

Geonarrating Subaltern Stories-so-far

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This article narrates and interrogates the spatial politics of Manila's port area. We ask how land reclamation schemes can be understood as state-led projects that, in part, produce dockside space to secure the uneven relations of capitalist circulation. We draw on interviews with truck drivers conducted during their idle times of waiting outside the entrance gates to the city's piers. Truckers' experiences reveal how Metropolitan Manila's local municipalities, port contractors, and labor unions regulate the daily rhythms and abstract times of port work. We also examine and analyse Jewel Maranan's documentary *Sa Palad ng Dantaong Kulang* (2017) as it narrates and gives voice to stories of dispossession among urban poor communities living on reclaimed land on Manila's waterfront. For most of the men, women, and children Maranan features, global economic and political forces prove to be far more menacing than the shady North Harbor characters looking to make a few pesos. This article concludes by considering how drivers who labor under these circumstances individually and collectively reclaim and leverage control over the concrete times of their daily work. Like the lives of the truck drivers in the port area, Jewel Maranan's film provides an exceptional portrait of the work necessary to sustain communities and families as the flows of global capitalism continue endlessly beyond the makeshift walls of residents' homes.

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In August 1964, the cover of the Philippines Free Press featured a cartoon with passengers, luggage in tow, stepping off a docked vessel at Manila's North Harbor. Three waterfront characters eagerly await the new arrivals: a shipping operator, a stevedore, and a taxi driver. In rendering these three as menacing animals, a pig, wolf, and crocodile respectively, the illustrator signals that these three are not to be trusted by the sea-legged provincial travelers. Nearby, a monkey masquerading as a police officer covers his eyes, willingly blind to whatever waterfront mulcting is set to unfold next (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Political Cartoon, Philippines Free Press, August 8, 1964.

The accompanying article entitled, “Gate of Hell,” paints a bleak picture of North Harbor’s passenger shipping industry and the illicit economies operating on the waterfront. For Free Press journalist Wilfrido Nollado this landscape was a paradise for swindlers, smugglers, and unscrupulous day

laborers. Taxi drivers and jeepney barkers welcomed passengers with inflated fares. Baggage carriers seized luggage and demanded payment for unsolicited services, and fake customs agents levied made-up-tariffs on the new arrivals. Tondo thugs who lived in the nearby shanties threatened anyone who might have protested the petty rackets. It was this unforgiving scene that supposedly introduced thousands of provincianos to the city, “You can imagine what this grotesque tableau must do to the country boy seeing it for the first time. What horror it must strike in the rural breast...[New arrivals] scrimp and save for their passage money, leaving their huts behind, always with the fond image, Manila, Manila. When they get there, Manila is nothing more than North Harbor—the pearl of the piers.”¹

North Harbor returned to the glossy magazine pages a few years later. In February 1968 President Ferdinand Marcos and his Secretary of Public Works, Antonio Raquiza, toured the port area. With hoisting machinery in the background, a photographer from the Sunday Times Magazine snapped a staged shot of the two men pointing at a detailed map of future construction.² Marcos’ visit signaled his endorsement of a P261 million mega-infrastructure project that would give rise to what is today Manila International Container Terminal (MICT), the country’s busiest cargo port. Yet the camera lended undue credit to its subjects: the mega-infrastructure project had been planned and drafted under President Diosdado Macapagal.³ By this time, engineers and construction workers had begun to reclaim hundreds of hectares of land from

¹ “Gate of Hell,” Wilfrido Nolloedo, *Philippines Free Press*, August 8, 1964

² *Sunday Times Magazine*, February 1968.

³ “Planning Aspects of the Manila International Seaport,” *Philippine Architecture, Engineering, & Construction Record*, Jan. 31, 1964, pp. 14-15, 21; “Philippine Ports & Interisland Shipping: Status, Problems & Program Development” by Cesar J. Reyes in *Philippine Architecture, Engineering, & Construction Record*, April 1967, pp. 96-104; Tupas, Rodolfo. “Changing the Profile of Manila Bay,” *Sunday Times Magazine*, March 31, 1968, pp. 26-29.

the seafloor. With their photographer in tow, Marcos and Raquiza walked along a partially-completed one-kilometer-long wharf on which cranes would be built to service the loading and unloading of foreign cargo vessels.

