SPILLING BLOOD, SLIPPERY EXCESS:

VIOLENCE AS PERFORMANCE DURING THE DUTERTE REGIME

Eliaquim (Ken) Reyes

PhD Student, Department of Political Science

University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa

**Abstract**

In this essay, I argue that performative violence reveals an economy of desire that runs beneath disciplinary political agendas, departing from certain logics of modern warfare and counter-operations to produce and circulate a fleshly surplus. During former president Rodrigo Duterte's regime, there was a slippery yet staggering excess that materialized in gruesome forms of torture, murder, and other abuses of victims of the drug and terrorism war. While violence has always been a currency in the postcolonial Philippines, something else is happening beyond the discipline/control paradigm that Foucault suggests in his theory of governmentality. By examining his use of violence as performance rather than as discipline, I expose Duterte's preoccupation with producing flesh used to maintain and circulate fear among his constituents. I also draw from theoretical works on sovereignty, rhetoric, and masculinity to think through excess; on the one hand, excess reveals an economy of desire, and on the other, it opens a door for new possible iterations of subjectivity. Ultimately, this inquiry elaborates on Duterte's desire to use politics to perform violence, impunity, and irreverence—in short, politics qua war.

**Keywords:** Duterte, Philippines, violence, performance, excess, desire, masculinity, governmentality

**The world, his oyster**

Carl Arnaiz and Reynaldo de Guzman were teenagers out on a midnight snack run in their hometown of Cainta, Rizal when they were tortured, murdered, and framed by local police in 2017. This violence occurred one year after now-former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte was sworn into office and vowed to “order the killing of all criminals, ang mga drugista at drug lords[[1]](#footnote-0)” (Viray 2016). The boys’ bodies were found miles away from home—both of them were mutilated and bore clear signs of torture.[[2]](#footnote-1) The two police officers involved in the case alleged that Arnaiz began shooting at them after robbing a taxi driver in Caloocan; the taxi driver later recanted his statement about the incident and confessed that he was forced to falsely testify against Arnaiz (Bolledo 2022). Later, the courts declared the two officers guilty of murder, torture, and planting evidence[[3]](#footnote-2), a signature modus operandi of state and vigilante executioners. In 2020, NDFP peace consultant[[4]](#footnote-3) Randall Echanis, and his neighbor Louie Tagapia, were found dead in his Quezon City apartment. Echanis’ body was mutilated, bearing 15 wounds that were made through incisions and punctures. According to Commission of Human Rights investigators, 12 of the wounds on his back were superficial and reached only the muscular areas, as to inflict pain[[5]](#footnote-4). These two cases stand among thousands of extrajudicial killings that took place while Duterte was in power, bearing the mark of an excessive violence.

The first part of this paper provides the background for this (re)turn to torture, which contradicts the shift in modern warfare towards more calculated approaches to violence. While modern counter-operations, done mostly in discretion as drone technology promises swift kills, more precision, and less collateral, Duterte instead promised that his regime would be a “bloody war” (Petty and Lema 2016). Though he also committed to reforming the country’s economic and constitutional structures, his vow to wage war on drugs, and later on terrorism, became his main preoccupation. At this point, narcowarfare had long been conducted by the Philippine government and across past and current administrations. Moreover, extrajudicial killings, even acts of violence and torture in the hands of either vigilantes or police, were hardly breaking news. But something else began to emerge upon Duterte’s launch of the drug and terrorism war. The rhetoric behind his violent crusade provided a launching point for all kinds of horror unleashed against victims and the surviving kin of the drug and terrorism war. This rhetoric is what I consider to be “a species of violence, to think rhetoric as a kind of force,” which I address in the second part of this paper (Foley 2013). J.L. Austin’s theory of performative utterances and Kantorowicz’s theory of the two bodies also lend to my explanation of Duterte’s use of state and vigilante forces as extensions of himself to commit violence in the name of war. It is difficult to ignore Duterte’s eagerness to exude the sadistic essence of his given nickname, “the Punisher,” when he proclaims: “You drug pushers, hold-up men and do-nothings, you better go out. I’d kill you. I’ll dump all of you into Manila Bay, and fatten all the fish there” (“Philippine police” 2017)[[6]](#footnote-5). Throughout his presidency, Duterte’s speeches, brash and irreverent as they were, ultimately betrayed a single-mindedness in his political agenda—he desires to exceed both in his office and his violence. The third part of this paper speculates on the meanings of the excess produced by Duterte’s desire not just to take a life but to *perform* this violence.

