COMING TO TERMS WITH THE PAST

Decorated Duterte: Digital Objects and the Crisis of Martial Law History in the Philippines

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Much of the contemporary crisis in coming to terms with the past may have digital origins. We can see this crisis as engineered or assembled through a new series of historical actors: memes and posts on social media and, behind them, the work of trolls and paid influencers. These actors do not travel with first-person accounts of events so much as accumulate in the digital ephemera of daily lives and are then archived as the currency of digital capitalism, saved in individual online albums, on smart phones and then republished elsewhere. Their circulation and accumulation can be strategically directed by political actors who seek to overturn established historical consensus. Tracing the trajectory of memes featuring the Philippines' President Duterte, this paper explores how digital objects have contributed to attempts to rework the history of the Martial Law era.

Much of the contemporary crisis in coming to terms with the past may have digital origins. We can understand this crisis as one assembled through a new series of historical actors. These actors are memes and posts on social media and, behind them, the trolls and paid influencers whose work it is to create and disseminate them.[1] The actions of memes, posts and their makers are delimited by the dynamic regulations of social media platforms. Memes and posts here do not necessarily travel with first-person accounts of events so much as accumulate in the digital ephemera of daily life. Platforms archive posts and memes, while people save them to individual online albums, on their smartphones and then republish them on other media. Both these archiving practices establish durable associations between particular memes and posts, individuals and groups. Not only does archiving yield data underpinning platform capitalism, it enables political actors manipulating design, circulation and accretion of memes and posts to undermine established historical consensus.

Beginning with a visual object made from a digital one – a meme – this paper explores how contextualizing the object unpacks attempts to overturn Filipino understandings of martial law. Martial law in the Philippines marks the period from 1972 to 1981 when President Ferdinand Marcos suspended civil law, civil rights and *habeas corpus*, subjecting the Filipino people to military justice, arbitrary detention and disappearances while accumulating

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[1] The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines meme as: 'an amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through social media'. See www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/meme.

unexplained wealth. While martial law officially ended in 1981, the martial law era ended with the EDSA 'People Power' Revolution that forced Marcos from office in 1986. Over the last five years (2015–19) memories of the martial law era have been revived and reshaped online. Whispers of pro-Marcos sentiments emerged in public debate in the early 2000s, but were not repackaged for consumption by the mediated masses until social media became a well-established campaign tool.

Side-lining liberal memory

In the decades since the 1986 EDSA revolution, the liberal memory paradigm condemned Marcos as a criminal and found his regime guilty of committing grave human rights abuses. These included torture and summary execution, documented by internal and international investigators. The courts established that Marcos and his family had embezzled millions from the nation.

In the run-up to the 2016 Philippine presidential election campaign, revisionists began to rehabilitate the memory of Marcos in the public imagination. Presidential candidate Rodrigo Duterte, now president, ran for office with the support of Marcos's son, Bongbong Marcos. Marcos Junior was Duterte's candidate for vice president. Though Marcos Junior did not win office, the Duterte-Marcos electoral partnership marked a watershed. With Duterte, the Marcos family re-emerged as a locus for a national-level political powerbase with public credibility. Since his election, President Duterte, whose campaign depended on financial and logistical support from the Marcoses, has used his influence to rehabilitate Marcos Senior's reputation. Duterte and his supporters have worked to shift the public memory of Marcos from that of corrupt dictator to national hero. This shift has entailed using social media to undermine the liberal memory paradigm and its public consensus that the martial law era marked a nadir in Filipino human rights.

Social media, particularly Facebook, working through accounts held both within and outside the Philippines, has been key to the rehabilitation effort. This effort was artfully designed and engineered in the run-up to the 2016 elections. As a campaign, it was largely dependent on networks of digital labourers who took contract 'influencing' work or were employed by troll farms (Ong & Cabanes). These digital workers sold their services in shaping online discussions and public opinion on Facebook, the most popular social media platform among Filipinos. They posted content, including images, text and reposted media stories from other sites as well as generating memes. Most of these operations were funded by the 'black arts' arms of party-political campaigns. Some of these campaigns and operations, linked to Manila-based advertising agencies, appear to have sought advice from the Malaysia office of Cambridge Analytica. Given the popularity of these posts and memes as measured by Facebook 'likes' and 'shares', it is difficult to assess to what extent the impetus for the circulation of this content came from above or tapped into grassroots discontent. While the labour behind the images appears to have been purchased as a service, the widespread circulation of these memes and posts on Facebook tapped into public frustration. Strong feelings over continued economic stagnation and the impunity enjoyed by landed elites despite the 1986 People Power Revolution enabled the Duterte campaign to weaponize social media against both his political opponents and critical public voices.