In the opening pages to a popular history on the metropolis, Nick Joaquin writes, “The site of Manila was reclaimed from the sea—and the sea is still trying to get it back.”⁴ Joaquin refers here to the environmental process carried out over millennia in which sediment from the Pasig River settled and provided the city’s foundation. In contrast to the paces of geomorphology, the naturally smooth curvature of the city’s harbor has been subjected to more than a century of massive-scale earth moving, dredging, and the reclamation of land from the seafloor and riverbed. Building upon unrealized Spanish plans, by 1905, a contractor working for the American colonial government had dredged some five million cubic tons of earth and reclaimed 148 acres of newly-made land for a new port area in South Harbor.⁵ Some sixty years later, the expansion of the international port complex under Macapagal and Marcos inscribed a new layer onto a seascape that has been perpetually remade by the demands of a global economy.

Seaside Scenes

Jewel Maranan’s 2017 documentary film, *Sa Palad ng Dantaong Kulang* (In the Claws of a Century Wanting) transports viewers to the 21st century

⁴ Joaquin, Nick. 1990. *Manila, My Manila: A History for the Young*. Manila: Republic of the Philippines, p. 4.

⁵ “Report of Operations on Improving the Ports of the Philippine Islands for Fiscal Year ended June 30, 1905,” July 28, 1905, Curtis McD. Townsend, pp. 14-15, Folder 13110, Box 677, Record Group 350, United States National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

Manila waterfront.⁶ The urban poor communities living on reclaimed land serve as the principal setting for Maranan's film. She also takes viewers to other Tondo neighborhoods around North Harbor. With a film title that nods to legendary Filipino activist filmmaker Lino Brocka whose films recuperated and re-centered the lives of the dispossessed urban Filipinos marginalized by the capital-centric City of Man landscape of the Marcoses, her subjects are not victimized by the gangsters or swindlers depicted in the 1964 Free Press article. Instead, another round of capital investment to expand port facilities threatens to displace their families, demolish their homes, and upend their livelihoods. For most of the men, women, and children Maranan features, global economic and political forces prove to be far more menacing than the shady North Harbor characters looking to make a few pesos.

The Port of Manila is a built environment dedicated to facilitating the timely circulation of commodities and the turnover of capital. For Henri Lefebvre, the production of industrial spaces aims to facilitate and reproduce the conditions of repetitive work necessary for capitalism's survival.⁷ Maranan's opening scenes and lingering frames throughout the film feature these industrial rhythms: dockside cranes sway back and forth, truck drivers wait day and night to enter storage yards, and backhoes dig, move, and deposit mud. Shipping container stacks watch over all this activity like small mountains. Such shots depict the cyclical, well-trodden paths of the bodies and machines that enable global circulation and consumption (Figure 2).

⁶ The Young Critics Circle awarded Maranan's documentary the "Best Film of 2018."

⁷ Lefebvre, Henri. 1991. *The Production of Space*. Malden: Blackwell.



Figure 2: Land reclamation at Port of Manila (J. Maranan, 2017)

Yet, as Maranan makes clear, this is not simply an industrial space. The areas outside the port complex's gates are home to thousands of Manila's urban poor. Maranan's subjects carve their own paths through this newly made land, making their own claims to this unsettled earth that was once on the seafloor. As trucks drive past windows, doorways, and the entrances to housing compounds, she sets up her camera inside these communities and guides viewers through the rhythms of these residents' daily life: a mother watches for mosquitoes while her children sleep, young grade school students complete their homework together, and Archbishop Luis Antonio Tagle preaches in a sunlit, open-air mass. Parents cook their children dinner and sing them to sleep at night. Residents peddle goods in the informal economy and sell their labor in the formal one. They gossip with one another inside their homes and hold formal neighborhood meetings in collective spaces. The filmmaker provides an exceptional portrait of the work necessary to sustain communities and families as the flows of global capitalism continue endlessly beyond the makeshift walls of residents' homes.

In what comes closest to Agamben's gestural cinema, the almost wordless film evokes and recovers what is lost among subaltern urban dwellers living in the city's center and in its peripheries. Where spoken

language fails, gestures portray conditions of possibilities, imagined geographies and hopeful futures even as these also drown out and disappear along with the flickers from a thousand globalized and industrial sunsets. Maranan's film is a snapshot of several lives on the waterfront that, like Agamben's notes on gesture, manifest the inequality by the wordlessness adopted by the film. Or as Agamben describes it: "In the cinema, a society that has lost its gestures tries at once to reclaim what it has lost and to record its loss"⁸

