

MULTIMODAL ANTHROPOLOGIES

SPECIAL SECTION: RACE, THE DIGITAL, AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Essay

Multimodal Extractivism

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Like academics, autocratic regimes deploy multimodal tools developed out of the endless pursuit of knowledge. The case of the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte exposes the deadly repercussions of the intersections of histories of resource and labor extraction, foreign intervention, capitalism, experimentation, and technoscience, including the continued dehumanization of postcolonial/colonized peoples. Two years after Facebook rolled out its free internet campaign in the Philippines as a way of expanding its consumer database in a developing market, “a dictator was elected” (Swearingen 2018). Within days of Duterte’s election to office, mutilated and duct-taped bodies of suspected drug addicts began appearing on the streets of Manila, with placards warning the public: “drug user, don’t copy.” Spectacularizing death worked to heighten fear and suppress dissent. Global news outlets reported 8,000 deaths in Duterte’s war on drugs within five months of his inauguration as president in 2016. The police chief has a mascot made in his likeness, which appears at gift-giving parties for the drug war orphans. Duterte uses “drug matrices,” akin to anthropological kinship charts, for mapping drug operations networks used to justify extrajudicial killings and the incarceration of political opponents (Figure 1).

In a context where technology and communications infrastructure are lacking, ready-to-use platforms such as Facebook become part of the multimedia apparatus inundated with bots and paid trolls. The Duterte government uses memes, viral videos of dancing police officers, and jingles to distribute fake news, incite fear, target the opposition, and shape popular opinion. The multimodality that the Duterte regime and its loyalists deploy includes state propaganda in the realms of the two-dimensional, digital, viral, and performative. From this growing list, Duterte enforces his agenda with a “total lack of restraint, a great delight too in getting really dirty” (Mbembe 2001, 108). Local elites divide and rule with violence and impunity using new tools, mirroring the power dynamics from the colonial era. The power and affordability of multimodality carve out a state apparatus, touted by anthropologists today as brimming with potential.

Thus, the multimodality that many anthropologists applaud for its usefulness and promise also stifles lives.

Multimodalities that do not seriously engage with how violence, inequality, racialization, and injustice are perpetuated dangerously reproduce colonialist adventurism and obsessions with charting the unknown and rendering the Other readable and exploitable. Retaining awe of the expanding anthropological tool kit while neglecting self-criticism about our privilege and complicity loops us back to the problems concerning representation within extractive knowledge production, this time magnified by the high-tech capacities of our new tools.

I do not wish to be a killjoy, as there are, of course, undoubtedly many things to like about multimodality. It pushes anthropologists to think about how our discipline should move forward amid a world surrounded by media and how we might engage in this new environment and its pressing problems in ways that challenge disciplinary conventions (Dattatreyan and Shankar 2016). Multimodal anthropologies recognize the “intensified dynamism” in how anthropologists work in the field and with communities, as they open space for producing work beyond the usual expectations (Collins, Durlington, and Gill 2017). Multimodality also unlocks possibilities for bringing sensitivities into creative, inventive, and experimental engagements that would “contribute to enacting new entities, new relations, new worlds” (Dattatreyan and Marrero-Guillamón 2019, 221).

However, the experience of the Philippines resonates with recent critiques of multimodality, which raise concerns about the uncritical uptake of the range of tools and platforms subsumed within the multimodal label and “can just as easily reinforce existing power structures by making recourse to techno-fetishism or by dressing up neocolonial practices of extraction, inclusion, and appropriation in new language” (Takaragawa et al. 2019, 518). Takaragawa et al. call for troubling multimodality to include a reflection of anthropological positionality and privilege. For them, critical to multimodal anthropologies is the recognition that the technologies that make up our tools are made possible by the “labor and loss of others” (520). Our awe of endless possibilities in multimodality shrouds conversations about the blood and tears encoded in our tools. What methods and tools would we deploy if we were to consider Anand Pandian’s words that reconciling that we live in a “decaying present” may move us to be satisfied with the tools that we have rather than hope to “perfect . . . lives by accumulating more” (Pandian and Zhang 2021)? Even obsolete tools such



FIGURE 1. Screenshot of Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte showing the press a drug matrix akin to an anthropological kinship chart. Visit <https://youtu.be/zZzdwnkZlrk> to watch the full video. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

as an 8 mm film camera can be recycled to reflect on issues such as racialized surveillance and to unpack debates surrounding anthropological knowledge production that would otherwise be summarily identified as “complex” (Docot 2019). The obsession with new modes trumps reflection on privileged curiosities that are gratified by adventurism and revelation.

Tajen: Interactive is a multimodal project directed by Robert Lemelson on the “ancient bloodsport of Balinese cockfighting” that is undoubtedly impressive in scale.¹ The project includes a website with fifteen supplemental films, links to text and critique of Clifford Geertz’s classic piece on the Balinese cockfight, and a discussion guide, allowing for multiple forms of audience engagement. The thirty-minute film that is part of the project captures Bali’s sights with arresting cinematography and is accompanied by quiet yet crisp sound recording that builds up the right amount of suspense, leading to the cockfight scene. Lemelson explains that he had read Geertz’s piece in his undergraduate years, but Geertz’s thick description was insufficient to visualize the scenes. Through *Tajen*, Lemelson wanted to “expose students to the sights, sounds, and other sensory data of the cockfight itself” (Lemelson and Young 2018, 831). His team produced the project guided by a “structural sensorial approach” (Lemelson and Young 2018, 832)—a curious method that wants to capture the senses neatly amid a growing scholarship that argues for an attention to messiness (Manalansan 2014).

