

Quaranscenes of Filipino Religiosity: Online Devotion to the Black Nazarene during the COVID-19 Pandemic as a Performance

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Abstract: The COVID-19 Pandemic has brought many religious organizations and groups into isolation in which the government's quarantine measures resulted in holding most religious gatherings online. In Manila, before the Pandemic, thousands of the Black Nazarene's devotees would physically visit the Minor Basilica of the Black Nazarene in Quiapo Church and perform their devotion there. Now they are prohibited from doing so. How do the devotees perform their devotion to the Black Nazarene before the Pandemic? How do they respond to the quarantine measures? How about their Friday devotional practices? Are these religious activities the same as before? This historical and ethnographic study highlights the history of Quiapo Church and how devotees performed their religious practices online. Netnography was used from June 2020 to January 2021 to get the interview data and analysis from an online Catholic community of Quiapo devotees, who actively performed their Friday devotions through the live stream broadcasts of Quiapo Church's official social media platforms. The researcher argues that performing religious activities online transcends the spaces of worship. Performing these inside the church may temporarily invoke dramatic action, but it is not the source of this devotion. If physical limitations of space become irrelevant, then performance becomes confined within its event-space. Such articulates "how space performs" and "how the sacred event spatializes this performance. Uniquely, the quarantine has transitioned and transformed these performances from the physical space to the virtual event-space, "quaranscenes."

Keywords: Quaranscenes, Black Nazarene, Online Performance, Devotion, Event-Space

Introduction

The Black Nazarene is a life-sized image of a dark-skinned Jesus Christ kneeling and carrying the cross located in the Minor Basilica of the Black Nazarene in Manila's Quiapo district (Lyden, 2009, p. 184). Its exact origins are uncertain, except that it was carved around 16th century Mexico from a dark wood that was later shipped to the Philippines in 1606 (Melton, 2011, pp. 118–119). Presumably, it arrived with the first group of Recollection missionaries who first enshrined the image in Bagumbayan Church. Later, it was transferred inside Intramuros, where it became a sacred object of devotion (Aguinaldo, 2002, pp. 26–32). Accordingly, oral traditions suggested that there were two (2) images of the Black Nazarene: "the older grandiose version enshrined at the main altar of the Recoletos Church that was destroyed in the 1945 Battle of Manila; and a dusky version at the church entrance which became extremely popular

among the populace" (Austria, 2012, p. 2; Tallara, 2018, p. 109).

Around 1767-1787, Archbishop Basilio Sancho de Santa Justa ordered that the second image be relocated to San Juan Bautista's Church in Quiapo. There, the venerated image arrived on the feast of the Holy Name of Jesus on the 9th of January and was enshrined in the eastern chapel of the church (Aguinaldo, 2002, pp. 26–32). This event is the basis for the *traslacion*, or transfer of the image from Intramuros to Quiapo (Tallara, 2020, p. 207). According to Tallara (2020), before 2006, there was no *Traslacion*, but a Quiapo Procession only because the former requires the reenactment of the transfer of the image, either from Luneta Park or from Intramuros (Tallara, 2020, p. 207). However, Tallara (2018) narrated that in 2006 it was reintroduced and reenacted in 2007 to commemorate the 400th year celebration of the image's arrival in the Philippines (Tallara, 2018, pp. 117–118). Since then, it was held annually. As a result, Manila's citizens would commemorate the same through a

fiesta and would later become synonymous with Quiapo's town fiesta (Austria, 2012, p. 3).

Throughout history, the Black Nazarene became an object of popular devotion among Filipino Catholics. Such devotion stems from the passion of Jesus Christ as depicted by the image which Filipinos identify themselves with by relating their poverty and quotidian struggles.

