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Arte-Culations: The Novel Form and the Filipino Style of Being

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by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Arte-Culations: The Novel Form and the Filipino Style of Being

by

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University of California, Riverside, June 2024
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My dissertation project examines contemporary Filipino American novels to describe the aesthetics and inner-workings of everyday Filipino performances, or what I call "the Filipino style of being." My selection of novels (which includes Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters*, Gina Apostol's *Insurrecto*, and R. Zamora Linmark's *Leche*) shows how a specific postcolonial context gives rise to new literary forms that cannot be accounted for by the Western theory of the novel. Through Filipino vernacular languages and practices, I argue that the standard developmentalist and nationalist genealogy of narrative, which is novelistic, is out-of-place in the Philippine context. I also draw on different vernacular modes of performance or *arte* (*puro arte*, *walang arte*, *tuliro*, *bangungot*, *tsismis*, and *talak*) as counterpoints to understanding the Filipino American novel and to expand the critical vocabulary for Filipinx cultural and literary study. Drawing on *bakla* (queer) Filipino performativity, my formulation of *arte* also locates transnational queer of color subjectivities and cultural productions. For example, I use the queer Filipino speech act *talak* (fast talk) to describe the non-

developmentalist/heteronormative/nationalist lifeways of queer Filipinx YouTube content creators like Brenda Mage (a play on "brain damage"). The "Filipino Style of Being" claims that the importation of both the novel and commodity/media culture gave Filipinos an opportunity for inventiveness and transformation—*a room to play*. In other words, I describe in my project the ideological function of narrative—its bourgeoise aesthetic promises of coherence, fluency, and mastery—to in turn highlight the aesthetic quality, the *style*, of the Filipino culture that is in excess of Western narrative and linguistic traditions.

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Introduction

Philippines' latest export into the international social media scene, and my current obsession, is Taylor Sheesh—Taylor Swift's "budget friendly" Filipino counterpart.[1] Mac Coronel, aka Taylor Sheesh, has been impersonating, on stage and in drag, the American pop superstar Taylor Swift since around 2017, and has been a personal fan for much longer. However, Coronel broke into the global social media scene when Taylor Swift's Eras World Tour announced in the summer of 2023 its Asia Pacific destinations, which did not include the Philippines. This came after Singapore struck an exclusive deal with Swift's concert promoters, making it the only Eras Tour destination in Southeast Asia—and in Asia except Japan.[2] That same summer, I was supposed to see Swift in one of her Era's Tour performances at the SoFi Stadium in Los Angeles. While I enjoy her music, I am not what you would call a "Swiftie" (a term used to refer to Taylor Swift fans), and I would not have cared enough to see the live concert had a close friend of mine, who is definitely a Swiftie, not convinced me to go—with the condition that he would do all the ticket purchasing, which ended up becoming a Ticketmaster fiasco worthy of mention in a U.S. congressional hearing. However, two months before the event, my funding to conduct research in the Philippines that summer (for my chapter on *bangungot*) was approved, and so, my friend ended up selling my ticket and going to the concert alone.

[1] See Taylor Sheesh feature on *Good Morning America*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vb4UiH71Aec
[2] Sherisse Pham, "Taylor Swift's Singapore Leg Spurs Bad Blood in SE Asia, Neighbors Can't Shake it Off." *National Public Radio*, March 7, 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/03/07/1236282902/taylor-swift-eras-tour-singapore-concert-southeast-asia

Figure 1. Mac Coronel (aka Taylor Sheesh) during a mall tour in Manila, July 2023. Photos by Jeremy Lee/*Must Share News*.

While I was in the Philippines, the news of Singapore's deal with Swift's Eras Tour was all over the local news and social media. Filipino fans, many of whom would barely be able to afford a concert ticket in Manila let alone travel to Singapore, were, to say the least, disappointed. News media outlets have described Singapore's action as spurring "Bad Blood" (a Swift song title) in Southeast Asia.[3] But as with many global capitalist alliances between the United States and wealthier countries in Asia that often leave the Philippines and Filipinos in the lurch, an opportunity for "*artestic* playfulness" was also created—one that Coronel (Sheesh) was more than willing to take. In the months after, Coronel gained a mob following as she performed, in full Taylor Swift drag (costume changes and everything), for free in packed mall tours she calls "Errors Tour." Coronel's popularity was also exacerbated by viral TikTok and Instagram videos of her performances posted by fans. I was introduced to Coronel through these videos. Here, I am interested in how Coronel's rise to popularity acts as a coordinate for the "bad blood" that Singapore spurred in Southeast Asia, thereby also articulating the long history of "bad blood" between the Philippines and Singapore—marked by events like the controversial execution (by hanging) of Filipino worker Flor Contemplacion in Singapore.[4] That is, what Coronel's rise to fame points us to is the labor and politics of

[3] Sherisse Pham. "Taylor Swift's Singapore Leg Spurs Bad Blood in SE Asia, Neighbors Can't Shake it Off" *National Public Radio*, March 7, 2024, https://www.npr.org/2024/03/07/1236282902/taylor-swift-eras-tour-singapore-concert-southeast-asia

[4] See "Migrant Heroes: Nationalism, Citizenship and the Politics of Filipino Migrant Labor" by Robyn Rodriguez and "The Politics of Mirrored Metaphors: Flor Contemplacion and *The Maid*" by Benjamin McKay.

colonial imitative practices, as well as the violence implicated in them. Such is one of the workings of what I call "the Filipino style."

The Filipino style is best described through *arte*, which in Spanish translates to "art" (that is, high/deep/fine/masterful art), but in the Filipino context, *arte* actually means "acting." There is nothing *deep* about it. In fact, *arte* is all about surface performance. It describes the everyday performances, dramatics, and hysterics of Filipinos as they navigate colonial influence.[5] As such, I use *arte* as a *style* of articulating the aesthetics and inner-workings of everyday Filipino performances. And I use the terms "*arteculations*" (the title of my project) and "*artestic*" to gesture to the ways the Filipino style articulates itself *otherwise* through, yet also in excess of, its colonial history and Western narratives of development, progress, and modernity.

Through "style," I also examine the aesthetic form, value, and reception of Filipino imitative, performative, and linguistic practices. By highlighting "Filipino imitation," I am not interested in reproducing discussions on how exemplary colonial imitative practices are in relation to the "original," and so should be a point of national pride. Instead, I am interested in how Filipinos, according to Karen Tongson, "became originals by making the most beautiful copies, sometimes of themselves."[6] That is, I am interested in the Filipino obsession for imitation and repetition in its pursuit of surface beauty. According to Taylor Black, "style," like the peacock, "has something to teach us about becoming more and more like ourselves… [and is] committed to the cultivation

[5] Lucy Burns, *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stages of Empire* (New York University Press, 2012).
[6] Karen Tongson, *Why Karen Carpenter Matters* (University of Texas Press, 2019).

and repetition of [our] innate sense of difference…a method of perfecting and projecting that which is essentially peculiar."[7] I appreciate Black's point here as it pertains to his essay's subjects—the peacock, Flannery O'Connor, and Quentin Crisp—and their relation to the nature of queerness. However, I observe something slightly different in the Filipino Style's repetitive tendencies in that it is not so much about the formal repetition of that which is peculiar—making it original in its peculiarity—but about the repetition, perfection, and projection of the very familiar that in turn makes it strange and peculiar, *original* in its familiarity. Like many Filipino imitative figures—such as Arnel Pineda and Jake Zyrus (Charice Pempengco)—who broke into the international music scene, Coronel's Taylor Sheesh would be constantly pitted against, or described alongside, the original. But unlike Pineda and Zyrus who were hailed for the quality of their voice—their inherent likeness to the voices of Steve Perry and Celine Dion, for example—what strikes me is that Coronel's imitative style is all surface: dresses, wigs, make-ups, lip-syncs, and gestures. Thus, in accordance with the Filipino Style, she forces us to pay attention and to take seriously the form, value, and beauty of that which is purely superficial. She makes herself original by trying so hard to perfect Swift's likeness, but also failing in many ways to be exactly like Swift. And perhaps she was whole-heartedly embraced by her Filipino fans, me included, precisely because of our own intimate relationships with the vacuous and the superficial, in our effort to create ourselves through constant mimicry.

[7] Taylor Black, "Apotheosis of the Peacock: On Queerness, Repetition, and Style," *ASAP/Journal* 5, no. 3 (2020), 639-666, 640-641.

My project thus examines contemporary Filipino American novels to describe the aesthetics and inner-workings of everyday Filipino performances, or what I call "the Filipino style of being." My selection of novels (which includes Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters*, Gina Apostol's *Insurrecto*, and R. Zamora Linmark's *Leche*) shows how a specific postcolonial context gives rise to new literary forms that cannot be accounted for by the Western theory of the novel. Through Filipino vernacular languages and practices, I argue that the standard developmentalist and nationalist genealogy of narrative, which is novelistic, is out-of-place in the Philippine context. I also draw on different vernacular modes of performance or *arte* (*puro arte*, *walang arte*, *tuliro*, *bangungot*, *tsismis*, and *talak*) as counterpoints to understanding the Filipino American novel and to expand the critical vocabulary for Filipinx cultural and literary study. Drawing on *bakla* (queer) Filipino performativity, my formulation of *arte* also locates transnational queer of color subjectivities and cultural productions. For example, I use the queer Filipino speech act *talak* (fast talk) to describe the non-developmentalist/heteronormative/nationalist lifeways of queer Filipinx YouTube content creators like Brenda Mage (chapter 4). The "Filipino Style of Being" claims that the importation of both the novel and commodity/media culture gave Filipinos an opportunity for inventiveness and transformation—*a room to play*. In other words, I describe in my project the ideological function of narrative—its bourgeoise aesthetic promises of coherence, fluency, and mastery—to in turn highlight the aesthetic quality, the *style*, of the Filipino culture that is in excess of Western narrative and linguistic traditions.

Philippine Literature and the U.S. Empire

Philippine literature in English developed within the context of the U.S. occupation of the Philippines (1898-1945) and its effort to make English the standard for teaching, writing, and speaking. Under the narrative of "benevolent assimilation," American teachers traveled to the Philippines to establish a new public school system, to teach basic education, and to train Filipino teachers, while making English the new medium of instruction. These teachers were also referred to as the "Thomasites" after the United States Army transport ship *Thomas* that brought them to Manila Bay. Going the opposite direction through the *pensionado* program, chosen Filipina and Filipino students (*pensionados*) traveled to the United States to attend university and graduate degree programs. Sponsored by U.S. governors like William Howard Taft, the *pensionado* system cultivated Americanized Filipino elite intellectuals and politicians to manage anti-colonial resistance, as well as set the stage for the *Filipinization* of the Philippine government. Many of these *pensionados* would also help shape Philippine intellectual and literary life by publishing, or sponsoring publications of, literature in both countries. Writers like José Garcia Villa, Bienvenido Santos, and N.V.M. Gonzalez were some of the direct and indirect beneficiaries of *pensionado* sponsors (Augusto Espiritu). Works like *Five Faces of Exile: The Nation and Filipino American Intellectuals* by Augusto Espiritu has provided a rigorous historical contextualization of Filipino intellectual migrants to the United States and has argued for a diasporic approach, with an eye on the

U.S. imperial project, when thinking about the development of Philippine literature.[8] The focus on U.S. imperialism, according to Espiritu, forces us to think about the intersectedness of race, gender, class, ethnicity, and ideas of the nation, as well as the discourse of "benevolent assimilation," that shaped the works of Filipino writers.

According to Denise Cruz, the reception of Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart* and Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters* is "an especially illustrative example of how the boundaries of nation, gender, periodization, and the political intersected for scholars of Asian American literature." *America is in the Heart* is often read, and critiqued, as a developmentalist novel that follows the male narrator's own political and artistic awakening, as well as encounters with U.S. racism. (But, as Joseph Keith has argued, *America is in the Heart* should be understood—within the context of U.S. race relations and empire—not as a developmentalist novel but as a narrative of "underdevelopment.")[9] In contrast, Hagedorn's *Dogeaters* has been hailed "as a quintessentially queer, feminist, diasporic, and postmodern text." *Dogeaters* is especially known for its use of mixed media—from radio drama and advertisements to excerpts from newspapers, travel writing, and official speeches—as a mode of feminist, queer, postmodernist, and postcolonial critique of "the male version of cultural nationalism ostensibly espoused by Bulosan."[10] Along with a new generation of Filipino American writers like Peter Bacho, R. Zamora Linmark, and Ninotchka Rosca, Hagedorn's works "reflect the development

[8] Augusto Espiritu, *Five Faces of Exile: The Nation and Filipino American Intellectuals* (Stanford University Press, 2005).
[9] Joseph Keith, *Unbecoming Americans: Writing Race and Nation from the Shadows of Citizenship, 1945-1960* (Rutgers University Press, 2013).
[10] Denise Cruz, "Transpacific Femininities." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia, Literature*, 2019, 5, doi: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.904.

and growth of Asian American studies, women's studies, LGBT studies, and the emergence of multiculturalism in the United States." These writers would then "pave the way for the emergence of other Filipino women's voices such as Gina Apostol, Cecilia Manguerra Brainard, M. Evelina Galang, Tess Uriza Holthe, Michelle Cruz Skinner, Eileen Tabios, Marianne Villanueva, and many others."[11] *Dogeaters* received a particularly positive reception from academics since its publication. Much of the scholarship paid attention to the deconstructive postmodernist and postcolonial quality of the novel which also coincided with the institutionalization of Postcolonial Studies as an academic discipline.[12] The works of Lisa Lowe (*Immigrant Acts*), Viet Than Nguyen (*Race and Resistance*), Stephen Sohn ("From Discos to Jungles"), Sarita See ("Southern Postcoloniality and the Improbability of Filipino-American Postcoloniality"), Martin Joseph Ponce (*Beyond the Nation*), and Cristine Balance (*Tropical Renditions*), among others, are notable. However, *Dogeaters* also received its share of negative criticisms particularly from scholars like Epifanio San Juan Jr. San Juan who has pointed out that the "postmodernist technique of pastiche, aleatory juxtaposition, virtuoso bricolage" in novels like *Dogeaters* are but expressions of "narcissistic captivity" and imitations of western postmodernist tropes that mimic the fragmentary materialist, capitalist world system—what he calls "stylized gestures of protest."[13]

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[11] Jeffrey Arellano Cabusao, "Filipino American Literature." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia, Literature*, 2019, 11, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.777.
[12] See *Postcolonial Studies and the Literary: Theory, Interpretation and the Novel* by Eli Park Sorensen.
[13] E. San Juan Jr., *Racial Formations/Critical Transformations: Articulations of Power and Ethnic and Racial Studies in the United States* (Humanities Press, 1992), 125-26.

I appreciate San Juan's discussion in the same article on Western postmodernism's political limits, which for him implicates postmodernist Filipino American novels, but, as my project aims to describe, we can advance and rethink the postmodern aesthetics of novels like *Dogeaters*, *Insurrecto*, and *Leche* precisely when they are understood *not* through Western postmodernism, but through Filipino modes of performance and within the context of Philippine post/modernity. That the carnivalesque and fragmentary style of Philippine postmodernist novels are insidiously repetitive, playful, and imitative, I argue, are not mere "stylized gestures" but are the precise reflection of the Filipino style in which its idiosyncrasies are the very products of history and aesthetic innovation.

The Nation and Narrative

The historical modernization of the Philippines, out of which the Filipino style emerged, has rhetorical and institutional congruence with U.S. narratives of expansion, on the one hand, and Western/European notions of "development" and "progress," on the other. As Reynaldo Ileto has pointed out, "In the Philippines, the developmental outlook is deeply implicated in power relations within the society as well as between the Philippines and the outside world." For Filipinos, to be "educated" is "to learn about themselves, their society, history, and culture through books, the mass media, and the classroom, [and to] become immersed in ideas of development, emergence, linear time, scientific reason,

humane pragmatism, governmental ordering and nation building."[14] The education of the Filipino, thus, follows a "linear scheme" in which historical and cultural hierarchies are established, and narrative trajectories from primitive to modern are naturalized and "obscured in textbooks and teaching methods."[15] Even critics of the government and the technocratic elite, as well as anti-colonial nationalists, would nevertheless be confined within that very discourse of development. One such example is the renowned Philippine historian Renato Constantino, who, in *The Miseducation of the Filipino*, among his other works,[16] has expressed strong anti-colonial critique of the U.S. empire, particularly its influence in Philippine education. According to Constantino, English, which was made the medium of education by the Americans, "became the wedge that separated the Filipinos from their past and later was to separate educated Filipinos from the masses of their countrymen."[17] Here, Constantino advocates for a "truly nationalist education" through which to create a unifying nationalist culture—through a shared local language and distinct local history and culture—in order to become legible and compete in the industrialized and industrializing world, and move beyond the confines of agriculture.[18] In other words, a nationalist culture for Constantino supervenes the cultural alienation that Filipinos suffered through colonialism and capitalism. Constantino's assertion is developmental not only in its privileging of the *Illustrado* (enlightenment) trajectory but

[14] Reynaldo Ileto, "Outlines of a Nonlinear Emplotment of Philippine History," in *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow*, ed. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (Duke University Press, 1997), 98-131, 98.
[15] Ileto, "Outlines," 99.
[16] See also *The Making of a Filipino.*
[17] Renato Constantino, *The Miseducation of the Filipino* (Malaya Books Inc, 1977), 7.
[18] Constantino, *The Miseducation*, 2.

also because of its desire to *cohere* the Filipino nation—through language, history, and culture.

In his seminal work on the theory of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson has tried to describe the national coherence of the Filipino culture through his analysis of the opening scene of the 19th-century novel *Noli Me Tangere* by José Rizal, "The Father of Filipino Nationalism." For Anderson, nationalism *coheres* by way of "imagination" and "creation." And to suggest that national communities and identities are "imagined"—as opposed to "invented," as someone like Ernest Gellner has suggested—is to reject the binary notions of true or false, good or bad, communities and instead highlight "the style in which they are imagined."[19] Anderson adds that communities come to be imagined, following Walter Benjamin's notion of the Messianic Time, through the temporal simultaneity of past and present, the "temporal coincidence…measured by clock and calendar." In other words, a set of otherwise unrelated events can be made to cohere when understood (*imagined*!) in a particular shared historical and social context—the perfect expressions of which can be found in "the novel and the newspaper."[20] As such, Anderson found in the opening scene of Rizal's *Noli*—when a prominent local figure and "lavish host" announces to the public an event he will be hosting for other prominent figures in the city—"that right from the start the image (wholly new to Filipino writing) of the dinner party being discussed by hundreds of unnamed people, who do not know each other, in quite different parts of

[19] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (Verso, 2016), 6.
[20] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 24-25.

Manila, in a particular month of a particular decade, immediately conjures up the imagined community."[21] For Anderson, *Noli* exemplifies the nationalist novel for it describes not only the constitution of the community and its presumed norms, but also the consolidation of the "'interior' time of the novel" and the "'exterior' time of the [Manila] reader's everyday life."[22] However, what Anderson failed to account for is the composition of the imagined Filipino reader, the reader who did not get invited to the party, the Indios.[23] He failed to imagine Indio readers whose diverse vernacular cultures and languages do not cohere with the society Rizal supposedly describes—vernacular cultures and languages that the Spanish deliberately kept alive to mediate anti-colonial resistance and revolt.[24] Anderson's theory, thus, that the novel (and the newspaper) describes the coherence necessary in understanding nation formation, that the novel is the expression of nationalism, is limited in that he has mostly confined his theory of nationalism and social formation within the developmentalist novel. That is, what Anderson did was not merely suggest that the novel is the form in which nationalism is reflected, but rather—and perhaps without realizing it—give nationalism the shape of the novel. The novel seems to reflect nationalism for Anderson because he has in turn told a story of nationalism as if it were a series of novels: in the way he describes the trajectory of nationalists and nationalist groups, and in his *bildungsroman* narrative of the creole

[21] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 26-27.
[22] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 27; Anderson notes in the 2016 edition of the book (pp. 26-27) that "at the time of the original publication of *Imagined Communities*, [he] had no command of Spanish, and thus was unwittingly led to rely on the instructively corrupt translation of Leon Maria Guerrero."
[23] The term "Filipino" at that time only referred to Filipinos with Spanish blood, and not the native Indios. See *The Making of a Filipino* by Renato Constantino.
[24] See *The Making of a Filipino* by Renato Constantino.

and colonized subjects, like *Noli's* protagonist Crisostomo Ibarra (whose story is not unlike Rizal's), who move to and are educated in the metropolis and return home to create their own coherent culture.[25]

What Anderson fails to account for are the ways in which imported ideas and narrative forms are in fact displaced, twisted, and/or transformed in the colonized context,[26] what the Brazilian literary critic Roberto Schwarz calls "ideas-out-of-place." "Ideas out-of-place" for Schwarz refers to the literary rewriting of Brazilian history that understands Western liberal ideas as a scientific centering of knowledge, "which places Brazil outside the system of science," and focuses on the failures of Western ideas when adopted in Brazil.[27] Western liberal ideas had furnished the ideology for Brazilian independence, inevitably making them part of its "national identity." However, those ideas, in relation to the country's history of slavery, ultimately become untranslatable[28]—or, rather, that the ideas are perhaps translatable but in "twisted" manners, which for Schwarz are "recognizably Brazilian in their peculiar distortion."[29] What I find particularly useful about Schwarz's concept of "ideas out-of-place" in relation to Filipino culture are precisely the ways that such "cultural effects" are "twisted" in the target culture. When placed in the Philippine context, Schwarz's concept reveals the

[25] I thank David Lloyd for pointing out to me Anderson's inadvertent novelization of nationalism here.
[26] Partha Chatterjee has also made a similar argument here about the out-of-placeness of nationalism in a colonized space, for example India. See his critique of Anderson in the article "Whose Imagined Community?"
[27] Roberto Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas: Essays on Brazilian Culture* (Verso Books, 1992), 19; Although this translation uses the term "misplaced ideas," I follow the lead of David Lloyd who suggests the more accurate translation "ideas-out-of-place."
[28] Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas*, 20.
[29] Schwarz, *Misplaced Ideas*, 25.

incompatibility of enlightenment ideas with the Philippines—due to its history of multiple colonial and religious intrusions, archipelagic geography, and diversity of peoples, cultures and languages. Here, I argue that Rizal's *Noli* bears explicit congruence with the novels of Machado de Assis (Schwarz's subject of analysis) in their performance of (enlightenment) ideas-out-of-place, during the Spanish and Portuguese occupations respectively. That is, *Noli,* instead of the Andersonian narrative of coherence, should be understood through ideas-out-of-place precisely because of how it describes the disintegration not only of European enlightenment ideas in the Philippines ruled by corrupt Spanish friars, but also of vernacular cultures and languages in their clash with the Spanish (e.g., an argument scene in *Noli* about the "correct" pronunciation of "Filipino"). Instead of providing a coherent nationalist narrative, *Noli* in fact displaces Anderson's theory of nationalism in its ultimate inability to integrate in the Philippine context.

Noli also sets up the disintegration of the novel form in the Philippine context, for the nationalist narrative is not unlike the *bildungsroman's* struggle, which is the development of the inchoate hero who gains coherence, unity, and capacity to be a social agent. Georg Lukacs's idea of the *bildungsroman* is one where the novel individual is alone in the world, alienated—unlike the epic hero who is "at home in the world"—but seeks to be made whole in it. The trajectory of the novel for Lukacs is the movement of the alienated individual into a world that becomes "second nature," that is, an understanding of society and nature as opposed. Society itself is supposed to be opposed to nature and so for Lukács becomes a second nature into which the human must find his

way. The human is born as a natural being, therefore the trajectory of human life is to emerge into consciousness of the self. Lukács saw the novels of Dickens and Dostoevsky, for example, as failures because their characters are not so much individuals (finding their way) as social types, stereotypes. Dickens' use of London as a main setting, a metropolis rather than a rural place, takes away the social totality necessary in the ultimate integration of the protagonist, for London as a metropolis describes diversity and not totality. That is, for Lukács the trajectory of the developing character and its interpretation of the social world must communicate with the reader's legibility of the society—a coherence not unlike Anderson's imagined communities.[30]

If for Lukács the *bildungsroman* narrative is measured by a totality through the integration of the protagonist into second nature/society, for Mikhail Bakhtin, the novel individuals are less interested in integration or ideas of totality, but instead they are means for interacting with the social as a site of differentiation, multiplicity, polyvocality, and polysemy. That is, there is not for Bakhtin a normative society or "second nature" into which the protagonist integrates. Instead, Bakhtin values parody, comedy, and heteroglossia as ways of seeing in the novel a kind of uncontainable proliferation of antagonistic or incompatible modes of discourse.[31] This idea of the novel as a space of displacement is then what Homi Bhabha takes to think about the colonial condition in Salman Rushdie's works. For Bhabha, the appropriation of colonial language, for example, is a kind of *displacement* that thinks about appropriation not as assimilation but

[30] Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature* (MIT Press, 1974).
[31] Mikhail Mikhaĭlovich Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (University of Texas Press, 2010).

rather as a transformation. Bhabha is particularly helpful in thinking about the diasporic subject as a mode of displacement rather than an agent moving from alienation to integration. Thus, the performative dimension of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque is the overturning of hierarchies. Bhabha also poses critique on Anderson and his assertion that so long as people have a common vernacular language and a common place, they would recognize in one another a horizontal comradeship that would constitute the nation. For Bhabha, the idea of the nation that is constituted by "nation-ness," which is the diverse performances of the nation by diasporic communities that enter into it, has to be understood as having a displacing effect on the homogeneity of the nation. And unlike Anderson's use of the Benjaminian "empty time," Bhabha thinks about the nation as in fact *filled* with conflicting memories that "disseminate the nation." That is, the nation and the novel for both Bakhtin and Bhabha are not contained but disbursed, a place in which to play and perform.[32] But whereas for Bhabha colonial mimicry happens in subtle linguistic variations (e.g., from London to L.O.N.D.O.N. in his reading of Rushdie), my conception of the Filipino style and Philippine colonial mimicry is one that is far more aggressive and appropriative in its displacing and appropriative abilities—particularly within the context of the Philippine-U.S. colonial relation. The Filipino style is, I argue, a total appropriation, expressed in no better way than in the performance and reperformance of commodity and media forms.

Thus, in using Schwarz's notion of ideas-out-of-place, I also modify and situate it within the succeeding occupation of the Philippines by the United States (from Spain).

[32] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 2012).

For while Rizal describes the importation of European enlightenment ideas in the Philippines—where, I argue, they are displaced as opposed to cohere—during the Spanish rule, the U.S. empire did not import enlightenment ideas so much as disseminated commodity and media culture. Thus, on the one hand, by following Schwarz's concept and placing it in the Philippine context, I aim to reveal a social structure that is incompatible with the enlightenment ideas and commodity culture imported in the Philippines. That is, it would reveal fissures and contradictions within global structures of colonialism and capitalism. On the other hand, through a revision of "ideas out-of-place," which I call "the Filipino style of being," I examine the ways in which the imported medium (the novel) out-of-place and its content (media and commodity culture) out-of-place gave Filipinos an opportunity for inventiveness and transformation. Through novels like *Dogeaters* (Jessica Hagedorn), *Insurrecto* (Gina Apostol), and *Leche* (R. Zamora Linmark), my aim is to not merely write about anglophone Filipino novels—that is, only through the Western theory of the novel—but counterpoint them with vernacular languages and practices from the inside as a way of thinking about the novel in relation to a specific colonized culture. In other words, by articulating the ways that Schwarz's concept is itself out-of-place in the Philippines, we might be able to describe a particular kind of Philippine colonial carnivalesque (which is often thought of as simple imitation, parody, incoherence, and lack of fluency) that is distinctively aggressive and appropriative—one that is at once insurgent and creative in its unassimilability.