With over 2 billion users, Facebook dominates the social media market in the English-speaking world. In 2016, approximately 96 per cent of Filipinos on the web were on Facebook, with 47 million active accounts in a population of 100 million, so this platform is particularly influential for Filipinos (Hofileña 2). Facebook comes pre-installed on most smartphones in the Philippines, offering users Messenger for email. Using the Messenger app does not incur data charges. If users opt to set up a cloud-hosted email account via Gmail or Yahoo, data charges would apply. Poorer Filipinos thus cannot afford to be online without Facebook.

Among them are most of Duterte's political 'base'. Likewise, at least 10 million Filipinos live and work overseas and most use Facebook to stay in touch with home. While Facebook is highly individuated and personalized, it also has this extensive reach, securing a global audience for memes and posts designed by hired digital influencers.

On Facebook, the most popular content is based on images – photographs and graphics. Images enable users to review and communicate with others past experiences, to create shared and playful narratives, express affection and make their own art. These positive aspects of image-sharing attract users and maintain their interest in others' posts. A single image can be used in several ways simultaneously. Research has identified six ways in which images work within broader online communications (Voida & Mynatt). Some images amplify – in the same way as emoticons, cartoon characters and so on – accompanying text. Images can narrate, telling a story in themselves. People also use images to express or heighten awareness of feelings. Some images bind a local subculture by acting as a kind of shorthand which is inaccessible to outsiders, while other images can invite others to interact, initiating a kind of image-exchange conversation. Lastly, images work as objects or instruments when individuals send other people pictures of objects they own or that have a symbolic importance for them. For Filipinos, much of Facebook is public and hence the platform's record of photographs and comments serves as a quasi-public archive of political symbols (McKay).

'Rectifying' historical consensus

Here is a Duterte meme – one such symbolic image – which has been decorated (collaged and annotated) as part of an AHRC-funded project, Curating Development (**Figure 1**).[2] The original meme, circa 2016, is found on thirteen sites, including Twitter and Facebook pages

Figure 1: Duterte meme as found circulating on Facebook, extracted 16 February 2017.

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[2] See www.curatingdevelopment.com for details of the project, team and methods.

and meme generators, as well as featuring in news reports on the online activities of the 2016 presidential election campaign.[3] This image was saved by a Filipino migrant working on a short-term contract in the United Kingdom. She selected it from among the digital images she had posted or reposted to Facebook to illustrate how she contributes to Philippine development while abroad. The image, for her, spoke of her political loyalty and long-distance participation in politics while outside the country. Working with the Curating Development project team, we printed out the image at A3 and she annotated it with markers, adding on hearts, a tree, a moon, a sun, a star and a sketch of a schoolhouse beside a road (**Figure 2**). Her annotations read: 'Love it' and, on four heart-shaped elements (clockwise, from top left):

> *I love my president. Honest and true.*
> *God bless all people in the Philippines.*
> *He corrects mistakes correctly.*
> *He supports kids in schooling.*

Not only does this image exemplify how overseas workers collect Duterte memes via social media, it also shows how Duterte is associated with rectification: 'He corrects mistakes correctly.' Duterte's rectification has been most strongly associated with Marcos and the history of the martial law era.

The key exercise in the 'rectification' conducted by Duterte's government has been the transfer of Marcos Senior's remains to the Libingan nga Mga Bayani (National Heroes
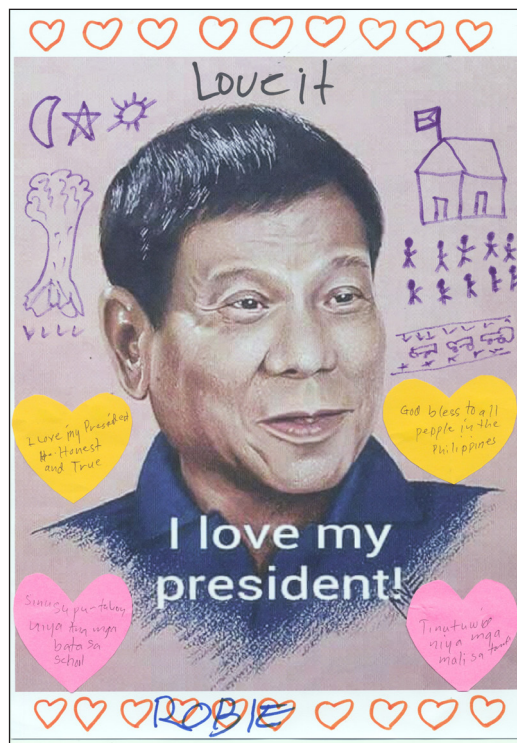
Figure 2: Collage made from above meme by Curating Development participant.