Interestingly, Aguinaldo (2002) described that the devotion to the Black Nazarene is externally manifested in many ways (Aguinaldo, 2002, pp. 26–32; Austria, 2012, p. 1). The most popular is the *Traslacion* which depicts the transfer of the image simulating a pilgrimage around the streets of Quiapo. Within the *Traslacion*, there are also other specific rituals, all of which, according to Austria (2012) could involve risk, pain, or danger, as a rite-of-passage (Austria, 2012, p. 7); These include: “throwing the towel at the image; grabbing the rope from the mamamasan and joining the pulling phalanx of veterans even for a few seconds; and climbing the moving carriage of the icon and personally wiping a towel on the image or kissing it with reverence” (Aguinaldo, 2002, pp. 26–32). Other acts of devotion could also be done aside from *Traslacion*: The *Pahalik* is often done by kissing the image; The *Pabihis* is referred to as dressing or changing the dress of the Black Nazarene to prepare for a mass or mere presentation. Others resort to the lighting and offering candles or *pasindi*. Similarly, the usual first Friday of the month *novenario* or novena masses is among the favorites. Alternatively, mirata or merely gazing at the presence of the image is enough (Aguinaldo, 2002, pp. 26–32).

These are just the famous acts of devotions performed by devotees. Moreover, there are many kinds of performing devotions since these acts are relative to the devotee. Expectedly, despite the number, they perform these acts in the Black Nazarene's presence. As Bautista posited (2010), such commonality is essential to understand the devotees' religious devotion and motivation towards the image (Bautista, 2010, pp. 2, 38). However, what if these acts were not performed directly in the presence of the Black Nazarene? Would the act of performing those devotions be different?

The title “Quaranscenes of Filipino Religiosity” is an interplay of two words, “Quarantine” and “Scene,” as the study is an attempt to narrate and explain how Filipino Religiosity persisted through the COVID-19

Pandemic and the quarantine implemented by the government as a response to it. Notably, such persistence is a reflection of devotion and should not be dismissed. Uniquely enough, the COVID-19 Pandemic has also manifested such persistence through the act of performing devotion online.

This study is situated on devotion practices conducted online by the Quiapo Church through its official Facebook page via live stream. Similarly, this study is focused on the online devotion practices performed by the devotees, which are not limited to: Watching and participating in online mass, novena; Commenting prayers, wishes, and these comments are included by the church in the live stream itself; Praying in front of the screen while the Black Nazarene is shown via live stream.

At the same time, as a contribution to Southeast Asian studies, this research focuses on Catholicism in the region, particularly in the Philippines, by highlighting the performance of online devotion to the Black Nazarene. Essentially, the performance of Filipino Religiosity did not change but only manifested into an online medium.

Methodology

The proponent employed online ethnography or netnography. Mainly, Cora et al. (2009) characterized that this online research method entails “adopting ethnographic methods to the study of communities and cultures created through computer/digital/virtual-mediated social interaction as online fieldwork” (Cora, Angela; Standlee, Alecea I.; Bechkoff, Jennifer; Cui, 2009, p. 53). The researcher conducted interviews through the teleconferencing app Zoom, discussions via instant messaging, and formal interview questions through Google Forms through this method. Additionally, online fieldwork was conducted by watching all Facebook live streams dedicated to the Black Nazarene, limiting only posts from June 2020 to January 2021. As a result of the taxing effort, watching these online live streams shows how online devotion was conducted in a special event-space in cyberspace such as the Facebook live stream. Lastly, all of these were conducted within this research timeframe, from June 2020 to January 2021.

This study is grounded on performance through an Anthropological Approach as propounded by anthropology professor William O. Beeman through performance studies as first

posited by its pioneer Richard Schechner. Firstly, Beeman (2002) related the “act and practice of performance to the broad questions posed by Anthropology”(Beeman, 2002, pp. 85–86):

- “Why are activities involving display and evaluation/appreciation so essential and endemic to the human condition?”
- “Why do such activities convey meaning in such a powerful fashion?”
- “What special tools for behavior and communication are found in performance mode, and what do they do?”

