



Article

“The Truthfulness Lies in the Process, Not the Outcome” Using Artistic Practices to Further Truth-Telling and Memorialization in the Philippines

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Abstract: The Philippines have never known a unified state-sanctioned narrative about the violence that happened during the Marcos dictatorship. In order to resist ongoing disinformation campaigns that seek to erase evidence and memories of past violence, various institutional and civil society actors are currently initiating interventions in the domain of truth and memorialization. Notably, artists, curators, and creative professionals are engaging in various kinds of so-called ‘narrative documentation’ and ‘narrative change-making’. Several of these initiatives mobilize spatial dynamics and co-created processes to facilitate more complex forms of truth-telling and memorialization, which foreground complexity and ambiguity, and which prompt more engaged forms of *truth-listening*. This article zooms in on a specific project that mobilizes traditional artisan and artistic techniques and forms to revisit women’s experiences of historical and ongoing violence by crafting layered and ambiguous narratives about harm. In doing so, the Weaving Women’s Words on Wounds of War project seeks to further memorialization, truth-telling, and truth-listening about gendered violence. Through an analysis embedded in scholarship on memory, truth, and artistic practice, I argue that it is the generation of ambiguous and complex narratives that invites an active and relational type of engagement and listening. This holds potential for resisting the erasure of complex forms of violence, both in the context of the Philippines, as well as in other contexts where truth or memorialization initiatives may be incapable of capturing the gravity of lived experiences of violence or of facilitating genuine listening.



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Keywords: narrative documentation; place-based approaches; misremembering; ambiguity; relationality; *lieux de mémoire*

1. Introduction

In the Philippines, a broad range of actors has recently become more active in debates about the nature and legacies of Marcos’ Martial Law era (1971–1981/1986).¹ They are responding to the ‘weaponization of memory’ and attempts at ‘forcible forgetting’ (Human Rights Council 2020). Unlike the first wave of truth and memory initiatives that emerged in the immediate post-Marcos years and that prioritized the establishment of memorials and public monuments to commemorate the violence and injustice, the current wave of initiatives adopts a broader variety of approaches to the practice of truth-telling and memorializing: from living libraries and oral history projects to social media campaigns or Wikipedia *editathons*. This has led to a complex and dynamic ecology of truth and memorialization initiatives including material and immaterial practices, formal institutionalized and informal grassroots work, and ad hoc as well as long-term interventions, all geared towards shaping collective memories about the violent past.

This article is empirically grounded in interviews with 27 (cultural) practitioners, activists, and artists active in the domain of memory, truth, and justice. As such, their demographic profile to some extent overlapped, in that most interviewees were formally educated and active in the realm of social justice. Their ages varied significantly, with

both victims of the Marcos regime as well as younger generations being represented. Some people were interviewed multiple times. Interviewees were selected on the basis of purposive snowballing. Interviews took place in person in Manila and online in the Fall and Winter of 2022–2023 and lasted just above one hour on average. The interviews followed the ethics procedures approved by the European Research Council. Questions varied slightly depending on the profile of the interviews, but always covered interviewees' relation to memory activism, their role in and perspectives of the specific project they worked on, and how they understood that project in light of a broader transitional justice movement. In addition, primary documents and materials were analyzed and various cultural events were attended, such as exhibitions, movie screenings, commemorative events, or round tables.

The article explores and theorizes how the interaction between place-based and non-place-based truth and memorialization practices, and the nature of the process itself, jointly affect how memories of a violent past are constituted, contested, imagined, transformed—and sometimes erased. Below, I first present theoretical debates undergirding this article and then briefly describe the societal context, before discussing the Weaving Women's Words on Wounds of War project, and reflecting on how it can inform our understanding of how difficult truths can be 'presenced' and listened to.

2. Theoretical Framework: Memory and Truth in Transitional Contexts

This section introduces the debates taking place at the intersection of scholarship on memory, truth, art, and resistance in contexts where there has been a political transition. The notions of memory and truth in particular are central to this article, and to the context of the Philippines, as I will show in the next section. While the scholarly literature on both memory and truth is dense and dynamic and spans a range of disciplines, I will narrow the discussion here to debates about truth and memory in post-dictatorial or post-conflict settings dealing with legacies of violent pasts. This makes transitional justice scholarship a useful, if not the only possible, lens for exploring the relationship between and the societal effects of truth and memorialization initiatives (Pablo De Greiff 2020).

Truth itself has been one of the main pillars of transitional justice since the domain was consolidated. Formal truth-finding mechanisms, such as state-sanctioned truth (and reconciliation) commissions, in particular, have a long and sound tradition in transitional justice scholarship and practice (Zunino 2019). These formal mechanisms have from the start been complemented by informal truth initiatives that are typically driven by a range of actors with divergent identities, objectives, and approaches (e.g., REMHI 2003; Fulchirone 2009). Critical transitional justice scholars have decisively shifted the debate away from the initial exclusive focus on formal state-led truth mechanisms, towards more attention to the contributions of grassroots, hybrid and dynamic truth initiatives that sometimes propose new interpretations of how truth-finding should take place and how it may contribute to a culture of peace (Evrard et al. 2021; Firchow and Selim 2022). As a consequence, the inherent value and distinctive logic of these informal kinds of truth initiatives are increasingly acknowledged in transitional justice scholarship, and they are no longer treated as mere precursors or as second-best to formal initiatives (Cohen 2020). Even if state involvement and acknowledgment continue to be important for many victims, informal truth practices can be potent because they may avoid the highly scripted nature of formal mechanisms, can typically better accommodate victims' voices and needs, tend to allow for more complex narratives and experiences, and are less characterized by preferences for institutional closure or recognizable stories of ideal victim- and perpetratorhood. As such, while often initiated for pragmatic reasons, these informal truth initiatives hold potential for countering the epistemic injustice implicit in many formal truth initiatives by 'presencing' (ongoing) lived experiences of harm (Herremans and Destrooper 2022).

