biopower requires the continued assertion of some form of state sovereignty. As Foucault points out, this means, among other things, that the state continues to reserve the right to determine the boundaries and terms of national belonging. This entails deciding on those who are and can be citizens, not only legally but also culturally, as well as those who are not, can never be, or may no longer be considered citizens. Who is inside and who is outside the nation? Who has the right to have rights, and who are those that have no rights at all? And what to do with the latter? How are they to be othered—to be conceptualized and controlled? Are they to be treated as migrants subject to eventual inclusion as full citizens as well as part of an army of surplus labor? As racialized social enemies to be targeted for segregation and incarceration, condemned to bare life, exposed to death, or driven towards annihilation? Or as “abnormal” types mired in perversion and poverty bound for perpetual neglect and allowed to perish? Where biopower is about governing all facets of life, what happens to the administration of death (Cheah 2003, 2007; Foucault 2003)?

In his extended gloss on Foucault's work, Achille Mbembe has pointed out that in the context of the postcolony—whether sub-Saharan Africa or other formerly colonized countries—the imperative of asserting sovereignty points to the persistence of what he refers to as necropower: the power to put to death often accompanied by an “aesthetics of vulgarity”—the obscene display of violent excess that spills over and circulates between rulers and ruled (Agamben 1995; Mbembe 1992, 2003). As the other, enabling side of biopower,

necropower engages in a range of deadly measures—from permanent exile to indefinite renditions, from colonial occupation to racialized incarceration—that often include the grotesque and bloody displays of the sovereign will on the mutilated bodies of those designated as unassimilably foreign and criminal. As the murderous counterpoint to the biopolitical imperative of administering life, necropower foregrounds the sovereign will as the practice of putting to death and helps us understand the turbulent history of the present.

Such a history at this moment and for the foreseeable future is dominated by a whole series of authoritarian figures around the world. One such imposing figure is President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines. Not only does he monopolize so much of our political attention, but also, like his North American counterpart Donald Trump, Duterte has laid claim to large reservoirs of our intellectual and moral energy. How then can we use the critical histories of Foucault and Mbembe to understand a figure like Duterte and come to grips with the crisis brought about by his regime? Let me give a few examples.

NECROPOWER AND BARBARIAN FREEDOM

My first example has to do with the workings of necropower and its role in shoring up the idea of sovereignty, or put another way, the idea that freedom and authority stem from the right to kill. Since assuming office in July 2016, President Duterte has fallen woefully short on his promises to improve Filipino lives—from improving infrastructures to alleviating poverty, from shifting to a federalist form of government to peace talks with the Communist Party and the Moro insurgents, and much more. Instead, he has focused tenaciously on the drug war, specifically on ridding poor neighborhoods of so-called “drug personalities.” Under his regime, necropower has consistently subordinated biopower. One way to see his emphasis on the former over the latter is to look at a speech that he gave on August 3, 2018, in the province of Bukidnon. Making one of his frequent jokes about human rights, he addressed drug users and dealers—what the police refer to as “drug personalities”—directly in Taglish:

You enjoy your human rights there in heaven *kasi* God promised you that *lahat ng* extrajudicial killing victims will go to heaven. *‘Yan ang hiningi ko sa Diyos. Sabi naman ng Diyos, “Pwede, pwede.”* [laughter] *Gawain—gagawin ko ba ‘yan kung walang guarantee? Kasi kaawa naman. ‘Tang ina, magdo-droga ka tapos sa impyerno ka. If you have a [consolation?] I’m going to heaven, sabi ko, “God, pagbigyan mo na lang ‘yan. Ako, wala akong hingiin sa akin. Reserve the hottest place in hell for me. And may I burn till eternity.”* (Republic of the Philippines 2018)

[You enjoy your human rights in heaven because God promised you that all extrajudicial killing victims will go to heaven. That’s what I asked God. And God said, “okay, okay.” Would I do that without guarantee? That’s because these pitiful motherfuckers, they take drugs then they have to go to hell? If you have a [consolation?] I’m going to heaven, I said, “God, do them a favor. Me, I’m not going to ask for anything for myself. Reserve the hottest place in hell for me. And may I burn till eternity.”]

Enfolded in this joke is the tacit admission of having authorized the extrajudicial killings of thousands of suspected drug users (Ellis-Petersen 2018). This confession,

however, is displaced by another image: that of the victims going to heaven to “enjoy” the human rights they were deprived of on earth. In effect, the joke converts victims into martyrs. It is a conversion that Duterte accomplishes through a conversation with God Himself. He asks God to “*pagbigyan mo na lang iyan*”—to grant them a favor—and offers to trade places with them—to “reserve the hottest place in hell for me.” Duterte’s joke suggests two things. First, that he reserves the right to suspend human rights by ordering extrajudicial killings. And second, that as the sovereign leader, he has privileged access to the Cosmic Sovereign himself, a connection that we might colloquially refer to as being “*malakas*” (strongly connected) with Him. This divine connection is what allows the president to make deals with God. Mimicking divine power, the president aspires to wield the same awesome might. He can decide, for example, who will be saved and who will be damned, determining the afterlife of his victims even as he usurps the very realm of the devil himself, who dwells in the “hottest place in hell.”

In this and many of Duterte’s other jokes, a macabre sense of humor comes with a recurring obsession with drug users. Both betray an intense fascination with death. Addiction and death are always linked in his mind. Indeed, for Duterte, the “drug personalities” he addresses are no longer human. Echoing popular belief, Duterte regards crystal meth, or *shabu*, as thoroughly destructive, driving users to acts of extreme violence. High on the drug, they seem as if possessed by a force beyond their control. Unable to defer their desire, they will stop at nothing to satisfy their urges. They have no qualms about raping children and killing innocent people. For this reason, they cannot be considered human, let alone claim to have any rights. Hence, when accused of committing gross human rights violations, Duterte once responded, “What crime against humanity? In the first place, I’d like to be frank with you, are they (drug users) humans?” (Lasco 2016; Ramos 2016). Against available scientific evidence, Duterte continues to claim that *shabu* thoroughly destroys the mental and moral faculties of its users. Their brains supposedly shrink, placing them beyond rehabilitation. Incapable of being productive members of society, they are a permanent danger to its inhabitants (PTV 2018; Salaverria 2017). Considered inhuman, drug users thus pose an existential threat to those around them. The only solution for Duterte is to exterminate them.