Articulating *Arte*: Chapter Breakdown

Ideas-out-of-place (and by extension media-and-commodity-out-of-place), when modified in the Philippine context as Filipino style, shows that the imported ideas and products are not being picked up by Filipinos as intellectual content but as everyday modes of performance, as *arte*. If, for Anderson, the novel is that which coheres the national narrative, then what of novels like *Dogeaters* that deals with representations not of (imagined) coherent narratives on the page but disruptions of media forms? And what of the newspaper which lends itself to the solitary pleasures of reading but not to the Filipino attachment to performance—to radio, TV, and film which tend to be more communal? How do we then think about the ways in which Filipinos perform and reperform media and commodity culture in relation to the novel and Western narrative traditions? And how do we describe alternative literary, cultural, and performative forms that exceed colonial, imperial, and global capitalist logics?

Chapter 1 uses the concept of "pure performance" to provide an alternative context for the fragmentary narrative style and use of mixed media in Jessica Hagedorn's 1990 novel *Dogeaters.* What I refer to as "pure performance" is a mode of narrative interpretation that describes the breakdown of the developmentalist novel, within a colonial context, by making us aware of its constructedness, and by directing us to the workings of narrative's various facades (screens). I also argue that *Dogeaters* deploys multiple narrative screens, using multiple media forms, to foreground the politics and aesthetics of surface performance in colonial narratives. On the one hand, I focus on the often-overlooked character of Lolita Luna to describe the ways in which she disrupts the

novel both narratologically and aurally by dissolving the boundary between media and character, thus, revealing not only the multiple narrative screens of the novel but also the screens of the American empire. On the other hand, by insisting on Lolita Luna's interruptions as the focal point of the entire novel, I suggest that *Dogeaters* also disrupts the Western theory of the novel because of the ways it subverts and revises notions of irony, drama, development, mastery, and morality by treating them as purely performative within the logic of Filipino performance or *arte*.

Chapter 2 uses and theorizes the Filipino performative style of *walang arte* to account for the ways in which Filipinos negotiate with the violence of translation and everyday life. By way of *walang arte*—which I also refer to as "Filipino non-coherence"—and its disruptive and playful stylistic possibilities, I look at Gina Apostol's 2018 novel *Insurrecto* as not a mere performance of a postmodern aesthetic but an enactment in novel form of a Filipino repertoire of style. On one hand, the Filipino repertoire of style that *Insurrecto* performs poses a problem for translation as an act of mastery and fluency because of the ways in which it not only identifies linguistic fragmentation but bridges the fragments through play; it enacts the Filipino capacity to move between fragments of languages. On the other hand, through fragmentation and acts of breaking, the novel articulates the dis/junction between playfulness and pain, the relationship between the pain of breakage and the play that breaking allows.

Chapter 3 looks at R. Zamora Linmark's 2011 novel *Leche* and its depictions of the deadly Filipino medical phenomenon *bangungut* (nightmare), which I argue acts as a performative means of surfacing and accessing not only the nightmares but also the

dreams, desires, and pleasures of Filipinos. *Bangungut* comes from the words *bangun* (to rise) and *ungul* (to moan) which describes that moment of struggle to move and scream out of a bad dream. But in the case of *bangungut*, the victim, in many cases, fails to wake up and dies. I also examine in this chapter the narrative and performative potentials of *tsismis* (gossip) in its articulation of *bangungut*—which, precisely because of its inherently enigmatic quality, is ideal for *tsismis*. That is, while *bangungut* brings to surface Filipino dreams and desires, *tsismis*, on the other hand, (due to its own disruptive and precarious quality) acts as the narrative mode that articulates *bangungut's* workings and structure. Through *bangungut* and *tsismis*, I examine the relation between the novel form and medical narratives of diagnoses/autopsies and how they are displaced in a particular colonial context. And I utilize *tsismis* not only as a "destructuring device" (Lisa Lowe) but as a mode of Filipino social organization that has both official and unofficial, real and superstitious, repercussions. The unpredictability of *bangungot*—its ability to paralyze and kill during sleep without warning—I argue, is precisely why it becomes an object of *tsismis*, and why it eludes medical narratives and diagnoses.

Chapter 4 takes the various Filipino performative forms described in the previous chapters, the various forms of *arte*, and examine how they are being performed and reperformed in popular media. I specifically focus on the actor, drag performer, and YouTube vlogger Brenda Mage (a play on "brain damage") and her group of *bakla* (queer) friends (aka "The Social Climber Squad") who were stuck together in a one-bedroom apartment during the COVID-19 lockdown in Manila, Philippines. On the one hand, I characterize the nationalist and developmentalist traditions of Filipino *teleseryes*

(soap operas) and its representation of the Filipino queer narrative through *Maalaala Mo Kaya's* (a variation of the *teleserye* genre) depiction of Mage's life story. On the other hand, I highlight in this chapter the forms of life and aesthetic creations that Mage and the Squad were forced to produce in their overlapping daily vlogs (video blogs) during the lockdown, which I argue defy *Maalaala Mo Kaya's* developmentalist narrative. I then use the Filipino speech act *talak* (fast talk) to describe the performative dysfunction, disorientation, misdirection, and incoherence that map out Mage and the Squad's seemingly "backwards" narrative trajectory, what I call "*bakla bildung*." The varying contents and qualities of their vlogs, I argue, give us access to not only a particular kind of *bakla* intimacy and community, but also another way of understanding the relationship of Filipinos to media forms: documentary, *Teleserye*, Reality TV, YouTube, and Facebook.

Statement of Significance and Field Interventions

Within Asian American Studies, the issue of representation has been at the center of discourse when accounting for minoritized and colonized peoples and cultures: the questions of "how to document absence and how to establish presence in America."[33] Filipinos being both minoritized and colonized—and the Philippines being the only U.S. territory in Asia—complicates notions of Asian American representations because it reminds us that establishing presence within the imperial visual frame is also to create a

[33] Sarita Echavez See, "Filipino American Visual Culture." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia, Literature*, 2019, 1, doi: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.867.

condition for the historical erasure of imperial violence. In other words, to be assimilated, represented, and documented—to be "seen"—within the bounds of the nation-state is also to perpetuate the nation-state's ideological and oppressive logics.[34] Thus, to understand Filipino/Filipino American representation and visibility, we must first understand the Philippine-American relation within the context of the U.S. Imperial War—in other words, within the context of the genocidal conquest of the Philippines by the United States in its effort to expand as a global capitalist power. During the U.S. imperial rule, the Philippines became the testing ground for the use of media and visual culture as instruments in promoting colonial ideology and White Supremacy—through photography, film, TV, radio, advertisements, etc. Through the imperial gaze, Filipinos were either spectacularized (Orientalized as primitive) or erased from the imperial frame, considered as "nationals," both minoritized and colonized, "foreign in a domestic sense" within the U.S. nation-state.[35] Another way that Filipinos are made visible within the imperial visual frame is through consumption and imitation. Filipinos' relentless and obsessive overconsumption and imitation of American media and commodity culture. As such, my project intervenes in recent Asian Americanist scholarship on narrative and consumption by providing an alternative way of thinking about commodity colonialism in the wake of the U.S. Imperial War. I argue that the carnivalesque quality of the Filipino culture, particularly its everyday linguistic and performative modes

[34] See Nerissa Balce (*Body Parts of Empire*, 2016)
[35] See, "Filipino American Visual Culture," 4.

(characterized by constant coding, referentiality, and wordplay), is disruptive of Western traditions and literary forms.

My project also contributes to scholarships in Southeast Asian/American Studies and Global Asias Studies that are paying attention to culture and aesthetics when thinking about Southeast Asian/American literature and culture—that is, those concerned about the form, value, and reception of these artistic works and cultural products. Literary and scholarly representations of Southeast Asian countries and cultures tend to focus, not inaccurately, on war and empire and, consequently, the lives of refugees, asylum seekers, exiles, immigrants, and colonial subjects. Through these representations, we often think either of how well literature portrays these complex lives and/or that these lives have more pressing concerns than to think about aesthetics. But, of course, colonized peoples and cultures are also living and moving through existing aesthetic frameworks that other cultures have imposed on them. And so, the question of *how* these imposed cultural influences have been performed and reperformed—that is, how they have been received, thought of, resisted, and even transformed—in the colonized space is what my project tries to describe. In other words, my work is interested not so much in how colonial subjects are represented in literature, but how they disrupt these forms of representations.

My project also intervenes in Queer Studies as it locates transnational queer of color subjectivities and cultural productions. The Filipino Style or *arte*, which describes the everyday performances of Filipinos, is very much indebted to the *bakla* (queer) Filipino style. *Arte's* characteristic hysterical quality, its manipulative tendencies, and its excesses, I observe, are amplified, made double-excessive, in the *bakla* context. Code-

switching, wordplay, the mashing up of multiple languages, and the incorporation of song lyrics in daily conversations, for example, are performed by Filipinos in everyday life, but Filipino gay lingo, or "swardspeak" (Martin Manalansan), pushes these manipulations and forms of coding even further, highlighting its constant defiance and playfulness. In chapter 2, I discuss the *bakla* Filipino YouTube content creator Mimi who introduces herself by singing her name, *Mimiyuuuh-oh-yeah*—mimicking her idol Mariah Carey's signature riffs. Mimi is known for incorporating song lyrics in conversations, especially when she runs out of (English) words or things to say. In one video where she invites an Australian YouTuber who did not speak any Tagalog, and she is trying to explain to her vegan guest why Filipinos love lechon (whole roasted pig) so much, she exclaims, "it gives me something like…something like…something like you make me feel like a dangerous woman."[36] Through the Ariana Grande song, "Dangerous Woman," Mimi dodged a possible embarrassment (about not speaking English fluently, the colonial condition) by playfully confusing her guest. This performative and linguistic manipulation also hides Mimi's frustration about always trying to make herself be understood, which is reflected in her video editing: the video turns black and white to show her frustration. Thus, I argue in this chapter that the Filipino Style is in fact an active and modern form of dealing with the various changes and circumstances around the speaker providing us a way of seeing how language mediates identity formations.

[36] Jeremy Sancebuche (Mimiyuuuh), "VEGAN MUKBANG WITH JAMIE ZHU (KASUKA OPO!!)." YouTube video, Sept. 21, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XYkUYmkj5w&t=563s.

My project's contribution to queer of color critique also has to do with the way it highlights alternative queer aesthetic and performative practices that navigate, mediate, and exceed the logics and narratives of global capitalism and the U.S. empire. My project's contribution to queer of color critique also has to do with the way it highlights alternative queer aesthetic and performative practices that navigate, mediate, and exceed the logics and narratives of global capitalism and the U.S. empire. I argue that the Filipino American novels I am engaging with not only bear the breakdown of narrative and novelistic traditions but also display Filipino performative forms and excesses that *transform* colonial influence. Much scholarship has been done on the racialization, sexualization, and commodification of colonial subjects within the logics of global capitalism.[37] There is also a vast amount of work done on colonial cultures and peoples and the ways in which they not only consume and assimilate but also resist colonial influence.[38] Building on this body of work, my project investigates how colonial peoples and cultures actually *transform* colonial influence—which, in the context of the U.S.-Philippine relation, is the transformation of influence from commodity colonialism. And so, I am concerned with the question, how does the Filipino culture react to, and ultimately *transform*, the (over)consumption of American media and commodity culture? And how might we understand these transformations as not only world historical but also modern aesthetic and cultural forms that negotiate, and sometimes *exceed*, western neoliberalist notions of queerness? As Roderick Ferguson points out, on the one hand,

[37] See the works of Neferti Tadiar
[38] See the works of Lucy Burns, Martin Manalansan, and Augusto Espiritu.

"queer of color critique…[engages] race, gender, and sexuality not as additives for social formations but as modes of difference that could help unpack social and subject formations on a variety of terrain—local, national, and global." On the other hand, queer of color critique should also be understood as a critique of culture: "queer of color critique would address culture not as the reflection of the social but as an active participant in the constitution of the social world."[39] In other words, queer of color critique not only points to the limits and violence of capitalist modes of production and social relations but also highlights alternative cultural and aesthetic forms produced and transformed by minority cultures and peoples who have been "disempowered in such a representational hierarchy."[40]

[39] Roderick Ferguson, "Queer of Color Critique." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, 2, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.33.
[40] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queer of Color and the Performance of Politics* (University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

Chapter 1

Tuliro: Pure Performativity in Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters*

Novelistic irony is the formative process of observing and learning the discrepancy between surface appearance and the moral reality it hides or deflects. It is the temporal and developmentalist movement from the naïve perception of the character (and the reader) to their moral, ethical, and *deep* understanding of the meaning of events or the true nature of the character. Thus, that which is on the surface needs to be overcome in favor of depth and development.[1] How do we then account for characters that persistently lack, or refuse to provide, depth? Are they to be understood as merely peripheral? And is surface also to be understood as always lacking, or the other side of, depth? In this chapter, I focus on the marginal character of Lolita Luna from Jessica Hagedorn's 1990 novel *Dogeaters* precisely because she has no depth. She merely pops in and out of the novel and does not develop. And we seem to know more about her surface theatrics and hysterics than we do of her character.

Our very first introduction to Lolita Luna is not through the character herself but the mere mention of a film in which she is the star: "'Let's go see the new Lolita Luna movie, *A Candle is Burning*,' Trinidad said, eagerly. 'I'll treat—I just got paid.'" Trinidad's boyfriend Romeo had been a big fan of Lolita's "*bomba [R-rated]*" movies, and she wants to treat him to Lolita's latest one. We learn more about Lolita through

[1] Mieke Bal and Christine Van Boheemen, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (University of Toronto Press, 2009).

Romeo's fantasies of being her leading man, "resisting the sex goddess Lolita Luna's formidable charm, while attempting to stay faithful to his loyal, self-effacing wife." Romeo also measures Trinidad's beauty against Lolita's, pointing out that Trinidad "is on the thin side, something that would take getting used to; Romeo preferred the voluptuous appeal of Lolita Luna."[2] By introducing Lolita in this way, Hagedorn is explicit about how Lolita is *not* one of the novel's main characters but a mere media form. She is an actress and a technology through which men like Romeo imagine themselves. But, of course, Lolita is in fact an important character as we learn later in the novel. On the one hand, what this chapter aims to achieve is describe the ways in which Lolita Luna dissolves the boundary between media and character and in so doing reveals the multiple narrative screens (or surfaces) of the novel, as well as the multiple screens of the American empire. On the other hand, by insisting on Lolita Luna's interruptions as the focal point of the entire novel, I want to suggest that *Dogeaters* also disrupts the Western theory of the novel because of the ways it subverts and revises notions of irony, drama, development, mastery, and morality by treating them as purely performative within the logic of Filipino *arte* (performance).

Pure Performance

I developed the term "purely performative" following Lucy Burns' conceptualization of the everyday Filipino mode of performance "*puro arte*." *Puro arte* can be translated, from its Spanish origin, as "pure art." But unlike pure (or high) art's desire for depth, to

[2] Jessica Hagedorn, *Dogeaters* (Penguin Books, 1990), 69-72.

be *puro arte* is to be all about surface performances, or pure performance. As Lucy Burns explains it in her book *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stages of Empire*, "*puro arte* performs a much more ironic function, gesturing rather to the labor of overacting, histrionics, playfulness, and purely over-the-top dramatics." It "strategically refuse[s] unmediated or clear-cut expression" and "highlights the attention-seeking element of…the performing body" whose "performative extravagance" is often the subject of discipline and violence. *Puro arte*, thus, expresses the complex and contradictory colonial characteristics of the Filipino culture while also conveying its creative and transformative capabilities: "*puro* is superficial and overstated as it is creative and risky." Through *puro arte*, Burns formulates a vernacular and material means of understanding performance within a colonial context that does not exoticize cultural practices for the consumption of the colonizer. Often "dismissed as entertaining, mundane, quotidian, diversionary, obvious, vulgar, or simply superficial," *puro arte* argues for a perception of Filipino performances as modes of artistic expression.[3] That is, *puro arte* aesthetics defamiliarizes surface performance and forces us to pay attention to what we might otherwise overlook or refuse to recognize due to noise, hysterics, and chaos (characteristics of Lolita Luna, to which I will return). Furthermore, *puro arte* also confronts the theatricality of colonial narratives of identity and national formation by highlighting the creative labor and politics of everyday Filipino performances. While Burns' book focuses on describing the relation between *puro arte* and Philippine anti-colonial theatrical traditions, this chapter is more

[3] Lucy San Pablo Burns, *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stage of Empire* (New York City University Press, 2013), 16-17.

interested in *puro arte* as a speech act phenomenon. Through performativity, *puro arte* disrupts the developmental trajectory of narrative and artistic expression by making us aware of their constructedness, and by directing us to the workings of narrative's various screens. In other words, what I refer to as purely performative describes how *Dogeaters* as a novel deploys multiple screens, or facades, using multiple media forms, to foreground the politics and aesthetics of surface performance in colonial narratives.

In her book *Filipino Primitive: Accumulation and Resistance in the American Museum*, Sarita See has described the significance of surface/screen as it relates to Filipino artistic expression and narratives. Following the Marxist theory of commodification, See points out that in order to understand aesthetic and commodity production, "we have to begin not with what we consider the foundational or 'concrete' elements of society but with what is 'immediately present on the surface of bourgeois society,' that is, the commodity. We have to begin with the finished product. We have to start with the end."[4] In other words, to focus on surface is to pay attention to the relational rather than the temporal, the part rather the developmental whole, and reverse the sequence of inquiry. By focusing on surface, we are forced to reckon with the labor and conditions that create commodity, precisely because it is the goal of aesthetic and commodity production to erase the trace of its production—thereby assuming mastery, perfection, and realness. Through the imitative artworks of Stephanie Syjuco, See then argues that the Filipino American aesthetics plays with notions of the imperfect and

[4] Sarita Echavez See, *Filipino Primitive: Accumulation and Resistance in the American Museum* (New York University Press, 2017), 152.

flawed surface to make visible the labor and materiality of art production. The purposeful flaws and imperfections in Syjuco's reproduction of artifacts collected in the American museum, for example, forces us to take notice of not only the labor of their production but also the condition of their theft within the context of colonial accumulation. According to See, such intentional surface flaws and imperfections makes us take a "second look" and pay attention to the illusory and deceptive nature of what's on the surface, the screen: "Enabled by Syjuco's auratic failure, this 'second look' allows us to see how literal and ideological obfuscation is enabled by the transparent screen." The second look reframes the narrative gaze by making us "pay attention to who is looking, not just who is narrating."[5] As See also points out, citing Mieke Bal, the relation between art production and surface/screen is narratological. In order to convey the appearance of reality, naturalness and objectivity, narratives rely on their ability to create unity between plot and point of view, which then hides narrative's ideological motivation, creating a transparent screen. What the second look does in narrative is not only make us pay attention to the screen but also the screen's intentions. And a focus on screen and intention brings us back to the politics of surface and pure performance. It allows us to think both about narrative screens and everyday Filipino performances, and the ways in which they bring to surface the relation between narrative and empire.

Paying attention to the surface also has to do with sound and listening. Martin Joseph Ponce's book *Beyond the Nation: Diasporic Filipino Literature* traces the various ways that Jessica Hagedorn's novels and poetry intersect music, pop culture and

[5] See, *Filipino Primitive*, 160.

migration with the literary, which provides an alternative context for thinking about Hagedorn's works outside Western postmodernist and postcolonial tropes. Through the Filipino musical genre of "kundiman," for example, Ponce suggests that the novel moves beyond its formal modes (plot/character, print, film, gossip) and into "another horizon" and "expansive vista" within which the novel constantly negotiates between the literal and the representation, film and music, the visual and the aural.[6] Ponce paints a portrait of the artist in Hagedorn as a writer, performer, and band leader within a "counter-assimilationist immigration narrative" who also "makes audible" *not* what is authentic but "the rhythm and (the) blues that move us."[7] In *Tropical Renditions: Making Musical Scenes in Filipino America*, Christine Bacareza Balance pushes further Ponce's depiction of Hagedorn as not only the artist but also as "fan, listener, and collaborator." That is, Balance is interested in the ways that "Hagedorn's adoration for and expertise in U.S. popular music has helped shape her poetic and performative voice and grounded her affiliations with other writers and musicians of her milieu."[8] Against normative tropes of authorial voice, Balance focuses on "listening" as an alternative tool for literary interpretation, particularly in the context of migration. To "flip the beat," according to Balance—that is, to reframe the colonial relationship between the artist and her influences—is to highlight the artist's contributions as well as her specific style. Both Ponce and Balance's works have meticulously contextualized not only Jessica

[6] Martin Joseph Ponce, *Beyond the Nation: Diasporic Filipino Literature* (New York University Press, 2012), 143.
[7] Ponce, *Beyond the Nation*, 124.
[8] Christine Bacareza Balance, *Tropical Renditions: Making Musical Scenes in Filipino America* (Duke University Press, 2016), 89.

Hagedorn's diasporic/exilic positionality but also her social relations, particularly her collaborations with musicians of color in the U.S., as necessary for understanding Hagedorn as an artist. However, Ponce and Balance have not explicitly linked sound and aurality to the narrative style itself of Hagedorn's novels, nor have they discussed Lolita Luna in relation to sound and listening. One of the goals of this chapter is to fill in that gap. By treating Lolita Luna as media form that disrupts the novel's narrative by being purely performative—that is, by being loud—*Dogeaters* provides us an alternative understanding of the novel form, as well as alternative modes of reading, listening, and paying attention. This chapter argues that what *Dogeaters* leaves us in the end is not a coherent novel of unity, utopia, or moral development but a dizzying novel that more closely reflects the reality of the Filipino culture—what I will later refer to as *nakakatuliro* (from the Tagalog term *tuliro* which means dizziness or illogic).

Lolita as Media Form

One of the ways that Lolita Luna is purely performative is by *acting out* and *acting up*. When we are introduced to Lolita Luna, the character, halfway through the novel, we are warned against her: "You could never tell with Lolita. She would act as if everything was a joke; she would boast of being game for anything. Then, without warning, she'd turn on you. Act just like a prim schoolgirl from a convent run by nuns." We are told that Lolita is not to be taken seriously, for to her "everything" is "a joke," and that she is unreliable, for she is prone to mood swings.[9] Everything Lolita does is an act, therefore she must

[9] Hagedorn, *Dogeaters*, 9.

either be a fool or a threat, or both. The mistress of military General Nicasio Ledesma, Lolita is also portrayed as a fetishized figure. As Humbert Humbert also perversely reminds us, the name "Lolita" itself is performative and seductive simply by the way it rolls off the tongue: "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta."[10] And her last name "Luna" conveys both her madness and her godlike beauty, which constitute her performed sexual appeal. In the opening scene of the chapter "Surrender," Lolita "is trembling, trying hard not to scream." But even that is part of Lolita's scheme. She seduces the general by being submissive, "they play this game often."[11] Though it is not entirely just a game. For Lolita, every meeting with the general is a performance: "She can never do anything without the proper ambience, the music piped in at just the right level. Everything for her is a scene from a movie: zooms, pans, close-ups, climaxes, and confrontations followed by whispered clinches." That Lolita sees her relationship with the general as a performance, "a scene from a movie," also means she can act the story out her own way—being an actress herself. She dims the light and "fills the room" with music, "something old, sad, and sexy by Dinah Washington." She also alters her state of mind for the performance by locking herself in the bathroom for "a long time" to get high, which "infuriates the general."[12] By doing so, she angers the general and steals time away from his exploits. By taking drugs, Lolita refuses to allow the general the pleasure of sober sex, which he prefers. Being high also gives her

[10] Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita* (Penguin Books, 1986).
[11] Hagedorn, *Dogeaters*, 95.
[12] Hagedorn, *Dogeaters*, 96.

the confidence to confront the general about his role as "an expert torturer" in government-sanctioned violence against insurgents. She irritates him by being vulgar ("I'll let you fuck me while I wear [a tight French dress]") and by asking about his wife, which he had "forbidden her."[13] Through orchestration, Lolita mediates the violent condition she is in by reconfiguring not only the spatial but also the psychological stage onto which she performs. Lolita's character does not *develop* (in the traditional sense) so much as reveals the inner workings of character and narrative. That is, Lolita is purely performative because she redirects our attention back to the surface, to the theatricality and constructedness of character formation. Here, I am not merely pointing out that moment of Lolita Luna's representation as an actress performing, but to her performativity in the novel as form—that is, the representation of her itself acts to disrupt the novel's standard mode of unfolding. By *acting out*, Lolita also *acts up* by putting on a show that brings the attention back to her own narrative labor and expression.

By disrupting the conventions of character development, Lolita also disrupts the novel by acting as media form herself. In *Dogeaters*, media (radio, cassette player, television, newspaper clippings, official speeches, travel guide excerpts, etc.) acts as the technology that disrupts the novel form. The linear and chronological movement of the *bildiungsroman* (the goal of which is to narrate one's movement from individual alienation into social integration) is quite literally obstructed by the almost random appearances of advertisement jingles, radio drama, and presidential speeches—and the characters, instead of integrating, become agents of displacement. But the integration of

[13] Hagedorn, *Dogeaters*, 97.

media is also not entirely random. It characterizes "a short attention span that appeals to the MTV music-video sensibility" and "loudly say[s] something about history [and] memory."[14] That is, *Dogeaters* reflects the burden of remembering and overconsumption in a colonized space. Thus, to think of Lolita as media form is to reckon with how she deals with such a burden. In the chapter, "Movie Star," which opens in *medias res*, Lolita responds to the General's complaint about being "too LOUD" while "The Aiwa tape deck is blasting…Grace [Jones, then] Chaka [Khan]." While the conversation is conveyed mainly through Lolita's perspective, the General's irritation is palpable in her response: "*Hoy*, Nicky [General Nicanor Ledesma]—relax *lang*." He wants to listen to Italian opera instead. However, the loudness that irritates the General is not only because of the "rock'n roll" music of Jones and Khan but also Lolita's obnoxiousness. The General also hates it "when she's high and…floating around the room": "She moves through the hypnotic music, a repetitive blur of incomprehensible lyrics to the General's ear. He asks her to turn down the volume, but she pretends not to hear him."[15] Here, Lolita is made indistinguishable from the songs themselves, moving and floating "through the music" and "around the room." The General's request "to turn down the volume" is also not clear whether it refers to the songs or Lolita's voice, or both. However, while Lolita herself is one with the music, she disrupts the actual song coming out of the cassette by singing it incomprehensibly and blurring the lyrics. Lolita's loudness and inarticulateness disrupts the General's mood and the media form (the

[14] Sarita Echavez See, "Southern Postcoloniality and the Improbability of Filipino-American Postcoloniality: Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! and Hagedorn's Dogeaters." *The Mississippi Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2003): 41-54, 44.
[15] Hagedorn, *Dogeaters*, 170.

cassette playing) that disrupts the narrative. As such, Lolita has not only made herself heard by being loud, but she has also taken over the narrative structure by refusing to make sense. Here, both the media form (Lolita) and the media mode (cassette player) interrupt the novelistic diegesis.

Grace and Chaka blasting from the Aiwa open the chapter and causes an argument between Lolita and the General, but it was in fact Lolita who purposefully turned on the cassette to irritate the General, as well as to feel good. Thus, the novel's use of media as aural interruptions is not limited to the material modes/technology (radio, cassette, etc.) but includes narrative forms themselves, such as the character. The novel is being loud literally by blasting songs, but it is also loud or extravagant narratively by conflating media forms and character, shattering the bounds of what traditionally the novel can do or make room for. Through the disruption of media (e.g., as both cassette and character), the form of the novel itself mutates. Through volume as both space and sound, *Dogeaters* straggles the natural density of the novel form by making media intensely audible.

Volume and Volubility

To discuss the relation between volume and narrative, I borrow from Roberto Schwarz's notion of "volubility" from his book *Machado de Assis: A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism*. According to Schwarz, characterizing the syntactical mood swings of Brás Cubas (the narrator of *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, the subject of Schwarz's book), volubility is the formalization of the lack of "transition in this rotation of different

poses," a "literary effect [that] depends on the vivacity and frequency of the contrasts." That is, by giving a sense of roundness, a *naturalness*, "to the narrators leaps, maneuvers, and transformations," volubility provides a veneer of authority and respectability—a kind of order (or rhythm) within disorder.[16] Through volubility, de Assis's novel can be understood as providing a performative formal unity, a "kinship," that explains the novel's constant contradictions within the logic of Enlightenment ideas of freedom, individuality, and rationality.[17] Here I want to engage with Schwarz's use of volubility as a "deceitful" narrative style that provides a context not only for thinking about Machado de Assis's novels but also for the Brazilian culture—its colonial history of slavery and the dissemination of European Enlightenment ideas. For Schwarz, these ideas are "out-of-place" in the Brazilian culture, and such out-of-placeness is formalized, through volubility, in the novels of Machado de Assis. In other words, the depth and seriousness of Enlightenment ideas become, in the Brazilian context, nothing but "a varnish of respectability," the surface for a bourgeoise society that accommodates both Western liberal ideas and its history of slavery. Such performative formalization of surface and style within narrative—which implicates the global flow of colonial ideas by displacing them in a colonized space—is what I find particularly useful in Schwarz's conceptualization of volubility.

