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“...delivered from the lie of being truth”: The Affective Force of Disinformation, Stickiness and Dissensus in Randy Ribay’s Patron Saints of Nothing

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“. . . delivered from the lie of being truth”:¹
The Affective Force of Disinformation,
Stickiness and Dissensus in Randy
Ribay’s *Patron Saints of Nothing*

ABSTRACT

Waged in 2016, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte’s war on drugs has claimed over 20,000 lives according to human rights groups. The Duterte administration’s own count is significantly lower: around 6,000. The huge discrepancy between the government’s official count and that of arguably more impartial organizations about something as concretely material as body count is symptomatic of how disinformation is central to the Duterte administration and how it can sustain the approval of the majority of the Philippine electorate. We suggest that Duterte’s populist politics generates what Boler and Davis (2018) call “affective feedback loops,” which create emotional and informational ecosystems that facilitate smooth algorithmic governance. We turn to *Patron Saints of Nothing*, a recently published novel by Randy Ribay about a Filipino-American who goes back to the Philippines to uncover the truth behind the death of his cousin. Jay’s journey into the “heart of darkness” as a “hyphenated” individual (Filipino-American) allows him access to locally networked subjectivities but not its affective entanglements. Throughout the novel, he encounters numerous versions of the circumstances of Jun’s demise and the truth remains elusive at the end of the novel. We argue that despite the constant distortion of fact and fiction in the novel, what remains relatively stable or “sticky” throughout the novel are the letters from Jun Reguero that Jay carries with him back to the Philippines. We suggest that these letters can potentially serve as a form of “dissensus” that challenges the constant redistribution of the sensible in the novel.

Keywords: affective feedback loops, stickiness, dissensus, Randy Ribay, *Patron Saints of Nothing*.

¹ From Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* (222).

INTRODUCTION

On 22 September 2020, Nathaniel Gleicher, Facebook's Head of Security Policy, announced that the platform had deactivated accounts and pages that were responsible for disseminating fake news and slander that conveniently targeted individuals and groups who were perceived to be against the Philippine government (Gleicher).² Facebook found that some of those accounts were linked to the Philippine National Police and the Philippine Army while others were linked to individuals residing in China (Gleicher; Elemia).³ In response, President Rodrigo Duterte threatened to stop Facebook from operating in the Philippines, saying: "We allow you to operate here hoping that you could help us also. Now if the government cannot espouse or advocate something which is for the good of the people, then what is your purpose here in my country?" (qtd. in Tomacruz). Duterte's government has been active in blurring the lines between truth and lies, making it difficult for independent agencies to determine the actual death toll of his violent war on drugs. According to human rights groups, this war has already claimed over 20,000 lives (Human Rights Watch). However, the Duterte administration's own body count is significantly lower: around 6,000 (Lema). This disparity indicates that either the police are underreporting or misrepresenting these cases, or that the opposition is highly inflating these numbers. This discrepancy is symptomatic of how disinformation is central to the Duterte administration and how it can sustain the approval of the people.

It has been argued that this atmosphere of disinformation, created by government-backed internet troll farms, has been present in the Philippines since Duterte was elected in office back in 2016 through his promise to wage a relentless war against criminality, corruption and drugs for the security of the nation (Balod and Hameleers; Ong and Cabañes; Dressel and Bonoan). This is indicative of how disinformation is central to the endurance of Duterte's populist politics, which is compounded by the fact that the country's top intelligence chief is personally spreading fake news (Talabong).⁴ The manifestly political and aesthetic implications of the prevailing atmosphere of disinformation is succinctly represented by Randy Ribay's *Patron Saints of Nothing*, a novel about Jay Reguerro,

² Nathaniel Gleicher reported that Facebook "removed 155 accounts, 11 Pages, 9 Groups and 6 Instagram accounts" for "coordinated inauthentic behavior on behalf of a foreign or government entity."

³ A ranking officer of the Philippine Army was named as an operator of inauthentic accounts.