**A (re)turn to torture**

Today, torture is generally perceived as an unusually cruel, archaic form of punishment. Penal institutions have instead become a main feature of modern society, taking on various forms such as the prison. According to Foucault (1977), the public spectacle of torture started disappearing into the nineteenth century (9). As punishments became subtler, more discreet, and less visible to the public eye, discipline became the new paradigm for governmentality:

Punishment, then, will tend to become the most hidden part of the penal process. This has several consequences: it leaves the domain of more or less everyday perception and enters that of abstract consciousness; its effectiveness is seen as resulting from its inevitability, not from its visible intensity; it is certainty of being punished and not the horrifying spectacle of public punishment that must discourage crime; the exemplary mechanics of punishment changes its mechanisms (ibid).

In his view, the body no longer remains the site for penal repression, since the spirit now bears its weight. Though incarceration, forced servitude, prohibitions, and exiles are still bodily experienced, “the punishment-body relation is not the same… as the body now serves as an instrument or intermediary” (11). In other words, the body is just a shell—the soul is what must be extinguished.

Among other institutions, Foucault elaborates on the prison as the instantiation of a new political technology around which governments will begin to take shape. But this attunement to discipline, as well as security and control (which Foucault addresses in his lectures on governmentality), has also changed the way modern warfare and counter-operations are conducted. Given the rapid advancements in military technology and weaponry (especially in drone technology) and the increased international attention to rights-based discourse, the use of torture[[7]](#footnote-6) departs from these logics. Indeed, Duterte’s approach to his drug and terrorism war seems antithetical to Western institutions’ turn towards more precise, calculated, and targeted approaches to war and punishment. But similar phenomena are still happening alongside Duterte’s quasi-wars. In Mexico’s Ciudad Juárez, a city just south of the US-Mexico border, violence against women became normalized as maquiladoras turned to women as laborers to increase their profitability—a masculine hatred erupted in response. The torture and mutilation of victims’ bodies signaled not just the multi-layered crisis of poverty, trafficking, and impunity that was unfolding, but that this violence was co-constitutive of the “anomalous ecology” of this borderland place (Rodríguez 2012, 8). Public violence has also shaken up India throughout many different periods of recorded history, as communities continue to reckon with the violent aftermaths of major political events such as the Partition, as well as ongoing caste and sectarian violence. While staggering death tolls, such as in the Calcutta riots[[8]](#footnote-7) of 1946, can easily provide an entry point for analysis of these events, much is to be said about the display of excess through torture, lynching, mutilation, and other forms of abuse of the body. We cannot neglect to interrogate the material and spectral residues of torture, and how these acts *still* puncture politics and public life today.

In the context of Duterte, the violence of torture has certainly transformed the terrain of Philippine political life, yet it does not seem to advance his supposed agenda of discipline (I elaborate on this in the next section). Still, violence undoubtedly remains one of the strongest currencies in the postcolonial Philippines, especially among those whose goal is to maintain and accumulate political power. For many, Duterte’s use of violence has been largely reminiscent of the Martial Law era[[9]](#footnote-8) under former dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr, who deployed the military to abduct, torture, and kill thousands of dissenters—historian Alfred McCoy describes this as “the apex of a pyramid of terror” (“Dark Legacy” 1999). Though comparisons are often drawn between the regimes of Duterte and Marcos, the former’s vulgar rhetoric and theatrics stand apart from his predecessor, who seemed to remain conscious of his image and reputation. The same can be said of Marcos’ son, Bongbong, who deviates from Duterte’s approach on the war on drugs and terrorism[[10]](#footnote-9). But for Duterte, it seems that killing is not enough, that one must make a “bloody” performance of it. But why is he intent on making it bloody?