In our interview with Maranan, she alluded to this loss of gesture when she was confronted with what she calls "lifelong cyclic impoverishment of a population" that manifests in the systemic inequality of the community she was working in. Speaking of the lightbulb moment that narrated the oft-told Philippine lifestory of the everyday people, Maranan said:

It was no longer a simple and unquestioned dichotomy of being rich and being poor. The system that I was totally immersed in became visible to me. It unfolded before me as something that leaves its traces as a visual system, a system of things, of everyday sights, objects, connections and movements – something that can be illustrated, demonstrated, and even depicted in film. All this understanding culminated in one moment while I was talking to a community midwife about how mothers in Tondo give birth, with the sight of an empty roadside funeral fundraising for the long overdue burial of the dead across the road from us, interrupted by the rolling of container vans on the road between— foreign-looking, but bearing the most weight and certainty and dictating the rhythm

⁸ Agamben, Giorgio. 'Notes on Gesture' (1992), in *Means Without End*, trans. V. Binetti and C. Casarino (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. 53.

of the whole port landscape. (Email correspondence and interview with the director, 2021)

Amid these intimate portraits of the city, Maranan slowly and subtly reveals the larger political forces at work: Tagle's visit comes after a fire has destroyed homes inside a dense housing compound. In another episode, as some of her subjects perform their evening chores, news anchors on a nearby television discuss the planned demolition of other informal settlers' homes along the city's esteros and creeks.⁹ In neighborhood meetings, residents debate the complex politics of urban housing. This, as the viewer quickly learns, is a time of significant change for many of the film's characters. It is a time of planned, state-led demolition. A series of government actors reveal the stakes for us in terminologies and language that are not always clear to either the viewer or, more importantly, the residents of Tondo. Victims of the fire and certain residents whose homes are within ten meters of the Pasig River Easement zone are slated for demolition. What is merely background noise for her subjects, Maranan artfully uses the television program's audio to reveal the political stakes of the moment. Slum dwellers living in flood-prone areas, as Maria Khristine Alvarez and Kenneth Cardenas argue, are increasingly rendered by the Philippine government as not only themselves vulnerable but also hazards endangering the rest of the city to flood events.¹⁰ Maranan captures the impact of these government policies: Tondo residents must consider government offers of cash assistance and housing loans to relocate to Bulacan and Cavite. The film's final hour is marked by dramatic scenes of

⁹ For more on housing, relocation, and flooding in Metro Manila see: Alvarez, Maria Khristine and Kenneth Cardenas. 2019. "Evicting Slums, 'Building Back Better': Resiliency Revanchism and Disaster Risk Management in Manila," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, Vol. 43, Iss. 2, pp. 227-249.; Saguin, Kristian Karlo. 2022. *Urban Ecologies on the Edge: Making Manila's Resource Frontier*. Oakland: University of California Press, pp. 140-157.

¹⁰ Alvarez and Cardenas, pp. 237-238.

demolition: swinging hammers, falling concrete walls, evicted residents pleading with authorities. Some accept offers to relocate. As cargo trucks pass by loaded with the freight of global commerce, their own worldly belongings are laid out on the sidewalk while they await government transport to the relocation sites (Figure 3). This is stunning and subtle cinematography, and it captures the highly-charged politics of urban housing in Manila.



Figure 3: Residents with their possessions await relocation (J. Maranan, 2017)

Many of the residents we meet refuse to relocate. In what appears to be an impromptu meeting in a narrow alley, a community leader and member of a community organization opposed to demolition makes an impassioned speech against accepting the government offers to leave. She makes clear to her audience that boarding a government bus will displace residents from their urban livelihoods and familiar communities. Provincial relocation sites, she

emphasizes, offer few opportunities for employment, and residents will likely fall into debt on their government housing loans. Skeptical of the government narratives, she insists residents are being forced out to accommodate foreign investors, and as she puts it, if they were genuine about providing housing to the community, “they can easily reclaim hectares from the sea.” Some of the final scenes depict residents who refused to leave rebuilding amid the rubble of the violent demolitions.

