

# TRANSFORMING THEATER FOR THE OPPRESSED

## Community Theater as Urban Poor Discourse in Sining Kadamay's *Gapok*

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### Abstract

In March 2017, the issue of urban poor housing was exposed on a national scale when thousands of members of the urban poor group Kadamay forcibly occupied nearly 6,000 abandoned housing units meant for members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the Philippine National Police in Pandi, Bulacan. Kadamay members were accused of being mendicant anarchists by their critics, while their supporters lauded their determination in demanding, and winning, their rights to housing. While the issue polarized Philippine society, it is evident that the Occupy Pandi movement revitalized urban poor discourse, and brought back to the fore the contradictions between the promises of the city and the prevalence of poverty and lack of opportunity for the majority of its inhabitants, those belonging to the urban poor sector. This paper aims to contribute towards this discussion by attempting to present urban poor mentalities as formulated by the members of the urban poor themselves, and how they have manifested through art. Among the various member organizations of Kadamay is the cultural group Sining Kadamay or SiKad. Initially formed by Kadamay to serve as its cultural arm, SiKad grew into an organization-member of Kadamay. While SiKad has several art programs, this paper will focus on its theater program, the Teatro Mulong Sandoval, and its one-act play *Gapok*. Set in an urban poor community threatened by poverty and demolition, what makes *Gapok* unique is its intimacy, not just in content but also in terms of space, as the play was designed to be performed in urban poor communities, and transform its audience from spectators to spectators. The paper will scrutinize the dynamics of the art production in *Gapok*, how accurately it

reflects the discourses that the urban poor engage in, and the role of the urban poor in (trans)forming art to serve their sector.

**Keywords**

informal settlers; community theater; protest art; neoliberalism; Metro Manila

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## INTRODUCTION

Culture, specifically in the limited sense of artistic self-expression, is rarely used and integrated in the narrative of the urban poor and its engagement with the city. Voluminous literature on this sector exists (e.g., Alcazaren et al; Doherty; Hunt), especially in the study of the urban poor's overall view and attitude towards everyday life (Antolihao; Jocano) but the lack of studies on forms of art they create implies that the generation of art is incompatible with the urban poor. Such a view inevitably leads to a dependence on mass media for representations of this sector, which often perpetuate stereotypes formulated through middle-class and upper-class biases, caricaturing the urban poor as pawns to be manipulated and exploited by those in power (Tolentino, "Masses, Power and Gangsterism").

Addressing the scholarly gap on the role of the urban poor in the formulation, production, and expression of their culture is imperative, given the growing urban poor population due to the increasing concentration of wealth in the cities, and the onslaught of consumerist culture targeting the urban poor to fetishize consumption in the midst of unequal distribution of wealth. By presenting an emergent urban poor counterculture that is both coming from and expressed by this sector, misrepresentations of the urban poor can be countered, and a more democratic engagement with the urban poor can commence.

## THE SLUM AND THE QUESTION OF CLASS

This paper understands urban poor culture as grounded in the ongoing neoliberal restructuring of cities, especially in the Global South. It operates from the assumption that the consequent shifts in urban spaces are not mere alterations that occur in the backdrop of human activity because "social identities are frequently forged in conflicts over the boundaries, ownership and meaning of places" (Gunn 9). The city is not just a theatrical stage for the everyday performance of urbanism but also an active participant in changing the nature of such performances. Radical geographers, such as Henri Lefebvre (*The Production of Space*), David Harvey (*Social Justice and the City*), Doreen Massey ("On Space and the City"; *For Space*), and Edward Soja (*Postmodern Geographies*), despite key differences that differentiate them, share a critical regard for space—without fetishizing it as an analytic concept separate from time—as a significant factor in understanding class analysis and class conflict. As much as the social cannot exist outside the spatial, space is an empty signifier without society moving in time. This paper builds upon Massey's theorization of the "sea-change" in critical scholarship in recent years: "Increasingly the spaces through which we live our lives, and through which the

world—and cities—come to be organized are understood as being social products, and social products formed out of the relations which exist between people, agencies, institutions, and so forth” (“On Space and the City,” 155). Dialectically, “*spatial configurations produce effects*. That is, the way in which society (more specifically the city) is organized spatially can have an impact on how that society/city works” (162, italics in orig.).

