Geonarratives of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) in Negros Island, Philippines

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This paper is part of a broader research project funded by the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) of the Philippines that looks into the lives, spatialities, and practices of human rights defenders (HRDs) in Negros Island, Philippines. The research aims to give voice to HRDs who are largely misrepresented in various media platforms, and to reflect the realities of their precarious lives due to the existing culture of violence and impunity in the island. The data from the research were gleaned using various methods that include: document

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reviews, online focus group discussions (FGDs), mental mapping, webinars, and KoboCollect mobile surveys. These methods were used to reflect the geonarratives, the grounded experiences of HRDs. We feature map outputs from this project which demonstrate that places are repositories of memories of violence, fear, and abuse, but are also vital sites of hope, community, and mutual care among HRDs.

Keywords: *geonarratives, human rights defenders, Philippines, geographies of violence, geographies of care*

> *"The geonarrative storying that utilizes countermapping and unmapping practices can be deployed by community- based groups, activists, grassroots, and peoples' organizations to generate grounded data and information as basis to carry out specific participatory action research and development work for social justice." (Palis, 2022, p.701)*

Introduction to Geonarratives

In geography, the use of geonarratives can be traced back to the early works on qualitative GIS, with 'qualitative' referring to data that are not simply non-numerical/non-quantitative, but those data that provide rich contextual detail about social and material situations (Elwood & Cope, 2009). Qualitative GIS emerged as one of the responses to GIS being grounded heavily in positivism and quantitative techniques. Public participation and participatory GIS, feminist GIS, and critical GIS, reflective of diverse set of data from quantitative and qualitative methods, paved the way for the emergence of qualitative GIS. Spatial knowledge in its various forms such as photographs, mental maps, and narrative descriptions can be incorporated into GIS-based spatial analysis along with

qualitative methods that include interviews, ethnography, focus groups and others, reflecting different ways of producing knowledge (Elwood & Cope, 2009).

Qualitative GIS, originates from pioneering academic pursuits of feminist geographers and participatory GIS scholars (Kwan, 2008; Thomas, 2021). They have criticized the masculinist nature of GIS technology and its focus on quantitative data sets, hence failing to articulate ambiguities, social processes, and lived experiences (Thomas, 2021). In order to address this gap, feminist and participatory GIS scholars restructure GIS and utilize a mixed method design that utilizes both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Qualitative GIS thus emerged as a "set of alternative geographies and alternative ways of visualizing spaces and places inhabited and experienced by diverse groups" (Mugerauer, 2000 p. 318-319). Qualitative GIS grounds the hybrid understanding of GIS and is viewed as "technology, methodology, and situated social practice" (Elwood & Cope, 2009, Chapter 1, p. 3).

Feminist scholars such as Mei-Po Kwan (2002) challenged the "bounds of GIS" to represent the experiences of women in various contexts. She mapped daily activities of women to determine the differential access to urban facilities based on gender (Kwan, 2002). Kwan (2008) also mapped emotions and feelings of a Muslim woman on her day-today travels around the city before and after 9/11. Another methodological innovation is the computer-aided qualitative GIS (CAQ-GIS) which was utilized by Kwan and Ding (2008) to retrieve and link interview data with its spatial locations. This innovation has been instrumental in exploring how narratives can be integrated, processed and interpreted in GIS. Kwan and Ding (2008) called this approach as "geonarrative" that uses GIS to conduct narrative analysis using qualitative and mixed methodologies. Thomas (2021) also referred to this approach as spatial storytelling wherein two interdependent research tools are utilized: narrative inquiry and visual mapping. Narrative inquiry pertains to the "study of experience as story" (Connelly &

Clandinin, 2006, p. 479). This is congruent with Massey's (2005) understanding of space as a 'simultaneity of stories so far … places as collections of those stories' (p.130). Visual mapping, on the other hand, challenges the notion of a conventional map wherein it situates the observer as outside and above the gaze (Massey, 2005). Thus, visual mapping as a research tool can be utilized to challenge abstraction and neutrality, and acknowledge the agency of the mapmaker (Thomas, 2021). In this regard, geonarrative is valuable as it integrates GIS with ethnography and grounded theory, allowing for the consideration of multiple ways of knowing that encompass qualitative and quantitative methods.

