

Democracy in a Time of Misery: From Spectacular Tragedy to Deliberative Action

My presentation today is based on a book that is scheduled to be released in August this year. It's entitled *Democracy in a Time of Misery: From Spectacular Tragedy to Deliberative Action*. The book is based on my Australian Research Council Early Career Research Fellowship. The grant was designed to examine modalities of governance in post-disaster contexts with the Philippines as case study.

As with most ethnographic fieldwork, however, what I found to be interesting as my research unfolded has less to do with what I set out to do.

While I was able to produce research outputs that did examine different ways in which the state, humanitarian organizations and local communities govern the process of post-disaster recovery and reconstruction, what I found particularly striking in my field work is the centrality of emotions, particularly misery, in developing political agency and shaping collective decision-making in the aftermath of a tragedy.

Which brings me to this book project. What I'd like to do this afternoon is to first locate this book in relation to my broader research agenda. Then I'll introduce the book's main arguments and how the empirical chapters speak to this argument. And I'll conclude by giving you a sense of the next phase of research.

So what is the intellectual project?

My work for the past five years has focused on democratic innovations in contexts of widespread displacement and dispossession. I take the view that democratic politics, broadly defined, can take root in the most trying of times.

So far, my work has focused on the Philippines where I have conducted ethnographic research in communities affected by disasters, which is the focus this book.

In a separate project, I conducted in-depth interviews with communities in Manila that have witnessed a spate of killings in relation to President Rodrigo Duterte's violent crackdown on the illegal drug trade.

And this year, my empirical focus has shifted to violent conflict. The photo you see is Marawi City, an Islamic City in Southern Philippines captured by ISIS-inspired militants exactly two years ago. The city was reduced to rubble after five months of air strikes and ground combat. Some observers to compare the scale of devastation to Aleppo.

Just this year, I was in the field thrice. First for humanitarian work, then to run a mini-public in a warzone for another research project.

So, you may ask, what brings the empirical contexts of disaster, urban crime, and violent conflict together?

In all these sensitive political contexts, my goal is to examine and compare the creative and subtle ways in which citizens make political claims, how their political claims are received, and the overt and insidious forms of silencing they experience. I am curious to know how the rudiments of democratic practice are reconstructed on the fly.

I am more interested with everyday practice more than political institutions, and when I do analyse political institutions, it is in relation to how vulnerable citizens experience and assign meanings to these institutions in the context of tragedy, trauma and precarity.

Why am I obsessed with this approach? Two reasons.

The first is an empirical argument. I think focusing on the micro-politics of democratic practice orients our attention to the everyday forms of democratic labour required from subordinate groups to break through spaces for decision-making on issues that affect their lives.

The second reason is a normative one. A turn to everyday politics is more than a 'romantic celebration of coping mechanisms,' but a recognition that democracy works with 'down-to-earth methods with regular effects,' to quote John Keane.

Focusing on the quotidian features of democratic practice creates a 'detailed vocabulary and enlarged perspective from which we cast normative judgment about good and bad practice.'

Creating political communities after a tragedy is hard work. The book is full of observations of seemingly mundane practices of fathers queuing for relief goods and cash cards, of mothers negotiating while also 'making do' with half-delivered promises of politicians and humanitarian workers, and young people practicing for a dialogue about land tenure with a city councillor using a hair brush as proxy for a microphone. All these serve as the everyday practice that rebuild a public sphere.

Overall, I would situate my work, as one that speaks to democratic theory, coming from the vantage point of fragile political contexts. The way I conceptualise this book is it's the first of what hopefully will be a series of ethnographically-driven theoretical interventions that sharpen the way we understand democratic politics in the most trying of times.

What then is the book about? The argument is simple. Misery can enliven democratic action.

How did I get there?

My interest in studying the relationship between democracy and misery is inspired by my ethnographic research in disaster-affected communities in Tacloban City, Philippines.

