

ETHICS AND PERSONAL POLITICS IN THE ENGAGED ETHNOGRAPHY OF URBAN SUBALTERNITY

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In this paper, I reflect on the ethical dilemmas of engaged ethnography with urban subalterns. Subalternity is a condition of exclusion and silence suffered by populations occupying a space of subordination and difference, outside of those occupied by rights-bearing citizens and possessors of the grammars of knowledge. When subalterns struggle to protect their homes and livelihood in the midst of fragmented socialities and competing claims among people's organizations, ethical choices of an engaged ethnographer become evidently political. This necessarily privileges a particular representation of space, being, and temporality, that in turn affects access to different knowledges and spaces. Within this intricate urban subaltern politics, I relied for guidance less on academic ethical standards, and more on constant reflexivity of my personal political convictions and on democratic dialogues with subaltern communities. When the researcher struggles to become a political partner of subaltern-historians, ethnography diverges from academic and funding frames and transforms lives toward subaltern-scholar solidarities and liberative knowledge mobilization.

Keywords: Research ethics, Engaged ethnography, scholar-activist, subaltern politics

Engaged ethnography and activist scholarship are gaining legitimacy among academics, including anthropologists working in the Philippines (Abaya et al. 1999, Racelis 2014). A growing number of Filipino ethnographers are particularly contributing to urban poor advocacies (Racelis 2016). However, the ethical challenges faced by scholars who directly participate in partisan politics, particularly in situations of acute conflict endured by slumdweller have received less attention.

This paper reflects on the ethics of engaged ethnography on urban subalternity. My reflections are located in the politics of space, social position, and time and in the context of the heterogeneity of subaltern communities. ‘Space’, refers to the asymmetric physical and social space, and corresponding habitus, of the slum and academe. The positions occupied by the researcher and the researched, and the nature of their relationship, outline ethical dilemmas and responsibilities, and also define temporalities and research agenda. By temporalities, I pertain to timelines that accrue to different positions, institutions and discourses.

I draw from the ethical dilemmas I faced as a researcher observing urban poor life and struggles, and, as an activist participating in partisan political activities among competing claims of different people's organizations facing constant threat of demolitions amidst elite gentrification. In a field with severe conflict among the poor against the state and elites (see Ortega 2016), ethical issues and the researcher's access to participants' stories and events become entangled with subaltern struggles and personal political convictions.

Recognition of a researcher's politics at the onset helps tease out these ethical issues, and this positionality needs to be constantly interrogated during fieldwork (Bourdieu 2000b, 2003). In the process, the researcher's personal and academic space must be made porous and accessible to the subaltern – if political unity and action between the subaltern-historian (for the researched) and researcher is hoped for. As the fieldwork advances for an activist, the subaltern space intersects with the researcher's space. Such intersection is fraught with difficulties as different disciplinary regimes guide actions of individuals located in different social spaces. Despite these personal challenges, engaged ethnography has great potential for political empowerment of the scholar-activist and subaltern-historian, as well as generates epistemologically complex ethnographic narratives.

When the researcher struggles to become a political partner of subaltern-historians, ethnography diverges from academic and funding frames and transforms lives for subaltern-scholar solidarities and liberative knowledge mobilization. Engaged ethnography becomes less of a researcher–researched, and more of a researcher/activist–subaltern/historian relationship, where political risks, responsibilities, accountabilities, and vulnerabilities are shared, and the narratives written reflect complex and grounded struggles of fragmented subaltern communities against neoliberal violence and exclusion.

These reflections are put forward with the hope of inviting other engaged ethnographers and activist-scholars to share their experiences and learnings,

so we can better our craft towards contributing to the collective production of political disruption against neoliberal exclusions. These ethical dilemmas are neither exhaustive nor exclusive to engaged urban ethnography. Lessons can be drawn for application to other difficult sites and situations.

An ethnographer's social position underpins any self-reflection. I am a faculty member of the national state university, and at the time of writing and research, was a doctoral research fellow of a foreign university. This academic position, and spatiality, is critical in regard to contributing to subaltern struggles. Unlike ethnography in rural and indigenous areas, the academe is often spatially proximate to urban poor communities, this means that the ethnographer's personal and academic spaces can potentially merge with urban subaltern spaces.

The research upon which this reflection is based aims to celebrate and understand embodied subaltern political agency. By celebrating subalternity, it engages in the politics of recognition, rendering visible oral histories of exclusions, struggle, passions, and victories of urban subalterns from the margins. Following Pierre Bourdieu (1999), the social conditions of subaltern realities and struggles situated within neoliberal urban planning and development are uncovered. The celebratory aspect is contingent on a firm personal belief in the politics and partiality of research, inspired by the situatedness of feminist research and Marxist geography that links space to politics (Lefebvre 1991, Harvey 2003). The community and individual subaltern activists, however, are not identified by name for their protection. The recognition is for subaltern collective struggles and suffering, rather than for individual stories.

The said slum community has been facing forced evictions and demolitions since 2008. Under a 'public-private partnership' (PPP)¹, the slum is to be cleared for a central business district hoped to become another business hub in the country. Over more than a decade, militant community activists associated with the Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap (KADAMAY) have used diverse tactics – from community barricades and street protests, to educational discussions and state negotiations – to struggle for an on-site slum upgrading of their livelihoods and habitations. The government is offering off-city resettlement for sale with financial assistance, and forcibly evicts the resisting slum dwellers.

¹ PPPs particularly in infrastructure and real estate development are critical to the privatization of urban planning (Shatkin 2011, Harvey 1989).

In what follows, I first outline the theoretical and political departure points, drawing from relevant literature on engaged ethnography and urban subalternity. Then, ethical issues are enumerated that deal with: informed consent, unlearning academic privilege, political intervention by the scholar-activist, the principle of 'do no harm', equalization of representation, access to researcher resources, and epistemological complexity. Anecdotal experiences are used to highlight ethical issues. Advocacy for increasing subaltern access to the university for sustainable engagement and a personal epilogue end the paper.

