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THE HAUNTING AESTHETICS OF EMPIRE: FILIPINX AMERICA, US EMPIRE, AND CULTURAL PRODUCTION

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by

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DEDICATION

This one is for my Ate Ruby, my oldest friend in this life. I don't know what I would have done without you, metaphorically and literally, holding my hand through some of the scariest, thrilling, and most daunting moments of my life. I love you. Fuck cancer.

This is also for my nephews, Elliot and Elijah. You two light up my life with your curiosity, kindness, loyalty, care, and wonder for the beautiful things in this world. Thank you for making me an auntie.

For my Ading Patrick, thank you for the belly laughs, inside jokes, screaming matches and outrageous fights. We love each other ferociously.

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The Haunting Aesthetics of Empire: Filipinx America, US Empire, and Cultural Production

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ABSTRACT

Throughout this dissertation, I argue that US imperial knowledge production affirms US exceptionalism by disavowing the imperial violence wrought on the Philippines and its people. This disavowal not only renders the Philippines and Filipinx bodies illegible, but also haunts the Filipinx American diaspora. I argue that the haunted logics of empire are a set of relations, rather than specters of specific times and places, in which knowledge and power work together to continually produce and reproduce a specific and limiting reality and sensorium through which to view the world. In my interrogation of empire's haunted logics, I not only look at the ways in which the Filipinx and the Philippines is rendered unknowable, but also how Filipinx Americans in the contemporary period encounter, work through, ignore, negotiate, come to terms with, and imagine beyond this haunting through their relationship to its spectral evidence. I look at cultural production as a space where the materiality of Filipinx America's haunting – the spectral evidence – can be sensed through ghosts, ugly affects, memories in the flesh, and symphonies of rage. More specifically, I am interested in how Filipinx America becomes aware of the aesthetics of empire's haunting – the very principles and values that empire demands we believe and adhere to, and which shape our visual, sonic, sensory, temporal, and spatial experiences of this world. I offer Filipinx American critique as a way to name the critical discourse that emerges from empire's spectral evidence. Filipinx American critique disrupts epistemological formations that mark Filipinx American being through dismissal, disavowal, silencing, erasure, or assimilation and provides an opportunity for imagining genealogies of Filipinx being in the past, present and future that exist beyond haunting narratives of empire.

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Introduction

A reader does not need to know everything.

How many times has she waded into someone else's history, say the mysteries of lemon soaps and Irish pubs in Dedalus's Dublin, or the Decembrists' plot in Dostoyevsky's *The Devils*, or Gustave Flaubert's Revolution of 1848 in what turns out to be one of her favorite books, *Sentimental Education*, and she would know absolutely nothing about the scenes, the historical background that drives them, the confusing cultural details, all emblematic, she imagines, to the Irish or the Russians or the French, and not really her business – and yet she dives in, to try to figure what it is the writer wishes to tell.

She calls these reader moments the quibbles – when she gets stuck in the faulty notion that everything in a book must be grasped.

Why should readers be spooked about not knowing all the details in a book about the Philippines yet surge forward with resolve in stories about France?

Against her quibbles, she scribbles her Qs, her queries for the author to address later.

-Gina Apostol, *Insurrecto: A Novel* [1]

Gina Apostol's 2018 novel *Insurrecto* is a meta-narrative that grapples with memory, history, and forgetting. In *Insurrecto*, two protagonists – Chiara, a white filmmaker, and Magsalin, a Filipino translator (*magsalin* translates to "translate") – write different versions of a film script about the Balangiga Massacre of 1901 on Samar Island during the Philippine-American War. As their two versions of this historical moment spiral together in a dizzying and discombobulating narrative, readers are left seemingly with more questions than answers, the major one looming above the rest: what *really* happened at Balangiga? Apostle's recounting of the massacre through these refracted and competing perspectives, however, is less about telling the "truth" of what happened at Balangiga as it is about revealing the kinds of haunted logics that continue to frame Filipinx memory. *Insurrecto* reframes (or perhaps eschews) the question of "what really happened" to instead query why memory surrounding

[1] Gina Apostol, *Insurrecto: A Novel* (New York: Soho Press, Inc., 2018), 103.

the Philippine-American War seems so convoluted, and how other registers of sensing and knowing seem to reach beyond empiricist logic and official history despite that fact.

For example, in the epigraph above from *Insurrecto*, as Magsalin works on re-writing Chiara's script, the translator reflects on the discomfort she feels when reading about details of the massacre she has no knowledge about. While she happily dives into Western novels, in which there are historical and cultural details she knows little about, Magsalin wonders why readers are often "spooked" by not knowing the details in books about the Philippines. Magsalin's line of inquiry animates the following chapters, which not only explore how US imperial relations with and in the Philippines haunt Filipinx American memory, history, and knowledge production, but also how Filipinx American diasporic culture and creative production at times reproduces, and at other times contests, the haunted aesthetics of US empire. I argue that US imperial epistemologies are a haunting structure that not only affirm and preserve US empire but does so through the disavowal of Filipinx memory. In what follows, I not only look at the ways that Filipinx American is rendered illegible through imperial knowledge production but also explore Filipinx ghosts and other spectral figurations that arise in excess to these haunted logics to reveal to us our haunted realities and illuminate alternative futures.

Magsalin's feelings of unease around the "not knowing" specific to Philippine historicity highlights a common affect that is emblematic to Philippine-American relations and Filipinx diaspora. There seems to be this profound agreement that we know so little about the Philippines and Filipinx peoples, both past and present, and yet attempts to remedy this supposed failure in knowledge production seem to only exasperate the haunted logics of empire. From the historical recovery of the "Filipino American Renaissance" in the 1990's,

to George Bush's address to the Philippine Congress in 2003 about "friendly" relations between the two countries, to the current multicultural celebration of Filipinx American figures such as Bruno Mars, Darren Criss, Dante Basco, and Vanessa Hudgens – all these attempts to rectify this knowledge failure only seem to miss the point – that this cannot be rectified through US-sanctioned forms of knowledge, history, and recognition. Indeed, as Sarita See argues, the accumulation of knowledge about the Philippines/Filipinx by museums and intellectual institutions during the fin de siècle colonial period is ironically marked and haunted by an "epic failure" in knowledge production; in other words, the imperial archive relies on an epistemology of accumulation while it simultaneously depends on the forgetting of the colonial dispossession that allows for such accumulation. [2] Therefore, you cannot rectify this forgetting through a form of recognition that relies on things staying forgotten.

This ambiguity surrounding Filipinxness that seems to "spook" us is a central question throughout my dissertation. Through the framework of haunting, I explore how US imperialism shapes and determines how we understand and come to know (or forget) Filipinxness and the Philippines. From the Philippine-American War to our neoliberal multicultural present, there continues to be this profound lack of knowing the Filipinx and the Philippines. In particular, the imperial narrative of Philippine progress, Westernization, and friendship in the time during and after the Philippine-American War (or "insurrection") obscures and obstructs the continued violence that lives among Filipinx people today. In his 2003 speech to the Joint Session of the Philippine Congress, for example, President George W. Bush greeted the Philippine politicians by stating that "today we are honored to visit

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[2] Sarita Echavez See, *The Filipino Primitive: Accumulation and Resistance in the American Museum* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 5.

America's oldest ally in Asia, and one of America's most valued friends in the world." [3] The irony here is that the Philippines was America's first colony, not their ally, and that the "friendly" relationship that exists between the two nations is not one between two self-determining entities but instead a deeply entangled and haunted web of empire, violence, displacement, and dispossession. Scholars such as Leia Castañeda Anastacio, Alfred McCoy, Nerissa Balce, Sarita See, and Allan Isaac have, in various ways, argued that American imperial intervention in the Philippines is a pivotal moment, not just for the Philippines (and not necessarily as a moment of "enlightenment" or "progress"), but also served as a significant moment in the shaping of US empire, nation-state, and subject formation. Indeed, as Nerissa Balce has argued about Bush's speech, though it intended to enlist the Philippines in the "War on Terror" and compared the Iraq War with the Philippine-American War (as wars fought in the name of "democracy" and freedom), it ended up highlighting the fault lines in US imperial histories as it also drew parallels between the immense economic burden and cost of human life of both the Philippine-American and Iraq Wars. [4] When read for its contradictions and ironies, Bush's speech, then, not only tells us about how history is constructed and narrativized between the Philippines and the US, but how memory, or the detritus of official history, finds a way to make itself known to us.

My research is also interested in what Danika Medak-Saltzman calls the haunted logics of empire. Specifically, I draw on Medak-Saltzman's work on haunting, empire, and indigeneity and her assertion that "logics of empire that haunt settler colonial societies are

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[3] President George W. Bush, "Presidential Address," recorded October 18, 2003, *C-SPAN*, video, 27:45, https://www.c-span.org/video/?178742-1/presidential-address.
[4] Nerissa Balce, *Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 160-161.

vestiges of the goals and spirit of colonialism that haunt in order to maintain the foundational narratives of Indigenous absence/inconsequence that justify settler colonial presence." [5] I am interested in the particular ways US imperial logic and forms of knowledge production preserve US benevolent empire oversees through a constant performance or rehearsal of disavowal that haunts Filipinx life, space, and memory. By interrogating this haunting structure of imperial knowledge production, I not only look at the ways in which the Filipinx and the Philippines is rendered unknowable, but also the ways in which Filipinx Americans in the contemporary period encounter, work through, ignore, negotiate, come to terms with, and imagine beyond this haunting through their relationship to its spectral evidence. More specifically, and as it will become clear throughout the chapters that follow, I am interested in how Filipinx America becomes aware of the aesthetics of empire's haunting – the very principles and values that empire demands we believe and adhere to, and which shape our visual, sonic, sensory, temporal, and spatial experiences of this world – and how coming to know this haunting can produce unruly, incommensurate, amorphous, scary, terrifying, wondrous, and beautiful imaginaries.

While my project focuses on contemporary Filipinx American cultural production, I believe the specters found in my archive tell us about an epistemic violence that goes beyond the last 120 plus years and spans multiple continents, languages, identities, nationalities, and citizenship statuses. My particular focus on contemporary cultural items is a decision I made based, in part, on my own experiences with discovering ghostly figures and empire's haunted logics as a Filipinx American living through the post Bush administration, post-9/11 era of

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[5] Danika Medak-Saltzman, "Empire's Haunted Logics: Comparative Colonialisms and Challenges of Incorporating Indigeneity,'" *Critical Ethnic Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (2015): 17.

neoliberal multiculturalism. In short: this is what I know. But perhaps more significantly, it is my intent to show how empire's logics continue to haunt us, *despite* our multicultural, "post"-colonial moment. Further, ghosts and haunting are not limited by space and time. They tell us about the past and present, as well as the future, as they traverse space and place. Indeed, while my research archive consists primarily of contemporary cultural items, it is certainly not limited to the here and now. These ghosts call on me to grapple with memories, stories, subjects, and other forms of ephemeral debris that are not wedded to this moment or space. Indeed, ghosts persist. They are not particular to my archive's specificities. They show up elsewhere, again and again. For these reasons, my project is not interested in providing a chronological series of chapters or archival work.

US Empire's Haunting Aesthetics

In what follows, I assert that imperial knowledge production on and about the Philippines and Filipinx/Americans is an ongoing project that affirms and renews US imperialism through an aesthetics built on a specific set of values and rationales that result in the unintelligibility of Filipinxness. Drawing on Ronak K. Kapadia, I look at the aesthetics of haunting as a "built sensorium" that not only frames and structures what and how we encounter the world, but also hides other knowledges from our view and suppresses sensorial faculties that would allow us to perceive the ghosts around us. [6] As much as imperial epistemes are a project of affirmation, they are also projects of obscurity, ambiguity, and violence or what Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein call "colonial

[6] Ronak K. Kapadia, *Insurgent Aesthetics: Security and the Queer life of the Forever War* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 190.

unknowing" to refer to the epistemological process(es) that render the historicity and relationalities of colonization unintelligible. [7] Indeed, as I expound on later, I see these haunted logics of empire as a set of relations, rather than specters of specific times and places, in which knowledge and power work together to continually produce and reproduce a specific and limiting reality and sensorium through which to view the world. Empire's logics haunt precisely because they rely on both a highly visible assertion and narrative of power as well as a pervasive disavowal of alternative memories and knowledge production. Lisa Lowe calls this an "economy of affirmation and forgetting," arguing that "the forgetting [of liberal empire] reveals the politics of memory itself, and is a reminder that the constitution of knowledge often obscures the conditions of its own making." [8] The co-constitutive nature of affirmation and forgetting in US empire haunts Filipinx life because, as Oscar V. Campomanes argues, "Filipino American invisibilization and the self-invisibility of U.S. imperialism belong to the same order of relations and are enmeshed in a complex of reciprocal determinations." [9] In other words, the affirmation of US exceptionalism relies on the veiling of empire in the Philippines and on the Filipinx body, rendering Filipinxness as illegible, ineffable, and ghostly.

I therefore assert that the misunderstanding, invisibilization, or erasure of the Filipinx at the center of fin de siècle Philippine-American history is not a momentary lapse that can be rectified through historical recovery or neoliberal multiculturalism, but is instead a

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[7] Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein, "On Colonial Unknowing," *Theory & Event*, 19.4 (2016).
[8] Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 39.
[9] Oscar V. Campomanes, "Figures of the Unassimilable: American Empire, Filipino American Postcoloniality, and the U.S.-Philippine War of 1898-1910s," PhD diss. (Brown University, 2011), 12, 24.

continual project that buttresses US empire. Indeed, as scholars such as Ronak K. Kapadia and Gayatri Gopinath have illuminated regarding US empire in the Middle East, America has a "visual life" and visual technologies that perform a sort of "calculus" – a process in which scales of violence are rendered necessary or unnecessary based on the outcomes expected and the impact on national security. In this process, the affective lives of the people impacted by these technologies and violence (civilian victims of drone strikes, for example) are obscured. People become abstractions or, alternatively, they become visible only as non-human statistics. [10] Similarly, the ambiguity and illegibility of the Philippines and Filipinxs is not, then, a poor happenstance of empire, but a condition of possibility for empire's continued haunting. Along these lines, I ask how empire and (neo)liberalism work together to sustain such a haunting. Rather than seeing the time of the Philippine-American War and the era of neoliberal multiculturalism as disparate and unrelated moments, I assert that both moments exist relationally through haunting, and that ghostly and spectral evidence, unbounded by time and space, can present itself to us in the here and now, to tell us about the past and the future.

In what follows, I deploy haunting as a relational framework to understand imperial epistemologies in the past, present, and future. I assert that haunting and the spectral evidence that gets left behind cannot be contained spatially or temporally and that they are not bound to a specific time and place (i.e., that haunting over there began with this event). Instead, I view haunting as a set of relations, as an amorphous structure, that produces and reproduces knowledge, sociality, and culture. Therefore, to understand a haunting requires us

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[10] Kapadia, *Insurgent Aesthetics*., Gayatri Gopinath*, Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

to analyze how it interacts in the world, on bodies, in culture, in our society, etc. While I deploy empire's haunted logics as a way to make sense of Filipinx American cultural production and spectral encounters, these logics are not wedded to or restricted by these relations per se. Rather, I look at this relationship as indicative of the mechanisms of haunting. Positioning haunting in this way allows me to decenter Philippine-American relations, specifically the Philippine-American war, as *the* framing rubric for understanding Filipinx being. Though this, as I have argued up to this point, is a foundational moment in imperial knowledge production on and about the Filipinx, it is also important to look at the ways in which these epistemologies transcend the fin de siècle moment. To put it differently, the Philippine-American War is not what haunts Filipinx America, it is imperial epistemes that haunt us. While the framework of the Philippine-American War has provided rich and invaluable analysis for understanding Filipinx being, scholarship to which I am indebted to, I am here interested in viewing haunting as a set of relationships, in a Foucauldian sense, rather than a particular moment, which allows me to see different relationships, meanings, and possibilities in my archive, including intersecting Filipinx being and ghostliness with that of non-Filipinx beings and realities.

Likewise, I make a distinction between empire's haunted logics and some of the ways trauma has been discussed as a form of haunting. While trauma certainly exists within Filipinx life as a result of epistemic violence and exclusion, I pivot away from an individualistic understand of trauma that centers personal experience without consideration for larger structural forces. [11] I also want to avoid an *ethos* of trauma, as Dian Million

[11] Grace M. Cho similarly argues to "deindividualize haunting…to consider not only the collective unconscious but also what Patricia Clough calls 'subindividual finite forces' such

describes it, because such an ethos often recuperates and further substantiates the structures that cause the trauma at hand. [12] In other words, I am less interested in speaking trauma (as it is understood as an ethos) out loud as a way to "heal," establish justice, or recuperate a forgotten injury. Instead, I think through haunting as a continuous structure of violence and set of relations, not just a moment of harm in the past that torments us in the present and that can be banished by speaking it aloud. Drawing on Abraham and Torok's assertion that, "what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others," I look at the ways the logics of empire create gaps and silences that affect entire generations. [13] Indeed, if ghosts provide a counter-humanist approach to apprehending shared trauma, then what might we learn from them?

The conceptual metaphor of the ghost is another useful analytic to my project because, as Maria Del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren assert, ghosts get at the "tangibly ambiguous" where "its own status as discourse or epistemology is never stable, as the ghost also questions the formation of knowledge itself and specifically invokes what is placed outside it, excluded from perception and, consequently, from both the archive as the depository of the sanctioned, acknowledged past and politics as the (re)imagined present and future." [14] As my project approaches the power-knowledge relationship between the Philippines and the US, and the epistemic violence such a relationship enacts on both the

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as matter and energy." Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 40.

[12] Dian Million, *Therapeutic Nations: Healing in an Age of Indigenous Human Rights* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013).

[13] Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 171.

[14] María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, "Introduction: Conceptualizing Spectralities" in *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory,* ed. María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 9.

Philippines and Filipinx Americans, ghosts, spectral figures, or spectral evidence (which I use interchangeably) become a useful analytic not only for reading what the imperial and liberal archives do not tell, but what inevitably gets invoked in these omissions and suppressions. Indeed, ghosts have a materiality and sociality to them that is often felt beyond the normative epistemologies that give body to such ghosts precisely because they exclude them. This is the "spook" that Magsalin feels as she grapples with the (lack of) memory of Balingiga. As Magsalin notes, her hesitancy to dive into a history she does not quite know requires a shift in mind, an ability to embrace the spookiness and uncanniness of suddenly knowing what you do not know. As my research will suggest, a consideration of ghosts requires a willful suspension of (dis)belief and the capacity to sense beyond empire's epistemic violence. As such, I draw on the work of Avery Gordon and Grace M. Cho and their assertions that ghosts are not what haunt us, but what tell us a haunting is occurring. I am therefore not interested in exorcising these ghosts or assimilating them through historical recuperation, but instead looking to them as desiring subjects that convey alternative knowledge and futures. This spectral evidence may "spook," but only because it makes us aware of the structure that harms, frightens, and terrifies: the haunted logics of empire.

Spectral Evidence, Filipinx Ghosts, and Queer Communions

Throughout the various chapters of this dissertation, I look at cultural production as a space where the materiality of Filipinx America's haunting can be sensed through various forms of spectral evidence, including ghosts, ugly affects, memories in the flesh, and symphonies of rage. This spectral evidence can act as an agent of memory, history, and alternative futures outside of, but in relation to, imperial knowledge production. Drawing on

Avery Gordon's argument that ghosts are the figures or the "evidence" that a haunting is taking place, I contend that the ghosts and other spectral evidence I pay attention to throughout my research are revelatory figurations, not monsters that need to be expelled, and that they both reveal to us empire's haunted logics as well as show us what is possible for Filipinx American futures beyond imperial epistemes. [15] I look for this evidence in the detritus or debris of imperial archives and knowledge production, as what is cast out or suppressed but nonetheless exists out there, somewhere. I examine Filipinx American cultural production, including visual art, performance, popular culture, and music, arguing that these forms of knowledge production provide a space or a stage for these spectral figurations to be encountered, realized, and sensed as the show us our haunted realities and the alternatives to it. I do not want to romanticize these alternative knowledge and histories, however, as they may very well be filled with stories and feelings of betrayal, deceit, and complicity. Nonetheless, these ghostly alternatives are important precisely because they tell us a different genealogy of knowledge that can lead us to imagining a future beyond empire.

I also assert that to perceive these ghostly elements, we must access a different sensorium, outside of the aesthetics of haunting. Throughout the following chapters, I assert that the ghosts and spectral evidence found within my archive are emblematic of a unique form of *Filipinx American critique*, as they provide us with a critical mode of disrupting imperial epistemologies and a genealogical method for approaching Filipinx history, memory, and futures differently. Specifically, by engaging Philippine-American relations through a framework of haunting, ghosts, and spectral evidence, I wish to provide materiality

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[15] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.

to the critical articulations of Filipinx American being that have existed since the beginnings of (and even before) Philippine-American relations. Filipinx American critique is a damning discourse that can be seen throughout the spectral evidence of empire's haunting into existence. Filipinx American critique is not an undoing of the ghosts or spectral residues of empire, but is instead the process marked by dismissal, disavowal, silencing, erasure, or assimilation. The spectral evidence of empire is very much material – it is a roadmap for other ways of knowing and remembering, a genealogy of Filipinx being in the past, present and future. Filipinx American critique is an unraveling of empire's haunted logics – nothing short of a reckoning.

In the latter half of the dissertation, I also look at ghostly intersections, for example in the works of artist Crystal Z. Campbell, the queer punk band Aye Nako, and the photographs of the Nightcrawlers to assert that the ghostly Filipinx figurations that live among the Filipinx American community not only ask us to be accountable to them, but ask us to witness those haunted by state-sanctioned genocide, police states, dispossession, and chattel slavery. In this way, the spectral residues of empire's haunting show us that other worlds are possible when we attune and adjust our senses beyond empire's sensorium, a world outside of empire's haunted logics, one that is for all of us, our memories, and our knowledges.

The archive that informs this project consists of various cultural items that are by and/or about Filipinx/Americans. Specifically, I will analyze the artwork of Crystal Z. Campbell (Filipina American, African American, Chinese), the television show *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* (depicts Filipinx American spree killer Andrew Cunanan), the queercore punk band Aye Nako (includes trans, Black, and Filipinx members), and the independently produced film *Bitter Melon* (about a Filipinx American family reunion). I look

at these cultural products to discern the ways in which Filipinx American specters or ghosts are invoked as what Victor Román Mendoza calls, "the inassimilable debris of the imperial-colonial fantasy frame."[16] In other words, how do these cultural archives, intentional or not, lead us towards that which official colonial archives systematically obscure? And what, by way of existing outside of or in tension with the archive, do these ghostly figures tell us about what is possible outside of imperial epistemologies?