On November 8, 2013, tropical cyclone Haiyan laid waste to a cluster of islands in some of the Philippines' poorest regions. Haiyan is described as the world's strongest storm recorded in almost a century. It makes Hurricane Katrina a run of the mill storm, as a meteorologist put it. The death toll was pegged at six thousand at a time when the government could not accurately count casualties. A twenty-three-foot storm surge or tsunami reduced villages along the coastline to a scatter of tin roofs. Tacloban is the ground zero of this disaster.

I first entered the field in August 2014, eight months after the disaster. My last field visit was in November 2017. I, together with two research assistants, interviewed over two hundred respondents, most of them earning five to ten dollars a day and living in informal settlements along the shoreline.

How did get to the theme of misery? Misery in the aftermath of a tragedy is often taken for granted, because it is obvious. Miserable, heartbroken, deprived, and humiliated are the words my respondents use to describe their conditions. Markers of misery are still visible in Tacloban. Mass

graves and memorials, candle lighting ceremonies and solemn processions paint the image of a city in mourning even four years after the disaster.

But what is obvious needs to be unpacked. In the study of political practice, what drew my attention to misery was how this emotional state shapes the character of public discourse. As I spent more time in the field, it became apparent to me how misery served as currency for democratic action.

Protest movements used the repertoire of misery to demand better treatment from the state. In a congressional enquiry, misery provided discursive power to a city mayor testifying about the horror his family endured. For a Filipino diplomat, the performance of misery strengthened his appeal for climate justice in the United Nations Climate Summit in Warsaw, a gathering that took place three days after the disaster.

These observations come together in this book as manifestations of how misery enlivens democratic action. Closely linked to misery are attempts of disaster-affected communities to gain voice and visibility in the global public sphere.

Now, if I talk to social movement scholars or psychologists, the argument that misery drives democratic action seems unoriginal. Emotions do play a role in politics for good or ill.

There are, however, two fields of research I wish to talk to in the book. Democratic theorists and disaster governance scholars.

If you work in the field of disaster research or humanitarian studies, the claim that voice is important in the aftermath of a disaster is not new. 'Communication is aid' is one of the trendiest slogans in the humanitarian world today.

There's a push to democratise post-disaster politics by correcting power asymmetries between receivers and givers of aid. Some come from the perspective of efficiency, others come from the critique of humanitarianism as neo-colonial projects. There's lots of talk about accountability where, ideally, disaster survivors are treated as rights holders who can hold duty bearers into account.

How precisely voice is operationalised in practice remains controversial. There's a lot to say here, but let me focus on two of my critiques on how voice is conceptualised in the disaster literature.

First, while there have been inroads in examining inclusion, voice, and accountability in post-disaster contexts, these analyses, I find, are premised on an idealised image of 'normal and active citizens' waiting for an opportunity to be heard.

This premise needs to be problematised. Spectacular disasters result to extreme material deprivation and rupture the fabric of everyday life. Politically, post-disaster contexts are not straightforward cases of build a forum and they will speak. Arjun Appadurai raises this issue in India, the site of the world's largest institutionalised deliberative forums. He finds that speeches made in public deliberations on resource allocation are usually articulated in the form of requests. Instead of 'empowering' citizens to make political demands, participatory forums promote discursive cultures that reinforce inequalities in voice.

I witnessed similar observations in the field. In a separate project on humanitarian technologies, my co-investigators and I found that technologically-driven feedback mechanisms like text hotlines tend to obscure the demands of aid recipients. After the typhoon in 2013, humanitarian organizations considered the Philippines an 'ideal laboratory' to pilot accountability projects given the country's

high levels of mobile phone and social media use. Text hotlines were considered the main channel for voice, while listening was reduced to local aid workers cataloguing these text messages and reporting the findings to the headquarters.

One of our research findings is consistent with Appadurai's observation. We noticed how feedback worked in the Filipino context. We found messages of gratitude as among the most popular SMS sent. The messages provide an impression that relief operations have, by and large, been successful from the perspective of beneficiaries.