This research builds upon Palis' (2022) articulation of geonarratives, which he defines as 'place-writing – subjective stories that define, portray, delineate, emphasize, expand, rewrite, and imagine a place' (p.700), drawing from Massey's definition of landscape as 'stories-so-far,' stressing the 'producedness of space, and the fact that, above all, space is the dimension of multiplicity' (Massey in Featherstone, et.al., 23, p. 265). As Palis (2022) contends "geonarratives are embodied and practice-based geographical projects that entangle the individual with the created image through the act of storytelling" (p. 701).

This paper presents the geonarratives of human rights defenders (HRD) in Negros Island by mapping their lived experiences as they face ongoing harassment and threats as they conduct their advocacies. As a method, geonarratives may articulate a sense of place, particularly expressions of topophilia or love of place (Tuan, 1990), but we veer away from this and instead use them to account for the violences and atrocities rooted to place. For example, while notions of home are oftentimes portrayed as safe spaces, HRDs view them as unsafe. Also, we consider geonarratives as one of the many established modes of folklore expression, such as oral narratives, which provide alternative ways of mitigating dehumanizing tallies and reports of violences. As such, geonarratives

offer a novel way of expressing these narratives, effectively complementing other forms of folklore expression.

Human Rights Defenders in Negros Island

The Philippines has a long history of violence against human rights defenders (HRDs), the most bloody of which took place during the imposition of nationwide Martial Law by the former president and dictator Ferdinand Marcos from September 1972 – January 1981. Human rights abuses that include arbitrary detention, involuntary exile, torture, killings, and forced disappearances (*desaparecidos*) persisted during the Marcos administration until his ouster in the People Power Revolution on February 25, 1986. According to the Human Rights Victims' Claims Board (HRVCB), there were 11,103 victims of human rights violations from 1972-1986 (Human Rights Violations Victims' Memorial Commission, n.d.). Decades after the bloody regime, human rights violations continue to be recorded in various places in the country. The administrations that followed the Marcos bloody regime were also tainted with recorded cases of human rights violations. In a study by Louys (2019), the Philippines has been identified by various human rights groups as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for HRDs, particularly for land and environmental rights defenders, echoing a study by the Defenders of the Earth (2016) that named the Philippines as 3rd most dangerous country for environmental defenders, next only to Brazil and Colombia. HRDs are subject to abuse, violence, and harassment from state and non-state actors which involve the police, military, members of the judiciary, local and state authorities, security services, paramilitary and other armed groups, right-wing groups, the media, corporations (Landman, 2006).

This project focuses on the island of Negros, made up of the provinces of Negros Occidental and Negros Oriental, both locally and globally known for the sugarcane plantations and significant contributions of the sugarcane industry to

the Philippine economy (See Figure 1.). This monocrop industry is a colonial imprint of the Spanish occupation of the Philippines, one that has recurring and persisting implications on the unequal and unjust sociospatial relations among *haciendores* or the landed elite and the tenant farmers. These relations are maintained through violent and non-violent practices that reinforce and re entrench the power of the plantation owners over permanent and temporary workers (*sacadas*). The non-violent practices include economic sanctions to punish non-compliant workers, posing the threat of dismissal from their sole source of livelihood; and using the rule of law against them by making up cases that can lead to the deviant worker's arrest, effectively threatening their economic survival. Violent practices involve intimidation and physical violence facilitated by the local police, private guards, independent armed groups, and in the past few decades, the Philippine Armed Forces (Kreuzer, 2011).