Because of my interest in "official" archives, as well as what gets left out of, expunged, or hidden, in the archive, I approach these cultural items and the history, memory, and trauma they grapple with through a genealogical approach and draw on Michel Foucault's argument that to do genealogical work requires us to look at accidents or errors in history, gaps and silences, places where stories of "origins" crumble or do not make sense. [17] My project approaches Philippine-American relations as a knowledge-power relationship that produces and reproduces a specific narrative of US and Filipinx/American subject formation that continues to be violent and based on an epistemic denial, though contemporary notions of liberalism, multiculturalism, diversity, and inclusion want us to believe otherwise. My project does not seek one defining moment in Philippine-American history to uncover or (re)tell in order to amend past and current Filipinx conditions. Rather, I look at the myriad stories that the cultural items in my archive tell as a way to sense and feel out the unruly,

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[16] Victor Román Mendoza, *Metroimperial Intimacies: Fantasy, Racial-Sexual Governance, and the Philippines in U.S. Imperialism, 1899-1913* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 31.

[17] Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. D.F. Bouchard (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977).

illegible, and ineffable excesses of US imperial epistemologies, as well as how these epistemes haunt us to the point of near oblivion.

The cultural archive I bring together and look at in tension to official archives and imperial epistemologies is ultimately an unruly one. It does not cohere chronologically, nor does it seek one originary moment or narrative. Instead, my archive of television shows, film, visual art, and music relates to the multisensorial phenomenon of witnessing ghosts through an exploration of various sensorial registers, including temporality/spatiality, taste, the visual, and the auditory. Along these lines, the methods I deploy to make sense of the ghosts in my archive require a readjustment of the senses, a suspension of normative modes of seeing and believing.

For example, in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, in which he discusses queer public sex before, during, and after the AIDS epidemic, José Esteban Muñoz suggests that if we "sensitize" our eyes to access other histories and experiences, "we can potentially see the ghostly presence of a certain structure of feeling." [18] Muñoz suggests that we can detect this ghostly presence by accessing a queer visuality, though "we may need to squint, to strain our vision and force it to see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here and now." [19] In both performance and visual studies, training our vision differently or accessing other sensorial faculties is one method through which to apprehend alternative uses of visual culture and performance, as well as the worlds they create. My project strains to see how cultural production by and about Filipinx/Americans, as well as the ghosts that they conjure, requires a different way of seeing, sensing, and discerning.

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[18] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 42.
[19] Ibid., 22.

Along these lines, I am interested in the ways imperial hauntings produce an aesthetics that becomes embodied, and how the body and its senses need to recalibrate in order to perceive the ghosts that surround them. Scholars such as David Lloyd and Leticia Alvarado have argued that European aesthetic philosophy is co-constitutive with Western notions of modernity and the human. Though what is deemed as "aesthetic" seems to occupy the world of disinterested contemplation and exists outside of the material world, Lloyd asserts that this very notion of aesthetics is based on ideas such as freedom, rationality, and enlightenment, and the belief that such notions are universal and sublime. Therefore, the formation of liberal subjects through aesthetic judgements are also racial judgments of the non-liberal subject. Aesthetics create the ideal human through a rejection of its supposed opposites: the Black, Savage, or Subaltern. [20] The body as a site where imperial aesthetics and logics haunt, or perhaps possess us, is also a body that has the capacity to attune itself to the alternative possibilities presented to us by ghosts. Alvarado, for example, queries what an aesthetics of abjection, abject performances, or negative affects that avoid a Kantian definition of aesthetics tells us about the indiscernible and unrepresentable of racial and queer subject formations. [21] This is precisely because the haunted logics of empire rely on suppressing other forms of knowledge production, including the knowledge our bodies learn and carry with us, but perhaps also suppress, as we experience the contradictions, fissures, and gaps of these logics. Witnessing ghosts, then, prompts us to activate these embodied knowledges and attune our senses differently in relation to our haunting. Similarly, I deploy a

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[20] David Lloyd*, Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018).
[21] Leticia Alvarado, *Abject Performances: Aesthetic Strategies in Latino Cultural Production* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 14-16.

queer of color critical reading practice that, as Muñoz and scholars such as Gayatri Gopinath have articulated, require us to attune our bodies and senses differently, as a I approach my archive, and the ghosts that encompass it.

I deploy visual studies and performance studies methodologies in reading the cultural items that make up my archive. I bring these two fields together because, as Richard Schechner's asserts, "when texts, architecture, visual arts, or anything else are looked at by performance studies, they are studied 'as' performances… they are regarded as practices, events, and behaviors, not as 'objects' or 'things.'" [22] Indeed, the visual or to see is often performative and the performative is often visual. As visual studies scholar W.J.T. Mitchell argues, "visual culture entails a meditation on…the invisible, the unseen, the unseeable, and the overlooked; also on…the visible language of gesture; it also compels attention to the tactile, the auditory, the haptic, and the phenomenon of synesthesia." [23] Following both visual and performance studies scholars, I formally analyze the various cultural items that make up my archive, including television shows, film, visual art, and music, as a way to comb through or "meditate" on forms of alternative knowledge, what Diana Taylor calls the repertoire or what Muñoz calls the disidentificatory politics of cultural production. [24] Indeed, while much of my archive is considered mass culture, I still find them important and

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[22] Richard Schechner, "Fundamentals of Performance studies" in *Teaching Performance Studies*, ed. Nathan Stucky and Cynthia Wimmer (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), x.
[23] W.J.T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture" in *The Visual Culture Reader,* 2nd Edition, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 2002), 90.
[24] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).; José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

informative to my archive as their production and consumption tells us about the desires, contestations, and negotiations of Filipinx American culture and knowledge production.

Filipinx American Critique

Throughout the writing of this project, I have been indebted to what Campomanes has called a "paradigmatic shift," a shift in understanding the Philippine-American War not as a monumental moment of American war-making and US assertions of sovereignty, but as a part of an ongoing set of relations that continue to produce both American and Filipinx subjecthood. Especially after 9/11 and the subsequent war in Iraq, in which American studies, postcolonial studies, and ethnic studies scholars began looking at US empire in a different light (Amy Kaplan highlights this in her 2003 presidential speech to the American Studies Association), the critical turn in Filipinx American studies sought to reckon with the pervasive and amorphous nature of US empire, as well as how US empire has narrativized and archived itself. [25] The common trope that Filipinx/Americans are "forgotten" minorities in the US, or that the history of the Philippines has been obscured out of colonial guilt, and that such mishaps can be corrected via inclusion, visibility, and multiculturalism, fails to see how this lapse in memory and history is purposeful and structural in the logics of America's imperial structure. Following Campomanes' interventions, scholars in Filipinx/American studies have illuminated, in various ways, how the epistemic violence of US empire in and about the Philippines/Filipinx not only continues to "spook" through occlusions, ambiguity, and obscurity, but also how imperial epistemes that render the Filipinx unknowable are the

[25] Amy Kaplan, "Violent Belongings and the Question of Empire Today: Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, Hartford, Connecticut, October 17, 2003,'" *American Quarterly*, 56.1 (2004).

conditions of possibility for the continuation of US empire in the present. Filipinx American studies has disrupted these imperial epistemologies, not through historical recuperation, but by offering critical reflections on the structures of knowledge production that have produced the Filipinx condition. Martin Manalansan and Augusto Espiritu call this a "palimpsest" in reference to the "layerings, erasures, and reinscriptions of histories, spaces, and cultures," in and across Philippine studies, Filipino studies, and Filipinx American studies. [26] As an intervention, I call this epistemological disruption and genealogical method in the field *Filipinx American critique*, which I am able to name in part due to the theorization of Asian American critique and queer of color critique. [27] Relatedly, I draw on scholarship that reveals the intimacies between empire and (neo)liberalism, as a way to highlight the continuation of the power-knowledge relationship between the Philippines and the US despite the supposed independence of the Philippines in the 1940's and the assertion of a liberal, democratic, and multicultural America. [28]

While there is much literature in Filipinx American studies regarding the contradictions, obscurities, ambiguities, and violence of US imperial knowledge production in and on the Philippines, I add to this discussion by using a framework of haunting to understand specifically how the haunted logics of empire produce a phenomenological experience for Filipinx Americans, and to think critically about how Filipinx American

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[26] Martin F. Manalansan IV and Augusto F. Espiritu, "The Field: Dialogues, Visions, Tensions, and Aspirations" in *Filipino Studies: Palimpsests of Nation and Diaspora,* ed. Martin F. Manalansan IV and Augusto F. Espiritu (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 9.
[27] Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).; Rodrick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).
[28] Lowe, *Intimacies of Four Continents*.; Uday Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1999).

diasporic subjects grapple with empire's as an ongoing and persistent presence in their lives and consciousness. While the framework of haunting has been deployed to understand, for example, genocide, war, and slavery, my approach is specifically interested in the ways empire-building occurs alongside the building of knowledge and epistemologies that both function to maintain empire while obscuring empire's existence. The logics of empire produce a specific archive, narrative, and subject formation, but what is haunting about this is what gets cast out from these epistemologies. By approaching Filipinx American cultural production through a framework of haunting, my research attempts to sense beyond empire's logics for what can be seen, heard, felt, and remembered outside empire's sanctioned forms of knowing the world.

Chapter Overview:

My dissertation project includes several chapters which cohere in a rather unruly manner. As I organize these chapters, I draw on Gayatri Gopinath's concept of queer curation, a caring for the past that is more than design, selection, and interpretation (curation in the conventional sense). Queer curation is to attend to our archives relationally, to see the connections and collisions between seemingly disparate histories, art objects, and aesthetics. [29] Similarly, the chapters I propose here are not ordered chronologically but are instead arranged in an act of caring for the ghosts and spectral evidence that I witness as I read my archive (an archive that, upon first glance, refuses to cohere around a set of academic lines of inquiry). I offer this curation of my archive and chapters as an exercise in what it means to

[29] Gopinath*, Unruly Visions*, 4.

attune our senses differently and with care in order to apprehend our haunted realities and ghostly possibilities.

Chapter 1: The Ghost

This chapter explores how the aesthetics of empire haunt us through our sense of time and space by analyzing the TV series *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* (2018), which covers the murder of Italian fashion designer Gianni Versace by Filipinx American spree killer Andrew Cunanan. While the show has been praised for depicting the tragedy of queer life in the 1980s-90s, this chapter disrupts this discourse by examining how the show relies on the pathologization of Cunanan through a primitivizing queer Filipinxness. Drawing on queer of color critical reading practices and Filipinx American critique, I examine the celebration of Darren Criss, the half-Filipinx actor who plays Cunanan, arguing that despite Criss's recognition as a successful Filipinx American actor, he only becomes legible to mainstream white audiences through his portrayal of a racially pathologized and queer figure. Disrupting the temporal paradigm that places Cunanan in the primitive past and Criss in the multicultural present, I argue that Filipinx America continues to be haunted by imperial representations of the Filipinx body as an abject and primitive figure. Further, I show how the aesthetics of haunting (in this case, multiculturalism) create a linear temporality and spatiality that obscures imperial epistemic violence in the past and present.

However, through my analysis of *Assassination*, Darren Criss, Andrew Cunanan, and popular American media discourse around these figures, I also assert that the imperial epistemologies that haunt Filipinx America irrevocably produce the ghosts that reveal to us that we are being haunted. Looking at *Assassination*, I glimpse the myriad ways abject,

primitive, and queer Filipinx ghostly figures make themselves known, not as a way to reinforce empire's haunted logics, but in order to illuminate the contradictions, and therefore faultiness, of these logics by calling on us to attune our sense of time and space differently.

Chapter 2: The Unhappy Ending

This chapter examines the independent film *Bitter Melon* (2018), a black comedy that illustrates the violence of assimilation through the depiction of a Filipinx American family reunion that devolves into a plot to kill a family member. Throughout this chapter, I assert that *Bitter Melon* works against the assumption that proper assimilation is tied to positive affective responses (such as happiness), and instead shows how ugly affects within queer diasporas, such as frustration, bitterness, and anger, can be productive in determining empire's haunting. More specifically, I am interested in the film's rejection of heteropatriarchal familial and intimate relationships, neoliberal notions of healing, and the expectation of a happy ending. Indeed, the film's ending, in which the removal of two abusive family members – presumably the source of all the family's ills – only further exacerbates, rather than alleviates, the Santos family's failure to adhere to an image of happy nuclear family. I therefore argue that the inability of the film's characters to provide us, the audience, a happy ending through the formation of a happy family is enigmatic of an *impossibility* – that no matter how much they may try to adhere to a romantic narrative of love, community, and the nuclear/heteropatriarchal family, their relationships to one another and to these notions of proper intimacy are always already *queer* because they are the always already *foreign* subjects.

Chapter 3: The Waste

In this chapter, I look at the epochal presidencies of Donald Trump and Rodrigo Duterte to understand the historical, current, and haunting relationships between the US and the Philippines or the Filipinx to America. Chapter 3 argues that the sometimes ineffable anger, frustration, and sorrow felt between and across the Philippines and its diaspora can be heard in excess to, as the waste of, or as a form of spectral evidence in empire's haunting. More specifically, I look at several of the queercore punk band Aye Nako's songs, most prominently their 2017 song Nightcrawler, which lyrically explores themes of self-deprecation, haunting, waste, and getting high, to think about the shared affect and political urgency felt across the Filipinx diaspora and the Philippines, between two presidents (Donald Trump and Rodrigo Duterte), and between various wars on those deemed waste by the imperial capitalist societies we wade through. I draw connections between Aye Nako's music and the filmic and photographic documentation of the extrajudicial killings in Duterte's war on drugs. Throughout this chapter, I draw on what Bakirathi Mani describes as "diasporic mimesis" utilizing it as a methodology and way to make sense of the seemingly disparate, yet effectively similar and eerily coincidental connections between Aye Nako's music and the work of the Nightcrawlers. [30] I listen to Aye Nako, for what Saidiya Hartman calls a "symphony of anger," and make connections to other kinds of anger felt not just throughout the Filipinx American diaspora, but through other racialized communities, in ways that may not be explicit, but that are none the less telling of the haunted realities we wade through. [31]

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[30] Bakirathi Mani, *Unseeing Empire: Photography, Representation, South Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 5.
[31] Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 29-30.

Chapter 4: Paradise

In my final chapter, I look at the work of the Filipina American, Chinese American, and Black artist Crystal Z. Campbell, particularly her exhibition *I Live To Fight (No More) Forever* and its engagement with the life and death of Henrietta Lacks and its gesture towards the supposed words of Chief Joseph, leader of the Wal-lam-wat-kain band of Nez Perce, and his surrendered to the US military. In particular, by looking at Campbell's work and drawing on Toni Morrison's "in sight" or what Black feminist scholars have called witnessing, I argue that we can see the incommensurate, yet no less intertwined, histories and ways of being for Black, Indigenous, and Filipinx diasporic subjects living through US imperial haunting, as well as how we might imagine paradise(s) with and alongside one another. Through Campbell's work, and guided by Morrison, I think through what it means to see and witness the relationality of haunting, how our skin and flesh carry with it archives of knowing otherwise, and what it would mean to imagine paradise(s) alongside one another. I consider Campbell's long-time fascination with memory and archives as an act of imagining beyond empire's haunting aesthetics and epistemes to imagine new paradises, ones that are complicated, messy, beautiful, ridiculous, and contradictory – ultimately I ask what it would mean to refuse imagining one singular future and what might unfold when we let go of the desire to find a universal answer and explore multiple possibilities.

Conclusion

In the conclusion, I grapple with the recently announced agreement between the United States and the Philippines that will allow the US to expand its presence in the archipelago by establishing four new Enhanced Defense Cooperation

Agreement (EDCA) sites. Returning once again to the writings of Gina Apostal, which I reflect on in the opening of this dissertation, I examine the EDCA announcement as yet another iteration (or a repetition) of our haunted realities. Thinking through this announcement and its timeliness with the completion of this dissertation, I ultimately end by reflecting on this dissertation as an act of acknowledging the haunting and as an example of what I describe as Filipinx American critique.

Chapter One

The Ghost

On July 15, 1997, Andrew Cunanan murdered Italian fashion designer Gianni Versace outside of Versace's Miami Beach home. Versace's murder was widely publicized, launching Cunanan into the public eye as well. While Cunanan was already on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted Fugitives list for the murder of the prominent Chicago real estate developer Lee Miglin, his assassination of Versace propelled the FBI hunt for the spree killer into a frenzy. Immediately after Versace's death, the FBI had the Floridian island city of Miami Beach surrounded, leaving no route of escape for Cunanan. Though Cunanan was able to evade authorities for over a week, on July 23, 1997, he was discovered. [1] He had died by suicide via a shot to his head. Several dramatized retellings of this story have been produced since then, including films such as *The Versace Murder* (1998), *Murder in Fashion* (2009), and *House of Versace* (2013). Perhaps most notable and successful, however, has been the 2018 adaptation of this event in the second season of the anthologized television series *American Crime Story* entitled *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*. [2]

Assassination, as well as its cast and crew of creators, has been widely praised in US popular media for telling the tragic (yet, in many ways, celebratory) stories of Cunanan, Versace, and queer life in the 1980s and 1990s. Despite this, it is difficult to watch the show and not notice the pervasiveness of race, even while racial themes are pervasive in the narrative. Cunanan's racial ambiguity, the slow build up to revealing his Filipinx background,

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[1] Reuters, "FBI: CUNANAN WAS WOUNDED BEFORE SUICIDE POLICE FOUND ITEMS THEY THINK ANDREW CUNANAN WAS USING TO TREAT THE WOUND IN HIS ABDOMEN," *Orlando Sentinel*, August 7, 1997.
[2] *The Assassination of Gianni Versace: American Crime Story*, directed by Ryan Murphy et al., aired January-March 2018 on FX.

and his troubled relationship with his Filipinx migrant father serve as crucial plot devices in the character development and narrative arc of *Assassination*. However, mainstream US media failed to address these themes even amidst the show's success at both the Golden Globe Awards and the Primetime Creative Arts Emmy Awards shows. Even the title of the show itself, which highlights the murder of Versace, is misleading as much of *Assassination*'s screen time is devoted to exploring the "mythological figure" of Cunanan, as noted by executive producer Ryan Murphy at the seventy-sixth Golden Globes backstage group interview, which is posted on *Variety*'s YouTube page. [3] When the issue of race in relation to the show is brought up, however, it is usually in order to celebrate the success of Darren Criss, the actor who plays Cunanan in the show and who is white and Filipinx like Cunanan, as a multicultural symbol of success over and against the pathology of Cunanan.

The deracinated tale of queer tragedy and struggle that American mainstream media was so bent on telling in its coverage of *Assassination* is beset by the ghostly presence of Cunanan's primitive and abject queer Filipinxness. Drawing on Avery F. Gordon's assertion that, "if haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place," I argue that Cunanan's queer Filipinx ghostliness is revealing of a larger structure that haunts Filipinx America: US empire. [4] In other words, ghosts do not haunt, but are byproducts of a haunting. Ghosts live with us, disrupt our daily lives, and often perform affective work. That

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[3] *Variety*, "'The Assassination of Gianni Versace' - Golden Globes - Full Backstage Interview," YouTube video, 7:44, January 6, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0XmjYSo0L4.

[4] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 8.

is to say, ghosts make us aware of a collective feeling, a feeling of loss, of trauma, of disjuncture. Rather than viewing ghosts as individuated and vengeful figures of death that need to be expunged or neutralized, I approach the figure of the queer Filipinx ghost as an assemblage, to draw on Grace M. Cho's theorization, that transmits knowledge, memory, and affects. [5] The ghost of the queer Filipinx, in this case embodied by Cunanan, is not simply an angry and restrained soul come back to life. I acknowledge Cunanan as one iteration of a queer Filipinxness ghost, a complex figure that not only reveals the imperial logics under which we conceive of Filipinxness in the present, but also lives with Filipinxs collectively as we attempt to navigate imperial paradigms and points us to alternative futures.

Throughout this chapter, I look at the relationship between the Cunanan of *Assassination* and the celebrated Criss in order to disrupt the linear temporal paradigm that places Cunanan in a distant past and Criss in the modern present. Through such an analysis of Criss and Cunanan, the ghostliness of queer Filipinxness, racial ambiguity, and misrecognition come to the surface not only as markers of empire's haunting, but as themselves a queer of color critique and analytic. In other words, the ghostly figures that emerge within my archive provide us with a queer heuristic through which to discover (and perhaps move beyond) the continuous violence of US imperialism, especially in a multicultural moment which too often paints a picture of a post-racial, postcolonial present. More specifically, I am interested in the continuities and contradictions between contemporary celebrations of difference through Filipinx American multicultural inclusion in mainstream American cultural, social, and political life, and empire's historical configuration

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[5] Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 40.

of Filipinxness as queer and ambiguous. In a moment when multiculturalism seems to announce the end of empire, this chapter looks at the relationality between Criss and Cunanan to illumine how queer Filipinxness functions as a sort of photographic negative for a supposedly legible Filipinxness of the present. What would it mean, then, to approach queer Filipinx ghostliness through Cunanan by way of Criss, not as something to be expunged or exorcised, but as an agent of revelation, memory, and knowledge? Perhaps acknowledging this ghostly figure can serve as a guide to think beyond the haunting structure of empire that seeks to claim and silence queer Filipinxness through inclusion.

Looking for Ghosts: Queer Filipinxness and the Archive

Culling together an archive that includes *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*, particularly the last three episodes of the season, and various American media reports and interviews that cover the show's success and Criss's many accolades for his role as Cunanan, I practice a form of what Gayatri Gopinath calls "queer curation," "an act . . . that seeks to reveal not coevalness or sameness but rather the co-implication and radical relationality of seemingly disparate racial formations, geographies, temporalities, and colonial and postcolonial histories of displacement and dwelling." [6] Through this queerly curated archive, I examine how Cunanan and Criss are understood as *temporally* distant, though to do so requires bringing the primitive past and the multicultural present into temporal proximity. The dramatic retelling of Cunanan's life at the height of the AIDS epidemic and violence again queers is juxtaposed against Criss's success in a moment with ever increasing inclusion

[6] Gayatri Gopinath*, Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 4.

and representation for actors of color in Hollywood. Criss's success is celebrated as a symbol of progress and modern assimilation, but only because he is perceived to have overcome the primitive and abject Filipinxness that Cunanan represents. Meanwhile, Cunanan's Filipinxness is acknowledged in popular discourse only through his shared background with Criss, often disregarding the ways in which the show's narrative depends on tropes of racial pathology. Attempts to disavow the show's reliance on a pathologized Filipinxness through celebrations of Criss in popular media discourse are never fully successful, however, as the ghosts loom in the background. In other words, though American media may try to negate this fact, *Assassination* cannot depict Filipinxness in any other ways because it exists, to borrow from Danika Medak-Saltzman's theorizing, within a "haunted logics" of empire that depend upon the temporal naturalness of the primitive and abject Filipinx. [7]

My focus on American popular culture and popular media discourse that exists in online articles, reviews, interviews, and award shows, instead of on the "official" colonial archive is crucial for discerning ghostly figures. As Victor Román Mendoza has argued, "the 'truth' produced around the perverse Philippine native body does not wholly remain in the official colonial archives but also is out there, in plain sight, in the cultural forms by non-state actors that function as the inassimilable debris of the imperial-colonial fantasy frame." [8] Following this assertion, my focus on popular culture is one attempt to look at the ways in which queer Filipinxness continues to live among us "in plain sight," so as to reveal the haunting presence of US empire. In particular, I am interested in how this *cultural*

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[7] Danika Medak-Saltzman, "Empire's Haunted Logics: Comparative Colonialisms and Challenges of Incorporating Indigeneity,'" *Critical Ethnic Studies*, Vo. 1, No. 2 (2015): 14.
[8] Victor Román Mendoza, *Metroimperial Intimacies: Fantasy, Racial-Sexual Governance, and the Philippines in U.S. Imperialism, 1899-1913* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 31.

interpretation and representation of the *historical* figure of Cunanan becomes unintentionally surrounded by ghostly figures that it cannot escape. Further, I seek to explore what these queer Filipinx ghosts always already desire and speak in excess of imperial forms of knowledge production.