At this moment, Maranan’s viewers must question whether the supposed environmental concerns of the Pasig River Rehabilitation Commission are the real reason for demolition. Some might even question the source of the fire. In her own words, the director, who spent more than two years living in Tondo, described this larger political moment and her own orientation to the community,

I worked as a full-time community organizer, living in the communities around the port area right after graduating from film school. There was no film in mind at the beginning. I was completely outside an artistic mindset. Instead, I was in a mindset of problem-solving for a community I was serving as a volunteer social worker trying to come up with ways for how the rights and dignity of the residents of the Tondo Foreshoreland area can be asserted in the face of unjust and unconsultative mass evictions, demolitions and arbitrary relocation, which was a consequence of the Manila North Harbor Privatization and Modernization Project that got a green light around 2010 favoring the private takeover over of the country’s premiere port by giant business led by Manny Pangilinan and Reghis Romero II. While big processes were taking place and decisions were being made in business and government offices, the people most directly affected by these decisions were completely isolated, their futures suspended, and their fates seemingly in the hands of invisible unsympathetic forces. (Email correspondence and interview with the director, 2021)

Routes in the Sand

Not all of the residents are facing eviction. Maranan also features a dockworker who fastens and unfastens the lashing cables that secure containers on cargo vessels. Despite a seemingly stable job and membership in a labor union, he too lives in informal housing. Neither his home or his livelihood is threatened, but Maranan's time spent with the dockworker and his family portrays the hardships and mundane doldrums of life in this community. Despite a few comforts, like satellite television, it is clear that his salary does not provide much. Some of our interviews with the city's truck drivers reveal that they too dwell in precarity. There is a devastating irony here. Many of Maranan's subjects were displaced to expand the port and widen its roads. Yet, many of the truck drivers who transport freight across these roads labor without the comfort of home and a permanent place to sleep.

In early March 2020, just a few weeks before the pandemic upended the globe, Rey, a driver, invited us into his truck with a wave. He was parked in the "Truck Holding Area" of MICT, a site that also appears in Sa Palad ng Dantaong Kulang. Rey was waiting to enter the port facilities at his scheduled time to pick up a shipping container. For now, he had time to pass and agreed to our interview. In front of us, a line of trucks with empty chassis inched forward for their own appointments to enter the pierside storage yards. Rey's stories and experiences echoed details from the handful of interviews and informal conversations we had with other drivers elsewhere in the port area in the weeks prior. Rey did not have a permanent home in the city, usually sleeping in his cab after parking it near the palatial Manila Hotel. Securing such a spot typically required a small payment to guarantee his protection from city traffic officers and private security guards that patrolled the area. He typically returned home to his family in the provinces only a few times a year. His employer owned a garage in Bulacan where he could sleep and bathe, but, as he explained, he preferred to stay in the city and only returned to the

trucking company's garage about once a month. His truck cab was both the source of his income and his bed.

In another interview, a pahinante, or truck driver's assistant, informed us that despite living in Novaliches, Quezon City, he usually only returns home to his family on Sundays, sleeping in the truck outside warehouses or in the port area the rest of the week. As we chatted, he recounted his journey the night before: after dropping off freight in the city earlier in the morning he and his driver raced back across the city and arrived at the port area at 4 AM. They had good reason to rush back. During peak hours of Metro Manila's morning and evening commutes, most cargo trucks are banned from plying major thoroughfares. Police, Metro Manila traffic enforcers, and local municipalities write tickets for drivers caught on the roads and highways during truck ban hours. Repeat offenders are subject to escalating fines and license suspensions. Trucks with appointments to pick up or drop off cargo in the port area--known as "bookings" in the industry--are exempt from this truck ban. The exemption, however, does not apply to trucks who do not have active business in the port. Bookings grant truckers access to the port terminal at designated time slots. Nearly all reservations require a fee. To decrease citywide traffic and port congestion, the port operators' online appointment booking system incentivizes work during non-traditional hours. The terminal operators offer transactors free pick-up and sometimes rebates during Sundays, early mornings, and late nights. They also levy penalties and fines for late arrivals or if a driver misses their pick-up slot.¹¹

Importantly truck bans restricted truck mobility after drivers and assistants dropped off merchandise. If drivers and pahinante arrive at their

¹¹ For an excellent overview of truck bans see, Llanto, Gilberto M. 2017. "Cargo Truck Ban: Bad Timing, Faulty Analysis, Policy Failure." In *Unintended Consequences: The Folly of Uncritical Thinking*, edited by Vicente B. Paqueo, Aniceto C. Orbeta Jr., and Gilberto M. Llanto, pp. 21-36. Quezon City: Philippine Institute for Development Studies.

bodega during the morning or evening when the citywide truck ban is in effect, the law prevents them from plying Metro Manila roads after their appointment window has expired. If, for example, a truck finishes a delivery to Cavite at 5:45 AM and their booking exemption has expired during travel and unloading, the crew has to wait in Cavite until 10:00 AM before they can legally return to the streets of the metropolis. The same policy affects afternoon and evening deliveries. Drivers are paid “kada biyahe” (each trip), so there is no money in waiting. Instead, drivers usually pay for food or entertainment while they pass the hours. They must also often find temporary places to park their trucks to rest or sleep.