This is reinforced by the photo you see here, a billboard in New York's Times Square, portrays Filipinos as 'ideal victims' who are grateful for the world's outpouring of support for typhoon victims. This image of cheerful and resilient people of the archipelago fit the cosmopolitan imagination of the nation, and so it was fitting for the state's tourism ministry to use the tragedy as springboard for a tourism ad.

Meanwhile, complaints about the indignities poor communities suffered during disorganised distributions of relief goods are not articulated in the SMS feedback mechanism.

If the virtue of voice is about enlivening the narrative agency of disaster-affected communities, then we must be able to capture the various ways in which these narratives are constructed, expressed, renegotiated, contested and defended. And so, methodologically, I think we need to go beyond voice and text as indicators of political claim-making or communication more broadly.

Second, post-disaster contexts are moments where there is 'surfeit of affect' as sociologist Vincanne Adams put it in her work on Hurricane Katrina. I take inspiration from this work and argue that a meaningful account of democratisation in the aftermath of a tragedy needs to prioritise the emotional foundations of political life.

As I searched for spaces where community participation take root, I gained insight into the ways in which misery has shaped the workings of my respondents' everyday lives.

I saw a mother painting the names of her children on a cross over a mass grave, who said 'someone has to be held accountable' for the death of her five children. I talked to a fisherman in his sixties supportive of the government's plan to relocate his neighbourhood from the coast to the mountains, because his wife remained terrified of the waves. And then I met a man who refused to leave his flattened coastal home, in the event his missing wife returns to the shore where she disappeared.

These observations lead me to ask what is seemingly obvious but left out in disaster studies: how do distressed communities take part in democratising post-disaster reconstruction?

Misery, I argue, is not secondary but constitutive of the character of political participation in the aftermath of a spectacular disaster. The issue is not one of community participation per se, but how avenues for political expression bestow recognition to emotional injuries and affective forms of political claim-making.

When we use only voice as the primary currency for community participation, it is possible to see a bleak landscape of post-disaster politics.

In my ethnographic work, I witnessed how formal spaces for community consultation have become ritualistic, the sort of participation that has the mayor calling for a public consultation among village leaders to provide token approval of the rehabilitation plan.

I was confronted by the practical reality of collaborative city planning, where decisions are made inside the air-conditioned ballrooms of downtown hotels, while those affected by these decisions are not invited.

In community meetings, I saw the stigmatization of inquisitive community members as poor team players, particularly those who demanded audits of donation spending. If we focus on these formal sites of community participation, it appears that democratising post-disaster recovery does not stand a chance.

In Chapter 2, I argue that such a pessimistic view of democratic politics is shaped by a narrow understanding of what counts as meaningful political participation. I make a case for broadening our gaze from a view of democratisation dependent on formal sites of political participation to visual, creative, embodied and emotive expressions of political claims in the public sphere. I refer to this as the multimodal account of discursive participation.

I begin chapter 2 by describing the ‘unspeakable’ character of misery and the tensions this creates with a voice-centred view of participation. Drawing on developments in deliberative democracy—a normative theory that once defined itself as a talk-centric view of politics—I explain how creative and subtle forms of claim-making can give recognition to the narrative agency of disaster survivors beyond the forum. Drawing on developments in disaster studies, I identify spaces where spontaneous, emotional and meaningful forms of political action can unfold.

This approach has both analytical and ethical value. Analytically, a multimodal appreciation of political expression enables a robust account of participation. It, as Toby Rollo argues, corrects ‘the methodological subordination of deeds to speech, which often has the effect of erasing contributions of citizens who are either unable or unwilling to exercise voice’ (Rollo, 2016: 588).