While written in a straightforward manner, the actual experience of these dilemmas was complex and emotionally demanding. Moreover, the personal risks suffered by the author, despite being a crucial part of ethical dilemmas, are not discussed in detail in this paper.

Points of departure

This reflection is inspired by engaged ethnography and activist scholarship (Susser 2010) for emancipatory knowledge. Activist scholars blur the boundaries of ethnographic research and political involvement to engage in a co-production of knowledge with subaltern groups as a counterhegemonic project in the struggle for human rights (Fluehr-Lobban 1995) and social justice.

The reference to subalternity draws from Antonio Gramsci, and the Subaltern Studies Collective, who problematized notions of postcolonial representation, political agency, and heterogeneity. First used by Gramsci to describe the conditions of silence and exclusion imposed by the capitalist system on the peasantry, the category of subalternity was later associated with populations occupying a space of subordination and difference (Spivak 2005), a space located outside of those occupied by rights-bearing citizens and possessors of the 'grammars of knowledge' (Sandos 2008). Intellectual elites consider subaltern knowledge as inferior, and construct its subjects as unworthy of being listened to in a way that mattered. Subaltern exclusions manifest in a 'lack of history' or in the subsumption within master-narratives of the subaltern perspective in official documents and academic writing (San Juan 2008).

Subalternity is not a homogenous subordination to a singular social relation. Rather it is constituted within specific variations of racial, class, gender, and socio-cultural relations. In particular spaces, subalternity is co-constituted by various forms of exclusions and domination, as much as by the

diverse racial, gendered, religious and politico-economic positions among subaltern groups (Green 2011). Notwithstanding the heterogeneity of subaltern groups, Gramsci hoped for the development of a homogenous and ‘disciplined’ transformational mass politics. Not only with “a unison of economic and political aims, but also intellectual and moral unity,” where exclusion becomes the foundation to “create a new ethico-political form and a source of new initiatives” (Gramsci 1971:181-182, 367). This liberative potential inspired subaltern studies in marking a “space of difference” (Spivak 2005:476) that recognized the ‘politics of the people’, evidenced by substantive works on the Indian peasant participation in social movements for liberation (Arnold 1984).²

‘Engaged ethnography’. Engaged ethnographers bear witness to subaltern resistance. By attending to localized struggles against situated neoliberal exclusion and violence, ethnographic accounts “can generate a critical position by standing outside the state’s own version of itself” (Harvey 2005:127) to challenge hegemonic representations of the poor and excluded. Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995) advocates for “militant ethnography” that ‘shocks and alarms’ in order to denaturalize the acceptance of injustice, and to produce political disruptions (Forrest 2017). In the same vein, Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues for a ‘sociology of absences and emergences’— a politics of recognition where elite knowledge is deconstructed and subalternity is recognized as a source of alternative imaginaries for social justice (Santos 1999, Dalea & Robertson 2004).

By locating research in actual struggles, engaged ethnographers move beyond merely witnessing. While the researcher’s interventions often draw from personal moral and political convictions (Scheper-Hughes 1995, Madison 2005), these engagements may result to epistemologically complex understanding of marginality, survival, and resistance. The thick description that engaged ethnographers produce locate the limits, complexities, potentials, and hopes of situated struggles within subaltern heterogeneity and intra-community conflict (Urla & Helepololei 2014, Sieder 2013, Chari & Donner 2010). This generates “knowledge as emancipation,” grounded on situated collective struggles (Santos 1999:39-43) that challenge the reproduction of inequality within and outside of subaltern communities. From being ‘academic voyeurs’ (England 1994), engaged ethnographers can participate in the concrete “collective work of political intervention” and

² For a history of the Subaltern Studies project, see Chaturverdi 2000.

“produce and disseminate instruments of defence against symbolic domination” (Bourdieu 2000a:99-107), to advance a “collective production of realistic utopias” (Bourdieu 2001:40).

Epistemological complexity. The merging of ethnographic research and political involvement requires that engaged scholarship must be founded on mutual learning, accountability, solidarity and democratic participation (Bourdieu 2003). Similarities between the researcher and participants must, despite being partial, be present to ease the scholar’s difficulties of ‘unlearning privilege’ to transform his/her own life as a site of resistance (England 2009) and minimize symbolic violence. Toward this end, Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant (1992) highlighted that scholar-activists who occupy a dominated position within the academic field, with little entanglement with capital and dominant discourses, may engage in a co-constitution of knowledge based on shared experience of marginalization and aspiration for socially-just communities. While shared exclusion is important, the process of unlearning privilege—including a constant struggle against the traditional hierarchical dichotomy between the researched and researcher—is critical to generating liberative knowledge based on subaltern political practices and the scholars’ symbolic capital (Chari & Donner 2010).

Activist scholarship need not deny what Michel Burawoy (2012) calls “elementary divergences” with our research participants. These divergences are critical sources of mutual learnings if placed within a democratic dialogue that is built on shared beliefs of human rights and collective movement. The call for political unities is cognizant of different spaces and positionalities, and potential political interventions play on the activist-scholar’s symbolic and economic capital. Because of their academic status, often higher incomes, and wider networks relative to subaltern communities, engaged ethnographers can help respond to concrete research needs for political ends— such as by securing documents, capacity-building, networking, fund sourcing and campaign formulation and conduct. Scheper-Hughes (1995) envisions ethnographers who help train organic intellectuals in anthropological research. We are also called on to help subaltern campaigns reach a wider audience.

In these public engagements, the narratives told must highlight the subjective voices of our participants and be sociologically located within structural neoliberal violence and reconstitution of subjectivities. In this manner, engaged ethnographers may bear witness to the resilience of indigenous populations, intervene against human rights violations (Sieder

2013), and help produce knowledge that may be instrumental to subaltern struggles.