A look at the etymological genealogy of volubility orients us to the different ways in which it will be useful for thinking about Lolita Luna's disruptive nature, as well as the

[16] Roberto Schwarz, *A Master on the Periphery of Capitalism: Machado de Assis* (Duke University Press, 2001), 11.
[17] Schwarz, *A Master*, 26.

narrative form of *Dogeaters*. "Volubility" and its root word "voluble" made their way into various literary usage in the Romance languages (dating back to the 1500s) from the Latin word *volvere*, which means "to roll" or "to turn"—whose other variation, *volūbilis*, refers to a "volume" or a book, a set of written scrolls that have been *rolled* together. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "volubility" in contemporary use as either "the capacity of revolving, rolling, or turning round…an axis or centre" *or* the "capacity for or ease of utterance" or "garrulousness," a "ready flow of speech." That is, volubility can signify both geometric precision (e.g., the circumference of a cylinder—which brings us back to (geometric) "volume") as well as potentially substance-less speech that is all about style. The latter has to do with the elegant *rolling* of words from one's mouth. Thus, to be voluble in a "garrulous" sense is to be *precise* in one's eloquence of tongue. Much of the literary uses of the term in this latter sense would then be conveyed in either the incantatory effect of religious speeches or the charisma of the eloquent politician. Rarer, or even obsolete, uses of volubility, according to *OED*, is its "quickness in turning from one object to another," "versatility," or "mutability."[18] In sum, volubility captures the spirit of a kind of mastery, the result of both versatility and precision, of a specific superficial style—which is what Schwarz takes on. According to Schwarz, key to the volubility of de Assis's narrator, Bras Cubas, is his "self-congratulation in this tendency to mutability." Bras shows *eloquence* through his encyclopedic knowledge of world history, philosophy, and literary form, but reveals his superiority by making fun of his

[18] *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2023), s.v. "Volubility," https://www.oed.com/dictionary/volubility_n?tab=factsheet&tl=true#15462091.

eloquence through self-deprecation and caprice. Through volubility as a mode of irony, Bras is simultaneously eloquent and capricious. Schwarz clarifies that while such a narrator might initially repel readers, because of the style's consistency throughout the narrative, which establishes (the illusion of) integrity, the readers actually end up caught in the same pleasure of superiority Bras feels. In other words, Bras's consistency justifies, for the reader and himself, his hubris. In volubility, the only constant is caprice transformed into eloquent style "via the magic touch of absurdity."[19]

Mutability and capriciousness are very much characteristics of *Dogeaters'* narrative style and content. In *Dogeaters*, performed mood swings are common between many of the characters, but for different applications. As a sex worker, the way Joey Sands goes from disgust to flattery when dealing with his customers, and the way he performs elegance at the club (e.g., knowing exactly what expensive cognac to choose, even though he squats at his uncle's shack) accounts for the way mood swings operate in the economy of queer Filipino sex work. During Daisy Avila's torture scene, General Ledesma's language is parental, intimate yet authoritative, affectionate yet violent. Upon seeing Daisy at the interrogation site, the General utters what I think is one of the most haunting lines in the book: "Good evening, *hija*."[20] At first look, the greeting seems benign, if not warm. But in the context of the impending interrogation and torture, its warmth only increases the terror. The choice of languages in this greeting cannot be overlooked. By using English and Spanish (colonial languages) side by side, which evoke

[19] Schwarz, Roberto. *A Master*, 17.
[20] Hagedorn, *Dogeaters*, 211.

class and authority, the general elevates his respectability and legitimizes his actions. Of course, *hija* means daughter, which suggests gendered and patriarchal violence, complicated by the prior information that the general, although a political rival, is also a family relation. Many of the poor characters in the novel are also at the mercy of the favors given to them by those in power, the generosity of whom oftentimes depends on their *mood*. In *Dogeaters*, caprice and eloquence—which relies on surface performance—encourage a *second look* to make us pay attention to how authority and violence operate, on the one hand, and how alternative modes of survival and creation manifest, on the other.

Sound Check

Paying attention involves not only looking but also *listening*. And volubility is again useful here for my analysis of *Dogeaters* in its relation to space and sound (volume), and the ways in which it describes the link between noise and confinement. The more common use of the term "volume," of course, is how it controls the quantity of sound. Not unrelated to "volume" as geometric dimension, aural volume measures the amount of sound in a given space.[21] Sound, or the aural—the quality of sound being heard—plays an important role in *Dogeaters* not least because of the novel's use of mixed media: the movies being watched from the theater, the radio drama and music being listened to, or the interruptions of advertisement jingles. But to discuss volume in the Filipino context,

[21] *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2023), s.v. "Volume," https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=volume.

one must also reckon with the politics of Filipino speaking, or over speaking. Filipino speech acts such as *arte, jejemon*, *tsismis*, *talak*, and swardspeak (all present in *Dogeaters*) have been considered underdeveloped, backwards, and unmodern often due to their loudness and incoherence. In the colonial context, they are backwards because they exist outside the normative modes of "articulation" of the "civilized man." Loudness and incoherence are "inarticulate."[22] But as Martin Manalansan points out, the unpredictable, incoherent slippages between languages, the constant punning, and the talkativeness of Filipinos are in fact modes of innovation as well as products of history that describes the modernity of the Filipino culture.[23] And as I have discussed elsewhere, the Filipino lack of fluency and playfulness with language can be read as ways of navigating and mediating overconsumption and should be understood as creative—that is, "as orchestration of fragments" and "expressions of desire."[24] Like volubility, there is logic to, and reason for, the seeming incoherence and disorder of Filipino speech.

Lolita's loudness and inarticulateness are her weapons for defying the person on whom her life and future depends. And although, as a movie star and mistress, she might not be taken seriously in the first instance, Lolita wants us to know that she is *there* by being *loud*. Narrative tropes such as dramatic irony—a literary device that reveals to the audience/reader the fate that is destined for, but unknown to, the character—might suggest that Lolita's narrative trajectory will lead her to tragedy given she is dealing with

[22] David Kazanjian, *The Colonizing Trick: National Culture and Imperial Citizenship in Early America* (U of Minnesota Press, 2003), 7.
[23] See *Global Divas* by Martin Manalansan.

[24] David G. Siglos Jr., "Walang Arte: Gina Apostol's Insurrecto and Filipino Non-Coherence." *Alon: Journal for Filipinx American and Diasporic Studies* 2, no. 1 (2022).

ruthless men operating within a ruthless institution. However, if we take Lolita away from the narrative's developmentalist and chronological path, and instead focus on the *noise* she makes, we might be able to see her not only as an agentive character within the sexual economy of the novel (as I have described) but also as providing an alternative dramatic irony—one that is not premised on the privilege and cruelty of knowing more than the characters but is *puro arte*, one that lays everything bare on the surface for everyone (including the characters) to see and is completely aware of its own absurdity. At the gay club "CocoRico," where the foreign "honored guests of the government" gathered (*Dogeaters* 131),[25] "Lolita Luna makes her noisy entrance, her Coca Cola figure poured into a short, tight dress," and everyone saw "a genuinely crazy bitch" that the men also "wouldn't mind fucking." "She totters on her four-inch heels, silver toenails peeking out of her flimsy, silver sandals. I [Joey] appreciate her flamboyant style—she's dangerous, a dangerous bitch."[26] Here, not only is Lolita making a dramatic entrance by being loud, but she is also quite literally spilling out: her body "poured into a short, tight dress" and her "silver toenails peeking out." While "drama" in theatrical/narrative terms requires a certain unity of events that lead to tragedy or consummation—thus, dramatic irony is the awareness of such a structure—to be "dramatic" in the Filipino context is to convey, through surface performance, a person's shifting emotional and/or physical condition. As Manalansan points out in the context of Filipino *bakla* (queer) performance, "'Ano ang drama mo [what is your drama]?' can be a question about

[25] Hagedorn, *Dogeaters*, 131.
[26] Hagedorn, *Dogeaters*, 136.

personal problems, sexuality, schemes/plans, or mundane tasks."[27] In other words, Filipino drama is not so much a monolithic narrative trajectory as an immediate self-conscious expression of a feeling or state of mind that manifests in multiple, often contradictory, performances. As a feminized and sexualized colonial subject, Lolita's drama, delivered through loudness and extravagance, is a refusal of ignorance and complicity. As a reaction to power structures, Filipino drama is also always already ironic in that it requires constant doubling and often reveals itself by hiding.[28] Lolita makes herself known by being inarticulate and creating noise. By describing her as loud and excessive, *Dogeaters* insists that Lolita, as a commodified and sexualized figure, has always been there and is finally making herself known. And by being loud, the reader is forced to *listen* and overcome the temptation of *only* looking at her.

Lolita's arrival both at the club and in the sense of making herself known in the novel—that is, her interruptions—also provides an alternative temporal trajectory that defies the developmental logic. Here, I borrow from Allan Isaac's conceptualization of "*dating* (dah-TEENG)," which is the Tagalog term for "arrival." *Dating*, according to Isaac, not only refers to arrival but "also describes the impact or force a person or object brings to a social milieu."[29] That is, *dating* is the "affective energy [that indexes] the encounter between object, person, or performance and audience [and] also generates a feel to the space and relationships between and among people." "Ascribed to persons,

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[27] Martin F. Manalansan IV. *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Duke University Press, 2003), x.
[28] For more discussion on the relation between doubling and irony, see chapter 4 of *Filipino Primitive* by Sarita See.
[29] Allan Punzalan Isaac, *Filipino time: Affective worlds and contracted labor* (Fordham University Press, 2021), 24.

dating is not necessarily about being conventionally beautiful but having social potency, which English words like 'attractive,' 'captivating,' or 'prepossessing' only in part suggest." But unlike these English equivalents that imply "a focal point or centripetal force," *dating* "names how a body or object exudes centrifugal force, negative or positive, in a locale."[30] In other words, *dating* has less to do with the actual arrival in a space than the sensorial feeling (through sight, hearing, touch, or smell) the arrival evoked from the observers in that space. That Lolita Luna, as a "crazy" and "dangerous bitch," caught everyone's attention as she enters the club is proof of Lolita's *dating.* But her *dating*, I argue, in fact tells us more about the people around her than the arrival itself. It tells us about how Joey might feel threatened by her, as a sex worker herself and one more successful than he. It tells us about the German director Rainer, whom Lolita seduces but fails because he prefers a male prostitute. It also tells us about how Chiquiting defends the First Lady—despite having been beaten up by her son—because the "First Lady is his main client, after all."[31] It tells of how Nestor Norales, one of Lolita's leading men, is afraid of being accidentally outed as gay by Lolita's crassness. Lolita's *dating* is offensive to the men around her because it threatens to reveal their secrets. In a developmental and chronological narrative, arrival tends to indicate a return, or a belonging in the present that anchors a continuity between past and future. The narrative of return also tends to be "premised on the overvaluation of the individual as an autonomous agent rather than as always already integrated in a social network of

[30] Isaac, *Filipino Time*, 26.
[31] Hagedorn, *Dogeaters*, 134.

people."[32] However, Lolita's arrival, or *dating*, is not so much about the progression of time—and in consequence the novel's plot—but about ceasing time (that is, taking time and space) in order to make us pay attention to things that are hidden either behind the surface or in plain sight. Here, Lolita also provides an alternative for the Schwarzian "volubility," which has the tendency to naturalize through eloquence. Lolita's *dating*, the way she takes space and time by being loud, is not so much about the force of eloquence (through fluency, reason, or propriety) as the force of presence itself that reverberates in a particular space. By not allowing us the satisfaction of a developmentalist trajectory and dramatic irony, we are forced to rethink how a character develops and finds their way in the world of the novel—or in Lolita's case, how to get out of it.

But how might we understand *Dogeaters* deployment of an alternative dramatic irony within the context of the American empire and the Marcus regime? In the world of *Dogeaters*, dramatic irony is not the private pursuit of knowing (more than the characters) but a mode of dramatic performance that is premised on public appropriative and mimetic displays. It is a kind of ironic doubling that in the first glance seems childish, shallow, and inconsequential, but upon paying closer attention—or better, by paying attention to its noise—demonstrates the various historical and transformative conditions that necessitates disruptions and overacting. As Burns points out about the "politics of what enables emergence" or overacting in *puro arte*, "the Filipino/a performing body…negotiates key historical events: the U.S. acquisition of the Philippines as a colony in the late nineteenth century; the dawn of Philippine independence (1920s-

[32] Isaac, *Filipino Time*, 36.

1930s); the tumultuous years of the Martial Law (1972-1981); and the closure of U.S. military bases in the Philippines at the end of the twentieth century."[33] Lolita as *puro arte* alters the way we read the novel by also redirecting us to the workings of narrative within the U.S. – Philippine imperial relation. As both media and character, she dissolves narrative's illustrative screen—which creates the illusion of reality—and unveils the multiple screens at work. The traditional novel often functions ideologically by having one transparent screen that both separates and connects the reader from and to the narrative. Through the unity of plot and point of view (fabula and sjuzhet) naturalized by the illusion of objectivity, the reader is placed in a voyeuristic relationship with the narrative.[34] However, in *Dogeaters*, that screen is not so much shattered as revealed into consisting of multiple screens. The chapter "The Famine of Dreams," for example, where Daisy is taken in by General Ledesma and his men for interrogation and torture, opens with an extravagantly horrific description of her arrival to the scene/screen of the crime:

> The Coronel who arrested her has a baby face. He speaks to her politely in English. They arrive in an unmarked car at the recently renovated military complex. It is after midnight. Colonel Jesus de Jesus holds her by the elbow in a deferential manner, as if he were a gallant gentleman escorting her to a formal ball…He takes her on a brief tour as he leads her down the maze of corridors towards the General's special interrogation room, what some survivors jokingly refer to as General Ledesma's "VIP Lounge"—for very important prisoners.[35]

[33] Burns, *Puro Arte*, 19.
[34] See *Narratology* by Mieke Bal.
[35] Hagedorn, *Dogeaters*, 211.

While the description gives an air of objectivity through its omniscient narrator and the necessity of the description itself in the world of the plot, the motivation[36]—that is, the underlying subjective intent of the narrator—instead of being masked, is unmistakably purely performative. The explicit language of romance, sentimentality, and melodrama with just a hint of pun (VIP—Very Important Prisoners) employed in an impending rape and torture scene is the novel's first instance of breaking the naturalness and inevitability of narrative description. Filipino irony is not subtle. The second instance is by quite literally placing the main plot of this chapter in parenthesis. The chapter's focal point, of course, is a radio drama *Love Letters* that is playing on the background while Daisy is being interrogated and molested—occasionally interrupted by advertisements "Brought to you by our sponsors Eye-Mo Eyedrops, TruCola Soft Drinks, and Elephant Brand Katol Mosquito Coils."[37] Instead of providing a realistic effect, *Dogeaters* unmasks the workings of the novel by revealing not only the multiple screens of narrative but also the multiple screens of the American empire.

That Daisy is being tortured in a "recently renovated military complex" called "Camp Meditation"—which has a "VIP Lounge" and a "state-of-the-art computer area, where vital information is processed and transmitted to our other headquarters"—signals the relation between progress and violence. The novel insists upon disclosing the underlying exploitative logics of the U.S. empire that is inherently tied to its narrative of benevolence and modernity. Furthermore, that the interrogation scene is subsumed by a

[36] See *Narratology* by Mieke Bal.
[37] Hagedorn, *Dogeaters*, 211.

radio drama and advertisement jingles asserts the unique feature of the U.S. empire: the dissemination of commodity culture. Independence was granted to the Philippines by the U.S. in 1946, however, the remnants of colonial technology (public education, government system, medical training, military, and police forces), including consumer and media culture, would remain widespread in the Philippines. The framing—that is, the juxtaposition of multiple screens—of violence within this chapter highlights not only the perpetuation of labor exploitation but also the institutionalization of violence.

Lolita Luna

To follow my own suggestion about listening and paying attention (Sarita See's taking a "second look"), I now want to turn back to Lolita Luna who gets overlooked when discussing the matter of torture in *Dogeaters*. Daisy's torture is rightfully shocking and horrific, and this has been reflected in the numerous scholarships on *Dogeaters* that focus on the depiction of violence during the Marcos regime. But my interest here is on Lolita as the subject of torture and the politics of her neglect. Lolita has made it clear to us from the beginning that she is indeed a victim of violence. The chapter where Lolita Luna's character is introduced is called "Surrender." That itself is telling in that "surrender" can have both a military and romantic connotation—which is not unlike the framing of Daisy's torture. In the chapter's first sentence, "Lolita Luna is on her knees," as if begging for us to pay attention. But in this scene, she is in fact facing the General who is "hold[ing] her head up by her mane of unruly hair." Lolita resists and eventually tells him, "Enough! You're hurting me." She is also described as "still beautiful, her body still

firm and voluptuous in spite of years of abuse," and it is said that "They play this game often." Although, unlike Daisy, she is not in an actual military camp, she is alone in a confined space. She lives in an apartment funded by the General, and whenever he is there, "her servant Mila is always given the day off."[38] The frequency with which the abuse occurs, and the helplessness Lolita feels are clear evidence of her torture. The novel also makes parallels between Lolita's torture and that of Daisy's. As with Daisy, the General refers to Lolita as "*hija*" (daughter), and the novel also uses familial language when describing the two: "sometimes he feels like [Lolita] is the daughter he never had," and "it's all too incestuous."[39] But most strikingly, I think, is how Lolita calls the General out for his "reputation as an expert torturer." While Lolita seems to only be referring here to the General's *official* acts of violence (e.g., Daisy's torture), given the context in which she speaks, calling the General an "expert torturer" should be understood as Lolita telling us that he is *her* "expert torturer." As literary critics, we are often taught to dig deeper and find what is not explicitly there, but what Lolita and the purely performative reminds us of is paying attention to what is already on the surface—sometimes screaming too loud we cease to listen. Lolita has been screaming at us all this time on *Dogeaters'* multiple screens—in the novel's plot, in her *bomba* films, and on the multiple mirrors she keeps staring at, looking at herself, looking at us—yet we continue to ignore her.

What I want to further suggest is that Lolita is not only making us pay attention and listen, but she is making us listen to the *noise* on the surface. By listening to the

[38] Hagedorn, *Dogeaters*, (Kindle) 91.
[39] Hagedorn, *Dogeaters*, (Kindle) 93.

noise, we account for Lolita's obfuscation from the narrative of torture (and from the scholarship), and we are reminded of the limits of dialogic listening. That is, the noise helps us reconfigure what it means to create meaning and knowledge in narrative. As Ana María Ochoa Gautier explains about the nature of aural inscriptions within colonial power relation—that is, the transfer of meaning from sound (colonized) to narrative description (colonizer)—sounds that are unfamiliar and unpleasant, such as "bodily produced noise—vocal utterances and stamping feet," are deemed "barbarous, lustful, [and] angry," and are often "associated with the irrational." The categorization of sound—what sounds get to be considered pleasant or unpleasant—also plays an important role in how we listen: "The ephemeral nature of sound is supposed to be one of its defining qualities, but when sonic perceptions are troubling, or perceived as unwanted, then sound becomes endlessly unbearable, materialized on the body as a sign of the limits of listening as a dialogic practice."[40] In other words, disgust determines not only to whom we pay attention (or do not pay attention) but also who gets to be (il)legible within the epistemological process. That Lolita gets overlooked—in favor of Joey and Daisy, for example, or even in favor of the sound coming from the cassette—tells us there is something unpleasant about her, or at least something we feel indifferent to.

One reason we might overlook Lolita is because she is not the ideal feminine figure. Unlike Daisy who has a legible narrative trajectory—she comes from a wealthy and well-connected family, she is a beauty pageant winner, and she eventually becomes a

[40] Ana María Ochoa Gautier, *Aurality: Listening and Knowledge in Nineteenth-Century Colombia* (Duke University Press, 2015), 32-33.

member of a revolutionary group—Lolita is a *bomba* actress for near-pornographic films and a mistress to multiple military Generals who does not have a narrative trajectory so much as mere narrative interruptions. In the novel, she pops in and out of other characters' conversations as much as she does in the narrative plot. She is also literally loud, outspoken, and tacky, the very antithesis of the refined beauty queen or the *mahinhin* (gentle and submissive) Filipina. While at the bar with the German director Rainer, Lolita carelessly makes fun of the First Lady: "'Did you know she has her perfume custom-made in gallon size bottles? *Talaga*! 'First Lady' it's called. Pretty clever, huh?'" Nestor Noralez, the leading man in some of her films, overhears her and asks her to shut up because she's "embarrassing our guest."[41] Irritated, Lolita tells Nestor to dance with Tito Alvarez, insinuating that she knows Nestor is attracted to men. Here, I want to suggest that part of Lolita's "noise," which is why she is not taken seriously, is less about her *not* making sense but about making *too* much sense. She calls everyone out, and she tells it as it is. As Gautier further explains about the relation between listening and knowledge production, "Once sound is described and inscribed into verbal description…it becomes a discursive formation that has the potential of creating and mobilizing an acoustic regime of truths, a power-knowledge nexus in which some modes of perception, description, and inscription of sound are more valid than others."[42] In other words, the production of narrative meaning depends upon the occlusion of that which is deemed meaningless (to the listener). In *Dogeaters'* socio-political context in which

[41] Hagedorn, *Dogeaters*, (Kindle) 176.
[42] Gautier, *Aurality*, 33.

everyone and everything is about facades and appearances (and many are at the mercy of wealthy people's *moods swings*) truth becomes meaningless and disgusting. What gets neglected is the noise that we refuse to recognize either because they are unfamiliar and illegible or precisely because they are telling the truths we do not want to hear. Do we neglect Lolita's violence because as a mistress and *bomba* actress she is not the kind of woman who is worthy of protection? Or do we neglect her because we cannot bear the loudness of her honesty?

By listening to Lolita's noise, not only do we understand the constructedness of the novel and the workings of empire, but we also describe a mode of (pure) performance that, unlike volubility's desire for fluency, refuses to naturalize because it cannot hide itself. In pure performativity, hypervisibility also sets the condition for its invisibility. Lolita's noise and interruptions do not leave us with a coherent or utopian novel. Instead, we are left feeling dazed, confused, and dizzy. And the state of "reality" that *Dogeaters* leaves us is not one of *realist* representation—that is, a narrative of development that claims innateness and universality[43]—but one that is *nakakatuliro* (dizzying), which, I argue, also more accurately describes the *realities* of the Filipino culture.

Tuliro

In her 2009 song "*Tuliro*," Filipino pop singer Celeste Legaspi lamentingly points out the effects of *tuliro*: "*kaybilis namang mabulagan ang ganda ng buwan / Kaybilis namang matabunan ng ulap ang daan* / *Tuliro, tuliro, tuliro* / *May biglang sumiklop sa dibdib ko* /

[43] See *Under Representation* by David Lloyd

At nagsumigaw bawat himaymay ng aking laman [how quickly the beautiful moon is blinded / how quickly the clouds cover the streets / *Tuliro, tuliro, tuliro* / Something turns in my chest / And comes screaming every grain in my gut]." With characteristic Filipino (and Shakespearian)[44] sentimentality, *tuliro* refers here to the lovesickness that "clouds" reason and logic, on the one hand, and is visceral, gut turning on the other. The Filipino rock band *Sponge Cola's* chorus from their 2014 song also called "*Tuliro*" expresses similar sentiments: "*Tuliro, di malaman ang gagawin at* / *Walang sinumang makapipigil sa akin* / *At wala nang ibang makapagbabago ng aking isip sa' yo* [*Tuliro*, don't know what to do / No one shall stop me / And no one shall change my mind about you]." In an interview with *Rappler*, *Sponge Cola* vocalist Yael Yuzon explains that the song is about youth and "the idea of being *kilig* [infatuated] or shookt."[45] *Tuliro* is the irrational excitement one feels in the early days of a crush or the "honeymoon stage" of a romantic relationship. "No one shall change my mind" because the feelings, fleeting they might be, are too intoxicating. The *Leo James English* Tagalog – English dictionary defines *tuliro* (*adj*) as being confused, puzzled, dazed, or stupefied, while the verb *nakakatuliro* can refer to making something/someone stupid, dull, or senseless through medication or "a blow in the head"—that is, "to confuse mentally." What immediately intrigues me about *tuliro* is not only its subversion of reason but also its dizzying effect. Due to its lack of logic, *tuliro* causes chaos and discomfort. Part of *tuliro*'s dizzying tendency is also due to its loudness both affectively and audibly. It makes itself known by being louder than

[44] See "Sonnet 148" by William Shakespeare.
[45] Rappler. "'Tuliro' – Sponge Cola." YouTube video. Oct. 19, 2017. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYZRa9a78Fs.

logic. I find *tuliro* useful in describing the structure and content of *Dogeaters* because of the ways it captures mood swings (and by extension volubility) and Lolita Luna's noise and disruptiveness (as I have described above). But in the same way that dizziness best describes the world of *Dogeaters* (as opposed to utopian realism), I use *tuliro* to suggest that *Dogeaters'* dizzying world also corresponds with Philippine conditions of reality.

The state of Philippine politics and political campaigning, for example, can only be described as *nakakatuliro*. In one of Leni Robredo's (2022) star-studded presidential campaigns, *Sponge Cola* performed "*Tuliro*" among a few of their other love songs. Between songs, the band vocalist Yael Yuzon cheers the crowd before introducing the next song: "I know we've been playing…we just played a bunch of love songs for you guys, *pero* [but] it goes hand in hand with what [we feel about Leni, and what she stands for]."[46] The feeling of youthful excitement (and, in this context, love affair) towards a political candidate, especially one with an underdog narrative, is what Yuzon is referring to here. Robredo's rise in the polls against the leading presidential candidate (and now president), Bongbong Marcos, is arguably thanks to the massive backing of young people, LGBTQ+ people, women, and those unhappy with Duterte's brutal patriarchal regime. Love songs convey such excitement, but the song "*Tuliro*" is especially pertinent because of the way it describes the voter-politician relationship in which gut feeling is a crucial ingredient. But, of course, this is not entirely just irrational, gut feeling either. Media (celebrities, advertisements, social media, etc.) plays a large role in the political landscape and in creating political excitement in the Philippines. The dizzying influx of

[46] See link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6u3z_THL5Kk.

(mis)information from various media forms—which is made even more chaotic by social media—has only fueled the gut feelings of many Filipinos. [see Maria Elize Mendoza on the role of social media in the election of Duterte and Marcos]. Furthermore, *tuliro* also refer to the dizzying brutality of Philippine politics, not only in the Kafkaesque sense of judicial and bureaucratic confusion but also the sheer violence involved during political campaigns—to which the term *salvaging* (political extra-judicial killing) has become synonymous. *Tuliro*, thus, characterizes the contradictory effects of Philippine politics that drive hope and excitement, on one hand, and numbing violence, on the other.

