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Knowing, Feeling: Toward a Queer Filipinx Poetics

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Ethnic Studies

by

MT Vallarta

June 2022

Dissertation Committee:
Dr. Jodi Kim, Co-Chairperson
Dr. Stephen Sohn, Co-Chairperson
Dr. Sarita See
Dr. Dylan Rodriguez

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The Dissertation of MT Vallarta is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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Dedication

To all who have been touched by the poetic but specifically to

Gin Rodriguez

(1995-2022)

and

Alex Ratanapratum

(1993-2021)

Thank you for gracing me with your love and words.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Knowing, Feeling: Toward a Queer Filipinx Poetics

by

MT Vallarta

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Ethnic Studies
University of California, Riverside, June 2022
Dr. Jodi Kim and Dr. Stephen Sohn, Co-Chairpersons

"Knowing, Feeling: Toward a Queer Filipinx Poetics" is an exploration of contemporary queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming (QTGNC) Filipinx visual, digital, and print poetry. While the term "Filipinx" was coined in the mid-2010s to be inclusive of QTGNC people in Filipina/o subjecthood, this dissertation argues that the term can function as a method, a shifting composition of difference where new understandings of gender and sexuality emerge. Contemporary poets Mark Aguhar, Kay Ulanday Barrett, Melinda M. Babaran, Karen Villa, and Aimee Suzara illustrate how "Filipinx" can be executed as a set of aesthetics, a mode of analysis, and an act of resistance. As a result of these multiple exercises, this dissertation argues that a Filipinx poetics is a hybrid method, where a poem's formal elements do not only reflect the social conditions of Filipinx people, but also articulate queer futurisms that enable us to *know* and *feel* that another world is possible.

Chapter One examines the repertoire of transfeminine multidisciplinary artist, Mark Aguhar, whose work critiques heteronormativity, racial capitalism, and ableism, demonstrating how these systems work together to produce aberrant queer of color bodies. Chapter Two compares Kay Ulanday Barrett's and Melinda M. Babaran's poetics, exploring the commensurabilities between tomboy masculinities and disability justice. Chapter Three analyzes a visual poem from filmmaker Karen Villa's 2016 documentary, *Visibilizing Queer Pinays* [Filipinas] *in Southern California*. Villa's "documentary-poem" highlights how queer death is symptomatic of U.S. empire and how haunting is manifested through poetic afterlife. Chapter Four close-reads Aimee Suzara's poetry collection, *Souvenir.* Suzara uses Saidiya Hartman's technique of "foraging and disfiguring" to "forage" and "disfigure" found language and images from the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, demonstrating how the American museum and anthropology are undergirded by knowledge accumulation. The dissertation concludes with a lyric essay, a hybrid piece that connects disability, intergenerational trauma, and U.S. empire.

Ultimately, *Knowing, Feeling* investigates what queerness can do—what it agitates, what it animates—rather than who or what it may represent. It is this textual operative—how language can move, compel, touch, and provoke transformation within us—that informs a queer Filipinx poetics.

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Introduction

Filipinx:

adjective

1. of or relating to people of Philippine origin or descent, especially those living in the United States (used in place of the masculine form *Filipino* or the feminine form *Filipina*): *a Filipinx singer-songwriter.* *noun, plural* **Filipinxs** *(especially collectively)* **Filipinx.**
2. *Sometimes Offensive.* a person of Philippine origin or descent, especially one living in the United States (used in place of the masculine form *Filipino* or the feminine form *Filipina*) (*Dictionary.com*).

On September 2020, *Dictionary.com* updated its lexicon with the term "Filipinx" and the above definitions. According to the site, the usage of "Filipinx" was first recorded sometime between 2010-2015. Although the origins of the term are uncertain, 2010-2015 marks a shift in the U.S. LGBT movement. In 2010, President Barack Obama signed the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act, a law that repealed the previous "don't ask, don't tell" policy in the U.S. military, enabling lesbian, gay, and bisexual people to serve openly. Hailed as a civil rights victory, the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act served as a robust homonationalist[1] doctrine, a legal gesture that located a U.S. LGBT movement grounded

[1] In *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Jasbir Puar defines "homonationalism" as "national homosexuality," a socio-political position "that corresponds with the coming out of the exceptionalism of American empire. Further, this brand of homosexuality operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects" (2).

in rights discourse. Despite this extension of rights, the year 2016 was marked by the Pulse Night Club shooting in Orlando, FL a national tragedy that resulted in 53 people wounded and 49 people dead. On June 11, 2016, Pulse was hosting "Latin Night," an evening that primarily drew a Latina/o/x crowd. Omar Mateen, a 29-year-old Afghan American man, was identified as the assailant, and the tragedy was declared as an act of domestic terrorism and one of the deadliest incidents in U.S. LGBT history. While the passage of the 2010 Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act and the 2016 Pulse Night Club Shooting do appear to be interconnected events in their targeting of LGBT communities, I argue that both occurrences are not merely analogous but fundamentally entwined—are *interdependent* to each other. Both events are undergirded by the U.S. War on Terror: the repeal of "don't ask, don't tell" allowed LGBT people to serve openly in the U.S. military whilst fighting wars in the Middle East; the Pulse Night Club shooting led to an upsurge of Islamophobia when it was revealed that Omar Mateen was an Afghan American man. I argue that the extension of LGBT rights in the U.S. military and the domestic terrorist attack at Pulse both reveal the limitations of LGBT rights discourse *and* the interdependence of this discourse to U.S. empire in West Asia. It is not coincidental that popular usage of the term "Filipinx" increased after these two events, as "Filipinx" came to symbolize not only the interrogation of the gender binary by diasporic Filipina/os, but emerged as a new hermeneutic, a way of deconstructing the world, that is dedicated to anti-imperialist art, thought, and action.

This dissertation, *Knowing, Feeling: Toward a Queer Filipinx Poetics*, investigates how the term "Filipinx" functions as (1) an identity category, (2) a diasporic

position, (3) an aesthetic, and (4) an epistemologically generative method. The "x" functions as a gender neutral term for queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming (QTGNC) Filipinxs, while simultaneously locating the subject's positionality to the Filipinx diaspora. "Filipinx" describes a digital and poetic aesthetic that emerged in 2010, an aesthetic that is not only a mode of self-expression, but an act of critical deconstruction and radical mobilization. I argue that all four functions are illuminated in contemporary queer Filipinx poetry, a body of literature that both partakes in and is essential to anti-imperialism. I locate "anti-imperialism" not only as anti-colonialism, but as a liberatory vision and social movement that includes the eradication of racial capitalism, militarism, incarceration, heteronormativity, patriarchy, and ableism. "Anti-imperialist" does not only describe a position or affiliation against U.S. empire, but the term acknowledges the visions, methods, and practices undertaken to abolish this totality of governance. While the "x" in "Filipinx" challenges the gender binary and gestures to the ambivalence of Filipina/o/x[2] identity, I am further concerned with what the "x" aggravates and incites, what it pushes us to think, create, and do beyond what it may represent. Writers of contemporary queer Filipinx poetry, I argue, do not only acknowledge Filipina/o/x ontological ambivalence, but oftentimes embrace this ambivalence and galvanize it to create something new, transformative, and provoking. In the following section, I further

[2] I use the term "Filipina/o/x" throughout this article to refer to the multiplicities of Filipino identity. I exclusively use "Filipinx" when discussing queer diasporic Filipinx poetry and "Filipina/o" when referring to work from the Philippines. This is to acknowledge both the possibility and impossibility of Filipina/o/x coherence.

discuss the emergence of the term "Filipinx" and what it means to utilize this formation as a hermeneutic, an art practice and method of analysis.

Toward a Filipinx Method

In her book *Ends of Empire*, Jodi Kim situates "Asian American critique" as *an unsettling hermeneutic*, "a new interpretive practice or analytic for reading Asian American cultural productions, and the very formation of contemporary 'Asian America(n),' in new ways" (5). Kim expands the term "Asian American" beyond an identity category or political affiliation, but as a *method*, a way of interpreting Asian American cultural productions, locating culture as "a powerful articulation (and at times disarticulation) of knowledge" (31). Kim situates "Asian American critique" within the Cold War's imperialist and gendered racial formations, arguing that this hermeneutic reveals the *interdependence* of the "U.S. imperial Cold War presence in Asia" *to* the "gendered racial formations both 'here' in the United States and over 'there' in Asia" (19). Similar to Kim, I am interested in how the term "Filipinx" reveals how Filipinx diasporic struggle is undergirded by white supremacy in the U.S. *and* U.S. imperial forces in the Philippines. The emergence of "Filipinx" and the debates surrounding the usage of the term reflect these racial and colonial manifestations, but also the limitations of its mere situation as an identity category.

In her blog, *Formations of a Filipinx American*, AnneMarie discusses the debates surrounding "Filipinx" in 2017. AnneMarie defines "Filipinx" as "a term born out of a movement to create space for and acknowledge genderqueer members of the Filipin*

diaspora in the white-centric binary places their parents decide to move to (e.g. the United States). The term is also seen as a way to decolonize our colonized identity" ("Conversation around 'Filipinx'"). With "colonized identity," AnneMarie refers to how the gender binary, a colonial construct, was imposed on indigenous people in the Philippines under Spanish and U.S. empires. J. Neil Garcia has extensively researched indigenous formations of gender and sexuality in the Philippine archipelago before European conquest (163). In these formations, which he terms "precolonial gender-crossing[s]," "attributes of womanhood and manhood, at least during the Philippines' pre-Hispanic past, rested not on anatomic difference alone, but on the social elements of occupation and prestige" (Garcia 163). Philippine precolonial societies were already approaching gender as a *socially constructed* category that can be determined by forces outside of anatomy. As a "decolonized" identity, "Filipinx" can allude to this pre-Hispanic past, where QTGNC Filipina/o/xs in the diaspora find empowerment in their nonnormative gender identities through the embrace of this precolonial history. But many Filipinas/os from the Philippines have highlighted that "Filipinx" as a "decolonized" identity is an appropriation of Philippine indigenous cultures, and that the term imposes Western conceptions of gender and sexuality on Filipinas/os in the Philippines. AnneMarie cites the Tumblr user @roadhouss, who shared the following:

> filipinx discourse on tumblr is constructed on ideas of gender and identity that are firmly rooted with usamerican social activism. the term "filipinx" as an attempt to "decolonize" the word filipino is in itself cultural imperialism. it does not base itself upon the actual lived experiences of filipinos but instead attempts to

> condense the complexities of filipino gender into a box tailored for usamerican discourse. i am a filipino woman. i am not filipinx. the axes upon which i am oppressed, including the axis of gender, are not the same axes upon which usamerican women are oppressed. filipinx discourse ERASES my experiences as a filipino woman living in the philippines; it exoticizes and equates contemporary indigenous cultures with pre-colonial culture; it condenses the multivocality of the filipino experience into a monolithic discourse that is not rooted in the lives of filipinos. i am not filipinx ("Conversations around 'Filipinx'").

In this post, @roadhouse highlights how "Filipinx" is informed by U.S. structures of sexuality and gender, shrouding Philippine and indigenous formations of these identities and experiences while also aligning to a U.S. homonationalist politics. She discusses the appropriation and co-optation of Philippine indigenous culture, identifying how acts of "decolonization" by diasporic Filipina/o/xs objectify, exoticize, and erase contemporary indigenous communities, illuminating the complicity of diasporic Filipina/o/xs to a settler colonial Philippine state. Overall, @roadhouss's post elucidates the problems of using "Filipinx" as a form of identification and the limits of representational fullness in Filipina/o/x communities. By sharing @roadhouss's critique, I am not suggesting we scrap "Filipinx" and identify another term that can fully encompass Filipina/o/x subjectivities. Rather, I suggest we position "Filipinx" as a method—an art practice and a site of mobilization—that can interrogate the heteronormative and its unmistakable

alliances with white supremacy.[3] While the "x" in "Filipinx" can symbolize a dismantling of the gender binary, the "x" can also stand for the heterogeneous ways Filipinx poets and artists use art and poetic attentions to work against white supremacy while creating aesthetic, affectual, and accessible alternatives for racialized, queer, femme, migrant, and disabled populations. Rather than working against the ambivalence of Filipina/o/x identity, I am interested in uncovering how poets and artists have found possibility in the identity's inconclusiveness and have looked to "Filipinx" as a figuration that can be interpreted, articulated, and executed as a liberatory practice.

Thus, with this resituating of "Filipinx," I argue that the term moves Filipina/o/x Studies toward what Kandice Chuh[4] has called "subjectless critique," locating "'a wide field of normalization' as the site of social violence." (Eng et al. 3). By curating a foundation for Filipinx method, I argue that queer Flipinx poetry can illuminate the limitations of Filipina/o/x communion—how advocating for a "Filipinx" coherence cannot adequately address, in the words of Dylan Rodriguez, "a nexus of profound racial and white supremacist violence…The ongoing consequence of this historical encounter is

[3] In their article, "Filipinx Critique at the Crossroads of Queer Diasporas and Settler Sexuality in Miguel Syjuco's *Ilustrado*," Sony Coráñez Bolton highlights the importance of "[a]dvancing a queer reading practice of 'Filipinx' critique" that understands "the global structure of settler colonialism, which shapes the sexuality and subjectivity of many Filipina/o/x diasporic migrants and whichever narrative protagonism they emblematize or re-signify" (220). I argue that a queer Filipinx poetics can highlight the global structure of settler colonialism by both embodying, critiquing, and dismantling this structure in its form and content.

[4] Kandice Chuh describes the "subjectless critique" of "Asian American" as "making a claim of achieved subjectivity and referring to the impossibility of that achievement," especially when we consider the history of colonialism in Asia and the racialization and exclusion of Asian Americans (8). As a result, "Asian American" "deconstructs itself…In other words, deconstruction as a state of becoming and undoing" (8).

a relation of violent alienation with modernity, the colonial state, and the nation-state form itself…[T]he coherence of Filipino American subjectivity relies on the persistent rearticulation and dispersal of this alienation" (*Suspended Apocalypse* 11). Rodriguez demonstrates how Filipina/o/x American subjectivities under U.S. colonialism have played a key role in the dissemination of white supremacist, settler colonialist, and heteronormative violence. Rather than advocating for the further national inclusion of QTGNC Filipina/o/xs, this coherent "Filipinx" body or identity may be complicit to a homonationalist LGBT rights framework that administers further harm to Black, indigenous, migrant, and disabled populations. It is because of these risks that I posit the urgency to rearticulate "Filipinx" as a method rather than a form of identification, and I demonstrate how contemporary Filipinx artists already perform this critique through their poetics.

Similarly, Jian Neo Chen has also located queer and trans of color aesthetic practices as "embodiments" that "address and attempt to rework subjective and social orders of (cis)gender dominance," tracing "the technologies and histories of racial and colonial gendering that have established binary gender/sex as one of the primary faultlines for securing and differentiating the national body of the white settler US state and civil society" (4). By terming QTGNC of color aesthetic practices as "embodiments," Chen demonstrates how these cultural productions *embody* the reworking of heteronormative social orders rather than merely representing the harm and injury these structures distribute. Furthermore, Chen refers to "racial and colonial gendering" as "technologies," situating the gender binary as a code or script that is translated and then

made into being. If the gender binary can be rendered as technology, then perhaps this binary can also be reworked and unwritten through the discursive and aesthetic embodiments afforded by the poetic. If one is to understand poetry, in a Foucauldian sense, as "an event that neither the language . . . nor the meaning can quite exhaust," this means one can locate queer Filipinx poetry as an abundant site of liberation where the potentiality of queerness is boundlessly known and felt (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 28).

Furthermore, while it is crucial to understand the limitations of radical literary production, especially from a historical materialist sense, contemporary queer Filipinx poetry emphasizes the urgency of identifying the insurgent ways racialized, queer, femme, migrant, and disabled populations mobilize for social change despite the alienation and violence they face. One of the artists discussed in this dissertation, Mark Aguhar, emphasizes this urgency in a blog post on November 22, 2011: "I'm tired of being told to be strong or stronger or whatever because it feels like a lie / and it feels like a betrayal to even suggest that the people in my life who didn't survive were somehow not as strong as me / I don't need to be strong, I need for the world to stop being so fucking weak, that my sisters are being swallowed up before my eyes." Not only is her post a critique of homonationalist sensibilities, such as Dan Savage's It Gets Better Project, but she criticizes how the debilitation QTGNC people experience is attributed to individual failure rather than state violence. In assuming that those who could not survive were not strong, survival becomes unjustifiably dependent on individuals having the

strength to live on, rather than on society addressing the lack of access to work, medical care, housing, and other resources QTGNC people need.

Dean Spade in fact identifies QTGNC individuals as among the most socioeconomically vulnerable populations in the United States, where "state programs and law enforcement are not arbiters of justice, protection, and safety but are instead sponsors and sites of violence" (2). As a result, "transformative change can only arise through mass mobilization led by populations most directly impacted by the harmful systems that distribute vulnerability and security" (Spade 8). While Spade performs a critique of LGBT rights discourse and emphasizes the necessity of organizing mobilizations led by those most vulnerable, one must acknowledge how mass demonstrations and direct actions can be inaccessible to racialized, queer, femme, migrant, and disabled populations and how this inaccessibility can disperse further violence and alienation. In "Sick Woman Theory," Johanna Hedva explains, "The inevitability of violence at a demonstration—especially a demonstration that emerged to insist upon the importance of bodies who've been violently uncared for—ensures that a certain amount of people won't, because they can't, show up. Couple this with physical and mental illnesses and disabilities that keep people in bed and at home, and we must contend with the fact that many whom those protests are for, are not able to participate in them—which means they are not able to be visible as political activists."

Hedva highlights why creative and accessible alternatives to mass demonstrations and protests must be organized, as one considers the countless communities who are unable to participate in these actions not only because of physical and mental disabilities

but because of their vulnerability to police brutality, deportation, incarceration, and other forms of state violence. If vulnerable people cannot show up to the mobilizations intended for them, how else can their groundbreaking contributions to justice be made visible? How can activism be made accessible by transforming the able-bodied ways we seek liberation? While the poetic—especially American and European poetics—have been utilized for the advancement of imperial conquest (such as Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden"), the Filipinx poets I examine—Mark Aguhar, Kay Ulanday Barrett, Melinda M. Babaran, Karen Villa, and Aimee Suzara,—demonstrate how poetry can be used not only in the pursuit of justice, but also through a feeling of restoration, a feeling of being seen, held, and cared for. These affects, I argue, allow readers to question the very definition and institutional administration of justice itself.

Furthermore, the five poets I examine write in a variety of forms and genres: concrete poetry, documentary-poetry, spoken word, and creative non-fiction. Not only am I curating a selection of multigenre Filipinx poetry, but this body of work also engages in a hybridity that is foundational to the multiplicity of Asian American Literature. In *Immigrant Acts*, Lisa Lowe uses the term "hybridity" to connote "the formation of cultural objects and practices that are produced by the histories of uneven and unsynthetic power relations; for example, the racial and linguistic mixings in the Philippines and among Filipinos in the United States [that] are the material trace of the history of Spanish colonialism, U.S. colonization, and U.S. neocolonialism…Hybridity, in this sense…marks the history of survival within relationships of unequal power and domination" (67). Despite the multiple colonialisms (Spanish, U.S., and Japanese) that

have produced structures of "unequal power and domination" in the Philippines, these overlapping and interconnected empires have resulted in "the formation of cultural objects and practices" that signify a complex "history of survival." With this definition, Lowe demonstrates how a hybrid art practice can produce "an alternative aesthetic" that resists essential and monolithic representations of Filipina/o/x culture and expands what it means to be "Asian American" beyond a representational sense. I argue that "Filipinx," as a hybrid term, functions as a queer and trans representational strategy, illuminating the possibility and impossibility of what Rachel C. Lee has termed "representational fullness" (3). "Filipinx" signals to a mode of subjectivity that is critically ambivalent and always in fluctuation. This fluctuation, I argue, is what enables "Filipinx" to be galvanized as (1) an identity category, (2) a diasporic position, (3) an aesthetic, and (4) an epistemologically generative method. These multiple functions are what foreground "Filipinx" as a hermeneutic.

In addition, I deploy a hybrid writing practice in this dissertation as well. In addition to being a scholar, I am also a poet, and my lived experience and cultural work as an artist informs the scholarship I produce. I am inspired by the autopoetic strategy of Gloria Anzaldúa, whose execution of "mestiza consciousness" connotes both her theoretical interventions and her craft. Anzaldúa defines "mestiza consciousness" as "developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity…Not only does [the mestiza] sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else…The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is

transcended" (101-102). In this passage, we can see that "mestiza consciousness" is a hybrid method, a way to "[develop] tolerance for contradictions," "[turn] the ambivalence into something else," and "break the subject-object duality." At the beginning of this Introduction, I highlighted the online debates and contradictions of the term "Filipinx," where the term serves to be inclusive of QTGNC Filipinxs, but still excludes the Philippine population and ignores indigenous Filipina/os in the Philippines. Rather than making a case for "Filipinx" as a viable manifestation of queer Filipinx subjecthood, I locate the ambivalence of the term as an opening for analysis, aesthetics, and queer of color resistance instead. Similarly, Anzaldúa argues that mestiza consciousness also "break[s] the subject-object duality," critiquing the ways literature and other art forms are normatively positioned as mere objects of study, as projectors—rather than the direct producers of—knowledge. Anzaldúa intervenes in this subject-object duality, illustrating how her hybrid poetics is itself a method, a queer of color episteme. This episteme is reflected in the poetry of *Borderlands/La Frontera* itself:

> 1,950 mile-long open wound
> dividing a *pueblo*, a culture,
> running down the length of my body,
> staking fence rods in my flesh,
> splits me splits me
> *me raja* *me raja*
>
> This is my home
> this thin edge of
> barbwire (24-25)

This poem frames Anzaldúa's first chapter, "The Homeland, Aztlán / *El otro México*." Anzaldúa uses this poem to illustrate how the U.S.-Mexico border is "the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. Borders are set up to define the

places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*…A borderland is a vague and undetermined place…It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants" (25). This "third country," in the words of Lisa Lowe, locates the borderlands as the product of both racial and gendered formations of Chicana/o/xs and U.S. settler colonialism of the southwest. Anzaldúa's hybrid identity as a queer, mixed-race Chicana eludes to these interconnected histories. And thus, the "third country" becomes a site of possibility and fluidity where "the prohibited and forbidden" can be thought, and the hybrid unconvers a constellation of state hierarchy, power, and dominance across different temporalities.

By alluding to the interdependence of the U.S. and Mexico, Anzaldúa actually engages in what Roderick Ferguson has termed "queer of color critique," a method of analysis that "examine[s] how culture as a site of identification produces such odd bedfellows and how it—as the location of antagonisms—fosters unimagined alliances" (3). Audre Lorde makes a similar claim in her essay, "Learning From the 60s," where she states, "we must face with clarity and insight the lessons to be learned from the oversimplification of any struggle for self-awareness and liberation…There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (138). While this quote from Lorde has been popularly interpreted as a call for intersectionality, I argue that this quote is a Third World feminist articulation of "queer of color critique." Lorde argues that we must consider the interconnected struggles "among women, other peoples of Color, gays, the handicapped—among all the disenfranchised peoples of this society." By expanding our analysis beyond a "single-issue struggle," we are able to

identify how liberalisms, in the words of Ferguson, become "odd bedfellows" to empire, nation, and capital ("Learning From the 60s" 138). With this dissertation, I seek to resituate "Filipinx" beyond its liberal and representational uses, and highlight the ways contemporary Filipinx poets have been deploying "Filipinx" as a radical hybrid method that does not only resist multiple colonialisms, but finds futurisms outside the liberal solutions produced by the state. "Filipinx" locates "normalization" as a wider "site of social violence" (Eng et al. 3). My own work as a poet is also invested in this hermeneutic. As a result, this project illuminates how an autopoetic strategy inspired by Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa can contribute to a diasporic Filipinx anti-imperialist movement. My research and poetry are both invested in anti-imperial struggle, critical of the alliances and antagonisms of the Filipina/o/x community to the U.S. nation-state.

Chapter Descriptions

The poets in this dissertation—Mark Aguhar, Kay Ulanday Barrett, Melinda M. Babaran, Karen Villa, and Aimee Suzara—are queer diasporic Filipinx poets who have conceptualized "Filipinx method." I locate my research in our contemporary moment not only because "Filipinx" is a significant phenomenon, but due to the political urgency that informs these poets' work. While Mark Aguhar's repertoire is primarily located in the early 2010s, her poetry and visual art was grounded in articulating the vulnerability of queer, trans, fat, brown, and femme bodies to normalized state violence, as illustrated by her poem, "Litanies to My Heavenly Brown Body:"

> BLESSED ARE THE SISSIES
> BLESSED ARE THE BOI DYKES

> BLESSED ARE THE PEOPLE OF COLOR MY BELOVED
> KITH AND KIN
> …
> BLESSED ARE THE DIS-IDENTIFIERS
> BLESSED ARE THE GENDER ILLUSIONISTS
> BLESSED ARE THE NON-NORMATIVE
> …
> BLESSED ARE THE BELOVED WHO I DIDN'T DESCRIBE, I
> COULDN'T DESCRIBE, WILL LEARN TO DESCRIBE AND
> RESPECT AND LOVE

While I engage in an in-depth close reading of "Litanies" in Chapter One: "Call Out Queen: Queer Recognition, Gesture, and Futurity," this excerpt highlights Aguhar's commitment to a queer of color liberation that locates "'a wide field of normalization' as the site of social violence" (Eng et. al 3). By blessing the sissies, the boi dykes, people of color, dis-identifiers, gender illusionists, and the non-normative, Aguhar demonstrates how these communities and identities have been socialized as "queer" because of their deviance from the white, male, straight, cisgender, middle-class, and Christian norm. In "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens," Cathy J. Cohen explores how people of color, particularly poor Black single mothers, have been racialized as "queer" because of their "failure" to conform to the norms above. With this wider critique of normalization, Aguhar is already deploying Filipinx method by aligning her poetics with what Cohen has termed the "radical potential of queer politics." Even though "Filipinx" was galvanized after Aguhar's passing, this method is built on her work and legacy as a poet and artist, illustrating that solidarity with the most vulnerable communities has always been key to queer of color liberation.