**The sovereign ventriloquist**

 When COVID-19 struck, Duterte added another war to his agenda, doubling down on his desire to discipline the Filipino people while chastising them for their lack of it. In April 2020, he gave an impromptu national address to threaten potential quarantine violators and those who would protest against the pandemic guidelines:

Do not threaten me with chaos because if chaos is what you want, we will create chaos in the country. Since we don’t have food. If you want a shoot-out, fine. If you want beatings, I will not hesitate. My orders are, to the police and military, and to the neighborhood [authorities], if there is chaos and an opportunity arises to protest, and your life is on the line, shoot them dead… Instead of causing chaos, let’s just bury them… Do not test the government, because this government is not stupid.[[11]](#footnote-10) (Rappler 2020, starting 3:33).

“Shoot them dead” drowned out Duterte’s later remarks about food distribution and other emergency implementations, and it was precisely what state forces heeded. Two days after uttering those words, the police shot dead a 63-year-old farmer for not wearing a face mask—the first of many war-on-COVID casualties (Billing 2020).

If we are to understand this event, and the rest of the killings, through J.L. Austin’s (1962) theory of performative utterances, we must hold Duterte’s claims to command discipline suspiciously; that is, his rhetoric projects an invitation to violence that supplants his demand for discipline. The illocutionary act—the intent behind his speech— demanded violence, not discipline. By way of Foucault’s elaboration of discipline as the means to secure a population, Duterte has long missed the mark (though this does not necessarily prove his intentions). One could aptly contend that Duterte was instead *warning* the people, intent on preserving them, rather than *inciting* violence. But what if we were to view this in light of Duterte using the police, military, and vigilante forces as extensions of himself, operating as a second body of sorts? Kantorowicz’s (1957) theory of the two bodies may be useful for fleshing out this inquiry. His theory emerges from an argument found in an Elizabethan jurist’s reports, which I summarize as follows: the king (or sovereign figure) has two bodies. The first is the body natural—the fleshly, mortal body that is subject to illness, disability, and ultimately death—and the second is the body politic—the invisible, mystical body that constitutes, vaguely, the government and the will of the people, which never dies or is subject to the mortal limitations that the body natural experiences (7). Firstly, Duterte seems not to absorb the second body of the sovereign, the body politic, into himself. Despite being voted into his position, he does not care about aligning himself (or appearing to align) with the will of the people, at least in terms of maintaining the conventional image of a president. Secondly, it is important to note that in his body natural, Duterte does not physically commit these acts of torture and murder[[12]](#footnote-11). Despite that, there remains an earnest desire to enact this violence insofar as he also desires to exceed his office. Could it be that he manipulated the second body, discarding the body politic and creating a new one out of his willing executioners? Moreover, these executioners are not merely consenting individuals—this superbody represents penal institutions that still constitute a particular political will, that is, of discipline and punishment. In this way, the second body already exceeds the first despite the two being “fully contained in one another” (9). This is how Duterte performs violence—the sovereign trickster becomes the sovereign ventriloquist.

Returning to Foley’s (2013) analysis of the violence of rhetoric[[13]](#footnote-12), which leans heavily upon Aristotelian logics and ethics concerning will, desire, and violence, she foremostly suggests that rhetoric’s force is never determining, that the will to violence is ultimately a deliberation that “confronts desire… the unarticulated remainder that keeps deliberation on the move… always radically open to the future” (197). Yet when Duterte speaks violence, it happens, and it produces this fleshly surplus rendered through torture and abuse. Though local activists and international bodies have challenged his impunity, there still seemed to be a uniformity in the force of violence unleashed during Duterte’s term. If he managed to discard the body politic in favor of a different second body, what is left of the desire of the people, whose outcry fades behind the strongman’s still-pervasive will to violence?

**Desiring flesh**

In his examination of India’s public violence, Thomas Blom Hansen (2021) writes that performing violence “enables [these events] to become visible and intelligible across otherwise deeply segmented, and antagonistic, public worlds” (45). Excess, he iterates, is what transcends the opacity of the particularity in these events and experiences of violence. It takes on a universality that makes itself seen, heard, felt, and known. This explains why Hansen also suggests that violence, and its threat, are “so powerful and intoxicating, also for the bystanders” (29). In the performance of violence, one does not only accrue an experience of “power, fraternity, and freedom”—an economy of desire rests atop the accumulation of a fleshly surplus (ibid). There is also something in the production of excess that points to a hypermasculine desire and a kind of phallic fraternity, seen not only in Duterte’s performative violence but in the public violence of Mexico and India as I mentioned earlier. In the context of Duterte, the unequivocal impunity by which his executioners-as-dummies acted is where this excess began to materialize.