I use the adjectives "abject" and "primitive" in relation to queer Filipinxness to refer to the ghostly evidence of the US empire's haunting presence. Following Nerissa Balce's argument that abjection is "the foundational logic of American imperialism," and should be used as "a *discourse* and *theory* for understanding how race . . . and gender . . . frame the narratives of the history of the Philippine-American War, the Philippine colony, and, by extension, the global Filipino diaspora," this chapter's use of abjection foregrounds US imperial logics that constitute Filipinxness as always already racially and sexually perverse. [9] Meanwhile, my use of primitive underscores how imperial logics of the supposed past continue to shape knowledge about Filipinxs in the present. As Sarita Echavez See has argued, "the imperial archive [is] a mode of accumulating a special kind of capital—knowledge—and . . . this accumulation of knowledge depends on the idea of the racial primitive." [10] By suggesting that a primitive and abject queer Filipinxness exists is *necessary* for framing and reading multiculturalist celebrations of contemporary Filipinxness, I point towards the contradictory yet co-constitutive existence of colonial ghosts and a postcolonial present. I pair "abject" and "primitive" with queer Filipinxness, not necessarily to

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[9] Nerissa Balce, *Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 21.
[10] Sarita Echavez See, *The Filipino Primitive: Accumulation and Resistance in the American Museum* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 2.

differentiate a particular type of queerness, but to highlight those aspects of the "always already 'queer'" characterization of the Philippines and Filipinxs. [11]

This chapter draws on the theoretical and methodological projects of both queer of color critique and women of color feminisms, particularly how they challenge epistemological structures that render certain histories, ontologies, and bodies illegible, fragmented, or ghostly. [12] Further, building on the works of Medak-Saltzman and Cho, I approach the queer Filipinx ghost not as what haunts the Filipinx diaspora, but as a victim of a haunting too. What haunts us, and Filipinx America specifically, is empire. This chapter also contributes to Filipinx/American studies, where Cunanan's racial ambiguity and queerness in relation to white America has previously served as a crucial case study in the field. As scholars such as Allan Punzalan Isaac and Christine Bacareza Balance have already noted, Cunanan's ambiguity and seeming evasiveness in American news and media at the time of Versace's murder reiterated to the Filipinx American community their historically ambivalent position within the United States. Further, Isaac asserts that "colonies, like repressed memories, have a return effect on the metropole; they leave a ghostly, and sometimes bloody, trail that haunts the center." [13] However, instead of looking at Cunanan as a haunting figure, I argue that Cunanan's ambiguity is the result of the haunting structure of empire itself. If the ghost is not a haunting presence, then it is a signpost revealing to us that we are being haunted. The ghost is the photographic negative of what empire wants us to

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[11] Mendoza, *Metroimperial Intimacies*, 27.
[12] Grace Kyungwon Hong, *The Ruptures of American Capital: Women of Color Feminism and the Culture of Immigrant Labor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xiii., Grace Kyungwon Hong, *Death Beyond Disavowal: The Impossible Politics of Difference* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 29.
[13] Allan Punzalan Isaac, *American Tropics: Articulating Filipino America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xxv.

see—it is present but exists beyond our ability to sense it. However, as José Esteban Muñoz suggests, we can detect these ghosts by accessing a queer visuality, though "we may need to squint . . . strain our vision and force it to see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here and now." [14] In what follows, I read *The Assassination of Gianni Versace* and Criss's public presence through squinted eyes to see the ghostly figure of the abject queer Filipinx in ways that reveal the traces and residues of US empire in the "here and now" of post-racial and postcolonial multicultural inclusion.

Queering Filipinxness

Popular media discussions about Cunanan and his victims following the release of *Assassination* usually reiterated similar themes: that the show was "about queer lives, and queer deaths," that "it is a taxonomy of gay tragedy," or that it is a "grim portrait of gay life." [15] Further, though the majority of *Assassination*'s screen time focuses on Cunanan, much discussion was given to the portrayal of the (white) victims of the spree killer. Indeed, in the same group interview noted above, executive producer and show writer Tom Rob Smith remarked that, "[the showrunners] felt an enormous sense of responsibility . . . Versace was very famous, but there were the lesser-known victims. They were amazing people . . . we saw

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[14] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 22.
[15] Philippa Snow, "'The Assassination of Gianni Versace' Was a Rejection of Glamour," *Garage*, March 28, 2018. https://garage.vice.com/en_us/article/ne9ebx/assassination-of-gianni-versace-finale., Richard Lawson, "*The Assassination of Gianni Versace* Is Knotty, Uneven, and Captivating," *Vanity Fair*, January 16, 2018. https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/01/assassination-of-gianni-versace-american-crime-story-season-2-review., Jake Nevins, "The Assassination of Gianni Versace review – a grim portrait of gay life," *The Guardian*, January 17, 2018. https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/jan/17/assassination-gianni-versace-american-crime-story-review.

them as celebratory rather than Cunanan, who was crushed by homophobia." [16] Though the show does cover the lives of those who were murdered in detail, Smith's memorialization of the lives and accomplishments of Cunanan's victims is misleading: it suggests that the show is a robust exploration of queer life and death in the 1980s and 1990s. I would argue, however, that it is only through the unraveling of Cunanan's pathologization as a racialized and queer colonial Other that the show is able to celebrate the lives of his victims and touch on issues such as violence against queer people, the AIDS epidemic, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," drug abuse, and queer perseverance. Put differently, it is only through the abjection of Cunanan's queer Filipinxness and the juxtaposition of his tragic life under crushing homophobia (to use Smith's words) that *Assassination* is able to narrate the equally difficult, but much more joyous, love-filled, and purposeful lives of his white victims.

During the same interview in which Smith discusses the tragedy of Cunanan's queer life, Criss, the actor who played Cunanan, is asked what it means to him to be the first Filipinx American to win a Golden Globe for his role in *Assassination*. Criss responds: "I always tell people being half-Filipino is one of my favorite things about myself . . . I feel like I've been given a superhero cape . . . It's a great privilege and it means the world to me." [17] Further, in his acceptance speech given earlier in the evening and posted to NBC's YouTube, he acknowledges that, "this has been a marvelous year for representation in Hollywood and I am so enormously proud to be a teeny tiny part of that as the son of a firecracker Filipina woman from Cebu . . . [directed towards his mom] I love you dearly. I dedicate this to you."

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[16] *Variety*, "'The Assassination of Gianni Versace.'"
[17] Ibid.

[18] As these moments illuminate, Criss's recognition as a "half-Filipino" actor is routed through his portrayal of Cunanan, who shares the same "half-Filipino" identity as Criss. Oddly enough, however, much of the narrative arc of *Assassination* hinges on Cunanan's racial *ambiguity*. It's not until episode seven of the nine-episode limited series that Cunanan's status as Filipinx American is confirmed. Yet, despite this revelatory episode, Cunanan's mournful story as it is discussed in the media and by the show writer himself is often simply described as one of "crushing homophobia" devoid of processes of racialization.

In the seventh episode of the series, entitled "Ascent," we finally get a verbal confirmation from Cunanan that he is Filipinx American. Though there have been hints here and there throughout the previous episodes (especially when Cunanan paints an elaborate image of his father as the owner of large pineapple plantation in the Philippines), we are never sure what to believe because it is established early on in the series that Cunanan is a pathological liar. However, when he goes to audition for an escort agency and gets asked "what are you?" Cunanan finally announce himself as Filipinx and Asian American. To this, the agent replies with a disheartened "oh" and proceeds to explain that "straight men like Asian women, but gay clients don't ask for Asian men." After Andrew suggests that he might be able to pass for Latinx, the agent changes subjects and asks him, "what are your greatest attributes?" to which he replies, "I'm clever, witty . . . I'm very fun to be around . . . " However, the agent interrupts him and says, "I was thinking more along the lines of how big." After showing the agent his penis at her prompting, the agent tells Andrew, "I can't sell

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[18] *NBC*, "Darren Criss Wins Best Actor in a Limited Series - 2019 Golden Globes (Highlight)," YouTube video, 1:31, January 6, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PYe-WmztHCw.

a clever Filipino. Even one with a big dick." In a moment of defiance, Andrew retorts "then I'll sell myself," before walking out of the office. This scene exemplifies the ways in which *Assassination*'s representation of Cunanan's queerness hinges upon his racialization and racial ambiguity. Cunanan's rejection due to his racialized body is what prompts the emergence of his chameleon-like qualities in his dating and social life, which we see when he suggests that he might pass as Latinx (the show establishes that he will later assume a Latinx identity, along with many others). Put differently, Cunanan's racial ambiguity becomes both the reason for, and mechanism of, his con-man act. We learn through the show that Cunanan goes on to work as a self-employed escort for wealthy, white, gay men after this experience, using the name Andrew DeSilva while claiming a Portuguese identity. Given this, it is curious that the show has accrued a celebratory discourse regarding its representation of queerness while also overlooking how Cunanan's queerness is inherently tied to his abject Filipinx existence and racial ambiguity. Not only does this scene highlight the racial hierarchies of the gay male scene, but it also reveals the anxieties produced by racial indeterminacy. Cunanan is not simply rejected because he is Asian, he is also rejected because his Asianness is not apparent. The blurred crossings of racial identity that Cunanan represents, and which continue to cast him as an untrustworthy and dangerous figure, both highlight the instability of racial subjectivity in the United States *and* our desire to maintain clear racial distinctions and the social, political, and economic statuses tied to them.

The episode that follows this one, which I will discuss further below, is a harrowing depiction of Cunanan's young life and heavily relies on Cunanan's relationship to his father, Modesto, who is a Filipinx immigrant. Yet, despite these very direct representations of Cunanan as Filipinx American, much of the accolades for *Assassination* are about the ways it

deals with the queer experience during the 1980s and 1990s. For example, in a review for *Vanity Fair*, Richard Lawson argues that "the true meat of the show is its attempt at diagramming the pitfalls of the gay experience in the 1990s," and that *Assassination* "frames a gay disaster as an intrinsically American one, binding personal values with national ones, tethering one sense of self-worth to another." [19] Indeed, Cunanan himself is often discussed as a monstrous product of queer *rejection*, one possible outcome for queers in a time that is laden with anti-queer violence, but in such a way that is devoid of racialization. His unfortunate circumstances are simply chalked up to a bad family life and the compounding effects of rejection in young adulthood. In fact, when Criss wins an Emmy for his role as Cunanan, he says in an acceptance speech posted by Television Academy on YouTube, "mom, dad, Chuck, unlike the character I played, I was lucky enough to be raised in a home that was very loving and emphasized the value of hard work, compassion, and not taking yourself too seriously. You are at the root of why I'm here." [20] Furthermore, Criss noted in the group interview following the seventy-sixth Golden Globes that his role as Cunanan is a "great irony" because while they share a "similar ethnic background," Criss's upbringing in a loving and nurturing home is what ultimately signifies his difference from Cunanan. [21]

However, despite the discourse in popular American media, the show itself suggests that Cunanan's Filipinxness *is* the reason for his pathological queerness. In fact, I argue that the show's depiction of Filipinxness and the Philippines, through Cunanan, his father, and the archipelago itself, is always already tied to a queer pathology. Mendoza has argued that "in

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[19] Lawson, "*The Assassination of Gianni*."
[20] *Television Academy*, "70th Emmy Awards: Outstanding Lead Actor In A Limited Series Or Movie," YouTube video, 3:31, September 17, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hDNLU-l_H4I.
[21] *Variety*, "'The Assassination of Gianni Versace.'"

fin-de-siècle US metroimperial culture, the Philippines and Filipinos were always already 'queer.'" [22] Mendoza explains that "a general understanding of 'queer'—as strange, odd, peculiar, deformed, or spoiled," informed US perceptions of the Philippines in ways that were not specific to gender performance or sexual acts and desires. [23] I contend that *Assassination* upholds the notion that Filipinxness is always already queer, and that Cunanan's misfortunes can only be understood through his abject and primitive queer Filipinxness. In other words, Cunanan's queer Filipinxness as what sets him apart from the other queer subjects in the show, all of whom are white, is also the reason for his ultimate downfall. Popular discourse, however, cannot speak to this fact, because to do so would shatter the temporal distance that it seeks to maintain from the story itself. Despite the narrative of *Assassination* taking place in the 1980s and 1990s, it cannot effectively use this fact to explain away its imperial and racial depiction of Filipinxness in a contemporary television show. To point out the ways in which Cunanan's racialization is depicted as the source of his queer pathology would be to point out the ways in which imperial fantasies about the Filipinx body still exist in our present moment, including in *Assassination*.

This tension between *Assassination*'s reliance on racialized queerness to explain Cunanan's psyche and the deracination of Cunanan in popular American media discourse about the show is mediated through Criss. In the Golden Globe group interview mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, questions and answers about Cunanan are often directly related to queer struggles while questions directed at Criss are about his role as a representative of Filipinx American actors, as though the two are mutually exclusive. [24] However, I want to

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[22] Mendoza, *Metroimperial Intimacies*, 27.
[23] Ibid., 28.
[24] *Variety,* "'The Assassination of Gianni Versace.'"

suggest here that it is through the multicultural celebration of Criss's success that we are able to acknowledge the queer Filipinxness that exists in excess of *Assassination*. Criss's success as a Filipinx American stands in as a proxy; it is through Criss that we can read Cunanan as Filipinx American without acknowledging the racist logics that this contemporary television show implements for its dramatic plot device. Put differently, Cunanan's queer Filipinxness gets flattened out and is made palatable through the acknowledgement and celebration of Criss.

It is important to note that Criss becomes recognizable as Filipinx American to American audiences only after playing Cunanan. Prior to *Assassination*, Criss's most well-known roles have been for queer and/or racially ambiguous characters (though Criss identifies as a cis-heterosexual male), such as Blaine, a gay and ambiguously Eurasian character on *Glee*, and the genderqueer title character of the Broadway show *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. Indeed, though Criss's break-through role as Blaine on *Glee* was recognized by many Filipinx watchers, the show itself leaves the character's racial background a secret, even with hints of Blaine's possible half-white and half-Asian identity. Interestingly, as Thomas Xavier Sarmiento has argued, "Blaine's racial-ethnic identity goes unmarked as his gay identity surfaces as his mark of difference," while *Glee*'s "celebration of multicultural America through its showcase of culturally diverse characters also lays bare the traces of US empire." [25] In other words, Blaine's (and by extension, Criss's) racial ambiguity are eclipsed by Blaine's queerness so as not to trouble the show's post-racial celebration of difference. Blaine can be incorporated through his deracinated queer difference, whereas his possible

[25] Thomas Xavier Sarmiento, "The Empire Sings Back: Glee's 'Queer' Materialization of Filipina/o America,'" *MELUS* 39.2 (2014): 224, 229.

Filipinxness cannot because it is always already illegible within the haunted structures of empire. To recognize Blaine and Criss as Filipinx would be to place them queerly out of place and out of time.

I bring up Criss's past work because it is no mere coincidence that Criss has become recognized for his roles as queer heroes, especially when these roles are always attempting to spatially and temporally distance themselves from a racialized pathological past. Yet, with *Assassination*, it seems as though Criss is finally recognized as Filipinx American (including being the first Filipinx American to win a Golden Globe) through his portrayal of the pathological queer Filipinxness of Cunanan. Criss's racial ambiguity is suddenly clarified for a broad American audience, even though, as Sarmiento has highlighted in his analysis of Criss as Blaine, Criss has always been recognized as Filipinx by Filipinx viewers. Both Isaac and Balance have made similar arguments about Cunanan and his time in the American spotlight (2006; 2008). [26] More than being racially ambiguous due to his multiracial status, Cunanan (and, I would argue, Criss) physically manifested the anxious perceptions and fears surrounding Filipinxness that exist as residues of US empire. The empire's classification of the Philippines, Filipinxs, and the Filipinx diaspora as always already queer, chameleon-like, and deceitful serves to connect Filipinx experiences across the hauntings of empire. As Balance has advanced, "for all of us, Andrew Cunanan remains a notorious symbol of the deadly consequences of crossing the lines of racial, sexual, and class boundaries that America creates." [27] Criss's passing from racially ambiguous to recognizably Filipinx American by a non-Filipinx audience signals the other side of this line, a side in which Criss's career

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[26] Isaac, *American Tropics*., Christine Bacareza Balance, "Notorious Kin: Filipino America Re-Imagines Andrew Cunanan," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 11.1 (2008).
[27] Balance, "Notorious Kin," 88.

success, racial celebration, and even his heterosexuality benefit US attempts to silence and transcend the ghosts that seek to remind us of empire's past and present. Yet, despite attempts to draw that line (between past and present, abject and celebrated, ambiguous and recognized) in the popular discourse on *Assassination*, queer Filipinxness remains the necessary other half of the equation. Criss can only be understood as the negation of these ghostly figures, but in that negation, the ghost does not simply disappear. Despite Criss's portrayal in the media as a success story, as a real-life example of a Filipinx American living the American dream over and against having a shared racial and historical background as Cunanan, Criss's acceptable Filipinxness only ever surfaces because of, and in order to temper the excesses of, Cunanan's queer Filipinxness. In other words, despite Criss's image as a successful Filipinx American, he himself is still haunted by a queer and primitive Filipinxness because it is through these haunted logics that Criss's "success" is given meaning and temporal relevance (as in, Criss has overcome the figure of Cunanan).

Between Criss and Cunanan, time continuously folds in on itself, where the abject and primitive queer Filipinx of the past constitutes the condition of possibility for the modern present and a future-in-the-making. [28] The two require each other to make sense—Cunanan and Criss, past and present. Like the show, which tells time in a circular nature (starting with the time of Versace's murder, going backwards in time to Cunanan's childhood, and then ending again in the time of Versace's murder), Criss and Cunanan exist in a circular relation, an endless looping feedback, rather than the standard linear time. In other words, the

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[28] See Eunjung Kim's description of "folded time," which she theorizes in relationship to cure, disability, and modern Korean nationalism (in which rehabilitation, inherently premised on the presence of a disabled body, suggests a future free of pathology)., Eunjung Kim, *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 2.

condition of Filipinx American being is haunted by a logic of imperialism that is evinced by the presence of a queer Filipinx ghostliness that it itself produces. The past, present, and future, are collapsed in one moment by the presence of these ghostly figures, who not only tell us about both Filipinx and American histories, but also about the circumstances of our present and the possibilities for our futures.

Queer Filipinx Temporality: To Be Out of Place and Out of Time

The depiction of Cunanan's racial-sexual ambiguity and chameleon-like qualities are not counter to, but an integral aspect of, his queer Filipinxness that not only render him out of place, but also out of time. [29] For example, in many ways, Cunanan is portrayed as unable to fulfill a homonormative vision that he nonetheless attempts to achieve. His obsession with David Madson, Cunanan's second victim, is propelled by the idea that Madson is "the one" that Cunanan could settle down and start a family with. This is juxtaposed with a reoccurring narrative that depicts Cunanan as unable to get along with men of his own age, doing better with the older wealthy men he escorts. He does not love these older men and seems to have very few good experiences with men of his own age until he meets Madson. When Madson rejects him, Cunanan "snaps," killing first their mutual friend, Jeff Trail, who he suspects Madson is involved with, and then killing Madson after he tries to escape Cunanan, who has taken Madson hostage in his own attempt to evade the police. Both Trail's and Madson's deaths seem to be difficult for Cunanan to grapple with, as they are his closest friends and

[29] Here, I draw on Victor Román Mendoza's concept of "racial-sexual" as a category of governance, subject formation, culture, etc. that explicitly links US imperialism to the constitution of sexuality as well as sexual regulation. Mendoza, *Metroimperial Intimacies*, 3-4.

peers. Thereafter, Cunanan appears less emotional about committing murder—with the death of "the one" meant to fulfill Cunanan's homonormative desires for the future, so too dies Cunanan's restraint of his monstrous urges. Cunanan's murderous and pathological queer Filipinxness becomes unhinged when the last thing tethering him to his homonormative dreams dies. While his chameleon-like qualities are what allow him to attract people like Madson to himself in the first place, it is constantly reiterated throughout the show that if only Cunanan would tell the *truth*, if only he would be his *authentic* self, people like Madson would love him. Within the narrative, Cunanan's deceit is what allows him to be seen and gives him hope for a homonormative future and yet, ironically, the opaqueness of his deceit and ambiguity is what leads to his downfall.

Importantly, *Assassination* is told through a reversed timeline—it starts with Versace's assassination, Cunanan's final victim, and then goes backwards in time, following Cunanan's various killings, his life prior to the spree murders of 1997, and his childhood, before looping back to 1997 in the last episode, where we see Cunanan's suicide. *Assassination* is bookended by the inevitability of Cunanan's queer Filipinx perversion, whether it be in his ability to murder or in his ability to end his own life. Within this temporal loop, Cunanan is never able to desire something else, even a homonormative future, because his calamitous demise is both what starts and ends the series. In a sense, this temporal loop, in which the show cycles backwards only to propel us back into a future in which the character's life ends, is suggestive of a queerness that Gopinath describes as "not so much to bravely or heroically refuse the normative, the way it appears in some narratives of queer subjectivity, as much as it names the impossibility of normativity for racialized subjects

marked by histories of violent dispossession." [30] Cunanan's queer desires for something else, whatever that might be, can never be realized because his queer Filipinxness renders it an impossibility. Cunanan is not simply a victim of "crushing homophobia" as the show writer announces but is, rather, a subject that desires and seeks out pleasure in ways that are "outside the colonial grid of intelligibility that might negotiate knowledge-power differently." [31] This is not to excuse or justify the actions taken by the real Cunanan, but instead to suggest that the ways in which Cunanan's life is dramatized in *Assassination* is inherently entangled in an imperial knowledge production that understands Cunanan's perversion as arising from his tragic encounter with his Filipinxness and is thus inevitable. At the same time, the show unintentionally gestures towards other readings of Cunanan and queer Filipinxness, particularly through the depiction of Cunanan's relationship to his father.

In the eighth episode of *Assassination* entitled "Creator/Destroyer," we finally learn the "truth" about Cunanan through his relationship with his father. Up until episode eight, we hear about Cunanan's father only through spectacular lies or half-truths: he's a stockbroker in New York for Merrill Lynch, he owns a Rolls-Royce, he's extremely wealthy, he owns vast pineapple plantations in the Philippines, he was once Imelda Marcos's personal pilot, etc. It is not until episode eight that we see Modesto, Cunanan's father, for the first time as he and his children load up a truck with boxes and furniture. The year is 1980 and the Cunanan family, we learn, is transitioning into the middle-class San Diegan neighborhood of Rancho Bernardo to be closer to the Bishop's School in La Jolla, one of the best private schools in the nation. It is expected that Cunanan will attend, though he has not yet applied to the school.