Memorialization, too, has been part of the transitional justice 'toolkit' from the early days, even if it was only formally acknowledged as a fifth pillar of transitional justice in 2020 (Human Rights Council 2020). This formal foregrounding of memorialization underlines

its centrality for achieving transitional justice's normative objectives of building cultures of peace. Moreover, its designation as a sui generis fifth pillar facilitates the examination of how memorialization interacts with other transitional justice initiatives, for example, in the domain of truth. Like truth initiatives, memory initiatives can be driven by states as well as non-state actors, and can be more or less formalized and institutionalized. While states in which violations of human rights have been committed have a duty to carry out memory processes, the 'weaponization of memory' and the tendency to manipulate information and memory in ways that encourage violence have pushed a growing number of non-state actors to also engage in memory work. These actors (from artists to victims' collectives to international NGOs) often bypass the state and propose innovative and context-sensitive approaches to memorialization ([Human Rights Council 2020](#)).

While there are significant differences within and between the domains of truth and memorialization, initiatives in both realms typically share the underlying assumption that knowing and acknowledging past violence helps citizens regain trust, both in the State and each other, and that this contributes to a democratic, inclusive, and peaceful society ([Human Rights Council 2020](#)). In this sense, the notion of truth-finding has been interpreted as having a component of truth-seeking (e.g., through archival work or formal investigations), as well as truth-telling (e.g., through victim testimonies). This practice of truth-telling can also be observed within the domain of memorialization, for example, in initiatives like living libraries, oral history projects, or when victims tell their stories of harm during commemorative events. Whereas memorials and public monuments continue to be important manifestations of memorialization, they are increasingly complemented by these more dynamic truth practices that are premised on narrative approaches.

What has been missing from both fields of scholarship and practice, however, is a focus on what I will refer to as *truth-listening*, i.e., questions of whether and how these difficult truths are listened to, how they operate in society, or how various approaches to truth-telling and memorialization interact differently with people's pre-existing beliefs in the quest for more peaceful and just societies ([Arnould and Sriram 2014](#); [Stahn 2020](#)). This notion of truth-listening, concerning both truth and memorialization initiatives, is central to this article. It foregrounds reception, and the complex processes required to facilitate reception.

One specific way of refocusing the debate on these questions related to truth-listening is through the lens of artistic practices as an approach to truth and memorialization. Throughout the world, in post-conflict or post-authoritarian settings, artists have developed practices that revolve around truth and memorialization and that have the potential to foreground thicker truths that go beyond forensic documentation ([Herremans and De-strooper 2022](#)). In doing so, they problematize the ontological status of truth in debates over past violence and ongoing individual and societal harm ([Breslin 2017](#)). As such, artistic interventions in the domain of truth and memorialization may resist dominant tropes, like that of the passive voiceless victim, the dichotomy between perpetratorhood and victimhood, the linear victim narrative, or the encapsulation of violence in a remote past ([Mihai 2018](#)). By allowing for a variety of approaches to narration, and for multi-layeredness, complexity, and ambiguity, these artistic interventions touch upon questions about how truth practices can 'presence' difficult truths, as well as how these difficult truths are received. Artistic practices that operate in the domain of truth and memorialization could re-center the discussion about truth-telling and truth-listening and push it in new directions through their focus on asking questions rather than providing solid answers, the destabilization inherent in and required for artistic practices, and the requirement for audiences to be receptive ([Cohen 2020](#)). Moreover, in the context of this article, artistic practices' potential for resistance is also relevant in terms of the avenues they provide for resisting and counteracting the ongoing historical revisionism by foregrounding thicker understandings of truth that require authentic listening. The next section gives an overview of this history of violence and the responses to it.

3. Contextual Background: How Violent Legacies Have (Not) Been Dealt with

When the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA) People Power Revolution overthrew the Marcos dictatorship in 1986, the incoming administration of Corazon Aquino had to deal with a legacy of massive direct as well as structural violence that took place during Marcos' Martial Law. This legacy included high numbers of extrajudicial killings, torture and *salvagings*,² illegal detention, and other gross violations of human rights, as well as large-scale fraud, corruption, and money laundering, along with institutional capture and cronyism (Celoza 1998; ICTJ 2021). Martial Law affected all Filipinos, but had particularly harsh effects in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao, a region historically inhabited by various Islamized ethnolinguistic groups collectively known as the Bangsamoro (Lamchek and Radics 2021). The region had been disadvantaged compared to other parts of the Philippines since long before the Martial Law era. Under Marcos, however, the army significantly stepped up its violent repression and attacks in the region, and socio-economic and cultural injustices surged (Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission 2016). This situation resulted in a protracted armed conflict between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the central government, which was formally concluded with a peace agreement in 2014.

Because of different timelines, nature of the violence, and political context, there are also great differences in the ways in which violent legacies related to Martial Law in general and those related to violence in Mindanao have been dealt with. Regarding the general legacy of Martial Law, the two most striking elements are the absence of formally designated truth mechanisms and the delay in large-scale memorialization initiatives.

