

Gut Feelings

Socio-Civic Response to Hunger in the Philippines

Oscar T. Serquiña, Jr.



Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, terror ravaged the Philippines under the presidency of Rodrigo R. Duterte. Duterte is known worldwide for his declared war on drugs, which led to the brutal and unlawful killings of many ordinary Filipinos whom the police tagged as drug pushers or drug addicts. He is also notorious for going after his staunchest critics, especially leftist activists, probing journalists, and members of the opposition. As historian Vicente Rafael writes: “To save the nation, it is necessary [for Duterte’s administration] to kill its enemies, those bodies rendered inhuman and foreign within the body politic” (2022:140). So when the pandemic reached the Philippines in early 2020, it was not surprising to see Duterte respond with repression; the president took a militaristic approach in managing the spread of the virus. Instead of appointing medical experts, he turned to senior military officers; instead of using the rhetoric of care and cultivating an environment of compassion, his administration ordered strict checkpoints and hard lockdowns. They put in place a 10:00 p.m. to 5:00 a.m. curfew; shut all offices, transport systems, and schools; and no one younger than 21 or over 60 was allowed to go out at all, anytime (Olanday and Rigby 2020). The lockdowns—or community quarantines, as we called them—happened in phases and, all in all, lasted for more than a year. Duterte imposed variations of the community quarantines

depending on the state of the nation under the pandemic. Duterte's administration generated categories such as Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) and Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine (MECQ). Eventually, these categories became "alert levels," all of which limited the mobility of Filipinos.

Those who defied stay-at-home orders, did not wear their masks, failed to practice social distancing, or argued with authorities were tagged as *pasaway* (roughly translated as a disobedient person). In the statist imaginary, this *pasaway* was not only a violator of social rules but also a potential super spreader of disease (Hapal 2021; Lasco 2020a and 2020b; Thompson 2022; Maderazo 2020; Navera and Bernadas 2022). What must not be forgotten, however, is that the *pasaway* often referred to poor and unemployed individuals who could not afford to stay put at home without risking starvation and death. To handle the *pasaway* who supposedly endangered the security and safety of national life, Duterte's heartless instruction to the police and the military was to "shoot them dead" (Beltran 2020). The pandemic enabled Duterte to fulfill his "strongman's dream of placing the country under armed rule." Duterte's flexing of his authoritarian muscles allowed the government "to shrink the democratic space and free discussion" (See 2021).

The Philippines was facing all sorts of crises and catastrophes even before Duterte ascended to power in 2016 and the virus forced the country to grind to a temporary yet devastating halt. But the militaristic response of Duterte's administration to the pandemic only aggravated the longstanding economic hardships of the Filipino people (Garcia 2021). In 2020, the Philippines experienced one of the deepest contractions in the Southeast Asian region. It also saw a 9.5% plunge in its gross domestic product (GDP), the country's worst economic slump since World War II (Suzara et al. 2021). The long and harsh lockdowns forced many small and medium-scale businesses to fold; inevitably, the oppressive measures led to massive joblessness, poverty, and hunger (Venzon 2020). In September 2020, a Social Weather Stations (SWS) survey found that an estimated 7.6 million Filipino households went hungry at least once during the height of the pandemic (see Aguilar 2020; Flores 2020; and SWS 2020). Though these numbers improved in succeeding years, reports continue about the alarming rates of "involuntary hunger" in the country (Boliver 2021; Vera-Ruiz 2021). Additionally, in a 2022 survey, 34% of Filipinos felt that their quality of life was worsening. Filipinos "lamented that if they didn't die of coronavirus disease 2019, they would die of hunger" (*Philippine Star* 2020). Even one member of Duterte's cabinet declared that: "At least Covid-19 can be cured by the vaccine. There is no vaccine for hunger" (Reyes 2021).

Farmers and jeepney drivers were some of the hardest hit by the economic downturn. Despite being lauded by the government as "food heroes," Filipino farmers were one of the first sectors to bear the social and economic consequences of Duterte's harsh response to the pandemic. Journalist Atom Araullo noted that people in the countryside "who feed the rest of the population, struggle to feed themselves" (2021). Duterte's long and severe lockdowns likewise forced jeepney drivers off the road, leaving them jobless, homeless, penniless, and hungry. Many were evicted from their apartments, squeezing their possessions into the cramped passenger compartment where they

Figure 1. (previous page) People captured by Inquirer.Net lining up for food and other types of aid at the Maginhawa Community Pantry. 20 April 2021. (Screenshot by Oscar T. Serquiña, Jr.)

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lived and slept (Agence France-Presse 2020). Others resorted to begging in the streets, displaying cardboard signs asking for money and food. To eke out a living, some drivers put up “a mobile *palengke*” where they sold vegetables, fruits, and other products (Garcia 2020). These hungry Filipinos exemplified Duterte’s mishandling of the health crisis, leaving “a large swath of the Philippine population drained of livelihood, money, and hope” (Caparon 2021).

The government compelled Filipinos to mind their own business, health, and welfare, even as the world outside their doors was crumbling and their neighbors were dying. Plainly stated, Duterte’s administration fragmented Filipinos and reduced the social cost of the health crisis to individual suffering, placing sole responsibility on Filipinos to look after and ensure their own survival. They had to attend to their own needs and protect themselves from the purportedly contagious other, the pasaway, at all costs.

In contrast to these self-centered measures, two separate, spontaneous food-related civic initiatives proliferated in the pandemic-stricken and politically volatile Philippines to address the nationwide hunger at the height of the pandemic. The first initiative involved the campaign commonly called “Leni Lugaw,” a feeding program that supporters of Vice President Maria Leonor “Leni” Gerona Robredo started in 2016 and accelerated in 2021–2022. In her bid for the vice presidency in 2016 (president and vice president run separately), neophyte Robredo faced two major setbacks: her campaign lacked funds and people did not know who she was. To address these, Robredo’s campaign sold *lugaw* (porridge) to generate both financial and cultural capital for the candidate. Robredo won the vice-presidential race, defeating all of her contenders, including her fiercest rival, former Senator Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, Jr. Ever since pictures of Robredo’s supporters peddling porridge circulated on the internet, the term “Leni Lugaw” was used by allies of President Duterte to disparage Robredo, comparing her leadership to bland, soft, and plain porridge. Nevertheless, Robredo and her team remained unperturbed and undeterred; in fact, they embraced the label, using the cheap but comforting Filipino dish as a sign of the grassroots spirit of the vice president’s campaign (fig. 2). Throughout her tenure from 2016–2022, Robredo spearheaded programs in which she or her supporters served disposable cups or bowls of savory *lugaw* (at times accompanied by several condiments, a boiled egg, and shredded chicken) largely to the poor and the needy in disaster areas, in the streets, in parks, outside churches, and throughout poor urban communities and other public spaces across the country. She also led independent fundraising events centered on *lugaw*, whose sales supported programs such as housing those in need (Castillo 2022). In 2022, when Robredo ran for the presidency, her team once again deployed the *lugaw* campaign, but she lost that election to Marcos Jr.