The unjust working conditions and deeply repressive policies gave rise to various forms of resistance from the impoverished in the island, especially the peasants. In 1971, the National Federation of Sugar Cane Workers (NFSW) was founded by Luis Jalandoni, a Catholic priest and then social action director of the Bacolod diocese along with Hector Mauri, an Italian priest. The grassroots communities aided by the Church was instrumental in informing the sugar farmers of the benefits of a collective effort in condemning the inequalities and unjust treatment that they experienced and expressing dissent on unfair practices. The NFSW also assisted farmers and farming communities and helped strengthen advocacies and clamor for land ownership (Inquirer Research, 2018).
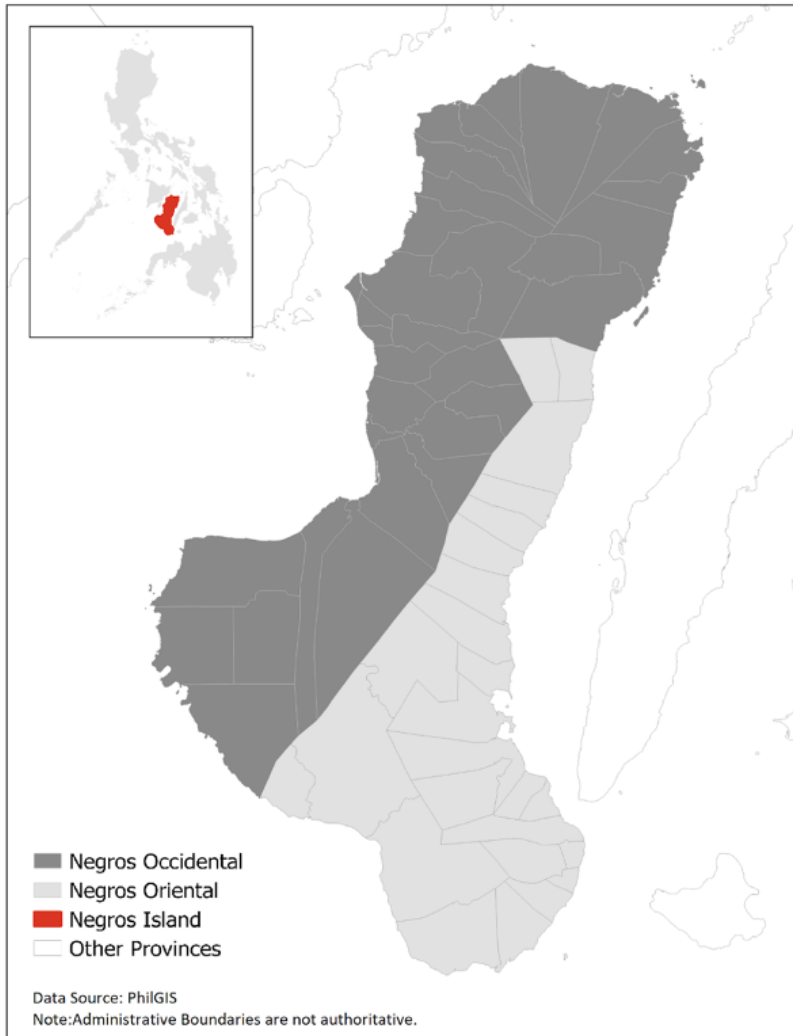
FIG. 1. *Location map of the study site.*

On October 20, 2018, in what is now known as the Sagay Massacre, nine (9) sugar workers and members of NFSW were killed in Hacienda Nene, Barangay Bulanon, in Sagay City, Negros Occidental, including four women and two

minors (Espina, 2018). The victims participated in a land cultivation and occupation activity called a *bungkalan*, from the Tagalog verb *bungkal*, which means to 'till the soil'. The *bungkalan* is practiced across the country to make productive use of idle but usually disputed lands. It is practiced by the Lumad in Bukidnon, Mindanao (Imbong, 2020), farmers in Lupang Ramos, Dasmariñas, Cavite (Ellao & Torres, 2021), and Hacienda Luisita, Tarlac, to name a few. The bungkalan serves as a necessary activity especially during *Tiempo Muerto,* a borrowed Spanish term that literally means 'dead time'. Farm workers practice *bungkalan* during this time, the period between planting and harvesting, to sustain their daily needs. On November 22, 2018, President Rodrigo Duterte signed Memorandum Circular No. 32, which identified the provinces of Samar, Negros Oriental, Negros Occidental, and the Bicol Region as sites of 'sporadic acts of violence' that were committed by lawless groups (Office of the President, 2018). This rationalized the deployment of military and police troops in these areas, effectively militarizing the communities, through *Oplan Sauron* – the implementing program of the Memorandum. Four months after the imposition of Memorandum No. 32, on March 30, 2019, 14 farmers were killed and 16 more were arrested in joint military and police operations in Canlaon City and the towns of Manjuyod and Sta. Catalina in Negros Oriental. The killings happened during the "Synchronized Enhanced Managing Police Operation" or SEMPO, or the joint police-military operations in Negros Oriental. The Philippine National Police (PNP) claimed that the victims were '*nanlaban*' which literally means "fought back," reminiscent of the killings of thousands of suspected illegal drug users and pushers in Duterte's "*Oplan Tokhang*, the war on drugs.