To the extent that truth-seeking took place in the immediate post-Marcos period, it was part of the work of institutions like the Philippine National Historical Commission (a permanent body with no specific truth mandate), the Presidential Commission on Good Governance (that was mandated to locate and retrieve laundered money) (Carranza 2008) or the Presidential Commission on Human Rights (which morphed into a standing Commission on Human Rights before concluding its report) (Mendoza 2013), or of prosecutions of the Marcoses that took place in the US (Davidson 2017), or, much later, the Supreme Court hearing regarding Marcos' reburial on the Cemetery of Heroes and Martyrs (Destrooper 2023). While carrying out important documentary work, none of these instances had the formal objectives of truth mechanisms, such as reconciliation, cementing state-sanctioned narratives about past violence, or reaching out to broad audiences. Hence, even if significant documentation about past violence and injustice exists, these facts do not always easily find their way into public discourse. An important example thereof is the multitude of affidavits submitted by victims in the US class action against Marcos, which never traveled back to the Philippines due to prohibitive procedures for access to these documents (Ela 2017).

Memorialization received more attention from the start, both by state and non-state actors, but a boom in memorialization initiatives only materialized in the past decade. On the side of state actors, the so-called Reparations Law of 2012³ sought to offer reparations to victims of the Marcos regime, both monetary (for which Marcos' stolen assets would be used) as well as through the establishment of a memorial. A Human Rights Violations Victims' Memorial Commission was established to construct a physical memorial, museum, and library to honor and memorialize victims of Martial Law. Interestingly, while the Commission was supposed to develop a physical space for memorialization, Congress's refusal to release (available) funds until early 2023 meant that the Commission had to proceed through low-budget non-material initiatives for most of its existence. This resulted in creative and innovative approaches to memorialization that can exist in the absence of a physical space for memorialization, such as living libraries, talking circles based on oral history approaches, Wikipedia editathons, or TikTok battles.

This exploration of immaterial and non-place-based memorialization initiatives can also be observed on the side of civil society, where memorialization has a longer tradition. One of the main actors in the domain of memorialization, *Bantayog ng mga Bayani*

(Monument of Heroes), has been documenting stories of resistance and martyrs since before the fall of the dictatorship. It erected a Memorial Wall and documentation center in Manila, which it complemented with immaterial and non-place-based practices, albeit in more traditional forms, such as commemorative events. Recently, Bantayog staff joined forces with a younger generation of justice activists to set up an online museum to reach a broader audience. This younger generation of activists is an important driver behind the current boom in memorialization efforts. Their activism is typically inspired by the ongoing disinformation campaigns that seek to muddy historical facts and create a climate of uncertainty regarding Martial Law (also see [Wedeen 1999](#)). As some activists indicated, they sometimes label their activism as memorialization rather than truth-telling in response to the contested connotation of the word ‘truth’ and the polarized societal debate, and as an attempt to reach audiences across societal divides. The choice for immaterial and non-place-based initiatives, too, was explained along similar lines by some interviewees: in a context of shrinking space for activism (notably since the presidency of Duterte) and resource scarcity, decentralized and immaterial approaches that can less easily be physically attacked have become more prominent.⁴ As I will argue below, this pragmatic choice for immaterial approaches has had interesting consequences with regard to truth-listening.

A specific subset of civil society initiatives in the domain of truth and memorialization are those driven by artists, curators, and creative professionals. These include exhibitions by and in galleries (e.g., Ateneo Art Gallery), research projects with an artistic component (e.g., Weaving Women’s Words), projects by artistic collectives (e.g., Dakila), individual artists developing artistic practices around Martial Law violence (e.g., Kiri Dalena), and creative professionals engaging in the narrativization of existing documentation (e.g., the Storytellers). The prominence of these artistic practices further contributes to a memory landscape that is shaped by the interaction between material and immaterial, and place-based and non-place-based practices. In addition to being rooted in the broader ‘memory boom’, these artistic engagements can also partly be understood in light of the explicitly activist profile of some of the important art academies and universities.⁵ Also, the 2014 Mindanao Peace Accords and the growing attention to violence there could be argued to have contributed to this memory activism—artistic and otherwise—by putting debates over memory and truth (including those related to Martial Law proper) higher on the agenda again.

As part of these peace accords, a Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission (TJRC) was established, which delivered its report in 2016. In addition to adopting a long-term perspective that assessed Martial Law-era violence in light of longer and deeper dynamics of direct and structural violence, the work of the TJRC underlined the importance of not only focusing on truth-seeking and truth-telling, but also listening: it organized several *listening sessions* where victims could talk about their experience ([Transitional Justice and Reconciliation Commission 2016](#)). Using this label implicitly shifts the focus from victims giving testimony toward related questions of what is needed for audiences to be able to listen to these stories. Because of institutional limitations and limited mandates, these questions were eventually left unanswered as the structure of the listening sessions remained fairly close to that of a typical truth-telling exercise. It is against this background that the Weaving Women’s Words project has sought to revisit this question of how to ‘presence’ complex and multilayered truths in ways that can meaningfully be received. This paper speaks to practitioners’, activists’, and professionals’ growing attention to how difficult truths can be heard, and seeks to enrich the conceptual underpinnings of this emerging debate, without seeking to be an impact study of how impactful their strategies are.

