A commentary on the special issue *Performance and Citizenship*: Challenging populist political performances through citizenship as performance?

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Abstract
This piece teases out the links between this special issue's key themes regarding performance and citizenship and the distinct realities of transitional democracies. To contribute to generating insights into other countries currently in the grip of populist political regimes, it looks at the case of the Philippines. In this context, it matters to think about the diversity of productions that can enable performances of citizenship. This is because contemporary media and communication research in the country has understandably but narrowly prioritised the toxicity of online political discourse brought about by the rise of populist political performances and political trolling. It also matters in the Philippines to think about the role of those involved in productions about performances of citizenship. This is because of the problems posed by how 'authenticity' has been hijacked by populism and has been weaponised against those who seek to critique the current political dispensation.

Keywords
artistic production, authenticity, citizenship, mediated production, political performance, political trolling, populism, public participation

The articles in this special issue *Performance and Citizenship* each contribute to demonstrating the ways that the performative turn can enable us to conceptualise how popular culture and the arts might foster resistant, disruptive and, crucially, alternative expressions of citizenship. These works are timely and relevant interventions in the context of some established Western democracies like the United States and the United Kingdom, where ordinary citizens have a chronically anaemic participation in formal electoral politics (Desilver, 2018; Electoral Commission, 2019). As people do not always feel that voting makes them truly 'counted', endeavours that offer them imaginative modes of meaningfully articulating their citizenship become valuable (see Coleman, 2013). The articles in this issue, however, can also serve as a springboard for connecting the analytical and methodological tools from performance studies to

the distinct realities faced by transitional democracies like Indonesia and Malaysia, where ordinary citizens actually have high participation levels in formal electoral politics (ElectionGuide, 2019a, 2019b). While people do vote in these countries, their voices are still heavily distorted by the persistence of political structures and cultures that predate their democratisation, such as that of patron–client ties (see Voltmer, 2013). Their voices are also blunted by the dirty tactics political elites deploy to keep their grip on the formal levers of power, ranging from vote-buying to voter intimidation (for example, Aspinall et al, 2017; Gomez, 2012).

To tease out how this special issue might link to democratising contexts, I identify two key themes across the different articles about how performances might foster expansive repertoires of what it means to imagine and to be a citizen. I talk about (1) the production of citizenship as performance and (2) the producers of citizenship as performance. I then discuss what the implications of these themes might be for transitional democracies. For this, I look at the specific case of the Philippines, which, as I further explain throughout the rest of this piece, is currently run by a populist regime that has given rise to intense and oftentimes toxic contestations about how citizenship might be expressed (see Curato, 2017). By focusing on the Philippine case, I hope to contribute to generating broader insights about performance and citizenship in transitional democracies that find themselves in a similar situation (for example, Chacko, 2018; Grigera, 2017; Turk, 2018; see also Chakravartty and Roy, 2017).

The production of citizenship as performance

One key theme in this special issue that I want to focus on pertains to characteristics of productions that enable performances of citizenship through forms that exist outside the sphere of formal politics and through techniques that go beyond the discursive. As the issue editors Rovisco and Lunt contend, these productions matter because they invite people to express their being a citizen in ways that are more meaningful for them. More than this, these productions also enable people to reimagine the terms of the relationship between themselves as ordinary citizens and the state.

Iannelli and Marelli's article concretises how such productions can take on forms beyond formal politics but nevertheless have consequences for it. The article talks about artistic public performances in Italy and Sardinia that have addressed the issues of urbanity, particularly by concretising the notion of a maximalist participation in democracy. Iannelli and Marelli say that these performances opened up spaces for ordinary citizens to experience multi-sited forms of political agency, each of which engaged them in distinct ways. These ordinary citizens were invited to be active audiences who would 'adopt alternative visions of the political issues of the territory'; performative publics who would 'talk about their marginalized experiences in visible spaces'; and mass self-communicators who would '[enhance their] technical skills to voice and act in public "by themselves"

in order to obtain social changes in everyday territory'. Together with this, Iannelli and Marelli emphasise that the artists at the helm of these public performances were clear in their intent to influence formal politics. For these artists, their performances were meant to insist that public institutions take the initiative and face up to the responsibility for making policy decisions that would, for good or bad, effect significant changes in the texture of contemporary cities.