Subaltern heterogeneity. While the hope for solidarity and movement arises from the activist-researchers' engagement with difference, this is not guaranteed. Subalternity is not an undifferentiated category; there is a 'multiplicity of movements' (Chari & Donner 2010:78). The marginalized are often caught in complex intra-community struggles that reflect differential internalization of and negotiation with neoliberal reconstitution of subjectivities and resource access. In such situation, the scholar's intervention and engagement, in an attempt to "do the right thing," is not always a straightforward affair (Robins & Scheper-Hughes 1996). Rather, it is pulled in different directions at the grassroots by the competing claims for legitimacy, representation, and resources of diverse socialities.

Critical analyses of subaltern communities require recognition of diverse political positions and energies, and complex and shifting interrelation among subgroups (Jones 1995). As political opportunities change, so do the stance and strategies of different community organizations, that in turn affects the actions of other groups. These heterogeneous subaltern realities require on the part of the research patient engagement and cautious mode of representation to prevent 'epistemic violence' (Mahmood 2005). Bourdieu (2003, 2004) warned against these violent tendencies of intellectuals to impose their point of view on the dominated and perpetuate subalternity.

Participation in the politics of particular subaltern groups may result in closure of certain spaces, knowledges, and rights: activist-researchers may be denied entry to spaces of competing subaltern organizations and political rivals (Scheper-Hughes 1995, Sieder 2013). As subaltern struggles often involve claiming recognition and accountability from the state and elites, participation in protester's lives and actions may ironically lead to the epistemological "neglect of the powerful and privileged" (Murphy & Dingwall 2001:346). Worse, it may lead to political confrontations with the state and elites (Sundar 2004), even the "withdrawal of offending academics' citizenship rights" (Muzvidziwa 2004:312). All of these have implications for the epistemological complexity of an ethnographic narrative that situates subalternity in the rationalities and technologies of neoliberal exclusion.

Reflections on ethics in engaged ethnography and urban subalternity

The spatial proximity and political engagement of ethnographers create particular ethical dilemmas for those who work with urban subaltern

communities. The convention in research ethics entails balancing the need of the researcher to conduct research and produce knowledge, with the right of participants to self-determination, privacy, and dignity. Research ethics dictates that researchers must ensure that the benefits of the produced knowledge outweigh the costs to all participants. The cost-benefit evaluation is necessarily subjective, and contingent on professional and personal values. In practice, these abstract ethical principles translate to notions of informed consent, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice.

Within urban subaltern research (Roy 2011), the ethical challenges are acute as participants occupy a distinct social arena of legality and fragmented sovereignty that Auyero (2007:51) refers to as “gray zones”. Urban subalterns exist and survive on the margins of legality. They build homes and earn an informal livelihood by illegally encroaching on spaces where economic surplus regularly circulates. When these spaces command high land market values and profitability, the state employs its legal and coercive capacities to evict informal settler families and relocate them, usually to off-city resettlement. The cleared spaces become sites of private accumulation (Harvey 2003) that increase state revenues through real estate and income taxes. Within this neoliberal mode of governance, the rights of urban subalterns are recognized in a fragmented manner— legal land ownership precedes the right of communities to development including access to adequate housing, sustainable livelihood and social services. Shelter is afforded to those who have the capacity to pay. Those who resist resettlement and struggle for alternative and equitable urban land distribution to assert a right to the city are considered unruly citizens and subjected to spatial exclusions and disciplinary mechanisms (Mitchell 2003, Merry 2001).

Doing ethnographic research with urban subalterns for their right to the city entails locating in the ‘gray spaces’, sharing in fragmented sovereignty, and enduring legal exclusion and state coercion. In claiming their rights, urban subalterns suffer from the closure of state spaces, policing, and non-recognition of citizenship rights, and the scholar-activist can be subjected to the same risks (Scheper-Hughes 1995). One’s academic integrity and symbolic capital may even be put on the line. To act with those perceived as criminals and outcasts potentially engenders being labeled as criminal and outcast. To minimize risks to themselves, scholar-activists may highlight their academic status and personal connections. This however, may not be enough.

Muzvidziwa (2004) advised that activism, when practiced in the field, should be sustainable. Sharing these risks must be balanced with the scholar-activists' role in countering symbolic violence and offering subaltern narratives to a wider public. While researcher intervention in human rights abuses and participation in subaltern politics is called for in many instances, there may be risks to research completion, access to state information and personalities, and 'damage' to academic credibility (viewed from a conservative academic's point of view) that is necessary in navigating within the academe.

The heterogeneity of urban poor communities further complicates the ethical challenges for activist-scholar engagement. Slum dwellers have diverse histories, migration patterns, languages, religions, socialities, and politics. Politically, the courses of action of different slum dwellers associations not only structure the movement of the state, elites and civil society, but also those of other slum dwellers, and, of engaged researchers.

At the same time, the spatiality of urban subaltern research presents unique opportunities and challenges for engaged ethnographers, particularly for those whose universities and research sites are located within the same cities. The proximity of academic and personal space facilitates better accountability and unities with participants. Sustained engagement at the personal and institutional levels is possible. This, however, calls for a complex reconstitution of a researcher's habitus, temporalities, and agenda.

Accessing state documents, sustaining consent

I started visiting slums in 2012, after personal introductions from labor leaders whom I had interviewed for a previous research on collective protest. From that time, I continued to visit slums intermittently and participated in protests and political activities with its resident-activists, who are mostly members or affiliates of the KADAMAY.

KADAMAY is an alliance of urban poor associations, workers' and semi-workers' groups, women's and youth organizations based in urban poor communities. In 2009, KADAMAY called for policies directly benefitting the urban poor, including: a moratorium on all forms of demolitions, legal protection for the informal sector; price control and subsidies on basic commodities especially rice; accessible social services particularly education, housing and health; and an across-the-board wage hike. The alliance is engaged in struggles for what it considers are the long-term solutions to urban poverty, such as: the termination of automatic foreign debt

appropriation in the national budget, genuine agrarian reform, and national industrialization.