⁴ Alex Montagudo, the Director General of the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, was grilled at a congressional budget hearing for "sharing photos that spread false information on his Facebook page" (Talabong).

a hyphenated subject who goes to the Philippines to uncover the truth behind the death of his cousin in the Philippine Drug War. Jay attempts to reconcile the multiple stories of his cousin's circumstances with the police's version that he is a drug addict who deserved to die for the security of the people. Our security concern is that the government institutions who should be upholding the truth are paradoxically the very same thing that endangers it through a propagandistic campaign of disinformation. What is also evident here is that there is a "security and intelligence mechanism" that presupposes the content in certain cultural texts (Gearon and Wynne-Davies 756) through a construction of "certain truths that reproduce social and political evils" (Zembylas 81). The scenario we described above represents what Jacques Rancière calls the "distribution of the sensible," which pertains to an "aesthetic regime" that dictates what is politically visible and invisible (*The Politics of Aesthetics* 7–9).

In *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Jacques Rancière suggests that art and politics are inseparable, arguing that art is inherently political and that politics in itself is a manifestation of aesthetics. Rancière coins the term "distribution of the sensible" to describe what is politically acceptable to the greater majority in a given "aesthetic regime" (*The Politics of Aesthetics* 18). He argues that most artistic practices in the political sphere shape what the "distribution of the sensible" is in a given political space. For example, the atmosphere of disinformation in the Philippines represents a "distribution of the sensible" where falsehoods are subverted into truths and vice-versa. Jacques Rancière proposes that radical politics and true resistance is possible in a particular "distribution of the sensible" through what he calls "dissensus" which is "the demonstration (manifestation) of a gap in the sensible" (*Dissensus* 38). That is to say that dissensus is the manifestation of real politics that challenges the idea of consensus in the political sphere (Rancière, *Dissensus* 37–39). Dissensus occurs when forms of resistance do not merely reiterate the distribution of the sensible. When Rancière uses the word sensible, he refers to what is perceived to be acceptable and logical for members of a particular society (Rancière, *Dissensus* 36). In this light, we follow Divya P. Tolia-Kelly who propounds that a redistribution of the sensible is possible by disrupting "affective logics" (126) established by the regime of disinformation as represented in *Patron Saints of Nothing*.

We suggest that the "distribution of the sensible" in Duterte's populist politics operates on what Sara Ahmed calls the "affective politics of fear" (*The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 76). The attachments of these affects and emotions shape how Duterte's disinformation campaign is perceived by the public, allowing it to package falsehoods as truths. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed explores how "emotions can move

through the movement or circulation of objects” (11). She elaborates that “[s]uch objects become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension” (11). As Ahmed would argue, stickiness pertains to how affects such as fear and happiness attach themselves to objects such as images, posters and narratives. Stickiness also points to how the affects that got stuck to an object also stick to other objects by association. The idea of stickiness helps to shape the relationship between objects of fear, and their capacity to affect other objects and bodies by “expand[ing] the mobility of some bodies and contain[ing] others” (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 79).

The result is that a certain affective politics of fear is made apparent “on the structural possibility that the terrorist ‘could be anyone and anywhere’” (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* 79). In other words, certain representations of the other (i.e. a foreigner, criminals and undesirables) have affects attached to them, and in turn, have the capacity to produce affects of fear. In the novel, there are numerous “objects” that stick to Jay, which are letters from Jun, social media accounts, and a sheet of paper that contains a list of suspected drug users and dealers. We argue that the affective stickiness of these objects shapes how a networked subject perceives what is true or not. Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness* uses the idea of stickiness to describe how happiness attaches itself to objects, turning these objects into what she calls “happy objects” which are basically things that “affect us in the best way” (22). We argue that the letters from Jun are “happy objects” that prevent Jay from accepting versions of truth that are not compatible with the happy memories the letters represent. The letters are affectively stickier for Jay, and hinder him from accepting that Jun is a mere drug addict in Duterte’s “distribution of the sensible.” Ahmed’s concept of stickiness has recently been used by Diaz-Fernandez and Adrienne Evans as they explore the gendered aspect of university drinking cultures in the UK through affect theory (745–46). They theorize the concept of “sticky atmospheres,” which suggests that some spaces, as a whole, affectively shape the actions of individuals (752). Tanner et al. also use Ahmed’s thought in critiquing the nutritional practices of Australian primary schools. They argue that negative emotions “stick” to food objects (1–2) and this produces “affective collateral realities” that negatively impact children. These scholars generally “stick” Ahmed’s thought to various cultural and social objects. However, our approach differs from these aforementioned scholars; we employ the concept of stickiness beyond its normative applications as we speculate how affectively sticky objects can be a manifestation of radical politics through the thought of Jacques Rancière.