For the second initiative community pantries were set up to offer basic food staples, fresh produce, medicines, face masks, canned goods, and other necessities to the poor. These makeshift grocery booths started in April 2021 through the pioneering efforts of Ana Patricia Non (fig. 3),

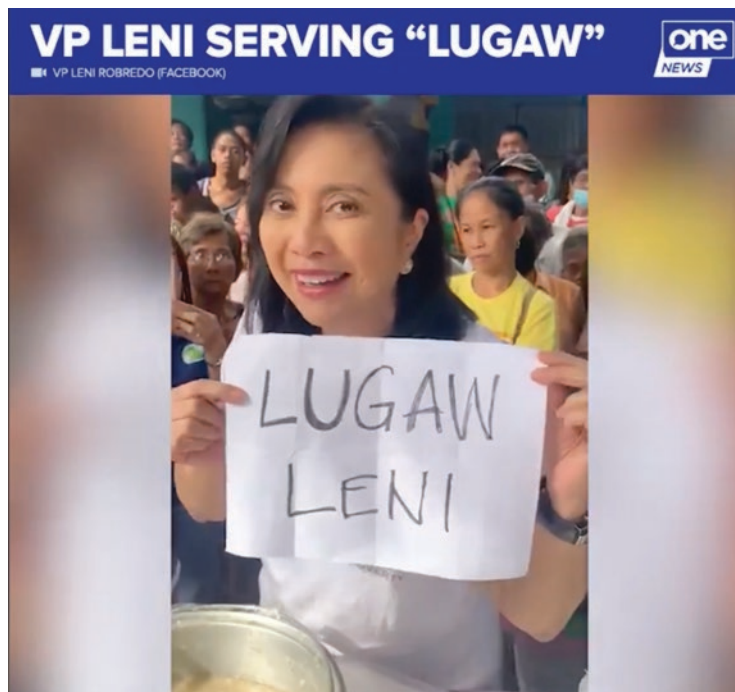


Figure 2. A still in the video shared on Facebook by the news outlet One News showing Robredo serving *lugaw* to residents in one local community. 21 January 2020. (Screenshot by Oscar T. Serquiña, Jr.)

Ana Patricia Non: Her foodcart pushed back vs apathy

Philippine Daily Inquirer / 05:14 AM January 23, 2022



MISSION FROM MAGINHAWA Without much fanfare, Ana Patricia Non singlehandedly initiated a humanitarian project on Maginhawa Street in Diliman, Quezon City, that attracted both admirers and cynics—the latter mainly from the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict. —RICHARD A. REYES



Figure 3. An Inquirer.Net feature on Ana Patricia Non and the Maginhawa Community Pantry she jumpstarted. 23 January 2022. (Screenshot by Oscar T. Serquina, Jr.)

a 26-year-old furniture entrepreneur who set up a small bamboo cart of supplies along Maginhawa Street in Quezon City, Philippines. When asked why she decided to mount her project, known as the Maginhawa Community Pantry, Non averred: “I am tired of complaining. I am tired of inaction.” Since then, Non’s “kindness station” has been replicated in other parts of the country. Guiding these food banks was a principle from Karl Marx: “Take what you need. Give what you can.” People started dropping off whatever food they could donate at a central location in the community and the needy lined up.

In May 2021, the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) identified 6,715 community pantries nationwide (Maghanoy 2021). Meanwhile, news outfits constantly released and updated growing lists of community pantries in different parts of the country (Layug 2021). These lists often included photographs of individuals or collectives coming to these unguarded tables and stalls filled with produce, canned or packed goods, and other resources. Journalists, government officials, and ordinary citizens have echoed the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*’s praise for the community pantries movement as “one of the clearest and most tangible signs of hope” in a desolate Philippine landscape; and “the latest incarnation of people power” (2022). It is a virtuous practice that manifested the “spirit of fraternal charity” of the Filipino people (Canete et al. 2022); and is “an act of solidarity with the poor and suffering” (del Castillo 2022).

While the Leni Lugaw campaign was more overtly political than the community pantries, both promoted humanitarian aid, civic spirit, and people-driven responses to widespread unemployment, food insecurity, and severe hunger. In a 2022 TV interview, Robredo defended the distribution of rice porridge as “a symbol of expressing empathy with the poor. [...] Giving lugaw is [our] way of showing that we stand together in fighting poverty” (Panti 2022). And in a 2021 media conference, Non asserted that the community pantry movement she started “became a way to prove to ourselves that we can help one another, and we are able to organize ourselves” (in Gotinga 2021). Remarkably, the *lugawans* and the community pantries rapidly and exponentially mutated

and spread all over the country. As they provided emergency meals to starving, beleaguered, and helpless Filipinos, both initiatives went “viral, vocal, and visceral,” rising to national prominence and firing up the hearts and minds of many (Espartinez 2021; see also Doyo 2021). Both were creative and critical acts in response to the terrible effects of the pandemic on the Filipino people. Both wrestled with what Eileen Legaspi-Ramirez characterized as “state-initiated and confabulated lockdown strictures masquerading as health measures that inevitably constrict not just mobility, but solidarity” (2022:159). In the context of deaths due to inefficient government responses to the pandemic and from the sanctioned killings by the Philippine state under Duterte, both programs laid bare how Filipinos persistently reworked helplessness into hopefulness. Furthermore, they spotlighted the politics of hunger in the Philippines, reclaimed food-oriented discourse, and gathered and shared resources reciprocally across society.

The Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries signaled that all was not yet lost, that help was on the way, and that acts of compassion and solidarity could save the day, albeit as a stop-gap measure. Refusing to accept the prevailing social order, these two programs attempted to provide what social services should have offered but were either nonexistent or perpetually deferred by the government. Under conditions where death and the possibility of dying have become central to Philippine life, these civic engagements served as life-affirming and life-sustaining initiatives that attended to the basic needs of those who were bearing the brunt of government terror, ineptitude, and neglect.

Performative acts and logics played a vital role in the way those behind these two socio-civic movements advocated for food availability and accessibility; protested government inaction and class inequality; and struggled for social justice and security. Specifically, these civic engagements relied on sensorial, visual, bodily, rhetorical, and discursive acts to inspire people to come together, share their resources, and provide nourishment to others in a tense social and political climate. They spurred reflexive actions, jumpstarted public events, and laid bare creative behavior that individually or jointly underscored what it means to be hungry and what it entails to address hunger in the Philippines. Indeed, rather than passively accepting the morbidity of Philippine life and replicating the desperation of Filipinos, these civic engagements enabled citizens to affirm the value of life and galvanize the capacity of people to help sustain the lives of others.

Spontaneity and Dispersal as Performative Methods

Staging community events that center on food is definitely not new in the Philippines. All year round towns, cities, neighborhoods, and barangays organize public gatherings, parties, and fiestas where sharing a meal is an essential activity and food is a primary medium for conversation, bonding, and rituals (Antonio 2021a). The ubiquity of these social and cultural occasions and activities makes efforts like the community pantries and the Leni Lugaw campaign unsurprising if not inevitable. And yet, these civic engagements were totally unprecedented, not only in terms of their contexts and the specific efforts they championed, but also in terms of the nature of their growth, the methods and approaches of their interventions, and the impact and influence of their contributions.

At the peak of the pandemic, amid threats of arrest and detention from the Duterte government, these civic engagements enabled people to be in contact with one another and realize the spirit of solidarity. Numerous photos and videos document organizers and recipients of these civic engagements together on the ground in the thick of things. Volunteers and supporters are shown arranging relief packs, preparing meals and other goodies, regulating the growing lines of people and the traffic of donations, as well as giving media interviews, dealing with donors and sponsors, and communicating with police and local government units. Oftentimes, these volunteers and supporters were affiliated with commercial enterprises (those selling food and beverages, local produce, clothing, and medicine), people’s organizations (those that work with the urban poor, indigenous peoples, and women and children), activist groups, and religious organizations. Further,



Figure 4. A Twitter post showing members of the LGBTQIA+ community mounting their own version of the kindness station across the country. 18 April 2021. (Screenshot by Oscar T. Serquiña, Jr.)

some belonged to identity-based collectives such as the LGBTQ community (fig. 4), K-pop fans, women's groups, farmers, health care workers, and alumni organizations.

Indeed, the Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries are remarkable for how they arose spontaneously and involved a loose yet potent base of Filipinos who vigorously, proactively, and generously acted upon their social responsibility for those who were suffering the negative effects of what political scientist Mark Thompson referred to as Duterte's "brute force governance" (2022:407–11). For instance, volunteers held a nationwide lugaw drive on Vice President Robredo's birthday, with stations in key cities and provinces from Manila to Laguna, Cavite, Pampanga, Isabela, and Batangas in Luzon; the Panay Islands in the Visayas; and in Marawi and Cagayan de Oro in Mindanao (Antonio 2021b). Relatedly, a volunteer group from St. Paul College showed their support for Robredo by putting up a feeding station with pink and white bunting in a public square and distributing food, especially to tricycle drivers. Meanwhile, in an opinion piece, lawyer and public intellectual Tony La Viña described in vivid detail what I call the magnanimity of the marginalized. In his account,

farmers from Paniqui, Tarlac donated sacks of sweet potatoes to the Maginhawa pantry, and fishermen belonging to the Pamalakaya Federation brought fish. Local Tricycle Operators and Drivers' Associations, in spite of being hard hit by the pandemic, volunteered to organize the donations and ensure that those who are lining up are observing minimum health protocols. (2021)

Featuring folks from vulnerable sectors, this passage offers an image of the poor not as helpless and hopeless but rather as empowered, generous, proactive, and socially aware. Despite their own dire living conditions, the farmers, fishermen, and tricycle drivers and operators featured in La Viña's report move from being victims of hunger to becoming agents who intend to aid the hungry. Instead of pleading for food, begging for alms, and waiting in line for donations, they are the ones sharing their meager resources and proffering various kinds of sustenance to others.

These diverse social agents showed that in the absence of adequate government support, average citizens will go out of their way to stand together and consolidate their personal and community resources and efforts. Though this solidarity does not necessarily dissolve class lines, it nevertheless serves as a reminder that many Filipinos are willing to come together to address longstanding national problems such as hunger. Though social relations of privilege and power persist, individuals of different social strata were able to interact with one another. Even more importantly, these actions proved that the nation's lingering struggles over food availability and accessibility could not be solved either by a strongarm approach or by a silver bullet coming from one person, one institution, or one segment of society.

Remarkably, these civic engagements had a ripple effect, not only nationally but also overseas. These events were held in diverse locales, pursued a range of initiatives, and were enabled by diverse energies and experiences. Both the community pantries and the Leni Lugaw campaign transpired not only in the privacy of people's homes but also in public spaces such as basketball courts, open parks, town squares, auditoriums, and churches. The state-driven depiction of the streets and other communal spaces as harbingers of danger and disease was challenged by these civic engagements, which reclaimed public spaces as thriving sites of civic life, advocacy, and activism even during the pandemic. In foreign countries like East Timor, where Filipino embassy officials discussed the concept of *bayanihan* (roughly translated as community spirit) and shared pictures of community pantries with their local counterparts, the initiative amazingly gained traction. Timorese organizers took inspiration from Filipinos and launched their own food banks to help the victims of devastating floods in April 2021 (Abad 2021). Meanwhile, in Paris, supporters of Robredo and her running mate Francis "Kiko" Pangilinan staged their own version of the Leni Lugaw campaign and predictably served lugaw at their political rallies (fig. 5).

