


Towards Urban Alter-Politics: Scholar-Activists Situated Solidarities in Philippine Housing Struggles

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Abstract

In this paper, I marked the critical alter-political works of urban scholar-activists in the Philippines. Slums are at the heart of capitalist dispossessions. Slum dwellers live, survive, negotiate, and resist on an everyday basis. In the Philippines, the struggles of slum community organisations are strongly influenced, formed, and pulled in divergent ideological trajectories by contending larger political formations.

I draw on my own experience and that of 20 Filipino urban scholar-activists with varied political commitments, reflecting on decades of community work, to highlight the alter-works and challenges of navigating the web of political heterogeneity within urban poor organisations and movements. By scholar-activists, I do not refer solely to those who are based in universities, but to the many who struggle every day to unearth subaltern political knowledges and collectively fight for the right to adequate housing, as well as, for some, the right to the city. I enumerate the multiple functions and necessary labours of being 'embedded' in these complex politics. We engage in political advising, framing, networking, organizing, translating, and capacity-building. Caught in a complex web that may necessitate strategic essentialisation, silencing, and foreclosures, scholar-activists play a crucial role of strategic facilitation that connects collective forms of living among urban surplus lives and corrodes neoliberal urban dispossessions. These alter-works are continuous efforts towards situated solidarities, where urban scholar activists critically draw from and reshape 'inherited' social movement frames and strategies grounded on actually existing subaltern realities, capacities, and political opportunities.

Keywords: alter-work; Philippines; strategic facilitation; urban scholar-activism; urban social movements

Introduction

Recent research on social movements has noted the rise of another politics, referred to as "alter-politics" (Hage 2015). This alter-politics has progressed from countering neoliberal dispossession, which still plays a crucial role, to propositional politics aimed at establishing a post-capitalist society (Kioupiolis 2023). It is a re-commoning project that fosters "autonomous and peaceful co-existence beyond capital" against neoliberal dispossessions and insecurities. Re-commoning de-commodifies resources and labours, and incites participation in "socially useful doings" for the care of others and the world (Shaw and Waterstone 2021: 1797-1798). Proponents advocate for alter-works, initiatives that cultivate, sustain, and link alter-worlds through non-hierarchical networks of global and local solidarity (Shaw and Waterstone 2021).

Kioupiolis (2023) highlights three strategic pathways approaches forwarded by Hardt and Negri (2017) that facilitate resistant and egalitarian collective solidarities—exodus, antagonistic reformism,

and hegemony. Exodus represents a collective and autonomous refusal of prevailing neoliberal structures and relationships while fostering new modes of communal living. Antagonistic reformism is reform efforts aimed at fundamentally transforming neoliberal institutions from within, contesting liberal property structures to reduce inequalities and enhance the welfare of marginalised populations. The counterhegemonic path is a protracted struggle to replace the intellectual, moral, and political authority of elites with socially transformative revolutionary formations. Hardt and Negri (2017) suggest that these strategies are complementary and should be applied variably and critically amidst ongoing collective re-commoning efforts. Alter-politics aims to help empower grassroots movements for self-governance by utilizing “visionary pragmatism” (Coles 2016), which combines street activism, critical engagement with the state and elites, and long-term social transformation (Kiouпкиolis 2023).

Avoiding exclusions arising from rigid, hierarchised, and centralised social movement organisations, alter-political enactments promote openness, democratic engagement, community empowerment, and autonomy. It calls for a ‘disarticulation of inherited historical dilemmas’ (Lynd and Grubacic 2008: 157) and straddles the rigid binary political categories such as revolution or reform, identity or interest, violence or nonviolence, spontaneity or organisation, and state control or autonomy. It promotes experimentation and constant reflection, and sustains solidarities through non-hierarchical connections of global and local networks (Kiouпкиolis 2023; Shaw and Waterstone 2021).

Scholar-Activists towards Urban Alter-Politics

Slums are central to neoliberal urban dispossession and disposability (Harvey 2012). These spaces are urban commons of chronic scarcity and precarity. In the Global South, urban development often facilitates elite accumulation through “gentrification by mass eviction” (Desmond 2012) from in-city slums. As dispossession is concentrated in cities, urban surplus peoples become critical to the alter politics project. Despite facing exclusion and instability, residents of slums endure these conditions every day (Bayat 2000) and resist using a variety of strategies (Arcilla 2023), including forging alliances to combat growing displacement and the erosion of democratic spaces.

In their political struggle, slum communities are assisted by urban scholar-activists. However, the significant role of urban scholar-activists in urban alternative politics, particularly in Global South housing struggles, has not been adequately deliberated. In this paper, I mark the essential alterworks of urban scholar-activists in the Philippines. I draw on my own experience and that of 20 Filipino urban scholar-activists with diverse political commitments, reflecting on decades of community engagement to emphasise the difficulties of navigating the complex political landscape of urban poor grassroots organisations and social movements. I enumerate the multiple functions and necessary labours of being ‘embedded’ within intricate urban poor politics.

Scholar activists are engaged in collective efforts to resist dispossession and promote a post-neoliberal capitalist society. At a recent meeting of global housing activists, they reaffirmed their dedication to producing “alternative and transformative forms of knowledge related to housing struggles...[through] continuous praxis focused on struggle, community, and collective learning” (Reyes *et al.* 2021: 2). They take part in feminist, grounded, reflexive, and engaged work.

Thus, in response to dystopian portrayals of slums, housing activists acknowledge that in these places, “repertoires and improvisations that sustain daily life...may offer valuable insights into new modes of production, reproduction, and social relationships.” Slums are housing solutions of the poor against urban land and housing commodification, and state withdrawal from public housing. Slum life fosters non-exploitative economic relations (Schmid and Smith 2021: 265) and new forms of co-living (Shaw and Waterstone 2021), based on mutuality and care (Fields *et al.* 2023; Simone 2022). Housing struggles challenge existing neoliberal configurations of property, power, and law

that declare their existence and communities blighted, illegal, unproductive, and unclean. The struggle for adequate housing is also integral to the struggle for informal livelihoods and mobilities (Dovey and Recio 2024). Indeed, slums host the practice of de-commodified living and “become sites for the development of new shared identities and social solidarities and, potentially, for the emergence of a new political subject” (Chopeline and Ciavolella 2017: 329).

By scholar-activists, I do not refer solely to the small number of those who are based in universities. Cognisant of Fullilove’s (2021) commentary on the ‘university-centric’ form of scholar-activism, I advocate for the recognition of the many outside of universities who struggle every day to distill urban poor realities, unearth subaltern political knowledges and collectively struggle for the right to adequate housing, and, for some, the right to the city. This resonates with Casas-Cortés, Osterweil, and Powell’s (2013: 202) plea for a “decentralised notion of expertise and the multiplication of authorised voices” in their work with social movements.