The neoliberal attack on Global South cities illustrates this need for a socio-spatial optic in analyzing contemporary society.<sup>1</sup> It has given birth to gated communities and other fortified, privatized spaces, amid an expansion of informal settlements with the barest of resources and basic services. Just by looking at Southeast Asia, we see the unabated growth of urban slums despite the visible lack of city-based industries. The unhampered mobility of capital has resulted in new forms of creative destruction that now typify the Southeast Asian city: local consumption-driven (rather than the manufacturing type) enterprises that require the cheapest and most flexible (i.e., least secure) type of labor reproduced in urban slums and the unabated need for space for such enterprises and the housing needs of the middle and upper classes who thrive on the dominance of mobile capital (Overseas Filipino Worker [OFW] and Business Process Outsourcing [BPO] incomes for the middle class; comprador-type of industries for the upper class). The obvious consequence of this inherent contradiction is structural violence against the urban poor. The *klongs* of Bangkok, *kampung*s of Jakarta, and, quite ironically, even the margins of Ho Chi Minh City in former socialist Vietnam (Atkinson; Harms) evince this phenomenon of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, “The ‘New’ Imperialism”).

Metro Manila best exemplifies such urban dynamics in the Philippines given its role as the country’s primary node for economic globalization. Indeed, to perform this function, this metropolis depends on the predominance of the neoliberal economic model within its space. Such has been the case as early as the 1990s and has led to the creation of “global city imaginaries” (Michel; cf. Shatkin, “Colonial Capital” 591–93). From an ideological standpoint, the embedded structural violence in neoliberal urbanism is obfuscated by government officials and business interests through the discourse of gentrification and large-scale urban rezoning. The current fad of mixed-use developments (e.g., Bonifacio Global City, Alabang’s Filinvest City, Eastwood City, Ayala Technohub in the University of the Philippines-Diliman campus, and the soon to be completed Quezon City Central Business District in North Triangle) is a by-product of this wholesale remapping of the metropolis. The resulting glitzy establishments and green architecture occlude the war that state and capital are waging against the very people whose labor allow such developments to happen in the first place. Beneath gentrification’s veneer are violent demolitions and the widespread dispossession of informal settlers, not to

mention the nonphysical violence of anti-labor practices (e.g., subsistence wages, lack of job security, union busting, etc.) that these establishments employ (Ortega 44–45). The dreamy refashioning of Metro Manila’s terrain and skyline diverts the attention of the middle class away from its slums, that are now long “forgotten places” (Shatkin, “Planning to Forget”).

The call to action, however, is not that simple. The problem is clearly structural and cannot be cured by NGO-led, middle-class moralist altruism that is now increasingly dominating the discourse (Kares). Indeed, the neoliberal restructuring of the urban economy has forced activists and theoreticians to reconsider earlier assumptions about the formation of relevant social movements. In Southeast Asia and beyond, Marxism has been the dominant lens used by social movements to fight structural oppression both in the city and the countryside. Despite fundamental differences in their exegesis and application, Marxist-oriented movements in the region have always clung to the classical understanding that the formation of the proletariat, the most revolutionary class to lead the struggle, occurs where the working class is “produced”: at the factory. But there’s the rub: the neoliberal restructuring of cities in the Global South has hollowed out whatever kind of manufacturing base that Southeast Asian cities have had and turned its workers into an uncollectivized pool of flexible laborers for short-term utilization. The proletariat has become the precariat, a shift made spatially visible by urban slums teeming with the city’s unemployed and underemployed. Ominously, Lefebvre’s controversial argument about first-world cities in the age of neoliberalism—that, given that factories have disappeared in them, thereby decimating the proletariat, cities (not factories) are the locus for the formation of the revolutionary working class (Harvey, *Rebel Cities* xiii–xiv)—seems to find currency even in the least developed urban areas.

This paper does not endorse such a reversal of classical ideas regarding class formation, but seeks to find relevant insights based on empirical data that may aid in sharpening our theoretical approach toward cities and class. Specifically, it looks at a putative “urban poor culture” that seems to be emerging in Metro Manila’s slum areas. To what extent can we look at the slums of neoliberal cities in the Global South as spaces for the formation of revolutionary subjectivity? In Metro Manila’s case where a historically weak manufacturing base continues to deteriorate due to neoliberalism, can we really take the slum as an alternative space vis-à-vis the factory in our efforts to locate the center of revolutionary struggle? Such a question requires a longer and much more sophisticated form of research. Instead, this paper tries to answer one aspect of it by interrogating the urban subjectivities that are currently being formed in Metro Manila’s slums.