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[3] Located via a Google Reverse Image Search. See: https://tinyurl.com/yxzdslqr.

Cemetery). A personal project of the president, Marcos's reburial as a hero required a decision by the Philippine Supreme Court in support (Pineda). The court decided that the burial could proceed as it was beyond the scope of the Republic Act (RA) No. 10368 – 'Human Rights Victims Reparation and Recognition Act of 2013'. This 2013 law obliges the state to recognize and provide reparation to the victims of martial law repression, torture and summary execution authorised by Marcos. Some Filipinos interpreted RA 10368 as requiring the government to appease the victims of martial law by denying Marcos the honours usually attached to deceased presidents, such as burial in the National Heroes Cemetery. Critics argued that reburying Marcos as a 'hero' effectively 'rewrote history' to deny the impact and severity of human rights violations that took place under martial law (Pineda).

Observers consider Marcos's reburial to be part of a broader revisionist approach to the martial law era and the Marcos regime, an approach that requires an erasure and denial of history. Observers claim that this 'Duterte consensus' – in other words, that Marcos was a national hero – 'fails to use history's lessons as a way of navigating through the period we are in' (Pimentel, quoting Enrique de la Cruz, Professor Emeritus at California State University, Northridge). The largely silent acceptance of Marcos's rehabilitation is seen as another example of the continued refusal to address elite impunity and the weak rule of law. Together, these have blighted development in the Philippines, stifling inward flows of investment and maintaining the country's status as a lower middle-income country.

Underpinning the rectification of Marcos's reputation is the revisionist idea that the martial law era was really one of progress. Revisionists contend that the number of infrastructure projects built under Marcos reflected a vibrant economy, one where progress depended on the stability generated by military rule (Rafael). Supporters of Duterte and Marcos Junior have built and circulated memes (see **Figure 3**) to this effect on social media, linking visual evidence to what are spurious claims.

Digital strategies for liberal memories

Voices critical of the Marcos rehabilitation have countered the manufacture and circulation of false evidence across Facebook. Online activists argue this revisionism has targeted 'people too young to remember the depths of the economic crash under Marcos' (Rogers) and people who depend on Facebook and YouTube for news and current affairs. Human rights activists on social media suggest there is a 'revisionist troll army' (Yamsuan) comprising digital workers and groups designed to support Duterte's election campaign. The trolls' digital campaigning

Figure 3: A Marcos revisionist meme circulating on Facebook.

has found an audience among younger Filipinos who have not learnt the history of the martial law era. As the historian Steven Edward Rogers explains: 'most are young; they were not there to see it and they believe the revisionists. I wish schools taught more history, and more critical thinking.'

The push back against revisionist histories of martial law and the 'rectification' of Marcos has happened in multiple fora, both within the country and abroad. Activists have combatted rectification by producing first-person testimonies and commentary. In the popular press, martial law era human rights activists have spoken about their experiences both of historical imprisonment and torture and of contemporary historical apathy (Yamsuan).

Human rights detainee and former senator Sergio Osmeña won a class action suit against the estate of President Ferdinand Marcos in 1995. That marked the height of the liberal memory consensus on martial law, which appeared for a time to be incontrovertible. But over the next two decades, resistance emerged and became entrenched, if hidden from public debates. The Marcos family refused to take moral responsibility for the outcomes of martial law and would not make apologies to those whose human rights were found by the courts to have been violated. Despite RA 10368, the Marcos family was able to behave in ways that undermined the legislative and public consensus that reparations and apologies were owed to victims. In 2019, Osmeña explained: 'We are trying to get apologies from the Marcoses, but to them, there is nothing to apologize for. Even [former first lady] Imelda does not apologize. I am disgusted but what can I do?' Osmeña further observed: 'People have short memories, what can I say?' (quoted in Yamsuan). Not only was Marcos's son a candidate for vice president, his daughter Imee sits in the Philippine Senate, and his wife, Imelda, remains free and active in public life despite being convicted of graft (Yamsuan).