The Defend Negros, Stop the Attacks Network was launched a few months after the brutal killings of what is now known as the Negros 14. This network is composed of individuals, families of victims of killings and human rights violations, human rights advocates, and peoples' organizations who are

collectively clamoring to fight against the culture of impunity, killings, and political persecution in Negros Island (Burgos Jr., 2019).

The aforementioned instances and stories of violence and harassment foreground this research, aiming to highlight individual narratives and geographies of human rights defenders, focusing on their ideas of risk and security amid a climate of impunity and violence in Negros Island.

Geonarratives of HRDs

The research team utilized the following methods to gain insights into the geonarratives: everyday geographies and lived experiences of human rights defenders in Negros Island. The principles of ethical research - informed consent, beneficence and non-maleficence, anonymity and confidentiality, were stringently adhered to in the conduct of the research. The researchers are cognizant of the dangers that these stories might pose to the human rights defenders, and the safety and security of the research participants were considered at every level of the research process.

Methods

The team employed spatially-oriented qualitative methods for the research. The project was initially conceptualized to include a multi-sited fieldwork where qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and mental mapping workshops are done *in situ*. However, due to the travel and mobility restrictions posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the primary data gathering for the research was done completely online using mental mapping and KoBoCollect workshops to ascertain the geonarratives of human rights defenders and how they make and re(make) safe and unsafe spaces in Negros; focus group discussions to foster conversations and validate the individual narratives of the

HRDs; and webinars, where we shared the findings of the research to the participants and other stakeholders. Aside from a venue to share the data to the participants, the webinar also served as a venue for continuous validation and confirmation of their stories.

The sensitive nature of the experiences shared by the HRDs posed a grave threat to their well-being and safety and identifiable location markers were purposely removed from the research. The precarity of the conditions of the participants required that we do away with the locational specificity that can be afforded by GIS. Due to the risks faced by HRDs from multiple perpetrators, locational data was concealed and obscured to refrain from the identification of the participants' whereabouts.

The research team coordinated with 16 human rights defenders (HRDs) coming from several sectoral organizations working in several areas in Negros Island. All of the participants are currently active in community organizing and human rights work. Given the vulnerability of HRDs, pseudonyms were used throughout the study to ensure the anonymity of their identities. Due to the sensitive and precarious nature of the research focus, the team collectively ensured that caring geographies are created and manifested all throughout the research process.

Storying

Developments in geography made way for the consideration and inclusion of stories in broader geographical discourse. Traditional conceptions of spaces in narratives focus on space as just a backdrop to plots. Ryan, et.al. (2016) argue for new conceptualizations of spaces that can serve other roles in narratives, as "focus of attention, a bearer of symbolic meaning, an object of emotional investment, a means of strategic planning, a principle of organization, and even a supporting medium" (p.1) Spaces can be objects of representations in narratives, or can also

function as a setting where a narrative is physically deployed (Ryan, et.al., 2016. Focusing on space as an integral part of the narrative grounds the location-specific experiences of human rights defenders who are situated in Negros Island as a place that has been shown to be historically fraught with conflict on issues of land rights and labor conditions. The long history of unequal landowner – farm worker relations in Negros provided the necessary preconditions for resistance and acts of solidarity in the island.

Cameron (2012) contends that stories, while personal and particular, also reflect broader social and political contexts, therefore are useful in looking at the grounded experiences of human rights defenders, who largely operate within institutions that have historically failed to address their plight and demands. Stories and storying are powerful ways of reflecting individual narratives and collective experiences. These stories are "personal testimonies that show the complexity of human experience that defy easy generalizations" (De Guzman, et al, 2022, 36). By allowing the human rights defenders to tell their stories verbally (through interviews and focus group discussions) and visually (through the creation of mental maps), the research highlights their experiences as shaped by their individual characteristics and personal views.

A vital part of highlighting their experiences as HRDs revolve around how they view their advocacies and praxes. The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN OHCHR), suggested a "broad categorization" of HRDs, defining them as: "any person or group of persons working to promote human rights" (UN OHCHR, 2004, p. 6) which covers a range of human rights advocates, from voluntary workers to government officials and entities. Along with this definition, the document set minimum criteria for human rights work: 1) accept the universality of human rights, 2) have arguments that fall within the scope of human rights, 3) peaceful engagement. The framework offers an inclusive and standardized definition of HRDs, but the term remains ambiguous and fails to reflect specificities of contextualized experiences. Nah et al. (2013)

reflect on the discomfort of HRDs being affiliated with state forces, who are considered by the UN as HRDs in virtue, but most of the time, the police and military are the very same people HRDs fear. Fernandez and Patel (2015) reviewed the outlined qualifications for HRDs and argued for a definition banked on behavioral qualities of an HRD shifting the framework from asking who HRDs are to how HRDs act.