Similarly, while Kay Ulanday Barrett's work examines the intersections of being queer and Filipinx, Barrett is also a key organizer in the disability justice movement, as

demonstrated in Chapter Two: "'For You, For Us, For We:' Tomboy Masculinities and Disability Justice." In an interview with *Apogee Journal*, Jennif(f)er Tamayo asks Barrett to comment on their poem, "YOU Are SO Brave," which, according to Tamayo, "materializes" the "types of erasures and overwritings" that undergird the visibility of queer and disabled poets ("Feeling Our Possible Volumes: Jennif(f)er Tamayo Interviews Kay Ulanday Barrett"). In response, Barrett states:

> When all kinds of aesthetic and cultural identities oppose traditions of able-bodiedness and whiteness, the question of inclusion and exclusion come into play. Are these our only options? Is there anything outside this dynamic? Can we create something new…Does inclusion always equal success or evolution…do I want to be included in a setting/climate/landscape that primarily annihilates or erases me and if so, who is being left out ("Feeling Our Possible Volumes: Jennif(f)er Tamayo Interviews Kay Ulanday Barrett").

By questioning inclusion/exclusion as the key issue concerning queer and disabled writers, Barrett employs a Filipinx hermeneutic by critiquing and unsettling the assumption that visibility is a long-term solution to the violences that inflict queer and disabled lives. By asking, "Can we create something new?," Barrett urges us to think of alternative and transformative strategies that can further propel queer liberation and disability justice outside normative rubrics. While increased representation of queer and disabled writers may be empowering, there are other practices—what Ashon Crawley terms as "otherwise possibilities"—that we can create and consider. Barrett's poetry is

radically concerned with the viability of visibility, allowing readers to question whether representation is a feasible strategy for transformative change.

Furthermore, I compare Barrett's poetry with Melinda M. Babaran's creative non-fiction. A Filipinx migrant worker based in Taiwan, Babaran's 2018 monologue, "Latay sa Laman" ("Whipped Scar on Flesh,") won the 2018 Jury Award from the Taiwan Literature Award for Migrants. Like Barrett, Babaran explores Filipinx diasporic tomboy masculinities through the framework of debility, the slow wearing down of migrant populations through their exposure to premature death. Babaran illustrates how debility and disability are interconnected and disseminated under colonial governance in order to injure, maim, and eliminate undesirable populations. I discuss Barrett and Babaran together not only due to their experiences with diasporic transmasculinity, but also because both of their creative writing practices engage in a poetics of address that facilitates a radical sense of care, recognition, and affinity outside heteronormative kinship structures.

In addition, I discuss Karen Villa's 2016 documentary-poem, *Visibilizing Queer Pinays in Southern California*, in Chapter Three: "I Don't Know You, But I Love You[5]: Queer Death and Documentary-Poetics." This chapter continues to interrogate the viability of visibility through an investigation of the precarity of queer Filipina/o/x life. Due to Villa's use of metaphor, found images, and silence in her documentary, I argue that *Visibilizing Queer Pinays* [Filipinas] *in Southern California* is a "documentary-poem," which Paola Bilbrough characterizes as "rel[ying] on real people's life stories,"

[5] I am indebted to Alex Ratanapratum for the title.

but using poetic elements to "[offer] a rich, expressive, and immediate way to express an idea that is often difficult to express in another type of text…poetry is 'particularly suited for those special strange, even mysterious moments when bits and pieces suddenly coalesce'" (300-301). While Villa uses the term "visibilizing" in the title of her docu-poem, she critiques its significance in her Master's thesis, "Subliminal Spaces: Queer Pinay Visibility in Southern California," stating, "Increasing a discourse on queer Pinay in/visibility is important to understand multiple sites of oppression and empowerment for queer/Filipino/women. The silence and invisibility that queer Pinays experience in their families, relationships, and employment shape…how queer Pinays navigate issues of difference and create new ways of belonging" (8). Rather than rejecting silence and locating it as another mode of oppression, Villa argues that the invisibilities and silences queer Filipina/o/xs employ are also legitimate forms of resistance that "navigate issues of difference and create new ways of belonging" (8). While Villa does not use the term "Filipinx" in the film and her docu-poem focuses exclusively on the lives of queer Pinays, a Filipinx method is arguably employed, due in part to her interrogation and expansion of visibility, but also, the form of her film itself engages with a digital poetics that traverses the boundaries between human and machine, locating the digital as a key terrain in the en*gendering* of the queer Pinay body.

I continue my discussion of docu-poetics in Chapter Four: "Keep Us in Your Eye:" Accumulating and Incarcerating the Filipina/o/x Primitive." In this chapter, I discuss Aimee Suzara's 2014 poetry collection, *Souvenir*. Suzara engages in a method of "foraging and disfiguration" to provide a Filipina/o/x counternarrative of the 1904 St.

Louis World's Fair, where Filipina/o/x colonials were exhibited in a human zoo (Hartman 12). Suzara reads against the grain of the colonial archive, demonstrating how the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair was more than a phantasmagoric cultural event, but a world-making project that (1) located the U.S. as a world power and (2) revealed the settler colonial, carceral, racial, and gendered logics of American empire. I continue my reading of *Souvenir* by illustrating how a Filipinx hermeneutic can lead to parallel and interconnected revelations about the multiple manifestations of U.S. empire, illuminating how the present is ineluctably informed by the past. This chapter delineates how "Filipinx," as a reading practice, enables readers to trace contemporary formations of civility, human rights, and multiculturalism as foregrounded by the colonial logics of dispossession, incarceration, and genocide. These analytical webs are woven through our experience of Suzara's poetry, equipping readers with a lens that locates the poetic as a site of knowledge production.

I end this dissertation with "A Gesture Toward," a poetic essay that connects disability, intergenerational trauma, and U.S. empire to my positionality as a diasporic, mad, and queer Filipinx poet and scholar. Although the content of "A Gesture Toward" is extremely personal, I illustrate the commensurability of scholarship and creative writing through a hybrid lyric that moves through critical theory and my personal family history. I conclude "Knowing, Feeling" with this lyric to demonstrate Audre Lorde's argument in "Poetry is Not a Luxury." Lorde states, "I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom…Our poems formulate the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and

dare make real (or bring action into accordance with), our fears, our hopes, our most cherished terrors" (38). Lorde argues that poetry is not only a source where alternative knowledges can be extracted. Poetry itself creates and charters epistemologies that go against the grain of Western logic and enlightenment, highlighting the value and the revolutionary capabilities of feeling, emotion, and other tactile, vulnerable, and radical capacities. I argue that these evocations—feeling, emotion, and vulnerability—provide us with the strategy and the knowledge to counter Western hegemony and find transformative ways to live and be free. Not only is "A Gesture Toward" a poetic exercise of Filipinx method, but it also interrogates what it means to produce art *and* thought through the form of the lyric essay.

I have also chosen to curate the work of Aguhar, Barrett, Babaran, Villa, and Suzara together. because of their engagement with the Digital Humanities. As delineated by Jack Halberstam, the Digital Humanities "provide[s] new ground upon which to argue that gender and its representations [are] technological productions" (440). Aguhar, Barrett, Babaran, Villa, and Suzara, do consider gender and sexuality as "technological production[s]:" Aguhar cultivates a queer, brown, and fat transfeminine discourse on Tumblr; Kay Ulanday Barrett mobilizes queer Filipinx disability justice through online poetry; Babaran demonstrates how the literal "digits" (fingers) of Filipina/o/x migrant laborers produce capital and anti-imperialist migrant literature. These examples highlight how contemporary Filipinx poetry is fraught with the antagonisms and alliances afforded by gender and sexuality as "technological productions." In addition, my dissertation also relies on the excavation of knowledge and material from social media, as well as my own

poetic contributions to this project. My position as an insider/outsider has not been detrimental to my work; instead, it has been extremely generative and has aided in the progress of my research. I argue that poets' use of social media—online interviews, Tumblr posts, and more—are extensions of their poetic attentions, demonstrating that there is value even in the realness and messiness of the digital. Thus, a queer Filipinx poetics is not just invested in what is polished for the page or screen; a Filipinx hermenutic is also interested in what lies behind the finished product, how our daily exercises in the digital terrain create technological productions of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability, and also critique productivity's alliances with normativity, as production is not the only mode determining our worth and success.

By failing to align with what is considered "productive" and locating gender and sexuality as technologically produced structures, Aguhar, Barrett, Babaran, Villa, and Suzara deploy what Jenny Sundén has termed "the glitch," a phenomenon that "account[s] for machinic failures in gender within the digital domain" but is also "an accidental error and a critical potential in aesthetic practices" ("On Trans-, Glitch, and Gender as Machinery of Failure"). Informed by Jack Halberstam's "queer art of failure," the glitch demonstrates that what is broken, what is erroneous, is not useless; the glitch demonstrates how the formation of gender itself is prone to failure, to new ways of breaking down. Sundén states, "New technologies might solve old problems, but will always bring new problems, new failures, and new ways of breaking down. Similarly, gender as technological is a fragile, instable machinery prone to breakage and breakdowns…it is in the crack, the break, the glitch, that the inner workings of gender

reveal themselves" ("On Trans-, Glitch, and Gender as Machinery of Failure"). Aguhar, Barrett, Babaran, Villa, and Suzara, all illustrate the routinized failures of gender and sexuality, exposing that as long as these constructs remain under a normative script, cracks, breaks, and glitches will occur. However, instead of trying to fix these failures, these glitches can allow us to move beyond the conventionality of gender and sexual norms, revealing not only the "inner workings of gender," but the otherwise possibilities that lie outside its machinery. I am interested in the glitches that erupt in queer Filipinx poetry, and how contemporary poets use failure and mess to create new strategies in interrogating and dismantling empire, nation, and capital through a hybrid Filipinx method.

Chapter One:

Call Out Queen: Queer Recognition, Gesture, and Futurity

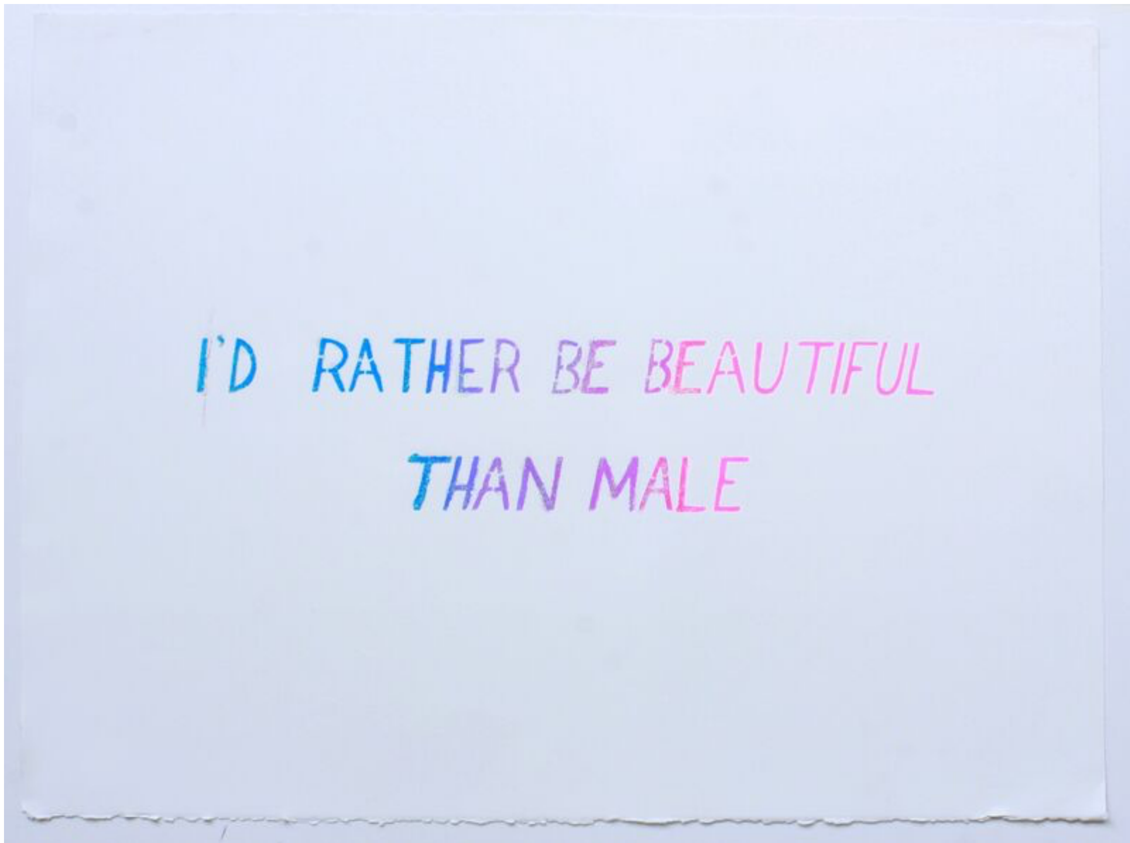

Figure 1: Mark Aguhar, "Making Looks," 2011.

On April 14, 2011, the Tumblr user @markaguhar posted a text painting to her online portfolio on her Tumblr blog. (Figure 1). Rendered in purple and pink gouache paint, glitter, and Arches paper, the words "I'd Rather Be Beautiful / Than Male" sparkled on computer screens. While the original post only has 263 likes and reblogs, the work of transfeminine, Filipinx American, multidisciplinary artist Mark Aguhar (also

known by the Tumblr username @calloutqueen) continues to be circulated and celebrated amidst our protracted movement for QTGNC justice. Although Aguhar was known for her blunt and flippant microblogs that called out racism, fatphobia, misogyny, and transphobia, her digital poetry also functioned as sites of critique and queer futurity. “I'd Rather Be Beautiful / Than Male” is more than an aesthetic proclamation; it is a poetic execution of QTGNC liberation. By tracing Mark Aguhar's work through her digital art, this chapter demonstrates how contemporary Filipinx diasporic poetry can function as a convergence of art, criticism, and mobilization across the demarcations of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability. Although Aguhar passed away on March 12, 2012, her work lays the foundation for “Filipinx method,” a heterogeneous execution of resistance, art, and thought deployed in the poetic.

Titled “Making Looks,” the poem's declaration of “I'd Rather Be Beautiful / Than Male” is an imagination and materialization of the infinite possibilities beyond the gender spectrum. Although the statement can be interpreted as a campy remark to patriarchy and misogyny, a queer of color critique points to how this simple proclamation functions as a liberatory utterance (Ferguson 2). The words “be” and “than” pique one's attention by locating this statement as a comparison. Furthermore, the word “beautiful” has a feminine connotation, as it is an adjective used primarily to describe attractive and aesthetically pleasing women and femmes. With this close reading, one can interpret “I'd Rather Be Beautiful / Than Male” as a feminist statement, where being female or feminine is just as beautiful (and maybe even more so) than being male or masculine. But Aguhar's deliberate use of “beautiful” points to another possibility. By using the word

“beautiful” instead of “female,” the utterer is also declaring that they would rather be transgender—beautifully non-binary and gender variant—than cisgender. The terms “male” and “female” themselves are sexual dimorphic categories assigned to people at birth based on the appearance of their genitalia. “Male” and “female” are also commonly positioned as the two poles of the gender spectrum, locating “feminine” and “masculine” expression as opposites of each other. By using the word “beautiful” instead of “female,” Aguhar also alludes to the limitations of this spectrum, how gender identity and expression can exist beyond “masculine” or “feminine,” defying the existence of the gender binary itself.

“I’d Rather Be Beautiful / Than Male” is thus a critique of the gender binary, an expansion of gender into what Anne Fausto-Sterling has termed “multidimensional space” (22). Because of these rhetorical strategies, “Making Looks” is a digital concrete poem where the design, texture, and spatial configuration of the text are essential to the poem’s affect and meaning. “Multidimensional space” becomes not only an imagined universe of queer potentiality but contours the very form and affect of the poem. As a result, “multidimensional space” becomes a known and felt possibility that is rendered through the aesthetic. “Making Looks” not only inspires QTGNC liberation but also embodies this movement itself. The poetic functions as a key method in the imagination and execution of queer futures, where gender is beyond the measurement of a spectrum but can sparkle as “points in a multidimensional space” (Fausto-Sterling 22).

While “multidimensional space” can be interpreted as gender variance, Black feminists such as Sojourner Truth, Audre Lorde, and Kimberlé Crenshaw have

demonstrated this variance must also be understood as the intersection of multiple systems of oppression. Because intersectional theory has been used to examine the convergence of racism, heteropatriarchy, colonialism, classism, and ableism in the lives of people of color, I argue that gender variance must also be rooted in a queer of color critique of gender, where variance is established not only in the galvanization of multiple gender identities but in the deconstruction and demolition of the institutions and systems that harm women of color as well as queer, trans, migrant, and disabled populations. If one is to apply Patrick Wolfe's assertion that U.S. colonialism is a structure and not an event, one must examine how the heteronormative has been key to the sedimentation of this structure through white supremacy, racial capitalism, patriarchy, and ableism (388). Aguhar's declaration of "beauty" embraces gender non-conformity but also the possibilities for another world, where the institutionalization of "male" and "female," as well as the colonial implications of these categories, can be investigated and eradicated. Mark Aguhar's visual and literary art on Tumblr laid a key foundation in contouring contemporary queer Filipinx diasporic poetry and the impact of this literature beyond Filipinx American communion, but as a socially transformative method

Tumblr as a Site of Possibility

Mark Aguhar's personal Tumblr blog, *Blogging for Brown Girls*, was active from May 2010 to March 2012. Before the service was purchased by Yahoo! in 2013, Tumblr was known as an alternative microblogging platform—one that, according to Marty Fink and Quinn Miller, "involve[d] marking and annotating, or simply reposting, content

encountered on other sites…Tumblr spark[ed] image-centered conversations about topics including art, fashion, race, disability, popular culture, and the obligatory cats" (613-614). It was Tumblr's capacity for "simple, short, multimedia expression" that provided QTGNC users with a means "to mix and match visual imagery [with] snippets of popular culture, poetry, and so on to express an emergent identity in a way that sites such as Facebook and Twitter simply do not allow" (Cavalcante 1720-1721). With its expressive and aesthetic yet highly fragmentary and ephemeral curation of digital social space, Tumblr enabled the cultivation of multidimensional queer identities, where the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability were interrogated by a QTGNC millennial youth and student population traversing the demarcations of these social categories.

Bonnie Ruberg, Jason Boyd, and James Howe discuss the pivotal role queer digital expression has played in representing "issues relating to LGBTQ subjects" (110). But expanding queer digital expression beyond subjecthood can not only aid in amplifying the LGBT movement's aims beyond a rights framework, but also help to rework and unwrite the homonormative codes and scripts that establish issues such as gay marriage and LGBT media representation as the most prevalent campaigns to ensure equality and fairness. Although Mark Aguhar did criticize homonationalism and illustrated how, in Ruberg, Boyd, and Howe's words, "technology, while imbued with problems of discrimination and difference, can nonetheless become a powerful platform for critiquing dominant norms," Aguhar also provided a continuous and accessible space

for her followers to know and feel that what they had was not enough, that other worlds—“multidimensional spaces”—were possible (111).

This “multidimensional space” is known and felt in @calloutqueen’s blog itself, demonstrating how digital spaces can contribute to QTGNC justice. By foregrounding on Tumblr the ongoing vulnerability and insecurity of QTGNC bodies, Aguhar not only exemplifies the need for a radical queer politics but also administers touch—a moment of recognition—that fosters affinity and solidarity across her community of Tumblr followers. These feelings do function as moments of empathy and comfort, but they are also acts of care—of support and tenderness—that are essential to the advancement of justice. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha reminds us how care work enables one to live on and fight on, that accessibility and mutual aid are essential factors in propelling resilient and sustainable communities of liberation (33). Although Mark Aguhar’s life tragically ended in 2012, her digital poetics demonstrate why the contemporary must be studied as a critical moment of QTGNC mobilization, and that a Filipinx method is fundamental to this movement. Through a close examination of Aguhar’s work in the following section, I hope to further demonstrate how and why we must examine contemporary digital cultures and the ways a Filipinx method can expose the alliances of heteronormativity to white supremacy, colonialism, racial capitalism, and ableism.

LEGENDLEGENDLEGENDLEGEND

ATENCION WINSTONELLIOTT MINO ANDRWJAMES KYLE CHASERR SISSYDUDE HGNERDSX2 OKAJ JIMJAM HAUSOFRICKY - RYAN QUINNFORDSCOUTx2 BOOTYMEAT XXX1990 2GAYVIRGOSX2

HEYLITTLEDEER HOMOINFERIOR SOFAKINGBEAR TWINOFYOURSELF JAMBOS PICKUPBEAR BARISTABEN INVENTAIRE LOWBROWBRILLIANT ELECTRICSHAMBLES NAKEDPICSOFURDAD ROBBLEROBBLE SELECTIVESIGHT DIMSHALA BENTOMBSTONE HARRYHORROR SYNTHPOPJOE RUBENIGGA ARABESQUEOFSATYRS EGGIS LETTERSTOLIFE BBBENJAMIN BLACKINKJAR MEJOE

MONSTRUOSO THATBOYLOS SMILLER PANTS SKEET MEMEMEMEMEME TOPO CLINTON<3PIZZA CPTSTEVEXXX MATT SEKRITGAYILLUMINATIORGANIZATIONX5

BENZI BLAAARGH ARMYOFKLAUS PARRINO WHITEYTIGHTIES JAREDSAYS GENTRYEVANS PHOENIXPYRE MATTHEWW BOYSANDBOMBS ADAMJK THEGOODMOMENT XYZACH MACGEEKBEAR BANJEEGIRLREALNESS CRACKERFINISHINGSCHOOL IDONTDRIVE FAGTASTICVOYAGE

GEAUX ARMANDCHIKNPOX QUANDOJOE RYANWHATT SOFRESH KINGORLOWEST DANNYBRITO JERMAIN SOMEONEMAYBENOTONTUMBLR? JONATHANROBERTS BOYSHAPEDBOX FRACKWITHTHEGODS THATGUYCHAD VINCENT MITCHELL SZAKALL ARGONAUT SHAMAMA SPIKEMARTINEZ/310S ADAMTHETERRIBLE DANINATOR MRGOLIGHTLY SIXTY40

LASTROWGETSTRICKY TOPLEFT: LAGUERRA SKOTTIE WOLFSHAM VOODAD SEAN ALLY TEENWITCH CUNTBURGER CPTAWESOMEPANTS DAVID

BOTTOMLEFT: DEPUTYJOEV YESHAIRY ACIDARMOR DISCOBIZKITZ WOLFCUB WEARETHEWEIRDOS

TOPRIGHT: POWDEREDONUTZ JAWNCHARLES BEARJUNKIE

BOTTOMRIGHT: EVANGARZA NAKEDRUSSIANS JESUS DUNCAN URSIUS DIAMONDMIND BEARSIMJEALOUSOF ZACHKIDD GOGODAVITRON

Figure 2: Mark Aguhar, "LEGEND," 2010.

According to the Getty Center's 2017 exhibition *Concrete Poetry: Words and Sounds in Graphic Space*, concrete poems are "committed to the idea that poetry [is] not just a column of words on a page, intended to be read silently or aloud, but [is] a spatial construct whose design was central to its meaning. Concrete poetry [takes on] many forms in diverse media, including book-poems, poster-poems, sculpture in glass and stone, and even digital poetics." One of Mark Aguhar's earliest pieces is the concrete poem "LEGEND," which was posted on her portfolio Tumblr (@markaguhar) on May 10, 2010 (Figure 2). Rendered using a word processor and relying on font type, color, and spatial design, "LEGEND" demonstrates how the digital, according to Laura

Shackelford, "repurposes concrete poetry's recombinations of verbal, visual, and aural modes in the context of twenty-first-century digital interface relations and their signifying economies" (111). Shackelford states that "the combination of visual and textual modes" in concrete poetry aim, in Cesar Espinosa's words, "to show and to name; to figure and to say; to reproduce and to articulate; to imitate and to signify; to look and to read" (111). Espinosa's striking characterization of concrete poetry situates the poetic as a series of acts, as sites of activation, which is similar to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's deconstruction of texture: "To perceive texture is to know or hypothesize whether a thing will be easy or hard, safe or dangerous to grasp…[T]o touch is always already to reach out, to fondle, to heft, to tap, or to hold" (14). By situating digital poetics as a set of touch points, Aguhar demonstrates the propensity of the poetic to grasp, to graze, and even to embrace the reader—that this tactility is embodied by the formal elements giving texture to the poem itself. In the following analysis, I pay close attention to the content of "LEGEND" but also examine how the choices of font, color, and other design elements are essential to the poem's affect.

Because of Tumblr's focus on a visual repertoire that Marty Fink and Quinn Miller describe as "cut-and-paste collaging" and "a participatory and transient DIY aesthetic," a concrete poetry work like "LEGEND" is able to flourish in this particular digital terrain, demonstrating how a multimedia textual practice can cultivate new and transformative poetics (620). Although "LEGEND" may appear like a "hot mess," it is this disarray that gives the poem its texture; it is how the piece actually presents a critique of normative queer expression in the digital age, particularly about social media

platforms. For instance, the terms “B00TYMEAT” and “2GAYVIRGOSX2” from the first stanza take the format of online handles. The quick succession of these usernames deploys a sense of immediacy, playfulness, and humor, which is enhanced by the bright-pink Comic Sans font, a casual script that mimics handwriting and is disdained by various typographers, graphic designers, and other creatives invested in text aesthetic. Comic Sans may be an “ugly” font, but it is Aguhar’s deliberate usage of it that contours the poem with camp humor. “B00TYMEAT” may be poking fun at the emphasis on ass in gay culture, while “2GAYVIRGOSX2” is making fun of QTGNC affinities to astrology. “LEGEND” gives readers a space to laugh at these cultural markers, while also cultivating critical capacities for a subjectless critique where the normalization of QTGNC bodies is interrogated.

This subjectless critique is seen in Aguhar’s continued banter at online typographical queer aesthetic, which illustrates the homonormative escapades of queer digital culture. Aguhar addresses anti-femme sentiment in the queer community by rendering “SISSYDUDE” in pink and speaks to fat shaming in the same community by illustrating “MONSTRUOSO” and “SMILLER PANTS” in blue. For Asian Americans on social media, fatphobia, femme shaming, and racism are often intersecting oppressions, as Nguyen Tan Hoang extrapolates in his research on Asian American masculinity and sexual representation. According to Nguyen, statements like “No fats, no femmes, no Asians” on dating apps such as Grindr are “an acknowledgment of Asian bottomhood—as the node where gender, race, sexuality, and sexual practice crisscross” (81). Nguyen reconstitutes Asian American bottomhood as a “position—sexual, social,

affective, political, aesthetic—[that] facilitates a more expansive horizon for forging political alliances" (3). By using the terms "SISSYDUDE," "MONSTRUOSO," and "SMILLER PANTS" in "LEGEND," Aguhar alludes to this crisscrossing of gender, race, sexuality, and sex, demonstrating that the horizons of intersectional analysis must also account for body types and sexual practices. Rather than fighting for increased representation of fat and femme bodies on Grindr, we must grapple with how bottomhood and fatness are also racialized under a homonormative script, illustrating the alliances of queer digital culture to this oppressive matrix.