## CULTURE AND THE URBAN POOR

Rural-to-urban migrants constitute a huge portion of Metro Manila's urban poor. Scholars have highlighted the different factors behind the creation of urban subjectivities among them. Conventional theories of socialization are not enough in comprehending the complexity of the formation of urban subjectivities especially those in urban poor communities. Porio has already pointed this out in her study of children growing up in Quezon City's streets ("Children of the Streets"), but such an argument extends to other groups living in the underside of the metropolis. For example, Banzon-Bautista emphasizes the role of social networks in the migrant destination areas, especially in assessing the inherent risks of moving to the city (25–26). Similarly, Berner argues that chain migration plays a role in the formation of urbanites (68). Another factor highlighted in the literature, though also connected to the first one, is the possibility of crisis situations. As Hollnsteiner reminds us: "Being poor forces a closeness beyond mere sociability, for crises arise frequently enough to encourage strong patterns of neighbouring" (32). Hence, informal settlers often nurture mutual-aid relations in anticipation of moments of crises. Banzon-Bautista concurs with this point and ties it with the importance of blood or kinship relations in urban communities (34). The tendency of ethnolinguistic clustering in Metro Manila's urban poor communities (that in some way replicates the "rural" in the "urban") is not unusual, nor is it a recent phenomenon (Arcinas 36; Pinches 108). Moreover, scholars have noted the persistence of "collaborative behavior" in communities affected by typhoons and floods. These ties are often relied upon during moments of temporary crises in order to spread risk to more manageable levels. These temporary crises include not just natural and human-made disasters but also cover frequent instances of conflagrations, (partial and wholesale) demolitions, and forced relocation.

This paper operates from the premise that the urban poor, just like any social group, forms, owns, and deploys its own epistemologies. These can be construed as local knowledge: "Information accumulated in everyday practices provides a rich source of knowledge that people use to navigate through the intricacies of life" (Antolihao 14). Furthermore, such a knowledge base provides the foundation for a specific culture that is legible even to outside groups, though not always understood according to the terms of the urban poor themselves.

Unfortunately, mainstream discourse mutes these epistemologies while the dominant classes represent them in various media. In this regard, urban poor culture has always been visible. Artistic forms and platforms often associated with the upper and middle classes have given space for urban poor culture to be understood and "consumed" by the said classes. The use of culture and the arts to discuss issues surrounding the urban poor is nothing new. The same can be said

about the literary works of Edgardo Reyes, Liwayway Arceo, and Rogelio Sikat. Television, especially sitcoms, boasts of a number of shows that represent the slum: from *Abangan ang Susunod na Kabanata* to *Home Along Da Riles*. The cinematic landscape owes a great deal to the social-realist films of Lino Brocka and Ishmael Bernal, both of whom were noted for choosing slum areas as the primary setting of their films (Tolentino, *Contestable Nation-Space* 85–120). Of course, mainstream theater is not an exception, with Rolando Tinio's *Isang Buhay sa Tambakan* and Tony Perez's *Gabun* as perhaps the most notable examples. Although the majority of these cultural representations of the urban poor are sympathetic to their plight and struggles, the fact remains that they are not the ones producing and creating these art forms.<sup>2</sup> Hence, misrepresentations are not uncommon. On the one hand, popular media has helped spawn enduring stereotypes about slums as places of crime, drugs, dysfunctional families, and other urban dregs. On the other hand, some artists, in their effort to counter such stereotypes, end up romanticizing the urban poor. Perhaps no cultural phenomenon has vividly reflected this conundrum more than the so-called “poverty porn” trend in twenty-first-century Philippine independent (indie) cinema (Tolentino, “Positioning *positions*”; Gonzaga). As though mimicking the unidirectional flow of capital from Global South to North, poverty porn as depicted in award-winning indie films panders to the thirst of Western critics and international festivals for exotic authenticity, which “inevitably generates an excess of meaning that subverts the prevailing urban discourse” (Gonzaga 102).

Despite their good intentions, middle-class articulations can never replicate the genuine voice of the marginalized. Going beyond culture and the arts, this reality holds true even in acts of solidarity with the urban poor. As discussed below, political actions led by the middle class and done on behalf of the dispossessed can only do so much; the urgent task then is to pay attention when those who are perennially represented by others stand up to make themselves heard.

### **SINING KADAMAY: BUILDING A THEATER OF THE OPPRESSED**

On 21 September 2017, a massive protest action was held at the Luneta, or Rizal Park, in downtown Manila, simultaneously commemorating the 45th anniversary of Pres. Ferdinand Marcos's declaration of martial law and assailing Pres. Rodrigo Duterte's alleged state policy of executing drug addicts and pushers, which had led to a body count of 13,000, mostly from the urban poor. Although a large component of the protesters were students, professionals, human rights advocates, and other individuals and groups concerned with the killings, the urban poor was amply represented in the event, not just among protesters, but also by the homeless

at Luneta and the itinerant vendors who peddled street food, refreshments, umbrellas and plastic mats. The event was a compelling performance, complete with fiery speeches, as well as agitating songs. One notable act was “Tao Po,” a monologue performed by Mae Paner (aka Juana Change). Clad in packaging tape, blood-colored paint, and a piece of cardboard bearing the words “tao po” (literally, a person, but also Filipino way of announcing one’s presence) and utilizing street language peppered with cuss words, Paner unleashed a scathing critique of the alleged state policy of extrajudicial killings. Throughout her performance, one can hear shouts of “tangina mo Digong/Duterte (Duterte you son of a whore)” and other statements echoing the form and substance of Paner’s monologue.