Exploring performance, Geertz (1973) observed that it is one of the primary ways to study human behavior and that regularities in performance derive from human interaction (Geertz, 1973, pp. 10–11). As such, Beeman (2002) associated performance “as an action that is transformed through culture into a conventionally understandable symbolic product, one that is socially co-created, with continual evaluative feedback, brought to realize that evaluation,” which is crucial for the continuance of the communication (Beeman, 2002, p. 86). At the same time, Schechner (1985) also said that performance intends “to transform or to be effective... striving to affect human affairs, leaving the individuals involved in the performative act in a changed state” (Schechner, 1985). Meanwhile, suppose the effects of performance only occur in a rich context while considering all environmental factors. In that case, performance is, as always, emergent, residing in “the interplay between communicative resources, individual competence, and the goals of participants within the context of particular situations” (Schechner, 2013, p. 121). Given this, Beeman (2002) proposed a method which is a balance between “theoretical material with practical experience in both participating in, and observing the process of, performing”(Beeman, 2002, pp. 87, 89):

- “As a Ceremony and ritual
- Analytical – Performers must assess the task and what they need to accomplish to achieve successful representation
- Technical – Performers must develop necessary motor skills to carry out the performative activity
- Interpretive – Performers must develop a method of making the performative activity uniquely their own – an embodiment of their skill.”

Ultimately, the success of the online performance represents what Beeman (2002) called “the accomplishment of cultural representation resulting in transformations in society” (Beeman, 2002, p. 86).

Results and Discussion

Online Devotion to the Black Nazarene

The netnography resulted in four (4) responses. The first was an online interview which was conducted through the teleconferencing app Zoom. Meanwhile, the other respondents preferred to answer the interview questions through other means such as Google Forms due to incompatible schedules and other priorities due to the Pandemic. Follow-up questions were conducted through the instant messaging app Messenger. Despite the different mediums, the question flow remained the same.

Firstly, all were asked regarding how they became a devotee to the Nazareno. One responded with her experience of going to Quiapo church every Friday to pray for her sickly daughter, which she believes to be the cause of her daughter’s gradual improvement in health (Ella, 2020). Meanwhile, two others cited how their familial relations (particularly parents and in-laws) influenced their devotion (Campo, 2020; Tamayo, 2020). However, one respondent stood out, citing her curiosity and then the need to personally become closer to Jesus (Leogo, 2020).

In remembering their physical practices of devotion to the Black Nazarene, all cited the following:

- Praying (*Pagdadasa*)
- Attending Mass during Fridays and the Feast of the Black Nazarene (*Pagsisimba sa araw ng biyernes at sa Pista ng Poong Nazareno*)
- Visiting the Minor Basilica (*Pagbibisita*) and gazing at the image (*Pamimirata*)
- Attending the *Traslacion* procession every January 9.

Evidently, the acts would vary on the person. However, interestingly, respondents recalled everyday experiences like the unexplainable feeling of being blessed, clear mind and heart, replenished, contentment, and the spiritual health of the devotee.

However, all of that changed with the emergence of the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Currently, the emergence of the COVID-19 has caused everyone to become isolated within the confines of their own homes. With government measures to quarantine the spread of the virus, most institutions were quick enough to adapt their services online. Such was also the case for the Quiapo church. It had no problem as it already featured live streaming services for all its events and activities even before the Pandemic. Through this, we can now access a repository of videos featuring performances made by devotees within the live streaming events and activities that were once customarily done within the confines of physical space (Quiapo Church, 2021).

As a result, respondents felt that they have to sacrifice physically practicing their acts of devotion within the shared space with the image. One understands that this is for personal and public health (Ella, 2020). Indeed, the physical presence of the devotee and the Black Nazarene in a shared space is essentially a sentiment shared by all interviewees, but they also feel that given the context of the Pandemic, this is not relevant anymore (Campo, 2020; Ella, 2020; Leogo, 2020). While everyone used to go to Quiapo Church to give devotion to the Black Nazarene once a week (Campo, 2020) or every first Friday of the month (Ella, 2020), the Pandemic and quarantine now poses a problem, how can devotees give devotion now? Specific acts of devotion transitioned online must first be identified to answer this.