For this research, we explicitly asked the HRDs to provide their own definition of a human rights defender. According to the participants, HRDs are people who work to protect and promote not just individual human rights, but more importantly, collective rights of the toiling masses who have long been suffering from systemic violence. Given that rights are not inherently afforded equally or universally to everyone, their struggles are focused on the most vulnerable, oppressed, and exploited groups. Furthermore, a participant shared that being an HRD is so much more than a career, it reflects an entire belief system manifested in their quotidian lifestyles which affirm their perspectives and stances in fighting for human rights.

The following word cloud stemmed from the registration to a webinar organized by the research team, the University of the Philippines Department of Geography, and the Defend Negros Network, entitled "Defend the Defenders: *Talakayan sa Sosyo-Ekonomikong Krisis at Makasaysayang Pakikibaka sa Isla ng Negros*" held on March 2021. The webinar was attended by invited guest speakers from Karapatan Alliance Philippines – Negros, Silliman University, NSFW, the Diocese of San Carlos, Commission on Human Rights, and the research participants. The words shown in the word cloud in the shape of Negros Island reflect what the registrants of the webinar thought about human rights defenders. The word cloud provides a glimpse of the self-perceptions of HRDs at the time of the webinar, reinforcing their own definition of HRDs and reflecting the inherent temporal nature of their personal views of the work that they do. Understandably, as the webinar was mainly attended by HRDs, allies, and

supporters, the word cloud is dominated by positive words, such as brave, heroes, courageous, revolutionary, strong, and enduring, but unfortunately these views of HRDs are not shared by a lot of people, as HRDs still experience vilification from the public (See Figure 2.)
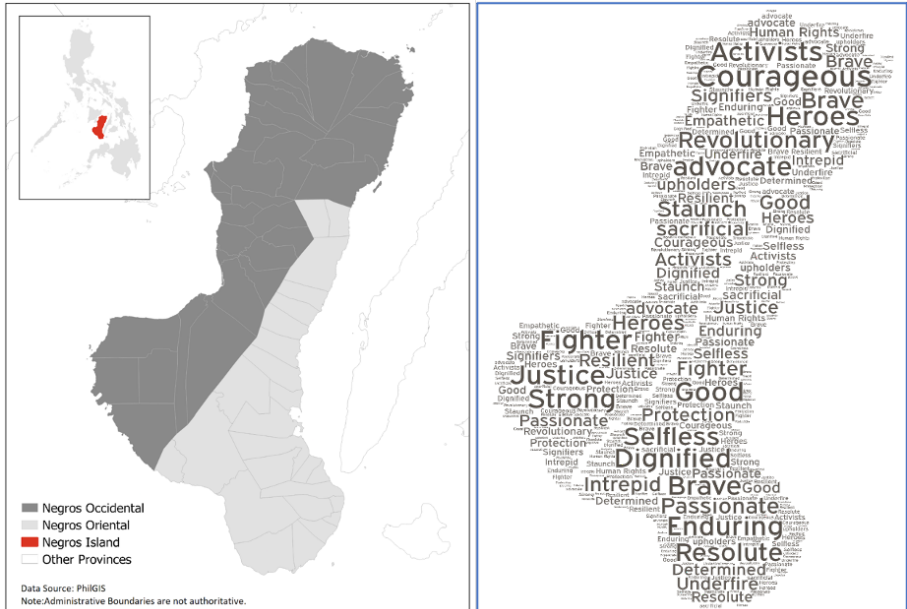

FIG. 2. *Word cloud showing words provided by participants in the Defend the Defenders Webinar held in March 2021.*

Mapping the grounded experiences of HRDs in Negros Island through the narratives of survivors contributes to the methodological efforts of exposing violent geographies and highly contested environments (See Tyner et. al., 2018; Curtis et.al., 2019). As Harley (1988) argues, "cartography as a form of knowledge and a form of power" (p. 279). Mental mapping places this power on individuals, allowing for the human rights defenders to take stock of their lived spaces and visually show their grounded realities.