Toward the end of the program, the song “Di Mo Ba Naririnig” was performed by a chorus of well-known artists, a powerful performance that resonated among the crowd, especially those who recognized the song as the Filipino translation of “Do You Hear the People Sing,” a popular song from the musical adaptation of *Les Misérables*. However, while the predominantly urban middle-class crowd were raising their fists (and their mobile phones to capture the event) during the song, the vendors, the street children, and the homeless of Luneta were hardly affected. The scenario was even made more ironic by the fact that the song “Do You Hear the People Sing” was the rallying cry of the predominantly middle-class students in *Les Misérables* in an effort to incite the masses toward rebellion. Although the protest registered the increasing resistance against tyranny and oppression, if we consider protest actions as performance, it begs the question whether the climactic moment—the collective singing of “Di Mo Ba Naririnig”—really resonated among the urban poor, who were the victims of the bloody drug war and who were also participants in the Luneta event as rallyists and spectators. The disconnection between the September 21 event and the urban poor presents the challenge of how to make performance truly resonate among the urban poor, especially those who have yet to fully appreciate their oppressive conditions.

Among the urban poor, there is an increasing recognition of the power of art and culture in achieving the said goal of arousing, organizing, and mobilizing communities. Leading the charge is Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap (Kadamay), which prides itself as the “largest alliance of urban poor organizations in the Philippines, carrying out a long-term struggle for the eradication of poverty and for a just, free, and prosperous society” (Kadamay). Kadamay and its allied organizations are no strangers to tapping cultural productions for its advocacy. In fact, Carmen “Nanay Mameng” Deunida, arguably Kadamay’s most notable mass leader, has been the subject of a video documentary and a theatrical production. The documentary presented Deunida’s biography. It became part of a film festival organized by the Urban Poor Resource Center of the Philippines (UPRCP), an advocacy group and research unit that has constantly worked with Kadamay.



UPRCP's film festival featured full-length studio films, independent movies, and documentaries that tackled urban poverty. Meanwhile, *Nanay Mameng: Isang Dula*, first staged in March 2014 at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines, was also biographical but took a more introspective angle in narrating Deunida's life as a mass leader in Manila's slums (Lopez, "Urban Poor Sector").

In 2008 Kadamay formed Sining Kadamay (SiKad) as its cultural arm. In its early years SiKad performed mainly in Kadamay activities and caravans, until in 2014, after the successful run of *Nanay Mameng: Isang Dula*, both SiKad and Kadamay recognized the potential of the former to function as an organization with its own dynamism and leadership. Aside from its cultural work, SiKad also aims to produce artists from urban poor communities, as well as mobilize support from artists from different sectors. Currently, SiKad has six programs, which include a rap and hip-hop program called Sining ng Kabataang Lumalaban, or Siklab (literally, a blast), and Kariton (literally, cart), which is a community-based art workshop (Lopez, "Urban Poor Sector"). However, it was the success of *Nanay Mameng: Isang Dula*, which was organized by SiKad's theater arm, Tanghalang Mulong Sandoval, which truly showed the potential of cultural work, especially when formulated and conducted by those coming from the sector itself.

SiKad attempted to build on *Nanay Mameng's* momentum through *Gapok*, although there were differences in production design and scale, as *Nanay Mameng* was "a big production with a cast of more than 40 artists from different organizations and had three shows and generated an audience of about 2,100" (Lopez, "Urban Poor Sector"). In contrast, *Gapok* was quite literally a by-product of the *Nanay Mameng* production, as most of the production materials, from the wood utilized for the set to the costumes of the actors, were recycled from the earlier play (*Ellao*). *Gapok* was also designed to be more mobile, as it was intended to be performed in urban poor communities, but the objectives of both plays were still the same, which according to Terence Lopez, a member of SiKad's national secretariat and *Gapok's* playwright, was to foreground urban poor culture that has long been buried by "bourgeois colonialist culture." More importantly, community performances such as *Gapok* aim to present an alternative to the typical modes of entertainment that members of the urban poor community are exposed to, especially performances such as dances, gay beauty pageants, and bingos, which are often sponsored or organized by individuals or organizations who exploit the poverty prevalent in communities for political or economic gains. Lopez also adds that, besides providing an alternative to exploitative cultural activities, SiKad aims to contribute toward the formulation, and more importantly the presentation, of urban poor culture. For example, he cites that while mass media highlights violent and anti-social (mis)representations of the urban poor, this was far from the reality in the communities, where cooperation, solidarity, and hard work manifest

especially in residents' everyday struggles and their fight for their right to the city (Lopez and Quinsayas).

