By the Waysides of Globopolis

NEFERTI XINA M. TADIAR

A sower went out to sow his seed:
and as he sowed, some fell by the way side;
and it was trodden down,
and the fowls of the air devoured it.
Luke 8:5

Not so very long ago, the earth numbered
two thousand million inhabitants:
five hundred million men,
and one thousand five hundred million natives.
The former had the Word; the others had the use of it.
Jean-Paul Sartre

In the metropole, the global-political horizon appears to be drawn. Dystopic visions of a world in the throes of death of modern civilization and democracy abound everywhere, while a widespread acknowledgement that we are living in a permanent, global state of exception, in which the distinction between peace and war no longer holds and the suspension of the rule of law has itself become the rule, sweeps the ranks of the progressive intelligentsia. Forty years before the U.S. decision to make homeland security and the global war on terror the basis of its practice of government, in the midst of France’s war against Algeria, Sartre tolled the death-knell of colonial Europe and decried the “fresh moment of violence” with which Europe answered the decolonization of the Third World as the desperate attempt of Man to hang on to the exclusive privileges of its racist humanity.1 In this realization pressed upon Sartre by the raging struggles of the wretched of the earth, neo-colonial war was nothing less than a war for the West to remain human in the face of the monstrous barbarism that the Third World revealed to be but the West’s own. Decolonization posed the question of what it might mean to become human, in the wake of the destruction of colonial, racist humanism, a half-forgotten question for which history has yet to provide an adequate answer.

Today, neocolonial wars have resurfaced with a vengeance, in the name of the civilizing influence of neoliberal democracy. These wars have renewed long-waning metropolitan attention to the continuing legacy and generalization of the politics of colonial sovereignty whose most accomplished form Achille Mbembe argues can be found in the contemporary, late-modern colonial occupation of Palestine, and now, one would have to add, in the imperial U.S. occupation of Iraq.2 In these exemplary contexts of what Mbembe calls necropolitics – the subjugation of life to the sovereign power of death – where “vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead,” the problem of new forms of cordoned off humanity looms large.

If such “bare life,” or “life that can be killed but not sacrificed,” is, as Agamben argues, the originary element of modern sovereignty, the exclusion of which founds “the city (polis) of men,” it is not only in the security zones of militarized occupation or “extraordinary rendition” where it exists; nor is it only conventional weapons of mass destruction that produce contemporary forms of disposable life.3 Widespread deracination and economic dispossession brought on by neoliberalist policies of structural adjustment have created a whole other category of “bare life” in the form of a global slum population whose life-threatening conditions of poverty and hazardous and radically uncertain settlement attest to their subjection to the ever-present threat of death and their expulsion from the emergent global polis of the capitalist world economy. Comparing the processes of neoliberal globalization to “the catastrophic processes that shaped a
‘third world’ in the first place," Mike Davis ponders the political future of this billion-
strong surplus humanity “warehoused” in slums, wondering whether this “true global
residuum” of disincorporated labor could possibly become part of a global liberatory
political project or whether it will merely regress to the politically-pliant behavior of the
pre-industrial lumpenproletariat. “Or,” Davis muses, mimicking the prophetic tone of
anti-colonial struggles of the last century, “is some new, unexpected historical subject,
à la Hardt and Negri, slouching toward the supercity?” Embodied the very limit of
contemporary global politics, how could this surplus humanity not assume some apoca-
lyptic, beastly form?

On the outskirts of the twenty-first century globopolis, in Metro Manila, a
metropolis somewhere between, in Davis’ terms, a megacity (more than 8 million) and
a hypercity (more than 20 million), we glean the outlines of this catastrophic vision and
worldly parable of “bare life.” What, here by the waysides of the globopolis, does the
Word, “bare life,” portend? In Manila’s phenomenal urban excess — its “floating popu-
lation” of unregulated, informal labor, their bodily presence, their settlements and the
artifacts of their activities – we not only see the continuing history of today’s surplus humanity and its relationship to necropolitical power; in this human debris of global sovereignty and modern, metropolitanist development we also find races of living beyond disposable, “bare” life that recast the question of what it means to become human as a question of how to survive and what it might mean to thrive.