This relates to the ethical value of this approach. Recognising plural ways of claim-making challenges the discursive inequalities that emerge from the celebration of voice. This ethical position recognises that in most cases, it is not suffering communities that must speak up, it is, us, spectators that must pay better attention. We must understand communities of misery on their own terms, beyond the frame of community participation constructed by the state or humanitarian agencies.

So, in my account multimodal participation, I place emphasis not only on the expression of claims, but also how global spectators, humanitarians and other powerholders receive these claims.

While Chapter 2 provides a theoretical case for understanding democracy amidst misery, Chapters 3 to 8 describe the precise ways in which political claims are articulated, performed, enacted, silenced, heard, ignored, challenged, and undermined. I investigate how the miseries caused by a disruptive event were folded into the rhythms of everyday political action in the four years since the disaster.

The next six chapters are organised around the types of ‘publics’ that emerge in the aftermath of Haiyan. By using the term ‘publics,’ I draw from Nancy Fraser’s definition, which refers to the arena for the production and circulation of discourses (Fraser 1990: 57). There are several reasons why I consider the term publics suitable to examine the character of political claim-making.

First, the concept of publics emphasises the contingent character of discourses in the aftermath of a tragedy. Publics are constituted through mundane collective experiences as well as deliberate choices political actors make to connect personal grief to public claims. Forming publics requires ‘emotion work’ or active management of feelings to convey arguments and secure desired responses (Hochschild 1979; Sanyal 2015).

Second, I use the term publics to underscore the fragmentation and diversity of views and practices in each arena. The term is in its plural form to acknowledge the nebulous definition of 'community'. Disaster-affected communities are not homogenous actors with a single interest. They are political agents with varying aspirations and contrasting views on how to realise that future. It is important to understand how these visions are articulated, enacted and contested, as well as silenced and judged in the global public sphere.

Third, the concept of publics I present is not tied to headcounts. It recognises that individuals can take part in different publics with varying intensities. Some categories of publics also overlap or facilitate the emergence of the other.

How then are publics formed?

The first two empirical chapters draw attention to how a global community of publics are formed due to a tragedy. The next chapters draw attention to how disaster-affected communities themselves form publics that draw attention to their claims.

Chapter 3 introduces the notion of 'spectacular publics.' I discuss how print, broadcast and digital media's dramatic portrayal of the disaster generated a global audience willing to bear witness to the tragedy. Journalists, celebrity humanitarians, and global audiences that respond to the tragedy some of the actors in spectacular publics.

I argue that spectacles have an ambivalent role in democratic life. Beyond accusations of disaster pornography, the spectacular portrayal of the disaster by journalists and humanitarian organizations can reinforce or break inequalities in voice and visibility. They can inspire or stifle reflections on the political causes of widespread misery. Spectacular publics can transform audiences to publics, which in turn set in motion a series of public deliberation.

Extending the analysis on 'spectacular publics,' Chapter 4 examines how global audiences evolve from their role as spectators who bear witness to the tragedy to 'surrogate publics' –self-appointed actors making claims on behalf of affected communities in the digital sphere.

Surrogate publics, for the most part, engaged in deliberation online by putting forward discourses that call for assistance. Rihanna's Instagram post is an example of a surrogate public using the voice of care. Contesting the voice of care, however, is the voice of justice. While the voice of care was successful in sustaining global attention to the spectacle, the voice of justice sustains the political conversation beyond the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, by demanding accountability from the state for avoidable deaths.

In summary, the first two chapters think about how global audiences respond to the spectacle of tragedy. Meanwhile, chapters 5 to 8 focus on disaster-affected communities' participation in democratic politics.

Chapter 5 presents the case of 'contestatory publics' where misery becomes simultaneous displays of mourning and indignation. Contestatory publics disrupt the dominant imaginary of Typhoon Haiyan as a compassionate moment of collective action. Instead, they engage in confrontational and blame-seeking discourse by holding officials accountable for avoidable deaths, the slow and selective distribution of aid, global inaction against climate change and undemocratic decisions made in post-disaster rehabilitation.