As the primary objective of SiKad is to empower and mobilize the urban poor, especially in the production and propagation of urban poor counterculture, communities must play an integral part in producing materials, as well as taking part in the performance, for the theatrical plays. Although the germinal ideas of *Gapok* came from Lopez and other members of the SiKad secretariat, the writing of the script underwent various consultation sessions among members of Kadamay and urban poor communities. The members of the community thus became producers of the play. According to Lopez, "*maliban sa tumulong sila na mabuo talaga yung material . . . sila rin yung nagtitiyak sa pagpapalabas . . . sila nagtitiyak sa audience, pati pagpapakain sa amin, paghahanap ng venue . . . ownership sa project*" (aside from assisting in the formation of the play, they also ensured that the actors and crew were fed, audiences were there for the performance, and a venue as well as other utilities were available) (Lopez and Quinsayas). While the initial runs of *Gapok* featured some volunteer actors, their roles were eventually taken over by members of the community.

The condensed formulation of *Gapok* was apparently intentional, as it made the performance as intimate as possible, reducing the distance between actors and spectators, and mirroring the spaces not just inside urban poor homes, but also the spatial conditions of the slum. A one-act play set for just sixteen to seventeen minutes, *Gapok* is an intense presentation of the socioeconomic contradictions faced by urban poor families. *Gapok*, which means brittle or fragile, similar to wooden structures eaten by termites, is a narrative of an urban poor family who is engaging the social and economic pressures brought about by their precarious existence in the city. Set in a domicile that is being threatened by demolition, the play features a sequence of mother-children exchanges revolving around Nanay (Mother) Lourdes, who attempts to resolve the contradictory positions of her sons Joseph and Jessie. Joseph, like his mother, is adamant that the barricades that defend their community must be maintained, while Jessie, in an act of desperation to support their hospitalized father and his newly pregnant partner Anna, joins the team that will demolish the community.

The overarching conflict in *Gapok's* plot that provides the invisible backdrop for the three characters is hardly novel for the play's intended audience. The struggle of organized slum communities against demolitions is an old urban reality, worsened by the city's neoliberal transformation. As early as the 1950s slum dwellers have already been organizing themselves for different reasons, whether for mutual aid or resisting demolitions, and have thus become an important political bloc in local affairs (Arcinas 39; Office of the President 95, 97). And since the 1970s a

number of urban poor communities and cause-oriented groups have established their militancy not just by resisting demolitions but also by questioning the whole discourse of treating urban land as private property (Antolihao 29–30) and “defending their place in the city” (Berner). Notable cases, such as the Zone One Tondo Organization (ZOTO), have been the subject of scholarly literature (Honculada; Doherty 19–20). What *Gapok* offers as a fresh take on the issue, however, is the internal struggles not only within communities but also within the household unit. Thus, rather than churn out caricatured generalizations, the play ventures into a deeper understanding of urban poor residents, presenting them as fuller characters that are richer in detail. The following excerpts from the play reveal these complexities:

NANAY

’wag ka nang magpaliwanag Jessie. Wala nang oras para d’yan. Kung hindi ka sasama sa amin, bahala ka na. Tatal, hindi mo naman kami pakikilinggan.

(Don’t explain yourself, Jessie. There’s no time for that. If you are not joining us [in the barricade], it’s up to you. Besides, you won’t listen to us.)

JESSIE

Nay, ’di ba kailangan ng pera para gumaling si tatay? ’Nay, pag nagtuloy-tuloy ako, bibilis ang paggaling ni tatay, makakalabas na s’ya sa ospital. Lalakas s’ya ulit, makakapagtrabaho ulit.

(Mother, don’t we need money to help Father get well? If I continue [working and earning], Father’s recovery will get faster; he’ll be able to get out of the hospital. He’ll be strong again, and work again.)

JOSEPH

Eh pa’no kung wala na tayong mauuwian? Pa’no kung itapon tayo sa Montalban? O kaya sa Bulacan? Sa tingin mo makakapagtrabaho si tatay d’un?

(But what if in the process we lose our house? What if we are relocated to Montalban? Or in Bulacan? Do you think Father can find work there?)

JESSIE

May trabaho naman ako ah. Malayo nga, pero meron pa rin.

(I have work. It’s far, but at least I have one.)

JOSEPH

Sarili mo lang talaga iniisip mo. May mga anak ako, Jessie. Hirap na nga akong pag-aralin sila dito eh, ano pa kaya pag sa reloasyon na tayo nakatira?

(You only think about yourself. I have kids, Jessie. I already have a hard time with their schooling here, what more if we live in the relocation site?)

JESSIE

Eh di magdoble-kayod ka! Tingnan mo nga kuya, absent ka na naman! Inuuna mo pa kasi 'yang barikada.