Chapter 2

Walang Arte: Gina Apostol's *Insurrecto* and Filipino Non-coherence

In a YouTube vlog, the famous Filipina actress and socialite Heart Evangelista joins fellow Filipino vlogger Mimiyuuuh in an ASMR video challenge.[1] Known for her fashion and make-up related videos, Evangelista invites Mimiyuuuh to her home for a make-up session and Filipino street food *mukbang* (eating on camera). Evangelista introduces her guest by singing "*Mimiyuuuh*," with the long "yuuuh" syllable endearingly and mockingly mimicking Mariah Carey's signature riffs. Mimiyuuuh's full name is Jeremy Sancebuche, but she often goes by Mimi taken from the doubled last syllable of her first name (or so I assume)—though her fondness for singing and for Mariah Carey has made her known for actually *singing* her name whenever she introduces herself. It must not also be lost on Mimiyuuuh that her idol Carey goes by the nickname "Mimi." While getting her lashes done, Mimiyuuuh asks how Evangelista got into doing her own make-up. "*Kasi ang arte-arte ko* [because I am *ma-arte*]," Evangelista replies, and the two giggle in a whisper. *Ma-arte* loosely translates into English as being picky, particular, or pretentious. Growing up as a picky and "girly" young person who enjoyed doing her own make-up, Evangelista admits being *ma-arte*.[2] As a socialite and fashionista, Evangelista is also known for her yearly vlogs in Paris for the Paris Fashion

[1] ASMR or Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response videos, where content creators perform in front of the camera while whispering very closely into a microphone to evoke sensory response from the audience, is a popular content genre on YouTube.
[2] Heart Evangelista, "ASMR MAKEUP CHALLENGE + MUKBANG WITH MIMIYUUUH FT. HAPPY SKIN | Heart Evangelista." YouTube video, Oct. 8, 2019, www.youtube.com/watch?v=GoT8KbaR5bc.

Week. Kevin Kwan, the author of the novel *Crazy Rich Asians*, has also featured her for *Harper's BAZAAR* as a "real crazy rich Asian."[3] While Evangelista might be famous for being the ultimate *ma-arte* (albeit a self-aware one), Mimiyuuuh's popularity (she has almost two million more YouTube subscribers than Evangelista) might be a credit to her being *walang arte*. The opposite of *ma-arte*—"*walang*" is the Tagalog word for "to be without"—*walang arte* is to be un-pretentious, un-cool, un-fuzzy, or to be mockingly yet admirably simple.[4] Apart from her very modest upbringing, her role as a family breadwinner, her rags to riches narrative while remaining humble (all qualities of the *walang arte*), Mimiyuuuh is also admired by her viewers for being a "*jejemon*," a variation of *walang arte*. *Jejemons* are known for their often-incoherent linguistic style, which is a mix of Taglish, Filipino gay lingo, Tagalog slang, and SMS shortcuts. "*U kńÓw wH@t éM sÉyéN*" pops up in Mimiyuuuh's videos whenever she wants to emphasize something.[5] And because they often wear mismatched, oversized, and counterfeit designer brands, in addition to their improper speech, *jejemons* are also derogatorily referred to as uneducated, and backwards. *Jejemons* are *walang arte* because they are both unapologetically cheap in style and in words, and utterly disloyal to proper speech. They love to pun and make fun: "jeje" after all comes from the SMS expression "hehe" which means to laugh.

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[3] See *Harper's BAZAAR* interview, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g01YnqH-2ek.
[4] I have encountered the term *walang arte* before, but the idea of thinking about it as a Filipino mode of linguistic performance came to me during one of our Filipino food trips in L.A. with my Filipino American friends Christianne Sanchez and Raymond M. Lorenzo—who always playfully point out the cracks in my accent when code-switching. I thank them for that.
[5] Jeremy Sancebuche (Mimiyuuuh), "FINALLY NAKAPAG-UKAY NA AKO ULIT! HIHI!!!!" YouTube video, Mar. 12, 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=YDdBduraJBk.

By way of *walang arte*, and its disruptive and playful stylistic possibilities, I look at Gina Apostol's 2018 novel *Insurrecto* as not a mere performance of a postmodern aesthetic but an enactment in novel form of a Filipino repertoire of style. Out of its formal acts of fragmentation, *Insurrecto* describes a Filipino non-coherence that, not unlike the style of *walang arte*, is borne out of the characteristically Filipino tendency to imitate, misrepresent, resist, hide, pun, and make fun as a means not only of survival but also creativity and play. By "non-coherence," I am not referring here to the colloquial use of the term or to "incoherence," which means meaningless babble, but its literal translation which is a non-coherence that refuses to come together or simply become one thing, thereby insisting on that which separates or bridges its parts. On the one hand, the Filipino repertoire of style that *Insurrecto* performs poses a problem for translation as an act of mastery and fluency because of the ways it not only identifies linguistic fragmentation, but also bridges fragments through play; the Filipino style enacts the Filipino capacity to move between fragments of languages. On the other hand, through fragmentation and acts of breaking, the novel articulates the dis/junction between playfulness and pain, the relationship between the pain of breakage and the play that breaking allows. Throughout the article, I use the terms Filipino non-coherence, Filipino style, and *walang arte* not necessarily interchangeably in meaning but perhaps interchangeably as points of articulating the relation of opposites: coherence and non-coherence, fragmentation and joint, border and bridge, pain and play. Through Apostol's novel, I intend to examine the labor, politics, and inner workings of the Filipino style.

When asked by Evangelista to introduce the Filipino street food challenge portion of the video, Mimiyuuuh bursts into her signature hysterics before saying, "I'm gonna challenge you in a [sic] eating…*kineso*."[6] "*Kineso*," like *kineme* and *kemerut*, is a Filipino filler word often used when one is out of (or cannot find the) words. The term, which most likely came from the expression "*kwan*" or "*kine*" (the Filipino equivalent of "you know"), is popular among *bakla* (queer) and *jejemon* circles not only because it is a convenient way of finishing a sentence, but also because of its mystique and playful gibberishness. Yet, it is not entirely gibberish. Mimiyuuuh most likely chose *kineso*, as opposed to *kineme* or *kemerut*, to make p/fun of one of the street foods in front of her, the cheese lumpia (fried cheese sticks), because cheese in Tagalog is *keso*: *kineso* could also mean "cheesed." Mimiyuuuh's *jejemon* style always has a reason for being, even if it is for the mere fun of it. Here, I also want to point out the significance of Mimiyuuuh's background as a queer, working class youth in my theoretical formulation of *walang arte*. Mimiyuuuh's *jejemon* style has roots in Filipino gay lingo, or what Martin Manalansan calls *bakla* swardspeak. According to Manalansan, swardspeak in Filipino queer culture, on the one hand, "mirror[s] the changes in popular culture; thus, the search for the new and the modern becomes the propelling force for changes in the language." On the other hand, "swardspeakers acknowledge that this language can be seen as a code for queer people, an 'open' secret for people 'in the know.'" In other words, the way I am formulating *walang arte* as a style of speaking (and being) follows from the tradition of *bakla* swardspeak in its reliance on innovation and inventiveness to sustain itself as a

[6] Evangelista, "ASMR."

communal space while also maintaining its exclusivity "as a code for queer people" and because of the various ways it poses a threat to structures of power.[7] Furthermore, *walang arte's* innovativeness also draws from the distinctly Filipino tendency to *p*un and make *f*un which characterizes its disloyalty to claims of authenticity. Sarita See has pointed out the importance of the relation between punning and making fun, not only because of its decolonizing potential, but also its "constant testing of boundaries [which] forms the hub of community."[8] That is, the demarcation between *p* and *f*, "Pilipino" and "Filipino," and pun and fun, in the Filipino context, highlights the precarity of linguistic formations and demands flexible identifications and multiple commitments. Evangelista's almost perfect American English against Mimiyuuuh's *jejemon* style, and her affectionate frustration in trying to keep up with Evangelista's English, make for a fun pairing while revealing tensions in the Filipino language.

"*Arte*," of course, is the Spanish word for "art," which means to be *walang arte* is akin to being "artless." However, in the Filipino context, *walang arte* functions in a more active and disruptive way in that underneath its performative surface of un-pretention and simplicity is the labor of adaptability and flexibility. Far from artlessness, it is a kind of concealed artistic style—in the manner perhaps of the Italian *sprezzatura*—that articulates various points of irruptions in Filipino life. Plain and incoherent on the surface, *walang arte*, underneath the surface, holds great logic and purpose. The *jejemon* style, *walang arte's* seemingly gibberish and backward variant, can be deeply coherent in its non-

[7] Martin F. Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Duke University Press, 2007), 50.
[8] Sarita Echavez See, *The Decolonized Eye: Filipino American Art and Performance* (University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 102.

coherence, and is in fact not backwards or undereducated but modern. I also situate *walang arte* alongside Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns' theorization of "*puro arte*" which performs an "ironic function" and conveys the "labor of overacting, histrionics, playfulness, and purely over-the-top dramatics."[9] However, while *puro arte* pays specific attention to the politics of "over-the-top" performances of Filipinos—in *puro arte*, a level of over-doneness and overacting has to be present—I use *walang arte* to account for the quieter, subtler, and more concealed ways in which the Filipino negotiates with the violence of translation and everyday life. Although I refer to Mimiyuuuh as *walang arte*, she is most definitely also *puro arte* in her "histrionics" and "over-the-top dramatics," which is a testament to *walang arte's* ability to mutate and exist in various spaces. But here I am particularly interested in *walang arte's* distinct marginality not only in terms of post-coloniality, queerness, and class but also as an aesthetic form, as a style that the novel formalizes.

Travel Guide

Having described some of the main workings of *walang arte*—its tendency to imitate, misrepresent, resist, hide, pun, and make fun, as well as its relation to breaking and violence—what the rest of this article aims to do now is complicate these ideas even further and, through *Insurrecto,* describe the tensions they create. Given the novel's relative newness, I make a deliberate effort in the next section to provide context:

[9] Lucy San Pablo Burns, *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stage of Empire* (New York City University Press, 2013), 15.

summary, reception, and a short author biography. In doing so, I hope to highlight not only the ways in which I de-situate the novel from its more predictable Western postmodernist aesthetic interpretations, but also the ways the novel was founded on and insists upon Filipino structures of breaking. By locating the novel within its Philippine literary and historical context in the section, "Hide and Seek," I describe the various colonial intrusions into the country which contributed to its fragmentation, while also underscoring centralization as a colonial hegemonic mode that sees the fragmentary nature of the Philippine culture as backwards, unmodern. To discuss the politics of translation and narrative representation, I interpret the novel's use of Chiara and Magsalin's dueling scripts in "Alter-native" as rehearsal of the novel's characteristic citationality, imitation, and distortion—that is, *walang arte* as plagiarism. In "Play, Pay, or Die," I describe the tension and relation between playfulness and pain. The novel's use of American song lyrics alongside President Rodrigo Duterte's drug war, for example, sutures the various remnants of imperial violence, as well as articulate *walang arte's* violent variants. And to better understand—perhaps, understand differently—the Filipino playfulness with language (e.g., the use of song lyrics in conversations), I offer in "Style of Being" a rethinking of colonial influence—that is, as orchestration of fragments, expressions of desire, and acts of frustration. That the Filipino style elides language mastery and fluency, I argue, is not a sign of inadequacy but of having to navigate and mediate overconsumption. Furthermore, I point out in "Singing the Anthem" the various linguistic slippages in the novel that allows us to think about *walang arte* as a self-aware means of survival and innovation. Both *walang arte* and *Insurrecto's* deliberately

appropriative and fragmentary modes provide not only an alternative means for thinking about cultural production and identity formation but also a means for rethinking the relation between center and periphery.

Insurrecto

Insurrecto has received rave reviews from mainstream magazine and online book critics. *The Guardian* has pointed out the "complexity of its narrative and thematic structure [that] hint[s] at the difficulty in understanding the confluence of history."[10] *The New York Times* describes its style as an "explosion of formal novelistic conventions."[11] Referring to the Philippine-American neo/colonial relation, *NPR* calls it, "seek[ing] to transcend the gap between the two countries."[12] *London Magazine* likens the novel's structure to "a locked-room mystery" that is at once "confusing" and "fun."[13] A few others have said something similar. What seems to be the common thread between these reviews is the way they reconcile the novel's postmodernist style with its postcolonial narrative characteristics, an issue that Kwame Anthony Appiah has tried to address in his essay, "Is the Post—in Postmodernism the Post—in Postcolonial?" Although it can be compelling, the issue of *reconciliation* is not this article's particular interest. Reconciliation itself

[10] Tash Aw, "Insurrecto by Gina Apostol Review – Struggles in the Philippines," *The Guardian*, Aug. 28, 2019, www.theguardian.com/books/2019/aug/28/insurrecto-gina-apostol-review.
[11] Jen McDonald, "A Comic Novel Asks Who Gets to Write the History of the Colonial Philippines." *The New York Times*, Dec. 26, 2018, www.nytimes.com/2018/12/26/books/review/gina-apostol-insurrecto.html.
[12] John Powers, "Witty and Stylish, 'Insurrecto' Offers an Inside View of the Pain of Colonization." *NPR*, Nov. 28, 2018, www.npr.org/2018/11/28/671506059/witty-and-stylish-insurrecto-offers-an-inside-view-of-the-pain-of-colonization.
[13] Jack Solloway, "Review: *Insurrecto* by Gina Apostol." *The London Magazine*, Nov.11, 2019, https://www.thelondonmagazine.org/review-insurrecto-by-gina-apostol/.

seems antithetical to postmodernist ideas of decentering and fragmentation (one of the qualities which separates postmodernism from modernism is its very comfort with keeping fragments fragmented as opposed to the modernist tendency to cohere fragments and make meaning). And to call *Insurrecto* postmodern in the sense that it is an "explosion of formal novelistic conventions" is to read it against a certain tradition, a canon. It assumes a universal center out of which the marginalized operates. Thus, what I want to offer is a way of reading *Insurrecto* that considers the forms of Philippine literature as determined by and corresponding to Philippine conditions of modernity, one that navigates fragments through a distinctly Filipino style. And I use the Filipino performative style of *walang arte* to describe these conditions not only to ground my discussion of the novel in the Philippine context, but also to articulate various forms of post/modernities that developed outside the perceived Western center, what Martin Manalansan calls alternative modernities.

Insurrecto is about a Filipino American writer, Magsalin, who returns to the Philippines to work as a translator for an American filmmaker, Chiara. The novel opens with a meeting between Magsalin and Chiara at the Muhammad Ali Mall in Quezon City after Magsalin, having "just arrived from New York, on vacation in her birthplace," replies to Chiara's advertisement for a Filipino translator—which, as Magsalin will later realize, should have been an ad for a Filipino tour guide.[14] Chiara, the Sofia Coppola-esque character in the novel, is in the Philippines "scouting locations for a movie" about

[14] Gina Apostol, *Insurrecto: A Novel* (New York: Soho Press, Inc., 2019), 3.

the Balangiga massacre of 1902 in Samar.[15] Chiara had been inspired by her father's film, *The Unintended*, which, not unlike Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, is about a massacre in a Vietnamese village but was filmed in the Philippines. Chiara shares the movie script with Magsalin and the two embark on a road trip, along with two private security guards, from Manila to Samar. Magsalin would then find Chiara's script inadequate and so, in the process, revise it. Weaved into the road trip narrative is Chiara's script about the 1902 massacre from the point of view of a white American female photographer and Magsalin's counter-script whose protagonist is a Filipina revolutionary. While the novel's three main narratives (the trip to Samar and the dueling scripts) might seem straightforward, the order in which they appear and reappear is less so. The book begins in chapter 20 and the proceeding chapters do not at all follow any kind of order or lend themselves to any solution, as a puzzle does. Some of the chapter numbers even repeat; there are about twenty Chapter Ones in the entire novel. Vivid descriptions of minor characters fill the novel, most of whom are given no context or ever mentioned again but whose stories can be consuming. *Insurrecto* also often digresses into lengthy reflections on American pop culture, literature, linguistics, and philosophy, various Filipino languages such as Bisaya, Waray, Tagalog and Spanish, along with fragments of Philippine history and current politics. The novel's narrative form is anything but coherent.

In *Insurrecto*, narrative acts of representation are indistinguishable from acts of mere collection. That is, the way Filipino life manifests in the novel is not one that seeks

[15] Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 7.

to be seen, or have coherent meaning, but one that signals various points of breaking. Magsalin's journey back home, for example, seems to be offering us a way of making sense of her *bildung* as a character, but we soon realize that her trip has only presented her, and us, more confusion than realization. The novel's narrative process—from its characters, use of language and translation, and acts of historicity to its reimagination of the Filipino style of being—performs a complex, and oftentimes non-coherent, movement of representation and misrepresentation, mimicry and mockery, a form of hiding in order to have/make fun. The novel's title, for example, is a reappropriation of the term *insurrecto* which has historically been used to refer to Filipino revolutionaries as dangerous, grotesque, primitive and uncivilized, thus in need of a leader.[16] Apostol's use of the term at once highlights that history and plays with it by refocusing the term to the active and creative ways that Filipinos and Filipino vernaculars rebel.

Given Gina Apostol's background, it seems, for her as a Filipino and writer, that such rebelliousness has also always been tied to the horrors of pain and the pleasures of play. "The horror of the Philippines is that its tragedy is best expressed through disco," writes Apostol in a review on *Here Lies Love*, a musical about Imelda Marcos. She further points out in the review that her relationship with the Marcos dictatorship is not only by way of growing up during the Marcos regime but also more specifically growing up in Leyte, a Marcos territory, where, as a young student, she "danced for Imelda Marcos"—as one dances for her king or dictator.[17] Elsewhere, Apostol has also noted that

[16] See *Body Parts of Empire* by Nerissa Balce.
[17] Gina Apostol, "Dancing with Dictators." *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Dec. 2, 2014, lareviewofbooks.org/article/dancing-dictators/.

her province's relationship with horror did not begin with the Marcoses but goes back to Douglas MacArthur's infamous landing in Leyte (1944) and way back to the "1901 revolutionary battle in Balangiga," Samar, a neighboring province and one of the settings of *Insurrecto.*[18]

Born in Manila, Gina Apostol grew up in Tacloban, Leyte before attending the University of the Philippines Diliman. She moved to the United States in her 20s and earned her Master's in writing from Johns Hopkins University. Her first novel *Bibliolepsy* (1996—but it only became available in the U.S. in 2022), which is set during the 1986 EDSA revolution, and has been described as a "love story" between woman and man and woman and books, is a winner of the 1997 Philippine National Book Award. Her second novel *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata* was published in the Philippines in 2009—which became available in the U.S. in 2021. Set in 19th century Philippines, *The Revolution* follows Mata's memoir and his discovery of fellow revolutionary Jose Rizal. The memoir is highly annotated by the novel's fictional present-day critic and translator Mimi C. Magsalin. Illuminating Marcos-era Philippines, her third book *Gun Dealer's Daughter* (2012) is a winner of the PEN/Open Book Award. She has also written short stories and articles for *The New York Times*, *Foreign Policy*, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Massachusetts Review* among others.[19] Apostol teaches creative writing at the Fieldston School in New York, and she actively promotes her books both in the U.S. and the Philippines. When asked in an

[18] Gina Apostol, "Surrender, Oblivion, Survival." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, Nov. 15, 2013, www.nytimes.com/2013/11/15/opinion/surrender-oblivion-survival.html.
[19] Details about Gina Apostol's books were taken from her official website: https://www.ginaapostol.com/.

interview why, despite having lived in America for so long, her novels are still "distinctly Filipino," she explains, having moved to the U.S. in her 20s, that she could not relate to the Filipino-American struggle "to take sides: be American or not American…I was always Filipino."[20] Hers is a different struggle; it is one against "[s]urrender and its twin, oblivion," which ironically are also "how we Filipinos have survived."[21] For Apostol, the Filipino desire to speak and narrate is almost always tied to survival and resistance against structures of power and with it the work of translation and revision. In other words, to understand the Filipino style, one must also understand its imitative, contradictory, and fragmentary nature not as a fundamental and intrinsic way of being Filipino but as world historical.

Hide and Seek

Thus, I position my "postmodernist" reading of *Insurrecto* within Philippine (American) literature as well as criticisms about postmodernist Philippine novels. As Jeffrey Cabusao has noted, Gina Apostol, among many others, follows the works of Ninotchka Rosca, Jessica Hagedorn, R. Zamora Linmark, and Peter Bacho which "reflect the development and growth of Asian American studies, women studies, LGBT studies, and the emergence of multiculturalism in the United States." That is, *Insurrecto* must be understood within the complex web of political struggles in the U.S.[22] However, someone

[20] Marga Manlapig, "In Her Words: Gina Apostol." *Tatler Philippines*, Sept. 20, 2019, ph.asiatatler.com/life/in-her-words-gina-apostol.
[21] Apostol, "Surrender, Oblivion, Survival."
[22] Jeffrey Arellano Cabusao, "Filipino American Literature." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, 2019, 11, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.777.

like E. San Juan Jr. has also pointed out that the "postmodernist technique of pastiche, aleatory juxtaposition, virtuoso bricolage" in novels like *Dogeaters* are but expressions of "narcissistic captivity" and imitations of western postmodernist tropes that mimic the fragmentary materialist, capitalist world system: "stylized gestures of protest."[23] While I appreciate San Juan's discussion on western postmodernism's political limits—which for him implicates postmodernist Filipino American novels—my reading of *Insurrecto* actually aims to advance and rethink the postmodern aesthetics of novels like *Dogeaters*, precisely when it is understood *not* through western postmodernism, but Filipino modes of performance such as *walang arte* and within the context of Philippine post/modernity. That the fragmentary mode of Philippine postmodernist novels like *Dogeaters* and *Insurrecto* are insidiously repetitive and imitative, I argue, are not mere "stylized gestures" but a deliberate Filipino style in which its idiosyncrasies are the very products of history and aesthetic innovation. And what San Juan might think of about these novels as Filipino complicity to bourgeoise aesthetic practice (which I am not claiming to be completely inaccurate) *can* also be understood as modes of experimentation as well as concealment.

But what exactly is the Filipino in concealment from? The Philippines' five hundred years or so of colonial rule (almost four hundred years under Spanish rule, at least a hundred years under American colony and neocolony, and about three years under Japan during World War II), apart from also being a cause for great resistance, has been a

[23] E. San Juan Jr. *Racial Formations/Critical Transformations: Articulations of Power and Ethnic and Racial Studies in the United States* (Humanities Press, 1992), 125-26.

source of Filipino fear and submission. During the early years of American occupation, for example, the establishment of a network of public schools throughout the archipelago acted through benevolent assimilation as aid to American military counterinsurgency. "In the face of a fierce and protracted war between 1899 and 1902,"[24] the United States moved to fight Filipino anti-colonial resistance not only with military force but also ideologically through American education. American soldiers were the first to serve as teachers to Filipinos followed promptly by "an army of American civilian teachers known as the 'Thomasites.'" And, during the 1920s, in order to "Filipinize the colonial government"—that is, to prepare Filipinos for their eventual independence and neocolonial status—the Thomasites were eventually replaced by their Filipino students whose American education would be passed down to younger generations of Filipinos, the eternal bearer of American language, ideas, and institutions. The aim of American education was to create a linguistic and cultural hierarchy wherein English would be the only medium of instruction. However, given the Philippines' archipelagic geography and its overwhelming linguistic diversity, the task would prove difficult, and the United States would have to pass a law establishing the Bureau of Education whose job it was to make mandatory the use of English as the "basis of instruction," as well as the language of the court system, throughout the country. This would lead some of the American schools to collect fines from their students for not speaking English on campus.[25]

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[24] As Sarita See (*The Decolonized Eye*, 2009) and Nerissa Balce (*Body Parts of Empire*, 2016) have pointed out, 1902 was not the end of the Philippine-American war, but only the beginning of America's active censorship of it.

[25] Vicente L. Rafael, *Motherless Tongues: The Insurgency of Language amid Wars of Translation* (Duke University Press, 2016), 44.

But, as the historian Vicente Rafael has also pointed out, due to "the chronic shortage of funds, the failure to extend universal access to schooling, and the difficulty of retaining the students beyond the primary grades," despite its democratizing and civilizing agenda, the American education system in fact intensified social and economic inequalities in the Philippines.[26] Moreover, the fact of Filipino students having to unlearn their native vernacular in order to learn a new and "superior" one at school added to the difficulty for Filipinos to master English. According to Rafael, Filipinos lacked wholeness because they were in a constant state of translation, managing multiple desires, making it impossible to become either coherent colonial subjects or coherent anti-colonial nationalists, rendering them on both sides "untranslatable." Rafael then argues—against what Renato Constantino called "The miseducation of the Filipino"—that the very fact of Filipino untranslatability, the Filipino "state of inarticulateness," highlights not only the failure of the American empire and the inadequacies of translation, but also the resistance and, more importantly, the *playfulness* of Filipinos.[27] For Rafael, such inability to master another language allowed Filipinos to create and innovate. In other words, against all American efforts to institutionalize English in the Philippines, Filipinos proved to be unassimilable, not despite of who they are but precisely because of it. It is thus in dialogue with Rafael's points on Filipino playfulness and innovativeness with language, as well as the limits of translation, that I locate my readings of *Insurrecto*.

[26] Rafael, *Motherless Tongues*, 45.
[27] Rafael, *Motherless Tongues*, 49.

Alter-native

As a Filipino colonial subject and writer, *Insurrecto's* protagonist, Magsalin, must not only perform the labor of translating for the American filmmaker, but also the labor of covertly rewriting that filmmaker's script—thus rewriting Filipino history and narrative. And underneath Magsalin's act of revision are also the novel's covert ways of problematizing translation itself—as an authenticating act for the "original"—through constant doubling and endless citations. Even before serving as Chiara's translator and guide, Magsalin had known of Ludo Brasi's (Chiara's father) film, *The Unintended*, which she had seen "several times in her teens. At one point, she recalls watching it frame by frame in a muggy class along Katipunan Avenue for a course called Locations/Dislocations."[28] Set during the Vietnam war, *The Unintended* is "about a teenage kid, Tommy O'Connell, who fails to be court-martialed for acts he has committed in a South-Vietnamese hamlet…The boy Tommy, along with his fellow soldiers of Charlie Company razes the hamlet to the ground."[29] Although the film is about Vietnam, Chiara had been aware that it was shot in Samar, Philippines where her father spent most of his and his family's time while filming. *The Unintended* here is an obvious nod to Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (and perhaps even to Jessica Hagedorn's *Dream Jungle*, a novel partly about the filming of a costly Vietnam war film in the Philippines), which was also inspired by Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*, and so rehearses the novel's characteristic citationality. Through the work of a Filipino

[28] Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 15.
[29] Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 34.

literary critic, Chiara then learns of the possible intentional link between the 1968 Vietnam massacre and the Balangiga, Samar massacre of 1901 in her father's film. This becomes an inspiration for her script about the Balangiga massacre, which would be narrated from the point of view of a white American woman who "is a stand-in for the generic consumer being enticed to know the story"—to which Magsalin asks, "does she need to be so—*white*?"[30] Magsalin is also uneasy about the use of Elvis's song as "the soundtrack for the Philippine-American War," parallel to the white woman's voice, making it seem as though there is something quintessentially and authentically (white) American about Elvis. For Magsalin, the script lacks imagination. It does not consider the possibility of Elvis's songs being in fact *made* in the Philippines—or at least equally possessed by different people from different places—how Elvis might have taken on a completely different and unrecognizable life in the Philippines. Magsalin after all grew up thinking that songs like "Are You Lonesome Tonight" by Elvis Presley "were absolutely Filipino…an annoying Kundiman if she ever heard one."[31] Her memory of the music of Sinatra and Presley is one "in which the songs seemed to spring from the bamboo groves, and grown men sang soulful versions of creepy ballads while sopping up bahalina tuba, their local wine."[32] Instead of grounding the narrative in the Philippines, Chiara's script assumes a fully realized white American narrative center out of which the Filipino operates.

[30] Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 122.
[31] Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 123.
[32] Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 123-24.

