

A Restless and Raging River

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We walked along the Tumana bridge to view the Marikina River. Peering over, we saw turbid river water engulfing an older bridge, much lower from where we stood. Its outline is veiled by the river's restless course. Artist Nathalie Dagmang recalled how her school bus braved crossing the bridge below years ago; the journey was simultaneously adventurous and perilous. The river was swollen when we visited, perhaps due to the monsoon rains and it submerged not only the bridge but also a trailer van, and portions of an already patchy river bank.

The view from the residential village where we commenced our walk revealed vestiges of rural life. It was evident in the grass covered lot parcels yet to be lived in, weekend visitors harvesting vegetables and herbs from patches of land as well as the occasional angler stationed along the river bank. A bridge way can be accessed along the linear river wall, whose 152-meter segment along the right bank of the Marikina river was recently constructed.¹ The walkway is bordered by a dense growth of lemongrass on a narrow strip of land where houses previously stood. They were demolished to make way for the river rehabilitation project.

The columns of the bridge, painted an industrial blue are the same ones that figure prominently in Nathalie Dagmang's photographs. They show the water level markings comprising an alarm system installed at both bridges in Tumana and Sto. Niño. The river sensors accurately measure floodwaters in real time, with a siren alarming communities in surrounding areas. A third alarm level places waters at 18 meters and requires immediate evacuation.² Nangka, Malanday and Tumana are areas most affected by floods.

The Marikina river was the gem of what was once an agricultural plain, its 220 hectare area bounded by fertile lands. It was in the 1970s and 80s that the river became choked by sewage and trash, and drained by erosion and quarrying. The river was at the center of a rehabilitation project implemented in 1993. It was then mayor Bayani Fernando's vision to have "people touch and feel the water".³ It is an act very close to ablutions in Catholic churches, before and after the celebration of the mass. Jogging lanes, a skating rink and an amphitheater were built beside the river. Houses along the 96 meter easement were demolished. The Marikina River Park became the center of these leisure amenities. Like similar programs, the rehabilitation project looked to the past, when the river was pristine and a primary source of livelihood. Ultimately, the river rehabilitation became the flagship of a city administration, a mayoralty that took pride in Marikina as one of the cleanest, most peaceful and most orderly cities in the National Capital Region.

The Philippine archipelago suffers an inordinate amount of natural hazards. The most common are tropical cyclones, typhoons, earthquakes and volcanic eruptions. Typhoons and tropical cyclones greatly shape life ways in the islands, producing intricate relationships that define the need for rainfall on the one hand, and the onslaught of disasters, on the other.⁴ Data from the Manila Observatory from the period 1888 and 1897 counted 5,050 storms with a yearly average count of 505.⁵ Storms varied according to rainfall and the evidence of thunder and lightning. While storms and typhoons were recorded assiduously, the records for floods and storm surges are few not because they are infrequent but that they regularly occur made them quite unremarkable.

The floods and droughts that happen in the wake of typhoons, earthquakes or volcanic eruptions belonged to the sphere of daily life of many communities across the Philippines.⁶ The few records of flooding chronicled the disruption of local events and the devastation they caused. Consider for example, the disruption of a fireworks display to celebrate the beatification of San Ignacio in Cebu in July 1811.⁷ The big flood of October 1871 inundated portions of Central and Northern Luzon with countless losses to livelihoods in Ilocos Norte alone.⁸ Damage from a typhoon in Central Luzon in October 1873 were meticulously noted in records compiled by

Miguel Selga, S.J. and eyewitness accounts of Nicolas de Saavedra and Captains Bankcroft and Griswold. There were 58 deaths, 20,917 destroyed houses and damage cost of 131, 242 pesos.⁹

Coastal plains in the Philippine archipelago are no wider than sixteen kilometers with rivers following tectonic lines, folds and faults. Floods are either sudden torrents from local rainfall or widespread with longer duration from persistent rainfall.¹⁰ The latter was the kind that submerged Metro Manila in 2009. Typhoon Ketsana or Ondoy unleashed 341 mm of rain over a seven hour period, devastating swathes of Marikina City, Pasig City, and Cainta. Marikina City was in 10 feet deep of flood water and knee deep in mud and sludge.¹¹ Images of rescue were beamed on television screens. Nathalie's aunt and grandmother recalled how nearly 100 people sought safety on the third level of their home and how vehicles flocked to the Tumana bridge eventually became trapped because there was nowhere to go. Stories of rescue abound, including those of entire families threatened to be washed away by the river's raging waters.

Barangay Tumana is Nathalie Dagmang's site and subject for her solo exhibition *Turbulent Waters*. Tumana was a prized farming estate in the nineteenth century, producing tons of vegetables and rice. Like most coastal plains, land in Tumana was fertile and attracted farmers and settlers. Tellingly, the streets of Tumana are named after agricultural produce: *talong* (eggplant), *mais* (corn), etc. Much of these lands however, have been developed into housing and commercial estates. Provident Village, one of these residential developments was badly hit by Ondoy in 2009.