More first-person testimonies celebrate the contributions to human rights and democracy of leftists involved in the 1970s First Quarter Storm movement, now senior citizens. This protest movement was a key chapter in the Philippines' history of student activism and popular protest. It was activities led by the First Quarter Storm that culminated in the 1986 EDSA revolution. Despite the initial optimism that democracy would be restored, after Marcos, successive governments became increasingly authoritarian. Some Filipino historians now regard the First Quarter storm as signalling the start of democracy's failure and, along with it, the decline of human rights and cosmopolitan norms in the Philippines (Yamsuan).

Long interviews in the popular press, however, are not the best way to engage the online audience that shares Duterte Facebook memes and pro-Marcos YouTube clips. To do so, activists and allies took to Facebook with the hashtags #neveragain and #NeverAgainMarcos. With more than 18,000 members as of 5 May 2019, the #NeverAgainMarcos Facebook group formed to share accurate information on martial law history online. They describe themselves as:

> A group for concerned Philippine netizens alarmed at the wave of misinformed pro-Marcos posts on social media and want to do something about it. YEP that is this group's reason for existence. The Marcos era was a DYSTOPIAN NIGHTMARE and you don't ever want to relive that. #NeverAgain to a Marcos dictatorship![4]

This group produces popular historical responses intended to circulate publicly. One of the key revisionist stories is that EDSA did not happen or was not reported accurately. In response, the group member and popular historian Steven Edward Rogers posted his own photos of the

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[4] #neveragain: No To Dictators, To Martial Law, To a Marcos Return To Power www.facebook.com/groups/neveragaintomarcos, a publicly visible Facebook group where posts are made by members only.

EDSA revolution on Facebook for public circulation.[5] The comments on these images reveal the activist approach to the revisionist arguments:

> Manja Bayang – These photos trigger some deep emotions. And historical revisionists would want the present generation to believe that this never happened.

> Steven Edward Rogers – That's one reason I finally scanned these pics and made a public post of them. If people want to debate the motivations, the outcome or the long term effects, fine… that's all within the realm of reasonable discourse. Don't tell me it didn't happen!

Rogers also posted a summary of the history of Martial Law:

> The lowest point in modern Philippine economic history was 1983–1986. That is demonstrated by every possible economic indicator and is obvious to anyone who has done basic research. Those who weren't around during the late Marcos years have no idea how bad things really got.

> When Marcos took office, 41% of Filipinos lived below the poverty line. When Marcos left office, 59% of Filipinos lived below the poverty line.

> When Marcos took office, the national debt of the Philippines was 10% of GDP. When Marcos left office, debt was 90% of GDP.

> When Marcos took office the NPA [New People's Army] had under 300 armed men, all in Central Luzon. When Marcos left office they had over 20,000 armed men operating in every province of the country.

> When Marcos took office Philippine GDP per capita was $187.11, South Korean GDP per capita was $108.70, Thailand's GDP per capita was $137.92. In 1986 Philippine GDP per capita was $535.24. Thailand was $813.20, South Korea was $2,803.37. The Philippines was left behind under Marcos.

> When Marcos took office the peso was at 3.9 per US Dollar. When Marcos left office the peso was over 19 to the dollar, the largest percentage decline of any Philippine administration.

> A Swiss Federal Court ruled in 1997 that $683 million in Marcos assets were "of criminal origin." That is verifiable. Any discussion of money has to begin with a credible explanation, with documentary evidence, of where that money came from. No […] fairy tales, please. It is not possible to acquire that kind of money legitimately without a paper trail.

This dispassionate summary of the facts still circulates, but it lacks the visual interest and cachet of the meme. It is simply not as fun to share and collect.

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[5] Rogers, Steven E. Public Facebook post. www.facebook.com/steve.rogers.56829/posts/10156297757042903. Accessed 12 August 2019.