Furthermore, "LEGEND" continues with a critique of LGBT rights discourse. Other than using Comic Sans font, the text is rendered in different colors: pink, purple, blue, green, orange, and red, representing the rainbow, the popular symbol of LGBT pride and the rights movement. If one examines the order of the colors, however, the commonplace succession—red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple—is actually reversed. This reversal may appear like a mere aesthetic choice, but I argue it is a rewriting or recoding of LGBT discourse. While the colors of the LGBT flag stand for life (red), healing (orange), sunlight (yellow), nature (green), serenity (blue), and spirit (purple), Aguhar flips the script on these representations. For Aguhar, this reversed flag discloses femme shaming ("SISSYDUDE" in pink), anti-Blackness ("RUBEN[word]" in purple), fatphobia ("SMILLER PANTS" in blue), racial capitalism ("CRACKERFINISHINGSCHOOL" in green), gender binarism ("BOYSHAPEDBOX" in orange), and misogyny ("CUNTBURGER" in red). While these all-caps terms are humorous and playful, they nevertheless illuminate how the mainstream LGBT

movement fails to account for the violences dispersed by such interlocking systems. Through textual design and plays on words, Aguhar deploys a highly affectual critique of homonationalism; she allows the reader to laugh but also enables the reader to question the viability of rights discourse to QTGNC justice.

Figure 3: Daniel Quasar, intersectional LGBT flag, 2019.

This question on the viability of rights discourse was further raised in June 2018 after Daniel Quasar's redesign of the LGBT pride flag went viral. Following a string of murders in which four Black trans women—Antash'a English, Diamond Stephens, Cathalina Christina James, and Keisha Wells—were killed in June 2018, graphic designer Daniel Quasar's redesign includes a chevron pattern on the left with white, pink, and light blue stripes for the transgender community, and Black and Brown stripes for Black,

Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC). Quasar's redesign went viral after George Floyd's murder on May 25, 2020, before LGBT pride month in June. According to George M. Johnson, "With last week's police killing of George Floyd, thousands across the country have taken to the streets to fight against injustice—a harrowing reminder this Pride month of a time in history when Black and brown trans and queer folks led a violent revolt against history" ("Pride is and Always Was About Rebellion, This Year More Than Ever"). Pride month is celebrated in June to mark June 28, 1969, when Black and Brown queer and trans women—Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, Miss Major Griffin-Gacy, and Stormé DeLarverie—led the Stonewall Uprising against the policing of BIPOC LGBT communities. Although Pride is celebrated across the country, Stonewall's history alongside Mark Aguhar's critique of a homonationalist LGBT rights discourse enables us to question the viability of Pride month celebrations of visibility, inclusivity, and representational fullness when Black and Brown QTGNC people continue to be routinely murdered by police. Quasar's redesign of the LGBT pride flag sheds light on the limitations of diversity, equity, and inclusion, highlighting that while this redesign enables intersectional representations of LGBT people, ending policing, incarceration, and violence against QTGNC BIPOC requires a structural and comprehensive transformation of society in addition to transformative art and design practices.

In addition to graphic design, Aguhar's wordplay is constitutive of queer Filipina/o/x life. According to Sarita See, these "polemical, aggressive, and frivolous forms of wordplay are evidence of a culture that is 'alive and vibrant because of a disposition toward light-hearted bantering and joking relationships'" (71). The wordplay

in “LEGEND,” I argue, is evidence of Aguhar’s conceptualization of a Filipinx method. With this Filipinx cultural practice, she is able to perform a subjectless critique of queer digital culture and demonstrate how this terrain is complicit with racialized homonationalism. This critical play on words is reflected in the title of the piece itself, in which the continuous arrangement of the word “legend”—repeated four times in bold uppercase letters with no spaces—confounds the eye. This bold repetition enables one to focus on G-E-N-D, the last four letters of “legend,” and also the first four letters of “gender.” This visual dissonance, once one becomes aware of it, is a funny and captivating realization. This play on “gender” and “legend” demonstrates Aguhar’s ongoing disruption and critique of the racial, sexual, gendered, and ableist norms that govern our society—how her fierce brownness, femininity, queerness, and fatness exist in opposition to these codes and scripts. Aguhar demonstrates how fatphobia and colorism are not just products of white supremacy, but are key actors in its dissemination. Diasporic Filipinxs are vulnerable to the fatphobic and colorist discourses permeating the Philippines, a colonialist rhetoric that is often intergenerationally transmitted between parents and their children. Preferences for light and skinny bodies are more than just white beauty standards but are connected to colonialist structures that physiologically shape body-minds. As a result, although QTGNC Filipina/o/xs can make fun of the slurs and restrictions that bind us, we must also account for the ways our linguistic acts—our witty and polemical wordplay—are complicit with anti-Blackness, fatphobia, racial capitalism, misogyny, and heteronormativity. It is through this callout of Filipina/o/x investments in whiteness that Aguhar’s work becomes “legendary.”

Queer Recognition, Gesture, and Otherwise Possibility

A "Filipinx method" can be known and felt further in Aguhar's most celebrated poem, "Litanies to My Heavenly Brown Body." While this poem engages in similar formal, affective, and critical exercises as "LEGEND," "Litanies" specifically executes what Juana María Rodríguez describes as "those fleeting moments of queer recognition, of touch both human and divine…Recognition, like survival itself, is a gesture—fleeting, flirtatious, and precarious—that stretches her hand and says, *come*" (138). By imparting queer recognition and gesture in her poetry, Aguhar invites readers to engage with what Ashon Crawley terms an "otherwise possibility:" "an unrest and discontent, a seeking to conceive dreams that allow us to wake laughing, tears of joy in our eyes, dreams that have us saying, *I hope this comes true*" ("Otherwise, Ferguson"). A fleeting, flirtatious, and precarious gesture, an "otherwise possibility" asks one to engage with and embrace the potentiality for QTGNC liberation: that one's hopes, dreams, and desires are just as crucial to justice as militant acts of mobilization and resistance. Through a fierce articulation of anger and abundance, "Litanies to My Heavenly Brown Body" bestows QTGNC communities with the power not only to survive, but to thrive despite the injuries that maim them.

Originally published by @calloutqueen in two parts on January 15 and 17, 2011, "Litanies to My Heavenly Brown Body" is an angry, unapologetic, raw, and tender poem that submerges readers in a sense of urgency, fury, and demand but also distributes a touch that is comforting, gentle, and cognizant of our pain and strength. The poem begins with rejections and oppositions to normative scripts: "FUCK YOUR WHITENESS /

FUCK YOUR BEAUTY . . . FUCK YOUR PRIVILEGE / FUCK THAT YOU AREN'T MADE TO FEEL SHAME ALWAYS." Although Aguhar's audience experiences this poem on digital screens, the use of anaphora and uppercase text allows the speaker's words to resonate in readers' heads like a scream. In addition, the uppercase "FUCK YOU" is as gestural as it is verbal. It is a speech act, a *doing* as much as a *saying*. As a performative utterance, the statement "FUCK YOU" functions as an open defiance of respectability and normativity, a challenge to the threat of racialized, gendered, and homophobic violence (Austin 6).

Furthermore, "Litanies" also recognizes the pain and suffering produced by such violence. By stating "FUCK THAT YOU AREN'T MADE TO FEEL SHAME ALWAYS" and "FUCK YOUR DESTRUCTION OF MY PERSONHOOD," Aguhar acknowledges the pain QTGNC people undergo. The poem's recognition of this pain heightens its affect; this recognition facilitates a knowing and a feeling that momentarily suspends pain and produces a fleeting but gripping sense of comfort. While this comforting touch point may be felt while using a digital device in the privacy of one's home, with the publication of this poem on Tumblr, Aguhar creates a collective online space of care. This space, in the words of Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, can be understood as a "care web," collectives of mutual aid where "sick and disabled people attempt to get the care and support we need, on our own terms, with autonomy and dignity" (33). While not all poor, racialized, and QTGNC populations have disabilities, these vulnerable communities are routinely exposed to debilitation, which Jasbir Puar describes as "the slow wearing down of populations instead of the event of becoming

disabled. While the latter concept creates and hinges on a narrative of before and after for individuals who will eventually be identified as disabled, the former comprehends those bodies that are sustained in a perpetual state of debilitation precisely foreclosing the social, cultural and political translation to disability" (xiv). Although disability is distinct from debility, Puar highlights the urgency of enacting an intersectional analysis of both conditions, especially as poor, racialized, and QTGNC populations remain increasingly vulnerable to state violence and many do develop disabilities because of the assault and abandonment distributed by harmful social systems.

In "Litanies," debility is addressed with the lines "FUCK YOUR JUDGING ME FOR SELF CARE" and "FUCK YOUR ASKING ME TO PRODUCE SAFETY FOR YOU AND NOT MYSELF." Because of the liberal state's failure, debilitated and disabled populations often have to seek care outside of limited social services. But instead of acknowledging the need for mutual and autonomous care webs across a spectrum of abled and disabled identities, there is often an assumption, according to Piepzna-Samarasinha, that "crips [are] supporting crips" and that they "intrinsically understand each other's needs," rather than acknowledgment of "the gendered/raced/classed dynamics of care" (65-66). Additionally, while self-care is often thought of as an individual act, Aguhar and Piepzna-Samarasinha urge us to acknowledge how "sick and disabled predominately Black and brown queer people . . . create networks of care by and for us. It's about our attempts to get what we need to love and live, in the world and in our homes, without primarily relying on the state" (33). Aguhar and Piepzna-Samarasinha highlight that state and capital actually disperse more harm to these

already vulnerable populations, that seeking support and recognition from these systems can cause further alienation as administrations specifically refuse to disseminate care and resources to Black, Brown, and queer people under a rubric of respectability politics. Thus, with this intersectional critique of debility and disability, "Litanies to My Heavenly Brown Body" creates a network of care webs through its formal and affective elements, as well as through its circulation on Tumblr. "Litanies" continues to be republished and recirculated to this day, demonstrating how this online care web remains vibrant and active as the poem is repeatedly experienced by readers.

While "Litanies to My Heavenly Brown Body" validates QTGNC anger and highlights the debilitating role of the state, the poem also, following the words of Juana María Rodríguez, charges us with vitality (2). This vitality becomes "that force of connection and communion that binds us to friends and strangers" (2). The recognition and gesture facilitated by "Litanies" produces a cooperative force between readers that relies on the relational—the extension of the self and the "possibility of a 'we' (2)." This "we" demonstrates how a Filipinx method can incite the emergence of new and alternative forms of kinship beyond Filipina/o/x communion. These kinships are not only known and felt through Aguhar's administration of care webs, they are also illuminated through the "blessings" Aguhar bestows upon her readers in the poem's next section, in which the speaker boldly and loudly exclaims:

> BLESSED ARE THE SISSIES
>
> BLESSED ARE THE BOI DYKES

> BLESSED ARE THE PEOPLE OF COLOR MY BELOVED KITH AND
> KIN . . .
> BLESSED ARE THE DIS-IDENTIFIERS
> BLESSED ARE THE GENDER ILLUSIONISTS
> BLESSED ARE THE NON-NORMATIVE . . .
> BLESSED ARE THE BELOVED WHO I DIDN'T DESCRIBE, I
> COULDN'T DESCRIBE, WILL LEARN TO DESCRIBE AND
> RESPECT AND LOVE

With these blessings, Aguhar further employs a subjectless critique of queerness. Rather than positioning the LGBT subject as the sole political referent, Aguhar demonstrates how "'a wide field of normalization' [is] the site of social violence" (Eng et al. 3). Although this poem may appear to be distinctly Filipina/o/x because of the Catholic elements, Aguhar's subjectless approach to queerness nevertheless highlights normativity as an expansive organizing logic that renders racialized, queer, femme, migrant, and disabled bodies as routinely aberrant, exploitable, and expendable, exposing non-normative populations to bare life, social death, and death itself. Aguhar demonstrates that while one can examine race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability through an intersectional analysis, an emphasis on how these axes work under a normative script can further illuminate the violence of this organizing logic under the constraints of empire, nation, and capital. "Litanies to My Heavenly Brown Body" acknowledges these normative constraints, but the poem also gestures to an "otherwise possibility" outside

these logics, scripts, and structures. By blessing everyone outside normativity—even the people the speaker did not and could not describe—Aguhar alludes to, in Ashon Crawley's words, "other ways for us to be with each other" ("Otherwise, Ferguson"). Rather than advocating for unification under, for instance, a cohesive identity, Aguhar highlights how a subjectless approach to radical mobilization can foster unimagined alliances and liberatory modes of social organization (Ferguson 2).

By posting "Litanies to My Heavenly Brown Body" on Tumblr, Aguhar has already fostered an unimagined alliance among her readers. Aguhar's work partakes in what Andre Cavalcante argues is Tumblr's capacity to "provide a kind of queer utopia that sustains LGBTQ users' sense of self, encourages them to talk back, and alters what they expect from the people and institutions they encounter in everyday life" (Cavalcante 1726). QTGNC people across generations, distances, and the non-normative spectrum are forged into a care web made possible by the queer recognition and gesture Aguhar's work facilitates. Within this unimagined alliance emerges a set of what Lisa Marie Cacho has termed as an "unthinkable politics." She quotes Fiona Ngo, defining an "unthinkable politics" as "'failure need not to be overcome, rehabilitation need not be desired, subjectivity need not be recovered'" (Cacho 33). Aguhar entertains the otherwise, the unimagined, and the unthinkable. The speaker in "Litanies" need not overcome her "failure" to describe those who could not be described. Rather, the speaker declares that she "WILL LEARN TO DESCRIBE AND RESPECT AND LOVE," demonstrating the abundance that awaits as we make queer futures possible.

Furthermore, “Litanies” is not concerned with reclamation and rehabilitation. As one can see from the content, the speaker has no intention of being recognized within or incorporated into a homonationalist rights discourse. She rejects this frame and chooses to align herself with those who live outside this regulative script. Additionally, although Aguhar does highlight the marginalization of queer identities and the destruction of queer personhood by acknowledging the people the speaker cannot describe, she does not, again, seek to incorporate these bodies into LGBTQ+ subjectivity. Rather, the speaker demonstrates how QTGNC justice can be achieved through an acknowledgement of the autonomy and difference within the spectrum of these identities themselves, rather than hinging liberation on equality and sameness. By locating QTGNC justice outside the referent of an LGBTQ+ subject, Aguhar opens us to “other ways for us to be with each other” without dispersing further alienation (“Otherwise, Ferguson”).

Lastly, “Litanies to My Heavenly Brown Body” ends with an “amen.” This “amen” is not only an allusion to Mark Aguhar’s Filipina/o/x Catholic upbringing, but it further intertwines the self with the collective by functioning as a call-and-response for readers, rendering “amen” as another performative utterance. “Amen” is part of the recitation of a prayer, but it is also a speech act, a hope and a promise that one day this prayer will come true. I argue that hope is not merely executed as a thought or feeling; the strategies for autonomy and care cultivated by QTGNC people are an execution of hope as well as an imagination of it. In fact, José Esteban Muñoz advocates for hope as both a critical affect and a methodology, defining the concept as “a backward glance that enacts a future vision” (Muñoz 4). It is anticipatory—“a being in, toward, and for

futurity" (Muñoz 91). In his research on Black Pentecostalism, Ashon Crawley enables readers to return to the flesh, the very aesthetic practices that are sung, chanted, danced, and breathed during a spiritual congregation. Similarly, Aguhar's dissemination of "blessings" and her resounding "amen" function more than a prayer, but are "antagonistic to the very doctrines of sin and flesh that so proliferate within the world" (Crawley 24). Aguhar gives life—breath—to the people exposed to premature death, with "Amen" culminating as the final collective shout or gasp that tingles and resonates within the body. While "Litanies to My Heavenly Brown Body" illuminates the violence and vulnerability QTGNC people are exposed to, Aguhar's gesture toward an anticipatory future is an activation of an otherwise possibility. Aguhar provides a multidimensional deconstruction of the ways racism, colonialism, patriarchy, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, and ableism structure our daily lives, but she also bestows futurisms—a multitude of blessings—on those who oppose and resist these systems. As a litany, the poem sings to us, soothes us, enables us to rest, so we may wake, touch, and feel what we once thought was unthinkable.

Conclusion

After Mark Aguhar's death on March 12, 2012, Juana Peralta and Roy Pérez compiled a set of Aguhar's Tumblr posts into *The Calloutqueen Zine*, a posthumous, open-access publication that retains the impact and accessibility of @calloutqueen's blog. In the dedication, Juana Peralta states, "There's no denying that calloutqueen changed the world. It changed me" (3). Because of her flippant, vibrant, and fierce presence on

Tumblr, Aguhar laid a foundation for the cultivation of a radical Filipinx method that is deployed through the potentiality of the poetic. Aguhar's critique of white supremacy, racial capitalism, heteronormativity, and Filipina/o/x complicities with these systems continues in our current moment. However, there is also the question of Aguhar's death—the @calloutqueen took her own life but left her art, thought, and work for her followers. What does it mean to commit suicide when so much of one's work is tailored to survival, to the call out of the various systems that administer premature death? James McMaster reads Aguhar's death as an act of "revolting self-care," situating her suicide as "a critique of the wretched world in which we live" (201). McMaster defines "revolting self-care" as "a performative practice that seeks to destroy and transform one's own and others' identifications with and desire for normative ideality…revolting self-care is nothing like neoliberal individualism" (194). Given that suicide is often framed as a selfish choice, an act where the individual fails to consider the impact of their actions on others, reading Aguhar's death through the lens of "revolting self-care" enables the recalibration of suicide beyond individual failure, but as the administration of premature death on an already vulnerable body-mind. McMaster provides a key rearticulation of Aguhar's suicide and the survival practices she fiercely galvanized: "'[Practices of survival] exist in revolt against conditions that make them necessary, conditions in which failure is often likely, if not inevitable. The failure to survive does not negate the practice, it is its reason for deployment'" (201). Aguhar extrapolates that under racial capitalism and heteropatriarchy, failure is normal and inevitable. Her work sheds light on this

inevitable failure and makes it even more urgent that new and transformative strategies beyond survival are created and deployed.

Furthermore, the poet Kimberly Alidio honors the ongoing criticality of Aguhar in "All the Pinays are straight, all the queers are Pinoy, but some of us," published in her 2016 poetry collection, *After projects the resound.* The first stanza of the poem reads:

> hold our femme gaze straight into the cosmos
>
> behold a supernova of fat negation
>
> know Mark Aguhar as the real babaylan
>
> have mothers young enough to be our sons never to reach 26 (66).

In this stanza, Alidio acknowledges Aguhar's cultivation of gender as "multidimensional space," where "hold our femme gaze straight into the cosmos" illustrates how @calloutqueen's QTGNC aesthetic expands gender beyond the poles of male/masculine and female/feminine into heterogeneous possibilities of desire and expression (Fausto-Sterling 22). Furthermore, Alidio calls Aguhar "the real babaylan," highlighting how Aguhar's expansion of the gender binary predates the emergence of "Filipinx" itself with the use of the word "babaylan"—a proto-trans Filipina/x indigenous priestess. With this usage of "babaylan," Alidio demonstrates how Aguhar's work, like J. Neil Garcia's, locates the existence of non-normative gender expressions outside of what the Tumblr user @roadhouss has described as "usamerican discourse" ("Conversation around 'Filipinx'"). Although Aguhar was a diasporic Filipinx, her engagement with gender, sex,

and sexuality, as I have illustrated, is situated beyond the LGBT rights framework that proliferates U.S. liberalism. @calloutqueen's blog was an extensive critique of U.S. empire, nation, and capital and the QTGNC possibilities that exist beyond these systems.

The second section of Alidio's poem continues with several uppercase lines stylized in the form of @calloutqueen's "Litanies to My Heavenly Brown Body:"

> LOL YOUR PINAY SELF
> LOL YOUR SUBCONSCIOUS DECOLONIAL IDENTITY
> LOL RECOVERY AS AN ESCAPE HATCH FROM REAL
> NEGOTIATIONS
> LOL CARING THAT WHITE PEOPLE THINK OUR BODIES ARE
> CHEAP
> LOL THINKING ONLY WHITE PEOPLE THINK OUR BODIES ARE
> CHEAP (66).

In this section, Alidio continues Aguhar's campy tradition of critiquing Filipina/o/x alliances with U.S. liberal feminism and white supremacy. The lines "LOL YOUR PINAY SELF" and "LOL YOUR SUBCONCIOUS DECOLONIAL IDENTITY" poke fun at Pinay (Filipina) feminisms that appropriate and co-opt decolonization and Philippine indigenous cultures for the sake of personal empowerment while failing to grapple with the ways many Filipina/o/xs uphold and invest in whiteness. In fact, according to a 2017 CNN Philippines article, 69 percent of Filipina/o/x Americans voted

for Donald Trump in 2016 ("Filipinos Are Trump's 'Greatest' Supporters Worldwide—Survey"). Diasporic Filipina/o/xs (myself included) routinely fail to acknowledge and call out the ways we remain interdependent to the United States, an alliance we defend under a promise of security, equality, and inclusion. "LOL-ing" not only reveals the contradictions of liberal Filipina/o/x empowerment, but employs the snarky yet critical expressive practice that Aguhar curated as @calloutqueen. While "LOL" may seem merely an initialism of internet slang, Aguhar and Alidio illustrate how we can transform such daily utterances into critiques of vulnerability, violence, and debilitation.

As a result, while "Filipinx" may partake in Filipina/o/x communion and coherence, Mark Aguhar's work demonstrates how the term can actually be deployed as a method, a heterogeneous execution of art, thought, and resistance that utilizes the poetic as a moment of social transformation. A Filipinx method not only calls out and names the institutional violences that harm racialized, queer, femme, migrant, and disabled populations but also imagines and materializes possibilities and futures outside of these structures through a campy concrete poetics and the queer recognition and gesture Aguhar's work affords. A QTGNC poetics is not supplemental to QTGNC justice but *fundamental* to it. For those who cannot resist in "normal" or able-bodied ways, poetry is a fundamental conduit for social change. Poets, artists, and scholars inspired by Mark Aguhar's work, such as Kimberly Alidio, show how and why @calloutqueen's work was more than a Tumblr blog of everyday musings, but a transformative archive of QTGNC and Filipinx self-determination.

Chapter Two:

‘For You, For Us, For We:’ Tomboy Masculinities and Disability Justice

On September 30, 2018, Melinda M. Babaran, a Filipina migrant worker based in Taiwan, was awarded the Jury Award from the Taiwan Literature Award for Migrants for her LGBT-themed story, “Latay sa Laman” (“Whipped Scar on Flesh”). “Latay sa Laman” chronicles the physical and emotional abuse Babaran faced from her father as a “tomboy”—a female-assigned Filipina/x who is masculine of center—in the Philippines. Not only does Babaran illuminate the trauma and harm she experienced at the hands of her father, but she also expresses the “liberation” migrating to Taiwan has provided. She states:

> Sa mahigit isang dekadang pagtira at pagtatrabaho dito, naging tahimik ang buhay ko. Malaya kong naipapakita ang tunay kong pagkatao nang walang humuhusga. Sa [Taiwan], pantay-pantay ang trato sa lahat. Dito, tanggap ako sa kung sino ako basta wala akong inaagrabyadong tao. Hindi ko kailangang magtago. Kahit sa aking trabaho, wala akong naramdamang diskriminasyon mula sa mga taiwanese (“Latay sa Laman”).
>
> I have lived and worked here for a decade and my life has been peaceful. I am free to be myself without judgement. In [Taiwan], everybody is equal. Here, they accept me for who I am as long as I don’t hurt anybody. I don’t need to hide.

> Even at my job, I don't experience discrimination from the Taiwanese ("Latay sa Laman," translations mine and throughout the chapter).

According to Babaran, migrating to Taiwan has been a liberatory experience as a queer Filipina. In contrast to her childhood in the Philippines, Babaran does not experience violence or discrimination from the Taiwanese. She is able to be herself fully at work and with her friends, truly "malaya"—free—in another country.

While Babaran's experience as an Overseas Filipina/o/x Worker (OFW) is unique as a queer survivor of intergenerational abuse, her story nevertheless demonstrates how LGBT Filipino/a/xs are routinely exposed to violence under a legacy of systemic homophobia and transphobia historically distributed by Spanish and U.S. colonial statecraft in the Philippines. Having to flee her homeland in order to escape domestic violence is not only reflective of the Philippine state's failure to protect LGBT people, but also how migration has become one of the few "solutions" LGBT Filipina/o/xs seek in order to find safety and security. While the OFW narrative is oftentimes deployed as a story of exploitation and loss, Babaran provides a contradictory and multidimensional perspective, where the OFW does not migrate merely to provide economic support for their family, but to seek the malaya—the freedom—a diasporic existence can promise.

I begin this chapter with Babaran's story in order to illustrate the multidimensional perspectives migrant queer, transgender, and gender non-conforming (QTGNC) Filipino/a/xs materialize in their writing. For Babaran, "diaspora" becomes a site of queer possibility, where QTGNC subjecthood, kinship, and desire can flourish.

Diaspora in also undergirded by how both the U.S. and Philippine nation-states distribute harm and injury to QTGNC people. Although Babaran situates her experience as an OFW as an escape from her father's abuse, we must still consider how the figure of the OFW was produced in order to keep a struggling Philippine economy afloat while exposing Filipina/o/x migrants to displacement, alienation, and debilitation. The production of the OFW thus, in the words of Robyn Rodriguez, "rearticulated ideas of nationalism and national belonging for the purposes of brokering labor," where "working abroad and remittances are recast as nationalist acts" (xxi). In this chapter, I examine "labor brokerage"—the neoliberal strategy the Philippine state deploys to mobilize its citizens as overseas workers—not only through a close reading of Babaran's work, but through a comparative analysis of Kay Ulanday Barrett's poetry.