Those affiliated with universities continually reimagine “ways through which research can serve housing organizing work, ways for scholar activism to redistribute resources out of universities” (Reyes *et al.* 2021: 9). They interrogate neoliberal academic structures that constrain political engagement and move writing beyond academic audiences. Even as some university-based scholar-activists can “hold an academic stance and maintain institutional privilege while actively contributing to struggles for housing and against displacement” (Portelli and Tschoepe 2021: 255).

While acknowledging the “messiness” around the notion of scholar-activism, I reiterate its provocation to “provide[s] an opening through which to have the necessary complicated, uncomfortable, and contradicting conversations about alternative infrastructures of knowledge production” (Reyes *et al.* 2021: 9) for collective housing struggles. These conversations need to interlace with alter-political deliberations to mark the critical link between engaged and transformative knowledge production and democratic, generative urban subaltern solidarities toward postcapitalist possibilities. I offer the learnings from collated narratives and labours from Filipino urban scholar-activists.

I argue that many Filipino urban scholar-activists are engaged in alter-works, producing knowledge as “caring for the endurance of collective struggles” (Lancione 2023: 845). The fight for urban land and housing within Philippines cities is anticipated to become increasingly politically relevant due to the rapid pace of urbanisation, the shifting foundations of elite wealth accumulation toward urban land and real estate, the growing slum population, the varied dynamics of social movements, and the heterogenous political landscape of slum dwellers. They, too, navigate the complexities between essentialist binaries, such as reform versus revolution, state critique versus engagement, and organisation versus spontaneity.

Yet, rather than viewing these as ‘disarticulations’ that suggest a break from inherited political thought from an external position, I contend that the experiences of many Filipino urban scholar-activists are better characterised as efforts of “situated solidarities” (Nagar and Geiger 2007). Many urban scholar-activists, community organisations, and existing networks are embedded in these political ideologies that remain influential in framing urban subaltern struggles. Moreover, the subaltern capacities and NGO/SMO networks, which outline achievable prospective alter-political projects, are partly outcomes of NGO/SMO efforts.

Situated solidarities acknowledge the “multiple situated knowledges” in specific struggles rooted in different social, epistemological, political, and socio-institutional formations (Nagar and Geiger 2007: 273). With diverse knowledges, we, as Larner (1995: 187), ask, “What kind of struggle is possible?” In situated solidarities, scholar-activists engage in struggles that are generative of solidarities and knowledges for social change while carrying insights from and negotiating the weight of inherited politics. These solidarities are “attentive to the ways in which our ability to evoke the global in relation to the local, to configure the specific nature of our alliances and commitments, and to participate in processes of social change are significantly shaped by our geographical and socio-institutional locations, and the particular combination of processes, events, and struggles underway in those locations” (Nagar and Geiger 2007: 273). Situated within subaltern struggles, they continually reshape

their positionality in universities, NGOs and SMOs with epistemes that are informed by essentialisms, or “theoretically-driven ideals” (Routledge and Derickson 2015: 3).

In around 2013, I began working with an urban poor SMO as an activist graduate student. I did ethnographic and life-history work on the collective politics of a large slum community facing eviction and demolition. I lived in the slum for about six months, until I was harassed by security guards. I continuously helped in community organizing, protest activities, educational discussions, and community capacity-building efforts. I also explained housing policies and neoliberal urban planning to many urban poor assemblies. As my engagement spanned years, I was able to document the geographies and histories of Filipino radical urban poor resistances, including the ‘historic’ Occupy Bulacan (Arcilla 2023). I also realised that the organisation I partnered with, the Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap (KADAMAY)¹ even as I was committed to its politics, was only one of the many urban poor SMOs, and one that was using particularly radical politics. Later, I was introduced to other scholar-activists of diverse political persuasions.

In what follows, I discuss the urbanisation and housing crisis in the Philippines, as well as the varied responses and social movement trajectories of the urban poor, providing necessary background for the alter-works of scholar-activists. Then, I highlight their critical contributions and labours and mark the epistemological and political constraints that they face.

Urbanisation, the Housing Crisis, and the Urban Poor Movements in the Philippines

After the Second World War, the country’s economy was predominantly based on agriculture, transitioning but largely failing to industrialise. Given the underdevelopment of agriculture (Putzel 1992), productivity declined, leading to increased poverty among peasants and fisherfolk. Beginning in the 1960s and increasingly from the 1980s, many farmers and their families migrated to the cities to find work in the struggling industries and the nascent service sector in Metro Manila. However, manufacturing could not absorb the surplus and migrant labour from the countryside (Herrin 1982). Due to the precarity and low pay in urban jobs, workers and their families settled in slums.

During the years of President Ferdinand Marcos, Karaos (1993) observed that slum politics was heavily influenced by housing and land policies, as well as the later resistance against Martial Law. Slum dwellers formed organisations to secure housing as early as the 1970s. The first federation of slum organisations emerged in Tondo, Manila. The Zone One Tondo Organization successfully lobbied for the first in-city relocation site for families displaced by the Tondo Foreshore slum upgrading project (Karaos 1993). In 1975, the state housing agency, the National Housing Authority (NHA), was created. In 1978, the Ministry of Human Settlements was formed, and urban land reform was implemented. These initiatives conveyed an impression that the government was committed to improving the living conditions of the urban poor.

At the same time, increasing repression, radical left organizing, and the failure primarily of the housing programs led slum organisations to form united fronts against martial law (Karaos 1993). Leftist student activists immersed themselves in nearby slums to understand poverty. Slums hosted underground cells. When Martial Law was declared in 1972, however, slums were raided and many activists were arrested. Slum dwellers supported many workers’ strikes, including the infamous 1975 La Tondena strike, one of the first large-scale workers’ resistance that defied Marcos’ ban on strikes (Lacaba 1982). President Marcos decreed squatting a crime in 1975.

Karaos (1993) noted these developments produced “contradictory tendencies” in the slum movements. On one side, there are inclinations to join forces with the radical left to oppose Martial Law and pursue significant social reforms, while on the opposite side is the inclination to uphold organisational autonomy for critical state engagement and concentrate on the fight for urban land and housing. These tendencies are still reflected in the present political dynamics.

¹Literally meaning ‘to be with.’

When the 1986 People Power revolt toppled Martial Law, the restored liberal-democratic space initiated political changes among urban poor social movements. Installed President Corazon Aquino declared a ‘no demolition’ policy codified in the Urban Development and Housing Act (UDHA) of 1992. This policy further expanded the slums.

Consequently, the progressive social movement was segregated into two major factions—the reafirmists (RA) subscribing to the primacy of a protracted armed revolution from the countryside based on a semi-feudal and semi-colonial analysis of the Philippine political economy, and the rejectionists (RJ) camp.² The RA camp focuses on organizing peasants and workers, whose alliance is envisioned to install a revolutionary government. In 1998, the RA-affiliated groups formed the KADAMAY,³ a militant centre of the Filipino urban poor. The RJs were diverse and did not necessarily agree with each other. The RJs included those who rejected the RA analysis and strategy, those calling for a debate within the movement, those who argued for more legal struggles, and even those countering with a semi-capitalist analysis requiring an urban-based insurrection strategy (Kerkvliet 1996; Putzel 1995; Rocamora 1994). Certainly, both the RA and RJ camps advocate for counterhegemonic struggles against the Filipino elites. These political lines, while pushed and pulled in diverse directions by different people and political opportunities, continue to influence urban poor social movements.