Meanwhile, Rovisco's article attends to how productions use non-discursive performance tools to powerfully voice contestations to predominant meanings and practices of citizenship. It looks at two artistic interventions – the performance *Welcome to Dreamland* and the film *Wait* – and highlights their use of embodied and expressive performance tools. Rovisco explains that *Welcome to Dreamland* used two particular tools to represent the lived experiences of migration and displacement as well as to engage with questions of migrant voice and visibility. One was ghosting, which was a performance that 'ma[de] visible (for an instant, live, now) that which [was] already there: the ghosts, the tropes, the scenarios that structure our individual and collective life'. The other was the scenario, which was about the use of 'conscious strategies of display to conjure a physical location, actors, setup and action, which allow[ed] for reversal, parody and change'. Rovisco says that in the case of *Wait*, one particular performance tool that was deployed was the individual testimony of one of its main characters: Hayder the asylum-seeker. During the various film screenings, he watched together with the audiences and conversed with them after. Through this, the hope was that the audiences would see him not only as a character in the film, but also as someone who was co-present with them in their particular context of reception. Rovisco argues that this set-up opened up an alternative to agonistic discussions, as it allowed for non-aggressive, intimate and embodied interactions about difficult issues surrounding citizenship.

Thinking about the broad range of forms and techniques that ordinary people can use to perform their citizenship and to reframe their relationship with the state is especially salient in the Philippine context. It offers another way to approach the current concerns about how ordinary Filipinos might articulate their citizenship, as a lot of today's scholarly discussions in media and communications have focused on the quality of online political discourse in social media (for example, Lorenzana, 2018; Simpeng and Arugay, 2018; Zaide, 2018). This is completely understandable, especially in light of the rise of online political trolling in the country (Cabañes and Cornelio, 2017).

Many commentators see the present situation as very much a marked departure from how Filipino social media was a few years ago, with its 'middle-class norms of respectability and cultural norms of circumspection and reciprocity' (Ong and Cabañes, 2018: 12). Mainstream media, both in the country and abroad, have linked this toxicity with the electoral victory and political ascent of President Rodrigo Duterte, who is known for using the populist political style to great effect. They say that Duterte's political performances, amplified by his army of paid

trolls, have legitimized uncivil ways of articulating citizenship online (for example, Ressa, 2016; Williams 2017; for contrast, see Lunt's discussion in this special issue about how studio audiences used 'disruptive' performances of citizenship to challenge the political performance style of former UK Prime Minister David Cameron). His genuine supporters online – ordinary citizens – are thought to have adopted his discursive style: entrenching cleavages between 'the people' and 'the establishment'; amplifying a sense of crisis that needs less considered thought and more urgent action; and enacting bad manners through 'gutter language', irreverent humour, and political incorrectness (see Curato, 2016; Moffitt, 2016). It is important to note, however, some of this moral panic from commentators is framed in terms of middle-class moralities. As such, it misses out on the very real discontent that ordinary citizens want to articulate about the previous dispensation of former-President Benigno Aquino III, which for them represents the status quo of oligarchic elite rule (Cabañes and Cornelio, 2017: 239). For many of Duterte's supporters (and Aquino's detractors alike), anger, irreverence, and incivility are all apt ways of expressing themselves. For them, this kind of online political expression captures their resounding rejection of the so-called 'politics of decency', which has been associated with the Aquino administration's failed campaign promise to take the 'Daang Matuwid' (or Righteous Path) of non-corruption to lift Filipinos out of poverty (Ong and Cabañes, 2018; see also Deinla, 2017; Heydarian, 2018).

Clearly, it is paramount to continue to work on reimagining online political discourse in the Philippines. Social media needs to be reclaimed from toxic politics – that is, from the systematic hijacking of authentic public sentiments but also from the middle-class refusal to acknowledge incivil political expressions – so that it can become an authentic space for political deliberation. At the same time, this special issue suggests that we should think about productions that allow for performances of citizenship apart from the online, apart from the discursive, and, crucially, apart from the polarities of populist performances and middle-class moralities.

In the case of the Philippines, media and communication scholarship would do well to look closely at existing artistic and mediated projects that seek to foster alternative performances of citizenship and, in so doing, redefine the framing of the country's political issues. For instance, the cultural studies scholar Anna Cristina Pertierra (2017) has already started on a task that parallels Iannelli and Marelli's discussion about artistic projects that concretised the notion of a maximalist participation in democracy. Pertierra has begun to conceptualise how some existing artistic projects have enabled ordinary Filipinos to engage the key issues of Duterte's presidency – especially the War on Drugs – in ways and in spaces that can go beyond the deep cleavages of formal politics. Arguably, the most interesting of these projects is *This Here. Land*, a performance of the LabAnino collective comprised of artists both critical and supportive of Duterte. It culminates in an invitation for audiences to participate in recreating the photojournalist Raffy Lerma's *La Pieta* image, an iconic depiction of the late-night