Why this ferocious obsession with the *shabu* addict, especially in impoverished areas? Why does he desire their death? Part of the answer may have something to do with Duterte’s attraction to the inhuman qualities he associates with drug addicts. Induced by drug use, their inhumanity is thought to manifest itself in their criminality. Breaking the laws and disrespecting social conventions, it is as if they recognize no other authority except their own. They seem, then, to be supremely sovereign. If they pose a danger, it is because they know no limits to their power for destruction. In addressing addicts, Duterte is at once repelled by and attracted to this inhuman power and its claims to absolute sovereignty. It is as if he wants to claim that power for himself, often sounding like the criminals he seeks to pursue. For example, in one interview, in response to a question about his involvement with death squads in Davao City, he said, “Am I the death squad? That is true” (Manlupig 2015). And when asked about the death toll while he was mayor of Davao, he responded: “They said I killed 700? They miscalculated. It was 1,700” (Human Rights Watch 2017a). Sounding like a gangster bragging about his prowess, he threatens to execute addicts: “All of you who are into drugs, you sons of bitches, I will really kill you. I have no patience. I have no middle ground” (Jenkins 2016).

To be inhuman is to possess a dangerous power that transcends law and life itself. It would not be too far-fetched to say that such a power, reaching beyond life, has to do with its access to death. Addicts, in Duterte's view, are driven only to satisfy their need for drugs, to the point of killing for it. Unable to check their desire, they reject normal social relations. The antisocial nature associated with the addict brings with it precisely that power that Duterte craves. He wants that power for himself.

Historically, states have executed criminals and in so doing claim the power of death over life in the name of preserving order and defending society. Usually, the state has recourse to the law and follows a judicial process. In Duterte's case, the widespread practice of summary executions carried out by police and their paid assassins short-circuits this process. Since July 2016, an official police policy referred to as "Operation Double Barrel" states explicitly that the government is committed to a "drug clearing policy" that entails the "neutralization" and "negation" of "drug personalities nationwide" (Punay 2017; Republic of the Philippines 2016b). Extrajudicial killings—both the policy and the practice—thus seem like the direct translation of Duterte's murderous threats (Baldwin and Marshall 2017). His rhetoric appears magical: he speaks and sure enough, one sees the effects of his words as multiple corpses nightly populate the streets. In killing them, Duterte can claim to control and channel their inhuman power. He can point to the corpses as proof that his plan is working. For example, in his remarks about an unusually large number of summary executions in August 2017, he said, "*Yung namatay daw kanina sa Bulacan, 32, in a massive raid. Maganda 'yun. Makapatay lang tayo ng mga* another 32 everyday then maybe we can reduce what ails this country (The ones who died in Bulacan, 32, in a massive raid, that is beautiful. We could just kill another 32 everyday, then maybe we could reduce what ails this country)" (Salaverria and Corrales 2017).

He sees in the death of alleged addicts something aesthetically pleasing. Their extermination is "good and beautiful" (*maganda*). Seeing the death of the inhuman addict, he imagines not only neutralizing their power, but also absorbing it. With each death, he becomes more assured of his capacity to access that which lies beyond life. His sovereignty is reassured by the death of those whom he thinks have access to another realm. Duterte thus appropriates the very excess he attributes to addicts. Indeed, his own admission of being addicted at some point to a powerful opioid, Fentanyl, makes his connection to addicts as imaginative as it is real (*ABS-CBN News* 2017a; Lui 2016).¹ The latter have what he wishes to monopolize: an inhuman and uncanny ability to overcome all limitations of the social and the political. We might say that he is addicted to the notion of addiction and the kind of antisocial and inhuman power he sees in it—a kind of power with which to transcend and dominate the human and the social. In this sense, Duterte sees the world through the lens of his enemies.²

¹In subsequent statements, however, the president said he was only joking. But as Freud (1990) reminds us, jokes are always tendentious and so, like dreams, convey the truth of an unconscious desire. As I will show below, Duterte's humor is an important tactic in his attempts to project power. It is always full of aggression and murderous wishfulness.

²In this and other formulations of the politics of the inhuman, especially as it exercises a fascinating hold on the state, I am indebted to the work of Siegel (1998, 2006).

One way to understand Duterte's rise to power is to situate it within the history of Philippine state-formation seen as an elaboration of a process of counter-insurgency. This means that the state is founded not only on its repression of those it deems subversive; it also depends on the active collaboration of its citizens to carry out this repression. In this sense, counter-insurgency is predicated on the simultaneous workings of biopower and necropower. The postcolonial Philippine state has been the heir of a legacy of colonial counter-insurgency dating back from the later Spanish and United States colonial periods. This counter-insurgent style of governing is founded on the state's ability to confront as much as accommodate insurgent forces that have historically challenged its authority: peasant groups, labor unions, communists, Moro secessionists, and a variety of major and minor criminals located inside and outside of official circles—often at the same time. Such insurgents are also major agents in the gray economies of smuggling, gun-running, kidnap-for-ransom, human- and drug-trafficking, illegal gambling, and many other forms of racketeering, allowing them to influence if not capture various parts of the state. As other scholars have pointed out, the political economy of state formation in the Philippines—and much of Southeast Asia—cannot be understood apart from the role of insurgent figures and their illicit economies in the production and operation of the state apparatus and the legal economy on both the local and national level.³

In Duterte's Philippines, the drug addict currently occupies the position of the most dangerous insurgent, thanks in large part to the tendentious hyper-inflation of the numbers of drug users by the president and the police (Lasco 2016).⁴ It is not surprising then that just as Duterte has sought to coopt the communists and the Moro rebels, he also seeks to tap into the insurgent energy of drug addicts. We can see something of this attempt to appropriate the addict's perspective in his long, improvised speeches (Republic of the Philippines 2016a). Obsessed with exterminating drug users, he mirrors, if not covets, the very inhuman power he attributes to them. And the only way he can extract this power is by killing them. The "beauty and goodness" of murder is that it brings him closer to the very thing he abhors yet intensely desires.

From this perspective, addicts are not merely the "living dead" who need to be killed again and again. As insurgents who live inside society but who seek to destroy it, they come close to being what Foucault describes as "barbarians." And in coveting their power over life and death, Duterte himself becomes a kind of barbarian. What does this mean?