During the Pandemic, one common act of devotion is offering prayers. This entails the act of petition (Leogo, 2020), asking for miracles or wishes to be granted, believing in the Black Nazarene's power (Ella, 2020). Whenever these acts of devotion are performed, one devotee feels "revived" (Campo, 2020), and the other describes the feeling of "*masarap sa pakiramdam*" (Leogo, 2020), while the other deepens the act relating it to vow or performing to strengthen one's *pananampalataya* (Ella, 2020). Since they are all updated with the online activities and events of Quiapo Church's Facebook, they have resorted to performing these acts by entering the shared space of the live stream. While most merely gaze, sing, and respond when needed (Campo, 2020), some would not only verbalize these acts through the comments section (Ella, 2020), but would go as far as to gather all members of the household to participate, as if they

were bringing the whole family to church (Leogo, 2020).

Even before the Pandemic began, such acts were already prevalent within the live streams' shared space. This transition towards the new normal brought by the Pandemic normalized such acts as the standard performance of participating in online events and activities of the Quiapo church. Despite the difference of what was customarily done, the devotees who were interviewed deemed that it was enough given the pandemic "*para makaiwas sa pagdami ng mga nahahawa sa sakit, maaring dito ang nakagawian nating pamamaraan. Ngunit, para makatulong, isa itong paraan upang makaiwas tayos sa sakit. Sabi nga, yung pagdadasal mo ng taimtim at bukas sa iyong puso na pakikipagusap sa Diyos ay paraan ng iyong deboto sa kanya*" (Leogo, 2020). Not only that, these online services by the church and the online acts of devotion are essentially the same as before despite the physical presence of the Black Nazarene and the devotee within the shared public space of the church (Campo, 2020; Ella, 2020). Although one differentiates this from before, again, it is enough for the general safety of all (Leogo, 2020).

In light of this, the researcher argues that the Black Nazarene's physical presence with the devotee in a shared public space is essential but not relevant anymore. In times of adversity like this, one cannot go into the shared space with the Black Nazarene that a longing to personally see, touch, and pray in his presence is vital. - Devotees now adjust and do not mind that they cannot see Him physically given the Pandemic circumstances. Therefore, physical space is irrelevant. What is essential for the devotees right now is the "*taos-pusong pagbibigay ng pananampalataya*" (Ella, 2020), and at the same time "*para na din sa kaligtasan ng nakakarami*" (Leogo, 2020), and that "this is enough given this pandemic" (Campo, 2020).

Online Practices of Devotion as a Performance

At the beginning of his book, Brook (1968) assumed that performance consists of three fundamental components: "performances are dependent on a *space* in which the *spectator* and *actor* come together and agree on a place which they call stage." Here, he mentioned the real space where the fictional world is imagined by the actors and spectator (Palmer et al., 2011, pp. 54–61), which he

refers to as the “empty space” (Brook, 1968, p. 11). This could explain how and why devotees have an eager longing to perform their acts of devotion in the presence of the image because of its dependence on the sacred space that houses the image of the Black Nazarene.

Meanwhile, Hannah (2011) posited that event-space could serve to bridge performance and spatial theory as a “useful paradigm to articulate how space performs and how the event spatializes the performance” (Palmer et al., 2011, p. 59). Applying this specifically to sacred spaces, we consider these places the proper site for performing religious activities. However, that is not the case for the Black Nazarene devotee amidst the Pandemic. Nonetheless, Hannah (2011) furthers that space must not be limited to the architecture or physical sense. Instead, we must view this through event-space (Palmer et al., 2011, p. 56). Additionally, architect Bernard Tschumi concluded that there is no space without the event (Tschumi, 1996, p. 39). Thus, there is a need to go beyond the church walls that houses the Black Nazarene and instead focus on the event when the act of devotion is taking place.

Coming from a performance as an act of doing and a thing done, Diamond (1994) surmised that space represents both noun and verb: the thing and action (Diamond, 1994, p. 5). Since there is a reciprocal relationship between the action in space and space in action, then quotidian environments can be perceived and utilized as continually fluctuating performances. Evidently, such is the case when practices of devotion that were traditionally situated within the confines of sacred space transitioned online. In doing so, the everyday acts of the Black Nazarene devotees also changed. Instead of physically going to Quiapo, they resort to prepare an area in their home, ultimately converting it by bringing the sacred space inside their home. Furthermore, as Hannah (2011) mentioned, this becomes more complicated when the ‘virtual world’ that emerged from various media and our imaginations influences the so-called ‘real world’ (Palmer et al., 2011, p. 59). Thus, in the online setup, most devotees no longer differentiate where they perform their devotion. It no longer matters if they are done online or within the physical presence of the image.