We argue that Randy Ribay's *Patron Saints of Nothing* represents the affective dimensions of disinformation present in the Age of Duterte. In particular, we look at how a hyphenated individual like Jay Reguero navigates through the overlapping networks of disinformation as a "networked subject" (Boler and Davis 82). Boler and Davis formulate the concept of "networked subjectivity" and the "affective feedback loop" in their article "The Affective Politics of the 'Post-truth' Era: Feeling Rules and Networked Subjectivity." They examine how affect and emotions were able to polarize both sides of the political spectrum in the US to the point that the notion of truth has become relative and subjective. Boler and Davis suggest that digital media is able to algorithmically and affectively create "networked subjects" (82) through "affective feedback loops" (83). They write that "affective feedback loops describe the emotional and affective circuit of relationality between human and information in computer-mediated environments" (83). Boler and Davis argue that this "affective feedback loop" is integral in "shaping the networked subjectivity fundamental to computational propaganda and algorithmic governance" (82). That is to say that an individual's affective response to a political post on Facebook and Twitter takes primacy over a logical response, thereby shaping how one perceives truth. We draw from Boler and Davis to productively speculate on how a "networked subject" like Jay navigates through an "aesthetic regime" shaped by Duterte's apparatus of algorithmic disinformation. In *Patron Saints of Nothing*, Jay Reguero deals with several versions of "sticky" truths as a "networked subject." In effect, he becomes trapped in numerous "affective feedback loops" during his stay in the Philippines. We also explore how a hyphenated "networked subject" deals with numerous "sticky" encounters and "sticky" truths in Duterte's age of disinformation. We take our cue from Rancière's suggestion that aesthetic representations "rework the frame of our perceptions and the dynamism of our affects" (*Dissensus* 151). In the succeeding paragraphs, we explore how ideas of dissensus and stickiness might challenge the distribution of the sensible through a "networked subject" such as Jay Reguero.

THE HYPHENATED SUBJECT AND NETWORKED SUBJECTIVITY

Patron Saints of Nothing begins when Jay Reguero, a 17-year-old Filipino-American, finds out that Jun Reguero was killed by the police for using *shabu* or Methamphetamine. Jay then receives a message from an unknown Instagram account, and he is told that Jun did not deserve to die. Jay flies to the Philippines to investigate the circumstances of Jun's death. In

Manila, Jay finds a list of suspected drug dealers and users in the office of his Uncle Maning, a high-ranking member of the Philippine National Police. To Jay's surprise, Jun Reguero's name was included in that list. Jay confronts Uncle Maning who merely reiterates that Jun was killed because he used drugs. Maning tells Jay that he gave Jun a choice: to stop using drugs or else leave their home. He tells Jay that Jun chose drugs over his family. After this confrontation, Maning forces Jay out of his home, leading him to Aunt Chato.