The KADAMAY chapter located in the site of the research where these reflections are drawn is struggling for their right to adequate housing and development. They protest the PPP project that is resulting in their eviction to off-city resettlement. They advocate for an on-site slum upgrading: “*Kung gusto kaming tulungan ng gobyerno, dito kami sa lugar namin tulungan paunlarin*” [‘If the government wants to help us, here in our place is where they need to help us develop’].

Since the research dealt with a currently contested project, it was sensible to gain access to relevant documents and to build contact with state agencies before immersion in the slum, lest association with subaltern activists result in limited access to state documents. In the process of requesting state documents, institutions were informed of the research objective of ‘analyzing urban planning and its effects on impoverished citizens’. I always signed as a university instructor and a doctoral research fellow of a foreign university as this social position merited greater consideration by the authorities. The foregrounding of my academic credentials indeed served me well. As Victor Muzvidziwa had argued, one needs an ‘appropriate mask’ when talking to the state, and, given multiple audiences and needs, as part of a “multiple native” strategy when studying communities at home (2004:311).

I did not secure formal written consent at the community and individual level. With their recent exposure to state processes and legal documents on evictions and relocation, requesting for a written consent would have been inappropriate and insensitive. It would serve only to protect personal interests and my academic requirements [i.e. ethics clearance], and as evidence in case of legal suit. I had encountered slum dwellers, including leaders, who could not adequately read or write. While the contents of the informed consent form can be verbally explained and signed with a thumb mark, I aligned with the dictum that trust should be earned every day and consent renewed every day (Zavisca 2008).³ Participation in the public lives of urban poor activists, particularly in protests, is a way to gain trust and acceptance of people in conflict (Mathers & Novelli 2007). Particularly for groups engaged in confrontational politics and subjected to heightened state surveillance and criminalization, consent is best sustained through continued participation in subaltern struggles (Urla & Helepololei 2014).

³ The absence of a written informed consent form was explained to the university ethics review board for a research presentation grant approval.

Informed consent was obtained on three levels – local government, social movement organization (SMO), and individual. The Department of Interior and Local Government and the barangay officers were formally informed in writing. They verbally consented to the research and of my presence in the slum community. This was critical for my personal security given the incidents of harassment suffered by the local activists.

During a meeting organized for the purpose of soliciting approval for my research, one of the activist-organizers explained that I differ from the usual organizers that they have encountered in their community in that I had a different objective, but that my research objective overlapped with the advocacy of the KADAMAY activists. KADAMAY is one of the several organizations working in the community. I requested that I be allowed to accompany the local urban poor leaders and participate in selected activities. Since I will be staying in the community for an extended period, I mentioned I needed a place to stay where I could be secure from theft and more from the violence that local activist leaders suffer, including harassment from the private security guards employed by the PPP contractors. When I could, I also promised assistance, both to the community and to my host. The local leaders approved of my research and eagerly offered to participate in it. The chairperson of the local alliance offered her home, which was strategic as other leaders and activists often visited to consult and discuss matters with her. In addition to verbal consent obtained from the national office and local chapter of KADAMAY, I also obtained verbal informed consent from local activists when invited to participate as ‘life-historians’. After gathering a substantial amount of documents from various agencies, and securing consent from KADAMAY national leaders and local leaders, I began immersing in the slum community.

Confronting asymmetric positionality. Constant entry and exit into and from the community, arising from the proximity of subaltern and academic spaces, made unlearning of privilege challenging. I lived in the slum community yet I had to pull-out once a week in order to teach at the university. This constantly reminded me, and the community, of difference in social positions and spaces. It took quite a long time to convince the community not to call me “professor”. Eventually, they called me “Prop.”, which is short for professor but much more personal.

There was one particular instance that made me realize the complexity of subaltern exclusions. One of the female subaltern-historians was invited to attend a high-level multisectoral gathering for an anti-corruption campaign.

Except for the fact that the urban poor needed to be represented, she knew very little of the agenda and participants. The attendees were well-known leaders and personalities of progressive national organizations, church (Protestant and Catholic), academe and civil society organizations. They met to devise a national campaign against widespread government corruption. Some participants spoke English. She did not speak a word during the meeting. At the end of the activity, she asked permission to pick up the empty water bottles to exchange for cash. She could have asked for money from the financially-well off participants, I was sure they would give happily, yet did not. I had seen activists take home food and request for donations to cover transportation costs. I had seen poor individuals collect trash during clean-ups. But that was my first time to see a participant in a high-level multisectoral meeting gathering trash to resell. I overcame my surprise and initial hesitation to help her gather the bottles. We emptied the garbage sacks and segregated the bottles from the leftover food with our hands. Upon arrival at their home, she gave the bottles to her grandson for reselling to a local junk shop for 20 pesos a kilo. “*Nadamay ka tuloy*” [‘You got unwittingly involved’, she said.

While seemingly trivial, this experience was important instruction on the extent of our asymmetrical positionality. It was neither the picking of trash nor public transport of waste bottles that was difficult for me. It was the performance of two divergent ‘habitus’— the expected conduct of middle-class academics as opposed to those of the urban poor. In the same space, I needed to act as an academic *and* as a subaltern. Spectators expect different behaviors from individuals belonging to different social positions. In order to contribute to subaltern struggles, Scheper-Hughes (1995) reminds us that we must “afflict our comfortable assumptions about what it means to be human,” and in particular a middle-class researcher. I imagine that this navigation was more difficult for my interlocutor. She had to politically represent the urban poor in a space occupied by the middle-class which largely used the grammar of the formally-educated.

The research agenda and protracted struggle

Unlearning academic privilege more importantly may require the reconfiguration of the research agenda and timeline. In 2014, I witnessed the ‘defeat’ of a community barricade against state-sponsored demolition and forced relocation. The homes of my friends were destroyed. Their families were in ruin, shattered by the very institution that was supposed to help provide housing for the poor. And there I was, writing and recording my field

notes. This traumatic event forced me to reflect on and ask myself what my research was for. As I struggled to make sense of the violence of forced eviction and subaltern resistance, I realized I had to better understand neoliberal urban exclusion.