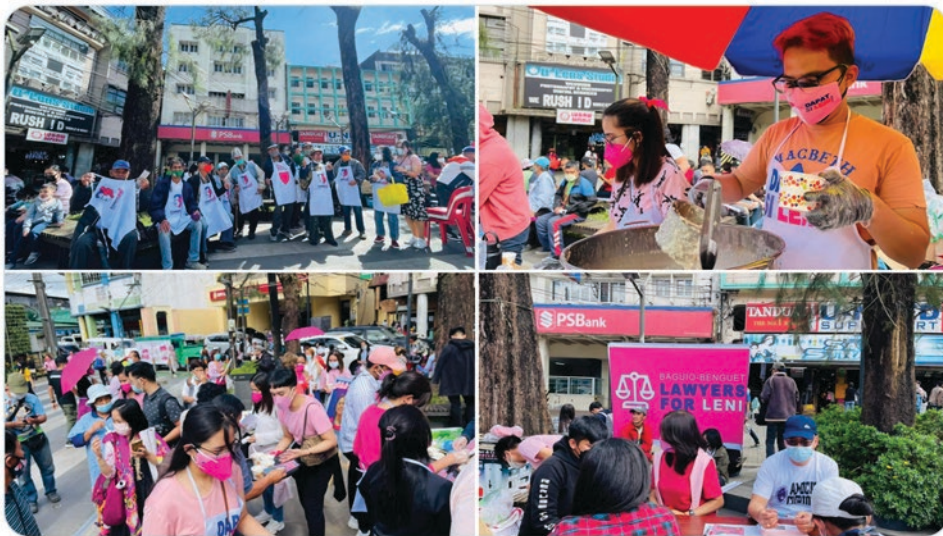


F1rst Ko Si Leni
@F1rstkosiLeni



Community service becomes one big lugaw party! Today’s lugawan at the Peoples Park Baguio was spearheaded by the youth group, First Ko Si Leni, and was participated in by Lawyers, Doctors, and Nurses for Leni who gave free consultations, and by other volunteers.

Maggie Fokno



9:39 AM · Dec 4, 2021

Figure 5. A Twitter account aggregating photos of supporters of the vice president who initiated feeding programs all over the Philippines to campaign for their candidate. 4 December 2021. (Screenshot by Oscar T. Serquiña, Jr.)

The dispersed geographical locations of the volunteer work, humanitarian aid, and public support emanating from Filipinos all over the country and the world illuminate the resourcefulness of Filipinos, who transformed even the most unassuming and mundane spaces into fruitful sites of engagement. While the public venues were often highly supervised if not controlled by the police and the military, they nonetheless housed kindness stations and food banks. Additionally, they fostered public assemblies and presentations, educational and political discussions, activism and protest, as well as artistic and critical expression.

Although occupying different spaces across the Philippines, the community pantry activists and the Leni Lugaw campaign coordinated their schedules and actions for notable occasions. One example was “National Lugaw Day,” the celebration supporters of Robredo organized to mark the 56th birthday of the vice president on 23 April 2022. It was also an effort to put a positive spin on the “Lugaw Queen” label that trolls and detractors had been using—and continue to use—to malign Robredo. Even more significantly, as press releases of this well-coordinated occasion made clear, the events during National Lugaw Day supported the millions of Filipinos who “struggle to make ends meet after the pandemic caused job losses and business closures amid steep quarantine

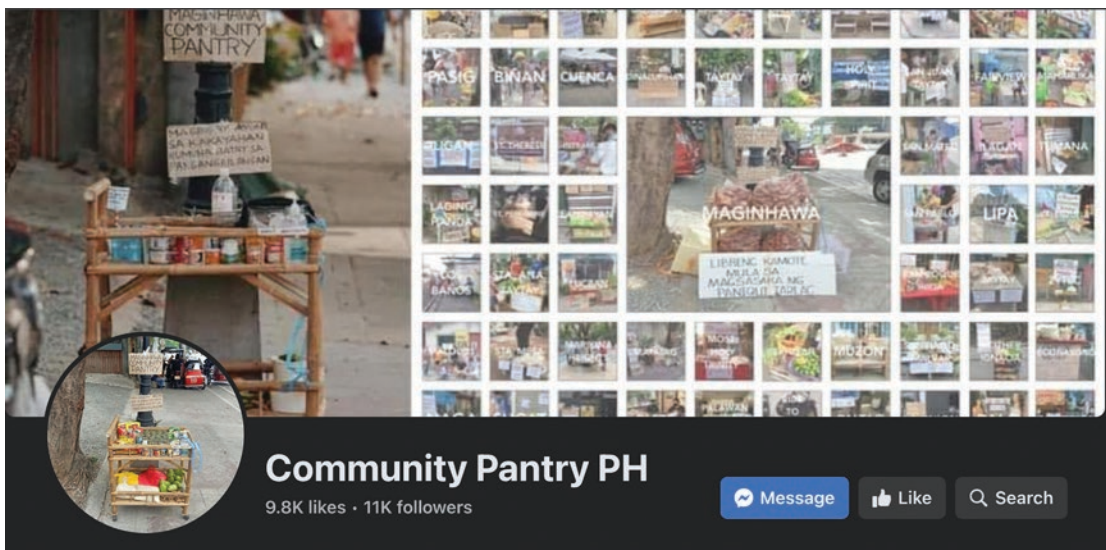


Figure 6. A Facebook page titled *Community Pantry PH* serves as a digital archive of the activities and accomplishments of the civic movement. 20 May 2023. (Screenshot by Oscar T. Serquiña, Jr.)

measures in parts of the country.” “We want to give the Vice President a meaningful birthday celebration,” stated Jover Laurio, one of the principal organizers of the feeding program, “and the best way to do it is to feed our hungry and needy countrymen who are badly hit by the pandemic.” This one-day event coordinated feeding programs in over 100 sites “from Baguio City up north to Basilan down south” (in Talabong 2021).

Organizers of food banks generated and disseminated instructional guides on how to lead a community pantry, customizing each project according to the needs and resources of the specific locale. One such guide, published on the website of the independent news company Rappler, included instructions on how to look for volunteers who could staff your pantry, how to encourage community involvement, how to prepare a list of available needed items, how to arrange resources and put together the materials (i.e., a cart or makeshift shelves, protective equipment, placards and signage), how to pick an accessible location, how to set up and manage your booth, and how to get the word out and subsequently persuade others to join the cause (Rappler 2021). Aside from circulating how-to manuals, organizers tapped social media platforms and online groups for donations, for help with mapping their disparate efforts, and to consolidate their set of alliances.