Many urban-based cadres and slum leaders re-aligned and/or formed their organisations and alliances to maximise the newly opened liberal-democratic space. During the Martial Law, building a united front of community organisations and people’s movements was the main urban poor strategy for resisting state aggression (Karaos 1998). After the 1986 People Power revolt, advocacy coalitions used diverse legal and parliamentary strategies to successfully lobby for slum welfare, including the repeal of Marcos’ anti-squatting law and the adoption of the Community Mortgage Program (CMP) (Karaos 1998). The CMP enabled some slum communities to purchase the land they occupied, financed by a subsidised state mortgage.

One of the most lasting rifts between the two major factions concerning urban poor politics is their positions on the UDHA. Pushed by many groups, primarily associated with the RJ camp, the UDHA contained essential protections for slum communities, including recognition of the right to adequate housing, no demolition without relocation, and off-city resettlement as only a last resort. Despite these protections, its proponents were vigilant of its implementation and advocated for policy reform given the private sector’s role as a housing provider and the lack of provisions on urban land reform. The NHA’s mandate reflected the privatisation of socialised housing. KADAMAY called for the repeal of UDHA, citing the use of the law’s demolition exemptions—state infrastructure with available funding, and danger zones—to forcibly resettle many urban poor communities, and criticizing housing commodification, the reduction of the state’s function to facilitator, and its failure to address the housing crisis and livelihood precarity.

From the late 1990s onwards, the country experienced an urbanisation turn (Ortega 2016). The continued decline of agriculture and manufacturing, along with the rise of an urban service sector, further accelerated urbanisation. The rate of urbanisation steadily increased from 45.3% in 2010 to 54% in 2020 (UN-HABITAT Philippines 2023). Within the last two decades, urban economic growth—encompassing public infrastructure projects, increased global linkages, and in-city mobility, as well as attracting foreign investments—has constituted a major pump-priming strategy. Philippine cities are offered as attractive investment sites through central business districts, which funnel capital into the service economy—encompassing call centres, medical tourism, real estate, and retail trade (mostly malls, hotels, and restaurant services).

²There is not enough space to detail the RA-RJ debate nor trace the ideological linkages of many SMOs. This discussion outlines the frames and trajectories that continue to influence urban SMOs today.

³Composed of organisations and individuals, KADAMAY aims to promote a long-term struggle for the eradication of poverty and the establishment of a just, free, and prosperous society, in support of the working class towards national liberation and national democratic struggle. KADAMAY is a member of the Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (BAYAN), a multisectoral formation struggling for national and social liberation against imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat capitalism.

As cities grew, slums proliferated. Even if, according to United Nations Habitat reports, the percentage of urban slum dwellers decreased from 54.30% in 1990 to 42.9% in 2018 — the urban population increased massively from 29 million to 51 million (World Bank 2024). In Metro Manila, over 4.0 million people were estimated to live in slums in 2010. This is projected to increase to over 9 million by 2050 (Ballesteros 2010). Housing backlogs, including socialised housing, are projected to increase from 6.5 million in 2022 to 22 million by 2040 (UN-HABITAT Philippines 2023). Slums grew via “quiet encroachment” (Bayat 2000)—individualised and unorganised—of unbuilt urban spaces. In 2025, the former Secretary of Department of Human Settlements and Urban Development remarked that the country may already have the largest slum area in the world, given the lack of affordable housing.

The socialised housing program, designed to address the growing housing needs of the urban poor, remained inaccessible. The targeted 30% poor families could not afford socialised housing, even when situated in remote off-city areas, and followed a minimum standard design to keep costs down (Arcilla 2018). In off-city resettlements, there are limited employment opportunities, and transportation is very costly. Consequently, many of the off-city socialised housing units built in the last decade remain empty (Arcilla 2018).

The urban-based growth amplified land contestation. Local elites shifted their focus to urban land ownership, property development, and financial services as primary means of accumulation (Cardenas 2020). Overseas foreign workers’ remittances fueled a real estate frenzy—subdivisions in urban peripheries and condominiums in the inner cities—that expanded cities and displaced the poor (Ortega 2016). This is reflective of “gentrification by mass eviction” (Desmond 2012). The NHA admits that its tasks are “involuntary” relocation to mostly off-city resettlement to clear in-city land for government projects. The Presidential Commission on the Urban Poor counted 620,743 families that suffered evictions and relocations between 2008 and 2016.⁴

To defend their communities, slum dwellers adopted diverse repertoires, ranging from foot-dragging and critical state engagement to outright contestation. Many urban poor groups associated with the RJs formalised community-initiated housing planning and development, called “people’s planning,” as a specific counterpoint to the NHA’s socialised housing program. People’s planning promises a more inclusive, affordable, sustainable, and socially just community. While community planning has long been practiced by slumdwellers to solve their needs, people’s planning was formally recognised by President Benigno Aquino, Jr. as a state housing policy option due to grassroots advocacy. Organisations such as the Alliance of People’s Organization along the Manggahan Floodway (APOAMF) and a community in Estero de San Miguel, aided by the CO-Multiversity and Urban Poor Associates (UPA), are among the relatively successful cases. Many interlocutors advocating for the people’s plan believed, as one summarised, “state engagement is capacity-building for the urban poor, and the unmasking of elite-dominated politics and economics.” Its long-term task is to build on these capacities and unities for an inclusive and just city. Arguably, when framed in this way, the people’s plan is reflective of “antagonistic reformism” (Hardt and Negri 2017).

KADAMAY-affiliated community organisations have recently adopted a people’s plan, which they refer to as a Community Development Plan. One of their primary concerns is that the state’s responsibility to ensure adequate housing is passed on to impoverished communities, and that the people’s plan does not address the root causes of the housing crisis—the commodification of urban land and housing, and livelihood precarity.

When communities are forced to relocate without any perceivable space for negotiation, they may file for restraining orders, which seldom occur due to cost considerations. More often, they engage in contentious politics. In 2009, KADAMAY led the San Roque slum community in the north of Metro

⁴This statistic only includes reported cases and does not include the number of families who are driven-off the streets and other public spaces every day.

Manila in a successful barricade against forced eviction and demolition. It inspired the use of protests and community barricades as a repertoire of urban subaltern contention for several years.

Drawing on the capacities and repertoires of radical solidarities inspired by the barricade, KADAMAY engaged in probably one of the largest housing takeovers in the Global South (Dizon 2019). In 2016, almost 10,000 poor families illegally occupied some 5,200 empty socialised housing buildings in a northern province adjacent to Metro Manila. The occupiers demanded collective ownership and the use of housing amortisation for their community's anti-poverty programs. Several years later, however, the radical socialities withered (Arcilla 2023). Protest fatigue set in. While these realities are observed in protest cycles, KADAMAY had to additionally confront state containment. A state-sponsored group arose from within the KADAMAY ranks to delegitimise and criminalise the Occupation.