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[30] Gopinath, *Unruly Visions*, 129.
[31] Mendoza, *Metroimperial Intimacies*, 89.

When the family arrives at their new house, a stark contrast to the small and dirty house they just left, Modesto and Cunanan go inside leaving Mary Ann, Cunanan's Italian American mother, and three older siblings, to unload. Our first introduction to Modesto quickly falls into the stereotype of the patriarchal, working-class, immigrant of color father-figure as he assumes a "king-of-the-house" attitude while leaving his wife and older children to the hard labor of unpacking all of their belongings. Indeed, when asking her older children where Modesto is, Mary Ann is told, "with prince Andrew" by her older son, the disdain apparent in his voice. Modesto is then shown leading Cunanan upstairs to the master bedroom, which he reveals will now be Cunanan's room. This is then followed by a small speech, in which Modesto tells Cunanan, "every morning when you wake up, and every evening when you go to sleep, I want you to remember that you're *special*. And that when you feel *special*, success will follow. [emphasis mine]"

This intimate moment between father and son is in juxtaposition to the opening scene of the episode, which shows a young Versace telling his mother, a seamstress, that his teacher called him a pervert for sketching dresses at school. After examining his sketch, she tells him, "we make it for real, yes?" to which Versace replies in defeat, "I can't, it's too hard." His mother then looks at him and, in an endearing tone, tells her son, "success only comes with hard work, many hours, many weeks, many years, and it's never easy. But that's alright. That's why it's *special*. [emphasis mine]." The differences between Versace's mother and Cunanan's father are stark. Whereas hard work and dedication make one special, according to Versace's mother, Modesto tells Cunanan that if one *feels* that they are special, then they are inevitably entitled to success. Unlike the "hard work" that Versace's mother preaches to him, like Criss's parents (who he thanks at the Emmys), Modesto teaches Cunanan a perverse

version of the so-called American dream, in which success comes from feeling and acting special, rather than "working hard" for it. As the show suggests, Modesto is instilling in Cunanan the idea that success lies in its *performance*. Understanding Cunanan in this way alongside Criss's comments about hard work and his loving family again works to establish Cunanan as a primitive queer Filipinx figure that has not yet found the proper path towards the American dream, unlike Criss.

Modesto's perversion of the American dream is further depicted in the larger "bootstraps" narrative that he spins during his interview with Merrill Lynch for a position as a stockbroker in San Diego. Born in a small village in the Philippines, Modesto joined the US Navy as a way to enter the United States. This was a common path to US citizenship for Filipinxs up until 1991, when the Philippines rejected the renewal of the 1947 Military Bases Agreement which allowed the United States to recruit citizens of the Philippines into the US military, as well as maintain and operate military bases in the archipelago, namely Clark Air Base and the Subic Bay Naval Complex. [32] Noting that he only made $97 a month serving in the Navy, Modesto then tells his interviewers that he bought his first house for $12,000 and then eventually bought his second house for $80,000. Distinguishing himself from his Ivy League counterparts who are interviewing for the same position, Modesto notes that despite only attending night school, his experience living out the American dream gave him the proper experience and knowledge in monetary investments. After landing the job, however, Modesto is shown lying on his first day. Fast forwarding a few years, we see that Modesto is still working as a stockbroker, but not at Merrill Lynch. His office is small and cramped, less

[32] David E. Sanger, "Philippines Orders U.S. to Leave Strategic Navy Base at Subic Bay," *New York Times*, December 28, 1991.

glamorous or prestigious. We soon learn that Modesto has been swindling thousands of dollars from his job as a stockbroker. As reflected in his speech to young Cunanan, Modesto performs a level of success and competency in his job, but this is constantly tempered by his failures at work. Modesto's lying and deceit are so egregious that he is eventually wanted by the FBI, who show up at his place of work and his home, where they narrowly miss Modesto as he flees to his hometown of Baliuag, Bulacan, Philippines. Cunanan, who is now a senior at Bishop's, runs into his dad as he is running away from the FBI. Modesto tells Cunanan not to believe what they tell him about his father before taking Cunanan's car and all of the family's cash. When Cunanan realizes that he and his mother are left with no money (his father, unbeknownst to them, sold their house a week before he fled), he follows his father to the Philippines expecting to discover a reserve of hidden wealth as he still believes his father is a "good" man with a plan to save the family.

Cunanan's visit to the Philippines, much like the narrative structure of *Assassination*, is meant to depict a journey backwards along a linear timeline. Returning to the homeland for the first time, Cunanan is confronted by the dirty streets of Manila, and he is visibly uncomfortable by what he sees. When he arrives at his father's family home in Baliuag, he first meets his uncle, who tries to speak Tagalog to him. When Cunanan admits that he cannot speak the language, his cheerful uncle asks him in broken English, "is this your, uh, first time home?" as he directs him to where Modesto is staying. After walking around the main house and through a back gate, Cunanan's uncle parts some overhanging foliage to reveal an overgrown and poorly lit area (it is night in this scene) on the family's land where Modesto is living. Cunanan cautiously approaches the small and simple hut Modesto is living in as the sound of eerie music and ambiguous jungle chirps grow louder. In many ways, this scene is

reminiscent of those in *Apocalypse Now* (1979), the *Heart of Darkness*-based film set in Vietnam and Cambodia during the Vietnam War (but filmed in the Philippines), in which Captain Willard seeks out the rogue Colonel Kurtz who has gone mad amidst the horrors he has experienced in Southeast Asia. The setting, the sounds, the darkness—all these aspects of this scene in *Assassination* suggest a regression in time, a move backwards into primitivity or the "heart of darkness."

When Cunanan finally finds Modesto, he is wearing white linen clothing and, later, a tank top (as opposed to the suits he wears to work in the United States). Modesto awkwardly offers Cunanan *chicharrón*, fried pork skins, explaining that "it don't look pretty" but is best eaten with a cold beer, despite Cunanan's tangible discomfort (or perhaps disgust). At this uncomfortable reunion dinner, Cunanan presses his father about what has happened and notes that his mother says there is no money left. Modesto dismisses his wife, claiming she has a "weak mind," and assures Cunanan that there is money "out of reach." Later that night, Cunanan wakes Modesto up. Modesto asks if Cunanan cannot sleep, claiming, "it's the heat. Me, I'm used to it. Grew up in it. Played in it. Worked in it . . . It's been a while since I've been back, but the body remembers. You can pretend you belong somewhere else, but the body knows." Modesto's return to the Philippines is not only meant to signify the primitivity of the homeland, of the diasporic subject's point of origin, but also a lifting of the veil on Modesto's tall-tales and performative American dream. After Modesto reflects on the fixity of his primitive body, Cunanan asks him again about the money. Modesto finally admits that there is no money, instead lamenting that he did not steal more money from his job when he had the chance. Cunanan, now realizing his life and his idolization of his father have been a farce, confronts Modesto by calling him a liar and admits, "I can't be this . . . I can't be you .

. . I can't be a lie." His dad proceeds to call him a "sissy" and says that he is weak, like his mother, who is shown as the constant target of abuse by Modesto throughout the episode, again reinforcing the image of the misogynistic father of color. Defiantly, Cunanan tells his father he will never be like him and leaves, intent on living a life away from the imposition of his father's desire for a (perverse) American dream.

After this experience, Cunanan is prompted to return to the United States, to go back to modernity and the future, where he has vowed to not be like his father. Initially, it appears that Cunanan's return to the Philippines allows him to find a sense of "clarity" that should, theoretically, redirect his desire towards success, modernity, and the "real" American dream through the juxtaposition with the primitive motherland. And yet, it is revealed to us that it is in his return to the states that Cunanan's pathology flourishes. When applying for a job at a pharmacy owned by a Filipino man, Cunanan is asked what his father's first name is because the owner might know him. After refusing to share his father's name, Cunanan is then asked by the owner what his father does. There is a pause and then, as though a switch has gone off in him, Cunanan raises his head, looks the store owner in the eyes, and tells him his father owns pineapple plantations in the Philippines, seeming to become the very thing he vowed not to be.

While this narrative strategy at the end of the eighth episode of *Assassination* attempts to locate Cunanan's pathology in his relationship with his father and through his encounter with the Philippines, as though his trip to the archipelago has infected him, I believe it can be read in an alternative (and more generative) way. In this scene, though Cunanan has returned to the states, the temporal and spatial place of modernity and individual freedom, he cannot seem to get away from his role as a deceitful conman. Perhaps

the intended reading of this moment suggests that, because Cunanan made a trip backwards in progressive time by returning to the Philippines, the motherland of the diasporic subject is always already primitive, abject, and queer. It is also important to note that Cunanan's father, his Filipinxness, and the "mother"-land are conflated as one and the same. In many ways, Modesto is depicted as the one who birthed Cunanan into this world, caring for him as a child when his mother could not (it is suggested that she suffered from postpartum depression), and grooming him as his successor. Modesto is also the source of Cunanan's Filipinxness and his connection to the Philippines. This relationship, as it is depicted in *Assassination*, is meant to portray Cunanan's perversity as always already being attached to the Filipinx body which birthed him into this world and the land from which that body originated. However, I approach this scene by considering what Martin F. Manalansan IV theorizes as "wayward erotics" or the expression of the,

> insubordinate or recalcitrant forms of practices, institutions, and meanings that constitute queer diasporic phenomena—forms of erotics that refuse or deflect being anchored to linear, romantic directionality and simplistic filial links to homelands. Wayward erotics are based on the idea of the indeterminacy and instability of the links between body, desire, place, and time. [33]

Manalansan uses wayward erotics to queer the temporal linearity of diaspora—as being inherently a move towards modernity, progress, and individual freedoms—by showing the ways in which queer homecoming narratives rupture this timeline. What if we were to read Cunanan's return to the states and his embrace of his ambiguous and chameleon-like role in

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[33] Martin F. Manalansan IV, "Wayward Erotics: Mediating Queer Diasporic Return," *in Media, Erotics, and Transnational Asia*, eds. Purnima Mankekar and Louisa Schein (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 37.

society not as a sign of pathology, but as a rejection of the "American dream" and its temporal impulse forward (towards liberalism, assimilation, and inclusion)?

Cunanan's encounter with his father in the Philippines incites a moment of "clarity," in which he finally expresses a wish and desire to break away from the influence of Modesto and his teachings. However, this desire cannot be fulfilled once Cunanan returns to the United States. The haunted logics of US imperialism, which cast Filipinxness as always already abject, primitive, and queer, do not go away upon Cunanan's "revelation." In order to navigate a world that is temporally and spatially uninhabitable for him, Cunanan must take on the role that he seemed to despise so much in his father: that of the shapeshifter. And this, I would argue, represents a form of wayward erotics for Cunanan. While *Assassination* depicts Cunanan's return as being accompanied by his full embrace of the role of deceitful liar and schemer, suggesting that he has been "infected" by his visit to the motherland and therefore reinforcing imperial forms of temporality, I contend that it is only upon returning to the United States that Cunanan realizes that he is being haunted and that, under such conditions, he will never be able to fulfill the American dream. Put differently, it is once Cunanan is back in the United States that he realizes that he will always be pathologized as primitive and abject due to his queer Filipinxness. Unintentional as it may be, *Assassination* offers us this alternative reading of Cunanan's manifestation of the conman. Indeed, in the scene where Cunanan calls Modesto a liar, Modesto retorts by proudly proclaiming that he stole and asserting that, "you can't go to America and start from nothing. *That's* the lie. So I stole." While this particular line is meant to reinforce Modesto's perversity, it also illuminates the haunted structures of empire—despite Modesto's service in the military, despite his attendance in night school, despite him landing the job at Merrill Lynch, he never truly

belonged in America. He was always set up to fail. Empire's haunted logics produced his perversity, it is not innate to who he is or in his Filipinxness. Cunanan therefore embraces his role as chameleon as a way to serve him and help him navigate this place and time he is not meant to belong in. *Assassination*, therefore, subtly illuminates the ways in which the US empire has *produced* Cunanan's queer Filipinxness, despite attempts to attribute these characteristics to the primitive motherland. His racial ambiguity and queer pathology are not inherent to him or to his Filipinxness, but rather are social formations produced by haunting forms of imperial knowledge production that will always render Cunanan's queer Filipinxness as out of place and time within the US metropole.

Ghostly Desires

I want to conclude by not only thinking about the ways in which queer Filipinxness is rendered an abstract and ghostly, if not monstrous, presence, but also how these ghosts desire and intone other possibilities that are not easily detected within imperial frames of knowing. Within a "colonial grid of intelligibility" and neoliberal rubrics of multiculturism and inclusion, Criss has been hailed as a heroic-like figure for Filipinx American representation. Ironically, this moment of Filipinx recognition through a clearly identifiable Filipinx difference obscures the queer and unruly Filipinxness that exceeds this identity category, serving to further abstract Filipinx being. The celebration of Criss's Filipinxness is necessitated by the need to conceal Cunanan's racialized and sexualized pathology in *Assassination*. At the same time, Cunanan's queer Filipinxness is the only way we are able to see Criss's Filipinxness: he only becomes intelligible through the ghostly presence of Cunanan's unfortunate life as a rejected, abject, and pitiful shapeshifter.

While *Assassination* seeks to temporally distance Criss from Cunanan, it ultimately fails to do so. The ghostly abstraction of the queer Filipinx body shapes and disciplines Filipinxness in the present. This haunting presence makes a certain type of Filipinxness acceptable and intelligible, a Filipinxness that is ostensibly modern and fully included within a neoliberal empire. While this acceptable Filipinxness is seen as what naturally follows the a priori figure of Cunanan, the haunting of Cunanan's ghost in the present is always already necessary for imagining a modern Filipinxness. This ruptures the seamless and linear timeline between the primitive queer Filipinx of the past and the full inclusion of Filipinx difference in the present. In his discussion of the media coverage that followed the actual murder of Versace and Cunanan's suicide, Isaac argues that "through obfuscated boundaries and misrecognitions, Andrew's Filipino American stories mark the tragic possibilities and limits of the US nation-state and its designated categories." [34] Cunanan's racial indeterminacy and unremarkability prompted paranoia over who and what constituted a serial killer; if a racialized serial killer such as Cunanan could pass without being detected for so long, then we are all in danger. Racial recognition fails to protect us. The formation of an ambiguous and queer Filipinxness through empire is irreconcilable with the empire's simultaneous need for racialized difference and recognition. Cunanan's ghost emerges at the crossroads of empire's contradictions, not only revealing the ways in which modern notions of Filipinxness are the continuation of imperial knowledge projects, but also desiring to expose these conundrums and contradictions so as to lead us to other alternatives.

Throughout *Assassination*, we get brief moments in which ghostly desires may be heard, perhaps most loudly in the ninth and final episode of *Assassination* where we witness

[34] Isaac, *American Tropics*, xxiv.

the near capture of Cunanan and his suicide. In the moment leading up to Cunanan's onscreen suicide, Cunanan looks at himself in a mirror. Nearly naked, head shaved, gun in his mouth, the FBI storming the structure he has been hiding in—Cunanan looks at himself one last time before pulling the trigger. Immediately after we hear the gun go off, we cut to a scene from the past (whether it is based on a true event or not, we cannot be sure) in which Cunanan, having met Versace for the first time, asks him "What if . . . you had a dream your whole life you were someone special? But no one believed it? Not really. They'd smile at you and say . . . oh sure, sure. And then what if, the first person who truly believed you, was the most incredible person you ever met?" Versace responds by telling Cunanan that it's not in the convincing of other people, but in the doing of something that marks one as special, encouraging Cunanan to finish the novel he has been telling Versace about all night. Cunanan then asks if Versace thinks he could be a designer, even proposing that he could work as Versace's assistant or apprentice. When Versace shrugs this idea off, Cunanan says with desperation, "It feels like destiny. Why . . . can't you feel it?" Even in the moment of or immediately after Cunanan's death, there is a lack of finality. Cunanan's memory (or fantasy) plays on for us to bear witness to, even after he is supposed to be gone. In the end, all he wanted was to be seen and validated, according to the show. But even in these final moments, Cunanan's ghost lays bare those impossibilities, as his desires seem foolish and ill-considered. And as the FBI agents positively identify his body, we are reminded that Cunanan always dies at the end of the story.

And still, Cunanan's ghostly presence speaks loudly. There we hear his deep and painful desire to find a place and to belong within a white homonormative narrative, even when his only foot in the door to such a world relied on his ability to play up his racial

ambiguity. In Cunanan's pain, and despite *Assassination*'s rendering of him as a pathological racialized and queer figure, we also sense another possibility, one that moves beyond imperial knowledge production and tales of homonormativity. As his pain becomes unsustainable, and as his impending capture comes nearer, Cunanan dies by suicide and begins his ghostly afterlife. While this scene in the show represents Cunanan's most abject form, it also offers us an opportunity to consider the true violence of empire's haunted logics. Indeed, reading Cunanan's death (and the way the show is bookended by its inevitability) as the result of a haunting rather than a personal failure to assimilate serves as a critical reminder that within the structures of empire that haunt us, we will never truly belong, nor will we be liberated. In other words, we can read the depiction of Cunanan's death not as an inevitability, but as a damning indication that queer Filipinx desire is always already an impossibility in the "here and now," as Muñoz puts it, of our haunting. [35] As a victim of empire's haunting, Cunanan's queer Filipinx ghostliness beseeches us all to imagine a future outside of imperial time frames that resign Filipinxness to constant abjection and primitivity, even when cloaked in multicultural inclusion.

I cannot determine what those futures revealed to us by queer Filipinx ghostliness and other forms of spectral evidence might look like. But what they do suggest is that, in order to imagine other possibilities, we must escape the desire to belong to a linear and progressive temporality that adheres to an imperial aesthetics. As Muñoz argues, "queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing." [36] In the same way, caring for the queer, abject, and primitive Filipinx ghosts that surround us not only

[35] Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.
[36] Ibid., 1.

reveals to us the shortcomings and impossibilities of our here and now, but also encourages us to imagine other futures and worlds where death or assimilation are no longer inevitabilities, and where the possibility for paradise is no longer limited by imperial haunting.

Chapter Two

The Unhappy Ending

In HP Mendoza's 2018 independent film *Bitter Melon*, the Santos family Christmas reunion quickly devolves into a plot to kill an abusive family member. The film is a spectacular narrative about an Ilocano American family, based in the Mission neighborhood of San Francisco, who find themselves grappling with intergenerational trauma, racialized and gendered violence, domestic abuse, and more when members are forced into close proximity with one another. What begins as a familial concern for the actions of an abusive brother turns into a discussion of fratricide and then results in the action of patricide.

Reviews of *Bitter Melon* come to the consensus that the use of black comedy to confront the issue of domestic violence and intergenerational trauma is successful, but only to a point. In particular, these reviews cite the first half of the film, in which we see the chaotic intrafamilial dynamics at play during a Christmas party, as being especially revealing of the sometimes loving and sometimes disturbing ways trauma is worked out and through within diasporic families. However, as some reviews have noted, the film seems to take a sharp turn in its second half, moving away from the quick-paced "cacophony" of interactions between various characters and their surroundings, instead moving towards dialogue-centric scenes where the conversations maintain the same level of darkness yet lose their comedic and satirical tone. [1] One review notes that "by the time fratricide is raised as one drastic possible solution, we're not quite sure how seriously to take this movie, or indeed how

[1] Rouven Linnarz, "Film Review: Bitter Melon (2018) by H.P. Mendoza," *Asian Move Pulse.com*, November 4, 2018, https://asianmoviepulse.com/2018/11/film-review-bitter-melon-2018-by-h-p-mendoza/.

seriously it's taking itself." [2] Another review notes that this change in tone makes the discussion of fratricide appear more "extreme" and loses its audience with the disappearance of the film's comedic relief. [3] However, while these reviews see this as a weakness in the film, either as an inconsistency in tone or a matter of poor writing, this presumption is actually revealing of what these reviewers believe a good filmic resolution to be and how *Bitter Melon* fails to adhere to that expectation.

Throughout the film, the affect of bitterness serves as a driving force for the narrative and development of our main characters, particularly Troy, the abusive brother, and Declan, the youngest gay brother. It is Troy's bitterness that drives his violent and turbulent behavior, while Declan's bitterness encourages him to consider fratricide (and then commit patricide). As the comedic tone of the film falls away, it becomes harder for the audience to identify with the conversations that characters are having, and the flashbacks that are shown, that detail the physical and emotional abuse the family has withstood first under Rojelio, the absented immigrant father figure, and then Troy. The very serious decision to kill someone in the family, and the carrying out of that act sans humor, can surely be interpreted as a missed opportunity to make a political comment about healing for an intergenerational Filipinx diasporic family. Instead, HP Mendoza's film does not allow us that happy ending. What we are left with is not only death, but a continuation of the bitterness, anger, and frustration that drove these characters to murder one of their own in the first place.

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[2] Denniz Harvey, "Film Review: 'Bitter Melon': Domestic Violence Mars a Family Reunion in H.P. Mendoza's ambitious seriocomedy" *Variety*, May 17, 2018, https://variety.com/2018/film/reviews/bitter-melon-review-1202813997/.
[3] Linnarz, "Film Review."

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed argues that "if good emotions are cultivated, and are worked on and towards, then they remain defined against uncultivated or unruly emotions, which frustrate the formation of the competent self." [4] Throughout *Bitter Melon*, our cast of characters continually display these unruly and uncultivated emotions, refusing to "heal" or "let go" of them. Ahmed also articulates what she calls affective economies, where emotions and feelings circulate to define objects and the orientation of objects to one another. Feelings and emotions circulate and define objects as good or bad through these relations of power. In the context of *Bitter Melon*, the Santos family may be interpreted as uncultivated, primitive, or abject because they refuse to move beyond their bitterness and work towards acceptable coping strategies and affective states of being oriented – happiness, healing, justice. Bitterness is a bad emotion, one that the Santoses should orient themselves away from. Instead, the Santoses are depicted as holding on to their bitterness and trauma, and therefore the past. The question of trauma – where it comes from and how we move past it – is a central question of the film. The way the Santoses (do not) cope with their past challenges the characterization of diasporic trauma as a signal of a primitive past, both temporally and spatially, that one must move away from in order to heal, assimilate, become civilized, and ultimately, cure the trauma.