From the objective of understanding subaltern resistance, the research was scaled up to explicate the exclusionary technologies of elite-led gentrification in the Philippine context (Ortega 2016) using the slum and city development project as a case study. As land and shelter are commodified, only the shanty owners or sharers who have the capacity to invest in socialized housing were qualified for relocation. The elderly, homeless, renters and youth – the poor and more vulnerable in the slum population – were generally considered ineligible.⁴ This policy is reflective of the city policy where only the ‘productive citizens’ are qualified for state assistance. According to the city shelter plan where the slum is located, “*may pabahay sa mga may hanapbuhay*” [‘there is housing for those with work’], there is a “home for the responsible and productive” resident.⁵

In the aftermath of a successful 2010 community barricade, the state was compelled to open talks on off-site resettlement using the frame of people’s proposals⁶ and to offer higher financial concessions for ‘voluntary demolitions’⁷. With the opening of dialogues with the state, KADAMAY activists were faced with the task of negotiations within an anti-neoliberal framework— to assert a right to the city for *all* the slum dwellers in the community. For effective engagement, this required familiarity with urban

⁴ This is based on the census conducted by the housing agency, and subsequent relocation practices. Different subaltern organizations sometimes find ways of including disqualified (based on the census) residents, including renters.

⁵ According to the city shelter plan, a minimum of ₱8,000 per month household income is necessary to afford a at least ₱1,600 monthly amortization for an in-city housing program in 2010 (QC Local Government 2010). In 2009, the Philippine Statistical Authority defined that households earning above ₱7,030 monthly are non-poor (PSA 2015).

⁶ The people’s plan is the output of a bottoms-up planning process where slum dwellers, with the assistance of non-government organizations and some sympathetic sections of government, collectively plan and implement their own on-site upgrading or near-site resettlement as an alternative to the National Housing Authority’s relocation programs. Due to the high price of land, the monthly amortizations for in-city housing are oftentimes prohibitive to a substantial portion of the urban poor families.

⁷ Voluntary demolitions happen when shanty owners or sharers agree to demolish their own homes in exchange for meager financial compensation and/or relocation.

planning and housing knowledge, processes, and actors. Up until that time, KADAMAY's energies and capacities were focused on community barricades to defend against heightened forced evictions and demolitions. Given this new political imperative, local activists implicitly requested that the research be adapted to their struggles.

Engaging in these new political demands necessarily pushed back the research timeline. Part of the output in this endeavor were discussions detailing legal processes, and the documentary attachments with regard to demolition protocols and neoliberal urban planning. Learning these knowledges with the urban subaltern called for a mode of communication within the context of subaltern struggles and grammar, in order to effectively develop social movement capacities, such that the community may effectively engage state processes and actors, specifically the threat of demolition in this case.

As a result of the learnings, the demolition of another slum community that KADAMAY was helping organize was delayed by almost a year. We, local activists and myself, acutely realized how neoliberal rationalities and technologies are deployed to grant differentiated citizenships and weaken collective capacities for resistance. The research realignment, thus, led to a better epistemological understanding of urban subalternity.

Bourdieu recognized the slow and difficult "conversion of the whole person" (2003:292), a journey to forget oneself that is required in reflective research. He, however, said little about the consequent feelings of guilt and loss, and the reframing of academic itinerary. This re-orientation process, where the divide between the self and other is blurred, entails simultaneous and complex "emotional, political and analytical labor" (Castillo 2015). Feminists advise the embracing of this uneasiness that accompanies the blurring of boundaries between the academe and participant's communities. Indeed, engaged ethnographers are "simultaneously an insider, outsider, both and neither" (Sultana 2007). In this "space of betweenness" researchers can begin to uncover and understand subaltern realities and politics, and link these everyday exclusions to structural domination to develop a politics of engagement (Katz 1992, 1994). Within such difficult situations, engaged ethnographers are advised to "avoid positioning ourselves as authoritative voices" (Sieder 2013:243).

Facilitating discussions on state engagement and of how to challenge neoliberal urban planning was not without difficulty and discomfort.

Particularly challenging was the community's need for practical solutions to the threat of evictions within conditions of fractured slum unities, amid their recognition of the protracted nature of the struggle for livelihood and habitation rights for all. Specifically, the people's proposal was discussed as a strategy for on-site upgrading advocacy and community organizing, in relation to the community barricades as defense for their community. In all these discussions, the SMOs [social movement organization] and community processes of decision-making were respected, and my role was to raise questions and offer clarification and advice for legal and state processes.

Reframing 'citizenship' as an ethico-political intervention

Engaged ethnography may also advocate for the inclusion of more vulnerable populations within subaltern communities— a “reconfiguration of subjectivities” (Sletto & Nygren 2016:974). Ethical duty requires advocating for the recognition of the rights of all individuals, particularly those whose rights are not fully recognized by the state, as well as those who constitute relatively *more* marginalized sections within a marginalized community. Renters and the homeless are often rendered voiceless and are among the most marginalized (Davis 2006) in slums.

After a 'defeat' of a community barricade in 2014, a serious collective assessment of changing political configurations and state approaches led to the realization of the increasing number of renters and homeless in the slum community, and their lack of organization. As a result, the renters and homeless were organized. A campaign advocating for the recognition of their right to adequate housing was launched.

In the Philippines, the socialized housing agency often deals only with families with sufficient capacity to pay and with structure-owners, i.e. those among slum dwellers with a shanty for clearing. Some of the local activists, who had internalized pseudo property rights in the slum, based on length of stay and initial occupation of space, at first resisted the recognition of equal rights for renters and homeless. Within neoliberalism, 'responsible' citizens and markets are expected to fill in the inadequacies of the state in terms of human rights promotion. Through a shared assessment of a political setback in which the scholar-activist was involved, a 'counter-hegemonic construction of responsibility' (Sletto & Nygren 2016:979) emerged. Those previously not considered 'productive' citizens with housing rights are recognized and now advocated for by the activists.