Aunt Chato tells Jay that Maning forced Jun out of their home when he found *marijuana* in Jun's room. Jay discovered that Jun went to live with a woman named Reyna after he left Aunt Chato's home. Jay also finds out that Grace owns the unknown Instagram account that messaged him at the beginning of the novel. Grace tells him that Jun left Reyna because the police found out that he operated an "anti-government" Facebook page. After this, Jay and Grace confront Uncle Maning again and they accuse him of having his own son killed. Maning denies it and tells them that they could ask his brother, Danilo, a priest, about what really happened. Uncle Danilo tells Jay and Grace that Maning bribed someone to remove Jun from the list of suspected drug dealers but that Jun "found his way back onto it" (Ribay 279) and that he was killed by a vigilante. Danilo tells them that Maning called him four months before Jun died to ask him to save Jun from "himself [and] from the drugs" (279). According to Danilo, Jun admitted that he had been using meth and that he sold drugs. At the end of the novel, the family holds a memorial service for Jun.

As a hyphenated subject, Jay Reguero immediately generates feelings of distrust from his paternal relatives. His Uncle Maning would often give condescending remarks such as "This is not America" (97), and he would lament the fact that Jay's father did not teach him *Tagalog*. Maning's resentment of Jay's hyphenated identity is made more apparent after Jay confronts him regarding the death of Jun:

You do not live here. You do not speak any of our languages. You do not know our history. Your mother is a white American. Yet, you presume to speak to me as if you knew anything about me, as if you knew anything about my son, as if you knew anything about this country. (160)

Even relatives such as Aunt Chato and Uncle Danilo, who are sympathetic to Jay, also reiterate that his sense of justice draws from his American sensibilities and that things are different in the Philippines. When Jay suggests that they should fight for justice, Aunt Chato responds by saying "the courts in the Philippines are not like the courts in America. Here you cannot trust them. They are very corrupt" (172), and she adds that "[b]

ecause you do not live here, you fail to see that I am not exaggerating” (173). Uncle Danilo would also remind Jay that “This isn’t America” (283) when Jay questions the idea that Filipinos accept the fact that there are extrajudicial killings. Aunt Chato and Uncle Danilo would actually agree with the spirit of Jay’s opinions and viewpoints regarding social justice and human rights, but these characters, who are not “hyphenated subjects,” are trapped in the idea that things will never change and that they are helpless against the regime. These non-hyphenated subjects have accepted the “regime of the sensible” created by Duterte’s populist politics and they realize that resistance will lead nowhere.

Conversely, as a hyphenated subject, Jay refuses to trust the multiple versions of the ever-shifting truth. Even at the end of the novel, Jay is arguably in a state of denial as he refuses to fully accept the *supposed* fact that Jun became addicted to meth. We argue that for the most part Jay was more convinced and affectively driven by the information he found online. For example, Jay placed far more trust in the “GISING NA PH!” Instagram page and the unknown Instagram account than the multiple versions of the “truth” he encountered through the novel. We make a case that the tension between Jay, a hyphenated subject, and his paternal relatives from the Philippines only serve to make him a “networked subject” who becomes distrustful of the information he does not agree with. What affectively “stuck” to him is the idea that his Uncle Maning ordered his own son killed in the name of Duterte’s populist politics. For the most part, Jay was trapped in a certain “affective feedback loop” induced by his Western sensibilities and the “GISING NA PH!” Instagram page, “which contains post after post of Filipinos holding photographs of their loved ones who the police murdered” (Ribay 31).

THE AFFECTIVE FORCE OF DISINFORMATION AND THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE SENSIBLE

One of the central figures of state disinformation in *Patron Saints of Nothing* is Chief Inspector Maning Reguero, a staunch supporter of Rodrigo Duterte’s War on Drugs. Maning believes that Ferdinand Marcos, the former dictator of the Philippines, is a “*tunay na bayani*” or a “true hero” (Ribay 148). However, Maning attests that “President Duterte’s legacy will be greater” (148) and that he is “a great man” (146). Maning has even been awarded a medal for the “excellent work he is doing to protect the people in our region from drugs” (146). Maning’s sense of nationalism is arguably built on the idea that the Marcos and Duterte administration is a necessary counterweight to Western imperialism. Maning would