I argue that *Bitter Melon* not only challenges what I call an aesthetics of empire, in which assimilation is not only premised on the diasporic subject's ability to healing and learn how to orient and handle their emotions in a civilized manner but does so through a rejection of heteropatriarchal forms of intimacy and kinship. In other words, the Santoses inability to

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[4] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emption, Second Edition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 3.

replicate the ideal American nuclear family is representative of their inassimilability. Amy Kaplan has famously argued that the realm of the cult of domesticity, often understood as an ideology that separates middle-class American public and private spheres along gendered lines, familial structures, and notions of the home, can also be understood in opposition to the foreign. [5] American notions of domesticity, family, and intimacy are, in other words, formulated both on a micro-level (the family) as well as a macro-level (the nation), where the "home" is defined against the alien, the foreign, the outsider. [6] The inability of the characters in *Bitter Melon* to provide us a happy ending through the formation of a happy family is thus premised on an *impossibility* – that no matter how much they may try to adhere to a romantic narrative of love, community, and the nuclear/heteropatriarchal family, their relationships to one another and to these notions of proper intimacy are always already *queer* because they are the always already exiled outsider that defines these very concepts. Indeed, Gayatri Gopinath defines queerness in relationship to diaspora as, "not so much bravely or heroically refus[ing] the normative, the way it appears to in some narratives of queer subjectivity, as much as it names the impossibility of normativity of racialized subjects marked by histories of violent dispossession." [7] The entanglements of these queer diasporic subjects and the ways their lives and deaths are imbricated with one another are not only recalcitrant to the project of assimilation and settlement but highlight the potentiality for other forms of kinship and intimacy outside romantic imperial aesthetics of love, freedom, and home.

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[5] Amy Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity" in American Literature (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 581.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of Queer Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 129.

Throughout this paper, I look at how *Bitter Melon* challenges the idea that bitterness as an affect should reorient bitter subjects towards positive affects (through the healing of trauma, the adoption of heteropatriarchal relations, and assimilation, etc.) and ask how the lingering of bitter feelings reveal the operation of empire's aesthetics in determining worthy subjects and narratives. Utilizing a queer diaspora lens, I specifically focus on the intimacies between the characters of the film and how the failure of these relationships signals other possibilities outside of imperial romantic notions of diasporic assimilation and progress.

While the father is killed at the end of *Bitter Melon*, we are left with little resolution, as most of the characters continue to carry with them resentment, anger, sadness, etc. If Rojelio's death does not provide the healing that the family sought, then perhaps he was never the source of their trauma to begin with. By denying the audience this sort of resolution, *Bitter Melon* also asks us to think: what haunts this family? Where did Rojelio learn violence? And why did they believe murder was a solution?

Allegory of the Bitter Melon

The namesake vegetable of the film, the bitter melon or *ampalaya*, is significant for not only understanding the lack of resolution and abrupt tone change in the film, but also why the absence of a happy ending is in fact the point (and not a failure) of the film. Grown across Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, the bitter melon is a vining plant known for its green, oblong fruit which is bitter in taste and bumpy in texture. Bitter melon is used in many Asian cuisines and medicines because of the positive health benefits it has for those with conditions such as diabetes and high blood pressure. Bitter melon fruit and leaves are used in many popular dishes of the Philippines such as Pinakbet, an Ilocano dish of mixed vegetables, such

as ampalaya, eggplant, okra, tomato, marunggay, and string beans, sauteed in bagoong alamang (fermented fish and shrimp paste). Ampalaya is known for its acrid and unpleasant taste, hence the common English name “bitter melon.”

The important thing to note here is that bitter melon is consumed *because* it is bitter. While there are cooking techniques used to temper the pungency of the flavor, there is no way to completely get rid of the bitterness. For example, one might soak the chopped fruit of the bitter melon in cold salt water in order to draw out some of the stringent taste. There is also a superstition or *pamahiin* that instructs one to place bitter melon leaves in one’s cooking vessel while donning a smiling, and to not stir the leaves or cover the pot or pan while they cook in order to reduce the bitter flavor. But the leaves and fruit, no matter how much smiling or soaking you do, will always leave a bitter after taste in your mouth.

The symbol of the bitter melon throughout the film alludes to the wider allegory of the narrative: that by allowing bitterness, anger, frustration, sadness, and other “ugly feelings,” as Sianne Ngai calls them, to linger, the racialized and gendered diasporic subject shatters the imperial desire for a happy ending. [8] The etymology of bitter comes from “Old English biter ‘having a harsh taste, sharp, cutting; angry, full of animosity; cruel,’ from Proto-Germanic *bitras- (source also of Old Saxon bittar, Old Norse bitr, Dutch bitter, Old High German bittar, German bitter, Gothic baitrs "bitter"), from suffixed form of PIE root *bheid- ‘to split’ (source also of Old English bitan "to bite;" see bite (v.)).” [9] The affects of the film certainly align with this definition of bitter (“angry, full of animosity; cruel”), but they also do the work being “sharp” and “cutting,” able “to split” or “to bite” in that it offers us a of

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[8] Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).
[9] “bitter,” Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed February 6, 2023, https://www.etymonline.com/word/bitter#etymonline_v_11200.

dissonance where the expected happy ending is torn out from under us. *Bitter Melon* is far from a feel-good family film. Instead, its abrupt and disturbing ending, and the lack of finality within it, force us to contemplate what we believe the problem is (the abusive immigrant patriarch) and what the problem actually is (the hauntings of empire).

In *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning*, Korean American poet and essayist Cathy Park Hong describes minor feelings as, "the racialized range of emotions that are negative, dysphoric, and therefore untelegenic, built from the sediments of everyday racial experience and the irritant of having one's perception of reality constantly questioned or dismissed." [10] Hong further elaborates that minor feelings are excluded from contemporary American literature precisely because they do not conform to an "archetypal narrative that highlights survival and self-determination" and that they occur when "American optimism is enforced upon you" and are "the emotions we are accused of having when we decide to be difficult." [11] Drawing on Hong's observations, I not only argue that *Bitter Melon* is a film about the minor feelings of Filipinx America but is also a rubbing against the grain of an imperial aesthetic of optimism (as Hong describes), gratitude, and assimilation. *Bitter Melon* is about leaning into the minor feelings that often are left out of narratives about diasporic communities and what can happen when we center these feelings rather than wish (or critique) them away.

Though *Bitter Melon* contains many filmic elements that register within the horror genre, it maintains a sense of skepticism, satire, humor, and banality that is often associated with the genre of black comedy. Similar to the recently successful Jordan Peele films, *Get Out*, *Us*,

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[10] Cathy Park Hong, *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (New York: One World, 2020), 55.
[11] Ibid., 55-57.

and *Nope*, *Bitter Melon* uses terrifying scenarios (such fratricide or patricide) to explore race in America, while also relying on the habitual, even the boring, to showcase how people of color experience the horrors of racism at such a high frequency, that it no longer feels so gruesome. Though to some audiences, films such as *Bitter Melon* or *Get Out* appear to be purely horror because of their terrifying subjects, actions, and characters, it is precisely through the shockingly scary aspects of these films that audiences of color find the humor. As Ryan Poll argues, "White people are incapable of recognizing that horror can be enfolded into their everyday lives, that horror can be constitutive of the everyday… the [horror] genre works because White people fundamentally imagine the world without horror," whereas people of color understand that horror pervades their lives, can often be banal and routine. [12] This is perhaps why the reviews of *Bitter Melon* find the film so lacking – because as a horror film it seems to cross a line, one that expects the "archetypal narrative that highlights survival and self-determination" for our main characters, as Hong describes. [13] Indeed, the horror genre is often characterized by the convention of a monster, something unnatural and threatening to the stability of everyday life, but that also gives us a character or an obstacle to overcome – a foe. [14] *Bitter Melon*, however, asks us to question who the foe of the film really is – is it Troy, Rojelio, Declan? Or is it someone – *something* – else? And what of the comedy? Who is meant to understand the humor of the film, and why are some audiences – white audiences – unable to fully grasp the satire of *Bitter Melon*? Why can't some see that

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[12] Ryan Poll, "Can One 'Get Out?': The Aesthetics of Afro-Pessimism," *The Journal of Midwest Modern Language Association*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (2018): 69-70.
[13] Hong, *Minor Feelings*, 55-56.
[14] David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction,* 5th Edition (New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies Inc., 1997), 58.

comedy and satire is not mutually exclusive from horror, terror, and pain.

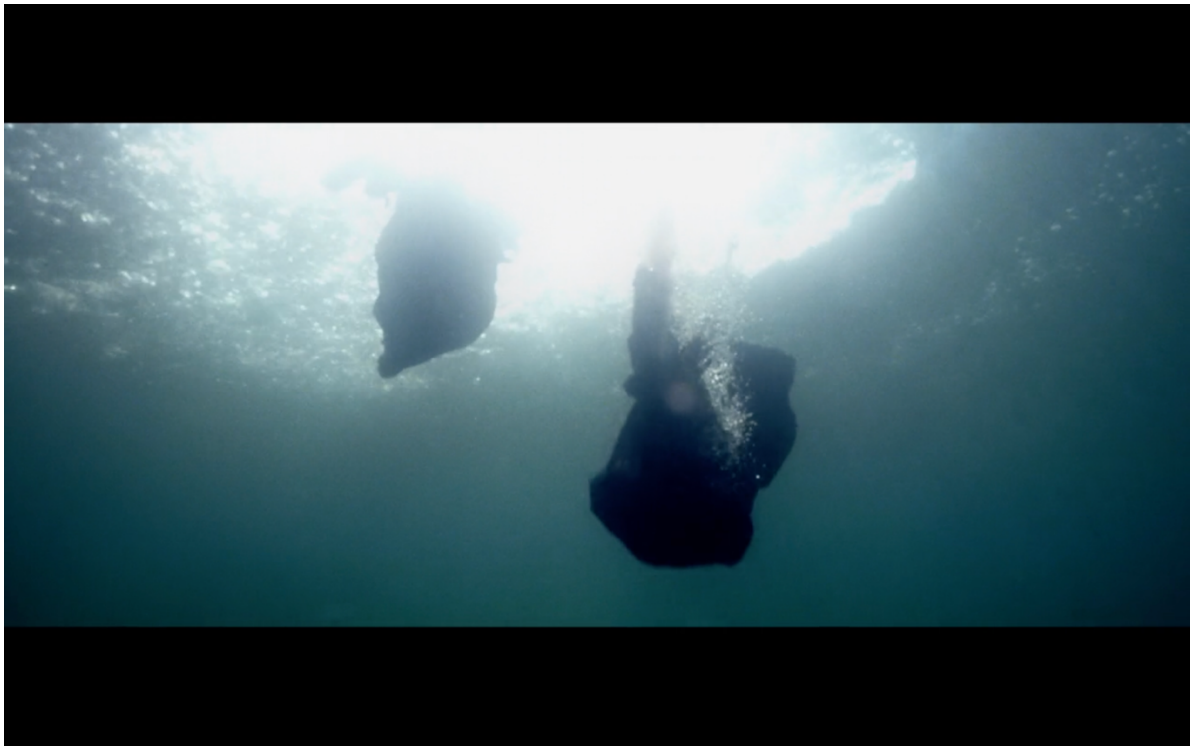

Figure 1. Screenshot from *Bitter Melon* (2018), Directed by H.P. Mendoza

Figure 2. Screenshot from *Bitter Melon* (2018), directed by H.P. Mendoza

Bitter Melon opens with a scene of several large trash bags being dropped into a body of water (figure 1). We see the bags drift to the bottom and out of frame in slow motion as eerie and sinister music plays in the background. This scene then abruptly cuts to an image of a cutting board. A hand places a bitter melon on the cutting board and then quickly chops the end of the melon off (figure 2). At the same time, a Bayanihan Philippine National Folk Dance Company recording of the Philippine folk song Cariñosa begins to play. Interestingly, Cariñosa is a Spanish colonial-era folk dance that involves a fan or handkerchief in which the couple plays a game of hide-and-seek to depict the romance between people pursuing each other. Despite the romantic and sweet connotations of this song, however, the narrative in *Bitter Melon* is anything but. This is illustrated made obvious as the opening scene progresses to show us the hustle and bustle of a family in chaos during the holidays all while alluding to a more sinister undercurrent in the narrative.

This strange introduction is followed by a compilation of scenes showing a family preparing for a Christmas celebration. One of our main character, Declan, waits to be picked up at the airport by his cousin Tiva, eldest brother Moe catches his connecting flight in Denver, sister-in-law Shelly takes the bus to the store, and their mother, Auntie Prisca, prepares food while talking on the phone. Auntie Prisca is cutting meat, preparing blood (probably for *Dinuguan*), and, notably, continuing to chop the bitter melon from earlier in the opening scene. This sequence of events, all displayed with the Cariñosa playing in the background, ends with Auntie Prisca tossing the chopped bitter melon in a pot of boiling water, mirroring the image of the bags being dropped into the ocean at the beginning of the film.

This action also mirrors the end of the film, which again shows the scene of the bags being dropped into the water. By now, we know that these are body bags containing the dismembered parts of Rojelio, the absent patriarch of the family. Declan enlists his entire family to help him dispose of the body; the rest of Santoses believe the body in the bags is Troy, the abusive middle brother. But we later discover that Declan set Troy free, instead killing his drunkard father with an ax, unbeknownst to the family (figure 3). The opening scene therefore foreshadows the violent act of Declan killing his father – the bitter melon is chopped up and tossed into the water, just as his father is dismembered and tossed into the Pacific Ocean.

Figure 3. Screenshot from *Bitter Melon* (2018), directed by H.P. Mendoza

Perhaps the most important thing about the foreshadowing in the opening scene is this: that the film begins by alluding to the grisly ending of the plot. What some reviewers see as a too disturbing twist of events, perhaps even an irresponsible way to end this narrative, was the intent of the film all along. Like the bitter melon that the film is named after, the point of this story is indeed to leave one with a bitter taste in one's mouth. After disposing of Rojelio's body, the members of the Santos family return to their pre-holiday lives. Brothers Moe and Declan return to Philadelphia and New York City, respectfully. Matriarch Auntie Prisca retires from her office job. Shelly, Troy's wife, and her daughter Mina continue to live with Auntie Prisca. Yet, this ending lacks the satisfaction of resolution. Moe returns to his pregnant wife, but still has not told his family that he is expecting a child. Auntie Prisca's sister makes her a retirement cake, but Auntie Prisca appears unhappy, instead sobbing while her sister embraces her in a hug. Declan, back in New York, sees an Asian father scolding his

small son on the streets while shaking the young boy and pointing at him. Declan stops and stares, his eye twitching for a brief moment. Shelly, with her hair down for the first time in the film, applies makeup as Mina questions where her father is, leading Shelly to snap at her much in the same way Troy snapped at Shelly.

In her analysis of the "melancholic migrant," Ahmed argues that "empire is justified as *liberation from abjection.* To be liberated from abjection is to be liberated from suffering even if it causes suffering." [15] Teaching the native to be happy is to teach the native to assimilate into the customs, desires, and social norms of the colonizer. [16] The migrant that refuses to let go of their traditions will always harbor bad affects – melancholy, anger, frustration, bitterness. The final sequence of scenes in *Bitter Melon* illuminates the Santos family's failure to assimilate, become properly happy, and fulfill the imperial desire to "liberate" them from abjection. But this failure is also revealing. Despite the figurative death of the abusive brother and the literal death of the abusive father, the secrets, trauma, pain, and tension within the Santos family still remain. Though achieved through violent ends, we expect that the removal of these figures should initiate healing if, as an aesthetics of empire might suggest, they were the true source of the family's trauma. In many ways, Troy and Rojelio were themselves caricatures of the abusive father of color trope that places the burden of the family's hardships squarely on the shoulders of Troy and Rojelio. But if their disappearance from the family does not result in healing, then perhaps they are not the ones to blame. And perhaps this ending is so disturbing precisely because we believe violence for the sake of a greater good (murdering 'violent' brown men in order to heal) is forgivable and

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[15] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 127.
[16] Ibid., 128.

justifiable. But because we are denied a good "reason" for Rojelio and Troy's literal and figurative deaths, we are left horrified by the utter brutality of the film's ending. We are meant to believe that the trauma the family suffers should be alleviated through their assimilation into the aesthetics of empire – we can almost forgive the murderous ending of the film as a final act of savagery before the diasporic subject becomes a fully-realized citizen. This is based on a belief that the trauma of the primitive Other is associated with a time and place that is backwards; it is the place the diasporic subject was and is moving away from. This not only justifies the colonizer's tutelage as brining the diasporic subject out of their despair but works to erase the trauma caused directly by empire. And because the over there/in the past is an undesirable place and time, those who sit in that place and time are deemed stubborn and queer. Thus, to be bitter is to be queer.

The ending of *Bitter Melon* asks us to question easy resolution, where individual people and actions have the power to fundamentally change material and psychological conditions. Declan orients his bitterness towards his brother and father, and yet finds himself holding on to that bitterness even after they are gone. If these ugly affects are rendered ugly through relations of power, then it begs the question: who should we really be orienting our feelings towards? And who decides that they're ugly? If the primitive Filipinx cannot assuage ugly feelings and assimilate into proper affects, then perhaps more is at stake here than simply removing the abusive patriarch(s) of the family. We must ask: who is truly responsible for the gendered, racialized, and classed violence this family experiences? If it is not inherent to the Filipinx father's body, then where does it come from?

In *War, Genocide, and Violence*, Cathy J. Schlund-Vials analyzes what she calls "memory work" being done by Cambodian Americans in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge and the

killing fields era. In Schlund-Vials' analyses, she differentiates between seamless narratives of apology and forgiveness, and true justice, arguing that memory, not "moving on" is at the heart of reconciliation. [17] Schlund-Vials thus notes the incommensurabilities between "historical fact" (events) and "historical truths" (experiences), or, to put it differently, between state-sanctioned history and diasporic memory. [18] Similarly, I want to think about how *Bitter Melon* embodies an affect and memory of Filipinx America diasporic subjects that is not so easily let go of, and how holding on to those feelings and remembering trauma is a type of memory work that embraces the queerness and impossibility of Filipinx diasporic assimilation. Rather than conceding to a narrative and aesthetics of "historical fact," *Bitter Melon* offers us "historical truths" to ponder instead. Put more simply, similar narratives of diasporic families often end with a message that squarely blames the violent brown patriarch for familial poverty, dysfunction, and abuse while simultaneously offering assimilation, neoliberal ideologies, and allegiance to the (Western) nation-state as routes away from such lifestyles. As a form of memory work, however, *Bitter Melon*'s unsatisfactory ending, marked by a lack of healing or "moving on" with the removal of these blame-worthy figures, asks us to consider other reasons why the Santoses find themselves in such dire situations in the first place: migration, displacement, job insecurity, gentrification, white heteropatriarchy, homophobia, and more. That it is not simply the abusive brown father's fault seems unimaginable to audiences seeking an easy and predictable resolution, but that discomfort and disappoint in the film's ending is exactly the point. It highlights what so many diasporic subjects and families already know – that we ourselves very rarely find the kinds of comfort

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[17] Cathy J. Schlund-Vials, *War, Genocide, and Justice: Cambodian American Memory Work* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 102.
[18] Ibid., 16-17.

and relief films about us lead others to believe is not only possible but is probable if only we orient ourselves to the appropriate aesthetic judgements.

The Aesthetics of Empire

Scholars such as David Lloyd and Leticia Alvarado have argued that European aesthetic philosophy is co-constitutive with Western notions of modernity and the human. Though what is deemed as "aesthetic" seems to occupy the world of disinterested contemplation and exists outside of the material world, Lloyd asserts that this very notion of aesthetics is based on ideas such as freedom, rationality, and enlightenment, and the belief that such notions are universal and sublime. Therefore, the formation of liberal subjects through aesthetic judgements, or taste, is also a racial judgment of the non-liberal subject. Aesthetics create the ideal human through a rejection of its supposed opposites: the Black, Savage, or Subaltern. [19] Indeed, Lloyd argues that "taste, or the capacity for disinterested contemplative pleasure, becomes…an index of human development and a means of discriminating a savage subordination to immediate pleasure and the coercive force of objects from the reflective mediations that characterize civilization." [20]

From the Filipinx displayed at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904 to Peter Parker's jovial sidekick Ned in the Marvel Cinematic Universe film adaptations of Spider-Man, Filipinxs in America are often depicted as pleasant, happy, child-like, and naïve. Aesthetic judgements abound in these depictions in that the imperial desire to see the native's gratitude and aspiration to assimilate into or mimic America writ large is both an acknowledgement of

[19] David Lloyd*, Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018).
[20] Ibid., 45.

the native's lack of taste and an assertion that the path towards reason is through the development of tastefulness or an orientation towards what is considered tasteful. While this conception of taste is shaped by Western notions of citizenship and reason, the belief that such concepts are not only universal but aspirational lends itself to the idea that the desire (or resistance) to embody these notions can be a value judgement of one's own humanity. From America's earliest contact with the Philippines, we see this at play through the portrayal of the Filipinx as America's "little brown brother," an image that not only justified US imperial intervention in the archipelago throughout the 20th century and into the present but lends itself to the romantic heteropaternalistic image of the US as the savior of the primitive other. For example, in a 1939 article from the *The Christian Science Monitor*, "The Philippines: Indispensable Outcast?", the Philippines is said to be "catching on" in their mimicry of the US, citing their expansion in overseas trade, the common use of English in the archipelago, and the growth of their educational system under American tutelage as evidence. For this, the article notes that, "[the Philippines'] Americanization is not merely skin-deep." Seeing the modernization of the Philippines through a change of minds, hearts, and culture, this article highlights that true civility is not only present in the mere mimicry ("skin-deep") of it, but in the introspective will to change how one thinks, desires, and orients oneself.

Of course, when not portrayed as the happy little brown brothers of the United States, Filipinxs are portrayed as abject, aggressive, primitive savages. The images of these two versions of the Filipinx seem at odds with one another, but their relationality is revealing of an imperial aesthetic judgment that sees the native Filipinx, both pre-European contact and pre-American contact, as being capable of a "certain amount of civilization" if only they

relinquished their stubborn (primitive) ways and give in to their better senses. [21] It is precisely this aesthetic of the abject Filipinx savage, the judgement of their worthlessness and not the figure themselves, that haunts Filipinx America. In an Atlanta Constitution article about the St. Louis World's fair entitled "Philippine Village ---Startling Exhibit at Fair: Igorrotes in Native Attire, Celebrate Holidays by Diet of Dog Meat; Strange Customs and Queer Practice," we see the relationality between the figure of the little brown brother and the savage Filipinx native body in stark relief. While the article describes Filipino soldiers in the Philippine Constabulary as "[submitting] splendidly to discipline," the Negritos or Aetas are dubbed the "most primitive of all the Filipinos," comparing them to monkeys and describing them as "extremely small being almost dwarfs, very black and have enormous bunches of wool on their tiny ape-like heads." Likewise, the Igorot are described as the most spectacular and popular attraction in the Philippine Exhibit, noted as being the most "barbaric" and "whose chief occupation in the Philippines is trying to cut off some enemy's head, eating dog and dancing." Compared to the Filipino soldiers, who are the quintessential little brown brother figures, the Aetas and Igorot are portrayed as abject and violently primitive, respectively, and not only serve as an example of what happens if the Filipinx are left to their own stubborn devices (the Igorot are noted as being resistant to wearing clothing beyond their notable loin cloths) but also justify US imperialism in the Philippines. As Amy Kaplan argues in her analysis of US empire and romance novels in the 1890's, "the formulaic plot of the romance uncannily parallels the popular narrative of the Spanish-American War as

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[21] See LA Times article about the Philippines Exhibit at the St. Louis World's Fair, where they are described as, "their skins are copper-colored, their hair is long and wavy, their faces are pleasant, and they have developed a certain amount of civilization."; Edmund Mitchell, "Splendid Exhibit From Philippines," *Los Angeles Times*, June 26, 1904.

a chivalric rescue mission that in turn rejuvenates the liberator." [22] The noble, even chivalric mission to liberate and enlighten the native Other is a key aspect to consider when thinking about the aesthetics of empire. If the Filipino soldiers represent a desirable outcome, exemplifying an appropriate aesthetic judgement and orientation towards the US empire, the abject and primitive Filipinx represented by lesser tribes at the St. Louis World's Fair represent the Other through which this aesthetic is defined.