(Then why don't you double your effort! Look, brother, you're absent at work again! That's because you prioritize the barricade.)

This heated exchange deftly illustrates *Gapok's* aim to reveal the intricacies that are literally and figuratively behind the barricades in an impending demolition. Middle- and upper-class Filipinos only see the violent clashes in the frontlines that get reported by mainstream media, often in a sensationalized manner bereft of socioeconomic analysis. In contrast, *Gapok* reverses this mode of representation. The dialogue reveals that violent confrontations do not define barricades; a complex web of factors (a family in dire need of money to pay hospital bills, serious concerns about the relocation site, the dilemma of choosing to protect one's house or going to work, worries about school-age children, among others) influences how residents respond to the situation. As such, the integrity of the community barricades, as refracted in the strength of familial bonds at the household level, depends on these supposedly personal concerns. The continuation of the dialogue above further emphasizes this point:

NANAY

Anak, ano ka ba! Bakit ganyan ka magsalita? Jessie, ang tatay mo ang lider ng samahan. At ako, kuya mo, pati ikaw, lahat tayo myembro, nakalimutan mo na ba ang mga pinaglalaman natin?

(Why, son? Why are you talking like that? Jessie, your father is the leader of our organization. And I, your brother, even you, we are all members. Have you forgotten what we are fighting for?)

JESSIE

Nay, nagugutom tayo sa pinaglalaman na 'yan.

(Mother, we are hungry because of that fight.)

NANAY

Lalo tayong magugutom doon sa reloasyon. Dito, kahit paano, nakakapaglabada pa ako, pag gumaling ang tatay mo, makakapagtinda ulit s'ya. Eh doon? Walang tubig. Walang ititinda. Alam mo naman 'yan ah. Kaya nga bumabalik sila dito sa Maynila eh. Anak naman. Pag lumaban tayo at nagtagumpay, mas maigi.

(All the more that we will go hungry if we get relocated. Here, at least, I can earn doing laundry for others. When your father recovers, he can sell his wares again. But there? No water. No goods to sell. You know that very well. That's why those relocated eventually return to Manila. Son, it's better if we fight and win.)

JESSIE

Eh pag natalo tayo? 'Nay pag sa akin kayo sumama, mas sigurado.  
(And if we lose? Mother, if you come with me, that's a safer bet.)

JOSEPH

Gago ka ba, akala mo ba aasenso ka d'yan sa ginagawa mo? May narinig ka na bang yumaman sa ganyan? Wala! Gagamitin ka lang nila!  
(Are you a fool? Do you think you will succeed in what you are doing? Have you ever heard of anyone who became rich because of that? No one! They will only use you!)

JESSIE

'Pag nakita nilang masipag ako, iaabsorb daw ako ng Ayala.  
(When they see I'm hardworking, the Ayala [Corporation] will absorb me [as part of its workforce].)

The urban poor as a precariat, rather than proletariat, is highlighted in this part of the play. The mother and father do not have regular jobs. Instead, they earn their livelihood through the informal sector, a rather insecure but highly accessible way of maintaining one's household. As a counterpoint, Jessie is depicted as a character with high aspirations, and yet his ambition is based on nothing but a slim chance of being hired as a full-time employee of the Ayala Corporation. Here, *Gapok* draws the clear connection between Ayala as an embodiment of the neoliberal twinning of accumulation (shopping malls and high-end residential spaces) and dispossession (not only in the eviction of slums, but also in denying the poor access to secure employment) and the precarious state of the urban poor. The play's characters do not speak the language of unionization to call for wage increase and safe working conditions. In the first place, they are struggling to find a decent and stable job—and are probably eager to swap their barricade for a place in a picket line.

### **GAPOK IN THE HISTORICAL CONTINUUM OF PHILIPPINE SOCIAL THEATER**

*Gapok* can be seen as a critical development both in the advancement of urban poor culture and in the attempts at empowering the marginalized and enabling their active participation in the production of art and culture. Its emergence can be seen as a logical result given the trajectory of protest theater in the Philippines. While early forms of ritual performances and theater in the Philippines existed from the prehispanic period to the nineteenth century, the emergence of "seditious plays" was the pivotal moment in the history of protest theater in the country. Staged at the turn of the nineteenth century while the country was caught up in revolutionary fervor, seditious plays were examples of cultural appropriation. While the form

was of foreign origin, the content represented nationalist aspirations and desires for freedom among the once-again colonized Filipinos, which made these plays popular with Filipino audiences (Rodell 89-90).