4. Case Study: Weaving Women’s Words on Wounds of War

The focus of the empirical section of this article is the ‘Weaving Women’s Words on Wounds of War’ project (WWWWW), which is the artistic component of the ‘Weaving Women’s Voices’ research project run by the Department of Political Science at Ateneo de

Manila University, which seeks to further research, solidarity-building, knowledge-sharing, and training, and which presents itself as a memory project seeking to further transitional justice ([Weaving Women's Voices 2022](#)). The broader project is coordinated by Lourdes Veneración Rallonza, a former senior gender advisor at the TJRC who was involved in the development of its listening sessions. It starts from the acknowledgment that there has been limited societal awareness about the experiences of women who faced massive direct and structural violence (personally and as members of specific communities) and about the impunity for that violence.⁶ The project, therefore, approaches participating women as bearers of knowledge and co-authors of the emerging narratives, arguing that 'it is important to document those narratives because in the Philippines, we still do not have that kind of formal process or mechanism'.⁷

Because of the acknowledgment that the experiences of these women (who come from six different sites in the Philippines, including Bangsamoro) do not lend themselves to 'easy storytelling', and that 'theirs are not stories that translate in straightforward ways from raw experiences to narrative form',⁸ the research component was complemented with an artistic project. This component starts from an exploration of the limitations of different kinds of documentation, the difficulty of navigating vast amounts of documentation, the 'diminished gaze' of mainstream media, and deeply rooted prejudices against women, indigenous groups, and Islamic cultures ([Castro 2023](#)). The creation of spaces for articulating lived violence in new ways therefore became a crucial ambition, addressed through the WWWW project that constituted a space where narratives of violence are constructed and circulated through visual artefacts and interventions (*Ibid.*). This approach illustrates the vital role of artistic practices in the pursuit of justice, truth, and memory, as well as the importance of curatorial practices for the dynamics of truth-listening. Because of this article's focus on truth-listening, the curatorial approach that has been put in place to achieve this aim constitutes the focus of this empirical section.⁹

The WWWW exhibition encompassed a physical show as well as an online virtual exhibition, both developed by the participating women who collaborated with an artwork developer and a curator, seeking to move beyond traditional representations of violence.¹⁰ Starting from this position, the curatorial team developed a practice that revolved around the recovery, reconstruction, and problematization of images to create new *lieux de mémoire*, as well as around artistic and traditional practices' broader potential in terms of accounting for complex forms of violence ([Castro 2023](#)). This approach steered the interventions in each of the six localities, which constituted the organizing principle for the exhibition. Throughout the exhibition, material and immaterial interventions interacted. A majority of the material artworks consisted of or included narratives expressed through weaving and textiles. These textiles were considered to have multiple meanings and effects, from highlighting the rich textile tradition and the role of women therein, to the risk of locking women up in more stereotypical roles and the need to deconstruct these stereotypes through careful curation of the artworks.¹¹

For the installation reflecting the first site (see Figure 1), the notion of tenacity was used as a central organizing principle. This installation included autobiographical recollection, backstrap weaving, embroidery, annotated maps, and a video installation. It combined narrative forms (such as excerpts from autobiographies) with visual prompts (such as maps capturing geographies of resistance in the Cordilleras region) and artistic and artisan interventions (such as hand-woven wrap-around *kalinga* skirts), highlighting the inter-temporal nature of both the violence and the resistance to it.

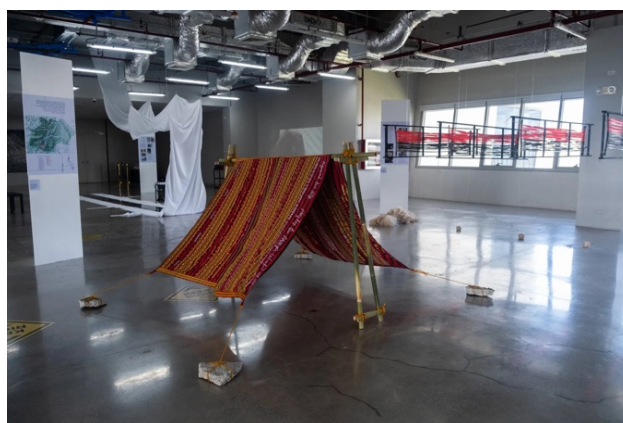


Figure 1. Site 1, copyright holder WWWW.

The concept of grace structured the second installation (see Figure 2), which included an autobiographical recollection, an impression on cornstarch, annotated maps, and an installation of plain-woven polychromatic prayer mats. These works explored the tension between women's aspirations and pressures emerging from modernization, Christianity, and fundamentalist strands of Islam. The mats woven by the Samalan women sought to capture grace and ephemerality within the material of the work, of which the molds will disappear soon to reveal new—or pre-existing—realities ([Weaving Women's Voices 2022](#)). The justice, truth, and memorialization called for in this installation is one that acknowledges Sama and Tausug ritual life, counters invisibilization, and guarantees their survival and flourishing.



Figure 2. Site 2, Copyright holder WWWW.

The installation reflecting the third locality foregrounded the concept of discretion, and comprised autobiographical recollection, annotated maps, impressions on cornstarch, and a video installation (see Figure 3). It represented the innovations in social order and the active role of women weavers, dyers, and embroiderers in leading their communities into a cash economy by selling their works. For this specific site, considerations about what women did (not) want to become public knowledge about their histories of violence and resistance were central. For this specific intervention, considerations about what women did (not) want to become public knowledge about their histories of violence and resistance were central. This led to complex questions about the right of the nation to know and the agency of the victim to choose whether they want to speak or stay silent, which in turn posed its own complexities because individuals were often inclined to speak about their suffering but also experienced a reticence to do so. This led the curatorial team to explore the technique of Ikat, which is part of T'boli culture. Ikat is a system of reserve dyeing whereby parts of the threads or the cloth are treated with a product that resists dye,

meaning that once the thread is dyed, parts of it are covered and others remain visible, so that the story ‘is there, but it’s not there’ (Weaving Women’s Voices 2022). The artwork consists of reproductions of *ikat* warping frames for dyeing with printed text.