In his lectures entitled *Society Must Be Defended*, Foucault retraces the emergence of the figure of the barbarian in French historiography from the seventeenth to the eighteenth centuries with reference to the Germanic tribes that swept through Western Europe with the fall of the Roman Empire. What made such barbarians so compelling, according to Foucault, was their peculiar relationship to freedom. "The freedom of these [Germanic] warriors is not the freedom of tolerance and equality for all; it is a freedom

³For histories of Philippine state formation that emphasize the dialectics of insurgency and counter-insurgency, see Abinales and Amoroso (2017); Coronel (2017); Kramer (2006); Lara (2014); Lara and Schoofs (2016); McCoy (2009a, 2009b); Rafael (1999); and Sidel (1999a, 1999b).

⁴The Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency puts the number of drug-addicted people at about 1.8 million, whereas Duterte claims without any proof that it is closer to between four and five million. For a summary of these contending claims, see Lasco (2016).

that can be exercised only through domination. Far from being a freedom based upon respect, it is, in other words, a freedom based upon ferocity ... from the Latin word *ferox*: “proud, intrepid, haughty, cruel” (Foucault 2003, 148–49).

The barbarian is thus the very negation of the liberal subject. Unbound to social contracts that can only limit his liberty, the barbarian sees his freedom primarily in terms of his ability to take away the freedom of others. Rather than engage in productive labor or the accumulation of property, the barbarian turns to plunder, forcing everyone else to be at his service. Contemptuous of any civilization that would tame and domesticate his rights, the barbarian’s ideal government is “necessarily a military” one, “not one that is based upon the contracts and transfer of civil rights.... Full of arrogance, [the barbarian] has to be inhuman, precisely because he is not the man of nature and exchange; he is the man of history, the man of pillage and fires, he is the man of domination” (Foucault 2003, 197–98).

Barbarism, located within rather than outside of civilization, thus lies at the foundation of both authoritarianism *and* insurgency. Foucault’s remarks on the genealogy of barbarism shed light, however partial and oblique, on Duterte’s necropolitics—his fascination with the power of the inhuman to deliver death. He arrives not as an exception, but as one who claims to be so—as one who will vanquish the putative enemies of the people by throwing away the cumbersome scales of Lady Justice and resorting instead to its swift and unforgiving sword. Duterte’s barbarian notion of justice brings me to my second example dealing specifically with the president’s endless war on drugs.

“TOKHANG”: PUBLIC TORTURE AND NECRO-ECONOMY

In his 1973 Collège de France lectures gathered in the volume *The Punitive Society* (Foucault 2015), and two years later in his book *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1975), Foucault talks about the major forms of “punitive tactics” used in France and other places in Western Europe from the sixteenth century onwards. One of these included the marking of the body of the condemned, “imposing on it a symbolic stain on his name,” meant to

humiliate his character, damage his status.... In this system, the infraction is no longer something to be redressed ... but rather something to be emphasized [and]... fixed in a sort of monument, even if it is a scar, an amputation, or something involving shame or infamy.... [T]he visible or social body must be a blazon of the penalties, and this blazon refers to two things: one the one hand, to the offense, of which it has to be the visible and immediately recognizable trace; ... and on the other hand, to the power that imposed the penalty and that, with this penalty, has left the mark of its sovereignty on the tortured body. It is not just the offense that is visible on the scar or the amputation, it is the sovereign. (Foucault 2015, 7–8)

Anyone familiar with Duterte’s war on drugs will immediately recognize in this punitive tactic the workings of Operation Tokhang (a Cebuano portmanteau for “knock” and “plead”)—the process by which suspected drug users are placed on a list, visited by the police and subsequently gunned down, their corpses left on the streets as gruesome

reminders of their putative crime and as the fearsome signs of the sovereign's power. As hallmarks of the drug war, extrajudicial killings entail a conversion of sorts: the impoverished meth or, as it is more popularly known, *shabu* addict is converted from citizen to social enemy and hence an absolute menace to society. Beyond cure or rehabilitation, it is bereft of rights. Killing the addict is a form of public torture that marks him for definitive social exclusion. But by being killed and put on display, the corpse is recruited for another equally important task: as a medium for conveying the power of the sovereign. To put it differently, the corpse is included by being excluded. Its death signals its crime at the same time that it memorializes the power of its killers. Extrajudicial killings are thus a kind of pedagogy meant to teach the living about the consequences of addiction and the fearsome consequences of offending the king. As with all public torture, it is a vehicle for performing and intensifying the signs of the sovereign's power.⁵

Foucault makes a point of saying that, increasingly since the later nineteenth century, modern states have tended to do away with the death penalty as a punitive strategy in favor of the rehabilitation and reform of the criminal. But in places like the United States, this is patently not the case, as the death penalty continues to be practiced, and racialized imprisonment brings with it a permanent stigma and a kind of social death—the loss of voting rights, discrimination in the job market, and so on. In the Philippines, while the death penalty has been officially abolished, it continues to operate in the form of extrajudicial killings carried out by regular and private armies, death squads, vigilantes, and the police. The deaths that have resulted from Operation Tokhang, ranging from a low of 4,500 to a high of 27,000 and counting, have a long history (*The Drug Archive*, n.d.; Johnson and Fernquest 2018). They were preceded by countless executions under the colonial regimes of Spain, the United States, Japan, and all other postcolonial administrations. The gruesome display of the dismembered remains of enemy bodies was standard practice—see, for example, the photographs of dead Filipino fighters during the Filipino American War, the corpses of Sakdalistas in the 1930s, or those of the Huks peasant and communist insurgents, the Muslim rebels and New People's Army fighters, from the 1950s to the present.

As a form of public torture and the death penalty by other means, Operation Tokhang continues the ritual of the ancient penalty of torturing and killing bodies of offenders, writing on them the nature of their guilt while staging the power of those who killed them. As I alluded to earlier, the killings are carefully planned, sustained by a technology of surveillance. Such a technology includes, for example, the making of lists of so-called drug personalities. These lists are compiled by the local government units that include the *barangay porok* (area) leaders and their *tanods* or village security forces appointed by the local *barangay* captain. The *porok* or block leaders compile their lists on the basis of personal knowledge, unsolicited tips, and rumors of suspected drug personalities. It is not clear how or even if these lists are vetted. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a number of those put on the list are not even involved in drugs but are simply there to fill the quota. Such lists comprise the basic elements for organizing policing operations directed at specific people in the community. They are then a kind of order

⁵For detailed accounts of the drug war, see Ateneo Human Rights Center (2017); Baldwin, Marshall, and Mogato (2017); Curato (2017); Eng (2017); Evangelista and Gabuco (2017); Human Rights Watch (2017b); *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (2016); *Rappler* (2016b); and Symmes (2017).

of battle that allows the police, with the aid of vigilante squads, to organize the killings of specific targets (Evangelista and Gabuco 2018; *Rappler* 2017a; *Vice News* 2017).