In addition to the traditional mass media that reported on the plans and accomplishments of the Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries, different types of social media functioned as vital platforms for the organizers and supporters. Through social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, as well as user-created sites on YouTube and TikTok, the Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries were able to cater to a wider audience. They publicized their triumphs and troubles and distributed their ideas and insights—for free and instantly. They were able to clarify or amplify their responses not only to their members and allies but also to the government and the state.

Both projects maintained their own Facebook accounts and utilized them to invite others to join the network and partake in the cause. These accounts aggregated the testimonies, photographs, experiences, resources, practices, and even video documentation of people who either had provided help or were in need of help (fig. 6). They disseminated calls for aid and featured groups or individuals (especially influential personalities) who joined, staffed, sponsored, and committed to fund a feeding program (fig. 7). They updated stakeholders and donors on where their donations and contributions went, prioritizing accountabilities. Furthermore, these social media accounts operated as a relational orbit that facilitated sociality, interactivity, and collaboration. In other words, they made possible the concentration of organizers and supporters in one time and place, the alignment

of disparate and nonaligned individuals and collectives, the joining of those in the core to those on the edge, and the coordination of a surfeit of interests and investments emanating from numerous parties under a centralized command and control.

Performing Publics in Precarious Times

The contributions, participation, and intervention of performing publics galvanized these civic engagements. They engaged in diverse symbolic and embodied acts not only to persuade others to take part in their cause but also to effect material consequences in Philippine society. The performing publics of the Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries did not exist in a unified field and work as a monolithic entity. They involved members belonging to different social classes and to cultures not entirely dependent upon literacy and print. Instead of bracketing what Nancy Fraser calls their “structural social inequalities” and inhabiting a “space of zero-degree culture” (1990:65), these performing publics represented their own sectors of society and underscored the many layers of identities, subjectivities, and positionalities in the Philippines. Unlike the idealized citizens Jürgen Habermas writes about in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1991), who enacted their political participation largely if not exclusively through the “medium of talk” (Fraser 1990:57) and through “an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction” (37), the performing publics that mobilized the Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries did not limit themselves to deliberation or debate. In fact, they resorted to an expansive repertoire of techniques and practices—from the linguistic, the communicative, the theatrical, the visual, the corporeal, the material, the affective, the spatial, up to the culinary—in their attempts to form, propagate, and circulate their civic initiatives.

Organizers of these civic initiatives mobilized people to move out of the privacy of their homes and into the streets. Many individuals—coming from different urban and regional locations, from varied social and economic backgrounds, from assorted professional affiliations—broke their isolation, risked their safety, and gathered with others in public during the pandemic. Even marginalized sectors such as fishers, farmers, the urban poor, stay-at-home individuals, and vendors joined the two campaigns as their way of transitioning from hopeless and helpless victims of state power to active subjects and collectives of civil society. In this capacity, these individuals not only declared their presence openly but also demonstrated what Judith Butler terms “their plural and performative right to appear” (2015:11). For Butler, this is a right that “asserts and instates the body in the midst of the political field, and which, in its expressive and signifying function, delivers a bodily demand for a more livable set of economic, social, and political conditions no longer afflicted by induced forms of precarity” (11). Through their civic engagement, their visible and palpable embodiment of protest and advocacy, and their attempt to make time and take up space for the sake of others, these performing publics turned to politics, or better still, became political. Additionally, by mobilizing their bodies, assembling in if not occupying shared spaces, releasing particular statements (that opposed the government, called for aid, and drew public attention to people’s struggles and sufferings), and engaging in various forms of labor, these performing publics enacted a type of political performance that communicated truths related to state institutions, policies, and discourses.

These publics engaged in congeries of performative acts to question and disrupt state violence. This is most obvious in the Leni Lugaw campaign whereby supporters of Robredo renewed the symbolic value of the politically charged lugaw, not only to reclaim it from Duterte and his allies, but also to use it as the principal symbol of life-affirming and life-sustaining efforts. Robredo herself took part in this resymbolization, especially in instances where she personally served porridge to her supporters, would-be supporters, and opponents. In one video of her relief operations in Taal, Batangas, a province south of Manila, Robredo was captured smiling for the camera while telling everyone that she and her team were giving out snacks for the evacuees (Adalia 2020). Through such actions and gestures, a highly creative and playful public (and leader) attempted to break the signification of lugaw as an object of mockery, a loaded cipher for political bickering. Rather, the rice porridge would be restored to its traditional status as a staple comfort food, a source of sustenance and relief during times of sickness and catastrophe. From a symbol of the bashing and bullying of Duterte and Marcos supporters, lugaw became a symbol of solidarity.

The output of these performing publics was wide-ranging and creatively produced: the dishes they prepared, the events they mounted, the instructional resources they assembled, the lugaw kits they distributed for easy cooking and consumption, and the audiovisual materials such as songs, YouTube videos, and games they generated. Running in step with their leader's pink color motif, volunteers for Robredo offered "pink food" in support of her presidential candidacy. They colored the lugaw, Filipino bread (*pandesal*), steamed rice cake (*puto*), eggs, and even the famed Ilocos empanada in pink (Antonio 2021c). In Batangas, pink trucks parked in the streets, decked with pink banners, where volunteers in pink distributed meals of lugaw and egg. Similarly, the nationwide day-long event "LugawOne," a feeding program that the supporters of Robredo organized in November 2021, involved physical activities such as the Walk for Leni in Iloilo (joined by around 2,000 people) and feeding programs that served lugaw and pink bread. On other occasions, Robredo's volunteers conducted lugaw drives that not only fed the hungry but also gave away various merchandise, from pink stickers to packs of pink candies and biscuits to the pink banners and posters—all promoting Robredo.

Robredo and her campaign team also produced various performative online materials. For instance, Robredo collaborated with the social media influencer Mimiyyuuuh, cooking lugaw while engaged in a friendly comic conversation. This 16-minute vlog entitled "Cooking Essential Lugaw with VP Leni Robredo" shows the presidential aspirant answering questions from the famous content creator (Villanueva 2021). On YouTube, videos of lugaw drives proliferated. One shows volunteers in pink setting up a lugaw station on a narrow street in a Manila barangay where young and old residents, both Robredo supporters and detractors, receive and relish bowls of *lugaw* (Jhun Wonder Vlog 2022). These volunteers document the event in video, pose before the camera and with the Robredo banners, and create a community event for everyone to participate in. Another YouTube video is a compilation of clips featuring Robredo's volunteers dancing with lugaw recipients, and Robredo herself serving people all over the country. The lively and entertaining song "Lugaw Is Wow," whose lyrics reclaim lugaw from its negative connotations, provides the background audio. Robredo's volunteers also put together an online game called "Lugawan ni Leni." In the game, the vice president appears as the main character, wearing a fuchsia-pink top and holding a bowl of lugaw. The game asks the player to prepare a bowl of lugaw with the desired food toppings of a random customer—a young kid, a female and male teenager, an old man—within a given timeframe. It's a race to see who can feed the most customers before time is up.