Figure 3. Site 3, copyright holder WWWW.

Equanimity was the concept structuring the installation for the fourth site, which included autobiographical recollection, embroidery on garments, annotated maps, wood-working, and an installation of a traditional Tausug applied canopy (*luhul*) (see Figure 4). This installation reflected on the loss, reconfiguration, and recreation of identities women faced when joining armed groups. For the installation, women donated a uniform they used at the time of war, which they embroidered with their names, to tell stories that ought to be understood as a form of memorialization as much as an ongoing reality of negotiating identities.

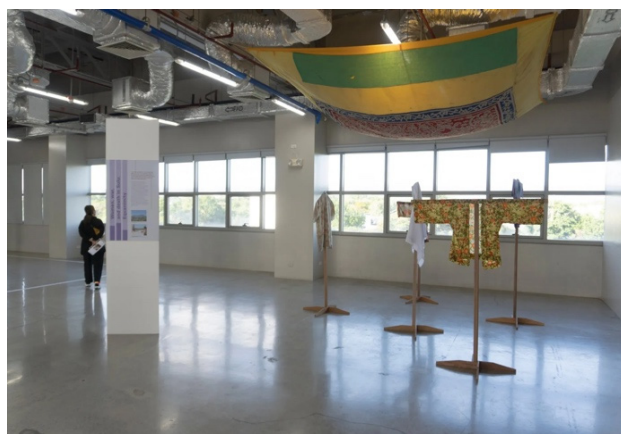


Figure 4. Site 4, copyright holder WWWW.

For the fifth site, narratives were organized around the concept of endurance (see Figure 5). An installation consisting of an autobiographical recollection, masonry, sand-blasted engraving on stone, videography, photographs, annotated maps, and a digital architectural rendering entered into dialogue with a place-based mass grave marker near the Taqbil Mosque in Palimbang where victims of the 1974 Malisbong massacre are buried and remembered. The non-place-based intervention complements the preference of residents for a form of memorialization and truth-telling that revolves around the actual mosque which still carries the marks of gunshots and blood (Weaving Women’s Voices 2022). The exhibition features a video installation documenting the design and fabrication of a physical memorial that is currently portable, but that may be permanently installed in the Taqbil Mosque in due course. This way of proceeding allows for the mobility of this memorialization material, as well as integration into more permanent structures.

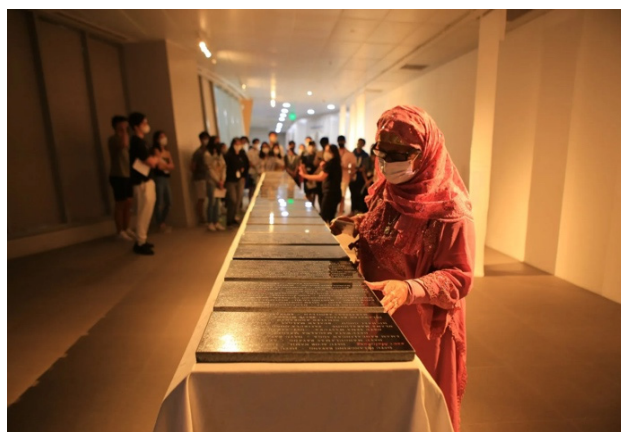


Figure 5. Site 5, copyright holder WWWW.

A sixth and last installation, revolving around the notion of amplification, contained autobiographical recollection, digital architectural renderings, acrylic and wood architectural modeling, annotated maps, embroidery, and an installation (see Figure 6). The artwork dealt with past and ongoing military action in the region and underlined the fear of repetition created by the blind spot in the national imagination about past massacres brought on by the *Ilagâ*. At the same time, the artwork also questioned the dynamics of memory and the truthfulness of remembering (see below).

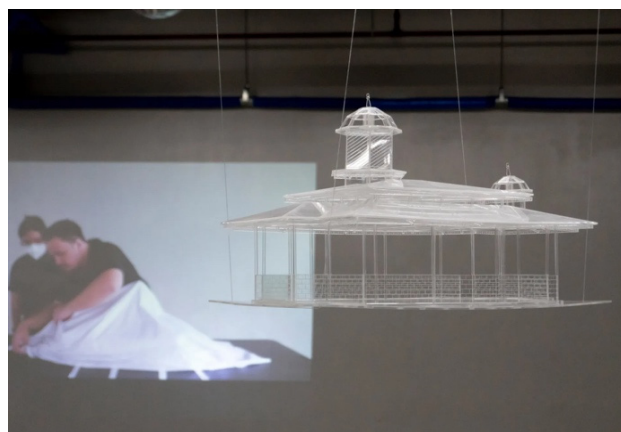


Figure 6. Site 6, copyright holder WWWW.