And so, while working as a translator for Chiara (for money) Magsalin is also secretly translating and rewriting Chiara's script. Magsalin refers to her protagonist as the "alter-native" with an "altered ego" whom she will call Caz after the Filipino heroine Casiana Nacionales from Chiara's script. Caz's character would be anything but generic. She would stand in for the

Caz Intahan [lover]

Caz Abwat [conspirator]

Caz Alanan [sin/sinner]

Caz Saysayan [history/historian]

Caz Inungalingan [lie/liar].[33]

In her alternative opening scene, "Caz is clutching an envelope, a thick manuscript…[and] there will be no voice over, no soundtracks, no song lyrics." Caz will be "a slight, brown woman" and "a schoolteacher in Giporlos, Samar, or maybe Oras, Bicol, or better still a doubling site—Sorsogon, Sorsogon, or Bulacan, Bulacan."[34] By providing Caz such plurality, Magsalin composes a narrative about the Philippines and Filipinos that is not driven by a desire for wholeness and coherence but by multiple identities and possibilities. That Caz possesses such variedness speaks of Magsalin's narrative as not one that seeks individuality but one whose search for identity must constantly reckon with other identities. That is, in the novel, breaking and bridging of identities are constantly at work. Not unlike Caz, Magsalin herself as a character

[33] Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 126.
[34] Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 126-27.

possesses the same plurality. “Magsalin” in Tagalog means to translate or to transfer, or translator, which, coincidentally or not, becomes her profession. I might also note that the Greek origin of “metaphor,” “*metapherein*,” means “to transfer” which is symbolized in the novel by another mode of transfer, a “duffel bag (leather, made in Venice, aubergine with olive handles, always admired by salesladies)” that both Magsalin and Chiara possess.[35] “Magsalin” is also the not-so-often-mentioned middle name of Crisóstomo Ibarra (whose full name is Juan Crisóstomo Ibarra y Magsalin), the protagonist of Jose Rizal’s novel *Noli Me Tángere*. Like Magsalin, Ibarra’s diasporic experience led him into acting as a revolutionary translator, something that could also be said about Rizal himself. Exemplified by Ibarra and Rizal, and Caz and Magsalin, it seems that the Filipino search for identity hinges upon the history of their name’s displacement. Thus, Apostol’s performance in the novel of an almost endless form of doubling and citationality (between Caz and Magsalin, Magsalin and Chiara, their opposing scripts, their scripts’ opposing protagonists, between America and the Philippines, between the two countries’ perception and translation of each other, the countries’ languages, etc.), on the one hand, understands the “persistently uneven, and always contingent, power relations” within imperialism and in the act of translation, and, on the other, describes the ways in which, when seen through the Filipino lens, narrative meaning inevitably breaks.[36] In other words, *Insurrecto’s* multiple, layered effort to translate in fact dramatizes what Vicente Rafael refers to as the “condition of untranslatability,” whereby

[35] Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 4. In the longer version of this article, I will be discussing further the significance of this duffel bag in terms of how it might function as a means of looking at class division and conflict within Philippine society.
[36] Rafael, *Motherless Tongues*, 1.

"form and content are constitutive just as meaning and style are inseparable. Neither 'free' nor 'literal' translation will do, neither word for word' nor 'sense for sense.'"[37] The novel's attempt then to "translate" an American script, and *Filipinize* it, has less to do with translation itself—that is, with the aim to be subservient to the "original" and its prescribed meaning—than the performance of a state of non-coherence, a distortion of the "original" in the target language.

It is also worth noting that Magsalin's "revision" is in fact plagiarism and tampering with the original. Yet, one of the ways *walang arte* operates—as exemplified by *jejemon's* love for anything counterfeit—is precisely through tampering, authenticity's nemesis. Unlike pure imitation, tampering is interested in interference and alterations which, for the purposes of the colonial subject, allow for various modes of experimentation and navigation through hegemonic structures. As Sarita See has argued about the Filipino artist's tendency to plagiarize and misrepresent, because of the historical and cultural erasures that Filipinos have had to endure, "the Filipino autobiographical or identitarian mode is characterized not by the 'real' representation of the self but the mimetic, ironized representation of the body double." And that in order to understand Filipino art and culture, we must first rethink "the imitativeness of the Filipino, understood usually as the limit of Filipino achievement and evidence of his or her incapacity for original thought…[,] as the sign of and for history."[38] In other words, the Filipino style, particularly modes of imitation like *walang arte*, operates on the level

[37] Rafael, *Motherless Tongues*, 12.
[38] See, *The Filipino Primitive: Accumulation and Resistance in the American Museum* (New York University Press, 2017), 170.

of aesthetic due to its ability not only to mock and make fun of power structures but also to make us rethink notions of originality and authenticity in cultural production. If for Chiara citation means honoring her father's work and the ideas of the literary critic—i.e., having a certain loyalty for the "genius" and "sacrilege" of the referent—Magsalin's plagiaristic ways might describe what André Lefevere calls "refraction," which is a way of understanding translation as being self-aware and without any loyalties to a sacred original, or that the "genius" of a given "original" has to be always understood not *a priori* but within the context of refracted/peripheral texts "which reflects the dominant practice of the time."[39] Magsalin deliberately tampers with the original not to honor it, but to further break it apart in order to make room for even more inquiries. *Walang arte's* hostility towards the original and comfort with tampering refuses hierarchy and allows for that very experimentation, yet for the same reason also poses a threat and so must keep itself concealed. And one of its modes of concealment, or non-coherence, is playfulness.

Play, Pay, or Die

By Filipino non-coherence, I do not mean mere meaninglessness but in fact a breaking, a distortion, of meaning that lends itself to multiple possibilities of interpretation. That is, by freeing itself from the confines of surface cohesion, the novel is at once able to play around with language while also apprehending violence. In the novel, when Magsalin

[39] André Lefevere, "Translated Literature: Towards an Integrated Theory." *The Bulletin of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 14, no.1 (1981), 68-78, 72.

mentions to her uncles her plans of driving to Samar with Chiara for research, her *Tios* (Uncles) warn her of the dangers of "'cutting,' as they call the land trip to Samar":

> "Do not go to Samar." "Or why not take the plane? Or even the boat," says Tio Nemesio. "You should take first class and watch the islands in the stream. That is what we are. How can we be wrong? No one in between! And we rely on each other, ah-ahhhh! I always wanted to watch the islands, Mindoro, Cebu, Siquijor, all pass by from the window of a first-class cabin on the MV *Sweet Faith*. Waste of money, but why not?"[40]

The dangers Magsalin's uncles are referring to here has to do with the current Duterte administration's anti-drug war effort and "the dead bodies…piling up at the garbage dumps, in the slums, near schoolyards, and on all the monotonous commercial streets of the country—bodies upon bodies."[41] Although not overtly named—he is called a "perverse despot" in the novel—Apostol is clearly referring here to the current Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. Prior to assuming office in 2016, Duterte ran a campaign with an insistent promise to wage war against what he called the most serious threat to the Philippines, illegal drugs. As soon as Duterte held the office, he mobilized the Philippine National Police (PNP) to operate a nationwide anti-drug campaign which would eventually be called "Oplan Tokhang." Oplan Tokhang has already killed at least 4,000 people—with 22,000 related deaths still under investigation—some of whom are innocent bystanders or collateral damage or wrongly accused.[42] Over 27,000 deaths have

[40] Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 112.
[41] Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 113.
[42] See "The Drug Killings: Who, What, Where, When, How?" *The Drug Archive*, drugarchive.ph/.

also been reported as "vigilante killings outside police operations," which are referred to as D.U.I. or "deaths under investigation."[43] As the novel points out, Tokhang comes from the Bisaya and not Tagalog phrase "toktok-hangyo"—a vernacular nod to the Bisaya-speaking region in Mindanao where the president is from. "Toktok" is the Bisaya onomatopoeic word for "knock-knock" while "hangyo" means to plead. The first syllables of the words then comprise the term "tokhang" wherein "the drug-war policeman will knock on your door, and whether you open or do not open, you are doomed."[44] The idea is that after the knock-knock one must plead and not resist in order for one not to get shot. Apart from door-to-door visits, the campaign also includes random drug testing, police entrapments, community sweeps, armed raids, and "vigilante-style" killings on the roads at night and even during daylight.[45] "Oplan," of course, is a term adopted from Operation Plan (OPLAN) from the U.S. military. "Oplan Tokhang" shows that Duterte's violence also operates through wordplay and imitation. Part of Duterte's charm which connects him to the masses is his bluntness, vulgarity, and un-pretension. He does not often speak English when addressing the people, and when he does, he carries a heavy Bisaya accent. And so, despite coming from an affluent political family, the masses see him as relatable. In other words, Duterte, along with his modes of violence, performs and *is walang arte*, and as such rehearses the connection between violence and play insofar as violence does not precede play but is its synonym. Region VIII, in which the province of Samar is a part, gets particular attention for their police

[43] Rambo Talabong, "How the Duterte Government Underreports Drug War Killings." *Rappler*, Sept. 18, 2020, www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/how-duterte-government-underreports-drug-war-killings.
[44] Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 95.
[45] "The Drug Killings."

department's strict execution of the anti-drug program, hence Magsalin's uncles' worry for the two women's plan of road travel to Samar. The uncles' advice against road travel in the novel implicates, through play, Duterte's murderous drug war.

Another noticeable feature about Tio Nemesio's comment is how, despite the seriousness of the subject, he playfully slips into song lyrics: Dolly Parton's and Kenny Rogers' "Islands in the stream." By taking a plane or a boat first class—and watching the "islands in the stream. That is what we are. How can we be wrong? No one in between! And we rely on each other, ah-ahhhh!"—Tio Nemesio offers Magsalin and Chiara an option for a safer means of transportation, away from the enforcement of state-sanctioned violence. Money is obviously not an issue for them, as Tio Nemesio boasts: "Waste of money, but why not?"[46] Magsalin, however, insists on taking the road to Samar but asks her uncles to provide them with private security. By making light of the dangers of driving to Samar, by casually finishing his thought with a song, and because they can afford to fly or take a boat first class or hire security, Tio Nemesio underscores the corruptness of state institutions and the unevenness of their victims. The Duterte administration has reportedly rewarded police officers 10,000 pesos ($200) for killing each drug suspect, 20,000 pesos for street pushers, one million pesos for wholesale drug distributors, and five million pesos ($100,000) for drug lords resulting to allegations of planned and staged killings which involve shutting down streetlights and CCTVs during their raids. Alleged quotas for "surrenders" too have resulted not only in more staged arrests—e.g., planting drugs and/or drug paraphernalia in the homes and pockets of

[46] Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 112.

profiled suspects—but also in the chronic overpopulation of the already overpopulated Philippine prison system.[47] Many of Oplan Tokhang's murder victims are people in poverty and the majority of those incarcerated for drugs either cannot afford to get a court trial or cannot get one because the legal system is too congested, or both. But, as Tio Nemesio playfully points out, if you have the money, you can either get away with it or you can get away *from* it. The novel's playfulness with language, therefore, reveals not only the limits of state institutions, but also the institutionalization of violence especially towards the poor and marginalized.

In the manner of Filipino non-coherence and *walang arte*, in which the playfulness of breaking is always very closely tied to the pain of breaking—and how such surface non-coherence always possesses an inner working—I want to further suggest that Apostol's use of the song "Islands in the stream" is conceptual. Although Magsalin has described her counter-script as "[a]n abaca weave, a warp and weft of numbers…measured but invisible in the plot," I find *Insurrecto's* form to be *not* like an abaca weave—which still seems too clean, too ordered—but more in the spirit of "islands in the stream." That is, *Insurrecto's* acts of fragmentation emblematize the archipelagic. Unlike an abaca weave, the Philippine archipelago as "islands in the stream" characterize a more random placement: the islands are of varying sizes and distances from one another (hundreds of islands even disappear during high tide), separated by a body of water that can be thought of as both border and bridge. By insisting on breaking points—as opposed

[47] See the Brookings Institution website, https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-human-rights-consequences-of-the-war-on-drugs-in-the-philippines/.

to the mere fragments, which has the potential of being neutral—we are brought back to the context of pain and loss.[48] On the one hand, because of the archipelagic geography, Filipinos suffered a loss of language/s during the American counterinsurgency to standardize English in the Philippines (apart from the actual loss of lives during the Philippine-American war), to cohere almost a hundred languages from thousands of islands. Losing one's mother tongue/s, or to have one's language made minor or inconsequential, and to be told that to speak one's language is backward have all become traumatizing experiences for Filipinos. The fraught Filipino relationship with language, thus, can only be understood through its brokenness. On the other hand, the Philippine archipelagic situation has also determined Duterte's *modus operandi* through the mobilization of the Philippine National Police (PNP) and, equally crucially, the use of social media.[49] In the Philippine case, archipelagic breaking is almost always tied to the violence of breaking. In other words, what seems to be a random burst into country song lyrics during a discussion on how not to get caught up in Duterte's violent drug war, what seems non-coherent and non-signifying, is deeply coherent, if the fragments are bridged. However, part of that coherence is never to provide a surface that coheres. Indeed, for Filipinos, "islands in the stream, that is what we are."

Style of Being

[48] I am inspired here by *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* where Fred Moten plays with the idea of *breaking* as part of a musical structure and about broken relationships to the past.
[49] For more on Duterte and social media, see *A Thousand Cuts*, a documentary by Ramona Díaz featuring *Rappler's* Maria Ressa.

In the spirit of playfulness and irruption of translation, I want to offer another way of thinking about Tio Nemesio's use of American song lyrics to finish a thought, one that reinforces what I have been arguing about the workings of the Filipino style, untranslatability, and *walang arte*, which is that the precarious nature, the non-coherence, of Filipino modes of performance forces us to think about these performances as world historical. Most Filipinos juggle at least three languages with varying levels of fluency (or lack of fluency): Bisaya, which is the most widely spoken language in the country; Tagalog, the national language; and English, the country's medium of education and formal instruction. Many, like Magsalin, speak four languages and pun in five. Magsalin speaks Waray, Tagalog, Bisaya, English, and Spanish in all of which she hints at being fluent, except Spanish (but could nevertheless pun in it as do most Filipinos). Although Filipinos might consider themselves fluent in multiple languages, the Filipino relationship with language fluency is fraught. According to Rafael, when speaking, Filipinos are relentlessly

> moving back and forth between his own and the other's language. What comes across is neither the meaning of words nor the settled identity of the speaker and the hearer but rather the sense of the unstable and shifting relationship of languages to one another and to their users. Translation results not in the emergence of thought but in the spread of misunderstanding.[50]

Because of the various colonial intrusions into the already diverse Filipino life—colonial intrusions that also assert social and linguistic hegemony—the Filipino style of speaking

[50] Rafael, *Motherless Tongues*, 57.

has often been deemed, especially by its colonizers, incoherent: "unstable and shifting." That is, someone like Magsalin would grow up speaking Waray and Bisaya at home, which she would then have to repress while learning English at school; she would learn English grammar at school, yet she would feel the language is imposed upon her and that she could never feel ownership of it; she would hear and learn Tagalog through the national television channels, but she would not have access to its form. Precisely because of these conflicting linguistic desires to which Filipinos have been subjected, they would never feel complete fluency or mastery over any of these languages. Indeed, they would feel the constant tug between the anxieties of their lack of mastery and the pleasures of being able to play around with language—a tension that only the imitative style of *walang arte* is capable of understanding and making room for.

Exemplified in moments when Filipinos during conversations would burst into American song lyrics, what I want to suggest is that the Filipino lack of fluency is not a matter of incompetence or inadequacy but a *style of speaking*. It is a style of finishing or continuing a thought that, due to its citational and repetitive nature, rejects any claim of fluency or mastery. Filipino non-coherence is *not* about not knowing enough but about knowing, or having to consume, too much, so that the excess of thoughts, ideas and languages that reveals itself in the Filipino style is a representation of one's navigation through an overflow of information. The particular use of American song lyrics, for example, highlights imposed American cultural hegemony. As an American neo/colony, American consumer and media culture—through the professionalization of advertisement—were forced into the throats of Filipinos, the new consumers of American

products, thereby embedding them into the Filipino psyche. But I also want to suggest an aesthetic dimension to that act of psychic and linguistic navigation. The ability of many Filipinos to expertly imitate American singers like Whitney Houston, Mariah Carey, and Steve Perry (e.g., the internationally acclaimed imitative voices of Charice Pempengco and Arnel Pineda to name two),[51] as well as expertly incorporate song lyrics into daily conversations, are proof not just of how much American music has seeped into Filipino pop culture and everyday life but how *aggressively* Filipinos take imitation. There is even the infamous case of the "My Way" murders, where karaoke singers have reportedly been killed for not properly singing the Sinatra song. That some are willing to kill and be killed for the sake of imitation (that Mimiyuuuh cannot help her outbursts, linguistic or otherwise), speaks of the Filipino style as not mere excesses from colonial influences, but an active expression of desire, as well as the labors of imitation and precision. That is, exploding into song lyrics in the middle of a conversation, for Filipinos, is not a simple manner of speaking but a playful and passionate orchestration of fragments.

Moreover, slipping into song lyrics can also be thought of as an act of frustration, or even a means of mediating anxiety for one's lack of fluency in English. For many Filipinos, speaking straight English is an inconvenience, at times a cause for embarrassment since English has become associated with the language of the educated. Speaking Taglish or any combination of languages is often far easier. And so, apart from being a stylistic expression, the use of song lyrics, because it is almost always funny,

[51] See Karen Tongson's and Christine Balance's works for more on karaoke, Pempengco, and Pineda, as well as the labor and aesthetics of imitation.

hides the anxiety and embarrassment that one might feel from one's lack of English fluency. It is defensive. In another mukbang vlog (with an Australian vlogger this time), where she must speak only in English, Mimiyuuuh is forced to resort to multiple defensive tactics to explain herself. For instance, while trying to explain to her vegan guest why Filipinos love lechon so much, she exclaims, "it gives me something like…something like…something like you make me feel like a dangerous woman." Having dodged the question through the Ariana Grande song, and having left her guest confused, the two moved on. At another moment, when Mimiyuuuh wanted to ask her guest if they could eat the vegan sushi with their arms intertwined like they were newlyweds, she finds herself lost for words and instead says, while dramatically gesturing with her arms, "we should eat it like…we should eat it…we should eat each other."[52] Another one of Mimiyuuuh's characteristically *bakla* and *jejemon* tactics (because of its vulgarity and tackiness, the opposite of *refine*) to get out of a bind is by turning the conversation sexual and flirtatious. Both scenes show obvious frustration (albeit at times affectionate) on her part which is reflected in her video editing: the video turns black and white to show her frustration. The Filipino style of speaking, thus, is an active and modern form of dealing with the various changes and circumstances around the speaker providing us a way of seeing how language mediates identity formations. Martin Manalansan has pointed out the constant changeability and mobility of the Filipino language and its "code-switching-system."[53] Although his book focuses mainly

[52] Jeremy Sancebuche (Mimiyuuuh), VEGAN MUKBANG WITH JAMIE ZHU (KASUKA OPO!!). YouTube video, Sept. 21, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XYkUYmkj5w&t=563s.
[53] Martin F. Manalansan, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Duke University Press, 2007), 48.

on the specificity of Filipino gay lingo, or *bakla* "swardspeak," his discussion on how "swardspeak" is "made and remade in a speedy, often dizzying, manner…[and] is always on the move" is helpful when thinking more generally about how Filipinos not only navigate multiple languages but also their hierarchical structure. For Manalansan, the ways in which Filipino languages change based on the needs and choices of the speaker must be considered not only active or reactive but modern: "The aim of the speaker is to be au courant, to be modern and to be aware of the latest and newest word or the twists and turns of the new verbal acrobatic act."[54] Although Mimiyuuuh's guest is somewhat confused about her hysterics, it is obvious that he is entertained by Mimiyuuuh's quickness of wit and pop-culture references. (But, of course, the *bakla* [queer] dimension in Mimiyuuuh's performative frustration cannot be overlooked. One must wonder if tackiness and sexual vulgarity are "entertaining" coming from a *bakla* person because the *bakla* person is perceived as always already sexual, making her funny but also vulnerable to heteronormative violence. Once again, we are reminded, here, of the relation between play and violence in every aspect of *walang arte*). Thus, the use of song lyrics to finish a sentence involves great navigational skill and method in that the syntactical movement between speech and lyrics must seem fluid and well-rehearsed, despite it occurring in the most random of times. And, as a defensive and stylistic form, it is often a source of comfort for the speaker and joy to the listener.

[54] Manalansan, *Global Divas*, 50.

Singing the Anthem

Apart from the syntactic use of song lyrics, the thematic of singing in the novel also indexes various linguistic slippages—between the official and unofficial, and the national anthem and nursery rhyme. And what I want to further suggest about non-coherence as the novel's formal mode, as islands in the stream, is that, like *walang arte*, it is very much aware of its fragmentation, as well as its imitative modes, as means not only for making sense of itself but also holding on to the fragments it has been left to deal with. That is, the Filipino style depends on innovation to survive. While in the Philippines with her father filming *The Unintended*, the young Chiara learns the Philippine national anthem from a Filipino teacher "before [she] learns [her] own country's pledge of allegiance." She sings the song thus: "*Bayang magiling, perlas ng sinungaling*."[55] Immediately, Magsalin and the two Filipino guards guiding them in their trip to Samar chuckle upon hearing the words. "Beri gud!" one of the guards mocked. "*Magiling*" and "*sinungaling*," Magsalin points out, should in fact have been "*magiliw*" and "*silanganan.*" *Magiliw* comes from the word which means love while *silanganan* means that where the sun rises, the east, or the orient. The phrase in English should have been "Oh country I love…Pearl of the Orient." Instead, Chiara was taught *magiling* which is to grind and *sinungaling* which means liar or lies. Magsalin translates the mistaken phrase as "*Obscene country, Land of lies*," translating *magiling* as "obscene" because to her, in this context, "magiling *sounds* [my emphasis] obscene." Such variation in Magsalin's (mis)translation is, of course, not a defect in the Filipino style but point to the difficulty

[55] Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 131.

of translating Filipino phrases since translation for Filipinos involve not only grammar but also context and personal perception—not to mention the constant urge to pun and make fun. As Manalansan further points out, the act of translation itself, making sense of the Filipino style of speaking, is always already doomed to fail since "changes in the code are usually seen as very rapid, so much so that conversations almost always contain lexical or syntactic innovations."[56] *Bayang magiling* roughly means "ground up country" which still playfully describes the country's brokenness geographically, linguistically, culturally, etc. But because *magiling* sounds obscene to Magsalin, although it is not the direct translation, she would translate it as so. And to refer to the Philippines as an obscene country and land of lies is in sharp comedic contrast to the actual sentiment of the anthem which is of love and loyalty. Magsalin is impressed with how well Chiara sings the Tagalog anthem, yet she is also convinced that Chiara's teacher taught her these words on purpose because in the Philippines "Everyone's a joker."[57]

However, the miseducation of Chiara might be more than just a joke. The Filipino descendants of the Thomasites—Filipinos who were expected to master American education and English, and eventually replace the American teachers—after all turned out to be disloyal, or incapable of being loyal even if they wanted to. As mentioned above, "the chronic shortage of funds, the failure to extend universal access to schooling, and the difficulty of retaining the students beyond the primary grades"[58] contributed to the "miseducation of Filipinos," to borrow from the Filipino historian Renato Constantino.[59]

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[56] Manalansan, *Global Divas*, 50.
[57] Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 132.
[58] Rafael, *Motherless Tongues*, 45.
[59] See also "The Miseducation of the Filipino" by Renato Constantino to which Rafael is responding.

But there is another dimension to that miseducation, as Rafael further points out, which has to do with "the workings of the vernacular."[60] Although English was strictly implemented in American schools, the fact that most Filipino students grew up speaking a non-English mother tongue/s, and that they were still surrounded by the Filipino vernacular outside the school, meant the mother tongue proved itself inescapable. And because the mother tongue was the one being repressed and policed, it was the language with less pretense, or *walang arte*, towards which the Filipino will always be drawn. Oscillating between the languages, and their imposed hierarchical status, Filipinos were in a constant state of translation. And, relieved from the burdens of complete translation/fluency, they now possess what Rafael calls "motherless tongues" with no real loyalties either to America or the Philippines. Given such unassimilable condition, what I think is worth considering about the Filipino teachers of Chiara is not only their disloyalty to their American education but also to Filipino nationalism;[61] it is unclear, after all, whether "*Obscene country, Land of lies*" refers to the U.S. or the Philippines, or both. Such lack of loyalty might be precisely how the Filipino language sustains itself.

Magsalin's miseducation also operates in a similar way. Upon hearing from one of the guards that they will have to take a "Ro-Ro" to get from one island to another, Chiara asks Magsalin what a "Ro-Ro" is. "You know, like ro-ro-row your boat, gently down the stream!" Magsalin explains, "though she has no idea, too, why Gogoboy [the

[60] Rafael, *Motherless Tongues*, 53.
[61] See *Motherless Tongues*, Chapter 2, for more on the anti-Filipino nationalist tendencies of having a motherless tongue.

guard] calls the vessels Ro-Ro." She then informs Chiara that the reason why the nursery rhyme was her first guess was because

> "Filipinos were taught YMCA camping songs by Thomasites…Clever form of pacification. Very smart. It stuck, you know. Camp songs are the backbone of my education. I learned the song 'Row, Row, Row your boat' in nursery school. I sang in English before I wrote in Waray. Actually, I never learned to write in Waray."[62]

Magsalin's introduction to English through nursery rhymes is in stark contrast to the young Chiara learning the Philippine national anthem. But, of course, the racialized dimension of it should be obvious. Part of President William McKinley's program of "benevolent assimilation" was the "uplift" of "savage" Filipinos through "Anglo-Saxon" values. The terms "unincorporated territory" and "foreign in a domestic sense" also juxtaposed American benevolence by virtue of Filipino racial difference.[63] Filipinos were savage children in need of Western education, which "naturally" begins with nursery rhymes. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, Magsalin's relationship with English is not one of disavowal. She is obviously fluent in English, and English surfaces in many aspects of Filipino life including the Ro-Ro vessel. And it is also not one of assimilation either. It is linguistic recurrence through playfulness and invention. Instead of seeing English nursery rhymes as a developmentalist medium into "greater" American values, she sees in the foreign language the possibility of the vernacular's survival, not its death.

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[62] Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 131.
[63] See Duffy Burnett and Marshall, *Foreign in a Domestic Sense*; Rafael, *White Love and Other events in Filipino History*, chapters 1-2; Kramer, *The Blood of Government*.

Instead of Americanizing herself, she Filipinizes the English language, turning an English phrase from a nursery rhyme into a Waray word for cargo ships—or so she assumes. Magsalin does not actually know if the origin of the Ro-Ro term is the nursery rhyme. RORO vessels are in fact cargo ships that allow vehicles to be "rolled in" and "rolled out," hence "RO-RO." She is simply guessing, which is another trait of the Filipino style; indeed, guessing and mistranslating are two of its many characteristics. But it is not *mere* guessing either. That Filipinos can assimilate an English language acronym to the grammatical doubling that happens in Malay languages[64] (e.g., *halo-halo*, *turo-turo, anting-anting*, to a certain extent *arte-arte*) is precisely an instance of appropriative inventive play. That is, because the doubling is endless, the potential for play is also endless, making Magsalin's rationale about the nursery rhyme utterly in keeping with the style. To be *walang arte* is to be un-picky, and to be able to *make do* of what one is left with—a trait particularly useful for the marginalized. Calling a cargo ship "ro-ro" from "row, row, row your boat" is also characteristically *jejemon* in its seeming childishness. But here I am insisting on the invention and innovation necessary in the playfulness that the Filipino style deploys. Magsalin may not have learned to write in her mother tongue, Waray, but she knows the language will survive so long as they are allowed to coexist—or, better, given room to play. Filipino non-coherence, therefore, does not hierarchize, favoring English over Filipino, or vice versa, but merely makes room for multiple parts to

[64] The longer version of this article will necessarily situate the geographic, cultural, religious, and linguistic fragmentation of the Philippines within its Southeast Asianist context.

simultaneously function while never losing sight of American imperial and racial subjugation and its centralizing, developmentalist logic.

Conclusion

At every turn, *Insurrecto* insists upon, not only the insurgency of the Filipino people, but of the Filipino vernacular over the implementation and institutionalization of English through American education. By way of constant doubling, endless citationality, and defiance against coherence, the novel articulates the resilience of Filipino languages—amidst a history of erasure and silencing—through the Filipino style of being and turns it into the literary. In other words, the Filipino style bears with it its own beauty and survival because of its adherence to adaptability and, most importantly, I think, playfulness. Apostol's book deliberately opens up and allows for various interventions in whichever direction the reader might take, such as precisely what I have been able to do in this article. In discussing the "play of translation and the friendship between languages" that characterize the Tagalog slang, Rafael quotes the Filipino journalist Nick Joaquin thus:

> "This language [Tagalog slang] …is the most daring, the most alive, the most used language in the country today…[It] is being created by the masses, out in the open, to express their lives, to express their times, and just for the fun of it. That's why it promises to be a great language: because it's being created for the sheer joy of creating. *Happy-happy lang!*"[65]

[65] Rafael, *Motherless Tongues*, 59, 62.