For their part, community pantries organized a network of not entirely coherent practices and events that underscored food availability and accessibility. These included discussions on the political economy of food production and consumption; online cooking shows where organizers showed how limited food resources could be maximized through creative meal planning; and other experiential activities that encouraged citizens to mobilize. A strong sense of playfulness animated all these performative efforts. The performers were largely ordinary citizens who relied on readily available resources, firsthand knowledge and experiences, and immediate social contacts. Community pantries demonstrated what Shannon Jackson identifies as "the aesthetics of a politically open participatory DIY performance world" (2012:18).

These initiatives illuminate two crucial points: Firstly, as civic engagements they depended upon artistic, embodied, and spectacular productions and performances to drum up public interest. The performances not only ornamented but also, and perhaps even more importantly, enacted the slogans, critiques, and demands of these socio-civic campaigns. Second, the Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries functioned performatively to the extent that they activated and deployed embodied encounters and practices that ferried across the visions of their organizers and participants, put forth their aspirations for better living conditions, evoked utopic scenarios, generated a feeling of *communitas*, and envisaged if not rehearsed alternative orders of Philippine life where the rich and the poor, the privileged and the needy, and civil society and the state stood side by side, no matter how tentatively. They brought into focus what many performance studies scholars have doggedly emphasized: that performances do not merely trigger affective responses; they also foster



CNN Philippines ✓
@cnnphilippines



LOOK: Actresses Agot Isidro and Pinky Amador joined 'Kwentuhan with Momshies for Leni' in Caloocan City.

Among the issues raised by the mothers is the lack of health facility and health workers in their barangay | @anjocalimario

📸 Momshies for Leni



10:26 PM · Nov 16, 2021

Figure 7. A major news outlet's Twitter reposting of photos from the group Momshies for Leni of Filipino celebrities who joined the Leni Lugaw campaign. 17 November 2021. (Screenshot by Oscar T. Serquina, Jr.)

ideas, images, and imaginations of social transformation, if not inspire people to realize the changes they all wish to witness and experience.

Further, this relay of initiatives underlines how these civic engagements entailed and engendered dispersed and fragmented modes of participation that comprised not only of unmediated and body-to-body systems of communication but also online cultures, communities, engagements, and personalities. Offline, organizers were busy with their person-to-person encounters, their day-to-day operations, and their face-to-face activities. Online, however, they were preoccupied with managing social networking sites and maximizing interactive new media. These sites and media allowed them to post real-time status updates; to scale up their calls for donations and volunteers; to circulate in an instant their photos, videos, and all types of memes; and to speedily respond to people's comments, questions, and reactions. Meanwhile, sympathizers added their own innovative efforts by producing virtual games, mixing or remixing video clips, writing online chronicles about their on-the-ground experiences, and even vlogging about their own or other people's involvements in the movement.

The online and offline dimensions of the Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries are not segregated from each other. In line with the central argument of Marcela Fuentes in her study on the entanglement of digital technologies with several protest movements in Latin America (2019), I see these physically and digitally rendered practices as fundamental components of a constellation of civic engagements and social advocacies. These multiplatform, multimodal, and multisited participatory performances gave the Leni Lugaw campaign and community pantries even more opportunities to raise awareness, to create alliances, and to reach as many parties or stakeholders as possible. Indeed, the Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries achieved some degree of success, even or especially at the height of drawn-out lockdowns and habituated social distancing in the Philippines, partly because they maximized the convergences between live performances and digital networks.

These heterogeneous social practices of Filipinos indicate the various vantage points from which one can take up the task of reflecting upon the issues plaguing public sector systems. They also mark the varied intelligences and capacities needed to prop up the duty and the desire of guaranteeing if not securing a whole population's survival from hunger. At the same time, the variety of public participations that propelled and were, in turn, propelled by the Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries brings into light the numerous and irreducible possibilities that can ensue when people choose to assemble with one another under shared causes without necessarily concealing or minimizing the disparities in their professional specializations, knowledge formations, skills and talents, and stations in life. Additionally, this array of performances and practices (and the locations in which they transpired) testifies to the characteristic looseness, porousness, and openness of civic engagements such as the Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries that came about within broken, uneven, and defective systems like those found in the postcolonial Philippines. Operating within less-than-ideal socioeconomic contexts, these civic engagements stressed that anyone could play a role in easing the hunger of others and contribute to the systems and operations of emergent social movements.

The task of fostering social awareness of hunger, rousing concern for socio-civic advocacies, and urging private individuals to care for public concerns and promote the public good requires more than monologic discourse and calcified social practices. The wide-ranging production of visual artworks such as murals and online memes; technological projects such as online games, social media accounts, and virtual communities; and artistic efforts such as musical compositions and cultural performances accounts for the spectrum of initiatives from artists, communicators, performers, programmers, and cultural workers. Taken together, these sundry modalities of cooperative action serve as proof of the enlivened will of the Filipino people to partake in what Jackson calls “a civic culture of participation” (2022:351). Moreover, they evidence how these civic engagements were able to spur innovative and inclusive approaches to carrying out social advocacy, political activism, and resistance in the Philippines.