Throughout, maps and the practice of mapping played a crucial role in defining the memorial practice and installation. With each of the six groups of women, the team first engaged in a geographical mapping of stories, to make visible experiences in ways that are not linear or narrative, per se, but that follow a place-based logic (see Figure 7). In doing so, the narratives, memories, and memorial practices emerging throughout the process have an inherent place-based dimension to them, even if some final outcomes, like the online museum, are entirely untethered from the places and spaces in which these stories emerged. Maps were used to detail the locations of activities of participants in combat, to identify relevant and constitutive spaces in women's lives, to overlay individual and personal maps with collective trajectories and geographies, or to bring that which was invisible because it happened in remote spaces back into the conversation. An example of the latter is Map 5 which shows the trajectory of the Mindoro ship (see Figure 8). Most narratives of violence regarding the Palimbang massacre focus on the killing of men in the Taqbil Mosque. Simultaneously, however, women and children were taken to a naval landing ship, the Mindoro, for weeks, where they experienced rape, forced marriages, hunger, psychological violence, and torture. Their remoteness at sea rendered this violence invisible. Starting

from a mapping exercise, facilitators sought to counter this invisibilization. Also, other mapping exercises offered non-verbal tools to present a personal or collective experience as part of a broader dynamic of place-based and cultural violence. While facilitators started from place-based approaches, they also moved beyond these to avoid the entrapment of stories, experiences, and narrators in frameworks typically associated with these place-based practices, and to propose new interpretations, formulations, and ways of imagining. This interaction between place-based and non-place-based approaches could be observed in the process as well as the outcome, where, for example, several installations could be read as stand-alone non-place-based interventions, as well as being components of a greater place-based memorial structure. This combination of place-based and non-place-based approaches to memorialization and ‘presencing’ sought to reflect layers and complexity that otherwise risk being overlooked.



Figure 7. Mapping exercise site 1, copyright holder WWWW.



Figure 8. Map site 5, copyright holder WWWW.

5. Discussion: Deconstructing Barriers That Inhibit Truth-Listening

Building on the overview of how the WWWW exhibition was constructed, this section analyses how this curatorial approach sought to facilitate conditions for truth-listening, notably in terms of how art and artistic practice were mobilized to construct and circulate layered narratives of violence and resistance through what Lourdes Veneración Rallanza calls ‘narrative documentation’, which she describes as ‘not necessarily some kind

of a truth-telling in the strictest sense of the word, but it's basically a listening process. It's listening to the women and listening to their stories'.¹² Through extensive engagement with perspectives shared by the project leads, the section analyzes the building blocks of this narrative documentation in more detail and reflects on what it means for broader debates about memorialization and truth in transitional justice contexts.

Artistic practices and how these are developed and curated are seen as crucial components of this narrative documentation that explicitly seek to facilitate listening processes. They are considered to hold the potential to facilitate a dialogic kind of truth whereby both those facilitating the process and those visiting the exhibition interact with a form of expression that is seen as a 'living document'. As Rallonza argues,

that was the original intent of the WWWW-exhibit that the dialog would actually be there in terms of how the truth was experienced, and the truth that is now being listened to and the truth that is now being seen. So how truth is performed and how truth is actually seen, those are two different things.¹³

The focus on how these artistic articulations of the experiences of women affect audiences links the notion of 'narrative documentation' to that of 'narrative change-making', which is proposed by other justice actors and activists in the Philippines who use artistic practices and narrative techniques to revisit documentation about Martial Law in ways that have an explicit objective of social and political change.¹⁴ WWWW's foregrounding of 'narrative documentation' rather than 'narrative change-making' is rooted in diverging positions regarding the political and social responsibility of art among project leads, with some advocating that the artwork not be beholden to any agenda and others insisting that art cannot be separate from the struggles surrounding its genesis. The primary focus is therefore on the complexity and volatility of representing, bearing witness to, and memorializing experiences of violence and resistance, and art's potential in this regard, notably in terms of deconstructing barriers that inhibit truth-listening by creating new—material and immaterial—*lieux de mémoire* that acknowledge this complexity and volatility (Castro 2023). In this section, I zoom in on two building blocks of this approach.

5.1. The Importance of Spaces and Places

The previous section highlighted the importance of spaces and places in shaping both the interventions and the narratives emerging from these, for example, because every workshop took place in a locality related to the violent events or started with a mapping exercise. The spatial characteristics of the exhibition, however, were turned into constitutive elements of how multilayered and dynamic narratives of violence and resistance were 'presenced' in ways that envisioned active listening. This is best illustrated by comparing the two different spaces in which the physical exhibition was mounted. The first time, the exhibition was set up in multipurpose spaces and classrooms of Ateneo de Manila. This was approached by curators as an invitation to envision an approach that would work in informal spaces, and that would allow the exhibition to also travel to communities where formal art spaces or museums might not be available. The spatial constraints encouraged the foregrounding of other than just aesthetic qualities to express these narratives in meaningful and powerful ways that required a more active role of audiences.¹⁵ The second time, the exhibition was mounted in a more conventional art space, which had visual advantages but also reproduced the atmosphere of a museum and carried the risk that installations would be seen as 'dead objects' rather than as interventions that require active participation. Curators mitigated potential undesirable consequences of this spatial reality by, for example, ensuring that text interventions would be limited so that visitors would actively have to search for explanations and context, and by developing a printed resource for visitors to take home in order to allow for narratives—that often defy easy or immediate understanding—to travel and be processed also beyond and outside of the museum space.¹⁶

The importance of spatial considerations in shaping the narrative that emerged and how that would be received is best illustrated on the basis of an example from one of the localities. Participants in Palimbang, for example, insisted on the importance of a more traditional local memorial site. Initially, an artistic installation had been proposed that would combine material interventions (i.e., references to the hundred sacks of bones that were recovered after bodies were dumped in the ocean) and immaterial interventions (i.e., a soundscape) as part of the exhibition. This proposal was pushed off the table by participants, who preferred a local memorial with the names of the deceased engraved on the walls of the mosque. This preference is rooted in 50 years of relative neglect of the Palimbang massacre by the government, and the fact that the mosque that carries the traces of the massacre is still there and is decaying, despite decades of promises by the government to reconstruct it. As the lead artwork developer explained,