The rise of this state-sponsored group is part of the 'whole of the nation' approach by the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC). The NTF-ELCAC was formed by President Rodrigo Duterte in 2018 to synchronise government power against the anti-communist insurgency campaign. The Duterte administration (2016-2022) was described as backsliding from democracy into authoritarianism (Thompson 2020), dealing with radical activists primarily through repression. Repression can include banning political organisations, employing provocative agents, censorship, arrests, surveillance, torture, forced disappearance, and executions of dissidents (Davenport 2009). Depending on their politics and affiliations, scholar-activists face different levels of risks. Desai's (2013: 106) observation of the scholar-activists as a "supportive interlocutor" *behind* the frontline of struggles does not apply to all those in the Philippines.

The NTFELCAC targeted KADAMAY in particular, and the National Democrats spearheaded formations more generally. KADAMAY activists report intensified surveillance, harassment, and red-tagging⁵ and even point to the summary assassination of its leaders. At least six Occupy leaders have been arrested on trumped-up charges. KADAMAY National Leader Carlito Badion was gunned down in 2020. KADAMAY condemned the murder as a state-sponsored killing, since days before the leader was red-tagged and received death threats. The NTF-ELCAC is still operational in 2025.

Beginning in 2022, the administration of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr shifted the focus of the socialised housing program to in-city vertical housing. Labeled as the Pambansang Pabahay Para sa Pilipino Program (4PH), the program envisions providing affordable in-city high-rise socialised housing. Welcomed for helping preserve access to livelihoods and social services in cities, many groups are deeply concerned about the affordability and suitability of condominiums for urban poor living and incomes.⁶

In addition to urban land contestation, urban subalterns are generally excluded from the politico-civic space afforded after the restoration of liberal democracy in 1986 (Garrido 2008; Kusaka 2017). Kusaka (2017) observed that educated middle-class citizens commonly consider the masses as inferior and 'non-citizens.'

Filipino Scholar-Activists: Critical Contributions and Necessary Labours

Having laid down the relevant political-economic background, I draw from conversations, both formal interviews and story-telling, with twenty scholar-activists over more than ten years to unearth their diverse functions and labours. Community organisers and leaders, full-time activists, housing NGO workers, researchers, and university faculty shared their reflections, drawing on experience spanning 10 to over 50 years. In interviews, I invited scholar-activists to reflect on our work with urban poor communities. Story-telling sessions mostly occurred during informal planning and

⁵Red-tagging refers to some state agents' practice of identifying individuals or groups as communists, subversives, or terrorists, and was deemed by the Philippine Supreme Court as constituting threats to a person's right to life, liberty, or security.

⁶The 4PH program has a number of ongoing projects. The national government commits to subsidizing 5 of the 6.5% interest for 15 years of the 30-year housing loans afforded to qualified beneficiaries.

assessment sessions about slum organizing efforts. Our political commitments are varied—some affiliated with groups sharing the RA or RJ trajectories, while many refuse this binary categorisation, and many work with urban poor groups of varied political leanings. A large number of them have worked with students, labourers, peasants, indigenous communities, and women. I do not mention their names here, as these reflections may not accurately reflect the politics of their current organisational membership, and to protect some from the risk of being red-tagged. As formal members of NGOs or SMOs, they are bound by the principles and processes of these formations.

I distill these conversations to initiate a critical dialogue among those who struggle for housing justice and urban alter-politics even as we navigate politically diverse slum collectivities and SMOs. A caution to be underscored: these are tendencies. The interlocutors and I are immensely aware of the heterogeneity of slumdwellers and scholar-activists. Indeed, there are still those who apply preset strategies drawn from their SMOs, with less critical evaluation of actually existing subaltern capacities and changing political opportunities, and those who maintain their associations only with those sharing their ideological positions. I also do not deeply analyze the personal labours and risks that scholar-activists experience. Scholar-activists collaborating with peasants, women, Indigenous groups, youth, and migrant communities in the Philippines may similarly carry out many of these functions, labour, and sacrifices (Borras and Franco 2023; Castillo 2015).

Political advising and issue framing

Perhaps the most evident function of scholar-activists working in the Philippine urban slums is political advising. Communities will consult—what can be done?—often in response to a threat of forced evictions and relocation. The role is critical as it contributes to defining the parameters of the community's situation, including its problems, relevant political opportunities, and available repertoires and resources. It also delineates the web of actors for engagement or contestation. Scholar-activists' political positions and organisational affiliations affect the nature of their advice.

In the words of a scholar-activist, the political advising function can be summed up as follows: “Start with the people, but do not end where they are.” This reveals the prospective nature of answering the question, ‘what kind of struggle is possible’? Starting with the people requires familiarity with urban social movement history and the political spectrum, as communities may already have established linkages with urban NGOs and activists, and understand their problems within a particular political lens. Many interlocutors mentioned that, based on the lexicon of slum communities, they would know to which part of the urban social movement spectrum they are allied or influenced. For instance, communities that use terms referring to political-economic structures like ‘neoliberalism, imperialism, etc.’ tend to be associated with radicals.

The response to ‘what can be done’ vacillates between ‘seeming’ extremes, some seeing the root problem in state housing failure, others in neoliberal development class-based exclusions. These frames reflect the progressive SMO ideological trajectories since the 1990s, oscillating between antagonistic reformism and counterhegemonic pathways (Hardt and Negri 2017). The former identifies the problem as the non-fulfillment of the right to adequate housing and critically engages with housing agencies to seek a more responsive solution. The latter highlights the problem as reflective of the housing crisis resulting from elite accumulation within neoliberal urbanisation and calls for contentious politics and a generally “*walang galawan* (as is, where is)” position of the threatened slum. Intimately associated with political advising is legal and technical advising. Both framings celebrate the pro-poor living in slums, the right to adequate housing against forced evictions and demolitions, and the collective capacities of slum dwellers.

Many scholar-activists recognise that these framings can be complementary, as Hardt and Negri (2017) suggest, but identify achievable short-term goals and the adoption of radical social change as a long-term aspiration. The temporalities of pragmatic versus structural change aspirations constrain and inspire the work of scholar-activists. Speed's (2006: 73) concern about “whether

activist-researchers are failing to maintain a critical analysis... because their attention is on *immediate* political goals,” does not seem to apply here.

However, viewing these perspectives as complementary presents an ongoing challenge for urban scholar-activists who are positioned within universities, NGOs, and SMOs. The endeavor to reconceptualise community issues within larger frameworks necessitates more time and resources than academic and NGO funding typically allows. Projects and research must be completed, reports filed, and articles written. One of the participants highlighted this challenge while working for an NGO that provided livelihoods to communities. After engaging with the intended beneficiaries for some time, he realised they were threatened facing eviction and concluded that assisting them required him to engage in political work, thereby deemphasizing the NGO's mandate. Similarly, scholar-activists in university positions express their frustrations with promotion standards that prioritise immediate research outputs instead of fostering long-term political involvement.