also dismiss investigations and journalistic accounts of the Drug War as he tells Jay that “[t]hese people—the ones writing these articles you have been reading—they do not care about the Filipino people. They sensationalize the worst of what is happening here and ignore the best in order to sell copies or win awards. It is that simple” (157). We read Chief Inspector Maning, rather appropriately, as an instrument of what Rancière calls the police order in Duterte’s Philippines. His nationalist and anti-western viewpoints, which are the total opposite of Jay’s western and liberal sensibilities, reflect the sensibilities of Duterte’s supporters who have ignored the inhumanity of his regime. Maning’s beliefs also reflect the pro-administration narrative peddled by the pages (which Facebook took down). These pages would usually say that criticism of Duterte is primarily driven by the imperialist West. Maning Reguero would apply the “regime of the sensible” that he represents on a more personal level when he instilled a sort-of-police state within his household; Grace and Angel were not allowed to have cell phones, and it is revealed at the end of the novel that he had ordered men to monitor his own children. Maning was well aware that Grace and Angel continued to meet Jun even after he was forced out of their home.

Of course, Uncle Maning’s beliefs and convictions affectively fail to stick to Jay; instead, they make Jay’s original beliefs “stickier” and further inspire Jay to navigate through the sea of multiple “truths.” Throughout the novel, the supposed truth regarding Jun’s life and the circumstances of his death constantly change in Jay’s perspective. Uncle Maning would have his own version of his son’s life and the manner of his death. Aunt Chato says that Maning lied about Jun’s circumstances and she has her own version of what Jun was like. Jun himself would spread his own version of the truth to different characters as he lied to Aunt Chato and his partner, Reyna. In a sense, as De Chavez and Varadharajan read the *Pietà*, Jay can be seen as dissensus, since he attempts to challenge the atmosphere of disinformation or the “distribution of the sensible” in the novel. However, towards the end of *Patron Saints of Nothing*, Jay realizes that truth will remain elusive as he reflects: “That’s not how stories work, is it? They are shifting things that re-form with each new telling, transform with each new teller. Less a solid, and more a liquid taking the shape of its container” (Ribay 281).

STICKY LETTERS AS DISSENSUS

We take our cues from De Chavez and Varadharajan, who recently used Rancière’s political thought in analyzing the *Pietà*, a popular image of the Philippine Drug War. They argue that “the image is a manifestation of

dissensus” and that “the Pietà is able to disrupt the particular distribution of the sensible that organizes current Philippine socio-politics” (De Chavez and Varadharajan 53–54). In a similar vein, we argue that like the Pietà, Jay’s letters are a form of dissensus which challenges the “regime of the sensible” (Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* 18) in the novel, which has deemed Jun to be a mere inhumane drug addict who deserved to die. While Jay does not uncover the entire truth of Jun’s circumstances, he is able to hold on to a certain truth through Jun’s letters. Six letters from Jun are presented in the novel, each of them describing a moment in Jun’s life. Arguably, Jay is affectively driven to go to the Philippines by Jun’s last letter when he rereads it. Jun’s last letter states that he has not received a reply from Jay in “three months” and that he has already sent “six letters counting this one” (Ribay 17). Jay’s experience is best described by this passage: “Guilt, shame, and sadness swirl in my stomach. Yet I reread it a couple more times, forcing myself to face the sorrow, face the fact that I never tried to find out where he had gone after he ran away from home, never tried to understand why” (19). Jun’s last letter affectively sticks to Jay as he feels guilty for being absent in Jun’s life. Jay seemed to have forgotten about Jun before he died, and Jun’s death became a reminder that he existed through the letters that he had. The letters’ capacity for stickiness becomes literal when they attach themselves to Grace:

She pulls away from me but holds on to my hand, eyes on the stack of letters. “When I went to wake you for dinner that first night, one was on the nightstand next to the bed. I think you were reading it before you went to sleep—so I went through your bag to see if you had any others. You did . . . and so I took them.” (263)

Grace would say that her father, Maning, threw away everything related to Jun (which is arguably an attempt to maintain a certain regime of the sensible). Before Grace saw the letters, she could only hold onto Jun’s online messages and that is “not the same as holding on to something physical, something real. It was like he was alive again in a way” (263).