While academics define and justify the boundaries of their research, engaged ethnography may require realignment of research parameters to take account of layers of exclusion and differentiated citizenships, and the struggles and sufferings of diverse and more marginalized individuals.

Temporal and differential aspects of ‘Do no harm’

The principle of non-maleficence requires researchers to minimize risk for research participants. When differentiated risks and benefits accrue to specific individuals and groups, a situation not uncommon in spaces of conflict, the researcher’s interventions and ethical decisions become necessarily political. This is compounded when these risks and benefits manifest in different timelines. The decision is multifaceted: Does it lie solely in the hands of the researcher? Should it be the individual or the collective right that is privileged (Murphy & Dingwall 2001)? When the researcher’s personal safety is entangled in the process, whose welfare or risk weigh heavier? How can scholars contribute to preventing and mitigating harmful unintended consequences?

The researcher’s differential access to state data may produce an ethical dilemma when confronted by the people’s need for information. Academics generally get better access to documents and state spaces than subalterns. This information access affects non-maleficence. When consent for access to sensitive yet public information was given for “research purposes only”, its release to a confrontational public could become a critical ethical decision, particularly when such data affects hundreds of lives and in situations where confrontational publics are often denied access. The ethical responsibility involves contemplating who owns the information, and thus, from whom should the consent be obtained. It involves the weighing of benefits and risks accruing to the researcher, state authority, and subaltern communities. This in turn requires a good understanding of the politics and history of subaltern lack of access to information.

A particular dilemma is noteworthy in my research: An official of a state institution withheld timely data on an impending demolition. The information was public and notification of affected informal settler families legally mandated.

Forced to rely on unofficial and unverified sources from familial and social networks, KADAMAY engaged in a “*bantayang-bayan*” [community watch], where members took turns watching for signs of an impending demolition for 24-hours a day, weeks before the actual demolition. This

resulted in weakened physical resistance during the actual demolition. By the time the demolition was conducted, much of the community's meager resources and energies had been spent in the community watch.

En route to the slum days before the demolition, the said official however informed me unofficially and by phone of the 'impending' forced eviction upon my 'word-of-honor' promise that I will not release such information to the community. No specific date was provided. When I reached the community, leaders claimed to have received an email from an unidentified insider from the state agency confirming the date of the demolition. The said email contained better information than what was revealed to me. While the ethical dilemma – to reveal or not confidential yet critical public information – became moot, the incident highlighted how a researcher's decisions over information access can mean the loss of subaltern homes and lives. In closely contested situations, the timely and reliable information shared by the activist-researcher could become crucial for political struggles.

In another instance, one government worker who said that he used to be a member of a progressive student organization in his younger days, released to me critical information which at that time was unavailable to the community. He asked for anonymity. This information could be of great consequence for the lives of hundreds of urban poor families. However, it was unofficial and unverified. Critical yet false information sometimes circulates in slums facing evictions, which heightens the people's sense of insecurity. While coming from what may have been a reliable source for the researcher, the release of the said information into the community could have compromised the scholar's integrity if proven incorrect. Attempts toward verification in relevant offices proved futile. A collective dialogue with trusted and affected leaders resulted in a calculated community response which included validation, and contingency action in case of accurate information. In this instance, the community, and not the scholar alone, was involved with the ethical decision, as information was public and critical, yet unverified.

The recognition of different temporalities of specific spaces in relation to harm is also critical. Let me cite what seems to me is a generic case. Sympathetic academics offer services to poor communities, usually as part of their course requirements. These are very much welcomed by communities. In one community I worked with, on-site slum upgrading plans were developed by an undergraduate class with the intention of helping the

community strengthen an on-site development advocacy. Informed consent was secured from the local organization. The outputs were explained as not based on actual community needs such as the number of beneficiaries, household incomes, intra-community politics, funding sources, etc. (this would have required a longer time period for accurate data gathering and was outside of the class objectives). The students produced aesthetic representation using colored three-dimensional drawings to on-site possibilities. These raised community expectations.

While the plans facilitated the community advocacy, the complex process of developing and implementing actual on-site people's plans, and legal impediments were not explained to the community. No assistance on the required organizational and technical capacities were provided. Several months later, these plans were submitted by the local leaders to some relevant state institutions. The leaders used the class outputs as evidence of the possibility of on-site upgrading. The community did not receive any positive response.

Scholar-activist interventions must be located within timeframes that allow a better understanding of subalternity and for researcher accountability to minimize future harm to vulnerable communities. These interventions may define community expectations and affect prospective political struggles. Helping develop a subaltern organization's capacity for effective on-site struggle requires the scholar-activist to have longer engagement with the community. Without extended engagement, giving serious consideration to subaltern timelines in the face of academic and funding deadlines, even well-intended academic interventions may result in unfavorable unintended consequences.

The distinctness of subaltern temporalities, capacities and constraints calls for continuous reflection on decisions, and prolonged academic-activist engagement to ensure the mitigation of potential unintended harm. Even when the research has ended (if it ever ends), a scholar-activist's responsibility to the community remains.

On equalizing representation and access to researcher' resources

The competing representations of community welfare and demands by different local organizations often puts the researcher in a compromising position in terms of equalizing benefits. Academics often possess more symbolic and economic resources relative to the subaltern.

Because the study celebrates subaltern lives and resistance, my host and local leader's life-story was the first object for documentation. Her life was a critical fulcrum upon which the community's sufferings and aspirations were channeled to broader progressive organizations. Most of the time during fieldwork, I was accompanying her. In some of these undertakings, I offered to pay for our transportation and daily food expenses to avoid being a burden. This became a source of criticism from other local leaders. As a response to the criticism, I visited other leader's homes and participated in other activities. I was reminded of my ethical duty to give equal chance of participation and not overly burden subaltern representation on my host. The criticism was contingent on a perception that constructs the researcher not only as an academic and as a potential source of symbolic and financial capital, but also as a sympathetic activist, a warm body, that can aid in their struggle.