Further, violence is understood in particular ways in the American empire, often understood as physical assault, destruction of property, withdrawing someone's civil liberties, challenging or suppressing someone's individualism – it is rarely understood as mundane, habitual, the thing that undergirds concepts like freedom, liberty, property, autonomy. So, while Declan's actions at the end of the film seem to be the pinnacle of violence in the narrative, I want to suggest that, in fact, the film is riddled with violence throughout. While empire might suggest that violence can be recognized by a particular aesthetics – specifically by challenging someone's humanity and autonomy, here understood as a form of whiteness – Bitter Melon offers us the other side of the coin. The violence of necropolitics, dispossession, assimilation, genocide – all structural in nature – that allow for this understanding of humanity to exist, are meant to be unseen and undetected as they are overshadowed by an aesthetics that makes violence a spectacle and an assault on white humanity.

In *Bitter Melon*, this sense of taste and aesthetic judgments are unmistakably present. An aesthetic of empire and, more specifically, of assimilation, in which proper

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[22] Amy Kaplan, "Romancing the Empire: The Embodiment of American Masculinity in the Popular Historical Novel of the 1890s," *American Literary History*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (1990): 666.

heteropatriarchal relationships and heteropaternalism serve as a marker of proper taste and civility plays a profound role in the development of the plot and characters throughout the film. Indeed, the heteropatriarchal family is imbued with tastefulness under the romantic narrative of assimilation. As Ahmed has suggested, this kind of family is a "happy object" and has argued that, "to become oriented means to be directed towards specific objects that are already attributed as being *tasteful*, as enjoyable to those with good taste" (emphasis my own, 34) and has suggested that the "happy family" is one such tasteful object (an indicator of one's taste) as it, "is both a myth of happiness, of where and how happiness takes place, and a powerful legislative device, a way of distributing time, energy, and resources" (45). Throughout *Bitter Melon*, the characters, what they wish for, and the choices they make are propelled by the legislative device of the heteropatriarchal happy family. What I = argue throughout is that the Santoses inability to orient themselves properly towards this happy object, their lack of taste or distastefulness towards this object (their bitterness), is a sign of the ultimate impossibility of the Filipinx to assimilate and become a tasteful subject. Yet despite this impossibility, empire continues to desire this aesthetic for the Other because it serves as a powerful tool of management in the shaping of narratives and epistemologies. This is what David Eng has defined as the racialization of intimacy, or the "the collective ways by which race becomes occluded within the private domain of private family and kinship," in which liberal humanists understanding of intimacy and family are premised on the disappearing of race. The family, in other words, is premised on a Western liberalism that views proper intimacy through a lens of whiteness. However, Eng also notes that this racialization of intimacy, "indexes other ways of knowing and being in the world," beyond

the dictates of assimilation through white intimacy, family, and heteropatriarchy. [23] For instance, in *Bitter Melon*, we see our characters not only fail to fulfill this romantic wish for the native to assimilate, but question its universality. Rather than becoming the happy family audiences may desire them to become, the Santoses display a form of queer kinship that is not so much a refusal of the happy object, but evidence of the impossibility to their ever truly becoming a happy family.

"All things bright and good"

Filipinx American comedian Jo Koy's debut 2022 film *Easter Sunday* is everything *Bitter Melon* is not. *Easter Sunday* centers around the Filipinx American character Joe Valencia (played by Jo Koy) and his struggles to launch his acting career. Amidst work troubles, he is cajoled by his mother to visit the family for the Easter holiday in Daly City, his hometown. With his Gen Z son along for the ride, Joe's holiday includes warring aunties, a scheming free-loader cousin, and illegal activities that involve stealing Manny Pacquiao's boxing gloves, clandestine dealings with Lou Diamond Phillips, and tiffs with a local gang. Through a ridiculous plot and redundant jokes about Filipinx American culture, the film finds its happy ending when, against all odds, the Valencia family comes together to overcome the sticky situation with the local gang that they find themselves in.

Not only does *Easter Sunday* provide a story of a quirky (yet predictable) Filipinx American family, it tells a story of Filipinx American assimilation and success through proper enactments of the nuclear and extended family. Joe's high school aged son, Joe

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[23] David L. Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 10.

Valencia Junior, who has spent most of his life living in Los Angeles and away from a Filipinx American community, meets a bay area Filipinx American teenaged girl and is thrusted headfirst into Filipinx American diasporic culture, which he seems out of touch with but comes to embrace by the end of the film. Joe Senior encounters a similar journey of ethnic acceptance by the end of the film – while he grows frustrated that he has been type-casted for acting roles because of his comedic use of a Filipinx accent, the film ends with him landing his very own sitcom about his Filipinx American family after casting agents overhear his family arguing on the phone. While the Valencia family in many ways mirrors the Santos family – both are based in the Bay area, are led by matriarchs, have reluctant sons and disconnected members – there are stark differences.

Though both of these families are not the picture-perfect image of the nuclear family, the Valencias exemplify a familiar diasporic narrative, one committed to family obligation, assimilation, and unconditional love. On the other hand, the Santoses represent dysfunction beyond repair, with a sense of love and kinship that does not comport to Western Christian notions of filial duty. They don't love each other despite their failures. Indeed, they despise one another very openly. Even so, their contempt does not break their bonds – but their connections to one another move beyond familial obligation and love to something more subversive.

Another film that is tangential to *Bitter Melon* and *Easter Sunday* is *The Fabulous Filipino Brothers*, a comedy following the four Abasta brothers (played, written, and directed by the Basco brothers) as they prepare for a family wedding. Though not explicitly a reunion narrative, the film begins with the four middle-aged brothers sitting at their family dining table, discussing the necessary preparations for an upcoming wedding. A female narrator

announced over the scene that the film is a love story, one about a "white picket fence" or, as more aptly, a "bamboo picket fence." Early on, we learn that some of the brothers still live in their intergenerational familial home, while some live on their own. As the film progresses, we follow each brother in the days leading up to, during, and after the wedding. The film itself is less about the wedding and more about spending time with each character. In doing so, we find ourselves following the eldest brother, Dayo, to a cock fight in order to make enough money to buy food for the wedding, journey to the Philippines with Duke where he rekindles a teenage romance and cheats on his wife, witness David partake in a scandalous almost-sex scene in front of the wedding party *lechon*, and go with Danny on his first date with a pregnant woman. We later find out that the wedding in question involves Danny and his date. Interestingly, in the scene where his date gives birth at his house (when she first meets his family), the Abasta sister, a nurse and the narrator of the film, comes downstairs to assist. As we meet her for the first time at the tail end of the film, she relates to the audience that, despite the boys thinking they run the family, the women are the ones who hold it together, as we see her, her mother, her sister-in-law, and her lola help birth the child. As the film ends, following the wedding, our narrator expresses that, though a white picket fence might be too idealistic for her or her family, being Filipinx American means they can adapt to anything. "Bahala na," she says – come what may. To adapt and stay determined in times of great difficult – this is what, according to the film, it means to be Filipinx American.

While *The Fabulous Filipino Brothers* is, in many ways a refreshing departure from films such as *Easter Sunday*, it still pivots on similar narrative tropes: (1) boys will be boys, (2) the diasporic subject reconnecting with their culture, and (3) normative notions of kinship. Indeed, a New York Times review lauds the film for, the feeling it creates of being

welcomed into a family that radiates all things bright and good." [24] What I argue in the next section is that the Santoses of *Bitter Melon* do not offer us "all things bright and good" but instead shed light on the darkness, pain, and trauma the diasporic family experiences, and how kinship can look like more than just "love."

Queer Kinship and Intimacies

The dysfunction of the Santoses, both within the family and in individual character's relationships with those outside the family, is a central plot device of *Bitter Melon*. While audiences might find the lack of familial healing to be a failure of the film, I have argued thus far that this "dysfunction" throughout the film, including its conclusion, is precisely the point. The intimate relationships throughout *Bitter Melon*, whether heterosexual, homosexual, homosocial, or familial, reveal that, as Lisa Lowe argues, "the intimacies of desire, sexuality, marriage, and family are inseparable from the imperial projects of conquest, slavery, labor, and government." [25] Put differently, these relationships, themselves tests of the diasporic subject's ability to assimilate, are inextricably linked to imperial notions of belonging, progress, and civility. For instance, Grace Cho has outlined how the "honorary whiteness" of the Korean yanggonju affectively silenced her trauma by creating the perception of a well-adjusted migrant who is in a better place (via marriage). [26] It is a romantic notion to think that a diasporic subject is inherently in a better place, that their migratory patterns symbolize a movement towards progress and their assimilation is a marker

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[24] Teo Bugbee, "'The Fabulous Filipino Brothers' Review: For Better or for Worse," *The New York Times*, February 9, 2022.
[25] Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 17.
[26] Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis: The University Minnesota Press, 2008), 133.

of their success in achieving what they would otherwise be unable to do if they had remained in their homeland. Normative intimacy and relationships not only signal a successful assimilation process, but serve the purpose of orienting those in the diaspora towards imperial aesthetics of progress, happiness, and belonging. But what happens when diasporic subjects do not fulfill these expectations vis-à-vis their intimate relationships? What happens when these relationships are queer, not in the sense of being non-normative but in the sense that they are an impossibility in a temporal paradigm of progress they are expected to adhere to?

While the Santoses' relationships are indeed failures if judged through an imperial aesthetics, they nonetheless offer powerful critiques of these aesthetics and, in their impossibility, reveal new imaginaries for thinking through intimacies and affective entanglements differently. In one scene, for example, Declan meets with an ex-boyfriend to catch up, but the conversation is tense as his ex grills him, asking pointed and passive aggressive questions. For example, he asks Declan if he is still "self-hating" and if he still hates effeminate men. Though Declan asserts that he loves effeminate men, encountering many when he worked in the Castro, he notes his displeasure for a culture of cattiness and dismissiveness within the community, especially when justified critiques of it were made. To this, Declan's ex responds, "the gay community may not be perfect, but it's all we have. I mean all I ever wanted my entire life was to belong. And when I moved to San Francisco, I felt like I did." Declan quickly fires back, stating, "as a native San Franciscan, I never experienced racism until I came out of the closet…for all the talk of equality, and getting rid of hate speech, and eradicating stereotypes…the gay community has an awesome way of making people of color feel like they're second-class citizens." As his ex gets up to use the

restroom, he passive aggressively asks, “why is it so hard for you to accept the fact that not everybody thinks or lives like you do?” Declan, somberly replies, “that’s a fair question,” to which his ex scoffs, “can’t you just be normal!?” After his ex walks away, sitting alone at the table, Declan sighs, “normal…”

The resentment and frustration towards the San Franciscan gay scene Declan is unable to relinquish here casts him as a villainous character. Throughout the scene, Declan’s ex’s tone is accusatory and resentful primarily because Declan is unwilling to assimilate into the rainbow capitalist and homonormative culture of the San Franciscan gay scene. Declan becomes an antagonist, especially as he is juxtaposed against his ex, who is also a gay Asian man. While his ex is able to look past the problematics of the community in order to find a sense of belonging, Declan was never able to forgive the gay community for its racism and misogyny, even going so far as to move across the country in search of something better in New York City. Through this resentment, Declan is casted as an enemy of the queer community, rather than a victim of the imperial desire to assimilate the migrant subject. This pinkwashing of the queer community in San Francisco is indicative of an imperial romance that at once holds up queer inclusion as a sign of progress in order to disavow the continuation of violence against the very people it seeks to assimilate into the heart of empire. As Sony Coráñez Bolton has argued about the particular figure of the ilustrado, a member of a Filipino educated class, and the homosocial relationships depicted in the novel *Ilustrado*, “[the] enlightened ‘queer’ kinships of ilustrados…do not so much as critique the heteronormativity of Filipino nationalism as they reify transphobia and homophobia,” precisely because “the fetish of wholeness and the mestizo embodiment of the ilustrado are made possible through the deleterious rejection of [an indigenous] queerness and femininity.”

[27] Though in the context of a Filipino nationalism, Bolton's astute analysis here highlights the ways in which some queer intimacies are acceptable when they signal Western notions of progress, democracy, and enlightenment. Bolton notes that the kinds of queerness and femininity that are abject in *Ilustrado* are those that are also marked by indigeneity. However, while this queerness is seen as antithetical to a modern Filipino nationalism, Bolton highlights the productive dialogue these queer figures in the novel bring surrounding indigeneity, diaspora, and sexuality. Likewise, I contend that Declan's unbelonging brings neoliberal and homonationalist understandings of community and love to bear on the impossibilities of queer diasporic inclusion in an imperial narrative of assimilation. If Declan would just "be normal" and get over his dissatisfaction with liberal queerness, he would be happier and, just as importantly, he would *belong*. However, to "be normal" would require Declan to disavow his bitterness towards the homonormative and homonationalist forms of misogyny and racism that he experiences as a Brown queer person. To belong, in this case, is to exhibit an accepted queerness, one that can exist alongside the aesthetics of empire and a liberal nation-state. Declan's refusal to be normal is, instead, the kind of impossible queerness that Gopinath highlights, one that not only rejects an affective orientation towards imperial aesthetics of assimilation, home, and belonging, but posits other orientations and relationalities beyond these expectations.

Though Declan is the obvious queer figure in *Bitter Melon*, playing the role of gay son/brother/uncle, his father's disappointment, and the punchline of many others' jokes, we can look at the entire Santos family as an example of queer Filipinx diaspora and kinship.

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[27] Sony Coráñez Bolton, "Filipinx Critique at the Crossroads of Queer Diasporas and Settler Sexuality in Miguel Syjuco's Ilustrado," *Journal of Asian American Studies,* Vol. 24, No. 2 (2021): 232-233.

The Santoses, beyond just Declan, represent what Cathy J. Cohen refers to as those "on the (out)side of heteronormativity," not so much for their non-heterosexual relationships, but for their non-normative relationship to a nation-state that aestheticizes assimilation and heteropatriarchal familial structures as signs of ones' humanness, subjecthood, and citizenship. [28] The conclusion of the film, in which the Santos family collude and commit a murder is the ultimate manifestation of their queer kinship and entanglements to one another. The family's failure to coalesce and assimilate under a heteronormative patriarchal nuclear family structure, the picture-perfect image of the well-adjusted diasporic family, makes clear the impossibility of their queer diasporic lives under an imperial aesthetic that romanticizes white love, hetero- and homonormative intimacies, and personal responsibility as markers of civility and degrees of assimilation. Such an aesthetic disavows other social entanglements, indigenous or antithetical to diasporic subjects and relationalities. In her book *The Empire of Love*, Elizabeth Povinelli has stated that,

> love, intimacy, and sexuality are not about desire, pleasure, or sex per se, but about things like geography, history, culpability, and obligation; the extraction of wealth and the distribution of life and death; hope and despair; and the seemingly self-evident fact and value of freedom. [29]

Along these lines, the Santos family's queer relationship to institutions of proper relations (marriage, nuclear family, community) not only signal their failure to assimilate but highlight the impossibility that they ever could. Indeed, the murder that is meant to bring about a happy ending for the family, while gruesome, in many ways represents a most extreme attempt to assimilate. The discussions at the end of the film center around blame – blame on

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[28] Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?," *GLQ*, Vol. 3 (1997): 452.
[29] Elizabeth A. Povinelli, *The Empire of Love* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 10.

the individuals in their familial unit, whether it be on Rojelio and Troy for their violent and abusive behavior, or on Auntie Prisca, Moe, and Declan for enabling this behavior – and how to rectify trauma or find justice through naming individuals as the sources of their pain. This is what ultimately leads to the discussion of murder in the family. If they can rid themselves of what (or who) they believe the cause of their trauma is, then they should be able to heal following this elimination. However, as we see, the Santoses find themselves unable to move past the bitterness they hold, and perhaps even regretting their actions, by the end of the film.

The imperial aesthetics of romance, intimacy, and assimilation place the responsibility on the individual to integrate into these social relationships as a sign of their liberal freedom and rationality. It does not allow room for (1) the possibility of other forms of intimacy, relationality, and kinship and (2) moralizes intimacy and relationships so that individuals, and not structures of power, are to blame for their impossibly queer entanglements. But the Santos family seek out the ultimate form of retribution – death – and still find their relationship to their trauma unresolved, thus revealing that individuals, like Rojelio and Troy, are not to blame here.

The kinships and affinities shared between these characters are queer precisely because they do not conform to an image of a normative nuclear familial structure that assist the diasporic subject in a quest for upward mobility. Like the effects of the bitter melon the film is named after, the Santos family find themselves with a bad aftertaste in their mouths after their failed attempt to rid themselves of their "trauma." But also like the namesake vegetable of the film, this aftertaste reminds us that along with the unpleasant flavor, the bitter melon can also be beneficial. We eat it because it had medicinal properties that assist with things like blood sugar and cholesterol levels. That lack of finality or resolution at the

end of *Bitter Melon* is cautionary – it reminds us to not place our trust in assimilationist rhetorics or Western imperial and liberal notions of intimacy and progress.

Exile and Arrival in *Bitter Melon*

Just as the heteropatriarchal, nuclear family unit is an object of desire within assimilationists rhetoric, so too is the idea of home. Throughout *Bitter Melon*, home for the Santoses is a constant source of pain and debate. Moe and Declan live in Philadelphia and New York City, respectively, while Rojelio has not lived in the family home for several years, a home that is fraught with domestic abuse between Shelly and Troy, who live alongside Auntie Prisca and their daughter Mina. Not only this, but the location of this home – the Mission – is already riddled with a history of multiple displacements, a palimpsest of exile, removal, and new arrivals. This is exemplified in a scene in which Auntie Prisca and Declan walk through a farmers' market in the Mission. As Auntie Prisca begins looking for bitter melo, Declan advises her to go to an Asian market instead because the increasing gentrification of the neighborhood will make it difficult for her to find the vegetable otherwise. Auntie Prisca follows up and asks Declan what "gentrified" means, to which he explains, "gentrification is when you try to turn an old neighborhood into a new neighborhood by bringing in newer people with more money." Auntie Prisca nods in agreement and says, "Like here in the Mission." Declan initially agrees with her but then Auntie Prisca says, "the Filipinos really gentrified the Mission…because when your Lolo and Lola first moved here, it was an Irish neighborhood." Humorously, Auntie Prisca conflates gentrification with white flight in this scene. But this back-and-forth between Declan and his

mom illuminates the various and overlapping histories of displacement, settler colonialism, empire, migration, and diaspora that exist in the Mission and that affect the Santoses.

Indeed, the Mission District of San Francisco, California is one of the oldest neighborhoods in the area. Built on the land of the Ohlone people, the Mission was founded first by 18th century Spanish missionaries. Since the 19th century, the Mission has been settled by working-class immigrants, first from European countries such as Germany, Ireland, and Italy and later in the 20th century by Mexican immigrants, initiating white flight. The neighborhood became a predominantly Chicanx/Latinx neighborhood thereafter, with migrants from Central and South America, the Middle East, former Yugoslavia, and the Philippines settling in the neighborhood in the latter half of the 20th century as they fled various wars, dictators, and political instability. Throughout *Bitter Melon*, there are other scenes that allude to current conditions of gentrification occurring in the Mission, specifically the entrance of young urban professionals, through the numerous scenes showing the construction of new apartment complexes and store-front buildings. Various characters, including Declan, Tiva, and Moe lament the changes happening in the Mission, Declan and Moe citing it as one of many reasons they no longer live in their hometown.

Taking this into consideration, the various scenes of transit throughout the film are symbolic of the impermanence and fleeting nature of Filipinx diasporic subjects, and their sense of permanent displacement. Images of planes, airports, highways, city streets, cars, and birds-eye views of cityscapes all suggest a sense of constant movement, of a need to be on the way to somewhere else. Perhaps this is what David Eng, by way of Oscar Campomanes, means when he says, “Asian American identity might well be considered more in conjunction

with a discourse of exile and emergence than with one of immigration and settlement." [30] In one of the closing scenes of the film, for example, we see Declan bring Troy to the airport to see him off, not only to a new place but ostensibly to a new life. Declan and Troy embrace one last time before Troy heads off to the escalator that will lead him to his gate. The camera, angled behind Declan's head, allows us to see Troy walking towards this escalator, or rather a portal into his future, while also allowing us to see a remanent of Troy's past/home (Declan) in the foreground. Troy pauses and turns to look at Declan one last time, but Declan is suddenly nowhere to be seen. There is undoubtedly a sense of kinship between these two characters – why else would Declan free his brother in such a way – but the expectation of sentimentality during this final moment is cut short between Declan and Troy by Declan's sudden absence. In this scene, Troy is not only in transit to an elsewhere, but is stepping into a space of constant exile from his home and his family, who now believe him dead.

The Santoses disperse to their various corners of the world after they rid themselves of Rojelio's corpse. What ties them together is not so much a sentimentality towards the nuclear family and its home (an orientation towards the happy object – family and belonging), but instead the realization that such a thing cannot exist for them. Their queer relationality exists in this knowing, in the acknowledgement that their bitterness is not of them but something that is being done to them. That they find themselves connecting under some of the most horrific conditions is not a failure per se, but a moment of possibility – the odds of getting together across so much space, space that they never truly settled in, to make connections amidst constant exile, even if it is fleeting, is a moment of knowing that this

[30] David L. Eng, "Out Here and Over there: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies," *Social Text*, Vol 15., Nos. 3 and 4 (1997): 32.

world, one that requires you to be on the run in order to survive while also punishing your for it, is not for you. And knowing that is powerful, because it allows us to imagine a world that is for you rather than trying to assimilate into this one that has failed you.

This family, despite their moments apart, whether spatially, emotionally, or between carefully held secrets, finds moments of return and kinship over matters of food. Food connects, even during moment of intense turmoil. Food exhibits love, even when it's McDonald's for breakfast. This is evident in the opening scene of the film which, as previously discussed, not only depicts the hustle and bustle of return for characters such as Declan and Moe, thus establishing the space and distance between members of the Santos family, but also displays the significance of food in bringing together this diasporic family. While Auntie Prisca prepares food for the Christmas celebration – cutting meat, vegetables, and preparing blood – she speaks to Tiva on the phone to confirm that her mother is bringing the mango cake because it's "Troy's favorite." Meanwhile, Shelly stops at the liquor store to pick up cigarettes for Troy and a green tea KitKat for Mina. And as Declan and Tiva arrive at the family home, the discuss the differences between New York City and San Francisco, notably debating the food selections available in each city and which one has superior Filipino food. Later on in the night, once more extended family and friends arrive, we see various dishes displayed potluck style on the dining table and, during a Skype call between the US bound members of the family and Auntie Prisca's mother in the Philippines, Uncle Boy expresses his heartfelt sentiments at the family being together again and gives thanks to the "veritable cornucopia of food" they are enjoying. However, their grandmother seems unimpressed with Uncle Boy's verbose Christmas speech, at one point cussing in Ilocano and

describing his voice as boring, while other members of the family sneak sideways glances at each other as Uncle Boy continues to ramble on.