While I agree with Joaquin's description as it refers to Tagalog slang (i.e., Joaquin's focus is the use of slang within *barkadas*, or close circle of friends), by way of the Filipino style and *walang arte*, I want to suggest that that description applies not only to slang but to various aspects of Filipino everyday life as I have catalogued above.

Bookending the novel are lyrics from Elvis Presley's "Suspicious minds." In one of the opening chapters, Virginie, Chiara's mother, hears "*We can't go on together! With suspicious minds*" on the radio in late 1960s Las Vegas—a city where "everything in the world is doubled."[66] While Stephen Sohn has described, not inaccurately, the "profligate provinciality of Las Vegas,"[67] I find the city to be an apt Filipino American double, as well as an apt starting point (to the extent that there is one) for the novel, in that it was not only home to "The King," but also because of its spectacular embrace of imitation. It is no coincidence that Filipino performers have done well in Las Vegas: Lani Misalucha, Martin Nievera, Pops Fernandez, to name a few—but, of course, they would not get the same renown as their American counterparts. However, at the end of the novel, Magsalin and Chiara find themselves in Magsalin's uncles' home in Punta, Manila where "Exequiel and Nemesio sing out the doubling chorus…*We can't go on together—with suspicious minds*" in a karaoke performance.[68] As Magsalin herself exemplifies, Filipinos like to imitate especially American culture, but they also have suspicious minds. That is, as in a mystery novel (Magsalin's choice of genre for her counter-script), in *Insurrecto*,

[66] Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 13.
[67] Stephen Hong Sohn, "From Discos to Jungles: Circuitous Queer Patronage and Sex Tourism in Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters*." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 56, no. 2 (2010), 317–348., doi:10.1353/mfs.0.1694: 329.
[68] Apostol, *Insurrecto*, 296-97.

and in *walang arte*, everything is doubled, everyone is of suspicious mind, and nothing is what it seems—which is precisely the mode of play and style: figuring it out. And so, to close the novel in Manila with Magsalin's uncles singing "Suspicious Minds" in karaoke is to insist upon that mode of suspicion (playfulness) and the deliberateness of Filipino imitation. While mimicry in the colonial context is often described as negotiation with colonialism and subtle survival technique,[69] the Filipino style tends to be more actively aggressive in wrenching away from the imposed imperial culture out of its own framework to the extent that Magsalin can think of Elvis's song as utterly and absolutely Filipino, as belonging in a communal karaoke machine for *everyone* to sing. It is a total appropriation through performative mimicry that is more aggressive and has the function not only of revealing contradictions and fissures in the American culture, but also the labor and inner logic of the Filipino style. Filipino non-coherence does not necessarily reject the desire for the original and authentic, but it understands the (Filipino) distance from/impossibility of the perceived original thus making imitation a worthy substitute. It describes Filipino modernity as a particular kind of colonial carnivalesque that at every turn defies any linear, rationalist, and developmentalist formation—but sometimes also, just for the fun of it, *arte-arte lang*.

[69] See *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha.

Chapter 3

Bangungot: Dreams, Nightmares, and *Tsismis* in R. Zamora Linmark's *Leche*

Death is a Many-Splendored Thing

While waiting for my 13-hour flight from LAX to Taipei, which would eventually take me back to Manila almost two decades after I left, I scrolled through Facebook, through the profiles and posts of relatives and friends, many of whom are from the Philippines, with the anticipation (and dread) of knowing I'll be seeing some of them again. One particular post from a distant aunt struck me. It was dedicated to the very recent passing of Kyle Verador. I had no immediate memory of how Kyle and I were related, but since we were Facebook "friends" (which hardly means anything), I had seen some of his posts in the past, as well as posts about him, and from what I can remember he worked as an advisor for the town mayor. Apart from posts containing political campaigns, I also remembered ones of him partying and drinking among crowds of people—a typical FB post. What immediately came to mind was the possibility of his death being connected to politics. The last town election was held not very long ago, and campaign-related crimes (in that town or many places in the Philippines) were not uncommon. I was distracted by the realization that, with less than an hour from boarding, my gate was at a different terminal on the other side of the airport. I immediately finished and paid for my drink at the bar before rushing to take the shuttle. On occasions where I had Wi-Fi connection between flights, I would scroll through Facebook again and see more posts about Kyle. I found that he died on the 7th of December, the same day I left the U.S.—though I would

have been 16 hours behind Philippine time. December 7 is also the day after the town fiesta, which meant, especially due to his political relations, endless partying (excessive eating and drinking) days leading up to the fiesta. It then occurred to me, for just a moment, the possibility that he died from *bangungut*—a deadly heart attack and/or multiple organ failure that (allegedly due to stress, heavy eating, and heavy drinking) preys on young Filipino men in their sleep. But I did not make too much of it then.

On the first night in my hometown of Siaton, an hour drive from Dumaguete in the province of Negros Oriental, I was visited by friends and relatives (news spread like wildfire in that town) which led to a long night of grilling, drinking, and storytelling—that is, gossiping, or *tsismis*. I learned that Aunt Judith and Uncle Rudy (not a couple) from the two houses just to the left of ours are still not in good terms: the feud had started because of some old familial property issue or other. Following that feud, Uncle Rudy purchased the lot right in front of Aunt Judith's house from her brother and just in the last couple of years built a three-story rental building that covered up Aunt Judith's house from view of the street. He allegedly added the third floor (which he is now having a difficult time renting) just to spite Aunt Judith. I was told there were days when they would scream at each other with insults out in the streets for everyone to hear—though in the three weeks that I was there, I did not observe such display. Someone jokingly said that an unspoken ceasefire had been established due to the holiday season. Wyna (Rudy's daughter) and Purple (Judith's daughter), who were good friends of mine growing up, I'm glad to hear, are in good terms despite their parents' quarrel. I was also surprised to learn that the neighborhood *buang* (schizophrenic) Edgardo, or Gardo, is still alive. When

I was young, I was told stories about how his mother chained him to the house because of how violent he would get during his psychotic episodes. Gardo eventually got worse, and his mother locked him in a concrete and metal cage, built especially for him, next to their house. Gardo's scream, *yawa ka, ma* (the equivalent of "fuck you, mom"), eventually became a regular part of the neighborhood noise at night. Out of childish curiosity, my friends and I once visited Gardo's house and saw his mother bathing him after he threw food all over the cage. She hosed him down like a pig in a corral. But on my first night back, I did not hear Gardo's scream. And then the issue of Kyle came up, after my cousin warned me that he and some others would be leaving soon because they wanted to attend Kyle's *katapusan* (last night of mourning). At that point, I was too curious not to ask who Kyle was and *how* he died. As much as I love *tsismis*, I did not want to seem too eager for one. He was Epoy's son, and he had a heart attack in his sleep on the 7th, my cousin said. The name Epoy immediately registered with me. Uncle Epoy used to work for my parents. My parents lent money to local businesses, sometimes individuals, with interest and Uncle Epoy oversaw collection. He would come to our house almost every day to drop off payments. Whenever I didn't like the food at home (I was a chubby kid and a bit bratty when it came to food), I would go to a local *karenderia* (buffet style restaurant), the ones I knew my parents' lent money to, and, without letting them know, charge it from Uncle Epoy's daily collection. Instead of making a big deal out of it, he would make sure I did not get in trouble with my parents. I was fond of Uncle Epoy. Kyle, on the other hand, I have no memory of. But that may have been because he was a few years younger than me, and they lived in a different neighborhood. My younger brother, who is

about the same age as Kyle, told me he remembers Kyle well. Kyle, at 32, my cousin added, had been irregularly taking *HB* (high blood pressure) medications, and he was out partying and drinking several nights leading up to the 7th. My Aunt Perla, who is a nurse at the local hospital, said "she heard" that when Kyle's body reached the hospital, before the doctor could call his death, he vomited barely chewed pieces of *humba* (braised pork). Before he left, I slipped my cousin some money to give to Kyle's family. It did not occur to me then to go myself and pay my respects (I may just have been too tired), which I deeply regretted after learning from a Facebook post a month later when I was already back in the U.S. that Uncle Epoy, due to complications from diabetes, had also passed away. The post had a picture of Uncle Epoy on it and as I zoomed into the picture, he looked strikingly skinnier than I remember. But the more I stared at his face, the more I recognized the Uncle Epoy I was once fond of.

At a beach party just two days before my flight back to the U.S., the issue of Kyle came up again. After hours of drinking, *tsismis* started becoming personal and attacks directed at each other as opposed to only those not around. My cousin Ying, who is a few years older than me, called out two *bakla* (queer) men in the group who were talking ill of Kyle. She overheard them blaming Kyle for having been not only unhealthy but also a drug addict. Kyle was suspected of both being a closet *bakla* and giving drugs to men for sex. No one had a problem with Kyle being *bakla*, not really, but the drugs bit, given the political climate around drugs in the country, was contentious. Ying pointed out that Kyle was already dead and so everyone should leave his *kalag* (spirit) alone. It's bad enough judging those who are living, we shouldn't do it to those who aren't able to defend

themselves, she added. Having just defended Kyle, Ying suddenly mentioned how Uncle Epoy should have taken Kyle to the hospital the first moment he complained of chest pains. Ying lives in the same neighborhood as Uncle Epoy and Kyle, and she had heard from someone that Kyle was already having difficulty breathing hours before he died. Kyle's parents apparently didn't make much of it, given he is young, and instead referred him to a *hilot* (local healer) for an oil massage. I thought you said we shouldn't judge anyone, but here you are making rumors about his parents. Were you even there when it happened? Aunt Rosie confronted Ying. The two had a back and forth that ended in tears. My sister-in-law told me the next day that, on her way home, she saw Aunt Rosie on the street drunk, holding a bottle of rum. She asked Aunt Rosie to get in the car where she promptly puked. But Ying and Aunt Rosie's spat was in fact not all about Kyle. It was triggered by a past family conflict, Aunt Perla (who took Ying home that night because she was too drunk to drive) narrated to me the next day. She added that everyone is now worried that Aunt Teofe (Ying's mother, Aunt Rosie's sister, and the family matriarch) would hear about what happened to her daughter and confront Aunt Rosie, making the family feud worse.

Like Kyle, I too was the subject of rumors between our *bakla* neighbors when I was young. Seeing perhaps a certain softness in me, or the way I smile whenever I observed them (taking too much pleasure in their gestures, puns, and playfulness), they would jokingly tell me I will turn out *bakla* just like them. This did not bother anyone because they have said this about half the kids around. But it bothered me, of course, because I knew it was true. I knew that although my parents say they wanted me to

participate in sports for "health reasons," they were worried I was not into "boy things." I knew they were worried not so much that I was always home, but that I was home watching celebrity talk shows, *teleseryes* (soap operas), and beauty pageants. I knew that although they appreciated me helping with chores—cleaning, cooking, rearranging furniture, styling the windows curtains, etc.—they were worried this was not what most boys did. I also knew that my father was more worried about it than my mother. However, much as I wanted to avoid being around my *bakla* neighbors for fear of being outed, I was also too tickled by them. My *bakla* Uncle Rolando, or Lando, or Rojelan, for example, was known for calling anyone he didn't like "*pobre*" (peasants!), in his exaggerated tone and gesture I loved so much (behind their backs, of course). I was told that whenever he was in the back seat of my older brother's car driving around town, he would occasionally roll the window down, peek his head out, and scream *pobre* to people walking on the streets. Once my cousin brought her new boyfriend, Prong (who was the nephew of the town mayor) to a family gathering, Uncle Lando got very annoyed because Prong didn't greet him. After Prong left, Uncle Lando gestured towards my cousin (though making sure everyone was within earshot) and said, he's handsome, and he comes from a *good* (that is, influential) family, but…Uncle Lando pressed one finger on his nose insinuating that it was too bad Prong had a flat nose, making it clear to my cousin he did not approve. Everyone, except my cousin, burst out laughing. It was true he had a flat nose, but most people in that town had flat noses. It was more that Prong can be at times disrespectful and bratty (perhaps due to his relations) that people tend to notice his flat nose more. Most people wouldn't dare say that about Prong though. But Uncle

Lando was not like most people. It was also not so much that Uncle Lando said what we were all too afraid to say that was amusing (though that's part of it, I'm sure), it was the mix of exaggeration and firmness to his tone (the very distinct qualities of small-town *tsismis*) that made what he said equally comic and serious. It was the performance of authority over some knowledge or information that is often either untrue or highly fabricated. Furthermore, the gesture of pressing a finger to his nose, as if to say he was far too civilized to actually *say* such a thing, did not only reinforce his perceived authority but also made his listeners complicit to the comment. We had to be already thinking what he was suggesting in order to get the joke. Failing to make Uncle Lando the center of attention meant Prong would be remembered, until now, in our family through Uncle Lando's eyes and gestures. Uncle Lando died almost a decade ago now after his motorcycle was run over by a passenger bus that was taking a detour in the residential streets due to construction. He was sandwiched between two young men from the navy in the motorcycle when the bus struck them. Uncle Lando and one of the men died immediately while the driver survived but committed suicide months later. During my last visit, Uncle Lando was still the center of attention and conversations. His jokes and gestures kept making appearances, sometimes refashioned in different contexts. It would be almost impossible to get through any family gathering without his infamous "*pobre*" being uttered. And whenever his name was brought up, which it often was, someone would say, I wonder what Lando would say about this or that, to which another person would say, if Lando was still alive, he would die again and again because he was

far too reckless. They say that about Uncle Lando, but I think his recklessness is precisely what we admire so much about him.

I relate Uncle Lando's recklessness to my own negotiations as a young boy with the threat of being outed. While it would have been "safer" for me then to not be around Uncle Lando and his *bakla* friends, something told me it was worth the risk. The moments of joy that Uncle Lando brought me (which was deprived of me in many social contexts) was, looking back now, absolutely worth the risk. That is, I want to think of *bakla* recklessness, whether in the performance of *tsismis* or ways of being, not as an occasion for judgement or as a cautionary tale, but as moments of splendor. Kyle and Uncle Lando's lives are moments of splendor because they were lives lived for the thrill of living—reckless lives that, although they've ceased to exist, and thus ceased their life-productivity, have continued to live on in non-productive yet moving and memorable ways in the stories and gestures told about them. Narratives tend to focus on lives that have lessons to teach, lives that have serious political implications, lives that overtly resist, but what do we make of stories about lives lived for the sake of living—"remaindered lives," to borrow from Neferti Tadiar? How do we think about Uncle Lando and Kyle's lives not as lessons for how not to be reckless but lessons for how recklessness is part of being? Kyle's tragic narrative has been so tied with him being a closet *bakla* and his drug use, as much as it is with his political affiliations and possibly unhealthy lifestyle. And the gossip form, *tsismis*, is very much complicit in bringing this *bangungut* narrative to life. But what does it mean that that very same reckless, at times

violent, narrative form (*tsismis*), which articulates another form of violence (*bangungut*), is also the source of joy and splendor to so many, including me?

In this chapter, I look at R. Zamora Linmark's 2011 novel *Leche* and its depictions of the deadly Filipino medical phenomenon *bangungut* (nightmare),[1] which I argue acts as a performative means of surfacing and accessing not only the nightmares but also the dreams, desires, and pleasures of Filipinos. *Bangungut* comes from the words *bangun* (to rise) and *ungul* (to moan) which describes that moment of struggle to move and scream out of a bad dream. But in the case of *bangungut*, the victim often fails to wake up and dies. As such, I am interested in how *bangungut's* performative tendencies retrace the displaced dreams and desires of *Leche's* protagonist Vince—and by extension of Filipinos, whose narratives have been so determined by its colonial history of displacement. In other words, I argue that *bangungut* is not so much an infliction to the Filipino body but in fact *in* the Filipino body; it moves the body (*bangun*) and makes it moan (*ungol*), thereby blurring the boundaries between dream/nightmare and reality. I also examine in this chapter the narrative and performative potentials of *tsismis* (gossip) in its articulation of *bangungut*—which, precisely because of its inherently enigmatic quality, is ideal for *tsismis*. That is, while *bangungut* brings to surface Filipino dreams and desires, *tsismis*, on the other hand, (due to its own disruptive and precarious quality) acts as the narrative mode that articulates *bangungut's* workings and structure. Through *bangungut* and *tsismis*, I examine the relation between the novel form and medical

[1] The novel *Leche* uses the spelling "*bangungut*" while all my other sources use "*bangungot*." As much as possible, I try to use the spelling used in the corresponding text or context I am referring to.

narratives of diagnoses/autopsies and how they are both displaced in a particular colonial context. And I utilize *tsismis* not only as a "destructuring device" (Lisa Lowe) but as a mode of Filipino social organization that has both official and unofficial, real and superstitious, repercussions.[2] The unpredictability of *bangungot*—its ability to paralyze and kill during sleep without warning—I argue, is precisely why it becomes an object of *tsismis*, and why it eludes medical narratives and diagnoses.

Leche and *Bangungut*

The sequel to Linmark's highly praised debut novel, *Rolling the R's* (1995), which was set in Honolulu, *Leche* (2011) follows the return of protagonist Vince de Los Reyes to the Philippines over a decade after he and his family left for Hawaii. The trip was part of the prize he won for being first runner-up of "Mr. Pogi [handsome]," a Filipino style male beauty pageant he joined in Hawaii.[3] Upon arriving and throughput his stay in Manila, Vince navigates not only the city's heat, stench, and chaos, but also the melancholy of trying to return home. As with many postcolonial narratives of return, he questions his sense of identity and place in the Philippines: still identifying as a Filipino, yet not quite *feeling* like a Filipino in the Philippines. Throughout his time in Manila, Vince encounters various eccentric characters, including President Corazon Aquino's actress daughter, Kris Aquino, known as the "Massacre Queen of Philippine Cinema," and Dante, Vince's married cab driver with whom he develops a deep crush. Not unlike

[2] Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Duke University Press, 1996).
[3] R. Zamora Linmark, *Leche* (Coffee House Press, 2011), 242.

Rolling the R's, which was known for its obsession with popular culture and playfulness with form, *Leche* manages to be both inventive and utterly readable. Weaved into its primary plot are postcard correspondence, dream sequences, sarcastic lists of "Tourist Tips," and entries from *Decolonization for Beginners: A Filipino Glossary*, which acts as a translator of sorts. One of the glossary's entries is "bangungut, *noun*. A contraction of *bangun* (to rise) and *ungul* (to moan). See also *batibat, hupa, Sudden Unexpected Death Syndrome.* The novel also indulges in extended retelling of Vince's youth both in the Philippines and in Hawaii. In one such instance, Vince recalls his first encounter with the term *bangungut* after reading about it in "Bonifacio Dumpit's essay 'The Contagion of Folk Beliefs: Bangungut and Racial Profiling in Hawaii's Plantation Camps'" in an "Ethnic Literature in Hawaii" course.[4]

Colloquially, *bangungut* merely refers to that moment, popularized in Filipino films and T.V. shows, when a person, moaning, pulls away from their sleep to break from a bad dream. That is, *bangungut's* English equivalent is nightmare, a bad dream. But the *bangungut* that *Leche* refers to here is a very specific one, a very Filipino one. It leaves its young prey, like Kyle, dead—unable to break from the terrifying dream. However, the English word "nightmare" is not exactly different from *bangungut* either. *Bangungut's* Ilokano version *batibat* is said to be about a supernatural creature, in the form of an old woman, who sits on its victim's chest, suffocating and killing him. Like *batibat*, nightmare is derived from "night" and "mare," a female horse that sits heavy on one's

[4] Linmark, *Leche*, 28.

chest while asleep.[5] As *Leche* points out, doctors who have done autopsies found that victims often "had a swollen heart, massive fluid in their lungs, a pancreas that wouldn't stop bleeding, and abdominal cavities that contained semi-digested meals." These deaths have been attributed to "acute hemorrhagic pancreatitis" blamed on the "heavy Filipino meal high in sodium, cholesterol, and uric acid right before shut-eye."[6]

Bangungut has also been tied to its Thai version, *la tai* ("died during sleep"), and the Japanese *pokkuri* (sudden unexpected death at night") which have been linked to Brugada syndrome. Brugada syndrome is believed to be genetic and linked to

> problems in the heart. A global estimate of Brugada syndrome's prevalence is 66 cases per 10,000 people and is believed to be higher in Southeast Asia. That could mean that for the Philippines with 90 million people, there would be almost 600,000 people with this condition. As we see in bangungut, Brugada syndrome seems to 'favor' men, with a ratio of 8 males for every 1 female.[7]

However, studies about the direct link of *bangungut* to Brugada syndrome remains inconclusive. The Philippine Anthropologist Michael Tan has also pointed out the importance of distinguishing these variations within their specific cultural contexts. *Bangungut* for example, Tan adds, can be traced through the stress and anxieties of displacement, that is, the dispersion of Filipinos within the Philippines and all over the

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[5] Michael Tan, "SUND." *Inquirer.net*, June 22, 2010, https://web.archive.org/web/20100626010034/http://opinion.inquirer.net/inquireropinion/columns/view/20100622-277063/SUND.
[6] Linmark, *Leche*, 17.
[7] Philipp J. Intern, "Unraveling the Enigma of Bangungut: Is Sudden Unexplained Nocturnal Death Syndrome (SUNDS) in the Philippines a Disease Allelic to the Brugada Syndrome?" *National Library of Medicine* 49, no. 3 (2011), 165-176, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3404490/.

world. Research shows that *bangungut* is common among male Filipino construction workers who have been dislocated from their families for long periods of time. Certain social pressures "such as higher social expectations and constraints on expressing one's emotions," along with high levels of stress, also make *bangungut* even more prevalent among young men.[8] Furthermore, the Visayan term for *bangungut* (which I am more familiar with and the term that was used in our town to describe Kyle's death), is *urong*. As Tan points out, *urong* means "to move" or "to be displaced," which relates to not only the displacement of one's soul from the body but also the act of "losing oneself" (*nawawala sa sarili*). To "lose oneself" in this context means to act impulsively and outside of reason, that is, like Uncle Lando, to be reckless, to put oneself in a position of danger for the sake of something else, perhaps some other way of feeling. [*Urong* could also refer to "seizure" or "being numb."]

But "to Filipinos raised on Catholicism and folk superstition," what makes *bangungut* even more terrifying

> is that the victim returns momentarily to the world of the living, only to witness, in his limbo state, the final scene of his life—moaning and kicking helplessly. He wants to get up, but he can't. He opens his mouth to scream but he can't. Because sitting on his face, which is how survivors of the nightmare described their near-death experiences, is the bangungut, shoving his fat cigar down the victim's throat, determined to drag his young and healthy prey to the underworld.[9]

[8] Michael L. Tan, *Revisiting Usog, Pasma, Kulam* (UP Press, 2008), 52.
[9] Linmark, *Leche*, 18-19.

What I find useful about *bangungut* is precisely that moment of "*bangun*," that fleeting desire to rise and live. Here, I am not referring to the evolutionary instinct for survival, or the philosophical "will to live" (though that may be part of it) but to *bangun's* narrative potential. That is, part of the limits of medical narratives, like autopsies—which has been the main subject of inquiry around *bangungut*—is its clinical need for answers and closures, and so what *bangungut* does, I argue, due to its religious and superstitious inclinations, is *open* alternative ways of narrating and making sense of someone's life and experiences, as well as map their precarious relation to other lives and experiences. One of the reasons why I open this chapter with a personal narrative is precisely because of how Kyle's death through *bangungut* served as a link to my own moments of trauma and joy. *Ungol* (to moan) is also a useful moment in *bangungut* in that, in its affective manifestation, it refuses coherence. *Ungol* prioritizes the need to be heard and felt rather than be understood. In this way, I am interested in how *Leche* reframes *bangungut* away from nightmare, as being a mere bad and potentially deadly dream, by using it instead to navigate Vince's dreams, desires, and pleasures.

Filipino Dreaming

Reading about *bangungut* in his "Ethnic Literature in Hawaii" course where they read Bonifacio Dumpit's essay, "The Contagion of Folk Beliefs: Bangungut and Racial Profiling in Hawaii's Plantation Camps,"[10] Vince is transported back to his childhood in San Vicente, "a small provincial town four hours north of Manila by car, [where] he read

[10] Linmark, *Leche*, 16.

about the bangungut from the Tagalog komiks Don Alfonso [his grandfather] bought him." Before they moved to Hawaii, Vince remembers how his grandfather used to pick him up at school and take him to the "magazine stand right across the plaza." They would proceed to the town bakery where they read next to each other in silence— "*Life* and *Time*" magazines for his grandfather and "Tagalog komiks" for Vince—while eating "ensemada," "a roll thickly coated with sugar and butter."[11] For Vince's grandfather, reading was like "praying, which allowed him individual access to a higher plain of reality," and it was like "dreaming, which opened the door to other worlds familiar or strange where the reader played the part of a sympathetic observer, an objective bystander, an accomplice, a protagonist, a villain, or all of the above." Vince admired and inherited this from his grandfather. And when his parents left for Honolulu, before Vince and his sister eventually joined them, "it was reading books and Tagalog komiks that helped lessen Vince's sadness, suppress his desire to ask why a mother would leave her three-year-old son in the hands of a maid, or a father removed away from his only daughter." Vince's favorite comic series was "Stories of the Unexpected," which his grandfather brought him every Friday. These comics had "stories about bangungut, which disguised itself as a nomad by day, wandering around Metropolitan Manila for potential victims, then transformed into a cigar-puffing hairy beast that terrorized them in their sleep."[12] In one of the issues, bangungut's new victim was "Mr. Smith, an American businessman who ran an illegal logging business on the island of Leyte, where much of

[11] Linmark, *Leche*, 18.
[12] Linmark, *Leche*, 19.

the virgin forest had been destroyed." Bangungut often preyed on "crooks and greedy men." Apart from being a womanizer, Mr. Smith "bore a striking resemblance to his grandfather, who was also very debonair." Mr. Smith was Vince's first crush. Vince's "hot lips were all over the pages" of the magazine. At night, "Vince went to bed thinking about him, kissing him goodnight, telling him 'Sweet dreams, Mr. Smith,' 'I love you, Mr. Smith,' 'Do you love me too?'" Vince even went so far as to imagine planning a wedding with Mr. Smith; they would hold hands "as they walked along the promenade of Manila Bay, chitchatting about full moons, wedding bells and the houses, love-nest resorts, and nurseries he would build for them and their babies."[13] While folklores and superstitions often offer narratives of morality and lessons of "good and bad," exemplified by *bangungut's* victims being "crooks and greedy men," Vince's relationship with this particular folklore is one of desire, pleasure, and sexual awakening. Not only does Vince realize his attraction to men through the stories of *bangungut* in his komiks, but the *bangungut* also indexes his attachments to his grandfather and his Filipino roots. Moreover, reading about *bangungut* in that Ethnic Literature course reconnected him to his favorite childhood pastime, komiks. For Vince, *bangungut* is not the deadly and terrifying nightmare that preys on young men, but a point of reconnection through which displaced Filipino desires and dreams can be traced.