Additionally, the list of drug personalities becomes an avenue for financial gain. As Sheila Coronel and others have amply documented, the police are given substantial bonuses for each kill they produce (Amnesty International 2017; Coronel 2017; see table 1). Vigilante squads riding in tandem on motorcycles are also outsourced and paid handsomely to help the police, some of whom moonlight as assassins themselves. Billions of pesos have been set aside by Congress for the presidential and police intelligence funds that can be spent at each agency's discretion with no accountability. One can surmise that these funds provide the financial wherewithal for the kill bonuses (*Rappler* 2017b, 2018).

Alongside the financialization of the killings is the commodification of the corpses themselves. Cops get paid commissions by funeral parlors—some of which they themselves own—for each dead body they call in. Funerals have seen a boom in their business. In the absence of a city morgue, all the dead are delivered to privately owned funeral homes, where they are processed and cleaned. Each body can cost as much as 50,000 pesos (roughly US\$950) to claim. To the families of the dead, the majority of whom are poor, this is a mind-boggling sum. To raise it, they must go into debt, but more commonly they hold gambling sessions during wakes where, of course, the house gets its cut. Hence, wakes no longer follow a set time period—nine days of viewing, as was the custom. Now, burials occur whenever enough money has been raised to cover expenses.⁶ In some instances, funeral parlors seek to recover the cost of processing bodies by renting out the corpses to households in order to give the latter legal cover to hold gambling sessions inasmuch as the law allows for gambling in the case of funeral wakes (Martin 2018). What we see then are the workings of necropower, understood to be neither murder nor sacrifice, accompanied by a necro-economy that profits from the accumulation and circulation of corpses. To paraphrase Marx (1992, chap. 3), under capitalism, circulation squeezes money from every pore, including that of the corpse. Thanks to the drug war and its lists, the dead are reanimated into labor power for the pursuit of profit.

President Duterte himself is fond of brandishing such lists that contain the names not just of low-level dealers and addicts but also suspected local officials, such as mayors. While the poor addicts are killed, the more politically and financially well-off are rarely touched, except for a few spectacular cases, in order to set an example. For the most part, the mayors and governors, including police officials who are supposedly on the list, are not killed and continue to be protected. But the fact remains that the drug lists are important instruments of intimidation. And the power of such lists comes from the fact that while their existence is widely acknowledged as a kind of public secret, their contents remain largely unknown. No one knows for sure who is on the lists, for even those who compile them, the barangay officials, could find themselves on them. Furthermore, there is no definitive way one can get oneself off the lists even if one is found to be innocent.

⁶For accounts of funerals, see Agence France-Presse (2016); *Al Jazeera* (2017); Almendral and Dean (2017); Freeman (2017); Gavilan and Tomacruz (2017a, 2017b); Lamb (2016); Macaraig (2016); and Morin (2017).

Table 1. A menu of financial incentives for killing “drug personalities” (Coronel 2017, 174).

<i>Profiting from the Drug War</i>	
<i>Types of Police Activity</i>	<i>Typical Amounts</i>
Extortion from drug suspects before or during arrests or while under detention	PhP 5,000–15,000 from poor victims to as much as PhP 1 million from rich victims
Theft of victims’ belongings during arrests, or during entrapment operations where drug suspects are killed	This can include cash or property worth hundreds of thousands of pesos as in the Jee Ick-Joo case; may include small amounts of cash, cellphones, jewelry, and other belongings of poor victims
Ransom demands after the abduction of so-called drug suspects, known as “ <i>tokhang</i> for ransom”	Amounts can range from a few hundred thousand pesos to P5 million as in the Jee case
Fees or rewards paid to policemen for every person killed	PhP 5,000-20,000 for small-time drug offenders
Bonuses for police officers paid for by civilian officials	Hundreds of thousand pesos
Commissions from funeral parlors	Up to PhP 10,000 for every dead body referred

Source: Compiled by the author from interviews, news articles, and human rights reports.

To be on the drug list is thus to be guilty regardless of one’s innocence. It is to live in constant fear that one’s time might be coming up. The lists thus derive their power not only from their panoptic nature—they allow the police to see you without you being able to see them—but also from the way they reorganize temporality. Put on the list, one can only be headed not for redemption or rehabilitation, but for a final reckoning. The seeming arbitrariness by which these lists are put together creates a climate of suspicion in the affected communities. As the anthropologists Anna Warburg, Steffen Jensen, and Karl Happal have pointed out in their fieldwork in the city of Caloocan, such lists make for an “illegible terrain of violence.” Triggering police operations and vigilante attacks that litter the street with corpses, people are left with a profound sense of uncertainty as to who will be targeted next, when, and by whom. For such communities, the future holds no promise, only a continuous feeling of unease and dread. In this way, necropower and the necro-economy it enables are produced by and productive of fear as the pervasive affect and mode of control in the most afflicted barangays (Jensen and Happal, [forthcoming](#); Warburg 2017).

In sum, the current practice of extrajudicial killings as realized through the tactics of *tokhang* is not a retrograde throwback to some feudal past, but part of a post-EDSA style of governing that has emerged since the overthrow of Marcos. It thrives in a setting where the legal system is profoundly politicized, where courts are backed up, and where judges as well as police are badly paid amid a largely impoverished population. And given the financial incentives that accompany the extrajudicial killings, one can see how they

work as part of a necro-economy that intensifies the necropower of the state (Montag 2013). Indeed, we can think of extrajudicial killings, as the name implies, as a kind of violent, arbitrary form of justice in a place where justice is often delayed and diverted. Setting aside the uncertain and time-consuming process of court trials and the difficult task of protecting human rights, extrajudicial killings insist on a different temporal and moral order, one where punishment is swift, visible, and unassailable. Indeed, defenders of President Duterte's methods insist that extrajudicial killings are in fact a means of safeguarding the human rights of non-addicts in the face of the threats posed by drug personalities. It is thus framed as a kind of justice that is steeped in injustice, one that is characteristic of the drug war and perhaps all wars.