Focusing on the alliance called People Surge, this chapter describes how sorrowful protests, grassroots organising, street theatre, and negative campaigning are used to communicate grief and anger. Together with these strong emotions is a vision for democratic politics where the views of communities of misery are given due consideration to address their claims of injustice. Here, suffering is both a productive democratic force and a political tool that lends symbolic power to contestatory claims.

Chapter 6 presents a different picture of democratic practice enacted by ‘collaborative publics.’ Unlike contestatory publics where misery is used as leverage to make political demands, collaborative publics view misery as an affective state that needs to be overcome by hope.

Collaborative politics occur through community-driven development programs instigated by NGOs, usually funded by humanitarian organisations and aid agencies. Their repertoire includes community deliberations, public consultations, capacity-building workshops, formal and informal feedback mechanisms, and in some instances ‘constructive mobilisations.’

The image you see here is their white board where they listed the content of the placards they will use in a rally, where even signs are positively framed.

I use the term ‘collaborative’ to draw attention to the norms of democratic practice, whether it is within the community or in relation to their funders, organisers or government. To engage and not offend, to provide counter-proposals and not ‘just’ complain are some of the norms developed among these publics.

The illustrative case in the chapter is a community working with the NGO Urban Poor Associates. In this chapter, I map the deliberative capacities the community developed over the course of their relationship with the NGO. It includes how these capacities were deployed to institutionalise deliberative engagement in post-disaster reconstruction as well as the tensions collaborative publics had with contestatory publics.

Chapter 7 presents the case of ‘populist publics.’ On the first national election since Haiyan, Tacloban City voted in a landslide for controversial candidate Rodrigo Duterte. President Duterte has been called many names—the Trump of the East, Duterte Harry, and The Punisher. He makes international headlines because of his vulgarity, calling the Pope son of a whore, God stupid, and the US ambassador a faggot. If there are Americans or Brazilians in the room who would like to keep a scorecard of whose president is a bigger nutcase, I say bring it on.

This chapter unpacks the political underpinnings of Duterte’s popularity in Tacloban, particularly how populist publics emerged to support a candidate who admitted to killing criminals during his time as mayor of Davao City.

I discuss how Duterte’s campaign enlivened the political agency of disaster-affected communities, reset the tone of electoral politics often driven by guns, goons and gold, and examine the resonance of Duterte’s often vulgar rhetoric and authoritarian discourse. The chapter concludes by making a case for how participating in a bitterly contested election allowed communities of misery to reclaim their self-esteem as citizens and challenge the elitism of Philippine democracy.

This is the longest chapter, and one that I find most confronting. I am a big critic of the President Duterte’s illiberal regime. It deeply upsets me to see friends and colleagues getting arrested, posting bail, getting harassed by the state’s troll army on social media. But my ethnographic work with

Duterte supporters truly adds value to my understanding of populism from the perspective of the public.

The final empirical chapter presents ‘patient publics.’ This is an analysis of the impact of delays on people’s political agencies. Patient publics are forced into waiting—for relief goods, for temporary shelter, for promises that remain unrealised. The chapter studies communities three years after the disaster, and their sense of abandonment from humanitarian workers and global publics. Far from being a passive act, I argue that patience is an act of choice. It is defined by strategic decisions and constant negotiations on the part of disaster-affected communities, although these unfold under limiting conditions of unequal power relations.

The concluding chapter theorizes a defensible account of democracy in a time of misery. It makes a case for celebrating everyday achievements of disaster-affected communities as they maintain visibility while the spectacle of the disaster wanes in the global sphere.

The chapter, however, is not purely celebratory. I begin to broaden the questions beyond the ones raised in the book. I asked, what about other tragedies?

While the publics of Typhoon Haiyan can claim some political victories, who bears witness to the sorrow of farmers starving from drought? Who cares about the asthmatic children who breathe ambient air pollution? What becomes of the collective miseries that could not find the same coverage of expressive modes of claim-making?