Scholar-activists' framing may not automatically reflect a community organisation's standpoint. Framing implicitly defines who constitutes the community. The political stance adopted by slum organisations can be defined by the level of housing ownership and organizational consolidation, and the dynamics that exist among them. Structure owners, whether single families or families sharing a shanty with others (sharers), are often more influential and active in grassroots organisations, as they were among the first migrants to enter the community. The term used in slum organisations—home-owner associations (HOA)—reflects this reality, even as HOA is a legal category implicated in housing codes and institutions that denote formal middle-class communities. As they own 'homes,' structure owners and sharers are the 'beneficiaries' of resettlement. Since they stand to lose their housing (and associated investments, history, and networks), they often opt for an as-is-where-is position or are often in a better negotiating position regarding relocation options and financial assistance. Renters and the homeless are often relatively new migrants into the community and are thus unorganised and unrepresented in slum organisations. Many scholar-activists struggle against the privileging of structure-owners and sharers as rights accrue to every human being regardless of ownership and history.

Repertoires of contention, resource mobilisation, and political opportunities

Shaped by NGO affiliation and personal political history, scholar-activists carry with them their “tool-box,” which outlines engagement repertoires, resources, political opportunities, and even political trajectories. These have implications for grassroots organisations and struggles.

When it comes to engagement strategies, individuals with extensive experience in working with the state facilitate talks with relevant agencies, aided by broader networks that include supportive state figures, referred to by one scholar-activist as “state champions.” These state champions can provide valuable information and help connect advocates with other relevant and supportive personalities. Moreover, scholar-activists contribute to the capacity-building of communities for state engagement, providing leadership training, effective communication, financial management, and negotiation tactics. State engagements necessitate a rights-based discussion of the functions of state housing agencies and the socialised housing program.

Slum organisations aided by radical groups often undergo an “arouse, organise and mobilise” process (Dizon 2019) and mainly rely on collective confrontational politics. Arouse includes educational discussions on housing rights, urban poor situationer, the Philippine political landscape, revolutionary history, and activist attitudes, as well as broader national issues such as workers' rights and neoliberal economic policies. Organise refers to the establishment and strengthening of grassroots organisations. Mobilisation is a collective, contentious action, such as street protests and barricades. Activist workers, students, teachers, and other urban poor groups within this political network extend support, such as serving as resource persons, providing propaganda platforms, and even participating

in protests and barricades. I detailed these strategies and linked them to the development of radical urban poor socialities and Occupy Bulacan (Arcilla 2023).

Many scholar-activists do advise a cautious mixing of radical and critical state engagement. The shifting of repertoires in response to changing political opportunities may be challenging, as some scholar-activists, community leaders, and networks may have limited capacities and resources for implementing strategies often employed by SMOs of different persuasions, and face different levels of risks. It can also change grassroots leadership, as those affiliated with SMOs specializing in a specific strategy may increase community influence.

The successful case of the Estero de San Miguel is illustrative of how political trajectories affect repertoires of contention and political opportunities. When typhoon Ondoy caused massive flooding in Metro Manila in 2009, river slum dwellers were blamed, and their homes were targeted by the Pasig River Rehabilitation Commission for demolitions to clear the waterways and ensure the continuous flow of floodwater. The Estero de San Miguel slum dwellers, living on stilts above a waterway, faced an eviction and demolition threat to clear the waterways. Many social movement organisers, including radicals, offered guidance and help. They chose to work with the UPA and proposed an on-site (along the waterway) and near-site in-city people's plan. They overcame numerous obstacles including removing their stilt homes, cleaning the river to secure a health clearance, researching and accessing available nearby land to augment the limited on-site space, securing funding from the Office of the President, and even obtaining design assistance from a renowned urban planner. These efforts were facilitated by UPA networks, including access to the heads of the Department of Budget and Management and the Department of Social Work and Development, and by negotiating skills acquired through decades of critical state engagement. This case is reflective of "deep democracy" (Appadurai 2001), where grassroots organisations drawing from their collective capacities set successful precedents for policy reform, engage in horizontal alliance formations to share experiences and innovations, and refuse to be aligned with radical social movements to remain 'politically neutral' and not foreclose critical negotiation or networking spaces with elites, state personalities and institutions. This perception of 'political neutrality' about radical politics, however, does not prevent them from asserting for the fulfillment of housing rights.

Nonetheless, the Estero de San Miguel community, similar to APOAMF, had to protest and barricade before they were able to open state negotiations. In the Estero community, it was the women who led the barricade. One of my interlocutors, who was deeply involved in the organizing of APOAMF, noted that he was arrested by the police during a community barricade where women and children defended the frontlines. Both of these cases involved urban-scholar activists who had experience with radical strategies, having previously been associated with RA-affiliated groups, but now involved with organisations that primarily employ the people's planning strategy.

Equally, radical enactments such as the Occupy Bulacan can only be achieved under the leadership of a centralised and hierarchical organisation. To evade state containment, the Occupy was planned and conducted with an almost militarised precision. The planning involved mapping targeted sites for occupation, predicting police response, detailing occupation tactics and defense, and training the occupiers to act in unison and precisely execute operational plans (Arcilla 2023). Later, however, as many occupiers demanded housing tenure, and as KADAMAY was retagged and its prominent leaders suffered repression, the organisation was constrained in its ability to help in the legalisation process.

Consequently, some urban poor communities may be 'deprived' of state and legal tactics due to some radical scholar-activists' lack of familiarity and networks, arguably arising from their ideological prisms. In the case of a slum community living along a waterway, a KADAMAY-affiliated activist organiser focused his energies on a barricade as a response to the demolition threats. I supported

this initiative, but also suggested that we write to the local housing board⁷ to correct the lapses in the legal eviction process. Being familiar with local state protocols, I noted the missing and erroneous documents attached to the certificate of compliance required for forced evictions and demolitions. This delayed the forced evictions and demolitions for a year and a half, giving more time for more radical organizing efforts. The community eventually had to barricade and was forcibly relocated to an off-city socialised housing facility. The people were very thankful for the year and a half they had been able to remain in their in-city slum.

Scholar-activists can “create space and time for communities/social movements that they cannot always provide for themselves” (Routledge and Driscoll 2015: 401). University faculty can provide access to available academic spaces and resources, co-write grants, and offer students skills to support communities as part of their course obligations⁸. For those in NGOs and SMOs, a community organiser or a full-time activist may be assigned to help with community issues.

Scholar-activists’ networks also contribute to defining available engagement spaces and alliances. Invitations to broader formations and initiatives are coursed through existing political networks, predicated on an assessment of the possibilities of communities to work productively. I witnessed how grassroots organisations were selectively invited into advocacy activities and state-engagement spaces, and how, in turn, those uninvited resented being excluded, which fractured existing levels of community unity. Alliance-building activists, of course, are constrained by available resources, as one scholar-activist said, “We simply cannot invite everyone.”