killings that have been happening during the War on Drugs. There is also '15 Minutes of Your Time', a collaborative zumba session between the performance-maker JK Anicoche and young women widowed by the War on Drugs. Meanwhile, the journalist Amanda Lago (2018) has written a piece that echoes Rovisco's focus on non-discursive performance tools as a way to powerfully articulate contestations to predominant meanings and practices of citizenship. Although Lago does not necessarily discuss this topic as conceptually as Rovisco, she does describe these non-discursive performance tools in her listing of relevant artistic projects. Take for example the multimedia installation about the War on Drugs titled *Ang Mga Walang Pangalan* (or The Nameless). To engage audiences through multiple modalities, this installation includes 'photos of the drug killings and victims, flickering lights, grating music, a voice recording of a 12-year old drug war orphan, and the actual chair where her father was shot'. By assessing the possibilities and limitations afforded by the particular performance forms and tools that such productions deploy, scholarship can contribute to increasingly robust subsequent interventions (Somekh, 2006).

The producers of citizenship as performance

The other key theme in this special issue that I want to discuss is the role of those who lead the production of projects that open up alternative spaces for the performance of citizenship. As the issue editors Rovisco and Lunt point out, it matters to reflect on the subject positioning of producers, broadly intended to include artists, creatives, activists, intellectuals, and the like. This is because ordinary citizens tend to be fragmented across various social cleavages and so might relate to these producers and their invitations to participate in divergent ways.

Lunt's article demonstrates the crucial role that project producers play in engaging ordinary citizens. It describes how the broadcasters of two television programmes during the Brexit referendum campaign were central in creating studio conditions wherein ordinary British citizens could confront then-UK Prime Minister David Cameron. Lunt argues that changes in the usual format of Cameron's so-called 'PM Direct' appearances led to the broadcasters gaining greater control of the shows. He says that these media professionals created opportunities for people to perform disruptive citizenship. Lunt also describes how the live audiences were able to transpose into the mainstream media a 'transgression of space' akin to the tactics of the Occupy Movement and other such expressions of radical democracy. He contends that these audiences-cum-citizens managed to generate influence 'through visibility and public impact and by providing models of alternative political practices'.

Meanwhile, Hill et al.'s article hints at the how the success of the interactions between project producers and the ordinary citizens that they seek to engage partly depends on the life contexts in which they are embedded. It looks at how the filmmakers of two documentaries about the Indonesian genocide of 1965

generated different kinds of ‘provocative’ engagement among their viewers from Scandinavia, Colombia, and Japan. Hill et al. describe the different ways that the filmmakers’ incorporation of performances of memory in the documentaries led the viewers to intensive moral, critical, and reflexive reflections about their own subject positioning. They also note, however, that the people they interviewed were primarily savvy art house cinemagoers who were already politically and civically inclined. Since they understood the ‘rules of the game’ that the filmmakers drew on, they could more easily be invited to bring to bear new and potentially challenging knowledge about impunity and how their countries either remembered or presently experienced conflict. Parallel to this, Stevenson’s article underscores how central performativity is in the work of intellectuals who seek to connect with ordinary citizens and work with them in imagining alternative expressions of citizenship. It focuses particularly on Raymond Williams and his writing. Stevenson contends that what made Williams stand out from the other New Left intellectuals of his time was that his astute deployment of his biography lent his work ‘authenticity’. Despite not being a charismatic or celebrity scholar, he grounded his intellectual project in his own working-class background and, as such, the experiences of his fellow others from the working class. As Stevenson puts it, ‘The intellectual strategy at the heart of Williams’ writing was to performatively contrast the instrumentality of capitalism with the more disruptive sensibility of artists such as himself.’

In the case of the Philippines, the urgent need is to address the issue of ‘authenticity’ confronting those involved in artistic and mediated projects that seek to invite ordinary people to participate in alternative modes of performing citizenship. This is because ‘authenticity’ has been increasingly hijacked by mainstream populist political performances that claim to represent ‘the people’. It is equally because ‘authenticity’ has been weaponised against a broad range of individuals who are depicted as ‘the establishment’, from those with middle-class moralities to, more absurdly, those with activist sensibilities.