After describing life on the road, traffic and truck bans, one pahinante described his work as “hinahabol ang oras” (chasing time), an illustrative example of days spent both racing against truck bans and waiting in various parts of the city or nearby provinces when the restrictions could not be beat. As one veteran driver stated rather simply of the truck bans, “Sakit sa ulo yan” (it’s a headache). Erratic work schedules furthered the problems. Many drivers and pahinante had little control over when company dispatchers might call or book an appointment for them. Veteran drivers also lamented that the electronic scheduling system decreased the number of available trips, and thus, opportunities to earn money.¹²

¹² For analysis of the trucking industry in Manila see, Bacero, Riches S., Monorom Rith, and Alexis M. Fillone. 2022. “Truckers’ perceptions on truck regulations and policies in a developing country: A case study of Metro Manila, Philippines.” *Case Studies on Transport Policy* 10 (2): 764-776; Bacero, Riches S. and Alexis M. Fillone. 2019. “Review of the National and Cities’ Truck Policies in Metro Manila.” UP-Diliman National Center for Transportation Studies, Working Paper; Castro, Jun T., Tetsuro Hyodo, and Hirohito Kuse. 2003. “A study on the impact and effectiveness of the truck ban scheme in Metro Manila.” *Journal of the Eastern Asia Society for Transportation Studies* 5: 2177- 2192; Castro, Jun T. and Hirohito Kuse, 2005. “Impacts of Large Truck Restrictions in Freight Carrier Operations in Metro

In consultation with the national and municipal governments, port management implemented the online booking systems in 2015 to reduce congestion and streamline the movement of cargo.¹³ Yet, as drivers and assistants explained, the systems produced stressful temporal pressures. Truck bans and industry regulations dictated the times and routes of port work and transformed truckers' lived geographies. The port construction projects featured in Maranan's film evicted and displaced Tondo's waterfront communities to expand roads and port facilities. Yet neoliberalism's own obsessions with managing the temporal rhythms of capitalist circulation created hardship and precarious housing for the truck drivers and trucking assistants who transport goods on these new roads.

When we excavate some of the histories that have produced this industrial landscape, we reveal a series of stratified layers of political, social, and economic processes. One of Maranan's final shots lingers on a backhoe reclaiming land along Manila Bay. Maranan subtly brings her audience back to the community activist's poignant observation: "They can easily reclaim hectares from the sea" (Figure 4). A simple question also returns: reclaim hectares for whom? It is in the expansive spaces and quiet moments of Maranan's beautifully shot film that she forces her audience to struggle with this question. We might implicitly know the answer, and this is certainly not a story that celebrates hope and resiliency. Yet, in the film's detailed storytelling and its intimate depiction of marginalized lives, the future—like

Manila." *Journal of the Eastern Asia Society for Transportation Studies* 6: 2947-2962.

¹³ Kalambakal, Jupiter. 2017. "Manila International Container Terminal: Implementing The Terminal Appointment Booking System (TABS)." PTI (Port Technology International) Edition 75: Mega-Ports & Mega-Terminals. For more on the politics of traffic in Manila, see: Sidel, John. 2020. "Averting 'Carmageddon' through reform? An eco-systemic analysis of traffic congestion and transportation policy gridlock in Metro Manila." *Critical Asian Studies* 52 (3): 378–402.

the reclaimed land from the sea—always remains unsettled and perhaps malleable for more livable geographies.



Figure 4: Residents at a community meeting (Maranan, 2017)

Continuing Stories-so-far

Like the lives of the truck driver and pahinante in the port area and in the lives of the community in Jewel Maranan's film, violence is stifled, transformed into willful survival, and when violence comes back in another more virulent form, transgressively bypassed and creatively stomped like pests. Violence here is the globalized ideal of neoliberalization; the lives of commonfolks at the margins bore the brunt of these state-imposed cruelties. Will they outlive this gruesome practice of promoting open markets and free trade at their expense? Will the landscape change if they give in to the lure of relocation? Is home within the derelict place they are forced to leave behind, or to the yet unseen landscape of affordable housing, alienated livelihoods and continued dispossession? Or to paraphrase Agnes Varda, is there a landscape inside people? Maybe if we open up people, we will not find beaches, but residues of what we were forced to swallow which remain un-regurgitated in the course of our lives.

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