A disabled and transgender Filipinx poet, Barrett is the author of *When the Chant Comes* (2016) and *More Than Organs* (2020), two poetry collections that celebrate and delineate the intersections of being queer, trans, disabled, and of color, but also carefully deconstruct the intimacies between queerness and labor brokerage. Although *More Than Organs* was released four years after *When the Chant Comes*, the synergistic elements of both collections reflect Barrett's commitment to queer justice, migrant justice, and disability justice, how the form and content of their work is marked by a specific aesthetic that loudly and unequivocally resonates and connects all three movements. These two texts might be separate collections, but they mesh and operate under a spirit of what I term as "poetic kinship." "Poetic kinship" describes the closeness and partnership between another text, whether or not it was written by the same poet. This "poetic

kinship" allows Barrett to illustrate how queer justice, migrant justice, and disability justice—three different social movements—have intersecting liberatory visions. The U.S. nation-state routinely distributes discrimination, violence, and exclusion on queer, migrant, and disabled populations, as seen in both Babaran's and Barrett's work. As a result, both Babaran and Barrett allude to the possibility of "diaspora" beyond the dispersion of people and cultures from their homelands, but as the cultivation of "poetic kinships" that traverse the demarcations and borders instituted and enforced by the nation-state. These kinships are essential to connecting the queer, migrant, and disability justice movements, demonstrating the commensurabilities and affinities of these liberatory struggles. Although Babaran is an OFW based in Taiwan and Barrett is a Filipinx American based in New Jersey, the intersecting themes and liberatory visions in both of their works illuminate the queer possibilities in diaspora, how queer diasporic literature can expose, contest, and momentarily alleviate the harm distributed by a U.S. neocolonial regime.

In the next section, I discuss my foregrounding of "queer diaspora" and how these alternative constructions of space, place, and self enable QTGNC Filipina/o/xs to feel "malaya"—a feeling of freedom and liberation—that is administered across geospatial lines.

Queer Diasporic Possibilities

In "Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies," David Eng situates the formation of "Asian American diaspora" as

“[s]uspended between departure and arrival,” how “Asian Americans remain permanently disenfranchised from home, relegated to a nostalgic sense of its loss or to an optative sense of its unattainability” (31). In addition, Sau-ling C. Wong, argues that the term “Asian American” conveys “a yearning for the kind of containing boundaries and contained site enjoyed by the dominant society, a ‘nation-state’—a home” (1-2). Although “diaspora” is connotated with a sense of exclusion and loss, queer diasporic literature intervenes with this interpretation, alluding to how diaspora can foster new formations and locations of belonging, empowerment, and care outside the fabric of the nation-state. Martin Joseph Ponce’s queer diasporic reading of Filipina/o/x literature marks this body of work as offering “alternative relationalities and socialities that surpass or elude the nation as the default form of imagining community” (2).

In addition, Gayatri Gopinath’s expands on queer diasporic cultural productions, arguing that these forms “point to submerged histories of racist and colonialist violence that continue to resonate in the present…bring[ing] into the present those pasts that are deliberately forgotten within conventional nationalist or diasporic scripts…queer diasporic forms work against the violent effacements that produce the fictions of purity that lie at the heart of dominant nationalist and diasporic ideologies” (4). I argue that both Melinda M. Babaran and Kay Ulanday Barrett’s queer diasporic cultural productions point to these submerged histories in the Philippines, demonstrating how heteronormative scripts institutionalized under Spanish and U.S. colonialisms continue to resonate in the present. Babaran and Barrett reveal the limitations of dominant and androcentric nationalist and diasporic ideologies through their poetics, illustrating how queer diasporic

positionalities, specifically Filipinx tomboy masculinities, disrupt the dominance of these colonial modalities.

According to Kale Fajardo, within the context of the Philippines, "tomboy" "broadly refers to Filipino masculine or male-identified fe/males who generally have sexual/emotional relationships with feminine females" (153). Fajardo uses the term "fe/male" "because some tomboys are female and masculine-identified, whereas others are male and masculine-identified. Tomboys may also identify as "FTM" (female-to-male), indicating a movement or shift in sex/gender identification" (153). Gina Velasco expands on diasporic tomboy identities in her examination of "That's My Tomboy," a Philippine pageant aired on the variety show, *It's Showtime!*, that provided a platform for working-class Filipina/o/x tomboys to appear on daytime television, perform their masculinities on stage, and compete for a cash prize. "That's My Tomboy" was televised around the globe through The Filipino Channel (TFC), globalized Filipina/o/x programming available across multiple nations that connects diasporic Filipina/o/xs to domestic media and cultural productions. With these diasporic ebbs and flows, Velasco situates the Filipina/o/x tomboy as a "queer diasporic figure" that connects conceptions and understandings of "fe/male" in the Philippines to "FTM" and trans identities and experiences elsewhere. Velasco "use[s] the term 'trans' in relation to the term 'tomboy' to suggest a traversing of both gender identities and sexual orientations across national sites within the Filipinx diaspora, from tomboy as 'butch lesbian' to 'working class man trans'" (72). As diasporic Filipinxs who are both masculine of center, I argue that Babaran and Barrett both demonstrate the fluctuation of tomboy masculinities not only

across transnational lines, but also across literary genres and forms. The metamorphosis of the tomboy across a spectrum of queer diasporic productions points to the multiplicity a queer Filipinx poetics can illuminate.

Although Kay Ulanday Barrett is a poet and Melinda M. Babaran's "Latay sa Laman" is written as creative non-fiction, both artists approach creative writing as performance and administer multiple modes of recognition and poetic address that directly engage with their audiences. Barrett is trained as a spoken word poet, arguing that this mode of performance "'enables [the] junction of literary craft [and] theater craft, and of the intimate. We are directly kindred when I am on that stage…The purpose is to disrupt the [idea] that we are alone'" ("What racial, disability, and LGBTQ justice have in common"). Similarly, in an interview with *CNN Philippines*, Babaran states that she approaches writing as an outlet: "'Nagsusulat ako whenever I'm upset just to pour out my emotions and then after that, tinatapon ko na. That's my way of hindi mapuno 'yung loob ko at hindi ako makapagtanim ng galit'" ("I write whenever I'm upset just to pour out my emotions and then after that, I let it go. That's my way to not be overwhelmed and to not bury my anger") ("In Taiwan, a Filipino factory worker wins prestigious literary award"). Babaran's use of writing as an outlet, her process of pouring out her words and letting go of her anger, are queer diasporic gestures, methods that challenge "exclusivist definitions of communal belonging [that] are relayed and translated between nation and diaspora within the realm of public culture, through intersecting discourses of gender, sexuality, nationality, and religion" (Gopinath 17). Through performance, Barrett and Babaran both challenge normative and exclusivist definitions of belonging. Barrett's presence on stage

does not only signify their positionality as a Filipinx tomboy and spoken word poet, but the live delivery of their poetry enables queer, transmasculine, and crip positionalities to be seen, heard, and validated. By performing their poetry live and publishing their work in print, Barrett caters to people of multiple abilities, ensuring that their poetry is available and accessible by any means possible. Similarly, Babaran's creative writing routine is centered on emotional vulnerability and release, where her monologue moves through the affective experience of emotional disclosure that provides tenderness and relief to the audience. Barrett and Babaran do not only curate queer diasporic landscapes but galvanize a method of poetic address and affinity that simultaneously critiques the nation-state and provides a queer affective experience that is seen, heard, and felt.

As a result, the poetic, for both Barrett and Babaran, is utilized to expose, contest, and alleviate state violence, and these affective experiences are made possible through the modes of poetic address provided in their work. Barrett engages in modes of poetic address that do not only activate the audience's capacity to think about intersectional identities, but calls readers/listeners to take part in the galvanization and mobilization of interconnected racial, queer, and disability justice movements. As Natalie Pollard argues, "it is only in language, in a poem's own articulations, that it can call interlocutors into being…poetic addresses cannot help but shape *you*, even when referring to an already-existing entity" (2). As a spoken word poet, Barrett's language is not limited to words on the page, but also includes the gestures, utterances, and expressions they perform during a live reading. Furthermore, the interpellative "you" that is being addressed and/or activated when we experience their work does not just include the direct audience, but for

multiple congregations fighting for racial, queer, and disability justice who use poetry as a critical act of political mobilization. Barrett's spoken word poetry both shapes and compels the audience to seek transformative justice.

In addition, although Melinda M. Babaran does not identify as a poet, I argue that her work *is* poetic, due to the dialogism and modes of poetic address "Latay sa Laman" partakes in. Dialogism, according to Marianne and Michael Shapiro, describes "the role of the (sometimes implied) addressee, the unheard 'other voice' that provides part of the poetic context" (392). Although this "other voice" is not named in "Latay sa Laman," the monologue is written as a conversation, a dialogue between two parties. This dialogic quality is signified with the queries Babaran poses throughout the piece, when she asks the addressee to accompany her through her story: "May oras ka ba? Pwede bang samahan mo muna ako?" ("Do you have time? May you accompany me, please?"). Babaran is not only asking the addressee to listen to her story, but *to be with her*, to bear witness to her resilience and survival.

However, the limitation of this act of witnessing is also called into question, and I argue that Babaran acknowledges this limitation, due to the consistent "calling in" she bestows. This "calling in" is evident toward the end of the piece, when she apologizes to the reader for crying: "Pasensya ka na, kung naiiyak na ako" ("I am sorry if I am crying"). This apology does not only provide a glimpse of the difficulty and vulnerability it takes to tell such a painful story, but Babaran's apology calls to attention the emotional labor and gestures of care trauma survivors extend to others, even if they are telling a story about how *they* were harmed. This gesture signals the reader to consider the

limitations of witnessing, that simply listening to Babaran's story will not, in the words of Cathy Park Hong, "extol the virtues of survival and overcoming" ("Against Witness"). In the same essay, Hong poses the following key questions: "What if the poet never overcomes?...What if the poet—and this is the ultimate emotional transgression that repels the reader who takes comfort in literature as forgiveness—still feels a shadow of hate and it is that hate that disfigures song into something broken" ("Against Witness")?

Rather than positioning disability and debility as mere obstacles that need to be overcome, Babaran and Barrett demonstrate how disability and debility are structures of social control where struggles over power, meaning, and belonging take place. Their poetics enable audiences to recognize the critical landscape of queer diasporas, how globalization, neoliberalism, and transnationalism shape the dispersal and lived experiences of queer and diasporic Filipina/o/xs. They convey how bearing witness is not reducible to engaging with testimony, but to actively listen, to be compelled to imagine other worlds where violent social struggles no longer take place. Just as queer diasporas enable the transgression of geospatial boundaries and the normative scripts we are interpellated under, perhaps a queer diasporic poetics can help us locate liberation—malaya—beyond the confines of nation and capital.

In the following sections, I provide closer readings of Babaran's "Latay sa Laman" and her engagement with the tomboy as a queer diasporic figure. This reading is followed by analyses of select poems in Kay Ulanday Barrett's *When the Chant Comes* and *More Than Organs*. I examine how both artists engage with questions of labor and

transmasculinity and provide landscapes of belonging and affinity outside heteronormativity.

A Poetics of Address

According to the *CNN Philippines* feature titled, "In Taiwan, a Filipino factory worker wins prestigious literary award," Melinda M. Babaran composed "Latay sa Laman" ("Whipped Scar on Flesh") as a monologue, which is conveyed through several modes of address to the audience:

> Ang weird di ba? Takot ako sa sariling ama ko.
> It's weird isn't it? I'm scared of my own father ("Latay sa Laman").

Babaran's rhetorical question, "Ang weird di ba?," directly addresses the audience. By asking this question, Babaran then elicits a response from her readers/listeners, enabling us to confirm that it *is* strange. She compels us to bear witness to the fact that she is terrified of her father. In asking us to confirm and bear witness to this fact, we also verify the horrors Babaran faces in her father's home, particularly the physical abuse she experiences in his hands. According to an article on *Phil Star Global*, "[e]ight in 10 children and young people in the Philippines have experienced some form of violence in their lifetime that usually begins at home" ("8 of 10 children in the Philippines experienced violence"). Bakla and tomboy (gay and lesbian) children face even higher rates of intergenerational abuse despite anti-discriminatory legislation. In "Being LGBT

in Asia: The Philippines Country Report" by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United States Agency of International Development (USAID), the 1992 Special Protection of Children against Abuse, Exploitation, and Discrimination Act declares that it is the responsibility of the Philippine state to "provide special protection to children from all forms of abuse, neglect, cruelty, exploitation and discrimination and other conditions" ("Being LGBT in Asia"). However, "[t]he existing laws do not reference sexual orientation or gender identity" ("Being LGBT in Asia"). In addition, "it is reported that the guardians of LGBT youths can fail to protect them or may abuse them, and that there is under-reporting of discrimination encountered by LGBT youths" ("Being LGBT in Asia"). This lack of protection by the state, despite having a law in place, demonstrates the continued failure of the nation to disseminate safety and security to the populations most vulnerable to harm. This failure is visible in "Latay sa Laman," where Babaran chronicles the continued physical and mental abuse she experienced for decades while living under her father's roof. In Babaran's story, it is not only the Philippine government that distributes harm to LGBT people, but the institution of the family itself.

While historian Teodoro A. Agoncillo outlines how the Filipino family thrives on close family ties, he also highlights how the family "has been *the* unit of society and everything revolves around it" (6, emphasis added). He states:

> The father is the head of the family...The Filipino parent exercises almost absolute powers over the children...The elders believe, and demand, that they be obeyed...For no matter how cruelly and unjustly a member of the family has been

> treated, the elders cautioned the victim to be patient: remember...that not only you but all of us will suffer (7-8).

The family, under Filipino tradition, constitutes the very fabric of the nation. The father, head of the family under unwritten law, mirrors heteropatriarchal Philippine statecraft, governed beliefs, ideas, and attitudes that injure those who exist outside these heteronormative regulations. In addition, elders caution young victims of violence to "be patient" and "remember...that not only you but all of us will suffer." This warning demonstrates the violent consequences that await those who transgress these policies and even for those associated with the transgressor. This is a warning of the abandonment and punishment that await those who fail to uphold the heteropatriarchal norms and regulations under family and state law. Melinda M. Babaran's allusion to the entanglement of state and family is illuminated in her narrative, where she explains why she is afraid to return to the Philippines:

> Pagkalipas ng ilang taon, kailangan ko ng umuwi. Sa Pilipinas, sa totoong tahanan ko. Pero natatakot ako. Natatakot akong makita ang aking ama...Natatakot akong makita ang dating nyang matipunong katawan na ngayon buto at balat na.
>
> Pasensya ka na, kung naiiyak na ako ("Latay sa Laman").

> After several years, I need to go home. To the Philippines, where I am truly from. But I am scared. I am scared of seeing my father...I am afraid of seeing his once proud form now reduced to skin and bone.
>
> I am sorry if I am crying (“Latay sa Laman”).

The Philippines and Babaran’s father are both representative of the intimacies between family and nation, how discipline of the LGBT Filipina/o body is necessary to maintain the stability of the household and state. By delaying her return to the Philippines, Babaran has failed to maintain the health and stability of her own father *and* her nation, witnessing “his [and the Philippines’] once proud form now reduced to skin and bone” (“Latay sa Laman”). Her failure to care for her father is representative of the suffering, according to Filipino elders, “that not only you but all of us [the entire nation] will suffer” (Agoncillo 8). Babaran then pauses, stating, “I am sorry if I am crying” (“Latay sa Laman”). This statement is another address to the audience, an acknowledgment of our act of bearing witness to Babaran’s lived experience. This moment of bearing witness does not only allow readers to empathize with Babaran’s pain, but it also enables us to recognize the writer’s exposure of the intimacies between the Philippine state and the Filipino family, their undisputable entanglements. Bearing witness to Babaran’s pain allows us to identify this connection, to recognize the ways both interlocking systems of governance routinely injure and harm the LGBT population.

Babaran's moments of address, which act as a kind of poetic communication, do not only function in account of the direct audience, but they also empower readers/listeners to be transported, in the words of June Jordan, "from the Brooklyn ferry into the hills of Alabama and back again, of line after line of bodily, concrete detail that constitutes the mysterious cellular tissue of a nation indivisible but dependent upon and astonishing in its diversity" ("For the Sake of People's Poetry"). The touch and feeling Babaran administers in her monologue allow the reader to be transported into a multidimensional affective experience where we acknowledge and connect both her fear of her father and the Philippine nation, highlighting multiple dimensions of loss and deterioration. As queer and diasporic people, migrant LGBT individuals routinely wrestle with the contradictions of intergenerational trauma and a responsibility to the maintenance of family and country. As a "bagong bayani" ("new hero"), Babaran is one of the many diasporic figures protecting the economic stability of the Philippine nation. By experiencing "Latay sa Laman," we are able to identify the Philippine state's dependence to LGBT OFWs while also recognizing how this dependence is connected to Western racial capitalism. The modes of poetic address Babaran administers gives space for readers to identify these connections and acknowledge the harm filial piety and labor brokerage disseminate together.

In addition to addressing the Philippines' labor brokerage state, Babaran also alludes to how tomboys and Filipina/o/x masculinities are essential to labor brokerage's administration. Kale Fajardo's research on Filipino seamen and Filipino masculinities reveal how "Filipino seamen are key laborers in contemporary economic and cultural

globalization as they literally work to transport the world's goods, while also contributing millions of dollars to the Philippine economy" (4). According to Fajardo, "in the first nine months of 2008, Filipino seamen sent $2.393 billion back home to the Philippines. This amount reflects an increase of 43.35 percent compared with the $1.669 billion they remitted over the same time frame in 2007. These figures suggest that the demand for Filipino seamen's labor has increased" (4). These statistics reveal both the Philippine economy's dependence on labor brokerage, how the construction of working-class Filipina/o/x (trans)masculinities is a key cultural and economic demarcation that keeps the Philippine nation afloat. Although Babaran herself is not a seaman, her positionality as a tomboy and OFW allude to how Filipina/o/x (trans)masculinities are configured to serve the demands of globalization, neoliberalism, and racial capitalism.

However, the tomboy masculinity Babaran expresses in "Latay sa Laman" also gesture to "alternative spaces and nonconventional or nonnormative ways to create, embody, and imagine other kinds of Filipino masculinities" (Fajardo 5). I return again to the moment of vulnerability where Babaran apologizes for crying: "Pasensya ka na, kung naiiyak na ako" ("I am sorry if I am crying") ("Latay sa Laman"). While I have already pointed to how this line functions as a mode of "calling in" and an expansion of "bearing witness," I argue that it also challenges hegemonic understandings of masculinity. Although Filipina/o/x tomboys do engage in hegemonic performances of masculinity (as evidenced in Gina Velasco's research of "That's My Tomboy"), Babaran's acknowledgement of her tears subverts these dominant discourses of masculinity,

pointing to the heterogenous ways tomboy Filipina/o/xs express, negotiate, and transform normative constructions of gender.

In the next sections, I discuss how Kay Ulanday Barrett also challenges hegemonic masculinity and the gender binary through a queer Filipinx method. As a queer, non-binary, transmasculine, and disabled Filipinx American, Barrett's poetry engages in a trans of color critique that does not only visiblize these intersections but mobilizes them into gestures of transformative justice.

Queer, Migrant, Working-Class, and Disabled Affinities

According to an interview with the *Disability Visibility Project*, Kay Ulanday Barrett's 2020 poetry collection, *More Than Organs*, is described as "'a love letter to Brown, Queer, and Trans futures.'" When asked to respond and elaborate further on this description, Barrett states:

> Our future is based on how we will show up for each other—sharing food stamps, accompanying someone to a medical exam, ordering food delivery...I feel like working class, poor, Disabled, Black, Indigenous, People of Color, Femmes, and Trans people know this hustle...We're creating the art, skills, strategies, with support from our ancestors to be the people who show up for a life that strives for liberation ("Q&A with Kay Ulanday Barrett").

This method of "show[ing] up for each other,"—daily acts of survival and care working-class, poor, disabled, Black, indigenous, people of color, femme, and trans people perform for themselves and for each other—is inherently tied to the execution of malaya,

of liberatory futures. Barrett illustrates this further in their poem, "What one does after poetry reading at the hotel:"

> You stay long after the last poem,
> thank the janitor whose face
> is your cousin's face.
>
> Say: *Sir, you should take this home.*
> As he shyly smiles, you nudge,
> *My mom would bring me these square*
> *cheeses, after her late night cleaning shifts.*
> *didn't even know how to pronounce them.*
>
> His face softens, as you make him a tower of a plate (42).

"What one does after poetry reading at the hotel" features a mode of poetic address, where the "you," according to William Waters, "calls everyone and everything by their inmost name...the summons of unidentified 'you' restlessly tugs at us, begging identification" (130). Barrett's usage of second-person point of view interpellates the reader, calling on the audience to identify the commensurabilities between the poet who stays late at the hotel and the janitor they prepare a plate for. In fact, there are multiple points of identification and recognition the poem employs to demonstrate the affinities between these different figures who encounter each other in this moment of ephemerality—the poet and the janitor, the janitor and the poet's cousin, the poet and their mother, and the poet's mother and the janitor. The janitor and the poet's mother are both working-class, which is conveyed by the poet's memory of their mother: "*bring[ing] [them] these square cheeses, after her late night cleaning shifts*" (Barrett 42). Although the poet/speaker in "What one does after poetry reading at the hotel" is grounded in a different social location than the janitor, the cultural memory of the

speaker's mother allows them to administer kinship with the janitor and encourage them to take these leftovers home.

In addition, the line "*didn't even know how to pronounce them*" conveys that the poet's mother was not a native English speaker and quite possibly an immigrant. These specific details do not only reflect the commensurabilities between the lives of immigrants and the working-class, but they also justify why these different communities should support and "show up" for each other, which is an act the speaker performs when they pack *baon*, the leftover food, for the janitor. In Filipina/o/x tradition, the act of packing *baon* is usually a gesture of love and care, where the host of a party or event ensures that the guests have food and nourishment to take home with them for a future meal. The act also demonstrates the host's hospitality, their proficiency and capacity to carve spaces of non-biological kinship and community by ensuring there is enough food for guests to pack and take home. Barrett illustrates the care behind this act and the curation of these kinship spaces at the end of the poem:

Everyone takes pause,
caterers, servers, custodial staff.
…

We smile far,
like we're reaching for
coconut rinds though
we stand in Ballroom H
in the midwest of December.
By the end of the night,
I take my baon and my poems,
words folded in half, inward like
they are rocking
themselves
to sleep (43).

Soon, it is not just the lone janitor packing food to take home, but also the “caterers, servers, custodial staff,” as well as the poet (Barrett 43). The pronouns at the end of the poem also shift; in the beginning, the poet who stays late at the hotel was marked by a “you” while at the end, this poet is now an “I” as they “take [their] baon and [their] poems” home (Barrett 43). This pronoun shift, I argue, further marks the ephemerality of this encounter, the passing of this moment of identification as the speaker leaves the venue. However, this ephemeral moment still creates a profound impression on the speaker, as they compare their *baon* and poems to the movement of “rocking / themselves / to sleep” (Barrett 43). Although the speaker may still be grieving the loss of their mother (“*I’m so sorry about your Nanay*”), interacting with and packing *baon* for the caterers, servers, and custodial staff provided a moment of reciprocity and care exercised by the speaker, a chance to remember their mother and also have their grief recognized by a group they share a relationality with (Barrett 43). As a result, Barrett demonstrates how such simple actions and interactions can create momentary yet profound webs of recognition and care. These ephemeral moments are essential to building bridges between different social positions and building affinity and care across a wide spectrum of identity. These care webs are further alluded by the line, “We smile far, / like we’re reaching for coconut rinds though / we stand in ballroom H / in the midwest of December” (Barrett 43). Although the poet, the janitor, the servers, and the caterers may never encounter each other again, they have fostered an unforgettable connection through the distribution of *baon* as they “[reach]’ for coconut rinds” and “stand in ballroom H” together.

This racial affinity and care are distributed further in "Origin Story for my chest or whatever it was." The poem depicts tomboy masculinities and features a young addressee who questions their gender identity:

> as a teenager, you would squint as the barrage of grade school
> silhouettes just reminded me of strangers, dead names,
> a graveyard of off-kilter smiles. Each face, somewhere else,
> each face asking for their bodies to vanish.
>
> you grow into a tomboy on their knees.
> by this time, a schoolyard scraped you with chants,
> *Girl or boy! Girl or boy* (29)*!*

In these stanzas, the speaker is recounting the bullying a peer has experienced in school, harm that included "the barrage of grade school silhouettes," "dead names," and "a graveyard of off-kilter smiles." Not only are these images incredibly visceral, but their depth and clarity enable readers to name the pain, to acknowledge the weight of their peer's suffering as the "dead names" and "graveyard" that represent larger structural violences that administer cisgenderism and premature death to QTGNC populations. "Dead names" mark the ongoing refusal of schools and other social institutions to recognize chosen names, while "graveyard" alludes to the hundreds of transgender people that have passed away not only from interpersonal acts of transphobia, but from the discrimination and abandonment the heteronormative nation-state facilitates to those unable to conform to the gender binary.

Despite this violence, the speaker's peer still "grow[s] into a tomboy on their knees." This line does not only gesture to this peer's resilience of still managing to grow

into a tomboy despite the bullying, but it also acknowledges the debilitating force of transphobia. The phrase “on their knees” conjures the image of a defeated or submissive body, alluding to transphobia’s ability to deny one’s personhood and force one to submit to the restrictive gender binary. However, the multiple and fluctuating uses of different pronouns in the poem complicate this passive and downtrodden position. These stanzas begin in second-person point of view (“you would squint”), but there is also the presence of a lyric speaker (“silhouettes just reminded *me* of strangers,” emphasis added). The “me” is a reference to the poem’s speaker, while the “you” is the speaker’s peer that has experienced the bullying. Furthermore, the second stanza signals the presence of a “they:” “you grow into a tomboy on *their* knees.” While “their” sounds like the speaker might be referring to the bullies, I argue that the “they” can also allude to the peer’s usage of gender neutral pronouns and refusal to conform to the gender binary regardless of their submissive position. This perspective enables readers to identify the agency of the “you,” the “you” that decides to “grow into a tomboy” and remain gender non-conforming despite the bullying.

Furthermore, the usage of second-person point of view throughout “Origin Story for my chest or whatever it was” is a gesture of affinity toward the audience. Although there is a direct addressee in the poem, the “you” enables the audience to position themselves as the receiver of the speaker’s declarations. As a result, the “you” becomes a moment of poetic address—a touch and affinity specifically for the audience. With this gesture, Barrett succeeds in distributing non-biological and non-normative recognition and care beyond white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy. Barrett’s poetic address

enables the final line of the stanza to echo loudly in our heads: "*Girl or boy! Girl or boy!"* The preposition "or" signifies how "you" (the audience), were pushed to choose girl *or* boy, one or the other, but nothing beyond and in-between. This chant evokes the constriction of the gender binary, recognizing the trauma induced by structural violence.

Thus, by locating tomboy masculinities within poetic modes of address, Barrett demonstrates how being gender non-conforming can not only lead to new and different ways to conduct identity politics, but alternative masculinities can also give shape and form to unthinkable kinship structures. The modes of poetic address administered by "Origin Story for my chest or whatever it was's" lyric speaker illuminates the meaningful friendship and kinship ties that can be forged by the poetic.