Other urban poor groups from other slum communities began asking for my personal assistance for their communities: development of on-site proposals, participation in fact-finding missions to expose different forms of harassment, and campaigns against forced evictions.

Within heterogenous subaltern communities, this equalization of benefits – the lending of the symbolic and material resources of the researcher, no matter how limited, to all marginalized groups in a given space – is not a straightforward affair. When some subaltern organizations engage with neoliberal governance to protect their families and members, the rationalities of property ownership and market-based resource distribution are inevitably internalized. In the process, they unwittingly become transmission mechanisms for the exclusion of other subalterns who question property rights, and the financialization and commodification of housing (Rolnik 2013). In such a situation, the engagement of the researcher, no matter how careful and well-intentioned, is necessarily caught and embedded within the complex web of community conflict and competition among subaltern groups. Here, I distinctly felt that stringent academic ethical guides were of little help.

In one instance, while participating in a protest march within the community, one of the leaders of a local homeowner's organization (HOA) whom I had previously interviewed, pulled me aside and asked point blank, "*Anong ginagawa mo diyan?*" ['What are you doing there?']. She was apparently referring to my participation in a protest of a group she perceived as contrary to their cause of off-site in-city relocation under a people's plan

framework. Surprised and confounded, I simply said that I needed to observe the activities of different groups to complete the story of the slum community's struggle.

The decision to focus my energies on one organization was based on personal political conviction. This focus allowed for emergence of trust and camaraderie stemming from shared struggle— necessary to collect stories of struggle within harsh conditions of state violence. In-depth narratives from the grassroots activists must supplement the official political lines of SMOs.

If sharing of the research burden and benefits including access to researcher resources is to be equalized among subaltern groups, then the intent to participate mainly in one organization's struggles necessarily excluded others. Yet without the focus on a particular organization, I would have been pulled in different directions by the demands of competing political organizations and the research will not have been able to access the intimate life-histories of local activists. Yet, the desire to contribute to social change and produce an epistemologically complex understanding of suffering is what often sustains engaged ethnographers.

Representing complexity

The textual representation resulting from the political alignment with a particular group must deal with Gayatri Spivak's (1995) reminder, on the challenges of representation for counterhegemonic projects amid subaltern heterogeneity. Indeed, within neoliberal exclusions "we need universals to produce critical readings of social injustices" (Chakrabarty 2000:254), with the critical reminder that homogenous representations of heterogeneous urban subalterns, even if written with sympathy, may silence other subaltern identities and politics (Small 2015). A representation of a marginal group based on the stories of one subgroup may not capture the intricacies of community struggles, and thus forward a political narrative that is not sufficiently grounded in complex subaltern realities.

Yet, with the focus of ethnographical research and political engagement on one group within a heterogenous subaltern community, how can the written narrative represent subalternity sufficiently?

When the state opened spaces for negotiation within the frame of property rights (i.e. property ownership as outweighing the right to adequate housing and development thus necessarily evicted the slum dwellers), several HOAs [homeowners' organizations] who had participated in a community barricade

were constrained to shift from struggling for on-site slum upgrading to in-city relocation under a people's plan framework. This shift was largely a response to the state offering of subsidies and technical assistance, and the assurance of no forced demolitions as long as organizations withdrew demanding for on-site housing and no longer protested against the development project. While these organizations wanted to remain in the same slum location, they viewed the acceptance of community-planned off-site in-city relocation as also necessary in order to secure decent habitation for *their* members' families.

People's plans⁸ enable slum dwellers to secure resettlement terms that are generally better than what government may offer. Such plans however rely on members' capacity to pay (for land and building cost), thus necessarily excluding the poorer members of the slum community. Confronting the state for on-site upgrading to preserve access to livelihood and social services of slum dwellers were deemed to have little chance of success. This made KADAMAY's reliance on slum community unities for adequate housing and development for all quite difficult to sustain.

The challenge of political organizing for sustainable urban poor struggles necessarily deals with such fragmented sovereignties and dynamic unities on the ground. For instance, I heard comments from those who pursue off-site people's plans that they respect and consider to be correct the other groups' struggles for on-site upgrading. They even consider them to be allies in certain struggles, unless positions are directly in contradiction. However, they said, they are pursuing a different strategy for their families given shifts in state approaches.

Simply referring to these different community responses within a complicity–resistance binary misrecognizes how subjectivities, social relations and community politics are penetrated (Theodossopoulos 2014) by neoliberalism. Urban ethnographers Bjorn Sletto and Anja Nygren (2016), observed the paradox of community empowerment within neoliberal state engagement: On the one hand, this may lead to internalization of the rationalities of 'responsibilization', where the poor are constructed, within neoliberal approaches, as needing proper guidance to take responsibility as productive citizens for the private provision of public goods, and consequently results in the exclusion of resistant subjectivities. On the other hand, this may also provide spaces for critical collective discussion and the

⁸ Please see Footnote 6.

generation of emancipatory knowledge for communities, which may result in identification of the structural sources of grassroots problems and demand for accountability and reform on the part of the state. Thus, the activist-scholar's politics and mode of engagement must necessarily be contextualized within changing community micropolitics, where intra-subaltern contestations reflect constrained and shifting strategies in response to neoliberal governmental technologies.

The textual representations we write as engaged ethnographers must be viewed as part of a larger story—a complex subaltern history in construction and of struggle, situated in changing neoliberal governmental rationalities and techniques. In this subaltern history, the subjects have dynamic, fragmented, sometimes ambiguous, but no less politically significant identities (Biehl & McKay 2012) in the struggle to overcome subalternity.

Opening up scholar-activist capital, space, and time

Activist-scholarship offers reciprocity and helps build solidarities with subaltern research participants (Hale 2008). To ensure sustainability, this requires that we struggle to open up not only personal resources and academic itineraries, but, more importantly, the university itself to subaltern struggles. The proximity of the university to slums affords a unique opportunity for extended engagement with subalterns.