The latest camera technology allowed for the extreme close-up shots of the Balinese men’s brown skin and fractured nails as they tame their fighting cocks and forge gaffs. The camera zooms in on the contours, lines, pores, cracks, and even wounds on the Balinese men’s skin, too disturbingly intimate, especially as the characters on the screen were left unnamed, without significant speaking lines. If articulating sensoriality is the project’s goal, it was quite effective in

building an atmosphere that Dorinne Kondo (2018) calls “affective violence”—a discomfort that audiences of color feel when witnessing shared racialization onscreen. In the film *Tajen*, as well as in the broader multimodal project, there was no reflection on the privilege, power, and positionality that made possible the launch of an “intellectual investigation” (Lemelson and Young 2018, 842) that evokes tired stereotypes about colonized peoples as broken and flawed with brutal vices. *Tajen*’s stated target audience for its project includes those in the classroom, at film festivals, and at museums (Tucker 2018), but not the Balinese themselves, who became unwittingly enlisted by the anthropological gaze for consumption elsewhere. Learning from Kondo, I offer this critique as potentially “a step toward the reparative” at a moment when anthropology is increasingly reckoning with its extractivism, the effects of which reverberate until today.

Frantz Fanon (2004) tells us about the usefulness of paying close attention to the formation of imagination and inventiveness, which manifest in modes as ordinary as songs and tales. The storyteller, Fanon tells us, “responds to the expectations of the people by trial and error and searches for new models . . . apparently on his own, but in fact with the support of his audience” (174–75). Following Fanon, the ordinary (versus the macabre, grotesque, and spectacular) are themes that could inspire and make up the storyteller’s work, or in this case, the anthropologist’s work. In imagining multimodal projects, the people whose lives appear in our work must be our first audiences. What would our aesthetic-political choices look like if we were to gaze among our own?

Respond and Break the Silence Against the Killings (RESBAK) is a community of artists, scholars, community workers, activists, and extrajudicial-killing-victims’ families raising critical awareness of Duterte’s war on drugs. It was among the first groups that acted to break the culture of silence surrounding the Duterte regime. In 2016, RESBAK launched with a videoke titled *Christmas in our Hearts*



FIGURE 2. Screenshot of the *Respond and Break the Silence Against the Killings (RESBAK)* videoke project. Visit <https://vimeo.com/196708085> to watch the full videoke. [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

(*Reloaded*), which appropriates a famous holiday song in the Philippines by replacing the original lyrics with a critical commentary on the rising instances of extrajudicial killings in the Philippines while retaining the song's tune (Figure 2). In the videoke, members of poor urban communities, which were the main stage for extrajudicial killings, held placards bearing the revised song lyrics. RESBAK takes from various cultural influences of the Philippines' former colonizers—American protest rock, particularly Bob Dylan's *Subterranean Homesick Blues*, and borrowings from Japanese pop culture in the form of karaoke—and mobilizes them in stirring political consciousness as weapons of protest. Through a videoke that invites its viewers to break the silence by singing a reimagined holiday pop song, RESBAK recruits audiences as protesters singing lyrics of dissent. Those who identify with the cause can sing along. In the meantime, RESBAK “moves on the ground” as a “collaborative platform” (Arumpac 2020, 129), producing zines, viral videos, short films, protest banners, memes, signature campaigns, effigies, entrepreneurial projects, academic talks, and healing workshops for those widowed and orphaned by the war—all addressing local and international audiences to break the silence about Duterte's war. A common thread in RESBAK's collaborative practice is the shared awareness that art and knowledge could be radically playful, multimodal, and interdisciplinary, but also emphatic and reparative. There needs to be care in not retraumatizing audiences through affective violence.

Tajen and the RESBAK videoke open space for thinking about the intentions and political stakes of our work. Anthropologists need to deeply reflect on the consequences of multimodal invention and revelation. Putting our fancy tool kit aside is also a legitimate option, which might give us the time to imagine a better future. Ethnic studies, for example, has long ago understood that capital was accumulated through acts of violence; that capitalism shapes discourses about individualism, freedom, and liberalism;

and that academic engagement needs to be reframed in light of the groundbreaking work by Indigenous scholars and activists (Melamed 2015, 76). RESBAK directs us to a model of knowledge production that addresses the public first. RESBAK agitates toward justice with playfulness and thoughtfulness, raising awareness about the deadliness of silence and complicity. Anthropologists more often take away than give back, as we subscribe to the demands of productivity of the capitalist academia that upholds ideologies about individualism, merit, and free will—discourses that serve as a powerful justification for the disposability and surplussing of racialized postcolonial/colonized peoples globally.

NOTES

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1. See www.tajeninteractive.com.

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