Trans of Color Critique

Kay Ulanday Barret's poem, "Brown Shout Outs," published in *When the Chant Comes*, also provides alleviation for the reader. The following lines convey the power of queer multidimensional lived experiences: "we are brown and trans and queer and out / and we've been told too many times that all of those / cannot belong all at once. that based on those odds, / we equal death" (27). These lines allude not only to the complexity of these intersectional identities, but also the denial of their intertwined existence under a white supremacist heteropatriarchal system that invisibilizes and annihilates these differences. I turn to Anne McClintock's situation of intersectionality under an analysis of Western imperialism, in which she states:

> I argue that race, gender and class are not distinct realms of experience, existing in splendid isolation from each other; nor can they be simply yoked together...Rather, they come into existence *in and through* relation to each other—if in contradictory and conflictual ways," which includes "the intimate relations between imperial power and resistance; money and sexuality; race and gender (5).

By critiquing how systems of power refuse to address the existence of intersecting identities and the multidimensional experience of being queer, trans, and Filipinx, Barrett alludes to how this lack of acknowledgment is inherently tied to a legacy of Western imperialism, particularly U.S. colonization of the Philippines. While McClintock appraises how "male theorists of imperialism and postcolonialism have seldom felt moved to explore the gendered dynamics of [imperialism]," recent Queer Studies scholarship has also highlighted the need to galvanize a *trans of color critique* of U.S. empire. Gabby Benavente and Julian Gill-Peterson discuss the promise of a trans of color critique largely grounded by the praxis of trans women of color. Inspired by the Stonewall Riots led by Black and Brown trans women such as Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson, Benavente and Gill-Peterson delineate trans of color critique as "[t]he recognition and affirmation of self-knowledge and feeling *as* theory inspires us…to mobilize rage as a concrete affiliation between queer theory and trans studies that continues to hold immense value for reflexive critique and political knowledge production about race, gender, and sexuality" (27).

In this definition, trans of color critique can manifest in affect, in *rage*. Like Audre Lorde's "The Uses of Anger," these scholars do not only locate rage as an emotion, but as a vehicle for mobilization, a site where self-led knowledge and feeling intersect to aggravate and incite one toward socially transformative action. This rage is alluded in "Brown Shout Outs," where the speaker states, "we are brown and trans and queer and out / and we've been told too many times that all of those / cannot belong all at once (Barrett 27). The first person plural—"we"—engages in a mode of poetic address that does not only acknowledge the rage QTGNC folks are feeling, but also creates a sense of belonging, a resounding affinity, that has the power to propel everyone together into action. "Brown Shout Outs" does not just inspire individual readers but facilitates a communal feeling of togetherness and rage that can be evoked and shared across a broad audience. As a result, Barrett's mode of poetic address becomes a blueprint for collectivity, highlighting the connections not only between words and action, but people of different social positions banding together in the expansion of social justice.

In addition, in order to understand the complexity of being queer, trans, and Filipinx, "Brown Shout Outs" enables readers to identify how homophobia, transphobia, and white supremacy are interlocking systems of power that "come into existence *in and through* relation to each other" (McClintock 5). Thinking that these systems exist in isolation or can only be "simply yoked together" results in the invisibilization of the multiple oppressions a QTGNC Filipinx person faces. This invisibilization leads to more vulnerability and violence, as Barrett conveys with "That based on those odds, / we equal death" (Barrett 27). The "odds" Barrett refers to are the intersections of being a QTGNC

disabled person of color. For these marginalized communities, the danger does not merely lie with not being seen. Barrett approaches invisibility beyond the need for more QTGNC representation, but actively calls out the very structures—such as our housing and healthcare systems—that are supposed to provide inclusion, safety, and security—but instead distributes further violence to the sick, mad, disabled, and homeless, leading to further debilitation and premature death. The phrase "we equal death" recognizes the vulnerability and harm QTGNC people face, but the next stanza also addresses the strength and bravery in resisting such exclusionary and regulatory structures.

The next stanza of "Brown Shout Outs" follows with: "for you / for us / for we / because without explanation, we exist / and you, you like all of our ancestors before / you live it so fiercely" (27). The line "for you / for us / for we" is a direct address to the reader, to the lyric speaker, and the larger QTGNC community. While it can be an incredibly isolating experience identifying as QTGNC, this feeling is momentarily alleviated as Barrett's acts of poetic address soothe us and gather us into an affective kinship that is known and felt through the poetic. This "poetic kinship" welcomes the reader into a tender and cherished space, but also asks the audience to imagine a non-biological genealogy of QTGNC ancestors to trace and connect with. With so many QTGNC people being disowned by their families, finding and connecting to a genealogy outside biological kinship is a direct contestation of the heteropatriarchal systems of family and nation. The embrace of alternative relationalities and socialities that provide healing, closeness, and resistance thus becomes a radical act of social transformation. As a result, Barrett demonstrates that sameness does not need to be promoted or reproduced

in order to create affinity. For QTGNC people, what constitutes as belonging can remain in fluctuation and inscrutable, as Stephen Hong Sohn illustrates in his research on queer Asian North American literature. Sohn remarks on the power of diasporic texts to produce "metaphorical national children who require recognition beyond that offered by a figurative state-father, who do not deem their romances and their alternative kinships worth legitimizing either through law or through cultural norms" (8). With the Filipino family as "*the* unit of society" with "everything revolv[ing] around it," Barrett's illumination of QTGNC affinities is also a contestation of the nation, the state-father who disowns and forgets yet still seeks to extract labor-power from his ostracized children (Agoncillo 6, emphasis added).

By acknowledging the pain of systemic violence but also providing momentary alleviation, Barrett demonstrates how an execution of trans of color critique through the appraisal of normative relationalities and socialities produces radical sources of kinship that challenge the exclusionary power of harmful social systems. In addition, by providing a connection between QTGNC diasporic people and non-biological QTGNC ancestors, Barrett illustrates how normative and national kinship structures are not the only administrators of recognition and legitimization. "Brown Shout Outs" contests the heteronormative fabrics of recognition and legitimization by stating, "and you, you like all of our ancestors before / you live it so fiercely" (27). By creating a comparison between "you" and "like all of our ancestors before," Barrett demonstrates that it is possible to be malaya—to be free—without being incorporated into state structures. In fact, many of these structures did not even exist during the time of our ancestors. Despite

multiple colonialisms under Spanish, Japanese, and American governance, transgressive realities, affinities, and desires have always existed for QTGNC Filipina/o/xs. "Brown Shout Outs" does not merely tell its readers that circumstances will "get better," but provides liberatory visions of other worlds—otherwise possibilities—that belie our current systems.

"Brown Shout Outs" ends with the following: "this rumbling sky houses your breath and / that is better than any survival story, / that, that is joy being born" (27). Barrett uses the term "house" as a verb to describe a vessel that both sustains and nurtures QTGNC life. Although the term "house" signifies images of heteronormative life with a husband, wife, two children, and white picket fence, Barrett's utilization of the term as a verb demonstrates how "housing" is a radical act, a gesture of welcome and acceptance that extends beyond the rubrics of a nuclear or biological family. Furthermore, by saying that the reader's breath under a rumbling sky "is better than any survival story," Barrett contests how QTGNC people want more than the means to survive, but the freedom to thrive, which challenges the homonormative narrative of "it gets better." According to Stephen Hong Sohn, Dan Savage's and Terry Miller's 2010 "It Gets Better" project "function[s] with a reductive ethos that homogenizes the LGBTQI community, especially from a frame that overshadows and even undercuts the persistence of social inequalities" (1-2). Claiming that things will "get better" for LGBTQI individuals minimizes and undercuts the social inequalities QTGNC people face on a quotidian basis. With homophobia, transphobia, and xenophobia embedded in the foundation of the state, claiming that life will "get better" is not a viable solution for those who have been

directly harmed by the nation-state and the policing of its borders. Barrett demonstrates that it is possible to "live so fiercely" without these structures as "our ancestors before." Rather than asking vulnerable QTGNC people of color to persist under such harmful conditions, Barrett asks readers to tap into their creativity, to imagine new socialities and affinities beyond what already exists, illustrating the futuristic capacities of a QTGNC Filipinx poetics.

Conclusion

When asked what defines a disability poetics, Michael Davidson describes a landscape where "the putative normalcy of bodies, sensations, and agency can be understood differently" (19). Davidson describes disability poetics beyond an aesthetic practice, but a site that "makes language visible by making language strange" (5). Different forms of embodiment, sensation, and agency are evoked in Babaran's and Barrett's queer diasporic Filipinx poetics. Babaran's complex exploration of tomboy masculinities amidst familial abuse, intergenerational trauma, and queer migration demonstrates how tomboy OFWs have not only become essential forces in uplifting the Philippine economy, but how their transmasculinities have become contested sites of racial capitalist production and self-determination. "Latay sa Laman" delineates how Babaran found liberation in a more LGBT-friendly Taiwan, but she also reveals how labor brokerage leads to the distribution of debility—the slow wearing down—of a QTGNC Filipina/o/x migration population. "Latay sa Laman" reveals how even under homonationalism, QTGNC populations continue to bear the brunt of racial capitalism.

Similarly, Kay Ulanday Barrett demonstrates how modes of poetic address distribute recognition and care to QTGNC BIPOC, illustrating the indispensable link between disability justice and poetry. Barrett does not only make language “strange,” but they also illuminate how the strange—the queer—can be sources of agency and resilience that create transformative affiliations and radical political mobilization through the poetic. Both Babaran and Barrett highlight how gender and sexual transgressions do not only serve to agitate the system but can provoke everyday people to imagine what else may exist outside regular conducts of labor and life.

Chapter Three:

I Don't Know You, But I Love You: U.S. Empire, Queer Death, and Documentary-Poetics

On October 10, 2003, Jacqueline Toves and Abigail Tapia were found dead in their hotel room in Big Sur, CA. While the public speculated whether their deaths resulted from a double slaying or suicide pact, investigations later revealed that Toves and Tapia were a lesbian couple from Long Beach, CA. In addition, a sole CBS news article with a generic Philippine flag, along with a brief conversation with Toves's father, revealed that both women were Filipina[6] ("Cops Probe Bizarre Big Sur Murders" Roberts). No other major news sources cited their Filipino backgrounds, leaving the majority of the Filipino/American community unaware that such a tragedy occurred in their midst.

In fact, it was not until Karen Villa's viewing party of her 2016 documentary, *Visibilizing Queer Pinays in Southern California*, did I learn about Toves and Tapia. I was an informant to this documentary, an autoethnographer of sorts, asked to produce content on what it meant for me to be queer and Filipina/American (at this time, I identified as a cisgender woman). Unlike the format of a traditional documentary,

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[6] I use multiple incarnations of "Filipino/a/x" in this chapter, each signifying a different intent. I use "Filipino" or "Filipino/American" to refer to the wider Filipino/American community. "Filipina," "Filipina/American" and "Pinay" refer to Karen Villa's intent on centering queer Filipina, Filipina/American,and Pinay voices in her documentary, as well as to identify Jacqueline Toves and Abigail Tapia, who passed before the term "Filipinx" became popular usage. I use "Filipinx" to refer to my conceptualization of a "Filipinx method," which is elucidated in this dissertation's Introduction.

Villa gave her informants full control of their content, giving us the opportunity to record, edit, and submit videos as clear and specific or as abstract and creative as we wanted as long as we reflected on the intersections of being queer and Pinay. While I stumbled through creating my own video clips and avoided eye contact during my interview for the documentary, Villa's own clip—recorded via cellphone during her trip to Big Sur—included a tour of the hotel room where Toves and Tapia's bodies were discovered. Villa's clip begins with jarring headlines from several news sources: "Women's deaths investigated as murder-suicide" from *CNN* (October 15, 2003), "Authorities investigate mysterious deaths of California lesbian couple" from *The Advocate* (October 14, 2003), and "Big Sur deaths appear to be suicides / 2 Long Beach women wrote notes to family members" from *SF Gate* (October 14, 2003). These headlines are followed by a shot of a cabin and Villa's dedication to Toves and Tapia (Figure 4). Other than these headlines and shots, Villa provides no other information surrounding the deaths of these women, nor is there a voiceover or dialogue that seek to explain and elucidate the tragedy.

The headlines and dedication are then followed by two postcards: Gorda Springs Resort and Big Sur Coast. After these postcards, stunning footage of Big Sur is featured from the window of a moving car: majestic cliffs, lush foliage, foamy waters, and an endless sky, all to the background of ODEZSA's "Say My Name," an electronic pop song and the only source of sound thus far in the clip (Figure 4). Because of the beauty and awe that is Big Sur, I momentarily forgot the context and setting foregrounded by the opening shots and news headings. Instead, I began to enjoy myself

while watching the beautiful images of Big Sur, and my enjoyment perked even further as Gorda Springs Resort approached, looking like a charming rustic community. However, as the owner/manager of the establishment enters the scene and we begin to climb a flight of stairs, we stop and see anguish on the owner/manager's face as he speaks (Figure 4). Even though we cannot distinguish what he is saying (ODEZSA's "Say My Name" is still the only thing we can hear), the owner/manager's facial anguish reminds us of the jarring news headlines at the beginning, signifying that there *is* something disturbing and awry about the establishment we are viewing, despite being in the midst of such beauty. We are then taken to the cabin from the clip's opening shot (Figure 4) and as the owner/manager opens the cabin door, he begins to talk animatedly. Although there is still no dialogue—just ODESZA's "Say My Name"—we can see that the owner/manager is describing someone or something in great detail as he makes gestures with his arms and hands and, once inside the room, points to the large bed in the middle.

Once we are inside the hotel room, the electronic pop song transitions into Ta Ku's "Hopeful," a quieter softer tune that shifts the mood to a feeling of nostalgia and melancholia. At this point, Villa gives us a tour of the room with her phone, specifically focusing on the benign everyday objects and surfaces such as the bed, the space heater, the sofa, and the lamp (Figure 4). With these images, I began to feel very confused and also very concerned. Based on the shift in tone, I could tell there was something disconcerting about the empty hotel room being recorded, but I could not know or identify what that was or what it had to do with the Jacqueline and Abigail

mentioned in the dedication. The clip ends with a shot of the cabin door as Villa raises her hand and rests it on the door's surface, still leaving us with no other sounds or dialogue, just the final notes of Ta Ku's "Hopeful" and a burning question of who exactly Jacqueline and Abigail are and if this hotel room relates to the murder-suicide mentioned at the beginning. Other than the dedication, Toves and Tapia's names are not mentioned throughout the clip, nor are there photographs of them present. However, despite the many holes and unanswered questions, Toves and Tapia's story is still told in fragments. The story of these two women are illuminated by the silence, uncertainty, and uncanny facilitated by Villa's aesthetic choices as the stunning shots of Big Sur are juxtaposed with the hotel room's benign objects and surfaces, the contrast ironically highlighting the violence that occurred in the cabin.

In this chapter, I argue that Karen Villa's clip in *Visibilizing Queer Pinays in Southern California* reflects not only the precarity of queer Filipinx life, but that this precarity is distributed by U.S. empire in the Philippines. By reading this documentary alongside news articles and message board posts that publicly speculate on Toves and Tapia's deaths, I will demonstrate how we can trace the strange, elliptical, and unsettling ways U.S. empire constitutes itself through violence on queer Filipina/o/x bodies.

A Queer Documentary-Poetics

Despite being a documentary, *Visibilizing Queer Pinays in Southern California* works against the typical format and structure of the documentary film.

Figure 4: Opening shot of the cabin from Gorda Springs Resort, the majestic cliffs andwaters of Big Sur, the anguished Gorda Springs Resort manager/owner, and a lamp from Toves's and Tapia'sformer hotel room (*Visibilizing Queer Pinays in Southern California*, 2016).

Not only did Karen Villa give her informants full control over their content, but the film lacks and distorts major elements that make and define a documentary. There is no voice over or narration guiding viewers throughout the film,which challenges the audience to synthesize all nine clips (from all nine women involved in the production), to actively find the threads that connect these women's experiences. Although there are interviews with Villa's informants, not all women chose to partake in an interview, leaving some stories clear and others more fragmented. There are also no primary sources or statistics on queer Filipina/American women shown in the film, demonstrating that the purpose of this documentary is not to necessarily share information or cold hard facts about being queer and Pinay, but perhaps to give these nine women a space to tell and reflect on their stories.

In his book, *Theorizing the Documentary*, Michael Renov states that the documentary film is oftentimes known as "the 'film of fact,' 'nonfiction,' the realm of information and exposition rather that diegetic employment or imagination…a remove from the creative core of the cinematic art" (13). Villa contests this typical definition; although *Visibilizing Queer Pinays* is concerned with non-fiction, it nevertheless uses fictive elements— storytelling, symbolism—to represent these women and their stories on screen. Creativity, imagination, and the tensions between showing and telling are employed and expressed by the participants. My impression of the film is definitely informed by own position as an informant, but also as an audience member during our viewing party in 2016. The documentary challenges what it means to "show" and "tell" queer and Pinay intersections. My own clip is chatty and explicative as I discuss my

thoughts on queerness and femininity from my bedroom and in an interview outside a restaurant in Riverside, CA. However, other clips—like Beverly's and Joni's—are more abstract, fragmentary, and less explanatory. Beverly's clip features her route during a bus ride in Los Angeles County while Joni is outside, playing basketball with her dog. These clips contain no narration or dialogue, leaving viewers to ponder what new and alternative queer and Pinay intersections are revealed by Beverly's and Joni's clips. Because of this provoking affective experience and the range of multiple aesthetic choices, I argue *Visibilizing Queer Pinays* is a docu-poem.

In her article, "Documentary Is/Not a Name," filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-Ha argues "[t]here is no such thing as *documentary*—whether the term designates a category of material, a genre, an approach, or a set of techniques" (76). Even though filmmaking is regarded an art, documentary is relegated as the "film of fact." There is oftentimes an objective or rational bias that underscores documentary, even if events or facts are not told from a clear or chronological manner. In a traditional documentary, "Truth has to be made vivid, interesting; it has to be 'dramatized' if it is to take shape. *Documentary—the presentation of actual acts in a way that makes them credible and telling to people at the time*" (83). Minh-Ha intervenes in this highly formal and highly precise documentary tradition, arguing that a documentary film is "no less an art, albeit an art within the limits of factuality" (85). As a poetic form, I argue that docu-poetry is not only aware of the limits of factuality, but plays with them and engages with them in a critical and substantive manner. As a result, according to Minh-Ha, "[a] documentary aware of its own artifice is one that remains sensitive to the flow between fact and

fiction. It does not work to conceal or exclude what is normalized as 'non-factual,' for it understands the mutual dependence of realism and 'artificiality' in the process of filmmaking. It recognizes the necessity of composing (on) life in living it or making it" (89). *Visibilizing Queer Pinays* is a documentary concerned with truth and fact, but it is nevertheless critical of truth and locates it as a subjective position. The multiplicity of the informants' video clips and the rich and nuanced lives we live resists the very act of attempting to produce a "truth" of what it means to be queer and Pinay.

Furthermore, Villa's intentional abstraction of Jacqueline Toves and Abigail Tapia's story is mindful of both the fact and the artifice the incident produced regarding the positionality of queer diasporic Filipino women in the United States. As I demonstrate in my close readings of news articles and message board posts later in this chapter, a fictive narrative of who Jacqueline and Abigail were was produced to satiate a speculative crime public. Rather than providing us details or evidence of this speculation, Villa compels audience members to research the incident themselves and to engage with the fictive as we delve into the sensationalized news reports published during and after the investigation. This affect, this compulsion, is incited both by the truth-telling and figurative techniques utilized in Villa's clip. We are jarred by the deaths of Toves and Tapia, but we are also called to critically bear witness to this event, an affectual response that undergirds our provoking experience of this docu-poem.

In addition, Paola Bilbrough expands on the affect a docu-poem can incite, arguing that docu-poetics "relies on real people's life stories and therefore may also

have real-life implications" but also uses poetic elements to "[offer] a rich, expressive, and immediate way to express an idea that is often difficult to express in another type of text…poetry is 'particularly suited for those special strange, even mysterious moments when bits and pieces suddenly coalesce'" (300-301). As a result, meaning in a docu-poem is "'relational'; created through an 'encounter' between 'beholder-manipulator' and art-work" (301). In *Visibilizing Queer Pinays*, the audience is the "beholder-manipulator" and meaning is produced through the relational and affective experiences facilitated by the docu-poem. Although the audience does not directly "manipulate" the content of Villa's clip, viewers are nevertheless able to evaluate and synthesize all nine clips, indirectly "manipulating" the content. Filmmaking, according to Trinh T. Minh-Ha, "*is* a question of manipulation—whether 'creative' or not—those endorsing the law unhesitatingly decree which technique is manipulative and which, supposedly, is not; and this judgment is made according to the degree of visibility of each" (88). Creating a documentary—and even writing a poem—*is* an act of manipulating words, sounds, images, and impressions to provoke an audience. However, in *Visibilizing Queer Pinays*, the audience is elevated to the role of "beholder-manipulator," an active participant that does not only bear witness to the docu-poem, but is also tasked with arranging, evaluating, and investigating the cleavages illuminated by the film.

Bilbrough also describes the "special strangeness" evoked by docu-poetry. As an informant to *Visibilizing Queer Pinays*, this "special strangeness" took the form of a connection—an affinity—to Toves and Tapia's story. However, as an audience

member, I was still a “beholder-manipulator,” forming conclusions and impressions based on my own unique positionality as a queer Pinay. Although documentaries seek to educate and inform the general public about a specific issue, person, or event, *Visibilizing Queer Pinays* itself is composed of many fragments—clips from informants, interviews of the informants, individual shots of landscapes and locations—that work together but refuse to be completely coalesced. The fact that almost every clip was produced and filmed by a different person and the fact that no informants gathered together for some sort of concluding shot or scene reflects how the docu-poem is not attempting to strive for representational fullness. Instead, by avoiding the construction of an overarching truth or narrative, Villa allows the audience to recognize and develop the unique and “special strange” affinities between each informant’s story, which results in momentary feelings of recognition and poetic kinship. Relationality, rather than meaning, becomes the focal point of the documentary.

However, given that *Visibilizing Queer Pinays* subsequently created a visual anthology of queer and Pinay narratives, the consequence of anthologizing comes into question. Putting together a group of diverse and multidimensional narratives raises concerns about how documentary itself produces an archive of moving art and thought contained in a single cinematic experience. In addition, although nine different women participated in the documentary, what other narratives and experiences were occluded in the effort to produce this seemingly cohesive collection? Are these Pinays “queer” because they identify as LGBT, or because of the racialized non-normative dynamics of

U.S. empire in the Philippines? How are Karen Villa's docu-poetics disrupting U.S. colonialism, particularly the imperial archive? How is this documentary-poem contributing to the formation of a more hybrid and heterogeneous queer Filipinx poetics?

To answer the first question: *Visibilizing Queer Pinays* works past traditional methods of narrative, representation, and documentation, not only because of the variety of stories and queer Pinays portrayed in the film, but also because of the elliptical, fragmentary, and non-linear telling that does not privilege one story or one Pinay over the other. For instance, even though Karen Villa's clip on Jacqueline Toves and Abigail Tapia's deaths does not contain an interview, dialogue, or is even explicit about the subject matter, the footage is still breathtaking, unsettling, and incredibly moving due to her abstract aesthetic choices. Instead of attempting to rationalize, pathologize, or sensationalize Toves and Tapia's deaths, Villa performs a delicate dissection that counters linear narration and historical determinism that is in tune with Rachel C. Lee's curation of literary works in *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America*.

In her book, Lee specifically curated Asian American texts that were "more phenomenological and topological than ideologically revealing or historically determinist. My work offers a methodological model of transversal crossings unfaithful to traditional genealogies of disciplined inquiry…The aim of this type of transversal thinking across platforms is not to expose a hidden truth but paradoxically to cultivate an openness to the wonders of the aleatory, the chance-event, and the insight of the accidental" (26). Although Villa's curation of informants was more intentional than

accidental, the aleatory, fragmentary, and hybrid nature of the documentary is evident in the final production. While the coalescence of all the Pinays' clips created a visual anthology that can stand on its own, every informant's contribution is like an organ, unique and necessary to the body of the documentary. This dynamic was achieved by the freedom every informant was afforded regarding the editing and placement of their clip. As a result, the powerful impact of *Visibilizing Queer Pinays in Southern California* lies in the chance-encounter as much as in Karen Villa's intentional aesthetic choices, demonstrating the critical multiplicities and hybridities that may be formed without ideological or historically determinist organization. As a result of this aleatory curation, Jacqueline Toves and Abigail Tapia's story can be read in its complexity and sincerity without the production of essentialized truth claims on what it means to be queer and Pinay.

Secondly, regarding the question of queerness, I argue that *Visibilizing Queer Pinays is* queer not only because the subjects and Karen Villa herself are LGBT, but in the ways the docu-poem tells the truth, but tells it *slant*.[7] Sara Ahmed expands on the queerness of "slant," arguing that it is not the slant itself that makes the object or subject "queer" but "might involve an orientation toward what slips…In other words, a queer phenomenology would function as a disorientation device; it would not overcome the disalignment of the horizontal and vertical axis, allowing the oblique to open another angle on the world…Queer would become a matter of how one approaches the object

[7] I am also borrowing from Emily Dickinson's 1890 poem, which begins: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant—."

that slips away, a way to inhabit the world at the point at which things fleet" (566). As a viewer, I experienced disorientation while watching Villa's clip. I was disoriented not only because we are not given a full historical account and linear narrative about Jacqueline Toves and Abigail Tapia. The disorientation also occurs when we are presented with the moving images of Big Sur; the murder-suicide headlines from the beginning slip away as we become enthralled with the electropop song and the stunning California landscape. However, we stumble back into place as we are given an uncanny tour of the cabin, only to be swept away again as the clip ends with no explanation or resolution—just the burning compulsion to discover who Toves and Tapia were and what atrocities could have possibly occurred in that hotel room. This slippery phenomenon, I argue, evokes queer phenomenology; by refusing to be fathomable and straightened, queer subjects can critique the hetero- and homonormative lives they are indoctrinated to follow. This phenomenon also allows Toves and Tapia's story to be told as obliquely as possible. Their story is eerie, sad, strange, and mysterious, but rather than urging us to solve this mystery or discover the truth, we are left with even more unanswered questions. This disorientation, I argue, is what pushes viewers to think about Toves and Tapia's deaths beyond the rhetoric of queer tragedy, but a multidimensional plane of U.S. empire and its many axes.