In theorizing the femicide machine, Rodríguez (2012), asserts that “impunity is the murderer’s greatest stimulant,” born out of “a misogynistic furor that escalates from an isolated crime to a collective ravaging (72). Hence, the excess. Though there is a particularity to the events that were unfolding in Ciudad Juárez, the male gaze similarly animates Duterte’s rhetoric and approach to politics. Rafael’s (2022) chapter on the aesthetics of Duterte’s vulgarity lends well to this argument:

His obscenity consists of making the private public, reaching below to connect with those above. It is this sexual politics from below that binds Duterte to these men along with the sprinkling of women who join in the laughter. Together, they share a common fantasy about the authoritarian phallus as something they can imaginatively access… the presidential phallus comes across not only as an instrument of pleasure, but also as a menacing sign of terror (43).

To understand the mechanisms that arouse the production of excess, we need to first encounter this excess in the obscenity of Duterte’s rhetoric, symbolized by his preoccupation with the phallus:

In his youth, Duterte claims, he literally stood out, creating a vivid impression among both men and women. While men envied his penis, women, however, ran away in fright. Wishing to have a phallus like his, the other men acknowledged Duterte’s possession of this power precisely for the respect it arouses in other men and the fear of sexual violence it stirs among women (Rafael 2022, 47).

For Duterte, who is provoked by challenges to his masculinity, excess provides the fodder to which his masculinity is secured and attached—whether it is created from the affective responses to his misogyny or from the bloody results of his war on drugs and terrorism.

There is no separating Duterte’s rhetoric from his authoritarian imagination and project. However, we need to be aware that this project is not necessarily centered on a struggle for autonomy or freedom (to enjoy impunity, among other things); I agree with Mbembé’s (2003) articulation that, ultimately, figures of sovereignty like Duterte are engrossed with “the generalized instrumentalization of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies and populations” (14). Appeals to human rights and legal personhood ring hollow in Duterte’s kingdom. Violence persists because it is precisely what constitutes the nomos of modernity.

But just as violence bears upon the making of modern politics, so does excess. Mbembé offers his insight by contrasting Hegel’s discussion on death and subjectivity to Bataille’s, wherein the latter “interprets death and sovereignty as the paroxysm of exchange and superabundance… [which is] excess” (15). For Bataille, death is not an ultimate annihilation but the “most luxurious form of life… the point at which destruction, suppression, and sacrifice constitute so irreversible and radical an expenditure… Death is, therefore, the principle of excess” (ibid). In the Philippines, necropolitics proliferated due to its “profitable amnesia”—it happened with Martial Law victims and continues to do so in the aftermath of Duterte (Rodríguez 2012, 39). But here, the excess of the flesh emerges from the shadows. I return to the events concerning the torture and deaths of Arnaiz, De Guzman, and Echanis, whose flesh visibly displayed death in the excess. Though these victims are no longer living and unable to articulate their experience with words, their flesh howls and screams in the wake of their deaths. Their bruised, mutilated, and wounded bodies bear witness to the violence committed in the name of war. The flesh is a haunting, existing in the margins, already spilling over. This slippery excess escapes even the sovereign’s grip over violence. Weheliye (2014) further describes it as follows: “The flesh is not an abject zone of exclusion that culminates in death but an alternate instantiation of humanity that does not rest on the mirage of western Man as the mirror image of human life as such” (43). Leaning on Hortense Spillers’ “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” he reimagines agency and subjectivity by claiming the flesh as a site for freedom, though this freedom may not be within our reach yet (125). Contending against the assumption that political violence cannot be grasped by and with language, Weheliye writes that “‘cries and groans,’ ‘heart-rending shrieks,’ ‘the mechanical murmurs without content’” is, in fact, a kind of language that exists beyond conventional claims on linguistic structures (126). I reckon that cuts, bruises, wounds, and lacerations function similarly, as the flesh echoes the disbelief of victims’ communities that yearn for justice in their deep grief and sorrow. In his 36-page decision regarding the murders of Arnaiz and De Guzman, Judge Rodrigo Pascual Jr. writes: “Carl [Arnaiz] and Kulot [De Guzman] may have been perpetually silenced by death, but this court cannot close its eyes to the physical evidence left by the torture they suffered” (Boiser et al. 2022). As long as one person is willing to open their eyes, the flesh is *here*. The flesh bears witness.