Vince also resented Cassandra, Mr. Smith's Filipina lover from Siquijor. He called her "That Bruja!" because Siquijor is "a Visayan island known for its witchcraft." In the comic, Cassandra "transformed back into her true identity as the cigar-smoking

[13] Linmark, *Leche*, 20.

beast, straddling [Mr. Smith] and stuffing his mouth with her cigar until he choked to death." Vince was so obsessed with Mr. Smith that he haunted Vince in his sleep. In one of Vince's *bangunguts*, "Mr. Smith knelt down to kiss Vince…[and] As he rolled his tongue inside Vince's mouth…a python slithered from Mr. Smith's mouth and down into his throat." Trying to get away from the *bangungut*, Vince was "moaning, kicking, and gasping." Had he not been heard and woken up, "the bangungut would have sucked out Vince's last breath, smelling of Mr. Smith's kisses."[14] That Mr. Smith's *bangungut* acts, for Vince, as a reference to both pleasure and pain underscores how *bangungut* is not so much an infliction to the Filipino body but is in fact *in* the Filipino body; it moves the body (*bangun*) and makes it moan (*ungol*). In that Ethnic Literature course, Vince also learns that "the bangungut had found its way into the plantation camps of Hawaii as early as the 1920s [which] reinforced the cliché that you can take the Filipino out of the Philippines, but you can't take the nightmares out of the Filipino."[15]

Tsismis and the Medical Narrative

Alongside superstitions, folklores, and komiks, another narrative mode that articulates and invigorates *bangungut* is gossip, or *tsismis*. Because *bangungut* happens quickly during sleep, and without prior indication, its enigmatic quality is precisely why it becomes the perfect subject of speculation. *Leche* reminds us of the workings of *tsismis*. While in line at the Honolulu airport for his trip back to the Philippines, Vince overhears

[14] Linmark, *Leche*, 21.
[15] Linmark, *Leche*, 22.

a "group of [Filipino] women gossiping about him literally behind his back." As he points out, this is "not uncommon. Filipinos talking loudly behind your back is their indirect way of showing you that you are important enough to kill time with. If they don't do it behind your back, they'll do it beside you or in your face. And if you're not within sight or hearing distance because you're in Serengeti National Park, or glacier-sighting in Patagonia, they'll make certain their words reach you."[16] One of the main characteristics of *tsismis*, performed in this passage, is precisely its attention-grabbing quality, exemplified by its need to be heard and exaggerate. While *tsismis* is nevertheless propelled by some fact or actual event, it prioritizes attention rather than truth. Having caught Vince's attention, the women are encouraged to amplify the *tsismis* even more:

> "He is here, Mare."
>
> "Who, Mare?"
>
> "The 'Let America be America Again' guy, Mare."
>
> "Ay, really? Where?"
>
> The woman stretches her pursed lips to Vince.
>
> "He looks so much better live than on my Sony Trinitron," her friend says, eyeing Vince up and down through her rhinestone-studded glasses.
>
> "And so much more gwapo [handsome] than that Negro who won."
>
> "He's a gay, you know, Mare," she whispers loud enough for the natives on Easter Island to hear.[17]

[16] Linmark, *Leche*, 9.
[17] Linmark, *Leche*, 9-10.

But instead of being offended, Vince is tickled by the conversation and makes all efforts to hear every word so that "the veins on his forehead are bulging, ready to pop."[18] He is especially delighted when one of the women cusses out the airline supervisor with "Leche" for charging her extra fee for the overweight luggage. Leche means "'Milk' in Spanish," but to Filipinos, its one variation means "Shit!" Vince has not heard that word in so long and it "conjures up childhood memories of melodrama movies, when deceived lovers, during a confrontation scene, threw it in the face of their cheating partners before walking away, as if to tell them no one could every break their heart again. The word has a definitive weight about it. It is fierce and final—an amulet to guard them from future heartbreak."[19] Here, not only does *Leche* (the novel) articulates and performs the workings of *tsismis*—its hyperbolic, seductive, and manipulative tendencies that equally catch Vince's attention and make him complicit in it—but, like *bangungut*, it also serves as a coordinate to his past, his childhood memories in the Philippines.

In her reading of Jessica Hagedorn's novel *Dogeaters* as it relates to the narrative and national formation of the Asian American citizen-subject, Lisa Lowe has argued that the novel's use of gossip (*tsismis*) acts "as an antifiguration of narrative" that "[interrupts] the traditional forms for narrating the development of the individual subject and its reconciliation to the national social order." That is, gossip as a "destructuring device" challenges "concepts of identity and identification within a universalized narrative of development"[20] and, as such, "disorganizes official history."[21] Furthermore,

[18] Linmark, *Leche*, 10.
[19] Linmark, *Leche*, 11.
[20] Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 100-101.
[21] Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 114.

Lowe points out that gossip should be understood not as "separate or discrete from official narratives; rather, gossip is peculiarly parasitic, pillaging from the official, imitating without discrimination, exaggerating, relaying."[22] Here, I am interested in how gossip, following Lowe, functions as an "'unofficial' discursive structure—or perhaps we might better characterize it as an antistructure or a destructuring discourse."[23] But I am also interested in how gossip or *tsismis*, particularly within localized Filipino contexts, maps out not only the social mores but also the dreams, desires, and memories of Filipinos. I argue that *tsismis* does not only "disorganize" or "destructure" narrative but in fact acts as a mode of social organization that has both official and unofficial, real and superstitious, repercussions. In other words, *tsismis*, as a performative and active narrative mode, blurs the line between dream, nightmare, and reality. *Tsismis* organizes in that it is a mode of collecting and spreading information, which has the potential of being hurtful to some yet helpful to others. And it is a form of aesthetic organization in that, stylistically, it assumes authority over the information it delivers, knowing full well its own precarity. As Uncle Lando reminds us, the illusion of authority makes *any* information worthy of discussion. And as I was pleasantly reminded during my hometown return, *tsismis* is also a literal mode of social organization in the way it drives many social and communal gatherings; no one wants to be the subject of *tsismis*, but everyone wants to hear it.

[22] Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 113.
[23] Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 113.

Thus, *tsismis* as both disorganizing and organizing narrative mode, I argue, gives us access to understanding the workings of the deadly *bangungut*, particularly in the way it eludes medical narratives. While *bangungut* is well-known in colloquial, folkloric, superstitious, and religious discourses, it is also a well-recognized, albeit polarizing, subject in the (Philippine) medical field. Medical accounts seem to be consistent in describing the main characteristics surrounding deaths from *bangungut*: it happens to men in their early 20s to late 30s, undigested food is found in the stomach, there is heavy meal/heavy drinking involved before bedtime, and that there are signs of pancreatic failure and irregular heart rhythm found in autopsies. But, nevertheless, medical doctors and researchers still cannot agree on what causes the *actual* death and so how to prevent it. They have also ruled out the popular misconception that eating large amount of starch, particularly rice and noodles, before bedtime can make someone die of *bangungut*.[24] While I was conducting research at the Ateneo de Manila University and University of the Philippines, Diliman in the summer of 2023 to find out more about *bangungut*, I was struck to find that most of the articles available in the archives were from 2002. But I had a creeping suspicion as to why that may be. In the early morning of Good Friday, March 29, 2002, Rico Yan—a very well-loved 27-year-old actor and heartthrob known for his comedic and dramatic roles in films and *teleseryes*—was found dead while on Holy Week vacation in Puerto Princesa, Palawan. I remember feeling a certain way after hearing the news, having a big (closeted) crush on Rico Yan myself. I also remember the rumors that circulated surrounding his death, which included drug overdose and suicide.

[24] [List sources here from Ateneo de Manila University and University of the Philippines]

But, as the national newspaper *Philippine Star's* headline put it that following Easter Sunday, it was *bangungut* that killed Yan: "'Bangungot' Kills Rico Yan; Claudine Still in Shock." Sure enough, many of the archival accounts—medical, entertainment news gossip, or otherwise—on *bangungut* had in fact been in response to Yan's death. According to the same article, Yan's family immediately made the autopsy result public to dispel the rumors, stating that he "was found to have died of cardiac arrest resulting from hemorrhagic pancreatitis (commonly known as *bangungot*). The doctor said that Rico ate so much seafood during the party [the night before], downed with drinks."[25] While Yan's autopsy seems to be consistent with *bangungut's* general characteristics, other doctors remain skeptical. One medical article has linked *bangungot* to Brugada syndrome: "Brugada syndrome is a genetic disorder that can cause a dangerous irregular heartbeat. When this happens, the lower chambers of your heart (ventricles) beat fast and irregularly. This prevents blood from circulating correctly in your body. This can be dangerous and may lead to fainting or even death, especially during sleep or rest."[26] Brugada is better known as SUNDS, or sudden, unexplained nocturnal death syndrome, and is also known to be genetic. Linking *bangungot* to Brugada is quite significant, according to the article, because it clashes with popular perceptions that *bangungot* is about bad diet or drinking or eating late at night or even carbohydrate intake, etc. It even disputes the notion that it is a pancreatic failure, since pancreatic failure does not kill

[25] Ricky Lo, "'Bangungot' Kills Rico Yan; Claudine Still in Shock." *Philippine Star*, March 31, 2002, https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2002/03/31/155539/145bangungot146-kills-rico-yan-claudine-still-shock.
[26] [UP article]

overnight and is known to be fatal mainly to men and women over 40.[27] But many Filipino doctors remain skeptical about the link between Brugada and bangungot. Some doctors have admitted being on the verge of giving up research on *bangungot* due to its elusiveness and inherent contradictions.[28]

Yet, it is also those contradictions and elusiveness that I find fascinating about *bangungot*. That it happens suddenly, without prior indication, is, I argue, not *bangungut's* failure to articulate itself, but in fact symptomatic of the limits of medical narratives. In his article "The History of the Anecdote," literary critic Joel Fineman poses critique on the anecdotal forms of new historicism by looking at the emergence of medical narratives as early as Hippocrates and their relation to the developmentalist novel form. According to Fineman, "diagnosis," for example, is "one that starts from some zero-degree of vulnerable healthiness, that then builds up to a series of significant symptoms, to a predictable dramatic climax at a moment of required 'crisis' ('crisis' being a technical medical term), after which the disease completes its predetermined and internally directed course, when the patient either dies or returns to health." Fineman shows that there is a fundamental novelistic quality to the medical narrative which is the movement from infection to crisis to healing, or to death—beginning, middle, and end. That movement is then propelled by anecdotes, realistic stories that fill in the gaps of the narrative trajectory: "the anecdote is the literary form that uniquely *lets history happen* by virtue of the way it introduces an opening into the teleological, and therefore timeless,

[27] [UP article]
[28] [UP article]

narration of beginning, middle, and end. The anecdote produces the effect of the real, the occurrence of contingency, by establishing an event within and without the framing context of historical successivity."[29] In other words, Fineman is skeptical about the new historicist approach wherein we become too reliant on the anecdote, the *realistic* stories, to *get at* the historical/medical/novelistic "truth." What is thus interesting about *bangungot* is that it happens suddenly, without prior indication, and so it is unavailable to such realistic and diagnostic method. *Bangungot* becomes an object of *tsismis* precisely because it is the thing that bursts into the scene, without the etiology that medical narratives expect.

[29] Joel Fineman, "The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction 1." *The New Historicism*, pp. 49-76. Routledge, 2013.

Chapter 4

Talak: Brenda Mage and the *Bakla Bildung*

"Miss Q and A: InterTALAKtic" is a segment of the widely popular Philippine noontime variety TV show *It's Showtime* on ABS-CBN[1] where *bakla* (queer) contestants in drag compete in a parodic version of the beauty pageant question and answer portion. In one challenge, the host (and Philippine queer icon) Vice Ganda assigns a word each to two competing candidates and a corresponding question, through which they must defend their respective words. In one example, a competitor is assigned the word "bird" and the other "flower," and they must answer why it would be better to wake up in the morning seeing a *bird* as opposed to a *flower*, and vice versa (figure 4.1). They are only given 15 seconds each to respond and another 15 seconds for rebuttal, which means they have to not only think on their feet but also answer the questions quickly. The contestants are then judged based on how fast they think and talk, while sounding confident, passionate, sincere, and persuasive—however silly the questions are and/or incoherent their answers sometimes might sound. In the example, the drag performer Brenda Mage (a play on "brain damage"), who was given "flower," said something to the effect of, it's better to wake up seeing flowers because they are more constant and predictable than birds, and waking up to flowers in your garden also shows your green thumb (although, with haste,

[1] ABS-CBN, a major TV and radio network in the Philippines, was shut down by the Duterte administration in 2020. However, ABS-CBN continues to produce some of its major shows for its online streaming services and social media channels. *It's Showtime* now airs on GMA Network (since April 2024) through a co-production between the two former network rivals. ABS-CBN also uploads full TV show episodes on their official YouTube channel, from which I cite in this chapter.

Brenda said, “green hand”). The competitor, Mitch Monte Carlo Suansane, responded by saying something like, waking up to birds give you “good vibes” and “positivity” because birds symbolize “love,” “freedom,” and “happiness.” (My simplistic translation of the answers of course fails to capture the comedic energy with which the performers deliver them.)[2] Fast thinking and fast talk, paired with unquestioned confidence, are all characteristics of the Filipino speech act *talak*—hence, “InterTALAKtic,” which is also a play on global beauty pageant names: Miss Universe/World/International/Intergalactic, etc. *Talak*, more generally, means prolonged loud and rapid talk often associated with women gossiping or “*bakla* swardspeak”—as Martin Manalansan refers to it. Yet, *talak* is more than just fast talk and high confidence. It also has a manipulative tendency as it intentionally confuses the listener—whether through gibberishness or illogic—in its projection of self-confidence.

Mage’s mastery of *talak* won her enough qualifying episodes to make it to the show’s finale which was held in 2019 at the Araneta Colosseum, one of the Philippines’ largest concert stadiums. One of the finale’s judges was ABS-CBN executive, as well as host and actress, Charo Santos who had the task of reading Mage’s final question.

[2] ABS-CBN Entertainment, “It's Showtime Recap: Miss Q & A contestants in their most intense final 'DeBattle!” YouTube, Feb. 23, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2zRsBrLOzCw

Figure 4.1. "*Anong Masayang makita sa bintana paggising: flower or bird?* [What would give you joy wake up to: flower or bird?]" Vice Ganda (middle), Brenda Mage (left), and Mitch Monte Carlo Suansane (right) on "Miss Q & A: InterTALAKtic." Screenshot from *It's Showtime* on YouTube, ABS-CBN.

Although Mage did not win the final crown, Santos was very impressed with her answers and her self-deprecating sense of humor that she featured Mage's life story in her biographical anthology series, *Maalaala Mo Kaya* (Would You Remember?), also referred to as *Memories*. Mage even played herself in the 2019 episode, which launched her acting career. Santos was particularly touched when Mage jokingly explained that she started calling herself "Brenda Mage" ("brain damage") on stage because of the "*kaguluhan sa aking utak*" (messiness in my mind) due to her traumatic childhood, growing up *bakla* in the province.[3] After the TV feature, Mage continued to get minor roles in ABS-CBN movies and telenovelas. She was in the cast of *Pinoy Big Brother: Celebrity Edition* (a Filipino version of the American reality TV series *Big Brother* on CBS) for two seasons (2021-2022), where she finished as a runner-up in the latter season. Her stint in the reality show, which was aired during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Philippines was in a very strict lockdown, is arguably what made Mage a household name. After *Pinoy Big Brother*, Mage, along with her *bakla* friends who lived with her in Manila (aka The Social Climber Squad), decided to return to their home province in Mindanao where they now spend most of their time. (I will the discuss the Squad and their move back to Mindanao later in the chapter.) Mage is mostly known now for her YouTube and Facebook vlogs where she has over 850k and 3.5 million subscribers respectively, which is also her main source of income.

[3] ABS-CBN Entertainment, "Kapamilya Toplist: 10 wittiest and funniest contestants of Miss Q & A Intertalaktic 2019." YouTube video, Feb. 23, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTNB4yZ7zOw.

In this chapter, I use *talak* as a counter-developmental mode of narration for describing the *kaguluhan* (chaos) in Mage's mind, and by extension her life, to provide an alternative narrative, what I call the *bakla bildung*, to nationalist, heteronormative, and neoliberalist narratives told about her through TV shows like *Maalaala Mo Kaya* and *Pinoy Big Brother*—which, although they classify as "documentarian" and "reality TV," follow Filipino nationalist *teleserye* (soap opera) tropes. *Talak's* performative dysfunction, disorientation, misdirection, and incoherence, I argue, map out Mage's seemingly "backwards" trajectory as a celebrity—having ended up back in her province as opposed to "making it big" in Manila, like *It's Showtime* host Vice Ganda. *Talak's* prioritization of overdramatics and excess of emotions and sentiments, instead of logic and coherence, also describes the unique friendship (both in its warmth and dysfunction) between The Social Climber Squad members who are all well-known YouTube and Facebook vloggers in their own rights. Here, I also think about "social climbing," which the Squad has fully embraced in their own distinctive way, as alternative social and economic forms of mobility. The varying contents and qualities of their vlogs,[4] I argue, give us access to not only various forms of economic displacements in the Philippines but also a particular kind of *bakla* intimacy and community, as well as another way of understanding the relationship of Filipinos to popular media forms: documentary, *Teleserye*, Reality TV, YouTube, and Facebook.

[4] Vlogs, or "video blogs" or "video logs," is a documentation of the vlogger's (content creator) daily life, or blog, in video format popularized by YouTube.

Brenda Mage: a National Pride

Characteristic of many Philippine TV biographical anthology series, Brenda Mage's *Maalaala Mo Kaya* episode opens with a short opening monologue by the host Charo Santos.[5] Santos frames Mage's narrative as such:

> *may mga taong biniyayaan ng talentong makapagpasaya ng madla gaya ng mga komedyante. Ngunit madalas, sa likod ng kanilang mga pagpapatawa, ngiti, at halakhak, ay may malalim na kalungkutang nagkukubli. Ngayong gabi, makiiyak at makitawa tayo mga kapamilya sa pagbabalik-tanaw sa kabiguan at tagumpay sa buhay ng komedyanteng si Bryan Roy Tagarao, o mas kilala natin sa pangalang Brenda Mage ng It's Showtime's Miss Q&A* [some people are given the gift and ability to entertain the masses, like comedians. But oftentimes, behind their jokes, grins, and outbursts, hides a deep feeling of sadness. Tonight, let us all weep and laugh as we look back to the hardships and successes in the life of comedian Bryan Roy Tagaroa, or more famously known as Brenda Mage from *It's Showtime's* "Miss Q&A"].[6]

Santos's introduction captures the very formula that has made soap operas, or *teleseryes*, a daily staple of Filipino TV consumption since the late 80's, when TV networks gained back control of programming post-Ferdinand Marcos Sr. dictatorship. The basic formula includes grief ("*kalungkutan*") and *aliw*, or entertainment, ("*halakhak*"): Christ-like suffering, or *pasyon*, coupled with a nationalist responsibility to "entertain the masses"

[5] Although the episode that I am referring to here is from YouTube (due to ABS-CBN's shutdown), I otherwise treat *Maalaala Mo Kaya* as a traditional TV series using *teleserye* (TV soap opera) tropes.
[6] ABS-CBN Entertainment, "Brenda Mage Life Story | Maalaala Mo Kaya | Full Episode." YouTube video. June 18, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=myPiHPsXWIo&t=1868s.

As the Philippine literary critic Louis Jon Sanchez points out, the well-televised EDSA People-Power Revolution of 1986 not only marked the end of Marcos's dictatorial regime—which took control of TV programming during its Martial Law years—but also "instilled nationalistic ferment among viewers, who saw once more unadulterated, tabloid TV news, sensationalizing the drama of everyday life." In the years immediately after the EDSA Revolution, "a barrage of documentaries in honor of the slain senator [and ultimate nationalist and Christ-like Philippine figure] Benigno 'Ninoy' Aquino and the heroes of EDSA Revolution started airing, contributing to the growing body of 'historical' drama for the public to consume and internalize."[7] These documentaries would then set the stage for the popularity of grief-stricken, yet entertaining, *teleseryes* and biographical anthology series like *Maalaala Mo Kaya*.

The trajectory of Mage's life fits perfectly into such a narrative, according to *Maalaala Mo Kaya*, because it is a developmentalist and nationalist one. From Santos's opening monologue, the episode cuts into an idyllic long shot of a shallow river lined with thick forests on both sides in Mage's hometown of Hasaan, Misamis Oriental, in Mindanao (southern Philippines). The camera then zooms into a line of young boys, one of whom is the young Mage (played by the young queer actor Awra Briguela), crossing the river carrying tree logs. As the camera focuses on her, she falls, as if on cue, into a perfect split onto the shallow and muddy water.[8] The other boys, who are also her

[7] Louie Jon Sanchez, "Koreanovelas, Teleseryes and the 'Diasporization' of the Filipino/The Philippines." *Plaridel* 11.1 (2014): 66-85, 3.
[8] As Martin Manalansan has pointed out in *Global Divas*, the terms "gay," "lesbian," "homosexual," "transvestite," or "transgender" do not, and cannot, quite translate to the Filipino "*bakla*," for *bakla* has a fluidity to both embrace and isolate each of these English terms. Because Tagalog, Bisaya, and many (if not all) Filipino languages do not use gendered pronouns, scholars and journalists alike are often forced to use

cousins, starts laughing at her, and one asks, "*bayot ka ba?* [Are you gay?], to which Mage responds, in an unintimidated tone, "*anong bayot? Ikaw kaya ang matumba dito?* [what do you mean gay? Try falling like I did!]." The boy replies, "*siyempre hindi naman ako mag-iisplit ng ganyan noh* [but I would never do a split like *that*]," before Mage's authoritative father (Bembol Roco) intervenes and asks them to go back to work. As Mage stands back up, the other boys, in chorus, sing, "*get, get, aw*," which is from a popular song by the Filipino girl group Sexbomb Girls, insinuating Mage's girliness. This scene sets up the tone of the entire episode which is the constant combination of comedy and tragedy, grief and laughter. In the following scene, while fetching water from the river, Mage, mermaid-like, sits on a rock and flaps her feet together as the drone shot zooms into her from way up high. Still flapping her feet and gleefully splashing water with her hands, a voiceover, narrated by Brenda Mage herself, begins: "*Dear Charo, Bata pa lang ako, tanggap ko na ang aking destiny. Pinalaki ako nina Judy Anne Santos at Claudine Barreto para maging best actress* [Dear Charo, from a young age, I have accepted my (queer) destiny. I was raised by Judy Anne Santos and Claudine Barreto

"he/him" pronouns to discuss in English male *bakla* persons (many of whom, like Brenda Mage, are female-performing) to avoid confusion with male-to-female transgender persons. And Brenda Mage herself has pointed out that although she is female-performing—she wears feminine clothing on a daily basis and likes men—she does not identify as a transgender woman. But, in the spirit of fluidity (gender, linguistic, or otherwise), which animates my work, I use "she/her" pronouns when referring to male *bakla* persons in my writing to in turn highlight their femininess and queerness which often gets minimized, erased, or outright rejected by the use of "he/him" pronouns—something that I also noticed when journalists, interviewers, and/or social media followers refer to Mage and the Squad using "he/him" with such exactitude. As a *bakla* person myself who grew up (closeted) in the Philippines and had to hear journalists on TV refer to female-performing *bakla* men as "he/him," (whether I was conscious of it or not, and whether the journalists intended it or not) there was a sense of rejection that I felt about my own otherness upon hearing that most ideologically *masculine* of pronouns. Thus, also acknowledging the limits of "she/her," I wish not to reproduce that feeling in my writing.

Figure 4.2. Young Brenda Mage played by Awra Briguela. Screenshot from *Maalaala Mo Kaya* on YouTube, ABS-CBN.

Figure 4.3. Drone shot of Brenda Mage. Screenshot from *Maalaala Mo Kaya* on YouTube, ABS-CBN.

to become the best actress].” The magical scene is disrupted when her father calls her out and throws a rock at her. Although the episode opens with mild bullying from Mage’s cousins and her father’s distaste of her girliness, the show makes apparent its embrace of Mage’s queerness. By juxtaposing Mage’s mermaid pose and narrative of “queer destiny” with a cinematic shot that moved to encompass the vast natural surroundings—as if to remind us of our inherent smallness in the grander scheme of things—the show makes clear it understands that Mage was *born this way* and that this was the *nature of things*. It is also established early on that Mage’s queerness was never really an issue among her neighbors, friends, and family, and that her father’s disagreement had more to do with protecting her from ridicule. This is in stark contrast to moralistic depictions of *bakla* men, common in R-rated Filipino films, whose queer promiscuity is often understood to be something they *can* and *should* overcome in order either not to die or not be outcasted in the films’ (and by extension the culture’s) imagination. However, Mage’s mention of Judy Anne Santos and Claudine Barreto—*teleserye* queens whose roles revolutionized TV drama in the mid-90s by incorporating rags-to-riches romance to the already popular grief/comedy/history formula post-EDSA Revolution—as her imagined mentors also tells us that her road to success, especially as a *bakla* person, would still by a thorny and treacherous one. Through Mage’s story, using the *teleserye* formula, *Maalaala Mo Kaya* reminds us that grief, failure, and suffering are necessary parts of success and *development*. We must accept and overcome nature’s cruelty, lest we perish.

About a quarter ways into the episode, we are introduced to the adult Brenda Mage (played by Mage herself) in Manila pushing a cart full of steamed corn for sale.

Mage, cart in tow, accidentally interrupts the filming of a TV series on the street before the director screams at her to move. Mage walks away and then thoughtfully looks back at the massive ABS-CBN Network satellite, determined and hopeful that she will eventually fulfill what she came to Manila for, to be an actress. Mage endured many jobs—from working at a food stall and as a janitor to becoming the personal assistant of a local boyband—before finally, out of pure luck, being casted to play the villain in a Tagalog stage production of *Romeo and Juliet*. This led to more minor roles on stage and in Indie films. Mage also started performing at local municipal events (fiestas, political campaigns, beauty/singing competitions, etc.) as a stand-up comedian where she developed the persona of "Brenda Mage," before eventually making it as a finalist in *It's Showtime's* "Miss Q and A: InterTALAKtic." Her prolonged participation in the show gained her enough connections to consistently get, for a while at least, minor roles in films and TV. And when work eventually slowed down in Manila, she took an opportunity to go to Japan as a stand-up comedian.

But alongside Mage's "road to success" story is yet another narrative of suffering through self-deprivation. *Maalaala* highlights how, in her first few years in Manila at least, Mage would send half of her paychecks back to her family in Mindanao, leaving her with barely anything after rent. In one scene, Mage confides to a friend that, after everything, she is usually left with only 500 pesos (about 10 dollars) each month for food, an especially dire amount to spend in Manila. But, as Mage retorts, "*kaya naman* [one manages]." One manages because also in full narrative display are the fruits of her sacrifice in the form of family contributions. Her sacrifice provides "*malaking ginhawa*

[great relief]" for the family. Every scene of sacrifice and suffering in Manila is countered by a cut into scenes of her family's comfort and contentment in Mindanao, which is supposed to be understood, in the Filipino nationalist narrative, as transcending all achievements. By serving as a breadwinner for her family, and enduring great personal suffering in doing so, Mage is not only a family but also a Filipino pride. But the notion of "national pride" is a complex one for *bakla* Filipinos in that their queer narrative of redemption is almost always tied to their productivity and contribution to both family and country. One can overlook one's *bakla* prejudice when one has something to gain. Mage is the "ideal" *bakla* in the eyes of *Maalaala* for she is productive not only to her family but also to the nation, not least because she provides *aliw* (entertainment) to the masses; and she is willing to do it at great personal cost. Towards the end of the episode, Mage has a heart-to-heart conversation with her father in

Figure 4.4. Brenda Mage (left), as herself, and Mage's father (right), played by Bembol Roco, moments before his passing. Screenshot from *Maalaala Mo Kaya* on YouTube, ABS-CBN.