The Politics of Civic Engagement

As volunteer-driven initiatives, the Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries relied heavily on ordinary Filipinos. As Robredo said: “Our volunteers really spend their own money and think about what they can do without waiting for the national campaign team” (in Subingsubing and Ramos 2022). Many small and medium-size community pantries depended greatly on donations from the small gardens of private individuals, from door-to-door collections, from farms, and from the daily catch of fishers in rural areas (Howell 2021). In one of his columns for the mainstream newspaper the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, sociologist Randy David categorized these food banks as vehicles “for faceless giving and discreet receiving of the most basic necessities.” They offered, according to David, “no space for the self-promotion and obligatory acknowledgments that usually accompany the mass distribution of emergency assistance” (David 2021). Whenever asked about her personal life, Non would usually decenter the focus of these inquiries and bring the concern back to the movement. As she would often say: “It’s not about me. It’s about the community pantry”

(in Pedrajas 2021). As grassroots movements, the Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries had no main actors, no big stage productions, no predetermined venues, and no definite dates of operation. Their operations leaned on the availability of volunteers and the frequency of donations. Indeed, by design these civic engagements remained open, unfixed, temporary, and transitory.

While the temporariness of the Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries may easily be viewed as a liability, my contention is that this was what successfully set these civic engagements apart from the rigid political determinations and the hardened bureaucratic structures of government-led or state-sponsored projects. As one organizer of the Matiyaga Community Pantry stated: “That’s the essence of the community pantry, there’s not a lot of bureaucratic process. Anyone can line up regardless of your background” (Ramos-Araneta 2021). Being temporary allowed these organizations to evade capture and control from those on top—be they government officials, corporate executives, or powerful leaders. Because they were limited by time, personnel, and resources, the groups had to remain urgent, contingent, grounded; to stay hospitable to and respectful of ever shifting plans and projects; to maintain flexible and fluid organizational systems and flows; and to adapt to the changing personal conditions and levels of commitments of the volunteers. These civic engagements deviated not only from a kind of linear, progressive, and forward-marching time but also from any grand and universal agenda. They unfolded episodically and tentatively rather than linearly. They moved from moment to moment, situated their actions and responses in the here and now, and kept their life-affirming gestures of feeding the hungry and, more broadly, addressing the high rate of hunger in the country in a protracted, open-ended manner. They did not present themselves as a panacea to all the country’s woes. Nor did they pretend to solve the miseries of the Filipino people overnight.

Non argued that community pantries “will not solve poverty and hunger, but [they] can help stave off hunger to help people study, go to work, make plans, and fight [for better conditions]” (Caparon 2021). Non’s rhetoric is interesting because it emphasizes both the immediacy and the insufficiency of community pantries. But she also reminds us that emphasizing the spontaneity and dispersed nature of these events can easily lapse into the ethos and logics of neoliberalism that valorize notions such as “innovation,” “flexibility,” and “social experimentation.” Certainly, I remain cognizant of the possibility that a celebration of spontaneous and dispersed acts can work against calls to go ahead with planned and predictable social systems. Moreover, I am mindful of the fact that these collective initiatives whose creative energies and social influence largely take place outside the government’s mandate may be coopted by capitalist discourses, as evidenced by all the pink paraphernalia produced. After all, as the anecdotes and testimonies of organizers indicate, these feeding stations and community pantries were motored by and multiplied through the resourcefulness, multitasking, mobility, and creativity of volunteers. Though far from being unencumbered by the restrictions of systemic interference, a hallmark virtue of the “risk society” that the sociologist Ulrich Beck (1992) conceptualized, these community pantries and feeding stations instantiated deregulated, temporary, and “just-in-time” interventions for long-lasting social problems.

I bring these arguments to the fore not to diminish the interventions of community pantries and the Leni Lugaw campaign, but rather to throw into sharp relief what I think are some of the vulnerabilities at the core of time-based, nongovernmental, independent movements. While it is appropriate and reasonable to celebrate the dedicated commitment and the myriad labors of volunteers, any attempt to do so must always be accompanied with a critical reckoning. What does it mean to volunteer aid in the face of government ineptitude at a time when a neoliberal government characterized by economic austerity and waning public services perpetually controls the lives and lifestyles of Filipinos? Even as they feed the hungry, how might the community pantries and the Leni Lugaw campaign ensure that they are not affirming the withering away of state institutions and enabling what Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim call “institutionalized individualism” (2002:20–25)?

To be certain, the Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries only did what civic-minded Filipino citizens conventionally do—and have always been doing—in the face of poverty,

government neglect, and national health emergencies: taking things into their own hands. Also, the Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries resorted to what many independent, not-for-profit, and unaffiliated individuals and collectives have been doing especially in the face of diminishing social services and the increasing neoliberalization of public institutions: establishing crowdsourcing or crowdfunding schemes and encouraging others to do the same in order to support and set in motion their social advocacies and civic-minded efforts.

And yet, the Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries neither simply capitulated to corporatist logics nor completely enacted neoliberal mentalities, even if they at the same time obtained the support of capitalist corporations, benefited a great deal from the flexible labors of volunteers, and accepted privately funded donations and other forms of market-oriented contributions. Rather, both the Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries shifted the discourse on the pandemic and hunger response from the individual to the collective, from the personal to the public. To substantiate this point, take Non's answer to concerns that framed community pantries as "charity work." For Non, her initiative "is not charity. This is like mutual aid. We're all helping each other" (in Valenzuela 2021). The purpose of her initiative was not to aid only one targeted group or person. Instead, it was to go beyond charity and encourage everyone to help out.

Moreover, I sense that both the Leni Lugaw program and the community pantries turned to temporary, adaptable, and decentralized interventions not to lionize individuals or institutionalize individualism, but to galvanize calls for collective action and institutional, governmental support. Though known for being independent and spur-of-the-moment, these civic engagements insisted on the need for building infrastructural systems of social and economic security. Though they moved within informal structures, formed loose collectives and networks, and proffered admittedly momentary solutions, their overall goals were long term: the end of hunger, the availability and accessibility of food for all, and a sociopolitical system that would not leave anyone starving to death.

Indeed, by involving the efforts and capacities of many people, by relying on public projects, and by underlining the systems and structures that contributed to daily forms of strife and suffering, these civic engagements effectively put an emphasis on the fact that hunger is far from a personal matter but rather a systemic construction and concern. Hungry individuals may experience their own hunger pangs privately, but the conditions that drove—and continue to drive—this state of suffering are always situated within and always concern a larger social order. Rather than individualizing or personalizing the process of finding solutions to systemic problems, community pantries and the Leni Lugaw movement provoked reflections on what Jackson calls our "enmeshment in systems of labor, ecology, able-bodiedness, social welfare, public infrastructure, kinship and more" (2011:10).