Thirdly, can a queer docu-poetics, disrupt the imperial archive, especially since the archive functions as a site of historical determinism? What does it mean for poetry to be archived, especially since we consider poetry as an ephemeral and affective art practice? In "Appraising Newness: Whiteness, Neoliberalism, and the Building of the

Archive of New Poetry," Eunsong Kim deconstructs the Archive of New Poetry at the University of California, San Diego, exploring how this archive "holds a comprehensive selection of papers belonging to the founding Language Poets" that invariably "breeds an internal and explicit logic of whiteness wherein whiteness becomes indexed to innovation" (3-4). The curation and mobilization of a queer docu-poetics, I argue, can work against the white supremacist logic undergirding innovative or avant-garde art. *Visibilizing Queer Pinays* may not be legible as an innovative film due to its simple and humble execution, but the multidimensional content and unconventional cinematographic choices illuminate otherwise. Furthermore, in an ironic twist, UC San Diego's Archive of New Poetry simultaneously shrouds and exposes its alliances to white supremacy not only with its lack of BIPOC representation, but in its designation as the archive of "new" poetry. The word "new" temporally projects the archive into a diverse and innovative future when in reality, the archive caters to poetic movements and traditions that have historically harmed and erased people of color. Karen Villa's clip from *Visibilizing Queer Pinays*, I argue, offers a queer Filipinx hermeneutic that allows viewers to locate visibility as neither problem nor solution, but a paradoxical state of cognizance.

I explore this paradoxical cognitive state further in the next section, where I discuss how Toves and Tapia's deaths call for a hermeneutics of memory that is not grounded in recovery or revision, but in highlighting and honoring the "holes," the ceaseless gaps and cleavages that resist the logical and linear manifestations that cater to normative processes of remembrance.

Haunting and Holes

In her haunting poetic essay, "This is to Live Several Lives," Muriel Leung critically reflects on grief and remembrance, exacerbating how neither produces straightforward or seamless processes. The poem's speaker recalls the loss of her father due to cancer. Through a series of mournful events and acts that cut across multiple temporalities and different anatomies of grief, the poem ends with the lines:

> I……
> suppose this is…….
> ….a way…………..
> ….to remember……
> ………with holes… (*Imagine Us, the Swarm* 19).

Leung uses extended ellipses throughout the poetic essay, not only giving the reader space to breathe as they traverse through these difficult feelings and experiences, but to illustrate what it means "to remember with holes," to think, feel, and write about the complications of trauma and grief, to reflect on the pain and cleavages that come with memory. I argue that these "holes"—the gaps and fragmentation in our memories and even the missteps we may take to recover them fully—are constitutive of a "glitch," as conceptualized by Jenny Sundén in her essay, "On trans-, glitch, and gender as machinery of failure." Sundén defines "the glitch" as "a mess that is a moment," a way to account for errors that illustrate how "[m]alfunction and failure are not signs of improper production. On the contrary, they indicate the active production of the 'accidental potential' in any product" ("On trans-, glitch, and gender as machinery of failure"). As a result, these messy moments "reveal the ghostly conventionality of gender norms and ideals, and the potentiality of a break with such conventions"("On

trans-, glitch, and gender as machinery of failure”). Leung’s work demonstrates how the fractures in our memories caused by pain, trauma, and/or grief are not unproductive failures, but can lead to potentialities outside linear and normative ways to conduct memory work.

Similarly, Grace Cho builds on Avery Gordon’s concept of “haunting,” highlighting how this ghostly phenomenon is both remembering *and* forgetting. Gordon argues that “hauntings are not rare supernatural occurrences but, more often, the unexamined irregularities of everyday life” (29). Cho elaborates that “the ghost and its haunting effects act as a mode of memory and an avenue for ethical engagement” (29). Studying ghosts does not only allow us to remember what has been forgotten, but it pushes us to use an alternative hermeneutics that allows these “unexamined irregularities of everyday life” to be read with critical thought and care. This involves accepting the “holes” that come with haunting and the difficulty of remembering. Rather than trying to excavate or fill these holes, we can instead suppose what these gaps reveal about both the haunting and the haunted. In many ways, the ghost is also a “glitch,” a soul with unfinished business who has failed to transition into the afterlife. The ghost is an accident, a specter that oftentimes reveals itself through chance-encounter. I argue that Karen Villa’s clip is a way “to remember with holes,” to acknowledge that gaps need not be filled in order to be cognizant of the ghosts around them.

With this metaphor, I argue that the “holes” surrounding Jacqueline Toves and Abigail Tapia’s deaths are constitutive of imperial amnesia. Priyamvada Gopal defines

"imperial amnesia" as "think[ing] of imperialism as already in the past and then underplay the toll that imperialism took on colonised terrain and peoples" (19). Gopal's definition illustrates that imperial amnesia is more than just Western empires' projects to exonerate themselves of their past crimes, but to demonstrate a Western exceptionalism and liberalism that paints the West as the bestowers of "greater freedom" (19). The U.S., in particular, engages in an imperial amnesia that does not only shroud U.S. imperialism in the Philippines, but even justifies its colonial presence. Kimberly Alidio's research on U.S. exceptionalism points to how U.S. colonialism portrayed "an exceptional romance between the colonized subject and the American civilizing mission" ("'When I Get Home, I Want to Forget'" 105). This romance is alluded in President William McKinley's 1898 speech on "benevolent assimilation," in which he justified U.S. colonization of the Philippines through a moralistic sense: "we could not leave them to themselves—they were unfit for self-government…there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them." Like a person who pins a picture of their celebrity crush on their bedroom wall, McKinley initiates a certain type of "romance" as he "put[s] the Philippines on a map of the United States," conveying an intimate desire to geopolitically link the Philippine archipelago to the U.S. This connects to Lisa Lowe's research on geopolitical intimacies, in which Lowe argues that "the intimacies of desire, sexuality, marriage, and family are inseparable from the imperial projects of conquest, slavery,labor, and government" (*The Intimacies of Four Continents* 17). Lowe deploys the term "intimacy" to characterize the social,

economic, and political relations and exchanges between Europe, Africa, Asia, and North America during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, geopolitical structures that illuminate how desire, sexuality, marriage, and family were essential institutions in the administration of U.S. empire in the Philippines. In fact, "benevolent assimilation" in itself, according to Victor Mendoza, evokes fantasy, "[t]he fantasy of U.S. democratic exceptionalism [that] supported the reality of colonial surveillance and genocide that occurred during the Philippine-American War" (21). McKinley's act of putting the Philippines on the map of the United States is a euphemism that reveals the galvanization of U.S.-Philippine relations in both romantic and genocidal terms.

However, under the narrative of "benevolent assimilation," these genocidal fantasies, intimacies, and desires become difficult to unearth, recognize, and trace. The the presence of these "holes" reminds us of what has escaped our consciousness, but it also highlights what remains to be remembered in resistance to imperial amnesia. As a result, investigating Jacqueline Toves and Abigail Tapia's deaths with attention and care may further reveal the intricacies and intimacies of U.S. empire in the Philippines, but it may also lead to more ghosts and dead-ends. Regardless, the affective impact produced by *Visibilizing Queer Pinays* enables the audience to critically engage with how U.S. empire facilitates multiple dimensions and temporalities of grief, and how these "holes" may function as cleavages or portals that allow viewers to connect queer death not only as genocidal technology, but a fabric of intergenerational trauma.

In the next section, I analyze *Visibilizing Queer Pinays* in conjunction with news articles and message board posts that were published in 2003, in the aftermath of the

incident. This small archive I amassed derives from investigative journalism and speculative crime websites where general members can post their theories and suppositions on unsolved cases with other enthusiasts. While my entrance into this disturbing digital archive did provide answers to some of the mysteries surrounding Jacqueline Toves and Abigail Tapia's deaths, my grief was also triggered as a trauma survivor. As I conducted this research, I became evermore grateful to the docu-poetic and the reflective and careful rumination it affords. My evaluation of these sources is definitely a glitched criticism; there are still plenty of holes I have not uncovered, many details that are unapproached and unanalyzed out of respect to the specters and survivors who remain tethered to this significant loss. Through my comparative analysis of the docu-poem and this fraught digital archive, I hope to open-up a conversation on how to conduct a trauma-informed reading practice that is not concerned with excavating truth or pursuing punitive measures for the offenders, but to conduct a critical mode of remembering that connects the intricacies of grief with the structural violences that administer such unfathomable losses.

Imperial Grammar and Queer Death

The 2003 discovery of Jacqueline Toves and Abigail Tapia's bodies in Big Sur began with a question: was it a homicide or murder-suicide? Because of the state their bodies when found, the public heavily speculated on the cause of their deaths. According to *The Advocate*, "The two women were found dead…with plastic garbage bags around their heads. They were lying side by side in a bed at the Gorda Springs Inn…their hands bound with duct tape and the bag pulled snugly over their heads"

("Authorities investigate mysterious deaths of California lesbian couple"). Another article published in *SF Gate* contained more details about their bodies, stating:

> [T]he women were side-by-side and face-up on a queen-size bed, wearing t-shirts and panties…Toves was wearing a white, red, green and black mask over the bag, while a second mask—a feathered masquerade mask that covers the eyes—was sitting on a nearby table.
>
> The smaller of the two women, Toves, had her wrists and legs bound tightly…whileTapia's wrists were bound loosely…two pieces of white rope [were found] under the sheets ("Big Sur deaths appear to be suicides").

I share these descriptions of Toves and Tapia's bodies not to illustrate how grisly or strange their deaths were, but to show how illegible the queer Filipina subject is even in death. Both articles observe how both women's faces were covered by plastic bags and, in the case of Toves, a feathered masquerade mask. In contrast to their obscured faces, their bodies are exposed. According to *SF Gate*, Toves and Tapia were lying "side-by-side and face-up on a queen-size bed, wearing t-shirts and panties" ("Big Sur deaths appear to be suicides"). These contrasting details intrigued and fascinated the public, leading folks to racialized and hypersexualized speculations about the women and their bodies.

For example, in a message board thread titled "Suicide staged" from October 14, 2003 (four days after Toves and Tapia's deaths) on *RealPolice.net* (a now defunct online resource for police officers and law enforcement, the performative aspect of Toves and Tapia's deaths is remarked: "Have you ever seen a suicide staged to look

like a murder? Why would someone do that? Life insurance reasons?" Two more posts follow, stating, "Its (sic) just so weird. Looks like a murder (hands tied, bags over heads) yet there were suicide notes. If it (sic) a suicide, why tie the hands. Did they think they wouldn't trust themselves and would rip the bags off. This way they couldn't? If it was murder, why leave a suicide note, but not untie them?" Another reads: "So it could be a very badly staged suicide."

These disturbing speculations do not only reflect the inscrutability of Jacqueline Toves and Abigail Tapia as victims, but already associates their intentions with vice and crime. The first comment suggests that Toves and Tapia staged their deaths as murders in order to collect life insurance. Not only is this supposition ridiculous and offensive, but it reveals how women of color are routinely criminalized and placed under suspicion, even if they are victims of a grisly death. Furthermore, the majority of these speculations lack respect and compassion, which makes one wonder if this type of speculation and suspicion would have occurred if Toves and Tapia were white women. The preoccupation with how their bodies were "staged" does not only gesture to their invisibility as racialized subjects, but their inscrutable faces (covered by the mask and garbage bags) gesture to the ambivalence of Filipina/o/x identity. The lack of attention to Toves and Tapia's racial backgrounds may be an attempt at colorblind investigative reporting, but it nevertheless obscures the multidimensionality of Toves and Tapia as queer Filipina subjects who were clearly suffering. Karen Villa gestures to this inscrutability when her camera pans to the empty queen-sized bed, which is where Toves and Tapia's bodies were discovered. Although Karen Villa's clip was

produced thirteen years later and the mattress in the hotel room is empty, Toves and Tapia's presences are still known and felt due to the emptiness and disorientation the footage evokes. As a result, Villa acknowledges the invisible ontologies of Toves and Tapia, but also honors a way to remember with holes. We may never have a full picture of who Jacqueline Toves and Abigail Tapia were and why they decided to stage their murder-suicides, but we can acknowledge these holes and the spectral traces that remain in the incident's afterlife.

While a ghostly existence is usually not considered an entrance into the afterlife, the holes reveal how Toves and Tapia's deaths nevertheless expand Eric Stanley's assertion on how "queerness is produced always and only through the negativity of forced death and at the threshold of obliteration" (1). The presence of haunting and holes, I argue, reveal that queer death does not always exist at the threshold of obliteration. Even in moments of inconceivable loss, specters can reveal themselves in hauntings and chance-encounters. In addition, holes, while remaining empty and unfilled, can still produce affect, can compel us to pursue what has opened this space up in the first place. As a result, queer death can result as a moment of reckoning for survivors, an acknowledgement that all is not lost. The lack of a conclusion or resolution at the end of Karen Villa's clip gestures to this, where the grief provoked within us is acknowledged but the afterlife of Toves and Tapia is activated through the audience's remembrance. Remembering the dead may not appear to be a militant act of resistance to structural violence, but it nevertheless recognizes what has been lost and what remains even after obliteration.

Although I complicate Eric Stanley's conception of queer death with the critical act of remembrance, the vulnerability of queer subjects to premature death is nevertheless a reality that is highlighted in Toves and Tapia's case. Investigations did prove that Toves and Tapia committed suicide. However, this fact raises the question about whether queer suicide, according to Heike Bauer, is a "[marker] of the potentially lethal force of heteronormative ideals and expectations" (37). According to Victor Mendoza, heteronormativity is "not peripheral or contrary to the…genocidal project of U.S. imperialism but constitutive of it" (2). Heteronormativity may not be pathologically acknowledged as a cause of suicide, but it nevertheless leads to the development of depression, anxiety, dissociation, and other mental illnesses amongst those who cannot conform under its scripts. Furthermore, the logics of white supremacy and U.S. imperialism remain entrenched in our social institutions, even under social services that are meant to help and protect those who are most vulnerable.

In "A Letter to My Sister," Lisa Park, a survivor of suicide, writes to her deceased sister. She acknowledges how therapy and social work can produce harm, alienation, and abandonment that does not only exacerbate the vulnerability of sick and mad individuals, but reveals the racial capitalist and heteronormative logics that undergird these institutions that are supposed to help. Park questions, "[H]ow can you reform something that is so structural, so absolutely essential to the constitution of this society?...Why would you want to place yourself into the hands of an institution that seeks to resocialize you into the environment that made a mess of you in the first place" (537). Not only does Park connect social work and therapy to reformism, but

this act of “resocialization” is parallel to the logics of “benevolent assimilation,” where U.S. imperial forces “civilized” or “resocialized” Filipina/o/xs (already a colonized population under Spanish rule) into the guise of American democracy. With this comparison, we can locate suicide as a violence that is derivative of colonial and heteronormative forces, a connection that was highlighted in my investigations of Jacqueline Toves and Abigail Tapia’s deaths. As a result, the queer Filipinx hermeneutic *Visibilizing Queer Pinays* complicates and uncovers the enduring legacy of U.S. colonial violence in the Philippines and the ongoing harm it produces on QTGNC Filipina/o/xs.

Other than Toves and Tapia’s obscured faces, an additional detail that grotesquely fascinated the public was that both women were found in bed wearing only t-shirts and panties with their wrists and legs bound. Although Karen Villa does not explicitly articulate these details in her docu-poem, it is alluded as we observe the anguished expression and gestures the hotel manager/owner makes as he provides the tour of Toves and Tapia’s former hotel room. In the clip, the hotel manager/owner puts his hand over his head, implying that Toves and Tapia were found with garbage bags over their heads (Figure 4). Secondly, he points to the bed, gesturing to it as the place where Toves and Tapia’s bodies were found. Finally, Villa’s camera pans to the bed, a benign, everyday object that she focuses on with an enduring pause, implying that there is something strange, eerie, and significant about this empty surface. The question of what possibly occurred on that bed provokes the audience, allowing us to identify a “hole” even in our confusion and disorientation.

Before the investigation concluded, the public could only speculate on Toves and Tapia's bodies in holes. On another message board thread from *FreeRepublic.com* titled, "Sheriff: Deaths of women near Big Sur were part of suicide pact" that began on October 13, 2003 (three days after Toves and Tapia's deaths), a message board user, after reading about the t-shirts, panties, and binds, commented, "They wrote suicide notes. This was just a kinky suicide." In a second *Free Republic* thread titled, "Two women found dead at Big Sur hotel; investigation continues [Halloween Mask Murders]," that began October 11, 2003 (one day after the incident), another user comments, "Long Beach: not an affluent community, overall. A couple of girls (prostitutes?) from there go to the jade festival to make some money. They get involved with the wrong john (s) and get killed." These comments were published before it was concluded that Toves and Tapia committed suicide. Because of the grotesque and ghastly nature of their staged deaths, multiple message board users began to surmise that Toves and Tapia were murdered. Their comments: "kinky suicide," "Long Beach: not an affluent community," and "[a] couple girls (prostitutes?)" illuminate multiple racialized, classed, gendered, and hypersexualized assumptions about Toves and Tapia. The first comment from *Free Republic* called Toves and Tapia's suicide "kinky" because they were found only in their t- shirts and panties; Toves was wearing a masquerade mask and had her legs bound, while Tapia's wrists were loosely tied. This comment illustrates how queer women, specifically Filipino women, are routinely hypersexualized, due to the history of militarism and conquest in the Philippines.

In addition, the second comment that Toves and Tapia are “prostitutes” signifies how Asian women are racialized, classed, gendered, and sexualized as sex workers due to a longstanding history of Asian exclusion that specifically targeted Asian women that worked or simply “looked” like prostitutes. The 1875 Page Law, passed seven years before the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, banned the migration of Asian women to the United States. As a result of the Page Law, all Asian women were stereotyped as deviant, diseased, and unworthy of U.S. inclusion. In addition, this second commenter also assumes that Long Beach, CA is “not an affluent community,” most likely because of Long Beach’s major population of working-class people of color. Even though none of these comments specifically identify Toves and Tapia’s race or class, these speculations nevertheless reveal how immigration exclusion and U.S. empire are modalities of racial capitalism, xenophobia, and hypersexualization. Allan Punzalan Issac terms this rhetoric as “American tropics,” “a set of regulatory tropes and narratives that reveal a particularly U.S. American imperial grammar that create ethnic, racial, and colonial subjects” (xxv). By identifying these tropes and narratives, we can trace how “Filipino Americans have left many clues to their existence and live as testament to America’s imperial past,” as well as how “the archipelago and its inhabitants’ global dispersal have an uncanny effect on the American psyche to which Filipinos have an intimate and uncomfortable linkage” (xxiii-xxiv).

This “uncanny effect” is most definitely illustrated in the impact, fascination, and speculation Toves and Tapia’s deaths aroused in the public, to the point where I identified at least three extensive online threads from 2003 discussing the event, and

over a dozen news articles outlining and reiterating the same gruesome details. The one key detail missing from these narratives are Toves and Tapia's Filipina/o/x lineages. In fact, while conducting a Google search with the keywords "Jacqueline Toves," "Abigail Tapia" and "Filipino," the first three results from *CNN,* the *LA Times*, and *CBS News* reveal its omission (Figure 5):

Figure 5: "Missing: ~~filipino~~"

I am pointing out this omission not to argue for Filipina/o/x representational fullness, but to illustrate the connection between American tropics and U.S. imperial amnesia. U.S. imperial amnesia is constituted *through* the rhetoric of American tropics, a genocidal discourse that does not only erase U.S. colonization of the Philippines, but makes the ongoing harm produced by such a violent imperial system invisible and unintelligible. In addition, another user on the *Free Republic* "Two women found dead at Big Sur hotel; investigation continues [Halloween Mask Murders]" thread speculates, "As for [Toves and Tapia] having Spanish names, they could be both

Hispanic and lesbian." This comment addresses a lived Filipino/a/x American experience, where we are assumed to be of Spanish or Latin American origin because of our surnames. While our Hispanicized names gesture to the shared Spanish colonial histories of Latin America and the Philippines, it nevertheless emphasizes the ambivalence of the Filipina/o/x as an unsteady and highly perplexing ontology rooted in imperial grammar. In the case of the Philippines, both Spanish and American tropics undergird the colonial and racial subject, resulting in a multiplicity that is unintelligible to the U.S. metropole.

In addition, that *Free Republic* commentator also assumes that Toves and Tapia are Hispanic *and* lesbian. The conjunction "and" may appear to be addressing Toves and Tapia's intersectional identities, but I argue the conjunction produces an additional mode of othering that renders both women as queer *and* alien. On another *Free Republic* thread titled, "Two women found dead at Big Sur hotel," an article about a Jade Festival taking place in Big Sur was linked. Upon examining the article, a new user responded, "Isn't jade big in Asia? Therefore, were there a lot of Asian jadeists staying at the hotel who have already left the country that might be suspects?" Although these comments were posted before investigations concluded, this rhetoric is nevertheless fraught with racialized and xenophobic logics, theorized by Edward Said as Orientalism. Not only does the user suggest that there were "Asian jadeists" staying at Gorda Springs Resort because "jade [is] big in Asia," the commenter assumes that these Asian tourists may be murderers, especially if they had already left town. Robert Lee defines this mode of American Orientalism as

"mark[ing] the Oriental as indelibly alien…Orientals represent a present danger of pollution. An analysis of the Oriental as a racial category must begin with the concept of the alien as a polluting body" (2). The Asian jadeists in this comment are racialized as a "polluting body," "indelible alien[s]" who come to the U.S. and "pollute" the country with vice and crime. These racial stereotypes were prevalent during the Asian exclusion era, where rhetoric of the "yellow peril" was used to subjugate, control, and maim the Asian immigrant population. This *Free Republic* comment illustrates how American orientalism is informed by U.S. imperial grammar, that Asian exclusion and U.S. imperialism were connected modes of white supremacist governance. This rhetoric influenced the passage of the 1934 Tydings-McDuffie Act, a law that granted "independence" to the Philippines, relieving Filipino immigrants of their status as U.S.nationals, making them vulnerable to immigration exclusion.

In addition to U.S. colonization and immigration exclusion, carceral logics were also expressed in message board posts. After reading details about the investigation, a *Real Police* user commented:

> At least they [Toves and Tapia] didn't throw themselves off an overpass taking off some innocent driver in the meantime.
>
> Another thing that sucks is when someone uses the cops to commit suicide. That traumatizes the cop who has to deal with that kind of crap. Do it the easy way—go out about 300 miles into shark infested waters and throw yourself overboard. That way no one has to deal with the aftermath.

This comment is disturbing in many ways. This user praises Toves and Tapia for not making a bloody mess and "throw[ing] themselves off an overpass taking off some innocent driver in the meantime," positing that there *is* a more clean and efficient way to die that does not involve traumatizing a cop for bearing witness to the aftermath of a suicide. Extreme insensitivity set aside, this comment does allude to the frivolousness and worthlessness of policing. In addition to incarceration and punishment, carceral logics also indoctrinate people into believing that not only do we need policing, but we should *always* sympathize with the police. Carceral technologies ensure sympathy for the arbitrators of violence, not their victims. Not only does this comment reveal the sheer ludicrousness of policing, but it also reveals its endless capacity for manipulation and discipline. These realizations both fundamentally locate policing as harmful *and* excessive.

Furthermore, the notion of an efficient and productive necropolitic is implied and has been employed by genocidal, colonial, and eugenic U.S. statecraft. James A. Tyner's article, "The Geopolitics of Eugenics and the Exclusion of Philippine Immigrants from the United States," demonstrates how immigration exclusion was a key project that accelerated the twentieth century eugenics movement. Tyner illustrates how "[a] geopolitically informed eugenical discourse demanded the identification of 'inferior' 'degenerate' peoples who threatened the security of race and state" (59). As a result, U.S. colonialism, immigration exclusion, carcerality, *and* ableism are key genocidal technologies united under a totality of white supremacy. Dylan Rodriguez complicates these systemic intersections with the extrapolation of "categorical death:"

> [C]ategorical death frames a modality of nonexistence that exceeds the spectacles of accumulated corpses and mass graves, initiates a historical technology of killing that perpetually demands the extraordinary climaxes of white sociality and white supremacist institutionality, and, in the case of the Philippine conquest, alienates the social possibility of the self-enunciated 'Filipino' from the materiality of genocide and accompanying struggles to resist, abolish, and survive it (*Suspended Apocalypse* 146).

Visibilizing Queer Pindys points and portrays this "modality of nonexistence." Although Toves and Tapia's bodies are no longer on the bed, the pausing frame and the room's sheer emptiness "[exceed] the spectacles of accumulated corpses and mass graves" (Rodriguez 146). This nonexistence and exorbitance are thus known and felt. In addition, imperial amnesia and U.S. imperial grammar facilitate the oppression and alienation of "the self-enunciated Filipino," demonstrating the genocidal logics that undergird erasure and racialization. "Categorical death" in the docu-poem is evoked through Villa's rhetorical and cinematographic choices, where the camera's lingering gaze summoned an uncanny feeling within the audience. This aesthetic choice is highlighted, in the words of Sarita See, through the "relationship between minority invisibility and imperial amnesia." (*The Decolonized Eye* xxii).

Conclusion

After the viewing party, I asked Villa for a transcript of the documentary. Even in text, the many holes in *Visibilizing Queer Pinays* are articulated (Figure 6):

Karen:

[Silence over opening three shots.]
[Shot of cabin. "Say My Name" by ODEZSA plays.]
[Shot of man knocking on the cabin door. He begins to open door to cabin. "Say My Name" by ODEZSA ends. "Hopeful" by Ta-ku plays.]

Figure 6: A screenshot from Karen Villa's Visibilizing Queer Pinays transcript.

Although the purpose of a transcript is to fully annotate and record an interview or oral history in print, there is no mention of Jacqueline Toves or Abigail Tapia in the entirety of this document. In addition, the purpose of stage directions is usually to set the scene, but also to immediately engulf the audience with first impressions. However, Villa's stage directions are vague: "Silence over opening three shots," "Shot of cabin," and "Shot of man knocking on the cabin door." The banality of these words and the enjambment of these stage directions further illuminate the potentiality of the docu-poetic. These sentences may appear to be frivolous, but they are a textual mirror to the genocidal violence that undergirds queer death. In fact, the only detailed and significant things in these stage directions is the background music. Villa provides both the song title and name of each artist: "Say My Name" by ODEZSA and "Hopeful" by Ta-ku. The title, "Say My Name," gestures to U.S. imperial grammar's propensity to systemically invisibilize and erase, but also a queer Filipinx docu-poetic's potential to reveal what has been shrouded, to name the violence for what it

is: U.S. colonialism. “Hopeful,” perhaps, may be a gesture to a not so eerie future, a future where a healed and resilient formally colonized people can thrive. Villa’s documentary-poetics aggravates the audience’s capacity to imagine and materialize this future, to challenge the white supremacist forces that distribute premature death to queer and mad people of color.

dear Jacqueline and Abigail,

i don't know you,
but i love you.
i know poetry cannot
raise the dead,
but it has allowed me
to graze your traces.
i am sorry that
i can only remember you
in holes; but i now know
that even empty space
has dimension, that
even after nothing,
comes something.
the next time i sweep
dust, i will think:
what star died
and left these remains.[8]

[8] My offering.