THE DRUG WAR AS CIVIL WAR

This brings me to my third example of what might be possible when thinking about the Philippines alongside Foucault: the matter of war itself. The tradition of liberal democracy in the Philippines, like that in much of the West, is fragile and daily upended. One of the most problematic aspects of liberal democracy is the notion that war and peace are two separate and distinguishable moments. Foucault has on many occasions pointed out the error of this way of thinking. War is not something that stops once peace is established. Neither is war something that happens “out there,” beyond the boundaries of society. It does not end when everyone decides to enter into a social contract and give up part of their liberty to a representative king or representative body who can then make laws and adjudicate conflicts. Peace is not the natural state that succeeds war whereby laws, guided by norms and rights, are administered beyond politics. For Foucault, there is nothing beyond the political. Invoking Clausewitz (contra Hobbes and Locke), Foucault argues that war is politics by other means, and politics is war by other means. Wherever you have power relations, you have inequalities, oppressions, and struggles that at times explode into armed uprisings and at other times manifest themselves in electoral campaigns, polemical tracts, social movements, dictatorships, coups, and the myriad varieties of insubordinations. In short, inasmuch as social relations are constituted by variegated webs of power relations alongside the resistances they call forth, they always take on a warlike nature (Foucault 2009, 2015).

For Foucault, unlike Marx, the warlike relations that pervade and infuse social relations are not simply based on class differences. Rather, class war is subsumed into a larger civil war. Whereas class war imagines society as riven by a death struggle between those who own the means of production and those whose only possession is their labor power, the concept of civil war stresses the relational, contingent nature of power relations. In civil wars, what we see are cross-class linkages and alliances. Often, these unfold as a series of factional rifts where rich and poor, middle class and working class, are allied against other similarly constructed factions reckoned less along ideological lines than on the axis of dynastic or familial affiliations. We see this, for example, in the cross-class alliances among the fiercest supporters of the president, the Die-Hard Duterte Supporters, or DDS—a play on the Davao Death Squads that Duterte himself allegedly authorized. The DDS are the self-proclaimed “children” of *Tatay* or Daddy Duterte and are made up of the aspirational middle class, especially overseas Filipino workers, old as well

as new oligarchs, and supporters and family members of previous presidents. They include working classes and *lumpens* from the police to slum dwellers, from among whom come the great majority of victims in the drug war. Such alliances are organized hierarchically: as dispersed and mobile clusters of patron-client ties and fungible personality cults that cultivate among their members aspirations of upward mobility, as well as fears of becoming downwardly mobile. Such hopes and fears in turn tend to generate intense fantasies of patriarchal order and dreams of an authoritarian utopia with which to protect its members from real or imagined threats (Curato 2016, 2017; Heydarian 2018).

Such threats are figured as social enemies. As Foucault points out—and so, by the way, does Marx—in civil wars, class enemies are supplanted by social enemies: those who pose an existential threat to society and who can come from any class: the monstrous dictator and his cannibalistic wife, for example, or the humanoid drug addict, the immoral female senator, the corrupt female chief justice of the Supreme Court, and so on. In this context, we can think of the People Power or so-called EDSA uprisings in 1986 and 2001 that ousted, respectively, presidents Marcos and Estrada as examples of civil war. So, too, with certain qualifications, were the Revolution of 1896, the Filipino-American War, and the war against Japan (Guerrero 2015; Manzanilla and Hau 2016; McCoy 1980). All of these were less class wars than civil wars pitting Filipinos against other Filipinos from different classes who either resisted against, or collaborated with, the colonial rulers.

Duterte, of course, earned his political chops while serving as mayor of a highly factionalized Davao, where civil war was the norm rather than the exception. Prior to being mayor, he was a law student at San Beda College where, as with all law schools, the hyper-masculine culture of fraternities shaped Duterte's violent political outlook. Fraternities operate like gangs where neophytes are brutally initiated and members taught absolute obedience to their masters and aspire to be absolute masters themselves through a combination of coercion and mutual aid.⁷ As mayor of Davao, Duterte sought to coopt the deadliest forces unleashed by President Cory Aquino's vicious anti-communist campaign—the death squads—as well as former members of the New People's Army. Integrating these armed groups into the local police force, Duterte controlled and commanded an impressive killing machine that carried out his bidding, clearing Davao of both its *lumpen* criminal elements (though not its largest drug dealers and smugglers), including homeless children, political foes, and the occasional hostile journalist. Thanks to this war against crime and drugs, Davao gained a reputation, however questionable, for safety and security, but one predicated on fear.⁸

Since becoming president in 2016, Duterte has sought to nationalize his style of governing. While summary killings have been the most dramatic tactic in Duterte's civil war, it is closely related to something else that I brought up at the beginning of this essay: his

⁷Despite their importance in Philippine politics, there is as yet no book-length study of university fraternities there. But as Patricio Abinales (2015) suggests, there is a strong connection between the workings of fraternities and gangs, especially in their hyper-masculine sociality, use of ritualized violence, and fierce demands for loyalty and obedience.

⁸For accounts of Duterte's Davao, see *ABS-CBN News* (2017b); *Esquire Philippines* (2016); Heydarian (2018); Human Rights Watch (2009); Miller (2018); Paddock (2017); Ranada (2017); Tiefenthaler (2016); and Villamor (2017).

style of humor, especially his use of obscenities. In the last section of this essay, I want to ask: how does humor serve as a vital weapon in the barbarian justice and the endless civil war he is engaged in?