Organizers argued that Filipinos should not be left alone to fend for themselves and their loved ones, especially at a time when the lifelines that every Filipino traditionally depended on had been severely compromised by a lingering virus and by an egregious excess of political inefficiencies and even terror. Nonautonomy and intersubjectivity were concepts brought to the fore every time organizers asserted that the pain of others is always politically induced and that no life should be regarded as more precious than others. Initiatives like the LugawOne program supported the validity of nonautonomy and intersubjectivity. Apart from serving rice porridge, volunteers framed this activity as a chance "to hear the problems that beset their fellow Filipinos," to exemplify a kind of fellow-feeling with others, and "to go out of their social media echo chambers to talk and to interact with the people in their respective communities or barangays, especially with those whom they may have stopped talking to due to their political differences" (Antonio 2021a). At face value, common refrains such as "Tayo-tayo na lang" or "We are on our own" that circulated on social media during the pandemic (Diaz 2021) may signify an acceptance of, if not a resignation to, state abandonment and an assertion of self-sufficiency and self-determination. They can also be understood as expressions of a kind of tribalism and a sense of defeat. I prefer, however, to interpret such pronouncements based on how they were embodied in every feeding program and every

community pantry. There, they indicate a different level of nonautonomy and intersubjectivity; they affirmed how Filipinos linked arms to withstand the bouts of despair brought by the pandemic and came together in unity to help others overcome the pressure of famished times. And there, these statements formed the overall expression of the Filipino people's capacity to recognize and live out their ethical commitment to those who bear with them the negative effects of a lumbering bureaucracy and who coexist in a shared, complex living environment.

Civic Practices as Acts of Solidarity and Resistance

Rather than rehearsing a messianic complex that spotlights a person or personality who can presumably save the poor and the hungry, rather than reducing the problem of hunger to an individual concern, or focusing on specific sectors as the principal units and sites of civic engagement, the Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries were built from socially horizontal relations. Nonbureaucratic, nonhierarchical, and nonviolent, they were a performative political practice that exposed not only the failures of the Philippine government but also the limits of concentrated power and state-sponsored stories of progress and development. As Alma Espartinez pointed out, civic engagements such as the community pantries “challenge[d] the hegemonic narrative that the government is at the forefront in alleviating hunger among Filipinos” (2021:3). Organized around the vision of reclaiming the dignity of human life and allowing Filipinos to survive, persist, and flourish in virulent times, the Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries were much needed sites of help and hope. Indeed, they stood in contrast to Duterte's death drive.

Furthermore, these civic engagements testify to how Filipinos took their collective precarity as the conditions of their social visibility. When Filipinos occupy public spaces and declare in the open their own or their collective need for food, they move the meaning of hunger, to use Patrick Anderson's formulation, “from the pit of the stomach to the tip of the tongue” (2010:17–18). When Filipinos congregate despite all kinds of political and pathological risks to either ask for food or provide food, they not only gesture toward their biological needs and display their already compromised right to live and survive but also perform their plight through critical practices such as persistent protests and vigorous proclamations of dissent. Certainly, whether they appeared as an organizer/supporter or as a recipient/beneficiary of the Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries, Filipinos who were present in these socio-civic movements powerfully staged dramatic and pressing directives: everyone deserves to eat, live, and survive—and the state cannot kill people through involuntary hunger.

There is little wonder, therefore, that many viewed these civic engagements as an “affront to the state's legitimacy,” as “evidence of the failure of its pandemic response,” and as a “symbol of solidarity against an apathetic state” (Diaz 2021; *Philippine Daily Inquirer* 2022). Prince Kennex Aldama writes that the emergence of community pantries revealed the weakening of the Philippine state (2021). Neferti Tadiar called community pantries “an anti-capitalist communitarian practice” that stood in contradistinction to “a state whose authoritarian, sovereign power cannot ever finally meet the needs of a people whose very lives such power feeds on” (2022:15). Congressman Carlos Zarate of the left-leaning group Bayan Muna said that the community pantries were “an act of resistance against government neglect and indifference” (in Luna 2021). These civic engagements were not only a resistance to the large-scale, well-armed, ineffective regime, but also the performance of a new social order.

Given the possibilities these dispersed and spontaneous movements carried and fulfilled, it is not surprising that the government, the military, online trolls (some likely government sponsored), and Duterte's supporters called the Leni Lugaw campaign “elitist, [...] a hollow and dishonest distraction that creates only an illusory feeling of hope that just as rapidly fades when the circus leaves town” (benign0 2021). Community pantries were accused of political opportunism because of how they “paint the current administration in a bad light” and “incite and elicit anti-government sentiments” (Malindog-Uy 2021). Some military and police officers branded organizers of the community pantries as communists. Lt. Gen. Antonio Parlade, spokesperson of the government's anticommunist task force, compared Non to Satan (Lo 2021). These responses demonstrate the

panic among government officials who saw in these initiatives not only how people, in the words of Butler, “act, and act politically, in order to secure the[ir] condition of existence” (2015:58), but also how they consolidated their energies, abilities, and resources despite being harassed and even terrorized by the state.

Still, I must note that the Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries are no longer very active or visible. The mass media no longer reports as comprehensively as it did in 2021 about the high number and sustained existence of food banks, even if pioneers such as Non continue to receive awards and recognition both within and beyond the Philippines. When Robredo lost the 2022 presidential election, the food trucks and feeding programs of her supporters dwindled. Civic engagements may gain ground for a time and then eventually subside but what the Leni Lugaw campaign and the community pantries carved in high relief in a relatively short time is that many Filipino citizens could move between structures, forge connections, and work *with* and *for* instead of *against* or *away* from others to build communities of support and sustenance. They spotlighted the capacity of Filipinos to experiment with styles, gesture, rhetoric, embodiment, and all means of expression even or especially within broken social systems. Filipinos, indeed, could bravely enact what Diana Taylor calls their “right to speak and the[ir] right to be there, the[ir] right to stand up and make claims” for the sake of those who could not appear publicly and assert their rights openly (in Lambelet and Taylor 2021:2). The spontaneity, dispersal, multiplicity, and diversity of these civic engagements showed what could happen when people come “into contact, into assembly, into collective and distributed agency, into ‘being singular plural’ with others” (Nyong’o 2013:159). As state violence, social injustice, bureaucratic inefficiency, and government neglect in the Philippines rage on like an unabated virus, socio-civic engagement will likely continue to emerge as citizens imagine other ways of living and working together.

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