The 1960s saw the revitalization of Philippine protest theater. Anticipating Bertholt Brecht's demand that realism become an integral part of theater aesthetics (1974), and Augusto Boal's formulation of a "theatre of the oppressed" (2008), protest performances both in the cities and the rural areas were already articulating the issues of the marginalized such as state violence, repression, and economic exploitation. Instead of being performed in theaters that were inaccessible to the poor, these performances were brought to the streets, as theater became an instrument of political education (Castrillo 530; Barrios 90). Philippine theater's radical (re)turn was a by-product of growing discontent with neoliberalism, the neocolonial relationship between the Philippines and the United States, and the worsening conditions of social injustice; the same impetuses that led to the rise of radical movements such as Kabataang Makabayan, Samahan ng Demokratikong Kabataan, and the reconstituted Communist Party of the Philippines. Theater groups such as Panday Sining, Gintong Silahis, Tanghalang Bayan, and Samahang Kamanyang, unlike their traditional counterparts, performed the entire year and had members among students, peasants, out-of-school youth, and workers (Ilagan 115-16). When martial law was declared in 1972, cultural workers went underground and brought their "lightning performances" in markets, churchyards, and other public places to the countryside. According to First Quarter Storm veteran and director Bonifacio Ilagan, activist theater at the time was "animated by three life-changing principles": to struggle without fear ("Makibaka, Huwag Matakot!"), remolding of the self through engagement with the masses ("Mula sa Masa, tungo sa Masa"), and service to the people ("Panglingkuran ang Sambayanan") (117).

During the 1970s and 1980s, when Brecht and Boal became popular among cultural workers, agitation and call to action became the primary objectives of protest theater, which made it necessary that protest plays reflect not just the conditions of the marginalized, but also their aspirations and a path for victory (Barrios 94). Taking their cue from Brecht and Boal, the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA) produced theatrical performances with the intention of mirroring Philippine social realities through the "aesthetics of poverty," as well as utilizing performance as an agent of "personal and societal transformation" (Fajardo 181). Community was also essential to PETA, as their Basic Integrated Theater Arts Workshop aimed to empower members of the basic sectors to utilize theater as a platform for awareness and hope (Castrillo 532).

Boal's poetics of oppression and liberation is quite evident in the formulation of *Gapok*. As Lopez mentioned earlier, misrepresentations of urban poor culture

are often narratives filled with the familiar tropes of anti-social and violent acts. These tropes are often magnified and consumed through mass media even among the urban poor, thereby disempowering them. Misrepresentations thus turn into a message of the inevitability of impoverishment, of a life as a petty thief, mendicant, and or an underpaid laborer. Boal calls this the poetics of oppression, where values are imposed on the marginalized, who are reduced to mere spectators (135). *Gapok* aims to do the opposite: to transform members of the urban poor from spectators to spect-actors. Since the play aims to mirror their conditions, they are liberated from their roles as observers and are empowered to intervene, initially in the conduct of the play, then hopefully later on, toward action.

Due to the centrality of space in urban poor discourse, urban poor performances, whether overtly political or cultural, are contests of, and about, space. Demolitions, which are contests between urban poor communities and private property owners (and the government) for occupied space, equate communities with the space that they occupy in the city, as their location defines not just spatial relations, but also individual and community identities connected to the space that they occupy. Hence, any attack that attempts to extract them from the spaces they occupy is tantamount to the annihilation of the community. A similar performance is that of the occupation of the abandoned housing projects in Pandi, Bulacan, a provincial town north of Manila. Government-owned housing and land were left abandoned, sterile, and deteriorating. The act of occupation of these projects by Kadamay was an act of intervention, ensuring that the houses and communal spaces was not just utilized, but also given identity, the identity of the community forged by the thousands of displaced members of urban poor communities of Metro Manila. The contest for space also defines urban poor subjectivities. People who occupy land to which they do not have formal proofs of ownership are called *iskwater* (a colloquial form of “squatter”), a term which is also used to describe people from the slums.

Hence, sensitivities to the dynamics of space in theater are a critical component of *Gapok*. Only one stage design set was used: pieces of wood constructed into a skeleton, which barely functions as a dining room, and possibly functions as well as a bedroom and living room. The cramped feel of *Gapok*'s stage design aims to present the suffocating conditions, not just of the physical setting, but also of the socioeconomic state in the slums. However, a number of *Gapok*'s spectators among the urban poor questioned the spatial mapping of the characters and noted that the set was still *maluwag* (spacious or loose), conveying that despite the already restrictive space the play utilizes, urban poor reality is even more suffocating than what is represented in *Gapok*. In a focus group discussion in San Roque, Quezon City, conducted for this paper, a resident said that smaller domiciles are occupied by more than three people, usually extended families which include grandparents, and possibly third- or fourth-degree relatives. Another interesting point raised was

while the impending demolition of the characters' house (and community) was a source of conflict, the experience in the community was actually more violent. Although the play is minimalist in nature, which could explain the lack of more dramatic encounters, the spectators' comments indicate that while violence is a fact of life in urban poor areas, it is never due to conflicts within the community, but were caused by their engagement with the forces that aim to extract them from their spaces, and in turn, eradicate their sense of identity which is connected to their homes and communities.