Experienced scholar-activists advise against raising community hopes unnecessarily. Communities threatened by eviction and demolition are often anxious and may see the interventions of scholar-activists as potential turning points. Although we can provide our resources, the battle against the commodification of land and housing, elite wealth accumulation, and neoliberal government practices is extremely difficult.

Translation

Scholar-activists offer their symbolic capital for translation. The act of translation is a primordial alter-political task. To translate is to recognise subaltern differences and help generate solidarities in the struggle against elites and neoliberal disposessions. Translation “allows for mutual intelligibility among the experiences [and knowledges] of the world without...reducing them to homogenous entities” (Santos 2006: 132). Undoubtedly, this is a “challenging endeavor in the multiplicity of voices” (Nielsen and Jorgensen 2018: 9), yet it is necessary to provide “historical ‘meaning’ to specific forms of political subjectivation” (Ciavolella and Boni 2015: 6). Moreover, translation unsettles elite privilege. As Hage (2015: 65) borrowing from Walter Benjamin asserted, translation is “to betray the destination language, not the source language” and to “speak and haunt” those who occupy the same privileged political and discursive spaces as that of the scholar.

Drawn from many specific housing struggles, translation entails helping community members and urban poor alliances articulate their problems and aspirations in a way that matters and is hopefully understood by relevant civil society and elite audiences. It aids in sharpening subaltern voices to assert the reintegration of housing with community sociality, livelihoods, histories, and futures (as it is reduced within neoliberalism as a commodified physical house).

Translation helps bridge and, if necessary, challenge the communicative gaps that exist between elites, politicians, policymakers, and marginalised groups, particularly in the face of the preference for English as the primary language (Kusaka 2017) in urban planning, media, law, and governmental

⁷The local housing board determines if a request for demolition has met all the legal requirements for demolition. Urban poor groups are legally mandated to have representation in the said board.

⁸Programs that consistently involve their students in marginalised communities have established practices for engaging students with those communities.

policies. One participant remarked that we are compelled to use English “because of our colonial legacy,” specifically citing the label “People’s Plan,” which was accepted by urban poor communities and organisations because it was thoroughly explained in Filipino.

In community role-playing activities conducted in preparation for meetings or negotiations with state personalities or elites, we introduce and suggest to community leaders the use of rights-based and legal terminologies, as well as moral arguments that resonate with or, if necessary, directly counterpoint the target audience’s perspectives. Against elite interests and the commodification of land and housing, a powerful phrase, “Where are we to live in dignity?” is echoed in translation. It claims the non-divisibility of the right to adequate housing from other human rights, including access to food, education, social services, and development. These human rights claims are then backed by scholar-activists with legal provisions in UDHA on adequate, the Philippine Constitution, and international human rights statutes, which the Philippine government is a signatory to. This legal parlance compels elites and states to listen to subaltern housing claims.

When needed, urban scholar-activists may help subalterns speak in translation. One interlocutor highlighted using the very “interest” of elites and state actors to compel them to listen and act with the urban poor. Often sitting in state negotiations because of his work, the interlocutor helps pressure politicians to contribute to solving community problems. His intervention is timed, after the community leaders have spoken, to diffuse tensions and ‘facilitate’ ‘win-win’ situations using state and legal parlance. Indeed, translation is the “crafting appropriate subtitles to enable the content to travel to other terrains and audiences,” and it requires “attuning oneself to others’ utterances and modes of living” (Casas-Cortes *et al.* 2013: 220). Given the risks of scholar-activists speaking for subalterns, however, translation requires a commitment to grassroots democratisation, community validation, and the use of Filipino.

Ontological Prisons, Strategic Silences, and Pragmatic Foreclosures?

Political struggles necessarily highlight neoliberal exclusions and tend to essentialise subaltern politics (Pande 2017) in order to pragmatically advance a unified position. Despite this political imperative, alter-politics must resist falling into what Frøystad (2016: 232) calls “ontological prisons,” where enactments that do not conform to scholar-activists’ political visions are not recognised, and into “strategic silences” (Hodgson 2011: 14) that render invisible internal differences, inequalities, or struggles. The risks of “ontological prisons” and “strategic silences” plague scholar-activists and can lead to foreclosures of subaltern solidarities. Sometimes, these cannot be avoided, said one radical interlocutor, as communities are politically heterogeneous, but political struggles require a unified stance. All of our insights as scholar-activists are reflective of “visionary pragmatism” (Coles 2016); yet, what is pragmatic in a specific struggle is partly determined by ideological visions and the available repertoires of contention and resources.

When I was living in the slum, I witnessed how essentialisation affects slum communities. Once, I heard a radical activist proud of aggressively ‘ejecting’ an iconic NGO leader associated with the UPA from a community. This iconic leader was instrumental in developing a grassroots collective planning for urban poor housing. The radical activist asserted that ‘these’ leaders facilitate the break-up of collectivities necessary to resolve the housing crisis. This ‘discollectivisation’ view was echoed by a prominent youth activist within the RA-affiliated SMOs. However, the said community had multiple grassroots formations adopting diverse strategies to secure their housing, including a people’s plan, the advocates of which would have significantly benefited from the iconic leader’s guidance.

Conversely, many scholar-activist interlocutors argue that all enactments of the urban poor need to be radical. One scholar-activist outrightly labeled as “erroneous” the tendency to limit urban poor collective engagement within the state and legal parameters, as the very existence of slum dwellers,

living on land that is not theirs, is illegal. He criticised the lack of appreciation for the political achievements of Occupy Bulacan among his NGO circles. He claimed, it “is incorrect. You are tied...to your ideology,” referring to his NGO’s frames and strategies. This tendency is widespread, he admitted, for “many advocates of the people’s plan... the [Occupy] tactics are far from their thinking. It’s too radical.” Occupation is perceived to close negotiations with the state. Another urban scholar-activist inspired by Occupy openly invited thinking about an urban poor occupation of many condominium buildings that are empty or have very low occupancy.⁹ A prominent urbanist told me, ‘Maybe we need more Occupy Bulacan’ as we discussed seemingly insurmountable elite power and commodification of urban spaces and housing. These interlocutors are involved with NGOs pushing for people’s plans.

To better understand the political heterogeneity of communities, several NGOs conduct a political and organisational analysis as an initial assessment for their engagement. They do not deal with grassroots organisations associated with SMOs that do not reflect their politics, as they do not want to contribute to intra-community conflict and difficulties. Organizing in these spaces requires intense emotional work, and even confrontation, to navigate the competition for legitimacy and membership within the community. As one organiser told me, they do it “out of respect” for the community. In turn, they expect other organisations to do the same. Other organisations, however, after assessing the situation, will aim to organise a larger part of the community, following the dictum that the majority must decide for their community.

Competition for legitimacy, framing, membership, and support among grassroots and social movement organisations is a critical part of democratic practices. As one comrade friend told me, the measure of an inclusive alternative social vision and strategy is its continued deliberation and support by the masses. Slum leaders are not passive recipients of scholar-activist politics. Many veteran grassroots leaders and their active members evaluate the risks and feasibility of campaigns and share knowledge of political formations. One community leader asserted, “We will not engage with groups that we feel will only use us for their political agenda.” She shared this sentiment when certain political formations offered to help their community’s struggle for onsite community upgrading if they participated in larger actions for social reform, such as wage increase campaigns. Even though she believed in the importance of these social reforms, she felt the community’s needs were being put on the back burner.