Chapter Four:

"Keep Us in Your Eye:" Accumulating and Incarcerating the Filipina/o/x Primitive

March 2000: my family's first trip to Baguio City. Known as the "Summer Capital of the Philippines," Filipina/o/xs and tourists alike flock to the northern city to escape the suffocating heat and smog of Southern Luzon. With its lush pine trees, stunning mountains, and curtains of fog, Baguio is the best place for anyone seeking escape or restitution from the cantankerous heat.

I am nine-years-old. I am running around Mines View Park—a Baguio tourist trap—with my parents and sisters. As we beg my parents for all the souvenirs we could not carry, another crowd of tourists catches my eye. At the entrance to the park are a man and a woman splendidly dressed in red robes striped with yellow, black, and white. The man is shirtless and his chest is bedecked with a sash and beaded necklaces. In his hand, he holds a pointy spear, and on his head sits a glorious headdress with black, brown, and white fathers. The woman is dressed just as beautifully, with a long skirt in the same striped pattern, beaded necklaces, a beaded headband, and the largest and roundest pair of earrings I had ever seen. I notice other people—tourists dressed normally like us—forming a line to take a picture with the couple. The man and the woman pose stoically with their backs straight while tourists smile, make the peace sign, and drape their arms across the man and woman's shoulders.

"Mommy, what are they?" my sisters and I asked.

"They're Igorots—Native Filipinos," my mother responded. "Tourists come here to take pictures with them."

"Can we take a picture too?"

"No," my mother said. "Come, we should climb the stairs up the park. I heard the view is amazing."

Autoethnography and Counter-reading

Since my first trip to Baguio, I have always wondered why my mother refused to pose and take pictures with the Natives at Mines View Park. As I grew older, I learned that my mother was opposed to the continued exploitation and commodification of Philippine indigenous cultures, one of which was pervasive in Baguio's tourist industry, where people of the Igorot clan—the indigenous peoples of the Cordillera Mountain Range—are a part of the picture-taking landscape alongside the city's trees, mountains, and gardens.

This trip to Baguio enabled me to reflect on my positionality as a non-indigenous Filipinx, as I realized just how vast, diverse, and heterogeneous the people of the Philippines were. I learned that a trip to Baguio was often the first time a tourist—Filipina/o/x, American, or other nationality—encountered a Philippine Native, and that such encounters—at home and abroad—undergirds the history of U.S. colonization of the Philippines.

I begin with this autoethnography of indigeneity and tourism to foreground the main focus of this chapter, an exploration of how U.S.'s settler colonial logics foreground

the American invasion of the Philippines, a genocidal event known as the 1898 Philippine-American War. I trace this logic through a close-reading of Aimee Suzara's 2014 poetry collection, *Souvenir*, where Suzara does not only illuminate the knowledge accumulation of the Filipina/o/x primitive during the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, but exposes how genocide, carcerality, and what Nerissa Balce terms "the erotics of American empire" were essential techniques and technologies the U.S. deployed to secure its empire in Southeast Asia. While my experience as a young tourist in Baguio and the 1904 St Louis World Fair's Philippine Exhibition are two different and temporally distinct events, the docile and abject figure of the Native Filipina/o/x is present in both the autoethonographic and the poetic.

Suzara explores the docility and abjection of the Filipina/o/x in her collection, not only through the form and content of her poems, but through her usage of photographs and found language from the U.S. colonial archive. I argue that a counter-reading of these archival images and documents is foundational to her craft, as much as her use of figurative language and rhetorical devices to provide a multidimensional and multisensory experience for readers. My close-reading of Suzara's poetry also considers the positionality of these images and documents in conjunction to her poetics, and that her disfiguration and deployment of these colonial sources is another technique under "documentary-poetics," a method I discussed in my previous chapter on Karen Villa's work.

In that chapter, I built on Paola Bilbrough's definition of "documentary-poetics." While Bilbrough defines this poetic method as relying on people's "life stories" in order

to describe those “special strange, even mysterious moments when bits and pieces suddenly coalesce,” I argue that a “docu-poetic” method also allows for new and alternative relationalities—momentary feelings of recognition and kinship—to be known and felt by the reader/audience (300-301). Thus, docu-poetics do not merely *describe* a moment, but *provides* a shared closeness and evocation made possible by the formal and textural qualities of a poem.

In addition to providing these evocations, Suzara’s “docu-poetics” also produces a counter-reading of history. While scholars such as Robert Rydell, Paul Kramer, and Shari Huhndorf have provided critical and anti-colonial readings of World’s Fairs, the Philippine-American War, and racial conquest encoded in popular culture, Suzara achieves this analysis by positioning the poetic as a hermeneutic, offering her potery as a lens or *mirror* to read from. I use the term “mirror” not only to be commensurable with Suzara’s usage of Jacques Lacan’s theory of “the gaze,” but Suzara offers her poems as lenses from which the specter can read and learn the history of the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair from a queer Filipinx perspective. This method allows readers to reflect on the Filipina/ox diaspora’s position to this shrouded history, while also questioning one’s complicity to settler colonialism.

As a result, the queer Filipinx hermenutic Suzara provides is a method of *care*, as well as an arbitration into the narrative of U.S. exceptionalism that pervades the colonial archive. As the poet-scholar enters the archive and prepares to delve into alternative articulations of U.S. history, Stuart Hall reminds us that, “Constituting an archive represents a significant moment, on which we need to reflect with care...The moment of

the archive represents the end of a certain kind of *creative innocence*, and the beginning of a new stage of self-consciousness, of self-reflexivity in an artistic movement" (89, emphasis). The "care" in which Hall describes is the self-reflexivity and reflection one must perform when the state of "creative innocence" comes to an end at the moment of encounter. Hall reminds us that approaching the archive is never a moment of neutrality, but a power dynamic already undergirded by hierarchy, privilege, and surveillance. It is the convergence of these matrices of domination that urge us to enter the archive with care, to locate archival research beyond extraction or retrieval, but as an "interruption" into the forces of "cultural power and authority" (Hall 92).

The "interruption" Suzara performs not only visibilizes the discursive and material violence facilitated by the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, but her intervention also encourages the reader to consider what remains unearthed and uncovered in U.S. history, photography, and anthropology. Nerissa Balce and Sarita See have delved into the emergence of these disciplines and practices as direct products of U.S. colonialism, but also as *directing* the project of U.S. invasion and imperial plunder themselves. According to See, "[T]he founding of anthropology as a discipline played in establishing the conditions of possibility—the racial primitivity assigned to the Filipino—for [the Philippine-American War]" (50). Whereas the field and hobby of photography, according to Balce, has "recorded and possibly celebrated the violence of war and empire" (50). With these revelations, we can see that Suzara's interruption of U.S. history is also an epistemological critique, and that her poetics offers a multisensory and evocative mode of analysis. As a result, the act of tracing or seeing these cleavages in U.S. exceptionalism

becomes a lens—a mirror—the reader can hold up to the text, and also one in which the reader can position themselves in relation to this shrouded history.

However, I argue that Suzara encourages us to move beyond mere self-reflexivity, but toward a social critique in which readers themselves are asked to reflect on the limitations of representational fullness. While uncovering the Philippine Exhibition is a key intervention in U.S. history and Filipina/o/x Studies, how we situate these findings in relation to the present is an act we must perform with care. *Souvenir* is divided into four sections: "Exhibit A: The Philippine Reservation," "Exhibit B: Anthropology," "Exhibit C: Science," and "Exhibit D: Objects & Artifacts." Exhibit C and Exhibit B, though still delving into the racial politics of the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, also include poems that are temporally located in the present, where the speakers are traversing through the ongoing manifestations of U.S. colonization of the Philippines in the quotidian. How then is the racial and colonial violence of the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair still transmitted into the conditions of the present? How does this violence permeate intergenerationally, through the transpacific ebbs and flows of ongoing U.S. governance and interdependence to the Philippine archipelago? Suzara tackles these questions in the penultimate and final sections of *Souvenir*, demonstrating how U.S. empire is an ongoing project under which "the self"—Filipina/o/x ontological development—is constituted.

I share the anecdote of my first visit to Mines View Park to reflect how the discourse of Filipina/o/x abjection and docility enabled me to situate myself *among and against* the figure of the Philippine Native/primitive. This lens does not only allow one to make the invisible visible, but to expand self-reflexivity into a critique of the U.S.

neocolonial project. My trip to Baguio was an opportunity for my family and me to experience another region in the Philippines—a region in which the traces of American empire remain so ineluctably present. I turn now to close-readings of select poems in *Souvenir* and hope the reader can carry my observations as trinkets, as hermeneutic offerings beyond the page.

The American Museum

Souvenir begins with "Exhibit A: The Philippine Reservation." Suzara's first poem, "Objects & Artifacts," is a tour of the American museum, a site, according to Sarita See, that is undoubtedly "capital, racial, and colonial" (2). Suzara already illuminates these three qualities in the first stanza of the poem:

> I enter the air-conditioned room, a maze of glass cases. Here,
> a lace-up dress stretched over a headless bust.
> White taffeta layers bloom and cascade like a wedding cake.
> Between this statue and myself, I see my ruddy face reflected
> in the glass. And which is the ghost: this colonial woman,
> headless, eyeless in her eyelet dress, or me, gazing back (13)?

We are taken to the location of the American museum with the line, "I enter the air-conditioned room, a maze of glass cases. The "glass cases" signify the display of objects and artifacts in the museum, where the lighted containment of these objects, according to See, facilitates "the act of 'seeing into'" which "invit[es] the viewer to lean forward and almost touch these things from another world" (43). By locating these objects and artifacts as emerging from "another world," the lighted display case, as illustrated by Suzara, does more than invite the viewer to see, but to "gaze back." "Gazing back" alludes to what bell hooks has termed as "oppositional gaze," looks that are

"confrontational...gestures of resistance, challenges to authority" (115). I argue that the "authority" is the American museum, an institution and entity that "forward[s] the colonial project by taking the colonized as *objects of accumulation*, which then can be studied in the traditional disciplines and which are to this day displayed before the American general public" (See 3, emphasis added). As a diasporic and colonial subject, the speaker of "Objects & Artifacts" is both included and excluded from "the American general public" of the museum. As a viewer located outside the display case, the speaker can observe the objects like an everyday American spectator but their "ruddy face reflected in the glass" allows them to speculate on their relationship to the knowledge accumulation of the Filipina/o/x primitive in the U.S. metropole. The speaker's "ruddy face reflected in the glass" is not merely a representational gesture, but expands the positionality of the speaker/museumgoer into one stratified by past and present entities of American empire.

In addition, Suzara alludes to how the American colonial regime is built into the architectural design of the museum itself, describing this particular wing as an "air-conditioned room, a *maze* of glass cases" (13, emphasis added). Air-conditioning is present not only to keep the patrons cool, but to preserve the objects and artifacts the museum has spent capital and multiple expeditions collecting for the sake of knowledge production. Furthermore, Suzara describes the floor as a "maze," which is antithetical to the general flow and design of a museum, where glass cases, exhibits, and the placement of ekphrases are meant to guide the museumgoer easily through the displays. However, for the diasporic/colonial subject, the exhibits can feel like a "maze"—an endless

labyrinth of knowledge accumulation—that appears to have no exit. Suzara effectively evokes this feeling of unease and disorientation, demonstrating how the American museum is not the neutral pedagogical site it claims to be, but an institution that facilitates and protects colonial governance.

Furthermore, Suzara describes one of the objects on display as "a lace-up dress stretched over a headless bust. / White taffeta layers bloom and cascade like a wedding cake" (13). This may appear to be a description of a dress from the Edwardian era, the time period in which the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair took place. However, the comparison to the dress to "a wedding cake" is not only a gesture to the institution of marriage, but reveals how heteronormativity is a key structure of discipline and tutelage under U.S. imperialism. Victor Mendoza argues that "intimate and even perverse relations between the figure of the Philippine subject and other people that emerge are not peripheral or contrary to the heteromasculinizing, genocidal project of U.S. imperialism but constitutive of it" (2). By describing the relations between U.S. colonial officers and Philippine subjects as "intimate" and "perverse," Mendoza likens this colonial relationship to a marriage, with the U.S. as the dominant heteromasculine husband and the Philippines as the submissive hyperfeminine wife or mistress. Acts such as "same-sex...crimes against nature, sodomy, inversion, intimate friendships, male effeminacy, female masculinity, and general gender deviancy" were policed as perverse, deviant, and immoral behaviors, demonstrating the heteronormative's role in social control (Mendoza 31). "Like a wedding cake" alludes to this disciplinary structure, where the colonial also functioned as the sedimentation of heteronormative social structures and to this day,

facilitates economic and socio-political interdependence between the U.S. and Philippines.

In addition, Jason Cyrus's research exposes heteronormativity in museums, where this violent form of socialization includes "imposing a non-intersectional viewpoint of the objects or art held within the museum's archive, while also assuming that the ideal visitor is heterosexual. This perspective informs all areas of museological practice, from the exhibition schedule to related programming and didactic material" (4). In the museum, it is not only the objects and artifacts that impose a heteronormative world order. Museological practice itself—the type of visitors that are accommodated, the type of activities offered, and the type of pedagogical enlightenment delivered to the public—are infused with the heteronormative. An example close to home is the Getty Center, a museum and cultural institution located in the Santa Monica Mountains of Los Angeles, CA. Like most children who grew up in Los Angeles, the Getty Center was a coveted place, not only for its winding botanical garden, exquisite collection of European art, and free lectures on art history and art practice, but the free admission and family-friendly landscape made it an ideal weekend outing for my parents. We even visited the Family Room, where my sisters and I painted our own facsimiles of European portraits and dressed up in the European hats and capes provided. The Getty Center was not merely providing us with a Western education; the institution conveyed that to *be* Western was to be educated.

Although playing European dress-up might appear to be a charming and harmless activity, clothing itself was deployed as a key tactic in disciplining and civilizing the

Filipina/o/x. Denise Cruz's research on "transpacific femininities" reveals the ways in which the donning of Western clothing was a discursive tool the U.S. employed to justify its project of "benevolent assimilation" by exhibiting Filipino women in Western dress at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. These women of "progress" were juxtaposed by the figures of the scantily clad indigenous Filipina, who were marked by the primitivity, backwardness, and barbarism that dominated the American public imaginary of the Philippines. In fact, the next stanza of "Objects & Artifacts" illustrates this juxtaposition: "In the adjacent case: grey, tarnished krisses; a bolo; the sharp tips / poke my eyes. A headdress with red and black feathers fans the city / out of me" (13). By placing the krisses, bolo, and headdress adjacent to the lace-up dress, the Social Darwinist narrative of "progress" under American imperialism is not only alluded to but highlighted in its systemic enforcement through the placement of these objects side-by-side. Although it may make logical sense to place these objects and artifacts that originate from the same time period and same region side-by-side, the fact that they exist *together* as a result of U.S. colonial conquest demonstrates the epistemological violence facilitated and employed by the American museum.

As a result, the presence of the lace-up dress and headdress in the American museum highlights heteronormativity as a disciplinary colonial tactic with the museum's own complicity to knowledge accumulation. Furthermore, the "headless bust" in the poem donning the lace-up dress, along with the invisible figure of "the colonial woman," marks the American museum's role in not only invisibilizing this history, but for failing to teach the public about the 1898 Philippine-American War and subsequent colonization

of the Philippines. With this act of imperial amenisa, the American museum ironically fails in its mission to educate the public. As Sarita See extrapolates with her research on the University of Michigan's Museum of Natural History's Philippine collections: "the museum is invested in *not* telling the history of [U.S. imperialism in the Philippines] because to do so would require revealing the university's direct involvement in the colonization of America's first colony in Asia" (53). The American museum lauds itself as a pedagogical site, a refuge for families to enjoy and for children to become enlightened, whilst simultaneously disavowing the violent history of U.S. colonialism in the Philippines.

"The White Man's Burden"

Published in 1899, Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden" was a poetic gesture of colonial advancement. Kipling did not only encourage the United States to colonize the Philippines but justified the "benevolent assimilation" of the Islands by painting Filipina/o/x subjects as "Half devil and half child." In addition to these poetics of imperialism, *Judge* magazine published a political cartoon of President William McKinley after he delivered his "benevolent assimilation" speech on December 21, 1898. Printed on June 10, 1899, this political cartoon, titled "The Filipino's First Bath" depicts President McKinley in a bathing suit holding a squabbling, brown Filipino baby in primitivity galore (Figure 7). Not only is the baby crying in a grotesque fashion, but he is naked except for tribal jewelry and a small inconsequential spear in his left hand. McKinley has a white towel draped over his right shoulder and a hard bristle brush in his

right hand labeled “education,” ready to scrub the Filipino primitive of his barbarism. The word “civilization” appears in the water’s ripples, ready to “bathe” the Filipino and divest him of his primitivity. In the background, with Capitol Hill as the facade, two boys (not men)—one named “Cuba” and the other “Puerto Rico”—are adorning themselves with red, white, and blue clothing on the grass, looking happy after their civilizing bath. These boys are racialized like the Black pickaninny caricature, with their dark hair, pink lips, and small statures.

Figure 7: “The Filipino’s First Bath,” *Judge* Magazine, vol. 36, no. 921, 10 June 1899.

Both “The White Man’s Burden” and “The Filipino’s First Bath” work together not only to justify U.S. colonization of the Philippines, but to racialize the Filipina/o/x under already established racial codes inscribed by the institutions of settler colonialism and racial chattel slavery. Nerissa Balce delves into these racial codes in her research of “the erotics of American empire” and visual cultures during the 1898 Philippine-American War. According to Balce, “Filipinos, as resistant and dark-skinned colonial subjects, were represented as bestial and intimate figures in the American popular imagination a century ago, joining black and Native Americans as antagonists and familiars in a United States newly transitioned from republic to empire” (30). As a result of these racial codes and images proliferating American popular culture, U.S. colonization of the Philippines became another racial project undergirded by the genocidal logics of settler colonialism and premature death under African enslavement. Genocide, enslavement, and colonization are not merely connected in this matrix of domination, but inform, overlap, and reinforce each other under a global U.S. imperialist regime.

Aimee Suzara alludes to this matrix of domination in her poem, “Norms,” which is set within the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair. A phantasmagoric cultural event, the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair showcased sites, sounds, and pleasures from around the globe. world’s fairs, in particular, “performed a hegemonic function precisely because they propagated the ideas and values of the country’s political, financial, corporate, and intellectual leaders and offered these ideas as the proper interpretation of social and political reality” (Rydell 3). These ideas and values included the situation of the U.S. as a

world power, an industrial colonial force that rivaled and even surpassed the "old world" imperialists of Europe. In order to propagate this idea of American progress, the display of Filipina/o/x people and Natives was essential to the U.S.'s global project, to prove that "benevolent assimilation" of the Philippines and settler colonialism was Turtle Island was a humane, necessary, and highly justifiable act. The Philippine Exhibition became the most popular display at the fair. Other than reconstructions of indigenous dwellings and the showcase of Philippine artifacts, Filipina/ox people "living" in their "natural habitats" were available for the visual consumption of the public, articulating the violence of U.S. empire and the racialization and dehumanization Filipina/o/x colonials faced. The perception that Filipina/o/xs were primitive, unclean, and hypersexualized subjects are articulated in the comments and observations of the fairgoers, where spectators "remarked on the Igorots' lithe, dark bodies, and graceful movements" and were also "disturbed by the near nudity of the Igorot men" (Breitbart 56).

"Norms" begins with an epigraph from Missouri Governor Hunt from 1904: "'There they [the Igorots] tom-tommed and danced the true savage dance and cut the throats of the six dogs, which had been several days fattening'" (33). The epigraph provides a description of the most popular event of the Philippine Exhibition, which was to watch a group of Igorot men perform a ceremonial line dance and witness their feasting of a dog (Figure 8). With Hunt's word choice alone, racialization of the Filipina/o/x primitive can be identified with his use of "tom-tommed" and his description of the Igorot performances as "the true savage dance." Entry number two in the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the verb "tom-tommed" as "Chiefly *Anglo-Indian* and *Indian*

English. To give notice of or call attention to (something) by beating a tom-tom." "Tom-tom" as a noun is defined as "A type of hand-beaten drum traditionally used in India. Later also: any of various similar traditional drums used in societies elsewhere in Asia, in Africa, the Americas, etc." (Entry 1). Although "tom-tom" has its roots in the Hindi language, the name of the tom-tom drum was nevertheless appropriated in American racial codes to generalize the ways BIPOC use drumming as a way to communicate. The root of "tom-tom" from India also signifies the material and discursive exchanges between British and U.S. empires as their colonies—India and the Philippines—are connected by this verbal gesture. Drumming itself was considered "primitive" and "barbaric" by the West, as evidenced in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In a scene where Marlow "'heard shouts and drumming and distant villages,'" Jonah Raskin interprets this moment as "European man's links to *primitive* man" (121, emphasis added). The shouts and small villages in *Heart of Darkness* are not the only elements that indicate primitivity, but the tom-tomming or drumming is significant in this scene. With its etymological roots in India and its racialized encoding, "tom-tomming" can also be understood as an Orientalist term, one that "has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" (Said 2). The West is civilized because the East is savage. Suzara conveys this American Orientalist structure by including this epigraph from Missouri Governor Hunt in 1904.

The entirety of "Norms" unfolds as a collective persona poem, positioned from the Igorots' point of view whilst on display at the Philippine Exhibition. In particular, "Norms" is recited as a set of utterances from the Igorots who performed, according to

Governor Hunt, “the true savage dance” and also partook in dog-eating, a ritualized event that offended yet fascinated fairgoers. “Norms” remixes the language from Rudyard Kipling’s “The White Man’s Burden,” re-opting the poem as follows:

> We are the White Man’s burden—
> The Igorette we’re called
> A name we do not use at home
> But now we must respond.
> …
> You give us twenty dogs a month
> To stage a ceremony;
> And warn visitors to watch their dogs
> In case we get too hungry;
> …
> We play the stage like actors
> who know our script by heart;
> we laugh at your hypocrisy
> and keep our selves intact.
> …
> So you, the Brown Man’s burden—
> Keep your dogs on steady tie—
> The crackling bones might be your own
> If you don’t keep us in your eye!
>
> *Your new-caught, sullen peoples,*
> *Half-devil and half-child* (33-34).

In the poem, the term “White Man’s Burden” is not rejected, but playfully mocked by the collective persona. The collective does not attempt to recover or reclaim another identity in opposition to “the White Man’s Burden;” rather, this racialized term is remixed and refashioned to point out its violence and excessiveness. In her research on Chicana activism, Maylei Blackwell coins the term “retrofitted memory” to describe “a practice whereby social actors read the interstices, gaps, and silences of existing historical narratives in order to retrofit, rework, and refashion older narratives to create new

historical openings, political possibilities, and genealogies of resistance" (102). I argue that Suzara engages in this methodology of "retrofitted memory" by not only visibilizing the Philippine Exhibition at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, but by revealing how "the erotics of American empire" ungirded the performances and spectatorship of the enclosed Igorot Natives.

Furthermore, "Norms" does not position the Igorots as mere victims of the American colonial regime; rather, she alludes to the agency—possible moments of resistance and play—that could have transpired among the Natives.

Figure 8: "Igorrotes Killing a Dog to Eat," Philippine Reservation, 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, Jessie Tarbox Beals. *Materiality & Spectacle*. Harvard University.

How could the Igorots be "the White Man's Burden" when they "play the stage like actors" and warn the fairgoers to "keep us in your eye?" With these lines, Suzara utilizes what Jennifer C. Nash has termed "racial iconography," investigating the pleasures racialized visual culture can unleash, in addition to the wounds it may inflict (2).

Although this is a poem rendered in text and print, Suzara nevertheless conjures the visual not only through her imagery, but the fact that this poem references a photo taken by Jessie Tarbox Beals captioned "Igorrotes Killing a Dog to Eat" at the World's Fair (Figure 8). Suzara is able to conjure this image with her language, which not only provides the reader with a multisensory experience, but also intervenes in the colonial archive, in the ways these images of the primitive Filipino reveal how "American imperialism is a visual and textual language, and that the U.S. colonial archive is not merely a source of knowledge but an object of analysis" (Balce 10). These abject images also strip the archive of its innocence, locating the archive as a site where "where 'imperial fictions' are collected and united in the service of the state and empire" (Balce 11).

Carceral and Imperial Logics

In addition to the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, there were several other expositions and centennial events across the country that celebrated the U.S.'s dominance as an empire and world power during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to Robert Rydell, "Between 1876 and 1916, nearly one hundred million people visited the international expositions held in Philadelphia, New Orleans, Chicago, Atlanta, Nashville, Omaha, Buffalo, Saint Louis, Portland, Seattle, San Francisco, and San Diego" (2). The fairs in St. Louis, Seattle, and Chicago, in particular, kept BIPOC enclosed and on display in what were essentially human zoos. Ota Benga, a Mbuti African man, was exhibited not only in St. Louis, but beginning in 1906, was incarcerated

in the Bronx Zoo. Pamela Newkirk has investigated Ota Benga's captivity in the Bronx Zoo and has highlighted that "there are hundreds of documents in the New York Zoological Society archives and elsewhere that conclusively show [Benga] was intentionally (and unapologetically) 'locked behind bars in a bare cage to be stared at during certain hours'" (170).

I use the term "captivity" to describe Ota Benga's internment, arguing that world's fairs were carceral sites undergirded by the logics of property and dispossession under racial capitalism, racial chattel slavery, and settler colonialism. Newkirk's research supports this claim, not only because Benga was "'locked behind bars in a bare cage,'" but due to the racialized logics and pseudo-scientific claims that justified Benga's captivity, describing him as "'a genuine African pigmy, belonging to the sub-race commonly miscalled "the Dwarfs"'" (Newkirk 172). As a result, I argue that the world's fair, the museum, and the zoo engage in carceral technologies that do not only enforce knowledge accumulation and the erotics of American empire, but also justify the historic and ongoing exposure of BIPOC to incarceration and premature death.