Mental mapping workshops were organized via Zoom. In these workshops, the participants were given the chance to create their individual drawn mental maps. After a brief introduction to mental mapping and providing general guides to the participants, they were given time to construct their views and ideas of spaces around them. The participants were instructed to draw their mental maps to illustrate the places that they consider as dangerous and unsafe along with places that they deem as safe. They were given the freedom to make use of their own set of symbols to personally denote their feelings of safety and danger. They were also encouraged to include calls, demands, and aspirations in their mental maps. After the drawing session, each participant was given the time to discuss their mental maps and they were asked to elaborate on the visual representations of their ideas of risk and safety. Three (3) mental maps are included here for inclusion from the 16 maps that were created by the participants.

The following mental map was done by a long-time HRD, Harabas* (not his real name) who detailed safe and unsafe spaces in his neighborhood. The safe spaces in his map were marked using the color green, relatively unsafe spaces like roads were drawn in yellow, and unsafe places were shown using a red cross. The HRD considers the inside of his home as safe, along with the market, owing to it being a public space, and also because it is a site where his allies are. Roads are seen as spaces where they have to practice extreme caution, especially at night, because it exposes them to vehicles, specifically 'riding-in-tandems,' a two-person operation on motorcycles that usually carries out summary executions in the island. Places marked with red are unsafe places where they have experienced surveillance, intimidation, and harassment (See Figure 3). This mental map serves as a stark reminder that normal spaces such as the road from one's house to the market are seen as potentially life-threatening by human rights defenders because of their advocacy. While the house and the market are generally seen as safe as marked by the green boxes, it is surrounded by relatively unsafe and unsafe spaces, making it challenging to move from one place to another.
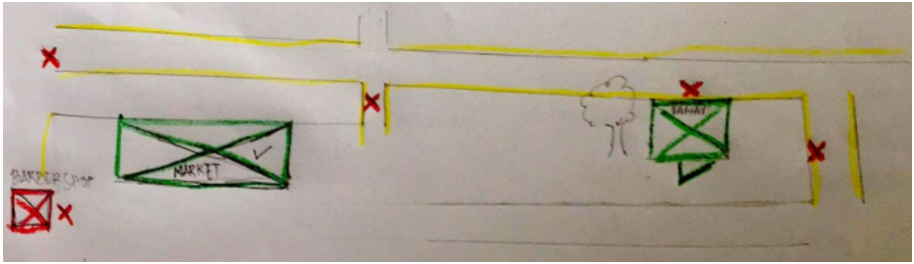
FIG. 3. *A portion of a mental map showing safe and unsafe spaces for Harabas.*
Mental mapping workshop, February 08, 2021.

Flora* (not her real name) detailed in her mental map that there are no more safe spaces in the island. She has also shared that the attacks were constantly happening before the pandemic and even during the pandemic. This mental map does not only include details about physical spaces, but she also included the digital or online spaces such as Facebook and her cellphone, marking them as unsafe, due to the death threats that she receives regularly. This mental map echoes the narratives included in the mental map of Harabas, as they both consider streets and roads as spaces prone to extra-judicial killings (EJKs) (See Figure 4). In sharing her experiences using her mental map, she jokingly says, "I did not indicate a safe space, I could not see any, maybe in outer space." While it is no joking matter that almost all of the places they inhabit feel unsafe, her manner of recounting a harrowing daily experience is a testament to the passion and strength of these HRDs even as they experience highly dangerous conditions. Flora's mental map also shows her house as a relatively unsafe space, in contrast to Harabas' map that shows his house as 'safe.' Even public spaces such as malls are sites where she has experienced harassment and surveillance. The participants identified ways of coping to deal with the presence of risk and danger in their everyday spaces. These task-oriented coping mechanisms include direct efforts to maintain control and protect themselves from violence through strict adherence to security measures such as changing their movement patterns, avoiding certain