THE SOVEREIGN TRICKSTER

Duterte is known among his supporters as “the Punisher.” But his punitive approach to governing includes telling jokes that disarm his audiences, often reducing them to laughter, as he names and shames his critics—often foreign and female. Those critical of Duterte have called him out on his use of obscenities and misogynistic remarks. But insofar as Duterte is concerned, his sexual banter is yet another way of asserting his sovereignty. It is for him an enactment of his freedom from the constraints of responsibility and the norms of decency. Unrestrained, he takes great delight in spewing profanities. He recounts bawdy stories about masturbation, jokes about rape, publicly kissing women and admiring their anatomy, making references to vaginal odor, and much more. In so doing, he has shown that he will not be bound by the norms of decency, or *delicadeza*, as his political opponents insist, just as he refuses to abide by the laws of due process and the protection of human rights. Whereas Freud regarded jokes as a way of expressing unconscious desires normally blocked by social conventions, in Duterte we might say that the unconscious has been given free rein, as the id usurps the place of the super-ego (Freud 1990).⁹

For the president then, part of his executive privilege includes the freedom to take pleasure in joking and shaming, turning these into important weapons. Duping and dodging his critics, he manages to hit his targets, as indicated by the outrage he stirs among his opponents and the endearment he generates from his supporters. Breaking from protocols of respectability endows Duterte with a rebellious quality in the eyes of his supporters, the above-mentioned DDS. It confirms to them that he is unlike anyone from previous administrations. As a kind of “bad boy” who commands the room with his menacing charm, as well as his flurry of invectives and sexual innuendos, Duterte seems excessive. It is precisely this excess that, as I alluded to earlier, makes him analogous to the drug addict that he simultaneously despises and envies for what he regards as the addicts’ claim to absolute sovereignty. By behaving irresponsibly, he places himself beyond convention and law, endowing himself with power over those who are otherwise obligated to defer to his authority. In his presence, they must observe proper behavior and attend to his authority while he himself seems to flaunt every rule.

Herein lies one explanation for Duterte’s continuing popularity, at least if the polls are to be believed. To his supporters, his coarse language and bawdy humor resist what has been proscribed by establishment elites. They relish his irreverence, identifying with his insurgent energy to upset conventions. Indeed, not only does he escape unscathed, his aura seems to be magnified as he becomes even more emboldened

⁹Accounts of Duterte’s joking abound. See, e.g., Aben (2016), Bacungan (2017); *BBC News* (2016); Esguerra (2018); *Rappler* (2016a, 2018); Rauhala (2017); *Reuters* (2017); StarGumFan65 (2017); and just about any of his recorded speeches found in the Republic of the Philippines (2016).

with every insult and invective. His insults directed at the Catholic Church—pointing out the corruption and perversion of the clergy, for example—are often followed by retellings of the sexual abuse he suffered as a youth literally in the hands of an American Jesuit in Davao. For rather than paint himself as a victim, Duterte turns the story of abuse—where as a youth he was forced to submit to the priest’s hand jobs—into a vehicle for ridiculing confession, associating the ritual with masturbation (Corrales 2018; *Rappler* 2015). Similarly, Duterte has projected an image of himself as both a homophobe and a homophile. During the presidential campaign of 2016, he derided his opponent Mar Roxas’s masculinity, implying that he was too gay to be president. However, he also surrounded himself with LGBTQ supporters. At one point in the campaign, he had a remarkable interview on the television show of the most popular trans entertainer in the country, Vice Ganda, where he lost no time flirting with her and confided that as a young man he thought he could have been gay (*ABS-CBN News* 2015). Furthermore, his administration has a number of visibly queer folks who count themselves as his most ardent supporters, such as Mocha Uson, RJ Nieto, and Sass Sassot (Carpio 2016).

Put differently, when Duterte jokes and cusses, he engages in a form of extended, recurring dissipation. He allows his desires to surface and his impulses to take over. Breaking taboos, he surrenders to what is usually forbidden—something that children are wont to do. Indeed, he performs a kind of infantile regression, lashing out at his enemies and shaming them with allusions to their sexuality. Listening to his speeches—which, when delivered in front of local audiences, usually begin with the act of throwing away his prepared speech and appearing to speak off the cuff—one is plunged into shifting linguistic registers, polemical tirades, and abrupt beginnings and endings. In his speeches, he often sounds like someone who is intoxicated by his ability to act out his intoxication.

Foucault (2015, 186–200) writes about what he calls the two great “illegalities” that characterized the advent of the modern period and that threatened the newly dominant bourgeoisie in Europe: depredations and dissipations. The first was easier to police. Depredations consisting of such acts as piracy, smuggling, and various other forms of property theft require stealth, calculation, and circuits of distribution: in short, an organized economy and a political rationality. For this reason, depredations were easily codified as crimes by the nineteenth century, while the bourgeoisie carved out all sorts of exceptions that would legalize their own predatory acts.

Dissipation, however, was a different matter. It was about indulging in excess and irrationality through drunkenness, intoxication, and forbidden sexual relations. It also meant engaging in “festivities,” taking pleasure in games of chance and various other activities that could not be transformed into profit. The dissipator was regarded as lazy, one who wasted time, or better yet kept time to him or herself. This hoarding and wasting of time violated the capitalist demand that one surrender to the disciplinary demands of production that meant, above all, converting the time of life into the time of profit. By refusing to give in to the tyranny of clock and calendar, dissipators came across as dangerous elements threatening the order of things. They were to be sequestered and trained—for example, in the army, in schools, in prisons, and in factories—where their bodies could be retooled from sites of pleasure into repositories of labor power (Foucault 2015).

Duterte, in taking on the role of the dissipator-in-chief, thumbs his nose at these bourgeois demands. Indulging in what Mbembe (1992) calls an “aesthetic of vulgarity,”

he will not be disciplined. Instead, he becomes a sort of trickster figure who entertains by veiling his aggression with jokes and obscenities. As a trickster, Duterte plays the role of the “*pusong*,” a staple figure in traditional *komedya* and folk tales. It is the *pusong* who makes fun of those in power while managing through deceit or humor to gain power himself. As the anthropologists Donn and Harriet Hart (1974) point out, the *pusong* is a truly pan-Philippine character, with variations of folk tales spread all over the archipelago among Christian, Moro, and indigenous peoples. In their survey of the various *pusong* tales in both urban and rural settings, they observe that he—for the *pusong* is almost always a young male—is characterized by a set of overlapping traits. More popularly known as Juan Pusong or Juan Tamad, he is at once “tricky, arrogant, and mischievous in addition to being a braggart, liar, knave and arrogant and a rogue.... He is always lazy and indolent ... [while being] shrewd, witty and immoral.... Other stories point out the *pusong*’s criminality, deceitfulness, bravery, compassion, and possession of miraculous powers.” In nearly all the tales, he succeeds in overcoming obstacles and winning rewards such as “marrying the princess (or rich girl), [gaining] wealth, [having] illicit sexual intercourse, gaining prestige, or merely the pleasure of defeating his opponent.... He, like other tricksters, also has his helpful companions or stooges and often appears as a ... child in his preoccupation with the humor of elemental incongruities, scatology, and cruelty” (Hart and Hart 1974, 136–43).