Photographs form the core of the exhibition, quiet and discerning witnesses to lives around the Marikina River. Nathalie records numerous facets of the river: its murky waters, sludge peppered with garbage, agglomerations of trash and waste, or the stray verdant greens that thrive in the waters. With a sensitive eye, she filters and records signs of life and commonplace joys: people strolling along the river bank, youth running against the upward slope of the flood wall or frolicking in the roiling currents. She renders her figures small against their setting yet they are depicted absorbed by some activity or other, whether bathing farm animals, congregating around the edges of the frame, meandering under the bridge and into the shallow river, or mindlessly going against slopes, wind and water. They are framed by the looming structures of the bridge and the flood wall. In contrast, she trains an artistic eye to her photographs of objects and forms. They are amalgamations of objects washed up by the currents, the whites of plastic and styrofoam providing stark emphasis to her compositions. Looking closely, we can pick out toys, food wrappers, remains of what perhaps can be described as lives of ease. The river is receptacle of all these. Nathalie frames mass of forms and captures their sodden quality whether damp earth, muddy water, or scalloped river currents. She washes them with a warm dispersed light, the kind that punctures the density of objects and forms. In previous iterations of her project *Dito sa Barangay Tumana* (Here at Barangay Tumana), she seamlessly integrated photographs with video pieces and object installations in space. Some of the most striking were photographs of objects (toys, school books and bags, household implements) drying out in the sun after being soaked and drenched by rain and flood water.

During our visit to Tumana, Nathalie points out a boat the residents made themselves; its body from recycled soda and water bottles. The residents of Tumana continue to devise ways to survive, some of them raising their house structures by another floor, building make shift bridges, and digging gravel for riffraff. The local government has also installed a more efficient warning system. Adaptive efforts have been numerous after the difficult lessons taught us by typhoon Ondoy and yet, little is done about the relentless encroachment of real estate developers into previously farm land and hilly terrain. Mountains are paved and mined, trees are felled and tracts of forests are cleared to make way for residential development and the accompanying conveniences of modern life. All while we dangerously careen towards a frightening decimation, hastening even more the destruction of the environment.

The severity of typhoons and floods in recent years is exceptional, our experience of flooding especially in urban areas paradoxically typical and common but unusually harrowing. Fr. Selga to whom we owe the meticulously kept records of the Manila Observatory, coined the term *tifonitis* to describe a condition that is ‘a pathological state owing to nervous over-stimulation produced by the frequency or extraordinary intensity of typhoons’. He recounted events of mass hysteria in the aftermath of five typhoons that passed the islands in succession between 15 October and 10 December 1934. A letter from an old man in Mexico, Pampanga predicted a stronger typhoon. The prediction was followed by farmers abandoning their fields, parents not sending children to school, and a sweeping mania that predicted the end of the world.¹² This is not far from the collective anxiety in the aftermath of typhoon Ondoy and similar disasters. Our dread can either spur us to action, or somehow propel us to greater self destruction.

Art is thoughtful recourse in precarious times, especially when ways of being together is investigated and articulated. Nathalie Dagmang thoughtfully and reflexively frames an immersive and documentary practice through prolonged and sustained exchange, listening, partaking and giving of herself in conversations and interactions. In the exhibition is a long cabinet on stilts. It houses objects she references in her works, family photos washed out by flood water, gravel, blue prints of old city maps, and hand written notes of stories from interviews and conversations. I imagine her transcribing and rewriting these stories on notebook sheets and pad reams, through light and form in the quiet, straightforward manner of her video pieces and photographs. Her practice underlies a coherence, of how she sees and situates herself not only in Barangay Tumana but also within a larger, more encompassing world where actions no matter small, reverberates across spheres of existence.

References

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Endnotes

¹ De Leon, Susan. June 5, 2019. “Flood Control Project Along Marikina River Completed” <https://pia.gov.ph/news/articles/1022878>, accessed September 11, 2019

² Serafica, Raisa, September 12, 2017. “Guide to Marikina River’s alarm level system”, <https://www.rappler.com/move-ph/issues/disasters/181894-guide-marikina-river-alarm-level-system>, accessed September 11, 2019

³ Marikina City Government, “A River Reborn: Marikina’s Gift of Life”, n.d.

⁴ Bankoff, Greg. 2007. “Storms of History: Water, hazard and society in the Philippines 1565 to 1930”, 164

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid, 165

⁷ Dolo de Samar, Archive of the Manila Observatory Box 7-16 quoted in Bankoff, 165.

⁸ Floods in the Philippines, Archive of the Manila Observatory Box 10-37, quoted in Bankoff, 168

⁹ Selga 1921:58-9 quoted in Bankoff, 173

¹⁰ Bankoff, 165

¹¹ Historical Mapping of Marikina Flooding

¹² Selga 1935:54-8 quoted in Bankoff, 179