routes, lessening their travel frequency, employing different transportation modes and employing a buddy system to ensure their safety.
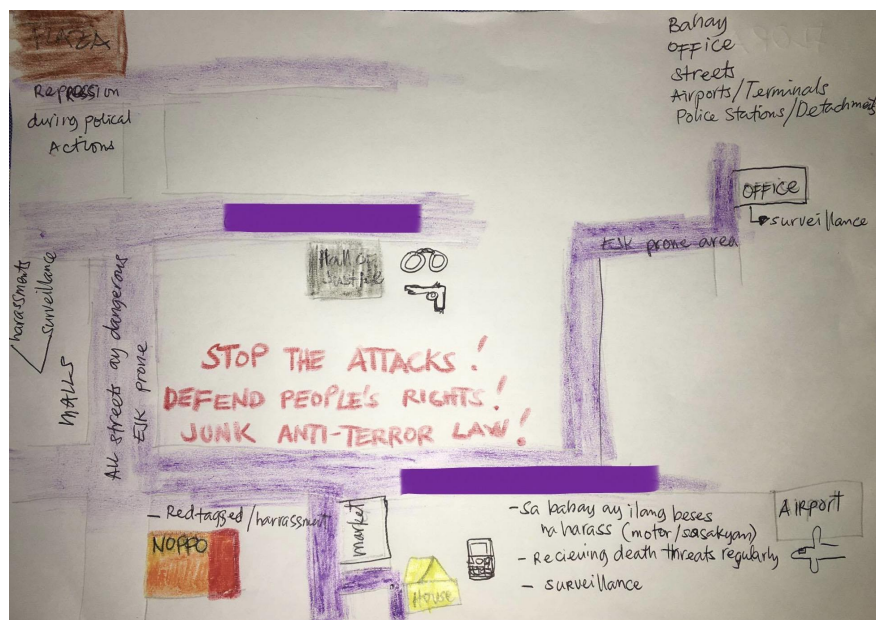

FIG. 4. *A detailed mental map of an HRD showing spaces of violence in Flora's community, which includes broader calls for human rights. Mental mapping workshop, February 08, 2021.*

Individual characteristics such as gender, age, as well as levels of education prove to have huge impacts on the perception of risk among HRDs. There are cases where women HRDs were at the receiving end of various rape threats and sexual slanders. The study indicates that women in general experienced higher levels of fear of violence than men, although according to the participants men experienced higher victimization rates. Men who have experienced some forms of violence, or are in contact with victims (Austin et. al., 2002 & Mawby et. al., 2020) have a high awareness of fear and concern for their safety and security. Some participants convey their sadness when recounting their lost friends, peers, and colleagues, even illustrating and narrating the critical event in their mental

maps. Majority of the participants exhibited a sense of fear and there is a certain resignation that at any given time and place they can be taken down and be killed.

Partz (not his real name) narrated the horrifying moment before his arrest and how a group of armed men pointed armed rifles on his head and told him to lie down, fearing for his life in the whole ordeal (see Figure 5).

> *…parang na-schock ako di ko alam kung gagawin ko, umiyak na lang at umiyak ako. parang hindi ko na naiintindihan, parang nawala na ako sa kalibutan o sa sarili, wala na akong masabi. …nung nagse-search na sila, kahit saang sulok ay mayroong baril, mayroong explosive, pati na yung room ko, may baril… yung mga baril, nilagay sa lamesa tapos pinipicturan nila ako parang ako ang may-ari ng mga baril…ang sama talaga ng loob ko na ginanun nila ako na wala naman akong kasalanan sa kanila at tsaka wala naman akong baril…"*
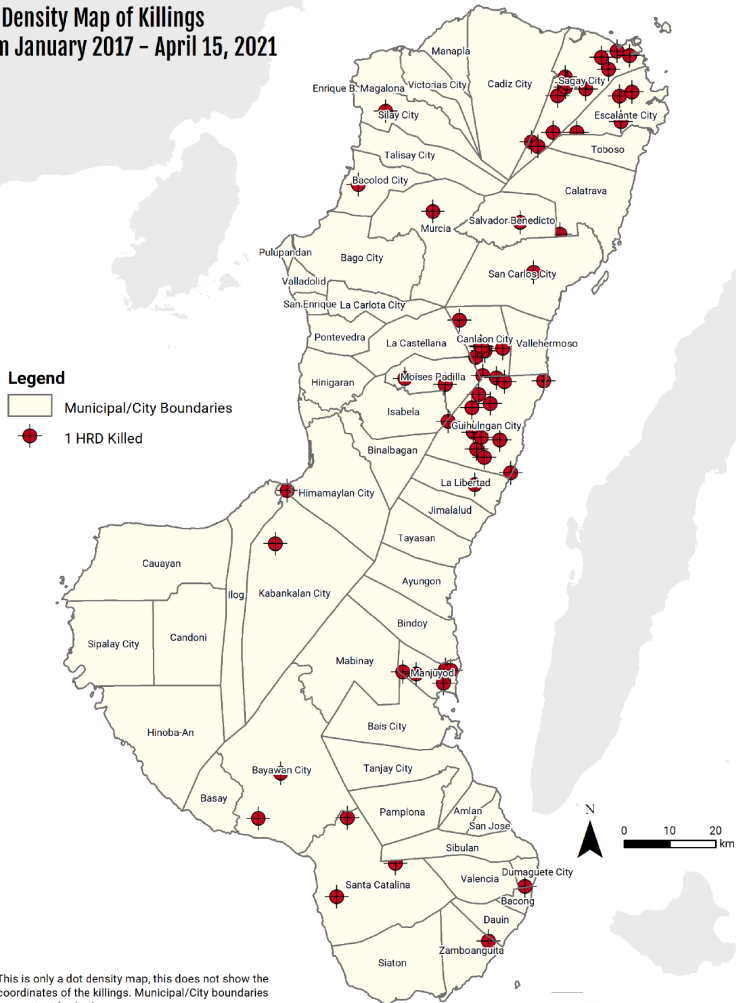