The letters, in general, reveal certain truths regarding Jun’s character and life that challenge Uncle Maning and Uncle Danilo’s “truth” about Jun. Uncle Maning is convinced that Jun was a drug addict, and says that “[h]e was an enemy of the state” (271). Uncle Danilo’s version of the truth purportedly confirms Uncle Maning’s version; Jun indeed became addicted to meth and became a drug dealer. Uncle Danilo was sympathetic, however, and only wanted to save Jun. But because the letters “stuck” to him, thereby operating as a form of dissensus, Jay would only remember

Jun through the letters even when he struggles against accepting the supposed truth that Jun actually used and sold drugs:

I close my eyes, as if doing so will rewind the story, erasing everything Tito Danilo has just told us. As if it will stop the warping truth. I can't reconcile this version of Jun with the one I had come to know, to love, to admire. Even as I sit still, I feel like I am falling. (281)

Towards the end, the family holds a memorial service for Jun. Even Uncle Maning, who did not allow this when Jun died, attends the service. In a eulogy, Jay writes a letter and reads it as his late "reply" to Jun's last letter:

I don't want to believe there was another side to you. But I don't have any choice, do I? I will try not to judge because I have no idea what you were struggling within your heart, what complicated your soul. None of us is just one thing, I guess. None of us. We all do both throughout our lives. That's the way it is. I suppose we just go on and do the best we can and try to do more good than bad using our time on Earth. I'd like to think your scales tip toward good. (299)

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At this point, Jay seems to finally accept the supposed truth regarding Jun's circumstances, but this letter is able to present a truth about Jun's humanity that becomes a form of dissensus as it challenges the accepted fact that Jun needed to be erased from their memories as Uncle Maning would have wanted. Uncle Maning's participation in the memorial service might have "planted a seed" as Jay reflects after the memorial (302). The Jun who lived in these letters as a human being was finally able to "stick" to the family. As dissensus, these letters were able to challenge the constant re-distribution of the sensible, which is represented by the variations of truth presented in the novel. While the truth remains elusive at the end of the novel, what stays relatively stable or "sticky" throughout the narrative are the letters from Jun Reguero that Jay carries with him back to the Philippines. The letters then become the singular "truth" that Jay holds on to despite the constant distortion of fact and fiction in the novel, as entailed by the atmosphere of disinformation in *Patron Saints of Nothing*.

CONCLUSION

The letters serve as happy objects that Jay holds on to as he deals with the horrible truths he encounters. In this sense, the letters reveal a gap in the sensible constructed by the different versions of truth in the novel. The construction of these truths reflects how government institutions in the

Philippines purposefully misinform the general populace as a means to prevent dissent. Jay's journey into the "heart of darkness" as a hyphenated individual and a "networked subject" demonstrates a possibility of dissensus in a regime in which the defenders of the state are precisely the same ones endangering it. Our reading affirms Rancière's assertion that aesthetic representations "rework the frame of our perceptions and the dynamism of our affects" (*Dissensus* 151). That is to say that the idea of dissensus and stickiness challenges the distribution of the sensible through a "networked subject" such as Jay Reguero. However, the promise of happiness in Ribay's *Patron Saints of Nothing* is that it shows us a "social order vulnerable to dissensus" (Gündoğdu 205) as it challenges an aesthetic regime built on "computational propaganda and algorithmic governance" (Boler and Davis 82). Current events in the Philippines reveal that normative means of resistance are ineffective in eroding Duterte's populist regime, and in fact, as of this writing, he currently has a 91% approval rating (Pulse Asia Research). Jay's narrative, however, indicates that there is still a way to enunciate a form of radical politics within a political present in which the stability of truth remains elusive.

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