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1. Translated, “the drug users and drug lords.” [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Arnaiz’s body was found on Aug. 28, 10 days after the two boys were last seen. He was found in a morgue in Caloocan, Metro Manila, 26 km away from home. An autopsy revealed that Arnaiz suffered five gunshot wounds all aimed at vital organs. The forensic head also noted that prior to being shot, he was likely handcuffed, beaten, and dragged based on his wounds (Buan 2017). Eight days later, De Guzman’s body was found in a river in Gapan, Nueva Ecija, 103 km away from home. Upon discovery, his head was wrapped in packing tape and later examinations revealed that he was stabbed 30 times—his killers continued to do so even after he died (Boiser et al. 2022, Talabong 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. The planted evidence included sachets of “shabu” (crystal meth) and marijuana, as well as a .38-caliber pistol (Bolledo 2022, Buan 2017). These murders bear an eerie resemblance to the slaying of Kian delos Santos, another teenage victim from Caloocan who was also accused of being a drug pusher. His case received the first conviction of law enforcement officers involved in the drug war (Boiser et al. 2022). These two convictions stand alone among all police-related violence during the Duterte administration. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. The NDFP or National Democratic Front of the Philippines, which has been red-tagged by the government and designated a “terrorist organization” in 2021, is a coalition of unions, organizations, groups, and political parties that organize around the National Democratic movement and its causes in the country. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. A disturbing detail also emerged about Echanis’ cause of death: it was a stab in the aorta by what was assumed to be a spike “or like a knitting needle” with a hook at the end, which investigators affirmed was a technique for torture (Gonzales 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. In a local report by Al Jazeera, fishermen claimed that police instructed them to dump bodies of drug war victims in the bay. One mentioned that he was specifically told to “take out trash.” See article for more details. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Additionally, we also know that torture is ineffective as a tool to secure and extract information from people (see Guantánamo Bay and post-9/11 prisoner abuses by the CIA and other US security forces). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Also known as Direct Action Day, the 1946 riots in Calcutta (now Kolkata) sparked as a result of continued tensions between Muslim and Hindu populations in the country. These events bled into the eventual Partition of India a year later, where the British Raj was dissolved and was split into India and Pakistan (and eventually, also into Bangladesh). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Duterte also enacted martial law and the suspension of habeas corpus in 2017, but limited its scope to Mindanao (as opposed to the whole country) due to clashes between the Maute group, a faction that separated from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, and military forces in Marawi (“Duterte declares” 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Marcos Jr. makes an effort to distance himself from Duterte’s ruthless approach to the drug war: “I think we have found – [and] it is certainly my view – that enforcement, which has been the part of the drug war that has been most vigorously pursued by President [Rodrigo] Duterte only gets you so far. ” Instead, he calls for a shift in focus to prevention and rehabilitation (Cupin 2022). However, drug-related extrajudicial killings by state forces are still happening. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. My own translation, from the original Tagalog speech: “Huwag niyo akong takutin ng gulo-gulo kasi kung gusto talaga ninyo ng gulo, guguluhin natin ang bayan natin. Tutal, wala pa namang pagkain. Kung gusto ninyo ng barilan, ‘di sige. Kung gusto ninyo ng pukpukan, I will not hesitate. My orders are, sa pulis pati military, pati mga barangay, na pagkaginulo at nagkaroon ng okasyon na lumaban, at ang buhay ninyo ay nalagay sa alanganin, shoot them dead… kaysa mag-gulo kayo diyan, edi ilibing ko na kayo… huwag ninyong subukan ang gobyerno, kasi itong gobyerno na ito hindi inutil.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Duterte does claim to have shot someone when he was a law student in 1972, saying that he was bullied by this person for being Visayan (Zamora 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Foley (2013) makes it a point at the beginning of the paper to demarcate her inquiry by confirming that she is departing from “the habitual grammar of our field… to consider ‘the violence of rhetoric’ rather than the ‘rhetoric of violence’” (191). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)