Fieldwork that partners with communities for collective dialogue and empowerment is necessarily challenging because traditional approaches to crafting research objectives and design, and the required time and resources, are superseded by the actual needs of the community. At the onset and during the research, the agenda is determined by both the researcher and the community, and the design (methodology, instruments, and fieldwork time) constantly must be reflected upon as longer time and greater resources are often entailed. Engaged ethnographers must incorporate such eventualities in research planning and offer acceptable justification to funding agencies and universities.

Apart from time and resources, engaged approaches may also require a different research skill set (Butler 2013). As marginalized communities continue to struggle for human rights and self-determination, they may request for continued participation from scholar-activists in advocacy and capability-building activities. This requires lending academic symbolic capital to subaltern struggles. It may include writing op-ed pieces, conducting training, facilitating consultation on legal and state processes,

engaging in resource generation, speaking in conferences, media appearances, and even court testimonies (Sieder 2013). In these performances, activist-scholars must resist the temptation of acting as authorities to testify on urban subalternity (Gounis 1996).

On occasions where the engaged ethnographer takes the stage, the challenge is not simply of ensuring credible and genuine representation of the communities' interests but of reframing public debate towards understanding subaltern suffering and resiliency. This requires translating subaltern knowledge into the mode of communication of academic gatekeepers (Goode 2013, Racelis 2014), or into legalese that lawyers and policymakers understand. Such is not an easy task. Accommodating elite and state grammar may redound to misrepresenting or discrediting the position of marginalized communities, especially when their existence challenges the very concept of property rights and legal assumptions. The very existence of homes in the slum is a violation of law. And, the slum economy is inclusive of the poor, as it creatively merges formal and informal livelihoods. Poor vendors with very little capital can earn a decent living daily by encroaching and selling services and cheap goods (rags, food, water, etc.) in spaces frequented by workers. Advocating for on-site upgrading and the inclusion of informal livelihood in urban development thus requires challenging property rights (and notions of bourgeois civility) and reframing as more important the right to development of urban poor communities.

To ensure that political engagements are sustained and do not overly burden individual academics, the university must be made more accessible to the subaltern. The academe is indeed a public space. Yet it largely remains inaccessible to the poor, despite continuous efforts of progressive teachers to link with marginalized sectors. Urban poor residents generally find entering academic spaces difficult unless they have been directly invited as resource speakers. The interests and struggles of subalterns are not very visible within the academe. Nonetheless, the academe does offer venues for subaltern representation and partnership. With continued engagement and solidarity, the scholar's resources and symbolic capital can be utilized in struggles for more just and democratic regimes (Mathers & Novelli 2007).

Upon consultation with progressive academics and activists, and as a direct result of this research, a course on "Slums and Southern cities" was developed and offered as an elective in the university where I belong. The course focuses on the difficulties of slum populations and celebrates their political and collective struggles. Part of the proceeds from film showings

and short theater performances in the university – the costs saved from the volunteer labor of slum dwellers, students, and faculty – was donated to help build a roving urban poor community theater.

In the case of the Slums and Southern Cities course, student output proved to be useful in helping communities, especially as these were located within the researcher-professor's continuous engagement. In one class, one of the course requirements was the collection of land use documents to expose students to urban research. The class presented these documents to affected urban poor communities and organizations. These documents were used by some of the communities to understand their tenure situations and the site plans of the local government, thus allowing early crafting of community campaigns against evictions and for on-site upgrading. Because communication was open and the university spatially-proximate to the slum communities, local leaders were able to request assistance in understanding the land use plans.

Revealing state processes to urban subalterns – as citizens bearing rights to information and political participation – has a critical democratization and empowerment potential. Such efforts, no matter how miniscule, are important. They make the effects of capitalism more visible (Katz 1994).

Engaged ethnographic writing is necessarily critical, aiming to generate response from academics and policymakers. Conservative academic circles and policy-makers who claim expertise and employ top-down approaches to planning and development may not welcome methodologies and research findings that partner with communities they largely assumed to be 'uneducated and unproductive' and who 'simply do not understand what is better for them.' The ideal situation is one of lively debate that may reframe public perceptions. However, it may result in the outright exclusion of activist-scholars, engaged ethnographers included.

With decrease in state support, as universities become more dependent on the private sector, the neoliberalization of the university (Larner & Heron 2005) subjects academics to accrediting agencies and market-based measures which marginalize those who use engaged and politically-committed methodologies, and who advocate for critical reflexivity in research. It is reasonable to expect, says Judith Goode that "new paradigms create 'noise' and communicative distance between us and the more literal straightforward analysis" (2013:88). Committed scholars must endure these criticisms as these are part of the process of opening and re-evaluating the academe

(Bourdieu 2004). And accept with hope that reforming the university for subaltern partnership will take a long time.

Epilogue

When subaltern populations struggle to protect their homes and livelihood, and where they endure fragmented socialities and face competing claims among other subaltern groups, the ethical choices of an engaged ethnographer become evidently political, necessarily privileging a particular representation of space, being and temporality, and in turn affecting access to different knowledges and spaces. Within complex urban subaltern politics, I relied for guidance less on academic ethical standards and more on the constant reflexivity of personal political convictions and democratic dialogue with the partner subaltern-historian both for epistemological complexity and ethical conduct.

The power of engaged ethnography for the scholar-activist does not lie in witnessing exclusion alone, it is contingent on recognition of asymmetries in knowledge and ‘capital’ (in Bourdieu’s sense). The responsibility is not one of speaking for subalterns, but of lending knowledge, time, and status so that the subaltern may be listened to— both by a subaltern and a bourgeois audience. By working collaboratively and sharing knowledge (Katz 1994) gained through research relationships based on ethical responsibility, empathy, mutuality, and respect (Staeheli & Lawson 1994), a more effective subaltern front against urban exclusion may hopefully be forged with academics.

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