These pragmatic foreclosure tendencies can also manifest historically, as slumdwellers face changing political opportunities and challenges. In the community where I worked for several years, multiple organisations executed a successful barricade in 2009 and thereafter returned to their repertoire of contention. As the state rejected initial attempts for dialogue, the community was left with little choice except to militantly defend their homes. Many community organisations relied on KADAMAY at that time to help plan and lead the barricade, despite being allied with other less radical groups that critically engaged the state. The barricade effectively paralyzed the major highway in the Philippine capital, compelling the state to open up negotiations. Many organisations then realigned with NGOs that had more developed state-engagement capacities and proposed their people’s plan *only* for their members. However, threats of street protests and barricades remained within their response arsenal. Those who remained allied with KADAMAY formed an alliance to celebrate the success of the barricade success and demanded onsite slum upgrading, with a minimum position of “*walang galawan*” [as is, where is], using protests and barricades. For many years, these groups employed a cat-and-mouse strategy, competing, often not in confrontation, for members and community legitimacy. The radical activists and scholar-activists allied with the diverse NGOs and SMOs

⁹The number of unsold condominium units increased by 77% in 2024, rising from P89.6 billion to P158 billion worth of inventory in one year. Based on the current market absorption rate, it may take as long as 8.2 years to sell these units. Metro Manila condo oversupply worsens, with 8.2-year market absorption time — Colliers. February 6, 2025 <https://www.bworldonline.com/corporate/2025/02/06/651623/metro-manila-condo-oversupply-worsens-with-8-2-year-market-absorption-time-colliers/>

engaging the community could not and did not find ways to overcome the foreclosures and weakening of community unities.

Almost a decade after the barricades, KADAMAY-affiliated organisations decided to develop their own version of a people's plan, given the waning community support for protests and barricades. A significant number of members broke away, formed their organisations, and aspired to develop their own people's plan. Some members of the splinter groups believed that KADAMAY lacked the necessary capabilities for a people's plan. Subsequently, however, a request for assistance from one of the splinter groups was flatly rejected by an NGO with a longer history and proven success in people's planning because the leadership of the breakaway group had a long history with radical activists.

Discussions on political heterogeneity and opportunities, as well as the need to adjust strategies, are conducted internally among many organisations. These discussions aim to resolve differences and unify the community towards collective action. When differences cannot be resolved at the community level, these are continually deliberated at the higher organisational levels and may involve not just the scholar-activists or organisers and the community, but also respected leaders of NGOs or SMOs, and other slum organisations. Such deliberations can be intense and may not succeed. I've seen organisations break up or wither as a result, and the community solidarities weakened.

Most scholar-activists I spoke with constantly problematise the notions that "social movements and communities are clear-cut entities" (Osterweil 2016), which we can easily align with, and their adversaries—elites, corporations, other organisations, and communities—which we can easily align against. The realities of urban subaltern organizing and engagement render this conceptual and political singular categorisation inadequate.

Moreover, a clear-cut categorisation can work to the detriment of the community. Organisations aligned with political groups that have been red-tagged can be subjected to surveillance, harassment, and even extra-judicial killings. Faced with such risks, some community organisations I engaged with deemed it necessary to maintain political indistinctness in terms of social movement membership or association. They consciously partner with perceived 'non-political' organisations for 'mundane' projects, such as child feeding, reproductive health, leadership training, and livelihood initiatives to counter attempts at red-tagging their organisations. Even as they remain committed to community empowerment, and in the struggle for the right to adequate housing and radical social transformation.

Strategic Facilitation

Located within the neoliberal urban dispossession and the heterogeneous trajectories of slum politics and social movements, scholar-activists are necessarily caught in a complex web that may necessitate strategic essentialisation, silencing, and pragmatic foreclosures. Against these necessary tendencies, I note that scholar-activists play a crucial role in strategic facilitation of alter-works. By strategic facilitation, I refer to the necessary efforts of connecting subaltern alter political solidarities, even as scholar-activists navigate politically varied communities and social movements. This strategic facilitation is a struggle against singular categorisation and essentialisation (Hage 2012). Indeed, transformative politics involves collective deliberation and positioning towards post-capitalist possibilities that are sensitive to and open to the context and sites of struggle (Schmid and Smith 2021).

Many scholar-activists are deliberately open to multiple levels of helping communities, even when their institutional or organisational commitments are geared towards specific trajectories. This openness requires extensive experience and knowledge of urban struggles, as well as transparency about personal political affiliations. As one fellow scholar-activist reminded, "We must be open to all perspectives...and study the actual situation." And as another noted, "I suspend my politics to listen to community issues and find a way to work based on a common ground." Many of us are engaged

in “issue-based” initiatives, finding ways to work together even as we may have diverse political views.

Strategic facilitation may involve linking communities with diverse urban-scholar activists and their toolboxes. One interlocutor who is also a community organiser underscored that he would offer communities contacts with diverse NGOs and SMOs, even welcoming those of different political persuasions. Then the community decides who they want to work with. Another agreed, highlighting that tactics depend on the situation, capacities, and political opportunities of slum communities. As one noted, ‘It is not correct when strategies and resources are constrained by our NGO/SMO affiliations. These must be decided by the people on the ground, and the problems they face.’ And another underscored, “Our engagement strategies are not [scholar-activists’] choices; these are part of an advocacy process” toward housing justice.

Strategic facilitation involves ideational alter-work. Here is where knowledge of the global and the local— unpacking the neoliberal capitalist forces, logics, and technologies that underpin subaltern dispossessions and disposabilities manifesting as localised housing struggles—is critical. Many scholar-activists act as facilitators, discussants, and organisers due to their academic backgrounds, extensive political experience, and SMO affiliations. Drawing from many specific struggles, we help articulate collective “radical imaginations” (Khasnabish and Haiven 2012) of postcapitalist possibilities. To help generate solidarities for housing justice, we need to engage in the “horizontal praxis of showing where, how, and if histories and struggles are linked, to find common pressure points to open further caring spaces” (Lancione 2023: 845). Cognisant of the critique of activist tendencies to lead and speak for the subaltern (Kusaka 2017), the long-term goal is to make ourselves obsolete in ideational alter-work and be “vanishing mediators” (Bond and Exley 2016: 149).

Strategic facilitation is critical in alliance-building. The most basic task is a ‘situationer’-sharing where communities disclose their current struggles, and others, with similar experiences, in turn, share what they have done that worked. From there, a shared political platform can be developed and implemented. As one interlocutor asserted, we must propose alternative modes of habitation and living, from people’s planning to postcapitalist societies. Alliance-building is a collective creation of alternative ways of resisting and co-living (Ciavolella and Boni 2015; Hage 2012).

