Book Review: Rafael, V. L. (2022). The Sovereign Trickster: Death and Laughter in the Age of Duterte.

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Since his 2016 election, and the commencement of the war on drugs (a campaign waged through extrajudicial killings), Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has become a global sensation. Winn (2019) declared the war on drugs to be "among the bloodiest massacres in recent Southeast Asian history" (p. 25) and a phenomenon "racking up a body count seldom seen outside large-scale land battles" (p. 128). Among many outside the Philippines, the Duterte phenomenon is poorly understood and is another example of how, according to Mishra (2017), "unable to discern a rational design in worldwide mayhem, many intellectuals seem as lost as politicians today" (p. 39).

Rafael *explains* the causes of Duterte's war on drugs as opposed to simply *decrying* it as an act of savagery. In Rafael's book there are no normatively charged statements, such as Winn's 2019 declaration "the Philippines is run by an elected leader with the bloodlust and dangerous unpredictability of a dictator" (p. xvi), or Miller's 2018 description of the war on drugs as a "daily bloodbath splashed across the headlines" (p. 3). As Rafael states at the outset of the book, "I try to recast Duterte from the unforgiving authoritarian and over-masculinized figure that many see him as into a more complex, fragile, and ambiguous character" (p. 5). Rafael's explanation of Duterte's rise, acquisition, and consolidation of power is useful for Philippine scholars as well as those interested in the global growth of authoritarianism; as Mishra (2017) states, "Authoritarian leaders, anti-democratic backlashes and right-wing extremism define the politics of Austria, France and the United States as well as India, Israel, Thailand, the Philippines and Turkey" (p. 9).

Rafael attempts to explain the Duterte regime, and the drug war, by looking at the relationship between life and death under Duterte. Rafael does this by using the concepts of biopower (power over life) developed by Foucault (2010), and necropower (power to kill) developed by Mbembe (2003). Consequently, the book's theme is, "What is the relationship between life and death under Duterte" (p. 3)? This "thematic thread", as Rafael describes it, runs as the red thread connecting all chapters (p. 3). Rafael continually discusses how the Duterte regime

acts to have power over life and to, simultaneously, exert its power to kill. The book consists of an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. Between the chapters are a series of short essays, which Rafael calls 'sketches', dealing with topics related to the book's theme. Rafael cautions the book "is far from being a definitive history of the age of Duterte" (p. 4). In terms of methods, the book is based on an extensive, thorough examination of secondary sources. There are no fieldwork interviews, such as those conducted by Warburg (2017). This may appear to be a weakness, but conducting fieldwork research on the war on drugs is dangerous for both the researcher and participants (Holden, 2021). Also, the book was published six years into the Duterte regime, and, by this time, an extensive body of literature had been published on Duterte's government, which Rafael effectively utilizes.

Rafael begins by discussing the historical conditions facilitating Duterte. Throughout Philippine history, elections have enabled the proliferation of armed vigilantes and death squads to coerce political rivals. According to Rafael, "death squads, vigilantes, and paramilitary volunteers of all sorts have long been an integral, though disavowed, feature of the state" (p. 16). While the 1986 People Power protests may have ended the Marcos dictatorship, many of its institutions remained in place and succeeding administrations resorted to extrajudicial killings of criminals, leftists, journalists, activists, and Muslim secessionists.

Rafael discusses Duterte's background as mayor of Davao City on Mindanao. In 1986, as Corazon Aquino replaced Marcos, Aquino replaced all governors and mayors, and Duterte, a prosecutor, was appointed Vice Mayor and Officer in Charge of Davao City. In 1988, Duterte was elected Mayor – a position he held, subject to term limits, until elected President in 2016. While mayor, Duterte incorporated elements of both anti-communist vigilantes and former New People's Army members into his regime, creating the Davao Death Squad, which mercilessly dealt with drug personalities (people using or selling drugs) and petty criminals, while earning Duterte the nickname 'the Punisher'. To Rafael, Duterte's time in Davao gave him a Hobbesian worldview, where life is in a state of "perpetual civil war" (p. 58). "For Duterte", wrote Rafael, "justice means revenge. It is about the right to seek satisfaction for an injury" (p. 58). In Duterte's worldview, human rights are an abstract Western imposition infringing on Philippine sovereignty.

Following Kusaka (2017a, 2017b, 2020), Rafael uses the concept of moral politics to explain the Duterte regime and the war on drugs. Starting with Fidel Ramos' presidency (1992-1998), successive Philippine governments have been committed to neoliberalism – a paradigm eschewing income and wealth redistribution (Holden, 2021). With neoliberal doctrine preventing income and wealth redistribution, society is differentiated into 'deserving' and 'undeserving' citizens. The former are hard working, decent, upright people engaged in "contractual service jobs such as overseas work, tourism, construction, and call centers"; the latter are "drunks, drug addicts, or criminals, [and] they are liable to be ostracized, arrested, jailed, and in some cases, killed" (p. 31). To Rafael, this demonstrates the stark difference between biopolitics (the politics of life) and necropolitics (the politics of death) and the "biopolitics of neoliberalism thus requires a necropolitics of moral cleansing" (p. 31). Moral politics is an effective strategy for Duterte's strongest supporters, members of the aspirational middle class. These people want to move up socially while fearing being forced

to move down. The drug war assures these people something is *being done* and it "assuages the fears of precarity and displacement among his supporters" (p. 82).