Hannah (2011) assumed that if “performance space is considered as an ‘evental’ repositions built and imagined space as both embodied experience and evolving time-based

event,” then “the constructed environment itself is no longer perceived as a ‘static object’ but as a ‘volatile spatial subject’” (Palmer et al., 2011, pp. 56, 59). Therefore, Hannah (2011) concluded that the theory of the “event” undermines the “proper place of both performance and architecture, sited in the playhouse” (Palmer et al., 2011, p. 60). Suppose we apply this to the proper place of religiosity that is traditionally sited in sacred spaces. In that case, these sacred spaces, like that of the Quiapo church, are no longer perceived as static objects but as volatile spatial objects.

For example, suppose performance is happening everywhere and every day. In that case, it would result to as what Hannah described (2011) its “un-housing and desire to leave the conventional stage and auditorium’ that discipline the spatial practices of spectators and performers; dictating how they act re-act, and inter-act” (Palmer et al., 2011, p. 60). Thus, if we view online devotion to the Black Nazarene as a performance in this sense, it would result in its “un-housing and desire to leave the conventional sacred space that disciplines the spatial practices of devotees, dictating how they act, re-act, and inter-act.”

This performance of online devotion is an example of what Tschumi (1996) referred to as the “spectacle of everyday life” (Tschumi, 1996, p. 22). Furthermore, Hannah (2011) surmised that this is because “the dramatic event negotiates between real-time and fictive time, existing site and scenography - as well as between actors and actors, actors and audience, audience and audience” (Palmer et al., 2011, p. 60).

Moreover, event-space acts as a complex spatial action between the “ordinary and the extraordinary,” “the subtle and the spectacular,” “the banal, and the epic” (Palmer et al., 2011, p. 60). These are implicated in monumental, aesthetic, and daily events, where dramatic public spectacles and everyday performances would shift thought during significant historical moments (Palmer et al., 2011, p. 60).

Quaranscenes of Online Devotion: The case of the Black Nazarene Devotees

When everything transitioned online, most devotees innovated how they perform their devotion. Most of the interviewed devotees often prepare an area in their household to devote their undivided

attention to perform their devotion at a given specific hour of each day. Gradually towards the start of the program, they felt how the physical space transformed as the event online "brought them" as if they were within a shared space with the community. They felt that even if the mode or place is entirely new, the act of devotion feels the same. However, it has only changed to adapt to the new medium: from the unabating chanting of prayers and wishes in the presence of the Black Nazarene to the constant prayers in the comments section of the live stream; from gazing at the Black Nazarene from afar to gazing at the Black Nazarene closely through the live-stream; from dictating responses to commenting the same. Evidently, in this case, while the *quaranscene* event-space is invented, the performance of devotion is innovated, meaning it only changed a ritual that is already there by adjusting their performance to suit new circumstances (Schechner, 2013, p. 81).

Since these specific acts of devotion are quotidian, what could be said for performances separate from the routine (such as the *Traslacion*)? Should a vaccine be available for the devotees but still mass gatherings are prohibited, the interviewees would still prefer not to attend the procession physically. One believes that as a result of the transition to online mode, she has realized that devotion can be practiced even without the actual presence during the church's activities (Campo, 2020). For another, one can still be distanced from the image of the Black Nazarene and the *Traslacion* because "*pwede namang dumistansya at magdasal ng taimtim dahil ang Poong Nazareno ay nakikinig sa ating mga panalangin*" (Leogo, 2020). For some, physical presence is still important because "*iba parin yung nasa loob ka ng simbahan at nakikita mo ang Poong Nazareno*" (Tamayo, 2020).