The increasing threats of forced evictions and demolitions, and ‘inadequate’ local responses (often limited within the threatened community and its networks) are a constant reminder to create alliances of grassroots organisations, whether as united fronts or as advocacy coalitions. As many global housing scholar activists assert, “through the exercise of critically thinking about or engaging in alternative forms of (doing) infrastructures of housing and home, that new meanings, practices, and strategies can come to the fore, not only conceptually, but also pragmatically.” (Reyes *et al.* 2021: 5). We are all involved in alliance-building, efforts on “connecting alter-worlds” (Shaw and Waterstone 2021).

When asked about the heterogenous subaltern politics, a scholar-activist contended, “It is a hindrance if we do not unite in the end, if we remain isolated...I do not want to let go of the hope of unities. As much as possible, reflect on common bases of unities even if we do not share the same persuasion in everything.” This is a sentiment shared by many scholar-activists. “Our task is to help empower communities towards radical social struggles, using repertoires of their choosing,” underscored a scholar-activist who has been organizing communities for three decades.

These strategic facilitations are generative and bear fruitful collaboration. For instance, in collaboration with a long-time urban poor advocate and a well-respected urban anthropologist, we developed an urban poor research agenda in partnership with some Manila-based community organisations. They identified the research issues affecting their communities, including the affordability of the 4PH program, democratisation of socialised housing and urban planning, and the critical contribution of the urban poor to urban life. This research agenda draws from the everyday urban subaltern experience.

Housing Alter-Work as Situated Solidarities

Many urban scholar-activists perform alter-work. All of the interlocutors enable, as Hage notes of alter-political efforts, “a resistance to certain forms of oppression within capitalism and a search for modes of existing in the world that are not defined within the parameters of capitalisms” and that they help to “draw on materially present but minoritised and repressed alternative ways of existing that can be made to reemerge to get us out of the capitalist closure” (Božić-Vrbančić 2020: 241). These alter-works are reflective of the efforts of many global housing scholars-activists to “recentering what is ‘alternative’ and focusing more prominently on historical and everyday modes of collective struggle and survival, rather than simply on the injustices created and maintained by neoliberal capitalism.” (Reyes *et al.* 2021: 5).

I marked the critical alter-political works of urban scholar-activists in the Philippines. They engage in political advising, framing, capacity-building, networking, organizing, translating, and strategic facilitation, prioritizing principles of openness, diversity, democratic participation, and solidarity. Caught in a complex web that may necessitate strategic essentialisation, silencing, and foreclosures, they undertake the critical tasks of translation and strategic facilitation that sustain, strengthen, and connect new and collective forms of habitation among urban surplus lives.

Among scholar-activists of diverse political commitments, collective informal reflections occur during alliance-building efforts or in friendly meetings. As they share diverse experiences, they also evaluate and rethink political strategies. Being embedded in community efforts, yet constantly reflecting on their engagements with other scholar-activists of diverse political persuasions, scholar-activists are critical nodes of housing alter-politics. These collective informal reflections may open new networks, lead to explorations of unfamiliar alternative strategies, and even influence social reform agendas.

I argue that these alter-works represent continuous efforts towards situated solidarities, where urban scholar activists critically draw from ‘inherited’ social movement frames and strategies while grounding these in community realities, capacities, and political opportunities. Rooted in the recognition of the ‘exodus’ practices of slums, where post-capitalist modes of living may emerge, they constantly contemplate the complementarity and limits of antagonistic reformism as highlighted by people’s planning, and the radical counterhegemonic collective politics.

This approach is not easy at the personal level. Scholar-activists who are reflexive of their particular political affiliations can be pulled in diverse political directions (Arcilla 2019). One scholar-activist said he has been accused of facilitating community fragmentation, to which he always responded: “Let the people decide.” Many others shared this experience. Another scholar-activist said he often felt “uneasy” when he was given the feeling of spying on different organisations as he engaged diverse urban poor organisations for anti-illegal vending initiatives. This political openness may also produce tensions within scholar-activist NGOs/SMOs, which expect their members to tow the organisational line, and stick with its specific framings, engagement repertoires, and translations.

For those involved in NGOs or SMOs that are less open to alterations of political framings, accommodating grassroots organisations with different NGO/SMO affiliations, or recognizing diverse community understandings and tactics to address threats of evictions and demolitions, requires a patient deliberation within the organisational hierarchy. For instance, suggesting state engagement, akin to ‘antagonistic reformism,’ in a radical SMO may be perceived negatively as counterrevolutionary, and similarly, suggesting radical confrontational strategies like barricades or occupation may be dismissed by those advocating for people’s plans as undermining state engagement. My own experience in discussing for several years a people’s planning process, and introducing urban planning and land use plans analysis to craft proactive campaigns¹⁰ to KADAMAY can be described as patient

¹⁰Protest and community barricades are reactions to threats of forced evictions and demolitions, which is at the tail end of urban planning. Analyzing land use plans developed at the early stages of urban planning enables the creation of long-term plans for subaltern housing and welfare, even before the onset of forced evictions.

deliberation.¹¹ While assessments of organizing and strategies are conducted regularly within many NGOs and SMOs, patient deliberations of alternative framing and tactics are crucial to aligning more closely with changing grassroots realities while refining the inherited and effective strategies. Through patient deliberation, inherited politics can be grounded in shifting subaltern collective struggles for a post-capitalist world.

Housing advocates and groups in the Philippines and perhaps more generally in the Global South may draw a line that separates them from more radical groups. However, radicals and less radical activists/reformists have mutually constitutive enactments, even if their relationship may shift from alliance to adversaries and vice versa from time to time. First, more radical groups are often potential allies in many issues. Housing movements take on other socio-political and economic functions, including welfare distribution, women's empowerment, support for other advocacies, and even patronage politics. Second, the enactment of radical groups may compel better state negotiations. While radicals often do not subscribe to state processes, the spaces they manage to open are beneficial to groups involved in reform and state engagement. Third, slum organisations shift their strategies in response to political opportunities, elite fractures, and subaltern capacities. Such necessary adjustments prevent the foreclosure of the use of antagonistic, reformist, and counterhegemonic strategies. Fourth, most reform political actors do not outrightly delegitimise radical activists' advocacies, but even empathise with them. They argue for a difference in tactics based on a different reading of community capacities and political opportunities. They nonetheless share a belief in the potentialities of subaltern collective politics.

These situated solidarities shape and reshape the urban scholar-activists' politics. Scholar-activists' 'toolboxes' that are shaped by their political involvements are offered in subaltern struggles. At the same time, their very positionality and institutional affiliations are reshaped to accommodate heterogeneous yet generative subaltern political solidarities. These alter-works represent collective learning in struggle, where "knowledge and experience complement one another, and both domains are continuously shaped, reshaped, and redefined" (Portelli and Tschoepe 2021) in the democratic pursuit of the right to the city.

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¹¹I was part of the initial efforts from 2013 to 2018 to have the people's planning process adopted by KADAMAY, which eventually led to the development of its own on-site Community Development Plan in a KADAMAY-organised San Roque slum in 2019.

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