I want to take this moment of family and food to highlight both the unsettledness of the Santos family, as well as the moments of queer kinship and entanglements that connect them, not in spite of their constant exile, but through it. As Anita Mannur points out in *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture*, "when it comes to thinking about South Asian diasporic bodies, food is never far." [31] We can expand this to think about diasporic subjects more broadly, whose food is often termed "ethnic" as opposed to, for example, "all-American" foods that, in fact, often have immigrant origins. [32] Often, narratives of diasporic subjects told through an aesthetics of empire, use and celebrate specific cultural objects and practices as a way to ground the diasporic subject within a narrative of multiculturalism. Enjoying "ethnic" foods can serve as one such trope, wherein the diasporic subject assimilates but maintains vestiges of their cultural background, cultural practices that are deemed tolerable by empire's aesthetics. However, in the Christmas dinner scene of the film, this is not case. Rather than showing a well-adjusted Filipinx family, celebrating and remembering their culture during a holiday event, this scene highlights affects of annoyance, inconvenience, and exasperation- members lament Uncle Boy's speech, a disagreement about whether or not desert should have been put out early ensues, a family member veganizes a Filipino dish and tells no one, and Auntie Prisca scoffs at the idea of the mango cake being made from scratch rather than purchased from a Filipino bakery. As the

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[31] Anita Mannur, *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 3.
[32] Martin F. Manalansan IV, "Beyond Authenticity: Rerouting the Filipino Culinary Diaspora" in *Eating Asian America: A Food Studies Reader*, eds. Robert Ji-Song Ku, Martin F. Manalansan IV, and Anita Mannur (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 291.

night progresses, various family members have side conversations about Troy, Troy forces the family to watch home videos of him singing poorly, and Shelly is demeaned in front of several family members by Troy. Despite being together, the Santos family are far from harmonious. And yet, this family dinner carries with it the weight of something important. As Martin Manalansan has argued, "engagements with the homeland are pivotal to the enunciations of the sexual, sensual, national, and erotic…[and] the gustatory…The sensual experiences of food often become events of both imagined and real diasporic homecomings."[33] As subjects always in exiles, there are moments of return throughout *Bitter Melon*. As Manalansan suggest, these are not physical returns to the homeland, but can be found in moments of longing, remembering, imagining, nostalgia, and, in this case, a Skype call. Food can also represent a moment of return, even if briefly. But this return need not always be pleasant, nor is it always final. As we see with the Santoses, these moments of return – to one another, to a sense of Filipinxness, to the home and homeland – are rife with bitterness, frustration and even annoyance. The sense of obligation to show up despite these feelings is, I argue, a form of queer kinship amidst the turbulence of exile.

Again and again, we see the Santoses show up for one another even when it perhaps goes against their own self-interests. Rather than fulfill the image of the assimilated, heteropatriarchal Norman Rockwell version of the happy family, the Santoses find other ways to be there for each other, even when it is difficult, painful, and perhaps contradictory to a narrative of progress or Western versions of love. The Santoses represent a queer kinship in the way they constantly return to one another, even if it is temporary, even if it sends them back into exile, and even when the return leaves a bitter taste in their mouths.

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[33] Ibid., 291-292.

Depression is for White People

Several times throughout *Bitter Melon*, Auntie Prisca is heard saying "depression is for white people." While this seems callous and lends itself to negative reviews regarding the handling of mental health, trauma, and abuse in the film, I would urge us to pay attention to Auntie Prisca's words more closely. Rather than viewing this statement as a dismissal, we can read it as a moment in which a character reveals an awareness of the impossibilities of diasporic subjects to ever assimilate under imperial aesthetics. It's not that Filipinx diasporic individuals do not experience depression, but that the Filipinx diaspora already exists in a depressed state, is always already impossible, in exile, queer, unbelonging, and bitter. Affectively, whiteness and white emotions are desirable outcomes – they are what diasporic subjects should orient themselves towards, what they should desire to become or to approximate. White people experience depression because depression is an other feeling – it is non-normative, it is undesirable, and it is often seen as momentary, something that can be healed, worked on, or worked through. But for Filipinx diasporic subjects, this is merely reality. Our always already depressed state is how we survive, it is how we know something is not right, it is how we know that another world must be possible because the one we find ourselves in is not a world for everyone. To draw on Jose Esteban Munoz, "queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing." [34]

In *The Sense of Brown*, Munoz further argues that "brown feelings [are] manifestations of the ways in which ethnic modes of comportment not only represent

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[34] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

antinormative affect, but also challenge the ways in which dominant ideology prescribes certain codes of normative comportment." [35] Throughout *Bitter Melon*, we are confronted with nonnormative modes of comportment and affect – bitterness, frustration, rage, silence, complicity, betrayal – affects that not only designate the Santoses as nonnormative and unassimilated diasporic figures, but signal what Munoz calls brown feelings. And though these feelings are undesirable within an aesthetics of empire, they nonetheless cohere around a certain sensibility that our characters are intimately familiar with and that connects them. Depression is for white people because it describes moments within whiteness that are too much like the always already depressed state of brown, diasporic, queer figures. Brown feelings are relational – this always already depressed state is not inherent to Brown people per se, but to their relationship to whiteness, empire, the nation-state, capitalism as always in exile. In this relationality, these feelings reveal the impossibility of assimilation for the Brown diasporic subject.

Even in this always already depressed state and amidst feeling of resentment, bitterness, annoyance, frustration, and pain, our characters find moments of tenderness, care, love, nurturing, solidarity, and longing. Those moments are not premised on the characters enacting the ideal familial relationships that are expected of them, but instead arise from moments in which they fully acknowledge their Brown feelings towards and for one another.

[35] José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2020), 49-50.

Chapter Three

The Waste

Whether in the form of mountains of garbage accumulating in toxic sinkholes, or in the form of people deemed the human refuse of the social orders from which they are expelled and from which they will continue to be excluded, 'waste' has become the object of much critique and concern, serving to crystallize the violence endemic to the creation and accumulation of modern, capitalistic value.

-Neferti X.M. Tadiar, *Remaindered Life* [1]

Mountains of batteries
Leaking their acid
A passive mistake
(I swim in)
As my lips shake

-Aye Nako, "Nightcrawler"

In 2016, Filipinx America contended with two epochal presidential elections that installed fascist leaders in both the United States and the Philippines – Donald Trump and Rodrigo Duterte, respectively. In 2017 during a phone call, Trump congratulated Duterte's "unbelievable job on the drug problem," in the Philippines, where government sanctioned extrajudicial killings throughout Manila, resulting in approximately 6,000 dead, with some sources estimating a higher body count, reigned terror throughout the country. [2] In that same year, Trump visited the Philippines and Duterte during his Asia tour, publicly touting the

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[1] Neferti X. M. Tadiar, *Remaindered Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 257.
[2] Jodesz Gavilan, "Duterte's Violent War on Drugs, as Recorded by Rights Groups, Int'l Bodies," *Rappler*, July, 4, 2022, https://www.rappler.com/nation/list-reports-documentation-rodrigo-duterte-drug-war-killings/.; Louis Nelson, "Trump Praises Duterte for 'Unbelievable Job' Cracking Down on Drugs in the Philippines," *Politico*, May, 24, 2017, https://www.politico.com/story/2017/05/24/trump-rodrigo-duterte-call-transcript-238758.

"great relationship" between him, the United States, Duterte, and the Philippines. [3] No mention of human rights concerns came up during the meeting between the two presidents, even as images of the victims of Duterte's extra judicial killings continued to proliferate in national and international media. [4] In 2018, the following year, Trump's policy of family separation for undocumented people detained after crossing the US- Mexico border separated thousands of children from their families, causing national and international uproar. Images of children in cages incited anger and elicited further criticism of the Trump administration, already plagued by scandal and corruption. Both presidencies are marked, in multiple and different ways, by the spectacular use of violence and the blatant disregard for human life. This is not to say the previous or future presidents in either country have not or will not see just as many, if not more, dead, forgotten, and exploited people as a result of their policies. However, the era of both the Trump and Duterte administrations is undoubtedly marked by a kinship and shared regard towards certain human life – those deemed the waste of society – and a public abuse of power that left many dead. [5]

In one of the epigraphs that opens this chapter, Neferti X. M. Tadiar ruminates on waste in the modernized capitalist and imperial world and contends that, while waste is often seen as the necessary excess, refuse, and debris of modernity, it can also be a place of living

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[3] Oliver Holmes, "Trump Hails 'Great Relationship' with Philippines' Duterte," *The Guardian*, November, 13, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/nov/13/trump-hails-great-relationship-with-philippines-duterte.

[4] Ibid.

[5] In the context of Duterte, Vincente Rafael asks the questions, "What is the relationships between life and death under Duterte? How does he, like all modern rulers, use one to contain, exploit, and deploy the other?" Throughout this chapter, I make connection between Duterte and Trump not simply as fascists governing at the same time, but as sharing an affinity for how they approach and control life and death through their positions.; Vincente L. Rafael, The *Sovereign Trickster: Death and Laughter in the Age of Duterte* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 3.

beyond the life required to maintain capitalism. Waste can be otherwise. More specifically, Tadiar illuminates the possibilities of the otherwise in waste through a close look at the war on drugs in metropolitan areas of the Philippines during Duterte's regime and the work of the artists and photojournalists, such as the Nightcrawlers, who documented the bodies of disposable life. I open this chapter with Tadiar's rumination on waste alongside lyrics from the 2017 song "Nightcrawler" by the band Aye Nako to illuminate a particular moment in and, as Josen Diaz describes it, a "configuration" of Filipinx American subjectivity in the aftermath of the concurrent Trump and Duterte administrations. In particular, I am interested in how "Nightcrawler" and other songs by Aye Nako express a sense of anger, frustration, self-deprecation, and hopelessness, while also holding space for the possibility for joy, community, and love. These affects, I believe, speak to the affective response of Filipinx America during the Trump and Duterte presidencies and opens up space for (re)thinking the ongoing haunting relationship between the US and the Philippines. As Diaz's puts it, the framework of configuration is less about determining what is Filipinx America (via identity, history, etc.) and is instead interested in thinking through the significance of the Filipinx *to* America in the ongoing relationship between the two countries, "[allowing] the incongruencies and incoherences that shape the Filipino relationship to America to guide other inquiries into state and imperialist power." [6] This chapter explores the imperial haunting of Filipinx America through the ongoing colonial relationship between the United States and the Philippines specifically through the epochal presidencies of Trump and Duterte across the US and the Philippines, as well as their shared disregard for and state-sanctioned

[6] Josen Diaz, *Postcolonial Configurations: Dictatorship, the Racial Cold War, and Filipino America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), 9.

violence towards those they deemed waste. In other words, the relationship, entanglements, and affinities between the US and the Philippines continues to structure each country in fundamental ways.

The cultural works I explore throughout this chapter speak to this moment in different ways and, I contend, both contribute to a symphony of anger that spans across the relationship between the Filipinx to America and vice versa. Looking and listening to Aye Nako, a Black and Filipinx American queercore punk band, and the photographic and filmic documentation of Duterte's war on drugs alongside one another is an act of what Bakirathi Mani describes as "diasporic mimesis," which happens, "when viewers establish a likeness or association between their own archival memories and the artist's creation, [and] are racialized through their identification with the artwork. The experience of seeing in diaspora is centered on this dynamic exchange between viewer, image, and artist." [7] According to Mani, the act of seeing (and I would add, the act of hearing) in the diaspora is premised on an exchange between the viewer (listener), the image (sound), and the artist. [8] Throughout what follows, I examine both Aye Nako and the documentation of Duterte's war on drugs alongside one another as examples of a shared symphony of anger, frustration and sorrow that exists through the haunting relationship between the US and the Philippines, and its particular manifestation in the Trump and Duterte regimes. In particular, I argue that those bodies relegated as waste in both the US and in the Philippines not only produce audible forms of sorrow that cannot be ignored, but that the sounds that emerge from such waste also speak of hope, love, and possibility.

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[7] Bakirathi Mani, *Unseeing Empire: Photography, Representation, South Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 5.
[8] Ibid.

Through diasporic mimesis, and as a Filipinx American living in the diaspora, I acknowledge that when I hear Aye Nako's music, very much centered in US racialized and gendered violence and political discourse, some part of my imagination and sensorium identifies the frustrations, anger, sorrow, longing, joy, and possibility of their music with a memory that sees Duterte's violent reign in the Philippines as intertwined with concurrent fascist and white supremacist movements in the United States. [9] I cannot help but to hear the expression that the band takes its name from – *hay naku!* – and also feel the kinds of intimate feelings and memories that I associate with it – my mother exclaiming it in frustration at me, my auntie sighing it in exasperation. I also cannot help but to hear Aye Nako's ruminations on chemtrails and toxic waste and not only think about how the Philippines serves as a dumping ground for other countries' literal waste and trash, but of Flint, Michigan and the toxic water in their pipes, and the pipelines the US government continues to insist on building through sacred Indigenous land and water. Throughout this chapter, I listen to Aye Nako, for what Saidiya Hartman calls a "symphony of anger" and make connections to other kinds of anger felt not just throughout the Filipinx American diaspora, but through other racialized communities, in ways that may not be explicit, but that are none the less telling of the haunted realities we wade through. [10] Indeed, Audre Lorde has famously proclaimed that it is not anger that destroys us, "but our refusals to stand still, to listen to its rhythms, to learn within it, to move beyond the manner of presentation to the substance, to tap that anger as an

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[9] Ibid., 5.
[10] Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), 29-30.

important source of empowerment." [11] What can we learn about our haunting is we pause to listen and feel the anger shared across the Filipinx American diaspora?

In what follows, I argue that the sometimes ineffable anger, frustration, and sorrow felt between and across the Philippines and its diaspora can be heard in excess to, as the waste of, or as a form of spectral evidence in empire's haunting. In other words, the sonic productions of the refuse of empire, capitalism, and modernity quite literally speak to a shared affect of longing, political urgency, and dreaming of otherwise amongst those deemed ghostly across the diaspora. I also argue that there are world-making possibilities in this excess noise, as seen in the work of Aye Nako and the photography of the Nightcrawlers, both of which produce meaning under the dire circumstances of fascist governments, environmental racism, and a killer police state. Furthermore, I conceptualize this chapter as itself a compulsion to produce meaning between seemingly unconnected creative works. Through a method of diasporic mimesis, I look, listen, and otherwise sense connections and crosscurrents between the Philippines and its diaspora, as well as the relationship between the Filipinx to America, by wading through the waste of capitalism and colonialism, and seeing connections that are otherwise casted as disparate, unrelated, or coincidental. Through this method, nothing and everything is coincidental. The connections are not always explicit or intended. But they nonetheless point us to a shared suffering, as well as shared possibility for the otherwise, for the imagining of paradise.

The Muck

[11] Audre Lorde, "Keynote Address: The NWSA Convention: The Uses of Anger*," Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (1981): 9.

Aye Nako, which is based in Brooklyn, New York, was founded by Mars Ganito (also known as Mars Dixon) in 2008, the same year Barack Obama was elected the first Black president that marked a "post-racial" politics in American culture. Rooted in the queercore subgenre – which is an offshoot of the punk movement and subgenre the emerged in the 1980's and arose from a discontent with the exclusion of the LGBTQ+ community from both the punk and gay scenes – Aye Nako writes and performs music against this post-racial impetus, instead creating music about being "queer, trans and black." [12] Furthermore, Aye Nako's name is a reference to the Tagalog expression *hay naku* ("oh my god" or "my goodness") and is a nod to Mars' life and upbringing as a Black and Filipinx American person.

In their song "Nightcrawler," from their 2017 album *Silver Haze*, Aye Nako's co-lead singer Jade Payne sings about the "mountains of batteries // leaking their acid" and how she swims through it anyways, echoing Tadiar's description of waste – "mountains of garbage accumulating in toxic sinkholes, or…people deemed the human refuse of the social orders from which they are expelled and from which they will continue to be excluded." Later in the song, Jade sings, "my haunted memories force a wrench in my stride // just want to wake up to // the possibility." While Aye Nako's "Nightcrawler" apathetically describes what it would be like to swim through literal toxic waste (battery acid), the song is also about remembering a past (haunted memories) and wanting/imagining/desiring a different future (the possibility). These things – swimming through the waste and remembering/imagining – are not mutually exclusive but are rather concomitant processes. Being, living in, and moving through waste

[12] Aye Nako (@ayedontnako), "About Me," Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/pg/ayedontnako/about/?ref=page_internal.

can also be the condition of possibility for imagining something new. In the music video for Nightcrawler, members of Aye Nako take cartoon-rendered psychedelic mushrooms during an excursion to the beach as they sing "I'm tripping" is the first verse of the chorus. The song saliently describes the tension between feelings of frustration and anger, self-deprecation and social disposability, and hopefulness and aspiration that marked so many lives during the Trump presidency. Indeed, many of Aye Nako's songs speak to this kind of unspeakable or ineffable affect – yearning, desiring, and longing for what could be through the pain of what is.

The ineffable that which is, "incapable of being expressed or described in words; inexpressible." [13] Being haunted is living with that which cannot be described, even when we try to speak it into existence. But in that very act of trying to speak our haunting into existence, we may imagine otherwise – because to acknowledge its presence, to make it real, we can also acknowledge that there are other possibilities. Whether it be in the music of Aye Nako, whose sonic performances illicit feelings so great they exceed the words they are attached to, or in the photographs of the Nightcrawlers, who capture the sounds of grief and sorrow in the loud silence and solemnity of their pictures of the dead and the grieving, attempts to bring out the haunting always feel incomplete. And yet, in that incompleteness, we get the sense that the pain we feel, as well as the joy that we are capable of, is simply too great to make sense of within our haunted realities.

Aye Nako harnesses the ineffable to imagine alternative possibilities and futures that speak to Filipinx American haunting. The band described their origins as being, "originally

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[13] "ineffable," *Dictionary.com*, accessed February 6, 2023. https://www.dictionary.com/browse/ineffable

formed to subdue boredom but now operating on another frequency," and states their missions as, "actively seeking a planet where those who fall in the margins can feel OK about being themselves."[14] Drawing on Roderick A. Ferguson's description of culture as, "one site that compels identification with and antagonisms to the normative ideals promoted by state and capital," I listen to the different frequencies, riffs, and harmonies of Aye Nako's ineffable performances and what they're speaking to, against, or into existence.[15]

Though there is no direct English translation for the phrase, *hay naku* can be understood as an expression of vexation or exasperation on the likes of "oh my god!" or "my goodness!" The phrase echoes throughout Filipinx America, serving as a point of familiarity for Filipinx Americans who recognize the phrase. For those having grown up Filipinx American, *hay naku* elicits memories of troublemaking, parental scolding, and making mistakes. *Hay naku* is often said in times of frustration, disbelief, chastisement, or anger—the ineffable meanings and emotions that exceed the utterance of *hay naku* itself. Aye Nako's repurposing of a phrase that emotes so much in so little reflects the ways the band grapples with the ineffable in, and the excess of, anger, sorrow, and joy.

"Muck," another song from *Silver Haze*, starts with a prolonged moment of guitar feedback and then, before we hear the drums, Mars Ganito's voices comes to us, loud and sharp, though tinged with a hint of longing: "So I've convinced myself it'll always feel this way // No matter how much I claim it was supposed to be a one-time thing // All these horror films are the dirt that fill my grave // A craniotomy to reach that part in my brain // Where I've kept so many secrets." The verses of the song are upbeat, despite the gravity of the

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[14] Aye Nako (@ayedontnako), "About Me."
[15] Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 3.

lyrics. However, for a moment before the chorus, the song and Mar's voice softens into a somber and sweet melody. This softness carries into the chorus, though the chorus is a bit more urgent, in which Mars and fellow bandmate Jade Payne take turns singing, "Confused by the sound // (Of all excuses given) // So am I // You're confused by the sound // (Our blood can't prove we're human) // So am I // I need time to recalibrate // Confused by the sound." As Mars and Jade's voices alternate, we ourselves cannot help but become slightly disoriented. The chorus ends and Mars' voice becomes strained again, each line of the second verse punctuated with a sense of indignation as he asks, "Who would pay // Pay to watch me choke? // When you see me, all you see is the muck!" This is quickly followed in earnest by a much more subdue question: "Could I feel uglier?" We hear an ineffable pull in Mars' voice, a sorrow that cannot be expressed in words but can be heard none the less. As the song progresses, the tempo constantly shifts from upbeat verses (somewhat pop punk but more insistent) to slow and melodic moments of clarity in the chorus, to a rapid and urgent bridge that ends the song with a feeling of uncertainty. By ending with the bridge, the song finishes amidst unresolved tension. It is a question left unanswered.

According to co-lead singer Mars Ganito, "Muck" is a poignant confession about how anti-Blackness can breed self-hatred and disgust within Black bodies. To escape from it can be just as damaging and painful as remaining in its perpetual cycle of destruction ("A craniotomy to reach that part in my brain"). Realization engenders more questions than answers in this case ("Confused by the sound"). While "Muck" gets at the ways in which anti-Blackness thrives and feeds off of the decay of Black bodies, literally and figuratively, as white supremacy works on and works through them to ensure the social death of Black being, the song also describes the nuanced ways white supremacy entraps our minds so that

alternative worlds feel impossible to imagine, let alone exist in. And yet, the impossibility of the otherwise can also illuminate the limitations of a reality that is formed not in spite of, but because of, Black death and Black suffering. As “Muck” ends with a bridge, leaving our ears upturned and waiting for something more, we can’t help but wonder: What’s next? Where do we go from here? Anti-Blackness trickles down into the mundane of everyday life so that when we no longer take its deliberate violence for granted, we are left confused and in need of “recalibration.”

Clarity can be disorienting. Waste can be knowledge producing. “Muck” is a song about what is feels like to be seen as the necessary excess of modern life, a life you are not allowed to be a part of. But listened to in the context of the entire album, “Muck” is reminder that being muck allows us to see things that those who have full access to modern life don’t see, refuse to see, or have become desensitize to. Aye Nako’s music itself might be illegible to those who don’t see, who only see the “muck” and not the possibilities within.