The sublime representation of Manila’s slums is the image of Smoky Mountain, “a Dantesque vision from hell turned postcard of global poverty,” an immense 40-year old heap of garbage on which entire urban communities, tens of thousands of people, survive. Reproduced over and over again, and circulating globally, the most photographed garbage dump in the world has served to mirror the disastrous failure of the authoritarian developmentalist schemes of the Marcos dictatorship, the excesses of consumption and corruption of that regime and its ‘democratic’ successors, and now the human refuse of globalization and its paragons of wealth. It is, undoubtedly, a spectacular image of surplus humanity, equal to the most dystopic visions of a world in permanent war.

War has, in fact, long fueled the exodus from the countryside. Enjoying the largesse and license bestowed by the permanent global-U.S. war on terror, paramilitary and military forces of the current necropolitical Philippine state have, in the last five years, carried out an unending spate of extrajudicial executions and forced abductions of human rights activists, political dissidents, and leaders and members of labor, peasant and women’s organizations and other cause-oriented groups, in a bid to eliminate any and all perceived threats to the state’s authority and right to exist. Combined with the dispossessing and immiserating effects of aggressive resource-extraction and agribusiness, this “total war” waged by the Philippine state on its own people, a war which it inherited from the dictatorship and now attests to its own status as an occupying force, has created extensive zones of insecurity and imminent death for those on the very periphery of metropolitanist national development. Although they would seem to be altogether outside of urban life, already rural populations live on the splintering edges of the growing national urban network, the provincial corridors of which current Philippine President Arroyo has proposed to expand into superhighways of global capital expansion, in plans that promise to surpass Marcos’ project of building roads as developmentalist instruments of counterinsurgency. Fleeing the condition of statelessness (abandonment by the state, suspension of rights, expulsion from a polity) and liminal existence into which they have been thrust, the refugees of this political and economic war pour into the metropolis, flowing into the already vast pool of surplus people scavenging for better lives on the waysides of the nation’s capital.
Squatters, scavengers, beggars – these figures of the urban excess have served as important, politicizing images of social contradiction in the vigorous Philippine tradition of protest in literature, film and art from the 1960s to the present. Even when they functioned as images of the commodified spectacle of poverty in ironic and satiric representations such as Emmanuel Torres’ 1972 poem, Another Invitation to the Pope to Visit Tondo, and Mike de Leon’s 1992 film Aliwan Paradise, images of urban squalor have been pressed into the service of awakening political subjects of change. For those who were part of this tradition, the urban excess signified the country’s abiding failure to achieve the promise of a liberated nation, the imagined community that was to emerge in freedom and prosperity after the chains of colonialism were broken. The human refusal of postcolonial developmentalism and modernization were, from this perspective, potential subjects of a future nation, yet to be achieved.

While the state has continuously tried to contain and eliminate this refuse, through periodic violent demolitions and relocations of its ever-mushrooming informal settlements, its facilitation of neoliberalist economic restructuring through policies of both outright war and emergency powers of repression (while maintaining its own foothold in crony capitalist ventures) has all but guaranteed the presence and growth of Metro Manila’s floating population. At the same time, the informal labor provided by the floating population subsidizes the metropolitan economy as a whole, making this “surplus” indispensable to metropolitan life. As the nation’s capital and its fully enfranchised classes embrace the universal promises of globalization, Manila’s new metropolitanism entails more and more technological pathways of circulation and communication that can transcend and bypass, rather than completely dispose of, the engulfing sea of social contradictions embodied by this surplus humanity. For Metro Manila’s metropolitan classes, surfacing from the mire of third world underdevelopment as emergent globopolitical subjects, the urban excess can, indeed, only signify “bare life,” as the necessary condition of permanent exclusion from the polity of the world economy.