Another critique that deserves analysis is that while *Gapok* accurately portrayed the social and economic contradictions that the urban poor face, the responses of the characters toward these contradictions were extreme representations of conflicts within urban poor families. One commentator in the focus group discussion said that while they faced similar (and even worse) conditions compared with those in the play, they never resorted to cuss words and violence in familial conflicts. As some of the residents of San Roque have pointed out, although *Gapok* correctly identifies the defense of the community vis-à-vis individual economic needs as a primary contradiction in their area, resolutions to this conflict were hardly as violent, and as dramatic, as shown in the play. They even stressed that, given the common appreciation for such contradictions within the community, residents often understood the urgency of addressing economic needs as a factor why some of them might choose to work, or even leave, the community rather than build and man barricades.

### **CONCLUDING ACT: THE PERFORMANCE OF DISSENT**

The concerns raised by community residents in the focus group discussion reveal that there are still areas for improvement that SiKad has to address before it can truly become a genuine articulation of urban poor culture. Nonetheless, *Gapok* is a step toward the right direction. As an art form, it demonstrates that the marginalized do have the capacity to articulate themselves in an organized and artistic manner. We can no longer be content with middle-class representations of the urban poor, notwithstanding the progressive content of some, when their unmediated articulations are waiting to be heard. As a scholarly source, *Gapok* is valuable for the study of urban society. For one, it calls into question several strongly held assumptions about urban poor communities that have been reinforced by canonical texts like Jocano's *Slum as a Way of Life* (ch. 8–9), which, for instance, limits the analysis of adolescent behavior to street-corner gangs and “deviant” females, whereas *Gapok* provides us with a more multidimensional view of the activities and attitudes of urban poor youth. The same critique applies to Jocano's



(ch. 10–11) discussion of the urban poor family and the normative behavior attached to it. Academia is perhaps next in line: ethnographic representation (including this very paper) of the urban poor has to give way to new forms of knowledge production that involve their direct participation and unmediated articulation.

*Gapok* intervenes in a moment when, due to their sheer number and “social visibility,” the apparently increasing political power of the urban poor has made them an attractive sector for attention by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). On the one hand, this trend has pushed the urban poor further into the political spotlight, leading local and national politicians to treat them as an important segment of their constituencies. On the other hand, it has co-opted them to a neoliberalized NGO culture that has had serious repercussions for the overall struggle to democratize city spaces and resources. Not only has NGO-ization misdirected otherwise well-meaning supporters away from agitation for state accountability, as a result of its structural aversion to socioeconomic issues, it has also (and more importantly) peddled notions of “self-help” among the urban poor. Prophets of neoliberal populism (Davis, ch. 4) encourage the urban poor to utilize their own purported untapped entrepreneurial spirit toward the realization of their economic potential. The result is the encouragement of “neoliberal individualism” among the urban poor: “increasing competition within the informal sector depletes social capital and dissolves self-help networks and solidarities essential to the survival of the very poor” (Davis 184). *Gapok*, and other art forms deployed by SiKad, are thus also crucial in redressing neoliberal corrosion of longstanding informal social structures that support progressive urban poor subjectivities.

Davis’s observation crystallizes the core argument of this essay: *Gapok* demonstrates that a progressive (let alone revolutionary) kind of culture does not inhere in the urban poor, as a kind of natural disposition. In many ways, poor people are as vulnerable to the empty promises of neoliberalism—which oppresses them—as the middle class, whom neoliberalism rewards, and *Gapok*’s importance is grounded in its capacity to stage for poor audiences their daily struggle with that contradiction. Rather than passing unfavorable judgment on the urban poor and their advocates, the political precariousness staged in the play foregrounds the extraordinary strengths of urban poor communities: barricades are only as strong as the resolve of the real people who put them up, and who maintain them, and are in constant tension with their commitment to dealing with other urgent personal concerns. That these barricades continue to hold in various parts of Metro Manila points to the endurance of a culture of dissent and resistance, in the face of crushing state and corporate forces; evidence, perhaps, of true revolutionary potential among the urban poor.

## Notes

1. This paper subscribes to Harvey's definition of neoliberalism as a product of an "uneasy alliance between state powers and financial institutions" beginning in the mid-1970s that featured market deregulation as a way to protect the "class power of capital . . . at the expense of working-class standards of living" (*Rebel Cities* 10–11).
2. Arceo is a rare exception, as she grew up in the slums of Manila's Canal de la Reina, which is also the setting of her famous novel.

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