Figure 4.5. Brenda Mage (middle) and family. Screenshot from *Maalaala Mo Kaya* on YouTube, ABS-CBN.

his deathbed, which is climactic because they were never really that close. Their relationship did not become verbally or physically abusive, but more one of passive aggressive silences and gestures on the father's side. In tears, her father admits being wrong about alienating her to discourage her queerness. But, the father continues, it was less about his disapproval of her sexuality and more about his fear of seeing her ridiculed, for which he says, "*Nagkamali ako, nagkamali ako, anak* [I was wrong, I was very wrong, my child]." He adds,

> *Sa totoo lang, mas lalaki ka pa sa mga tunay na lalaki na kilala ko. Napakalaki ng naitulong mo sa pamilyang ito. Sa nanay mo at mga kapatid mo. Nabigyan mo ng mga gamit na kahit kailan hindi maiibibigay sa kanila. Maraming-maraming salamat sa sakripisyo mo anak. Proud na proud ako sayo. Ngayon, hindi na ako natatakot na mawala sa inyo dahil alam kong nandiyan ka. Alam kong malaki ang pagkukulang ko sa iyo, anak. Sana patawarin mo ako.* [In fact, you are more of a man than any (heterosexual) man that I know. You helped this family so much. You gave your mother, brother, and sisters all the things that I could never have given them. Thank you for your sacrifice. I am very proud of you. Now, I am not afraid to die because I know you are here to take care of everyone. I know I had not been a good father to you. For that, I hope you can forgive me.][9]

Her father's remorse is not so much a critique of his inability to embrace Mage's queerness, but about his failure to see Mage's eventual development into a "*tunay na*

[9] ABS-CBN Entertainment, "Brenda Mage Life Story | Maalaala Mo Kaya | Full Episode." YouTube video. June 18, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=myPiHPsXWIo&t=1868s.

lalaki" (a *real* man). As a successful breadwinner, Mage's *Maalaala* narrative is punctuated with her ability to reproduce the patriarchal figure of the male provider. Her story is worth telling because she legibly coheres into both a national and patriarchal pride—or so the show wants us to think.

The Narrative of Claustrophobic Development

However, what *Maalaala Mo Kaya* failed to imagine is how Brenda Mage, instead of a patriarchal figure, would actually become a queer matriarch for her "orphaned" queer friends in Manila, especially during the strict and extended COVID-19 lockdown in the Philippines. A couple of years before the pandemic, while in Japan for a temporary stand-up gig, Mage released her first viral YouTube vlog, "Yakiniko Bisaya Style | JAPAN THROWBACK | Brenda Mage" (2018).[10] The 1-minute and 41-second video is a parodic tutorial of how to eat *yakiniku* (grilled meats) the "proper Japanese way," particularly the way one uses a piece of lettuce or cabbage to wrap the grilled meat before eating. What amused her viewers (at least, what amused me) may have been her mention of how she went all the way to Japan—an esteemed tourist and labor destination in Asia for Filipinos—to eat "*pagkaing baboy* [pig food]," referring to the lettuce leaves. This video, which captures Mage's self-deprecating and "social-climber" style of humor, would set the stage for her success as a YouTube and Facebook content creator. She currently has over 850,000 subscribers on YouTube and 1.3 million followers on Facebook. While

[10] Brenda Mage, "YAKINIKO BISAYA STYLE | JAPAN THROWBACK | Brenda Mage." YouTube video. Jan. 20, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zMHUxXTCQrA.

Mage's popularity was already on the rise prior to the pandemic, she experienced a surge of social media following during the lockdown. The lockdown was particularly strict in Manila, one of the densest cities on earth, where Mage and her friends sheltered in place, in a one-bedroom apartment. Initially, after breaking into the film and TV scene, Mage lived with her first cousin Bakang (Jessy Tagarao)—who also served as her personal assistant—and childhood friends from Mindanao, Deeva (David Gontiñas) and Jig Jag [legal name forthcoming], who also came to Manila to try their luck. ("Bakang," "Deeva," and "Jig Jag" are their *bakla* nicknames which I will be using moving forward.) Bakang, Diva, and Jig Jag appeared regularly in Mage's vlogs, for which they would get a fraction of whatever amount the video makes, depending on the number of viewership and whether the viewers skip ads or not. Another childhood friend, Oyong [legal name forthcoming], who had appeared in Mage's vlogs before and was recently laid off from a job in Manila, later joined the group in their apartment. Oyong became an immediate fan favorite not least because of her contagious laugh. Shortly after Oyong, Scarlet Dark [legal name forthcoming] joined and completed the one-bedroom household, having just also lost a job. Scarlet also became a fan favorite in Mage's vlogs because of her self-deprecating sense of humor and singing skills. (Scarlet Dark's nickname is most likely derived from her dark complexion which they often poke fun on, including Scarlet herself.) But the group also includes Didong (Ronnie Adarna), Mage's fellow stand-up comedian and friend from Mindanao, who lived by herself in a one-bedroom apartment just next door. Didong frequents Mage's apartment and vlogs, and she also lets the other *bakla* hang out and sleep in her apartment, unless of course she has *someone* over.

Didong is known for her excellent cooking skills—not to mention she is a professional singer and comic. Mage, Bakang, Deeva, Jig Jag, Oyong, Scarlet, and Didong, who would eventually become officially known as The Social Climber Squad, were stuck in their apartment complex when the then Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte declared "Code Red Sub-Level 2" lockdown on Metro Manila on March 12, 2020, due to COVID-19.

Mage's income from YouTube and Facebook had been fairly consistent for over a year leading up to the pandemic, and her viewership only went up during the lockdown as she had more time to create daily videos and occasional live vlogs—where for a period of time her audience can follow her live and ask questions in real time. Followers can also donate any amount during the live vlog. Before the lockdown, Mage's vlogs often consisted of her trips throughout the Philippines and Japan, as well as "Pogi [Handsome] Hunter" videos of her going up to random men she finds attractive—from flight attendants and Jollibee cashiers to Jeepney drivers, security guards, and cameramen—for (mostly harmless) flirtatious interviews. With the lockdown in full force, Mage had to become creative with her videos. Initially, the lockdown videos consisted mainly of the goings on in the household, e.g., Mage filming herself and her roommates cleaning, cooking, and eating. In one video, "ADOBONG PATA: HOW TO COOK | BRENDA MAGE,"[11] the vlog opens with Mage just finishing a Zumba routine before gesturing to the kitchen where a pot of pig's feet is boiling in water in preparation for the pork adobo

[11] Brenda Mage, "ADOBONG PATA: HOW TO COOK | BRENDA MAGE." YouTube video. April 5, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FnFSLcBYKUA.

Figure 4.6. Brenda Mage (right) and Oyong (left) on "ADOBONG PATA: HOW TO COOK | BRENDA MAGE." Screenshot from Brenda Mage on YouTube.

cooking segment. The video then cuts into a montage of the cooking process, with a voice over from Mage explaining the step-by-step procedures. Halfway through, the 13-minute video cuts into the dining room where the Squad is found enjoying the adobo with a pot of rice and big bottle of Coke, eating with their hands, and chatting. These dinner chats are for me the most entertaining, especially when they start punning and making fun of each other's accents. Although a native Bisaya speaker, Mage mostly speaks Tagalog in her videos to attract more viewers in the Philippines and the diaspora. But because the Squad members speak varying degrees of Tagalog fluency, the conversations often turn *punny*. When Mage calls out Oyong for making the rice *lata* [too wet], Mia (a female friend of the group and the only non-*bakla* member of the Squad),[12] who does not speak Bisaya, asks Mage what *lata* was, to which Mage answers, you know, "can," because *lata* (the vowels pronounced slightly differently) means "tin can" in Tagalog. The group bursts out laughing. Mage's lightning quick wit was precisely what brought her to the finale of *It's Showtime's* "Miss Q and A: InterTALAKtic."

Another amusing component of the dinner is the *tsismisan* (gossip). Didong arrives late to dinner because of a confrontation with her *jowa* (boyfriend), who is married to a woman and has children. The Squad could barely contain their excitement to hear the story. Mouth full of rice and adobo, Didong explains that it started with her being irritated because her *jowa* seemed like he wanted to be elsewhere that night, perhaps with his wife and not with Didong: "*Eh di doon ka. 'Tang ina, yan talaga iniisip*

[12] Mia lived in a different town in Manila, but because she worked in the medical field, she carried a medical pass that allowed her to travel during the lockdown.

mo. Isipin mo kong paano ka makakatulong sa pamilya mo, paano makapagtrabaho [Then you should go! Fuck, that's really what you're worried about right now? Why not worry about getting a job, so you can help your family?],"[13] Didong narrates before breaking into tears, presumably out of jealousy, while still chuckling of course to hide them. Everyone bursts out laughing, but you can tell they felt for Didong. She concludes the story with what she ended up telling her *jowa* before he left: "*diyan ka muna sa inyo, sa babae mo* [you should stay home for now, you should be with your wife]."

Throughout the vlogs, the Squad is fairly open about their non-traditional relationships with men. And these stories of romance, heartbreak, and even violence, are often buried in the jokes, laughter, and *tsismis*, which I think are what really attract their audience in and out of the Philippines. Some of the Squad's most loyal followers are female and *bakla* OFWs, or Overseas Filipino Workers (in Japan, United States, Australia, and all over Europe), as evidenced by those who send money during the live vlogs and the currency of the amount. Some of them also send money directly to Mage and the Squad through Western Union. Mage makes the point to disclose in the vlogs the use and distribution of the money within the group. Although the Squad members are not overseas workers, they nevertheless embody the labor displacement and isolation that many OFWs feel—having been separated from their families, having to work hard to send money back home, having to live in cramped spaces, having to create temporary communities, and (amidst, or precisely because, of all that) having to forge the time to

[13] Didong's *jowa* worked on and off for a food delivery company, which is why he could travel during the lockdown.

Figure 4.7. Didong on "ADOBONG PATA: HOW TO COOK | BRENDA MAGE." Screenshot from Brenda Mage on YouTube.

Figure 4.8. Didong on "ADOBONG PATA: HOW TO COOK | BRENDA MAGE." Screenshot from Brenda Mage on YouTube.

laugh and make fun of one's fortunes and misfortunes. Part of Mage's (and the Squad's) appeal, particularly to displaced working class female and *bakla* audience, which is also *talak's* appeal, is being able to entertain, provide *aliw*, through surface overdramatics and hysterics, but without necessarily diverting focus away from the (often uncomfortable and polarizing) subject—that is, without it being mere laugh for laugh's sake. In fact, *talak's* charm depends precisely on its penchant for pain and discomfort. That Didong is able to sob, chuckle, and entertain in one narrative breath, and that the Squad equally laughed and sympathized with Didong despite their varying opinions about extramarital affairs, are precisely the characteristics of how *talak*, as a narrative form, prioritizes fleeting affective milieus and temporary social contexts in favor of the promises, the sacrificial *yet to be*, of the family and nationalist narratives.

The tight and claustrophobic shots in Mage's video is also starkly different from the vast panoramic drone shots (figure 4.3) and precise family portraits (figure 4.5) in *Maalaala Mo Kaya*. Mage's video (as with most of her vlogs) is mostly composed of close-up shots of Mage or Didong, or whoever is speaking. During the dinner scene (figure 4.5), Mage tries to get a shot of the entire table unsuccessfully, holding the camera as far out as she could, while talking and eating at the same time (figure 4.6). There is not a shot in the entire video where everyone in the household is included—not least because the table is too small to accommodate them all. When Didong arrives after everyone else has eaten, she and her tale of heartbreak become the video's focal point. Mage zooms in and out of Didong as she speaks (figures 4.7 and 4.8), sometimes zooming in so close that you can really see the changes in her expressions, from fierce, sarcastic, and funny to

frustrated, irritated, and teary—sometimes so close that you can also see the food in her mouth. (It's also possible that Mage's arm has just gotten too tired to keep the camera steady, giving the zooming effect.) Unlike the *Maalaala* narrative that abstracts Mage's story into the inevitability, the naturalness, of the self-sacrificing family and national figure, captured in vast idyllic landscape shots, the vlog's claustrophobia forces us to pay attention to the variedness of the *bakla* narratives in the household and to focus on Didong's disruptions. It makes us pay attention to the specificity of Didong's romantic experience and how she navigates being a married man's *bakla* mistress. The claustrophobic and precarious quality of Mage's videos lends itself to *talak's* contradictory affective temperaments, as well as *talak's* multiple formal manifestations.

The Janus-Faced *Bakla* Matriarch

When the vlogs started becoming repetitive, Mage dabbled on various YouTube content genres such as gameshow, mukbang, prank, singing/karaoke competition, scripted drama, and "celebrity" interview à la *Maalaala Mo Kaya*.[14] She also encouraged and trained the Squad members to start their own vlogging channels—to make their own money, contribute to the household, and send something to their families back in Mindanao—hence the official formation of The Social Climber Squad. The Squad members have, until today, active vlogging accounts on YouTube and Facebook, each with subscribers varying in the tens and hundreds of thousands: @ohdeeva (Deeva), @JigJagChannel (Jig

[14] Particularly among, though not limited to, Filipino YouTube content creators, home-made video contents on YouTube that imitated television programs (such as gameshows, celebrity interviews, pranks, cooking shows, etc.) have become more and more popular among Filipinos, especially during the lockdown when various TV productions were shut down.

Jag), @didongvlog7675 (Didong), @BagyongOyong (Oyong), @ScarletDark (Scarlet), @miakaloka (Mia).[15] I obviously got very excited when this idea was floated, but I also worried that contents would become too overlapping and too repetitive. But, as I should have predicted about anything (*bakla*) Filipino, too much of a good thing, that is, *excess*, can actually, sometimes, still be good. In fact, the video crossovers became the highlight of all their contents, and you missed quite a lot of the continuing narratives/*tsismis* if you skipped one of the videos. In this section, I describe Mage's matriarchal role in orchestrating not only the household dynamics but also the various vlogs that the Squad produce. I also observe that it is only through the vlog crossovers that we really get a sense of both Mage's complex matriarchal role and *talak's* linguistic and performative multiplicity.

Taking Mage's lead, Didong starts a Q&A vlog series (inspired by celebrity interview talk shows on TV) and one of her first interviewees is Oyong in the video called, "USAPANG PAG IBIG WITH OYONG | AT NA HIGHBLOOD SI BRENDAMAGE HAHA [Love talk with Oyong | And Brenda Mage got irritated haha]."[16] In the vlog, Didong begins by asking Oyong about her romantic experiences with men: "*paano ba magmahal ang isang Oyong* [how does someone like Oyong express love?]." "*Siguro hindi na question kung paano magmahal si Oyong, kasi si Oyong mapagmahal na tao at tsaka siyempre naainlove ako sa taong mapagmahal din*

[15] Throughout the years, the Squad would go on to expand and include other *bakla* friends in Manila and Mindanao who also create social media content: @TripniWaet, @IndayKatok, @JeanBulagVlog, @PhengGwen, among others. But I focus, in this chapter, on the eight friends who were "stuck" together during the early months of the lockdown.

[16] Didong Vlog, "USAPANG PAG IBIG WITH OYONG|AT NA HIGH BLOOD SI BRENDAMAGE HAHA." YouTube video, June 14, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqzww68iA4g.

kagaya ko [I don't think that's a question of *how* because Oyong is an inherently loving person. And of course, I fall for someone who is also loving like me]," Oyong responds with her contagious chuckle, in the third person for some reason. Oyong continues to narrate how she is currently with someone, but that they've only communicated through social media so far. When asked about heartbreak, she explains that she has never felt it because, although she's loved many men before, she never actually felt like any of them loved her back in the same way. As Oyong speaks, Didong is visibly distracted because of the noise in the small apartment. There is audible chatter nearby and someone else seems to be doing a separate vlog. The Squad tries to be considerate, but they can only do so much in that tiny apartment. The Q&A gets officially disrupted when Mage throws a pillow at Oyong screaming, "*wala ng tubig* [there's no more water]," referring to the empty pitcher of water in the fridge that someone forgot to refill. Mage is known for doing these dramatic disruptions in the Squad's vlogs as a prank. But this time, although she laughs it off, it seems Mage is actually irritated not only by the empty pitcher but also by the disorganized bathroom. Didong tries to move on with the interview until Mage grabs the camera to show the viewers what it was that irritated her. Talking to the camera and walking to the bathroom, Mage shows how messy the bathroom is after, she claims, having just tidied it up. Didong, not bothered by the disruption, grabs the camera, then grabs Oyong back to the sofa to finish the interview. She adds, talking to the camera, that she's not going to bother editing out Mage's outburst. She ends the video by wishing Oyong well with her love life, and with Oyong saying that her only wish for herself is to see her family do well. Almost breaking in tears, while still chuckling, Oyong adds that

she can't let her family see her sad, to which Didong wholeheartedly agrees. Didong finally says goodbye and asks her audience to watch out for her next video, as well as for Oyong's. Needless to say, Mage received strong reactions from the viewers, some agreeing with her, others irritated that she disrupted Didong's vlog.

Here, I want to provide an alternative reading of Mage's "disruptions" and "outbursts"—caught in the Squad's overlapping vlogs—as in fact moments of *talak's* ability to describe *bakla* forms of affection. In the vlog, "GALIT AKO KAY BAKANG AT SCARLET | BRENDA MAGE [I'm mad at Bakang and Scarlet | Brenda Mage],"[17] Mage films a prank on Bakang and Scarlet who are filming their own vlog in a separate room in the apartment. Bakang and Scarlet's vlog is a spelling challenge, and whoever gets the spelling wrong between them must take a shot of either rum, soy sauce, vinegar, honey, or Mang Tomas dipping sauce. As Mage pointed out at the beginning of her video, before making the disruptive entrance, her plan is to go in and start yelling at Bakang and Scarlet for supposedly wasting the kitchen products, as well as wasting electricity with their cameras and lighting equipment, especially during the lockdown where resources are very scarce. Bakang and Scarlet tries to laugh Mage's disruptions off, but you can tell they're a bit confused, if not a little scared. After about two minutes of reprimand, Mage begins to smile wittily, which eased the two, before turning serious again, and telling them, "*Pag yan di maayos…pag yan walang kwentang vlog na yan ah* [that better be a good…you both better do a good job with that vlog, or else]," before

[17] Brenda Mage, "GALIT AKO KAY BAKANG AT SCARLET | BRENDA MAGE." YouTube video. March 20, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FIGsM8GoX0s.

leaving the room. Mage has been repeatedly *bashed* (gotten strongly worded negative comments) by their viewers for being too strict to the Squad, especially when it comes to household chores and rules. In a way, this prank is Mage's sarcastic response to those bashers. It's her way of not only acknowledging and dismissing the bashers but also making content and money off them. But Mage's interruptions during Didong and Oyong's Q&A vlog—which also included a scolding of (*tinalakan si*) Oyong and another *bakla* friend—was a moment of real frustration. And grabbing Didong's camera was to show to the viewers that her outbursts were not without merit. As the Squad's *bakla* matriarch, Mage must navigate not only the disciplining of the cramped household (through *talak* as scolding and reprimand) but also the audience who bash her (*talak* as bashing). In this way, *talak* describes Mage's mode of discipline in the Social Climber Squad household, which I ultimately understand as an affectionate one. Mage has to maintain a particular kind of order, labor division, and cleanliness in the household, so as to *make do* with the cramped space, and keep everyone comfortable—having opened her house to her displaced friends, especially during the COVID-19 lockdown. It is also evident in the overlapping vlogs that Mage takes equal part in all the household chores: cooking, cleaning, laundry, grocery shopping, etc. Thus, I understand her being *talakera* (nagger) as a gesture of care, so that the Squad can live as comfortably as possible in that space. Furthermore, her interruptions, serious or not, in other's vlogs are intentional because she knows viewers *like* them, and/or get irritated by them, either way would mean more views for the Squad's vlogs. By making herself the *contrabidang talakera* (nagging villain), she makes the viewers sympathize with the other Squad members,

which could mean more views, no ad-skipping, or even Western Union cash transfers from the viewers. Didong's choice not to edit out Mage's disruption in her interview vlog with Oyong, and even include it in the title, understands that it will attract both Mage's fans and bashers. Despite it all, it's also clear in the vlog crossovers that the Squad never see Mage's actions as malicious.

In this way, *talak* also articulates how Mage defies the narrative of the hostile and the self-sacrificing mother often depicted in Filipino films, *teleseryes*, and drama anthologies like *Maalaala Mo Kaya*. José B. Capino has argued that depictions of hostile matriarchs in Filipino films, particularly the melodramatic films of Lino Brocka, can be traced to the Marcos Martial Law years: "The maternal relation in these films substitutes for the paternal. These allegories, however, do not detail the exact workings of the authoritarian regime. They render only the broad dynamics of dominance, submission, and resistance. Historically speaking, this apparent limitation had its advantage. The displacement of the paternal dissimulated the enmity toward the Marcos regime."[18] That is, according to Capino, the hostile Filipino matriarch acted as a stand in for the male authoritarian figure that could not be depicted during the Marcos regime due to censorship. This figure would then be cemented into the Filipino cultural imaginary in the 1990s through the widely popular *teleseryes* of Claudine Barretto and Judy Anne Santos (the young Brenda Mage's idols according to *Maalaala*) who suffered, and so sympathized by the masses, under the brutal treatments of their respective matriarchal

[18] José B. Capino, *Martial Law Melodrama: Lino Brocka's Cinema Politics* (University of California Press, 2020), 43.

villains.[19] The counterpoint of this hostile figure, adds Capino, is the self-abnegating mother: "the contrapuntal figure harkens back to the martyrs in Hollywood classics…and indeed in much of Philippine cinema. This other figure of benevolent mothering constitutes the afterimage of dictatorships victims (including their loved ones) in real life. Following a tradition in Philippine art, the virtuous matriarch may also represent Inang Bayan or Mother Country."[20] Such a nationalist narrative of martyrdom and benevolence is precisely what *Maalaala* used to cohere and abstract Mage's story of development. And while Mage's *Maalaala* episode did not have an overt hostile mother figure from whom she suffers, *mapait na katotohanan* [harsh reality] or *tadhana* [fate] can be understood as a stand in for the oppressive matriarchal figure—Mage's actual *supportive* mother, Cita Tagarao, barely having any screen time in the episode. In other words, the *Maalaala* episode merely compressed Mage's *bakla* narrative into the proven formula of Filipino melodrama, which follows the oppressor-oppressed dialectic—Mage's subjectivity determined by her ability to survive and overcome oppression (through poverty), only to sacrifice herself ones more for the greater good of the family, and by extension the nation. On the one hand, *talak* is symptomatic of these narratives of female hostility and martyrdom in the way the Squad's viewers react to Mage's disciplinary actions, as well as in the way Mage plays into and capitalizes on these reactions. On the other hand, *talak* also points us, not to coherence, but to the logic of the narrative disjunctions and disorientations that the vlog crossovers articulate.

[19] For example, *Mula Sa Puso*, *Saan Ka Man Naroroon*, *Esperanza, Mara Clara*, among others.
[20] Capino, *Martial Law Melodrama*, 43.

Epilogue

As a nod to the Social Climber Squad whose funniest and liveliest communal vlogs happen either on the dinner table or in the kitchen, I end this project with my own relationship with the kitchen, which, as I'll try to explain here, is very much tied to my intellectual aspirations. I decided to leave the (professional) kitchen because it had started becoming claustrophobic. After graduating from culinary school, I worked as a line cook at various Michelin starred restaurants in the Las Vegas Strip, including Nobu and L'Atelier De Joël Robuchon. As someone in his early 20s in the early 2010s (a unique time for "celebrity chef" culture), I was seduced by the rockstar aesthetic promises of culinary life: the obsession for precision, the militaristic routine, the (organized) chaos, the kitchen camaraderie, and the mental and physical abuse (self-inflicted or otherwise) that felt necessary to belong in that culture. However, a year or two into professional cooking, I began feeling too confined, and I could not bear the fact that I did not have the freedom nor time to *read*. I had realized that I enjoyed reading about food (through the Thursday food section of *The New York Times*, food magazines like *Lucky Peach*, and books like *The Sorcerer's Apprentice: A Season in the Kitchen at Ferran Adrià's Elbulli* and *No Reservations: Around the World on an Empty Stomach*) more than having to conceptualize and *actually* create it. The *idea* was more appealing to me than the *fact* of cooking. Despite not getting home until 1 or 2am after a late shift, I looked forward to waking up early in the morning so I could have a few hours to read before work started again. I began dreading the anticipation of going to work and loathed being at work. So, I

decided to go back to college and major in English to become a food writer. I did not know then what that really meant or how I would be able to achieve it, but I knew it would give me reason and time to read.

I'm not quite sure what it was about reading that appealed to me. I did not come from a "reading family." I don't remember ever seeing my parents or older brothers read for pleasure. Everyone was either in the medical field or business, and no one really read *for pleasure*, as it were. And the television was our primary source of entertainment and information. The only literary-adjacent memory I can think of was seeing my uncle read the newspaper for hours every day. While I was in high school, I lived with him and my aunt in the city until my family immigrated to the United States. I admired him for it. I admired that he was reading a national newspaper that was written in English. I admired the seriousness and thoughtfulness of his state as he was reading. But most of all, I think I admired the solitariness and seclusion that reading seemed to convey. Growing up in a Filipino household where extended family members lived in the same house at the same time and privacy was an impossibility, there was something attractive about the fact that no one felt they could disturb my uncle whenever he was reading the newspaper. I tiptoed whenever I was around him. In Las Vegas, where I continued to live with my parents and brothers, perhaps reading was my own way of creating a little pocket of privacy. And perhaps it was also reading's solitary quality that seduced me away from the simultaneous claustrophobia and chaos of kitchen life.

To support myself, I kept working in the kitchen while pursuing English. But the more readings I had to do, the more invested I became, and the more I despised my time

confined in the kitchen—time I could have spent reading on my own. In my last undergraduate year, I was faced with yet another professional crisis: how to become a food writer, and did I still want to become a food writer? The more I was introduced to literature and theory—to the works of Tennyson and Rosetti in my Victorian Poetry course, to Hemingway and Dos Passos in American War Novels, to Said and Derrida in Literary Criticism, and to Freud and Pater in Narrative and Psychoanalysis—the more my interest in food and food writing also diverged. I discovered another literary world with far greater aesthetic and solitary promises. Based on the quality of my writings (the product of pure imitation, I realize now), and I suppose the palpable seriousness with which I took the literary courses (a memory that still delights, but also makes me cringe now), I was advised to consider applying to PhD programs in English. The idea that I could be paid (however abysmally) to read, write and take more literature courses, the fact that I could not bear working in the kitchen anymore and food writing has lost its appeal on me, and the reality that I had no other prospects, made graduate studies all the more appealing. The idea and pride of putting a "PhD" next to my name, which is my father's name—whose "American Dream" brought me to this country in sacrifice of his own—was also not lost on me.

In a way, the somewhat winding life that led me to pursue graduate studies—growing up in the Philippines, moving to the United States as a teenager, becoming a chef, and pursuing higher education—was a product of Neoliberal promises and discords. The promises of a "good American life" and the very limits and failures of those promises. But it was also a life in pursuit of a particular kind of *culture* and *style*. What

that otherwise militaristic, chaotic, and often abusive kitchen culture also offered me was a sense of artistic freedom that was supposed to be achievable through a task as quotidian as cooking. But being a chef in that Las Vegas mega-corporate context, I quickly realized how "cruelly optimistic"[1] that promise was. Artistic expression was only *free*, I observed, so long as it satisfied the dictates of tourist-driven profit. My attachment to literature was perhaps yet another attempt at satisfying my craving for culture and style. To read, to convey a sense of admirable solitude, and to be aware of a certain literary tradition was to have a particular *taste* (in a non-culinary sense). Having reflected throughout the years on this "craving" for "taste," it occurred to me that this might be the product of a *lack*—a "hunger," if I'm to exhaust the metaphor. In many ways, such lack, or loss, could be understood as part of my colonial upbringing and education, part of the Filipino colonial condition in which our tastes and desires have been constituted by the various colonial intrusions in the Philippines, most notably by Spain and the United States, summarized in the overused statement: "300 years in a convent, 50 years in Hollywood." However, having been raised in the Philippines and fed Filipino television my whole life, I cannot at all say that Filipinos *lack*, or have *lost*, a sense of style. If anything, there's an excess of it!

Amidst my social-climbing desires for elite literary and culinary culture, there was another cultural style that I consumed, albeit in private and with a small amount of shame, what I have tried to describe throughput this project as the Filipino style, expressed through *arte*. *Arte* revealed itself in the excess of sentimentality so blatant yet

[1] Lauren Berlant. *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011).

so well-loved in the *teleseryes* (Filipino soap operas) I watched. It also describes the Filipino attachment, my attachment, to beauty pageants, one of *arte's* most spectacular expressions. And in the age of YouTube and social media, Filipino content creators, who have taken full advantage of these democratized platforms of expression, have become for me (and for many Filipinos in the Philippines and its diaspora) a new *artestic* obsession—which I am terribly excited to write more about.

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