FIG. 5. *Mental map of Partz illustrating the moment he was asked to lie down with armed rifles pointed above his head. Mental mapping workshop, February 08, 2021.*

In a study conducted by Austin, Woolever, and Baba (1994), they discovered a positive relationship between levels of education and increased feeling of perceived safety; this was not the case, however, for some of the youth HRDs. As narrated by Lisa and Maya, both experienced persecution and intimidation within the school premises from their instructors, faculty administrators, and even fellow students. They were tagged as communists and were constantly being watched and monitored.

The dot density map confirms the feelings of fear and danger of Harabas, Flora, and Partz, and they reflect the actual recorded instances of the killings of HRDs in Negros Island (See Figure 6). Most of the killings were concentrated in the cities of Bacolod, Dumaguete, Escalante, Guihulngan, and Sagay. The map shows that Guihulngan City and Sagay City have the highest number of recorded HRD killings from 2017-2021, with 13 and 12 casualties respectively. The geonarratives presented in the paper humanizes these numbers as human rights violations are usually presented just as body counts and casualties. Their stories as told through their shared statements and mental maps provide another perspective of the extent of human rights abuses in Negros Island.

FIG. 6. *Dot density map of killings in Negros Island from January 2017 – April 2021.*

Conclusion

The HRDs in Negros Island have experienced different forms of violence that include intimidation, surveillance, red-tagging, death threats, and gender-based threats. Other forms of violence include the suppression of dissent, dispersion of mobilizations, forced evacuations, filing of trumped-up charges, forced surrenders and violent/arbitrary arrests, cyberattacks and online harassment, and killings. Geonarratives and storying are among a number of powerful tools that may showcase the individual experiences of human rights defenders in Negros Island. These individual narratives are informed and shaped by the long history of conflict and tension against land ownership and labor exploitation and injustices, and are part of the collective struggle against the culture of impunity in the island. Geonarratives and constructions of safe and unsafe spaces in Negros Island provide a glimpse into the everyday experiences of human rights defenders in the conduct of their work and are powerful statements that expose the long-standing abuses by multiple perpetrators against HRDs in an island fraught with contestation and conflict.

The grounded experiences of HRDs as narrated both visually and verbally contribute to efforts of exposing the realities of targeted populations in violent geographies as showcased in this research. Mental mapping and storying can be seen as complementary to other more established qualitative methods to understand the richness and depth of variegated folk subjectivities. The use of narrative inquiry and visual mapping through the use of mental maps effectively shows how policies imposed by the government reconfigured the activity spaces of human rights defenders. Places that are seen by most as safe such as the home become places of risk and danger due to the constant surveillance and threat of harassment against HRDs.

We have chosen to highlight these stories not only to humanize the body counts or casualties shown in the news but also to show that despite the constant

risks to their lives due to their human rights advocacies, the narratives also show that safe spaces are created with people who share in their collective struggle. The risks on their lives and well-being make ways of dealing and coping with these risks of tantamount importance. The security strategies and coping mechanisms developed and used by HRDs to cope with the dangerous nature of their advocacy within the culture of impunity in the Philippines reflect mutual care, support, and camaraderie. These are not just stories of fear and victimization but are also expressions of hope that social justice will be afforded to the disenfranchised in the country. It is our duty to tell these stories, not only to highlight their experiences, but also to ensure that we echo their calls to a wider audience, to #StopTheAttacks and to #NeverForget.

Acknowledgments

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