It is the *pusong* that most likely informs other variants of the trickster figure, such as the Visayan “*bugoy*”—the idler and vagrant—associated with the lumpen or *tambay*—who literally sees things from below. Sitting on his bum at the *sari-sari* store, he calls out the pretensions to respectability of those on top. In assuming or being attributed by his followers the role of the trickster, Duterte converts dissipation into an aspect of his authority even as he orders the arrest and prosecution of others who would dare muscle into his monopoly of dissipation, such as addicts and *tambays* (Almendral 2018; CNN Philippines 2018). His dissipatory behavior has an anticipatory effect: he is able to criticize the authority of anyone who would dare criticize his authority. He steals, as it were, the comedic resources of his opponents, preempting their playfulness while commanding the laughter of his supporters. These supporters, in turn, are drawn to Duterte’s style of political engagement, emulating it as a tactic for dealing with his critics by reducing the latter to caricatures ripe for vicious attacks. From cruel stereotyping, it is a small step to declaring critics as social enemies.

Here, then, are the two aspects of Rodrigo Duterte’s governing style. He is the sovereign who decides on the exception, setting aside law and putting certain groups to death. But he is also the trickster who, in disarming his critics, endears himself to his supporters as a dissipator, one whose performative excess gives expression to what is at once forbidden and desired. In the first case, he recruits the bodies of dead addicts as signs of his fearsome authority that brooks no limits. In the second case, he transforms himself into the trickster who rejoices in his irreverence and irresponsibility. He thereby conjures the illusion of evading the time of capitalist capture and actively embraces the charges of stupidity leveled by his critics—for example, by introducing his cabinet members as all class vaedictorians while he was simply a C student—all the while knowing that he is the one who has outsmarted them all.

The tactical advantage that Duterte enjoys, at least for the moment, comes precisely from his ability to craft what appears to be an impossible, split subjectivity: one that is

both the imperious sovereign *and* the irascible trickster. In doing so, he assuages the fears of precarity and displacement among his supporters, promising them both security and laughter. Whether newly rich, aspiring middle classes, overseas contract workers, or working poor, such supporters share a common fate. They find themselves burdened daily by the pressures and humiliations brought about by the demand for discipline and conformity in the neoliberal state, whether in the Philippines or abroad. Duterte rhetorically acknowledges their fragmented lives and domesticates their uncertainty (Curato 2016). He speaks to and of the anxieties of his supporters who find themselves unable to escape from the endless demands of capital even as they seek security from those deemed to be their social enemies. Occupying the center, the president continues to speak as if from the periphery; wielding enormous institutional and economic power, he acts as if still pitiful and impoverished. Rather than the king with two bodies—one that dies, while the other is ritually immortalized in the classic institutions of kingship—he is the king, or *datu* (i.e., chief) with multiple organs.¹⁰ He thus darkly refers to the many illnesses that wrack his body, calling attention to his physical frailties in between explosions of murderous rage at his enemies. Conjuring the sorry state of his esophagus, spine, anus, stomach, and skin, he alternately laments and jokes about their beleaguered state (Mendez 2018; Reuters 2018; Romero 2018).

By imaginatively exposing his body parts to public view, Duterte literalizes a politics from below, displaying what Mbembe refers to as the “banality of power.” Contra Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque—the periodic reversal of power relations deemed to be inherently subversive—Mbembe argues that in the postcolony, “evoking those elements of the obscene, vulgar, and the grotesque” is as much the province of official as it is unofficial culture. As in postcolonial sub-Saharan Africa, so in Duterte’s Philippines: “Obscenity and vulgarity—when regarded as more than moral categories—constitute some of the modalities of power in the postcolony.” In this context, the sovereign is joined to his subjects in a relationship of “conviviality” evinced in mutually reinforcing laughter alongside fear. The “real reversal” of power is effected not by the dominated but by the sovereign trickster. For it is the latter who manages to convert obscenity into “splendor,” and violent visions into noble acts. In these acts of inversion, he draws his followers “to join in [the] madness and clothe themselves in the flashy rags of power so as to reproduce its epistemology; and when, too, power, in its own violent quest for grandeur and prestige, makes vulgarity and wrong doing its main mode of existence.... One can say that the obscenity of power in the postcolony is also fed by a desire for majesty on the part of the people” (Mbembe 1992, 1–2, 29–30).

Taking debasement for splendor, the figure of the sovereign trickster—one that Duterte had crafted earlier while mayor for over two decades in Davao—sutures the wide gap between the president’s failure in the realm of the biopolitical and his obsession with the necropolitical. Reigning under the conditions of neoliberal precarity, which defines the existential conditions of nearly everyone in the country and the diaspora, he sets himself apart from the earlier strongmen in the Philippines, for example, Manuel Quezon and Ferdinand Marcos. Quezon and Marcos were anxious to project a

¹⁰The reference here is to Ernst Kantorowicz’s classic book, *The King’s Two Bodies* (1957). I owe this insight of Duterte as the king with multiple organs to Tak Fujitani.

heightened sense of bourgeois masculinity in the service of a benevolent patriarchy in the way they appeared and spoke. They dressed impeccably in formal barong or tailored suits and addressed the public in stentorian sentences, meticulously crafted and ponderously pronounced. Under late colonial and Cold War liberal conditions, they could still capitalize on middle-class conventions of respectability to hide from view the more brutal practices of their government. Unlike Duterte, who boasts of the women he has had and would like to have, Quezon and Marcos were far more discrete.

With Duterte, there is neither discretion nor shame, only a kind of heedless pride in reveling in his desires. Such brazenness is understood by his followers as the explicit permission to enjoy and engage in the verbal torture and humiliation of their enemies. For them, it signals Duterte's emancipation from colonial and bourgeois conventions of civility. However, this liberation is a ruse insofar as he seeks to govern by fear. With the help of his enablers, ranging from the police to the cabinet, from a compliant Supreme Court to his army of trolls, from the legislature to the Marcoses and their legions of ardent supporters, he is able to consolidate his hold and pursue his civil war against all those who oppose him. For Duterte faces two ways, as perhaps all sovereigns do: towards life and death, which he alternately animates with derisive laughter and commands with unremitting fear.