In *Forced Passages*, Dylan Rodriguez traces the emergence of the U.S. prison regime from racial chattel slavery to its modern structure, arguing, "The allegedly excessive, exceptional, or abnormal violence of the prison regime's violence is, within this political-intellectual lineage, reconceptualized as a *fundamental organizing logic* of the United States in its local, translocal, and global enactments" (7). This logic was fundamental to U.S. colonization of the Philippines not only with the captivity of Filipina/o/xs at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, but through the establishment of

concentration camps that led to the premature death of Filipina/o/x civilians during the 1898 Philippine-American War. In *Suspended Apocalypse*, Dylan Rodriguez delineates how "'[t]he entire population outside the major cities in Batangas was horded into concentration camps...Everything outside of the camps was systematically destroyed—humans, crops, food stores, domestic animals, houses, and boats" (147). This act of systematically destroying everything—"humans, crops, food stores, domestic animals, houses, and boats"—were acts of dispossession and genocide that white settlers executed under settler colonial regimes, demonstrating that the 1898 Philippine-American War was not only a genocidal event, but was, according to Nerissa Balce, a continuation of manifest destiny. Balce states, "[T]he histories and ideologies connected to 'Indian fighting' are continued: the Philippines was the new 'West' or frontier that had to be conquered and won" (58). These histories and ideologies are evident in the colonial archive, in the artifacts, photographs, and documents that showcase and even celebrate the captivity of abject peoples.

Another element of captivity that is evident in Ota Benga's case is the routinized spectatorship—or surveillance—during his time at the Bronx Zoo. Pamela Newkirk states that Benga was "'locked behind bars in a bare cage to be stared at during certain hours'" (170). One is incarcerated not only by being locked behind bars, but the modern prison, according to Michel Foucault, establishes "a state of consciousness and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" that is induced in the inmate (201). Foucault continues in *Discipline and Punish*:

> Hence the major effect of the Panopticon...So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they themselves are the bearers (201).

The Panopticon is a tower where, due to its architectural design, "[a]ll that is needed…is to place a supervisor in [the] central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of the backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery" (201). It is not the structure of the Panopticon itself that has made all-around surveillance possible in the modern prison; rather, the effects of the Panopticon, its ability to make "the surveillance permanent," is what pushes inmates to "be caught up in a power situation of which they themselves are the bearers" (201). The surveillance of oneself—to self-regulate and self-discipline even if there is no figure in the tower—is an effect of the modern prison, and one that routinely exposes the incarcerated to social and premature death. Benga's captivity in the Bronx Zoo, with the constant spectatorship of the public and the invasive picking and prodding of anthropologists and zoologists, is marked by cacerality and surveillance. In addition, the captivity of Filipina/o/x citizens in concentration camps during the 1898 Philippine-American War by the American military also constitutes a surveilled existence, where

keeping the population of Batangas enclosed was a genocidal tactic in U.S. invasion of the Philippines.

Aimee Suzara explores these genocical and carceral logics in “Dear Ota Benga,” an epistolary poem that does not merely allude to his incarceration, but directly addresses Ota Benga’s captivity in the Bronx Zoo. The speaker of “Dear Ota Benga,” writes from the present: “I am writing you across a century and this country / where we are both strangers” (42). Rather than stating, “I am writing *to* you,” the speaker states, “I am writing *you*,” an epistolary gesture that acknowledges Benga’s presence and locates him in the present, the time period where the speaker is writing from. In addition, “I am writing *you*” conveys the speaker’s desire to extend the singular pronoun “you” to Benga, an acknowledgment of Benga’s humanity, autonomy, and subjecthood that was historically denied by the spectators, anthropologists, and zoologists who proclaimed that Benga was “the missing link.” “Dear Ota Benga’s,” speaker details how Benga was “[m]easured each day / to demonstrate that you were the link / between humans and apes” (42). By taxonomically positioning Benga “between humans and apes,” he became neither human nor animal, neither subject nor object, but racialized and dehumanized as “other.” Audrey Smedley’s research on scientific racism reveals how “[a]ll of the human sciences—biology, psychology, anthropology, and sociology...were predicated in some fashion on what is identified here as the racial worldview. This was a way of perceiving the world’s peoples as being divided into exclusive and discrete groups, called races, that are ranked hierarchically vis-a-vis one another” (145). The search for “the missing link”—the link between humans and apes—is predicated on racial worldview, and Ota

Benga was captured as "proof" of this pseudoscientific structure. Suzara's poetics do not only expose racial worldview, but she demonstrates how Filipina/o/x people were racialized under a hierarchy that was already anti-Black. This racialization of the Filipina/o/x under a globalized regime of anti-Blackness continues today, notably with the popularity of glutathione and other skin whitening products in Asia. The speaker states, "Today / we're still measured, mocked. The pictures impossible / to become, unless we should stop eating, peel away our skin, / inject ourselves with whitening drugs, put plastic over our eyes / in unnatural hues" (42). The speaker's use of the word "we" signifies the continuation of scientific racism in our contemporary moment, but also functions as a gesture of solidarity toward Benga, of the similar but distinct experiences of Africans and Filipina/o/xs under the late nineteenth and early twentieth century expansion of American empire. This expansion includes the use of visual cultures—photographs, world's fairs, museum exhibitions—that position BIPOC as abject and uncivilized peoples. This racialized and disciplinary use of visual culture continues, which the speaker conveys with the phrase "The pictures impossible." "The pictures" are references to the skinny, light-skinned, *mestiza* figures that proliferate Philippine media and pop culture, but they also refer to an idealized image of whiteness, with the act of "put[ting] plastic over our eyes / in unnatural hues." The "unnatural hues" are a reference to blue or green eyes, hues that are common amongst the Caucasian race and "unnatural" for Black and Brown people. Although comparing captivity at a world's fair and the Bronx Zoo to modern-day standards of whiteness is an imprecise and harmful comparison, especially considering the routinized premature death Black people of the

nineteenth and twentieth centuries were exposed to, Suzara nevertheless demonstrates how these anti-Black logics have transformed across time and continue to be applicable to the present.

The poem continues with a tender speculation on Ota Benga's death. According to the speaker, Benga

> hoped to return one day to the Congo
> ...You could never go home,
> and preferred to die instead. Who would do otherwise in your position?
> …
> But you went down in history:
> refusing to continue the life of an animal
> trapped far away from home
>
> in a cage
> in a Zoo (42).

Karla F.C. Holloway describes the events of Benga's life after his release from the zoo. Although Benga had been taken in by a "benevolent" white American family, he nevertheless experienced "overwhelming loss and the agony of derision and exhibition" (101). One evening, as described by Carrie Allen McCray, Benga "'went into the old gray weathered shed behind Mammy Joe's store, uncovered a gun he had hidden in the hay, and shot himself'" (Holloway 102). Suzara imagines the circumstances of Benga's suicide, speculating, "You could never go home, / and preferred to die instead. Who would do otherwise in your position" (42)? Benga's anguish, alienation, and suffering was undeniable, and although Suzara frames his suicide as a possible act of agency with the line, "Who would do otherwise in your position?", I argue, as I did in Chapter Three, that suicide must be framed as a response to an already administered social death. Mimi Khuc argues: "*Madness is the psychic and affective life of living under siege*. And suicide

is not the failure of strength, of the will to survive. It is a heartbreakingly compromised act of resistance, 'a refusal to carry on under such brutal conditions'" ("Living Under Siege"). I am not arguing that suicide is an appropriate or even an empowering choice under the conditions of premature death. Rather, I argue that "living under siege" with such brutality and trauma limits one's agency to this final act. Suicide is the escape when no other means of escape are possible. At the end of his life, Benga refused "to continue the life of an animal / trapped far away from home / in a cage / in a Zoo" (Suzara 42). This suicidal refusal can be understood as an agential act, in the words of Khuc, "proof of the existence of unbearable violence" ("Living Under Siege").

Going Home

After the year 2000, my next visit to Baguio would be Summer 2017. I made another trip to Mines View Park, curious to see if the same attractions and a similar group of tourists would be present. This time, I saw tourists not only taking pictures with Igorot Natives, but also adorning their traditional necklaces, robes, and headdresses and snapping selfies while wearing them. I understood the contradictions of the Philippine tourist industry: it exploited indigenous communities yet allowed indigenous people to earn the Philippine pisos they needed to survive. However, indigenous communities *are* in this state of survival because of the feudalist and bureaucratic capitalist Philippine government that is still interdependent to the U.S.

In her research on the indigenous Lumad communities of Mindanao, Michelle Dizon writes, "Around 1972, during Martial Law and the Marcos dictatorship, [the

Lumad's] ancestral lands were unlawfully taken from them. Then in 1994 Alcantra and Sons, one of the largest logging companies in the world, was given free rein to begin intensive operations in Lumad areas...In 2015, it is the climate of intensive and violent paramilitarization that is driving Lumad to this sanctuary site" in Davao City (69). I am a diasporic Filipinx going home to the Philippines in the midst of militarized violence and indigenous dispossession. Aimee Suzara delineates the exorbitant contradiction of being able to "go home" while "home" is being destroyed for many in "because going home is not always romantic:"

> and even though its all about going to our roots and mango trees and banana leaves and coconuts and avocado oil for healthy hair and skin and eating crabs with your fingers pre-Spanish fork and spoon and pre-KFC native chicken you can be served by dancing feathered natives that is true it all tastes good but really there is also the glue-sniffing children with no shifts hawking towels cross-cut with twelve year old strippers red lights beer bellied white men gawking...is not very romantic I assure you" (88).

In the above second stanza of the poem, Suzara critiques the romanticization of "going home:" particularly the act of diasporic Filipina/o/xs returning to the Philippines in order to rediscover their roots. This act of "going home" is often framed as a gesture of "decolonization," a way to unearth one's pre-colonial roots which, according to the speaker, includes using natural organic products and eating Filipina/o/x food native to the area while dancing Native people in the background serve to affirm this journey of personal empowerment.

In contrast to the above contradictory and exploitative deconstruction of decolonization, Frantz Fanon defines "decolonization" as follows:

> Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is clearly an agenda for total disorder. But it cannot be accomplished by the wave of a magic wand, a natural cataclysm, or a gentlemen's agreement. Decolonization...is an historical process: In other words, it can only be understood, it can only find significance and become self coherent insofar as we can discern the history-making movement which gives it form and substance (2).

What is striking about Fanon's definition of "decolonization" is his situation of this act as a "historical process" and "history-making movement." Similarly, when theorizing decolonizing research methodologies, Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues, "In a decolonizing framework, deconstruction is part of a much larger intent. Taking apart the story, revealing underlying texts, and giving voice to things that are often known intuitively does not help people to improve their current conditions. It provides words, perhaps...but it does not prevent someone from dying" (3). Both Fanon and Tuhiwai Smith are commensurable in their situation of "decolonization" as a world-making process, one that both deconstructs the conditions of colonial regimes, but also gives form and substance to radical and liberatory ideas. While speaking the language of "going home" and discovering one's roots can be vital to one's self-preservation, "decolonization" must ultimately include a radical restructuring and reconfiguring of the world, one that alleviates the impacts of colonization from those most vulnerable.

Similarly,Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang argue for an "ethic of incommensurability," which includes "relinquishing settler futurity, abandoning the hope that settlers may one day be commensurable to Native peoples. It means removing the

asterisks, periods, commas, apostrophes, the wherea's, buts, and conditional clauses that punctuate decolonization and underwrite settler innocence" (36). This "settler innocence" is contested in Suzara's "because going home is not always romantic." Although the diasporic Filipina/o/x subject is still a part of the Philippine homeland, non-indigenous Filipina/o/x people can be complicit to the settler colonial Philippine state, a complicity that can take the form of being "served by dancing feathered natives" or trying on the traditional clothing of the indigenous peoples of the Cordilleras (Suzara 88). These acts alone demonstrate how the diasporic Filipina/o/x subject is not the same as an indigenous person from the Philippines. Unraveling this mutuality is a key step toward decolonization.

"because going home is not always romantic" further demonstrates how the Philippines is a neocolony of the U.S. Robyn Rodriguez highlights how U.S. neocolonialism of the Philippines took the shape of "economic, political, and social structures" that "laid the basis for neocolonial conditions 'post-independence.' The so-called 'independence' of the Philippines hinged on the consolidation of the Philippine economic elite at the government's helm. The elite were ensured their status and wealth in exchange for concessions to U.S. economic, political, and military interests that were folded into the Philippine constitution" (17-18). These neocolonial conditions and U.S.-backed economic interests have led to a widening socio-economic gap that has further consolidated feudal agrarian societies in the Philippine countryside, as well as a distinct class of urban poor residents that line metropolitan areas like Manila. The speaker in "because going home is not always romantic" refers to the Philippine urban poor as "the

glue-sniffing children with no shifts hawking towels cross-cut with twelve year old strippers red lights beer bellied white men gawking" (88). Not only do these lines reference typical vices (drugs, sex, alcohol), but "the glue-sniffing children" and "twelve year old strippers" are children exposed to premature death under U.S. neocolonialism. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority, in 2018, 16.6% of Filipina/os lived below the poverty line, which translates to 17.6 million people (Figure 9).

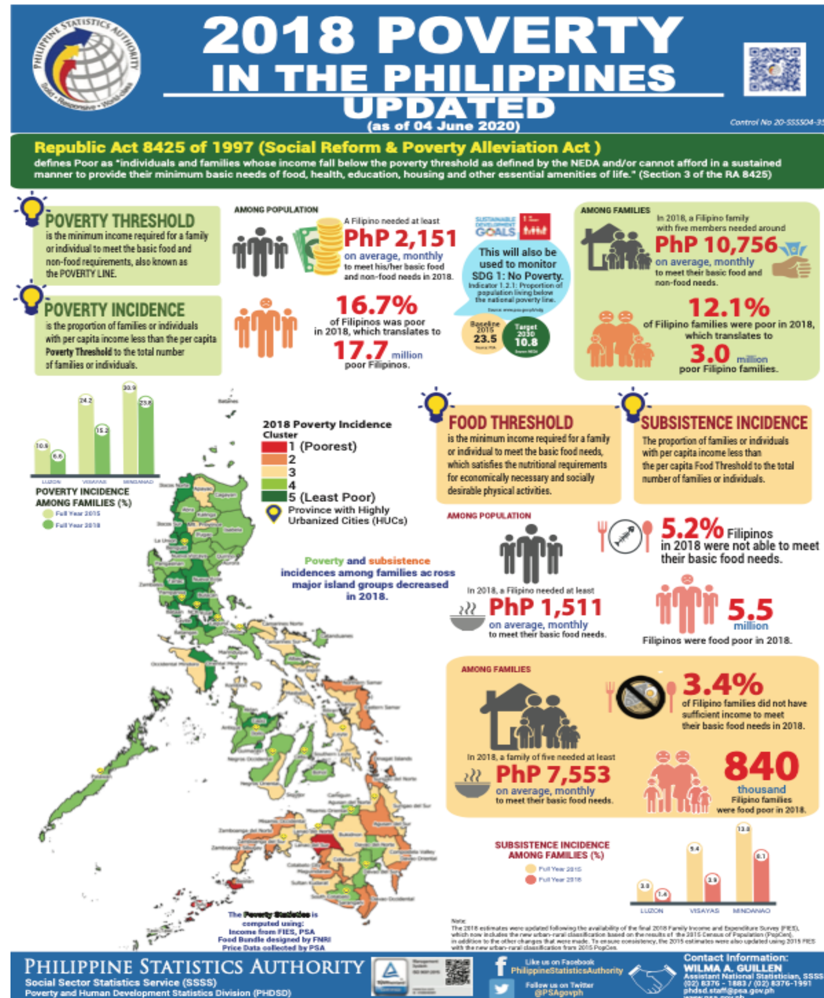

Figure 9: "2018 Poverty in the Philippines Updated," Philippine Statistics Authority, 20 June 2020.

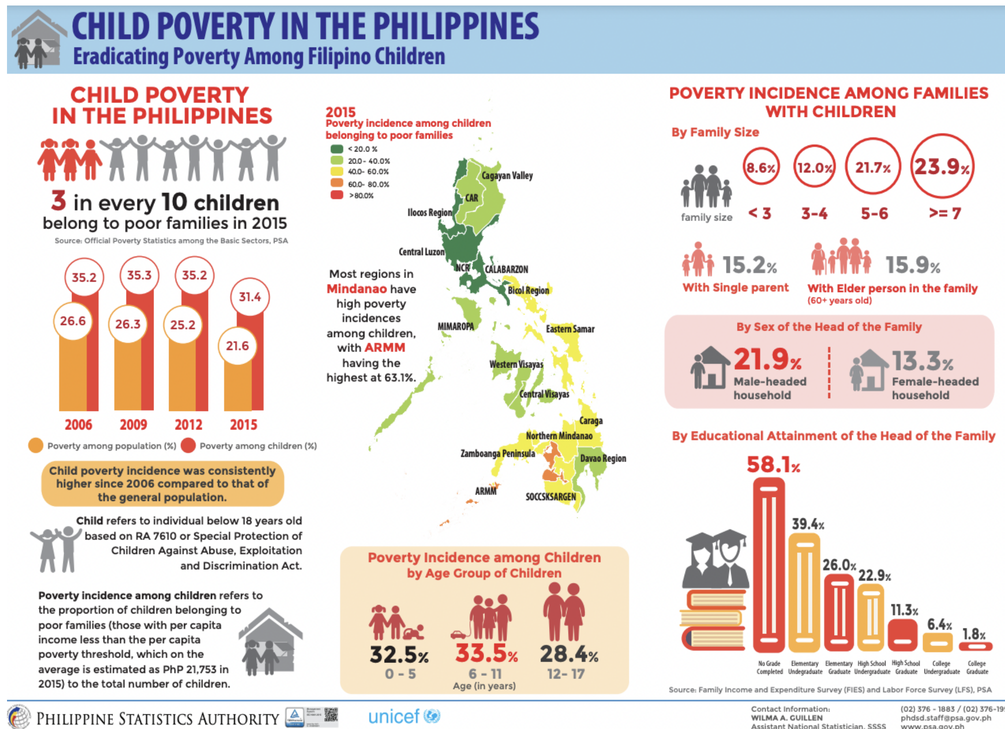

Figure 10: "Child Poverty in the Philippines," Philippine Statistics Authority. Accessed 30 October 2021.

In addition, according to their statistics on child poverty in 2015, three in ten Filipina/o children belong to poor families, with 6-11 years old being the highest age group exposed to poverty-incidence (Figure 10). Figure 10 also denotes that approximately 19% of children in areas like Metro Manila are part of the urban poor. As a result of this lack of support and subsistence, many Filipina/o children turn to "glue-sniffing," also known as Rugby, to alleviate the symptoms of hungry stomachs. In a 2010 study, Njord et. al report that street children use glue-sniffing and other substances "to escape harsh conditions common in the street environment" (204). Furthermore, "Toluene-based solvents (such as shoe glue) are low cost and are very accessible, making them common among street children across cultures. Inhalants therefore provide an easy and quick escape from a

difficult quotidian life but have lasting effects, including brain damage" With these studies and statistics, we can see how premature death is a direct result of ongoing U.S. interdependence, and that one of the most vulnerable populations—the youth and the poor—are exponentially exposed to debilitating conditions.

Finally, the second stanza from "because going home is not always romantic" also mentions "twelve year old strippers red lights beer bellied white men gawking" (Suzara 88). This line references the sex tourism economy in the Philippines, where children as young as twelve-years-old are recruited as sex workers. Robyn Rodriguez delineates how "the United States maintained its military presence in the Philippines as agreements forged between the two countries would allow the Americans to retain military bases throughout the archipelago" (10). The presence of these military bases have led to sprawling sex tourist industries in cities and regions in proximity to these bases. According to Yen Le Espiritu:

> "[T]he prostitution problem" in the Philippines stemmed from U.S. and Philippine government policies that promoted a sex industry—brothels, bars, and massage parlors—for servicemen stationed or on leave in the Philippines. During the Vietnam War, the Philippines was known as the 'rest and recreation' center of Asia, hosting approximately ten thousand U.S. servicemen daily. In this context, *all* Filipinas were racialized as commodities, usable and expendable (426).

Suzara writes from this history, demonstrating how Philippine interdependence to the U.S. is not only a socio-economic relation, but a gendered and hypersexualized one. Gina Velasco also researches how "the trafficked woman represents the subordination of the

feminized Philippine nation, as the Philippines is reduced to the forms of exploited, gendered labor that it provides for a global economy" (53). However, it is important to note that "because going home is not always romantic" specifically references child trafficking of young Filipino girls, which suggests that these pedophiliac desires are facilitated by the U.S. neocolonial regime. Mitali Thakor's investigation of "Sweetie," a computer model of a young Filipino girl launched by the Netherlands based group Terre des Hommes, an anti-trafficking agency, is representative of this abhorrent reality. According to Terre des Hommes, Project Sweetie "is an example of the power of technology to draw attention to the webcam sex tourism issue, through which 'predators are being stopped, and children are being saved'" (Thakor 142). However, Terre des Hommes also engages in a "white savior" narrative that perpetuates a "feminization of victimhood and masculinization of rescue" along with "state support for the neoimperialist rescue of non-Western women, especially those identified as 'prostitutes,' in the name of humanitarian intervention" (Thakor 142). The sex trafficking of Filipino girls—as well as the Western-based humanitarian interventions—are both undergirded by the feminized and neoimperialist scripts that position the Philippines as a feminized country in need of rescue, a noble mission that could only be achieved by a benevolent, more masculinized nation. Thus, the logic of "benevolent assimilation"—used to justify the 1898 Philippine-American War—is rearticulated and continuously deployed by Western and European states working under a rubric of global humanitarianism. It is a logic that simultaneously supports the rescue and the plunder of a colonized nation by the very state that seeks to conquer it.

As a result, Suzara's "because going home is not always romantic" alerts us to the complexities of neocolonial systems, demonstrating how "going home" as a "decolonial" project must be interrogated for its complicity to a settler colonial Philippine state. In addition, Suzara illuminates how specific industries, such as tourism, sex, and humanitarism, are contemporary neoimperialist formations undergirded by the evolving logic of "benevolent assimilation." The poem enables diasporic Filipina/o/xs to question their complicities to these violent structures, and why the act of "going home" should not only be to find one's roots, but should inquire what a multidimensional and transnational anti-imperialist struggle could look like.

Conclusion

Aimee Suzara's *Souvenir* demonstrates the incisive capacities of contemporary queer Filipinx poetry. Suzara's poetry is queer not only in the identitarian sense, but in the ways the strange and the unsettling make themselves known through her documentary-poetics, through her artistic intervention into the U.S. colonial archive. Suzara illuminates how archival research is more than an extractive or epistemological process; images, documents, and narratives can be seen, read, and heard through splintered and dissonant ways. *Souvenir* enables readers to scrutinize the 1898 Philippine-American War and the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair not only to visibilize this obscured history, but to question the viability of representation itself. As we interrogate the objects, artifacts, and bodies on display through a camera lens or museum glass, we must also

question what our gaze reflects back, how these incisive looks compel us to embrace what an anti-imperialist poetics incites within us.

Conclusion:

A Gesture Toward: A Filipinx Lyric Essay

I am folding myself into an airplane seat. Business class, group A. Surrounded by gray pompadours, pant suits, and briefcases staring at this tiny human in faded leggings and a jean jacket. I want to melt, meld, be stitched onto the surface—any surface—would suffice. It is the middle of October. Los Angeles remains sunkissed and colored. I wonder if I will finally see my father cry. I have one hour—

My sister didn't exhibit the same signs, but they were still there—baggy clothes, hiding behind curtains of hair, going to sleep with her head hurting but waking disappointed that she did not have a tumor. She got a lot farther—water, hands to the neck—while I only dabbled in pills. My mom blames me. Says she must've copied me, but I knew she didn't—her moves were too deliberate. I was too focused on suffering. She wanted to stop everything.

Four years later, I am high on Zoloft. The vomit that comes is a sac of baby spiders hatching from my throat. Seminar hours have become closing walls, aching to crush my shoulders. Angry red dots occupy my scalp.

“Your father has a history of mental disorder.”

Yes, I know about his brother.

“It’s not good to always be in therapy.”

“You shouldn’t go if you don’t want to.”

According to Jack Halberstam, queerness is the art of failure. While holding my sister after a month, I thought we must’ve looked like two kindergarten paintings, two flimsy canvasses swimming with strokes from the clumsiest fingers. I once wrote on a fellowship application that I write poetry because it is the only way I can scream. I didn’t get the fellowship.

My mother asks my sister's therapist about *nature v. nurture.* She finally has a theory as to why we are both so fucked. Immigrating to New Jersey left her uprooted, abused, and neglected. In that tiny apartment in East Orange, where my grandmother made snide comments and my father turned a blind eye, her pain made its way through the umbilical cord—to me and then, one and a half years later, to my younger sister. I had to laugh. *Am I a living body of diasporic suffering.* My mother is giving new epistemology to illness.

The Filipino diaspora is a transpacific current of chronic sickness.

Can queerness only be inhabited as pain takes shape? In "Otherwise, Ferguson," Ashon Crawley argues for *otherwise possibilities*: "the disbelief in what is current and a movement towards, and an affirmation of, imagining other modes of social organization, other ways for us to be with each other." When we think of queerness, will there always be a body dangling over an edge. What are the other ways we can bend and stretch our limbs, the other ways we can mark the gold and brown mapping our skin, the other ways we can envelop the adulation and desire clustered in our lips. I look at my bleeding, peeling, stubby fingernails. I tell my father it is okay to cry. I understand why he never told us about my uncle. I understand why he prefers silence; there are things that can only be communicated in pauses.

I wonder what my father would say when I tell him I am as much his son as I am his daughter.

I have folded myself in pieces. My partner and I name them—yellow, green, orange, and red. Red, I am ready for oblivion. Orange, I am dancing with the slivers of light echoing from a blade. Green, a breakdown in the making. Yellow, I think— I can—be happy.

"Your eyes must do some raining if you're ever gonna grow." I wonder what Conor Oberst would say when he sees what I've done to rainbows.

I almost lost my sister to University of California neoliberalism. I like to think my father lost his brother to U.S. empire.

"[T]he violent histories of empire and capital are written on the bodies of Filipinas, on our bruised and bleeding hands and our brown neocolonial breasts."

[Is] there [is] such a thing as

chronic empire and [how] was [is]

it written [transmitted]

in [on] me [my mother].

Kimberly says it's okay to write poems out of marginal notes—a "constellation of hyper-particulars." I am not a constellation—I am a mass of creases, of upset color, of a mind-body waiting, flailing, and beeping for the day where I can wake to possibility. I learned that my uncle also folded himself into a rope. My father found him. I think that was when his mind-body circuits disintegrated and he became machine-operator-paper-boy-company in the morning, busboy-restaurant-worker-best-rice-maker in the evening, and quiet-sleepy-silent-not-really-there-but-not-actually-deadbeat father. What does it mean to be both daughter and familial-emotional-laborer, to be g[x]rl and ghost-of-suicides-past, to be queer death and futurity wrapped in the same potentialities.

"an unrest in [ ] a discontent with [ ] a seeking to conceive [ ]
to wake laughing with tears of joy in our eyes
dreams of [ ] that have us saying:"

I can finally think-feel-bleep-feel I'm alive.

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Notes

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