It's Mindanao and they wanted to feel that their experience was given the same weight as something in Manila. So I just chunked all the more artsy ideas, but one challenge was the budget. We didn't have enough money to make a proper memorial as much as I wanted. But at the same time, I also wanted to show that we can make inscriptions and things that you would expect from a traditional memorial, without gentrifying the place, without upstaging the relic. Because it was still the real mosque. It was the same roof. The bullet holes are still there. If the local government plans would happen, it would erase the artefact. And I didn't want that. So I tried to balance the concerns about them getting a more formal, traditional recognition, but also show them that we don't have to make it look like a gentrified, pretty Mosque.¹⁷

This led to a plan for having someone engrave the names of the deceased in the exhibition space, throughout the whole run of the exhibition (with an accompanying livestream to allow people to tune in remotely). This was seen as a way of 'presencing' during the exhibition the tedious labor of memorializing those who died in the massacre. These plaques could then be transferred to the Taqbil Mosque and be installed as a local memorial. Eventually, it was decided that the plaques would also be engraved locally and that a record of the entire process of engraving the names would be presented alongside the plaques during the exhibition. In this way, place-based and non-place-based components complemented each other to respond to the various needs and demands of participants.¹⁸ As lead artwork developer, Karl Castro, argued,

Remembering is such a complex process. For example, we have a lot of traditional memorials in Metro [Manila]. [...] but I felt that it was also a way of forgetting. [...] It just becomes part of the landscape and it makes it easy to forget, even if you see it every day. So, for me, remembering is something that we do over and over again and you pass on and that it's something that should be embodied [...] maybe the ways of remembering should be more diverse. [...] we don't always have to think of a monument as a default in the process of remembering, maybe there should be a more creative, more nuanced way of remembering, [...] you don't have to have marble and granite and bronze in order to remember. And I don't want communities to feel that they have to do something that is very outside of what their resources are in their environment or in their culture.¹⁹

This statement clearly shows how the interaction between place-based and non-place-based practices is explored as an avenue for generating new multilayered narratives of violence and resistance and for asking questions in new ways that invite active engagement—even if pragmatic considerations and resource scarcity were also a determining factor: the entire exhibition had initially been conceived of as a mere show of fieldwork pictures and no significant budget had been earmarked for it. As the role and potential of artistic practices became more central, a more ambitious project was formulated, but a variety of accessible approaches had to be identified because of budget constraints and to make interventions more context-specific. Another factor for exploring the interaction between

place-based and non-place-based approaches, and notably for curating an entire online exhibition, was the desire to reach broader audiences than the topography of the Philippines would easily allow for with a purely place-based approach. Lastly, as hinted at above, actors sometimes turn to a combination of place-based and non-place-based approaches when they believe that place-based projects create a risk of attack.²⁰ In spite of a range of pragmatic considerations factoring into certain choices regarding (non-)place-based approaches, one of the outcomes of these choices has been the development of a curatorial approach that mobilizes spatial characteristics in ways that allow for a kind of ambiguity and complexity that prompt active participation in the process of telling and listening to difficult truths about past and present.

5.2. *The Ambiguity and Relationality of the Process*

In addition to mobilizing spatial characteristics for developing an approach that required active participation, WWWW decisively shaped the way in which the project was organized as a process of co-creation that was also characterized by ambiguity and complexity, and that demanded a meaningful kind of relationality. The starting point was that what was missing most from how legacies of violence and resistance had been documented so far were the lived experiences and the multi-layered and ongoing impact on people's day-to-day lives. Moreover, starting from lived experiences added legitimacy to these narratives in a situation where no official and authoritative records about past violence exist, and where new means of filling the voids created by this lack of authoritative record are actively foraged.²¹ Developing these new kinds of approaches also allowed for conversations where there were none before. The process surfaced new realities and facts that had not received significant attention until then, but also new silences, things people do not want to speak about.²² Not brushing over these silences was considered to be crucial in a collaborative process of truth-telling and memorialization. Through installations such as the abovementioned *ikat* installation, these silences and the ambiguity they generated were integrated as an integral part of the narrative fabric (see site 3).

Similarly, instances of 'misremembering' were embraced as an organizing principle of truth-telling and memorialization. This is illustrated through the installation that sought to resurrect the image of a mosque that is no longer there and of which there was only one partial picture (see site 6). On the basis of this picture, material remnants, and Google Images, an architect created a rendering of the original mosque. The rendering was discussed with and adapted on the basis of testimonials of survivors, who pointed out a significant discrepancy between the rendering and what they said the mosque had looked like. Renderings were adapted until people agreed that they adequately reflected the original mosque. After the scale model had been fabricated, however, librarians at Ateneo University found a photograph of the mosque with a more complete picture, which showed a very different image from the remembered mosque, including a different number of towers. This, however, was considered almost irrelevant to the process. As the lead artwork developer argued,

I know I will never be able to recreate the mosque with a perfect verisimilitude. But the point is, people will remember. They will try to remember. And even if it's an imperfect picture, the fact that they're participating in remembering, and that we are doing this together is what's important.²³

Both the silences and the misremembering point to an ambiguity that is considered to be a crucial tool for stringing together past, present, and future in the process of truth-telling and memorializing in ways that require a relational approach, and artistic practices are seen as powerful means for accommodating and nourishing this ambiguity, complexity, and relationality. These artistic practices are not encapsulated by the realm of facts (which can be covered by journalists and formal documentation efforts), but instead weave together and ask questions that can never be fully resolved but that need answering from various perspectives.²⁴ This includes feelings, things that pertain to the (justice) imagination, or

things that are intangible. These are not typically addressed in more factual approaches to truth or memorialization, but were crucial in this process. As the lead artwork developer argued,

I was very conscious that they should not be seen as mere depictions of the truth. The truthfulness of it is not even in what is displayed, but in the process of how it's made, how it is displayed, how invested the makers are in the actual process of remembering.²⁵

In that sense, ambiguity was not only seen as a crucial component of the process of truth-telling but also and especially as a crucial element for being able to listen to these truths, in that this inherent ambiguity requires audiences to ask questions and guide themselves through this ambiguity and to interrogate in ways that can establish a relationality between those speaking and those listening.