The hijacking and weaponisation of authenticity in Philippine politics happens across media, but is particularly evident online. Here one sees professional and systematic digital disinformation production from across the political spectrum being translated into online materials that deploy the semiotic and aesthetic resources of Filipino popular culture (Ong and Cabañes, 2018; see also Cabañes et al., 2019). This kind of disinformation production draws on already existing logics and processes of political marketing, in that it takes seriously the ‘emotional literacies’ (Corner and Pels 2003) and ‘affective intelligences’ (van Zoonen, 2005) of ordinary people in a bid to connect with them (Scammell, 2014). Concretely, what happens is that disinformation producers, particularly those who are known as anonymous digital influencers, use their multiple fake accounts on Facebook and Twitter as a platform for disseminating witty and creative tweets, hashtags, and memes that all draw on Filipino popular vernaculars (Ong and Cabañes, 2018). Through these materials, the digital

influencers hope to appeal to populist publics and incite them to express their political discontent in vitriolic ways.

In light of the above, producers of artistic and mediated projects about citizenship need to account for how they might themselves be perceived as inauthentic and as part of the establishment, even if they might only be providing a reasonable critique of the Duterte administration. There is in fact a group of artists, writers, journalists and media workers who have critiqued the administration for threatening the country's freedom of expression. Calling themselves 'Lodi' (which is 'idol' reversed but which also stands for 'Let's Organize for Democracy and Integrity'), they not only seek to 'call for a halt to government-led disinformation campaigns', but also to 'expose these deceptions' (Enano, 2017).

Here the insights of the cultural critic Katrina Stuart Santiago (cited in Cabato, 2017) could be of help. She contends that almost no artistic project done during recent years has actually managed to simultaneously protest oppression in the Philippines and also be cheered on by the general public. One of Santiago's insightful suggestions relates to Lunt's assertion about the importance of paying attention to the roles that project producers take on in order to engage ordinary citizens. She says that to cut through the political cleavages that might divide producers and ordinary citizens, the former should focus more on supporting or critiquing issues and not particular personalities. After all, issues persist across administrations and they are better addressed together with those who sit on the opposite side of the political fence. Another of Santiago's insights connects with the discussion of Hill et al. and of Stevenson about the need to think about the life contexts in which project producers are embedded. She says that producers should be reflexive about the context wherein they create their work. As Santiago's interviewer, the journalist Regine Cabato (2017), points out, this includes:

> asking questions like whether the works being collected and produced are representative of a plural community, including women and the youth; whether your gallery owners or sponsors have questionable practices or business endeavors; and what their limitations are, as well as points for improvement.

Alongside these points, media and communication scholarship could also contribute significant insights into the role of project producers by bringing into dialogue approaches and methodologies from production studies and performance studies. There are, after all, many key intersections between these two fields, especially as regards paying attention to both the structural and subjective conditions of those engaged in creative labour (for example, Banks et al., 2013; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Mayer, 2011).

Conclusion

This commentary sought to draw links between this special issue's recurrent themes regarding performance and citizenship and the distinct realities of

transitional democracies. It paid particular attention to how this issue's points about the production and the producers of performances of citizenship might be relevant to the case of the Philippines.

First, I discussed how salient it is in the Philippines to think about the broad range of production forms and techniques that ordinary people can use to perform their citizenship and to reframe their relationship with the state. This is because, with the rise of online political trolls in the Philippines, much of the media and communication research has been focused on the toxic quality of online political discourse in social media. I pointed out that media and communication scholarship could contribute to expanding the realm of possibilities for performances of citizenship by attending to the existing artistic and mediated productions in the country. In assessing the possibilities and limitations afforded by the performance forms and tools that they deploy, scholarship can contribute to increasingly robust subsequent interventions.

Second, I talked about the importance in the Philippines of thinking about the role of those who are involved in the production of projects on performances of citizenship. This is because 'authenticity' has been hijacked by populism and has been weaponised against those who seek to critique the current dispensation, including not only those with middle-class moralities but also those with activist sensibilities. I suggested that media and communication scholarship could contribute to greater reflexivity on the part of producers – be they artists, creatives, activists, or intellectuals – by putting production studies and performance studies into conversation with each other. This is an especially promising area, as both fields have a strong tradition of looking into the structural and subjective conditions of creative workers.

In the Philippines, and in a significant number of transitional democracies, there is currently much despair in the air because of how populist political performances have fanned toxicity in political discourses and have weaponised authenticity against unwanted socio-political critique. But it is precisely in these times that it becomes all the more important to draw attention to already existing projects that are laying the groundwork and generating hope for the possibility of truly imaginative, collaborative, and democratising expressions of citizenship.

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