It is important to question the implications of placing emotions at the center of democratic theory. While the empirical chapters provide evidence for emotion’s productive political power, I also recognize that there are, what I call, hierarchies of misery.

There are ethical stakes in this line of enquiry. In Monica Krause’s work on humanitarianism, she finds that the choice of ‘whom to save and whom not to save’ has been decided through the logic of the market. By treating humanitarian projects as products sold to the quasi-market of funders, ‘beneficiaries are put in a position where they are in competition with each other to become part of a project’. Emotion-oriented campaigns connect the ‘shock effects of suffering’ to spectators’ sentiments of guilt, pity, and sentimentality, thereby driving them to action.

What is an ethical and democratising response to this trend? Is affective politics bound to succumb to what Milanda Kundera calls suffering contests or what my queer friends call oppression Olympics?

Here I return to an argument I make in chapter 2, but one that I haven’t discussed this afternoon yet.

I argue that democracy in a time of misery demands what Lillie Chouliaraki calls ‘agonistic solidarity.’ It is an ethical disposition that links reason and emotion to facilitate public deliberation about the causes of suffering, the uneven valuation of lives, and how collective suffering can be overcome. I argue that agonistic solidarity is a key ethical response to disasters, as empathetic understanding can collapse to sentimentalism.

‘Grand emotions’ evoked by humanitarian campaigns and journalistic accounts of tragedies may be fleeting, but they can be a force for moral education. The challenge lies in translating these emotions to a reflexive stance, where one can take a step back, interrogate the bases for one’s empathetic identification towards the other, offer reasons for one’s empathetic action, and hold each other accountable for prioritising one form of misery over the other.

This ethical disposition is manifest in various ways in practice. Here are some examples.

In the context of representative democracy, prioritising responses to misery takes shape in the politics of budget allocation. Should Congress allocate budget for Tacloban's proposal for a new township at the expense of projects with no tragic back story? Or how about projects that also have a tragic backstory like Marawi City – the Islamic City burned to the ground because of government airstrikes? Or the widows of Duterte's drug war who are portrayed as undeserving of compassion for they coddled criminals? Budget deliberations, in principle, could be a productive space to put forward justifications for a proposal that may invoke affective reasons, public-spirited justifications, or both.

In the context of humanitarianism, inter-survivor accountability can be put in practice. The Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation, for example, leaves coin banks with their beneficiaries. Beneficiaries, in turn, are expected to contribute what they can. The proceeds are sent to other disaster survivors from all over the world. This approach has the potential to foster a cosmopolitan ethic of solidarity, where disaster survivors consider it their responsibility to look after each other. Here, mutual accountability and charity are upheld in the same practice.

In the context of global spectators, empathy and judgment can co-exist when the norms of lifestyle humanitarianism converge with critical questioning of the architectures of social media that selectively bestow attention to tragedies. The interrogation of Facebook's safety checks and social solidarity tool is an example, where users demanded Facebook to explain why the features were activated after the Paris terrorist attack, not in response to the tragedy in Beirut. Facebook responded. The social media giant announced a change in policy. The rest of the digital community also took action. A free online photo generator created templates for Facebook users to overlay any flag—including a combination of French and Lebanese flags together—for their profile pictures.

These examples, among others, demonstrate the possibilities where empathetic imagination and deliberation can take root. Suffering does not have to be a contest. It can be a bridge that connects the politics of shared experiences.

So, in closing, I argue that democracy in a time of misery is neither a time for hubris nor defeatism. It is a time for navigating the space between the two. Needless to say, the account I offer in this book is partial. It neither claims to speak for all disaster survivors, nor to provide a comprehensive account of Typhoon Haiyan. I situate this book as a modest attempt to make sense of a tragedy by linking democratic theory and post-disaster ethnography. At the end of this book is a celebration of democracy's humble victories amidst trying times.