A work is most powerful when the connection happens in the mind of the viewer. [...] I think that's when it's most effective, when you have to work for it so that when it clicks, when you get it, when you figure out the space in-between, you have that slight eureka-moment, you take ownership for it. And then that it's an embodied experience that you're in, you work for it. So I think that kind of small ambiguity is very important and it's a tightrope balance or it's a slippery slope [...]. So I think all the works are a little not self-explanatory in that regard. They're a little mysterious. You feel like there are layers that you want to unlock. And in thinking about the process of the works, I wanted the works to have these many different facets and layers which can serve as entry points. [...] And in a way, it's a little nonlinear: whichever route appeals to you, you'll get somewhere.²⁶

This importance of ambiguity and complexity both for truth-telling and truth-listening is also embraced by several other Philippine justice actors and activists in the domain of truth and memorialization, who adopt nuanced stances on the nature of the stories that can be told and the need for texture, complexity, and relationality rather than for sweeping statements.²⁷ As some respondents mentioned, the destabilization brought on by actively engaging with ambiguous narratives can be a ground for radical and rigorous empathy, as well as a form of resistance against and resignifying of dominant narratives—including ones that lock people up in fixed identities.²⁸

6. Concluding Remarks

This article explored how spatial dynamics and an artistic process of co-creation were jointly mobilized and mutually constitutive to 'presence' experiences of violence in ways that envisaged active listening based on relationality. I showed how these spatial dynamics and the characteristics of the process were explicitly used to deconstruct taken-for-granted interpretations of violence by 'presencing' ambiguity and complexity, for example, by turning silence and misremembering into generative and crucial components of truth-telling and memorialization. In doing so, the approach adopted in the WWWW project added layers and nuance to more forensic ways of documenting violence and resistance and to more standardized ways of memorializing these. It juxtaposes the erasure and uncertainties created through disinformation campaigns and narrative warfare with a generative ambiguity and complexity that can be seen as a means for foregrounding people's lived realities in ways that hold the potential of resisting epistemic injustice and recognizing harm in more meaningful ways. In doing so, it also invites for a more active form of listening, both on the side of those facilitators participating in the initial process of 'presencing' experiences of violence, as well as on the side of those engaging with those 'presenced' realities later on. Both expression and reception become more complex phenomena in such an approach, which differs fundamentally from settings like formal truth commissions, where the roles of speakers and audiences are clearly demarcated and highly scripted. In processes like this one, on the contrary, relations and positionalities are more fluid and more complex, and require constant renegotiations and re-signification.

This imbues both speakers and listeners with more agency, and facilitates more direct and meaningful engagements as well as a sense of being heard on the side of those who experienced violence. While this article is no impact study, theoretically, this approach could counter the expression fatigue often encountered in more formal processes, as well as open up new models for active listening. Because of these potential benefits, it is relevant to reflect on what the WWWW approach can mean for the debate over memory and truth in the Philippines more broadly, as well as in other post-conflict and post-authoritarian contexts where an overarching narrative about past harm is either missing or perceived to be inadequate for capturing complex lived realities of violence and resistance.

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Notes

- ¹ In 1981: Marcos formally lifted Martial Law, but retained many of his powers. In 1986 his regime was toppled.
- ² A majority of victims killed by the Marcos regime were tortured and mutilated, then dumped in various places for the public to discover, a tactic meant to sow fear among the public ([McCoy 2001](#)).
- ³ Republic Act No. 10368, also known as the Human Rights Victims Reparation and Recognition Act of 2012.
- ⁴ Interview 221125_022.
- ⁵ Interview 221121_019.
- ⁶ The women involved in the project came from Palimbang, Sultan Kudarat; Tabuk and Buscalan, Kalinga; Lake Sebu and Tboli, South Cotabato; Manili, Carmen, Cotabato; and Jolo, Sulu.
- ⁷ Interview with Lourdes Veneración Rallanza.
- ⁸ See notes 7 above.
- ⁹ Because of the importance of the gender dimension of this project, and the space constraints of this article, the reader is invited to explore the gender considerations of the project in more depth in the abovementioned online exhibition.
- ¹⁰ Interview with Marian Rocas.
- ¹¹ Interview with Karl Castro, 18 November 2022.
- ¹² See notes 7 above.
- ¹³ See notes 7 above.
- ¹⁴ Focus group with members of Dakila Collective.
- ¹⁵ Interview with Karl Castro.
- ¹⁶ See notes 15 above.
- ¹⁷ See notes 15 above.
- ¹⁸ Interview with Karl Castro and Castro, 2023
- ¹⁹ Interview with Karl Castro and Karl Castro, 2023
- ²⁰ Interview 221114_007.
- ²¹ See notes 10 above.
- ²² See notes 15 above.
- ²³ See notes 15 above.
- ²⁴ See notes 15 above.
- ²⁵ See notes 15 above.
- ²⁶ See notes 15 above.
- ²⁷ Interview 221117_014, 221121_019.
- ²⁸ See notes 5 above.

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