Most would still hold to the idea that physical presence within a shared public space is not required now. Again what is essential for the devotees right now is the "*taos-pusong pagbibigay ng pananampalataya*" (Ella, 2020), and at the same time "*para na din sa kaligtasan ng nakakarami*" (Leogo, 2020), and that "this is enough given this pandemic" (Campo, 2020). Essentially, Cardinal Luis Tagle stressed that what makes a true devotee in contrast to that of a fanatic "[*ay*] ang tunay na deboto ay nagmamahal. Ang dahilan ng debosyon ay pagmamahal. Pagmamahal na wagas. Katapatan na naglilingkod. At pakikipagkaisa kay Hesus. Yan ang

deboto ng Poong Hesus Nazareno" (Quiapo Church, 2019).

Conclusion

In historicizing the Black Nazarene within Philippine Cultural history, it is evident how the image roots from a colonial experience delivered from Mexico by the missionaries to the Philippines. Over time, devotion to the image ultimately defined the space wherein it is situated and its events, which resulted in various devotees' acts of performances. This is evident in the performance of devotions to the Black Nazarene, such as but not limited to: *pahalik*, *pabihis*, *pasindi*, *novenario*, *mirata*, *pagdasal*, the *traslacion*, among others.

While the emergence of the COVID-19 Pandemic may have disrupted customarily done, the new normal now entails performing these acts of devotion online through and in the public space that is now the Facebook live streams of the Quiapo Church. Despite the importance of the shared space with the devotee and the Black Nazarene, that is now irrelevant given these times of adversity.

In this light, performance is defined as any act confined within its event-space. As a performance, acts of online devotion carry the same essence and importance – it is something that is thought of, something that is prepared, and something that is acted as if it was in the church in the presence of the Black Nazarene. However, we must perceive that the sacred space is not confined to its physical limitations but as an event-space. For example, the emergence of the COVID19 Pandemic forced everyone to adapt. In the case of the devotees of the Black Nazarene, all traditional acts of performing devotion were innovated to meet the circumstances of the times. While they cannot be physically present amidst the image of the Black Nazarene, the devotees would resort to bringing the sacred space to the comforts of their home through the online activities and programs organized by Quiapo Church on their Facebook page. Evidently, novenas, masses, and prayers are not only recited verbally, but devotees also respond through the comments section and react to the live stream.

In a way, it is a challenge for one to view and interact with any space not only "as a site for performance" but also "as a performer in waiting." Which, as a result, would implicate "the built and natural environment within the event" and



“highlight the role that space plays in both action and reception” by simplifying the ‘staged event’ to a ‘raw spatial encounter between participants’ (Brook, 1968; Palmer et al., 2011, p. 62).

As a result, devotion transcends religious places of worship. Even though religious architecture may temporarily invoke dramatic action, it is not the primary source of this devotion. As a result, the limits of physical space become irrelevant when devotion is done. Thus, wherever we are, as long as we perform these acts as it is happening in its own time, space becomes one with the event. Devotees have adjusted to performing their devotion towards the online mode during the COVID-19 Pandemic and quarantine. For them, physical space became irrelevant as the internet provided the means to bring them together to one virtual public shared space. Here, one is not there but is actually (virtually) there.

Perhaps as a point of reflection on the performativity of space, such is also the case when Henri Lefebvre (1974) suggested that “place emerges as a particular form of lived space – and that such places are created and defined through the distinctive activities which take place there” (Lefebvre, 1974, p. 66). Additionally, Michel de Certeau (1984) also argued that “place is a practiced space and that space becomes a place when it develops significance by its inhabitants or users” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 184).

For example, during the COVID-19 Pandemic, an event-space emerged into what is referred to in this study as “*quaranscenes*.” Here, everyday activities are conducted online, becoming the new normal of everyday public shared space. Evidently, we can see this in professional space, where we work; in academic space, where we do webinars, fieldwork, and ethnography; in social space, where we interact and bond with friends and loved ones; and finally, in sacred space, where we perform our religious devotion and worship. Ultimately, it does not matter where devotion is practice. Wherever religious activities are practiced, essentially, they are still the same. What matters is that devotion is practiced and that there is meaning in doing so. The fact that one has thought of it, prepared for it, and it has moved that person into action is in itself a performance.

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