Rafael discusses Duterte's scientifically unfounded views of methamphetamine (Hart, 2014, 2021), which regards methamphetamine "as thoroughly destructive, driving users into acts of extreme violence" (p. 67). In Duterte's mind, methamphetamine users "have no qualms about raping children and killing innocent people", and consequently "they cannot be considered human, let alone claim to have any rights" (p. 67). Rafael explains an important component of Duterte's contempt for drug users, which is his resentment of their enjoyment of drugs (known in French as *jouissance*). To Duterte, drug users enjoy something illicitly and he wants to stop this illicit enjoyment by destroying them. This exemplifies how "drug policy", to Proudfoot (2019), "revolves around a concern with the *jouissance* of others" (p. 223).

Rafael examines how the war on drugs resembles a counterinsurgency campaign. This is a point made by Linnemann (2016) who wrote, "Counternarcoterror projects are best understood as counterinsurgency projects, aiming to pacify certain territories and populations" (p. 186). Rafael discusses how, in 2016, the Philippine National Police issued Command Memorandum Circular number 16 calling for "a 'drug clearing policy' entailing the 'neutralization' and 'negation' of 'drug personalities nationwide'" (p. 68). *Neutralization* is a term frequently used in counterinsurgency and is a euphemism for *killing* (Holden, 2009; McCoy, 2009). By discussing drug personalities as those needing to be *neutralized,* Rafael demonstrates how the war on drugs is conducted as a counterinsurgency campaign. "In Duterte's Philippines", writes Rafael, "the drug addict currently occupies the position of the most dangerous insurgent" (p. 70).

Rafael provides an intellectual discussion of one of the drug war's most notorious aspects – the public disposal of victims' bodies after being killed either by the police (in 'buy bust' operations) or by unknown killers. Rafael examines Foucault's concept of punishment, and the importance of marking the body of the condemned to demonstrate the power of the sovereign (Foucault, 1975). To Rafael, when victims' bodies are publicly disposed of they constitute "gruesome reminders of their putative crime" and "fearsome signs of the sovereign's power" (p. 72). This demonstrates what McCoy (2017) calls "performative violence" with "scattered corpses written upon and read as virtual political texts" (p. 517). When bodies are disposed of in this manner and then photographed by the night crawlers (a group of photojournalists documenting the war on drugs), they become "a stage to perform the basis of the president's authority" (p. 111), or what McCoy (2009) calls "a proscenium of psychological terror" (p. 407). The police, by leaving bodies behind to be photographed, are demonstrating "the fearsome power of the state delivering a kind of justice as cruel as it [is] inescapable" (p. 127). Rafael also points out how the photojournalists publicizing the killings have also pushed back against the drug war by turning "the nightly occurrence of violence into a narrative of injustice meant to indict the powerful" (p. 120), and this has directed global, negative attention to Duterte's regime. Intimately related to the public disposal of bodies is the Republic's weak legal system "where courts are backed up, and where judges, as well as the police, are badly paid" (p. 75). By forgoing "the uncertain, and time-consuming process of court trials," extrajudicial killings provide swift, visible, and unassailable punishment (p. 75). To Rafael, extrajudicial killings are

sold to the public as a remedy for the weak legal system, normalizing mass murder (especially of the poor), foregrounding fear as a governance technique.

In the final chapter, Rafael examines urban poor support for the war on drugs even though the vast majority of those killed are from the urban poor. Despite mixed feelings regarding the killings, writes Rafael, the drug war "continues to enjoy widespread approval, especially among the poor" (p. 140). Rafael addresses Duterte's popularity in urban poor communities by discussing how their tight quarters cause people to live in "a community of intimacy" (p. 136). This forces people to get along, but when people engage in antisocial behavior, such as abusing drugs, they threaten this community of intimacy. These disruptors are then identified for execution and killed in what Rafael describes as "a kind of regenerative violence necessary for the removal of the undeserving who endanger community" (p. 139). Rafael refers to this process of removing disruptive community members as "autoimmunity" (p. 139). When a disruptor is killed, their death confirms their lack of belonging and means they no longer threaten community safety.

In conclusion, the book provides a detailed, intellectual, historically-grounded explanation of the Duterte regime and its war on drugs. The book ends on a pessimistic note as Rafael writes, "With Duterte's scheduled exit in 2022, the drug war, and its authoritarian appeal, will not end but will most likely continue by other means and through other figures" (p. 142). Elements of Duterte's governing style, which some have described as 'Dutertismo', will "continue to be emulated by his followers" (p. 4).

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