Against weaponizing diaspora

We can link the appeal of revisionist accounts with Duterte's popularity among overseas Filipino workers. On #NeverAgainMarcos, Tina Cuyugan argues that 'So many of those overseas Filipino voters who cast their ballots for Bongbong Marcos [and Rodrigo Duterte] wouldn't have been forced to move abroad for economic reasons' (Cuyugan) if the country were not still repaying debts incurred by Marcos. Cuyugan links these comments to a press release from the Ibon Foundation, a left-wing think tank. Ibon claims that

> 33 percent of the country's total borrowings during Marcos's term did not go to infrastructure development projects or social programs but was pocketed by Marcos and his cronies. This amount translates to more than $8 billion, and the bulk of these [debts] may have come from foreign loans […] the Marcos debts are clearly illegitimate and onerous loans that benefited the private interests of Marcos and his cronies. ("Taxpayers")

How does the migrant in the UK who is celebrating her loyalty to Duterte as rectifier come into this story of contending histories? She is located in a provisional and online diaspora which appears to be particularly vulnerable to revisionism of histories that are not yet 'in the books'.

In my work with diasporic Filipinos in the UK, I found Facebook was usually pretty much their sole source of news and information on current events in the Philippines. This meant the platform's algorithms were tailoring content – both news and advertisements – in response to their 'likes' and 'shares' and those of other members of the groups they had joined and their platform 'friends'. It is not clear to what extent these users grasped that their configuration of Facebook's filters would allow them to block ads and conceal some personal characteristics. Instead, their default account settings located them on the platform in terms of their demographics, geography and political leanings and then allowed advertisers – including Filipino political campaigns – to target their Facebook feeds accordingly.

For this migrant, sharing images leads to social recognition. This recognition is expressed through the timing and number of 'likes' and comments, with social media etiquette requiring a positive response from those socially close to the person posting. She can note who in her networks has shared or reposted the image, who commented first, who merely 'liked' instead of commenting, and who commented late or not at all. These online actions indicate care, approval or disapproval (McKay). Social media activities now serve as a public archive of the expansion of individuals' social networks and ructions within them (McKay). Revisionists have taken advantage of this. Pro-Duterte supporters set up fake profiles as diaspora members and joined diaspora groups as a way of shoring up their own credibility and gaining influence during the 2015–16 presidential campaign (Hofileña, quoting investment analyst John Victorino). They targeted migrants to develop a shared sense that the president needed their unquestioning support and was being unfairly attacked for his policy decisions. Migrants hence took up a legitimizing discourse created, in part, by targeted advertising and paid social media campaigns (Ressa, "Part 1, Weaponising the Internet"; Ressa, "Part 2, How Facebook algorithms impact democracy"; Hofileña). Other members of diaspora, often longer settled or more media savvy, were dismissive of this as naïve politics or horrified by the propaganda being shared. I thus observed the diaspora begin to split into polarized pro- and anti-Duterte factions.

Underpinning this split is the way in which belonging in diaspora is negotiated through nostalgia. The idea of constantly working back towards a place that you have left and the days 'before' your departure when things were better, more commodious, more secure appeals to

migrants struggling with life abroad. This idea – that the past was better and can be attained again – comforts them. Recognizing the attraction of Marcos nostalgia for migrants too young to remember the era first hand enabled Duterte's 'black arts' operations to weaponize the diaspora in the 2016 election and then to support the reburial of Marcos. What emerges here is a circuit where memes and YouTube offer covert political actors new avenues of access to Filipinos abroad, which amplify their messages in ways that reshape popular memory among Filipinos overseas and in the Philippines.

To disrupt this circuit of revisionism, some Filipinos have begun to deploy anti-memes. At a recent anti-Duterte rally, the photograph that went viral on social media was one of a very simple brown placard, made from a section of a cardboard box, with a handwritten slogan: 'History books not Facebook.'

Lessons from a crisis

The Philippines is not the only nation in which historians have observed attempts to weaponize social media in order to undermine a liberal memory consensus. We need a much more in depth and scholarly characterization of this phenomenon, both in the Philippines and globally, than this sketch provides. We have to understand how it has been funded, designed and executed and how to combat it, most effectively, in situ. For historians, this requires a new facility with digital ephemera, ways of archiving and sharing evidence, and a network of cross-national and comparative collaborations that extend beyond the discipline. Crucially, these are histories of the present being rewritten, stories that have much power to reshape current events, and it is dangerous if these debates continue to ignore solid, historical grounding.

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