CODA: TRUMP AS TRICKSTER

Is the figure of the sovereign trickster, one who dominates both laughter and death, useful for thinking about other authoritarians, actual or aspirational? One thinks, most obviously, of US President Donald Trump. He and Duterte have often been compared in terms of their rhetorical bluntness, unapologetic misogyny, and vocal disdain for the press and other critics. Perhaps this comparison is to be expected given the colonial relationship between the two countries whereby events in the former colony have usually been framed within the terms of the former colonial power. However, Duterte's victory in July 2016 preceded Trump's by several months, and so arguably reversed this trajectory. It seems almost as if the figure of Duterte had paved the way for rendering legible the figure of Trump as a kind of sovereign trickster, thereby recasting the post-colonial relationship between the two countries. Duterte's carnivalesque authoritarianism helps to make sense of Trump's. It is not often that events in the Philippines can shed light on events in the United States—often it is the other way around. By seeing Trump through the lens of Duterte's aesthetic of vulgarity, we might try a kind of trick, as it were, by reversing the historic privilege of one to set the terms for understanding the other.

There are, of course, important differences between the two. Unlike Duterte, whose entire career has been entirely within the government as prosecutor, mayor, vice-mayor, congressman, and now president, Trump rose to power along a different route. His career has been intimately linked not to public service but to the real estate, hospitality, and entertainment industries, particularly his chain of Trump Towers and the television reality show *The Apprentice*. Rather than make people laugh, he projected in that show a kind of decisive, and often dour, personality. In his campaign rallies, however, he engages in a whole range of what we might think of as "tricksterisms": making fun of the disabled, hurling elaborate threats at the media, demeaning women and people of color with racist

and sexist language, engaging in wild conspiracy theories, obsessively insulting political enemies and, at times, even allies who fail to do his bidding—all to the thunderous applause and laughter of his audience. Charged up by the crowd, he performs like a man deranged, gesticulating wildly and bellowing great gusts of words that often barely make sense. In other words, he behaves, as with Duterte, like a man intoxicated with his ability to seem intoxicated, beyond the control of polite conventions. Trump's excessiveness, calculated, no doubt, to incite his base, is in many ways what “entertainment” has come to mean in the United States. In this connection, it is not strange that Trump was a big fan of wrestling—staged matches preceded by incessant and interminable insults exchanged between competitors to delight the crowd (Heer 2016). Much of popular entertainment has thus come to mean the intensification of spectacle, the ramping up of sensation, and the trafficking in affect at the expense of what used to pass for rational discourse and other modes of taking pleasure.

As with Duterte, is it possible to grasp Trump's “populism” in terms of a nationally specific history of folk entertainment and widespread notions of satire? In the case of Trump, let me propose that the roots of his trickster style may very well lie in the long history of blackface minstrelsy (see, e.g., Heer 2016).¹¹ The scholarship on what some have referred to as the first mass entertainment medium in North America helps us to reconstruct this genealogy. As various writers have shown, the racist and sexist tropes of blackface minstrelsy are meant to assuage white working class anxieties about and desires for black bodies: imaginatively owning them, wanting to be like *and* unlike blacks at the same time (Johnson 2012; Lott 1995; Roediger 2007; Rogin 1996; Sammond 2015). Blackface minstrelsy was also an important medium for addressing immigrant, especially Jewish and Irish, fears of exclusion and the wish for assimilation. The act of putting on burnt cork provided a way for acting out the “love” for and “theft” of black labor and culture, using these as ways of simultaneously accumulating material and cultural capital on the one hand and carving out a place in the racial hierarchy on the other. Miming the degraded yet vibrant bodies of slaves, blackface signified that one had the power to take on yet set aside blackness, that one was in possession of one's labor rather than merely enslaved to capital, and that one could mock and escape the effete, feminine demands of white bourgeois respectability. Small wonder that everyone from Abraham Lincoln to Mark Twain to Walt Disney loved blackface minstrelsy. It made it possible to appear at once rebellious and hilarious, mastering social death while inducing hilarity and always at the expense of those below in the social hierarchy. It masculinized whiteness and whitened masculinity through its imagined control of the abject but reusable bodies of others.

Put another way, putting on black disguise and often appearing in female drag allowed white male performers to act out the reversal of racial, gendered, and class

¹¹Tony Lucero also reminded me about the tradition of Native American trickster tales. In such tales, tricksters take the shape of animals that mediate between the sacred and the profane. They are clever in the extreme and so are capable of both good and bad deeds. Nothing could be more different from the racialized and sexualized figure of the blackface minstrel who enframes blackness as a vehicle for asserting white supremacy while satirizing white feminine bourgeois conventions of respectability. Trump's tricksterism would appear to descend from the latter rather than the former.

norms, seeking, as Toni Morrison (1993) has written, to play out the popular desire to appropriate both the labor *and* capital as well as the productive *and* reproductive powers that lay in the bodies of slaves. At the same time, such performances allowed both actors and audiences to imaginatively distance themselves in the very act of owning the abject figures they ridiculed and admired. Indeed, blackface minstrelsy, in projecting and seeking to master the unresolved legacy of slavery, lay at the foundations of white identity. It continues to thrive even and especially without the use of burnt cork. It does so through the mimicry of the cultural repertoire of black, as well as Asian, Native American, and Latinx peoples (Bhabha 1984; Fanon 2006; Rafael 2016).¹² As one kind of North American trickster practice among those on top as well as those who aspire towards its ranks, racial minstrelsy is a resilient and enduring form of popular entertainment that arguably informs Donald Trump's public performances and political appeal. As president, he has not only reauthorized minstrelsy's violent laughter; he has also used its capacity to obscure real historical relations by inflating what W. E. B. Du Bois famously referred to as the "wages of whiteness" (Roediger 2007). Sovereign tricksterism, from this perspective, is a kind of aesthetic for shaping the contours of contemporary racism—of blackface without the burnt cork—filtered through fake news and conspiracy theories that help sustain the daily practices of authoritarian cruelties.

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¹²Minority cultural repertoires are in turn built on the complex and critical mimicry of dominant European and Afro-Caribbean, Latin American, Asian, and other forms. Indeed, it would be interesting to read blackface minstrelsy alongside colonial and postcolonial forms of mimetic critique and expropriation and the multitude of tricksterisms that accompany such acts. The writings of Fanon (2006) and Bhabha (1984) and the films of Spike Lee also come to mind. In my own work, I prefer the term "translation" (and its related figures) to delineate a kind of transformative mimicry, one that gives rise to displacement and distortion, bringing with them the subversive possibilities of tricksterism, to which Duterte and Trump would appear to be perverse heirs (see, e.g., Rafael 2016).

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