No longer an aberration of national development in the metropolitan imaginary, squatter settlements burgeoning on the waysides of new as well as old urban pathways now merely embody the global problem of homelessness. In the planetary consciousness of more progressive globopolitical subjects, such homelessness is the defining situation of a new category of inhumanity – illegal immigrants, refugees, women and children working under conditions of neoslavery, prison populations, peoples under military occupation, religious-ethnic minorities under a genocidal majority, cropless and famine-stricken peasant farmers, slum dwellers – whose terrible fates exemplify the radical, insurmountable insecurity of our times.7 Announcing a new epoch of human disposability, surplus humanity appears as an environmental disaster, both in scale and in form of agency. Although ultimately attributed to human action, this disaster is mediated by a nearly unfathomable agglomeration of social systems whose totality can only be grasped by the physical finitude of the earth, making the notion of ‘accountability’ a paltry exercise of primitive thought. The sublime image of surplus humanity produced in the globally-circulated photographs such as those of Smoky Mountain (as postcards of global poverty) hence produces in the globopolitical subject an apprehension of the magnitude and character of human destitution, of human lack, of unprotected, sheer existence, that the same globopolitical order on which this subject’s “humanity” rests, creates. As the crystallization of dehumanization as privation or suspension of human status, “bare life” stares back at globopolitical “humanity” like a mirror, rendering the latter’s supreme power over the planet a chimera or catastrophe – a veritable humiliation of human sovereignty.8 Like the “transcendental homelessness” expressed by the modern European novel, the bourgeois epic of “a world abandoned by God,” images of “bare life” confront globopolitical “humanity” with an existential homelessness created by all the forms and practices of human abandonment operating in this global order, that is, by global sovereignty’s abandonment of the world, which remains.9
In Estrella Alfon’s 1958 story, *Man With a Camera*, written in the period of that earlier universal humanism bequeathed to postcolonial urban Filipinos, the monstrous evil and hate captured by a cameraman’s prize-winning photograph of a beggar is shown, through the image of the beggar weeping at the theft of his humanity and in the female character’s disturbing question about the source of the cameraman’s own contempt (“You know this man?”), to mirror the cameraman’s own corrupt soul.10 The mirroring function of the image in this story, which Alfon repeats by telling the same story from the beggar’s point of view in a companion piece, *The Photographed Beggar*, enacts the dialectics of seeing, of Self and Other, that shaped the relation between Europe and its colonies, and made possible the decolonizing world’s own claims to selfhood and humanity. This dialectics of Self and Other continues to animate, with undiminished force in world of voided meaning, the progressive search for some overall political meaning in surplus humanity that would redeem it. Fallen by the waysides of the globopolis, however, the Word of Man – the promise of reclamation of humanity – is devoured by the fowls of the air, the princes of global human sovereignty, who “cometh and taketh the word out of their heart, lest believing they be saved.”11 For Gopal Balakrishnan, the sighting of this figure constitutes the fundamental politico-ontological question posed by the present global state of affairs: “Is it possible for a new militant figure to arise in this milieu of radical homelessness that would concentrate and universalize its billion fold grievances?”12 But salvation by one political subject slouching towards the slums of the supercity to be born is itself an apocryphal event.

Neal Oshima’s ten photographs of Metro Manila’s squatter settlements featured in this journal as a photographic essay and originally taken for the soon to be published *Lungsod Iskwater, The Evolution of Informality as a Dominant Pattern in Philippine Cities* do not invoke this dialectics of seeing, nor do they cast a saving eye over the milieu of abandoned humanity. What they lead us to consider is not the radical homelessness that mirrors humanity’s own radical insecurity in the face of the present global state of emergency. Rather, in these photographs, we see informal settlements as public spaces – spaces beneath an interchange, by the side of a road or the railroad, along a canal – made into dwelling-places of “stolen” domesticity, like stolen time, time “borrowed” from the unforgiving speed of capitalist accumulation and circulation imaged in the empty urban pathways that bypass them. We sense this passage in the televisions, which people watch from the sidelines. As the vanishing points of these images, the televisions catch our eye in a loop of seeing that puts our own spectatorship on display, on the sidelines, like theirs. But there is nothing extraordinary here; no epiphany is reached. It is in fact the banality of these scenes, their domestic familiarity, that allow a fuller regard.

Focusing on these informal settlements as “architectural solutions” to the problem of living, of making homes, on the precarious edges and out of the flimsy sides and sheet-materials of formal buildings, Oshima’s wide-angled still lifes make room for all the bits and pieces, and things, with which people house themselves. Here we find no spectacular representation of destitution, no sublime images of sheer, unprotected existence. Instead we see a whole range of interiors and exteriors of living spaces, which remind us of the heterogeneity of this class of life as well as of the singularity of living. For those who make, clean, and sustain the homes and at-homeness of globopolitical humanity, the question of life is a daily, ordinary, though often also painful, violent, and laborious, task of making shelters for living. Clothes drying on a line, plastic containers of water, a metal pot, a mattress, a fan – these are not just means of surviving, of sheltering against “bare life.” They are the accoutrements of making lives, of making homes, in a world that would otherwise leave them bare.