Symphony of Anger

Clarity can be disorienting. Throughout Aye Nako’s music and the photography of the Nightcrawlers, what we see and hear is both illuminating and troubling – it is shocking to witness something that was intended to be swept under the rug, but it is even more shocking to witness something so impeccably violent and spectacular that it is meant to hold no meaning at all. From the familiarity of the environmental decay and anti-Black violence in Aye Nako’s music, to the distressingly ubiquitous dead bodies on the streets of Metro Manila depicted in the documentation of the war on drugs, such as the photography produced by the Nightcrawlers – we have become immune and desensitized to the objects of these works. Yet

it is in the way Aye Nako and the Nightcrawlers relate these horrors to us – in excess of the objects themselves – that we can begin to sense, even hear, the overwhelming affect of pain, anger, and grief bubbling through the surface that we have long been calibrated to ignore or suppress.

In her book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*, Saidiya Hartman looks at a photograph of a young Black girl – a child – posing nude on a sofa, and describes what she sees as a "symphony of anger" residing in the child in a moment where she had no right to be protected, to say no. Hartman notes that, "the avowal that violence is not an exception but rather that it defines the horizon of her [the girl's] existence" is to also "acknowledge that *we were never meant to survive*, and yet we are still here." [16] Here, I want to draw on Hartman's methodology, one that looks at stories of violence and the disposability Black girls in US history, and to hear the stories that are not told but are nonetheless there. Further, I draw on Tina Campt's study of the African diaspora's visual archive and how she accesses the *sonic* registers of the images she attends to in order to "animate the recalcitrant affects of quiet as an undervalued lower range of quotidian audibility." [17] By looking, or perhaps hearing, this symphony of anger in the images and sounds of the ubiquitous "waste" of the modern world, I think through the ways survival ("we were never meant to survive") is practiced and made possible by *being* waste, and how imagining otherwise occurs in the ineffable cries or those surviving.

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[16] Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, 29-30.
[17] Tine M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, Duke University Press, 2017), 4.

For example, you can hear the symphony of anger in the photographs taken by the Nightcrawlers of Manila, who documented the murders and their aftermath of Duterte's war on drugs. In *Listening to Images* and in relation to Black diasporic photography, Tina Campt argues that "the choice to 'listen to' rather than simply 'look at' images is a conscious decision to challenge the equation of vision with knowledge by engaging photography through [the] sensory…sound." [18] Drawing on Campt's provocation, the following is an attempt to listen to the images of Duterte's war on drugs, to not only hear the sounds of sorrow in the moment of their creation, but to hear the ineffable possibilities that these moments allow us to sense.

The power of the Nightcrawler photographic images is manifold. The photographs of the Nightcrawlers not only document the violence of Duterte's war on drugs, but also turn a tool that has long served as a technology of state power – the photograph – into a "light" for hope in the case of Filipino human rights. [19] Importantly, as Nerissa Balce and Sarita See illuminate, the use of the photography to document Filipinx bodies were first conducted by the United States. [20] In many ways, the images produced by the Nightcrawlers remind us of these earlier images, in which dead and abjected Filipinx bodies were documented and circulated to assert the cruel power of the US empire. Indeed, the presidencies of Duterte and Trump, and the relationship between these two world leaders, make clear a historical, continuous, and somewhat amorphous interdependence between the two countries. Considering what Leia Castañeda Anastacio asserts – that "the law creating the Philippine

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[18] Ibid., 6.
[19] Nerissa Balce and Sarita Echavez See, "Exposing EJKs and the State – A Collaborative Review of *Dark Lens/Lente ng Karimlan: The Filipino Camera in Duterte's Republic*," *Verge: Studies in Global Asias*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2020).
[20] Ibid.

constitutional infrastructure was itself shaped by colonialism's imperatives " and that dictatorships in the Philippines are not exceptional but inevitable given this infrastructure – we can also situate Duterte's extrajudicial killings as a part of, yet no less epochal, a historical and ongoing relationship between the US and the Philippines that continues to structure and determine how both countries see themselves as sovereign nations. [21] I contend that the photographs of the Nightcrawlers, then, are not only a documentation of Duterte's war on drugs but an expression of frustration and sorrow that has long been in the making, and that continues to haunt Filipinx bodies between and across the US-Philippine relationship.

On February 23, 2017, *Time Magazine* released a photo-essay collection entitled *'I Am Seeing My Country Die.'* [22] The images are a collection of photographs by various photographers who were on the frontlines documenting the victims of the war on drugs in Duterte's Philippines, including image descriptions written by each photographer. In one such image by Carlo Gabuco, we see several people peering through a window of an ambulance. The faces of two women, in particular stand out – one with her hand over her mouth to stifle a sob, and the other with her head bowed and hand covering her eyes. Both women are crying and though only depicted in a photograph, one can hear the gut-wrenching sobs they emote. Even then, there is something quiet about the photograph. The faces of the crowd are illuminated from above, possibly by a streetlight. Water droplets cover the window

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[21] Leia Castañeda Anastacio, *The Foundations of the Modern Philippine State: Imperial Rule and the American Constitutional Tradition in the Philippine Islands, 1898-1935* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 6.

[22] Andrew Katz, "'I Am Seeing My Countrymen Die': Local photographers on the frontline of Duterte's drug war reflect on the images that moved them most," *Time*, February 23, 2017, https://time.com/philippines-rodrigo-duterte-drug-war-local-photographers/.

of the ambulance, suggesting it is raining. From the image's perspective, we are inside the ambulance, looking out. There is something muffling about his perspective. Not only does it obstruct the sounds from outside, but it separates us physically, haptically, from the rest of the crowd as they grieve. Their faces are hazy through the wet and foggy window. Set amidst a darkened night-time background, when most of these extrajudicial killings were carried out, the image is both loud and hushed; though these women cry out, the intimacy of their grief feels so far away. We can hear it, but it is from a distance, mediated. The quiet, and yet very loud, sorrow of the image, along with the lighting, evoke a baroque style in the image.

Other images in the photo-essay similarly evoke a symphony of anger, demanding our ears as much as our eyes in viewing them. Basilio H. Sepe's image, for instance, of a drug war victim's wake similarly evokes the sounds of cries, sobs, screams, anger. Taken from a birds-eye-view, the image shows the deceased in an open casket surrounded by mourners. In the center, a man weeps as he falls before the sight of his loved one, though multiple people try to keep him standing. Or, in a photograph by Hannah Reyes Morales, a mourner holds up a cellphone so they can show the body of their deceased loved one over FaceTime. The casket has a clear covering over the body to allow viewing, but in this image, the clear covering causes the image on the woman on the phone to be reflected. We can almost hear her sobs, tinny over the phone. She is as much a part of this image, even as she is mediated through several screens, as the one who has been murdered.

The symphony of anger, rage, and grief evoked in these images is not extraordinary. Once again, these kinds of photographs not only recall the US's violence and spectacular document of abjected Filipinx bodies during the Philippine-American war, but also speak to a long history of violent state-sanctioned photographic practices as well as radical uses of

photography in the United States. For example, recall the explosive imaged of Emmett Till's open casket funeral in 1955. Lynched at the age of fourteen in Mississippi, Till became an icon of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States after his mother insisted on a public open-casket funeral service for all to see her son's mutilated body, which had become bloated and unrecognizable after being in the Tallahatchie River for three days. The images that emerged from the public funeral were horrifying – not just because of state of Till's body and the obvious pain and suffering he endured through his lynching, but because his mother's, Mamie Till, grief was so profound. What was perhaps most shocking about the images were not the fact that a young Black boy was lynched for being in the wrong place at the wrong time, nor was it that a mother and an entire community were grieving – it was the fact that it was public. But these lynchings were happening all the time, everywhere, an ubiquitous public spectacle, photographed and circulated as postcards by white participants, some of whom saved locks of hair and bits of clothing from those lynched. Rarely did we see in photographs the wake of such violence – the symphony of grief and the chorus of mourning. As Leigh Raiford has argued about the Till funeral images, the photos, "emerged in a new visual climate in which photo magazines had disciplined audiences to look at and understand images as not only illustrative and demonstrative but as the embodiment of truth." [23] The truth is not simply that lynchings happen, nor is it that they are terrible, violent, and unjust. The image tells us the truth about communal pain, grief, desire, and longing, and we can hear it just beyond the boundaries of what makes sense. The images of the Nightcrawlers do the same.

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[23] Leigh Raiford, *Imprisoned in a Luminous Glare: Photography and the African American Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 88.

Through the Nightcrawler's images, we can hear the sorrow of grievers, both in their heart-wrenching cries and in their deep silences. Can such a pain truly be described in words? The answer is resoundingly no. However, we can still hear the ineffable pain and something in us knows that this kind of grief is concomitant to life, even to the wasted, mucky, remaindered life of our world. Grief giving meaning to life, even for those seen as less-than-human or as disposable bodies. Grief is, after all, also about love, kinship, reciprocity, community, responsibility, and memory. Acknowledging that grief means life is the beginning of something else.

This is Where it Begins

Like the work of the Nightcrawlers, the film *Aswang* documents the ineffable pain, as well as possibilities for the otherwise, in Duterte's war on drugs. Indeed, director Alyx Ayn Arumpac opens the film with an eerie narration, stating that, "decay fills the air around us." Released in 2019 to critical acclaim and having been nominated and winning several film and documentary awards internationally, *Aswang* was filmed in Manila during the early years of Rodrigo Duterte's presidency (2016-2022). [24] The documentary, named after a mythic Philippine monster that is often depicted as a vampiric shapeshifter, follows the ongoing war on drugs in the city, set in motion following Duterte's election. Unlike similar documentaries covering Duterte's extrajudicial killings, such as National Geographic's 2019 documentary *The Nightcrawlers*, *Aswang* brings into focus the everyday, mundane, and even banal lives of those most effected by the slayings: the poor. While the film takes us to some of the most

[24] "Aswang (2019) – Awards," IMDb, accessed May 8, 2023, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt11131896/awards/?ref_=tt_awd.

horrific crime scenes and shows us the militant protests in response to the killings, *Aswang* also guides us into people's homes, neighborhoods, and jobs as they continue to live in a time of crisis. Scenes of a mortician collecting bodies and preparing them for funerals, people cleaning the blood of their murdered neighbor from the concrete, or graveyard dwellers burning heaps of waste people proliferate throughout the film. Perhaps most poignant is the fact that, throughout many of these scenes, we see how those most targeted by the war on drugs live – in shanty towns, amidst piles of trash, in graveyards, and on the streets. That their quality of life is not exceptional – in fact, it is the norm – is what is perhaps the most visually stunning aspect of the documentary. Amidst the waste, these people live lives of caring, dreaming, and hoping, not despite, but through feelings of immense abandonment, despair, and loss.

Jomari, the little boy that forms a relationship with the director and filming crew and whose story arches throughout the documentary, is an example of this. We first meet Jomari at the funeral of another slayed boy, who he claims is his "only friend." With both of his parents in jail for drug use, Jomari must navigate life alone. Though he visits his mother in jail when he is able to, we often find Jomari playing with other children in the streets of a shanty town or on the banks of a littered and dirty river. There, the children jovially discuss what they want to be when they grow up. Jomari is one among many that could disappear at any moment – a disposable young life. At one point, the director – who always remains off camera – and her crew look for Jomari, concerned that they have not seen him in several weeks. Documented in the film, the director and film drew search for Jomari for what appear to be several hours, asking people if they know where he is by showing his picture. When the film crew eventually finds Jomari, he explains what happened to him, claiming that he was

taken by social services "for a year" and lived in the "boys house," but was ultimately released to live on the streets again. As a seven- or eight-year-old child, Jomari says all this rather calmly and matter-of-factly. His nonchalant affect is punctuated by his suggestion that the crew follow Jomari down to the river to admire it in the moonlight. This is sort of blasé affect that Jomari has when sharing difficult stories or details about his life is repeated throughout other points of *Aswang*, such as when Jomari asks the director to buy him a pair of slippers and some clothes, and we get to watch him walk barefoot in and out of street stalls as he picks out his new attire. In another scene, Jomari emerges from a public bathroom freshly bathed and wearing his new cloths, even though the bathroom sign states bathing is not allowed. In yet another scene, Jomari eats Jollibee with and provided by the filming crew. In all of these scenes, Jomari's lack of material wealth is quietly obvious – he has no shoes, no shelter, no food. Yet, it is also in moments like these that Jomari seems to find spurts of joy – to talk, laugh, and be cared for by others. In relation to care workers, Allan Isaac argues that "rather than the impoverishment of the senses and desensitization of the worker to mental passivity, sensitivity and the capacity to anticipate desire is cultivated and valued." [25] Similarly, through Jomari, we see how the human "waste" of Manila finds ways to nurture dreams, share tender moments, and form relationships with one another in the space of social death they have been relegated to.

The capacity for care, love, and dreaming through crisis is evident in the ways Jomari talks about his mom throughout *Aswang*. As the director questions Jomari about his mother and his family, it is easy for the audience to question the veracity of what he tells us,

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[25] Allan Punzalan Isaac, *Filipino Time: Affective Worlds and Contracted Labor* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 12.

including a story about how a guard once let him sleep with his mother in her prison cell. Indeed, though Jomari asserts again and again that when his mother is released from prison, they will be reunited, it almost feels like wistful thinking. And yet, when the film ends, we find Jomari reunited with both of his parents. As they enjoy a meal together, his mother explains how Jomari would ask other visitors at the jail to take him in with them, and how once, a guard let him sleep with her in her cell out of pity, confirming everything we once believed to be ridiculous stories told by a child. Afterwards, Jomari and his mother take to the streets to pick through piles of trash in search of plastic bottles, CD's, paper, and other materials they can resell for money. It is in this scene Jomari appears happiest – reunited with his mother, trying to make it day by day.

Figure 4. Screenshot from *Aswang* (2019), directed by Alyx Ayn Arumpac

At the end of *Aswang*, the narrator/director observes, as she also did at the beginning of the film that, "whenever they say an aswang is around, what they really want to say is – be afraid." But it is not the poor of Manila that we should be afraid of. She continues: "this city

is [the aswang's] killing field, and it can devour you. Like how fear might drown out courage. But some refuse to be afraid. They choose to stand up and look the monster in the eye. This is where it begins." Amidst ambient shots of foggy Manila streets at night, Arumpac's final observation punctuates the film with a mighty declaration: it is not the poor, the human waste, the remaindered life, you should be afraid of; it is the killing machine of the Philippine police state. We are trained to look at the waste with disgust – a distraction that prevents us from seeing the monsters that lie ahead.

From the US to the Philippines: Pain and Pleasure in the War on Drugs

Between the songs of Aye Nako and the filmic and photographic documentation from Duterte's EKJs, an underlying tension or a nagging question persists: who can do drugs and, more specifically, how is the power to determine life and death manifested through the criminalization of drug use? Indeed, to return to Diaz's provocative inquiry into the "incongruencies and incoherences that shape the Filipino relationship to America" in order to determine different ways of apprehending state and imperialist power, how might we think about the war on drugs in the Philippines as a part of the long-haunted relationship between the US and the archipelago, or between populist presidencies throughout the decades? [26]

Duterte's war on drugs, for example, draws directly on the policies of populist American president Ronald Reagan and his war on drugs that plagued urban and Black and Brown spaces throughout American in the 1980's. As Elizabeth Hinton has argued, Reagan's war on drugs was deeply racialized (the possession of the crystalline rock form of cocaine or "crack" had stiffer penalties than the possession of crystalline methamphetamine, which was

[26] Diaz, *Postcolonial Configurations*, 9.

more popular amongst white low-income users) and was a part of a succession of policies meant to curb social welfare programs in an equally racially coded "war on poverty." [27] Reagan's policies and strategies during his war on drugs – the increased militarization of the police, the mass incarceration and killings of supposed drug users, and increased surveillance of poor Black and Brown communities – were directly utilized in Duterte's war on drugs in the Philippines. Indeed, Duterte's drug war has not only resulted in thousands dead and in jail but has also insured the constant policing of the poorest communities in Manila, creating a space of constant fear and social death. Taking this into consideration, it is no coincidence that Trump and Duterte would be elected as presidents in at the same time. Instead, their simultaneity can be understood not as exceptional, but as an inevitable moment in the long

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[27] Elizabeth Hinton, *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 309, 315.

history of populism in and between the US and the Philippines.

Figure 5. Screenshot of "Nightcrawler" (2017), performed by Aye Nako

Figure 6. Screenshot of "Nightcrawler" (2017), performed by Aye Nako

The music video for Aye Nako's "Nightcrawler" depicts the four bandmates taking psychedelic mushrooms on their way to the boardwalk and can seem to be in stark relief from the images of those killed as "drug pushers" in the Philippines. The juxtaposition of the music video to the work of the Nightcrawlers discussed in this chapter, upon initial viewing, begs the question of who can do drugs without facing certain death. Americans, it seems, do not face the threat of being gunned down by the police in the ways the poor citizens of Manila do under the pretenses of a war on drugs. But if we look (and listen) more closely, we can detect the haunting of Reagan's criminalization of poor Black and Brown communities in Aye Nako's music, such as in their song "Muck," or in the sheer fact that two of the bandmates who take drugs in the "Nightcrawler" music video are Black (figure 5, figure 6). Though the Aye Nako bandmates do not die at the end of the video, there remains a pleasure in the danger of what they do, which is reflected in the longing and self-deprecation of the

song. In his conclusion to *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz ruminates on a lyric from a song by the Magnetic Fields – "take ecstasy with me." [28] Though a direct reference to taking party drugs, Muñoz ponders other meanings of ecstasy when listening to the song – what feelings of pleasure, transcendence, and imagining otherwise might we access when we "take ecstasy"? What forms of life and futurity might we sense and feel beyond the dangers of the here and now? Similarly, how might we look and listen to Aye Nako's "Nightcrawler" not as a blatant dismissal of the real dangers of doing drugs in a police state, but as a risk that is worth taking, even if it is just to have some fun with your friends on the beach? Though not commensurate, Aye Nako's music, the photographs of the Nightcrawlers, and *Aswang* all allude to this shared ability to experience joy, love, care, happiness, and pleasure, not despite of, but in constant friction with the danger of being viewed as disposable, waste, and society's refuse.

"Let me know if you'd like some company"

Aswang, as with the photography of the Nightcrawlers and the music of Aye Nako, draws audiences in through the ineffable sounds of sorrow and pain. However, in all of these works, there are also ineffable sounds of hope, dreaming, desire, love, and care. You can hear it in the ways Jomari dreams about being reunited with his mother, or in the love that emanates through the grief of onlookers or funeral-goers captured in photographs by the Nightcrawlers. Considering the ways love, longing, and even joy can be felt and heard concurrently with incredible symphonies of anger, pain, and frustration, I end this chapter by

[28] José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 185.

returning to Aye Nako's music to think once again about the kinds of shared affects that existed across the Philippines and the Filipinx American diaspora during the epochal presidencies of Rodrigo Duterte and Donald Trump. More so, I want to think about how these moments speak not only to an ongoing haunting and relationality between the US and the Philippines, but the possibilities in caring for one another even in short- and long-term crises.

In their song "Particle Mace," also on their 2017 album *Silver Haze*, Aye Nako grapples with what it means to take care in a world that does not care about you. Jade sings about calling her friend Dave to check in on him while they casually discuss chemtrails and conspiracies – "Hey Dave, how are ya doing? // I'm in Joshua Tree roaming around today // Been through the ringer and then some // Let me know if you'd like some company." Through a deadpan delivery, dissonant guitar riffs, and a pop punk familiarity, the song elicits a feeling of repetitiveness, like this is something that Jade has said before, over and over again – discussing the state of the world we live in, the conspiracies that proliferate, the abundance of human and non-human waste, and various climate catastrophes, all while remaining an ignored and unseen entity. "Particle Mace" gets at the ways the most marginalized and affected are the most knowledgeable (and the least surprised) about the conditions of our world. Though Jade is apathetic in her delivery of the song, there are reminders that she cares – about her friend, about the world, about herself – scattered throughout the lyrics. For instance, she sings, "The flood on the border doesn't matter to me // 'Cause I'm invisible, used, and I don't wanna fail to see" or "Breathe, it's a sigh of relief // That we're finally safe here // That's what I wanna believe." Like in "Nightcrawler", "Particle Mace" recounts the horrors of the world and what it feels like to be relegated to its

excess muck. However, “Particle Mace” also holds out hope – that even though we are ignored, we don’t have to ignore each other (“I don’t wanna fail to see”), and that we are allowed to imagine what safety could look like for us (“That’s what I wanna believe”) even if our safety is never guaranteed. In many ways, “Particle Mace” reminds us of Jomari in *Aswang* – a little boy who witnesses too many tragedies because he is poor and because he is living under Duterte’s war on drugs. Through it all, Jomari remains hopeful that his mother will one day be released from prison. He believes one day he might have some modicum of safety. He finds joy in eating Jollibee and looking at the river with his friends. What is so miraculous about Jomari is that he is someone society would deem beyond desolate, but he still has the aptitude to image new beginnings and better futures, something others who have more than him cannot seem to do.

Later, during the outro of “Particle Mace,” Jade sings “I guess there’s only one kind of truth // My love’s rekindled in solitude.” Aye Nako ends with a statement of unwavering care – to love one another, not despite of, but precisely because we know what it’s like to be forcefully isolated, made disposable, killed, and haunted. Though our empire’s haunting may attempt to separate us, keep us in the dark, and distract us, we continue to find compassion, care, and community with one another not only by witnessing each other’s shared anger and pain, but through the collective will to scream together in a symphony of love, joy, and hope.

Chapter Four

Paradise

In June 2020, artist, filmmaker, and writer Crystal Z. Campbell published an essay in *Hyperallergic* reflecting on the ninety-ninth anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre. Published following the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin, the subsequent eruption of protests for Black lives, and weeks before President Donald Trump was scheduled to hold a widely criticized rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Campbell's essay reflects on the racist and imperialist histories of her home state, both remembered and forgotten, and what it would mean to seek reparations in a moment when performative justice saturated US media and news outlets. In her essay, Campbell speaks about her work *Notes from Black Wall Street*, a series of archival images taken of Greenwood, the Black district of Tulsa targeted during the race massacre, which is widely forgotten in US public history, and onto which the artist has applied thick embellishments of paint. Thinking through the past, present, and future of racial terrorism, Campbell "offer[s] these works as prompts to meditate on the future of our complicit fictions, suppressed memories, and united histories."[1] In an interview and artist talk with the Brooklyn Rail, Campbell further described the project as, "an exercise in optics, not only regarding optics of this history, which is undoubtedly connected to other swift and slow violences against

[1] Crystal Z. Campbell, "99 Years after the Tulsa Race Massacre, an Artist Reflects: Dear Tulsa, today marks a grim anniversary. Will justice take another hundred years?" *Hyperallergic*, June 1, 2020, https://hyperallergic.com/567582/crystal-z-campbell-reflects-on-tulsa-race-massacre/.

communities of colors imbedded in our social and spatial lives. These works are an attempt to think about how we read images and how images trouble collective memory." [2]

Campbell's ruminations are a part of her longer repertoire of creative work, which includes an extensive exploration of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre (and its archival erasure), the 1978 Jonestown Tragedy, the gentrification of a now demolished Black civil rights theater in Brooklyn, and the immortal cell line of Henrietta Lacks, a Black woman whose cells were forcefully taken from her to be used for scientific research. As a Filipina, Chinese, and African American artist based in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Campbell creates work that "excavates public secrets," histories, records, and stories that have seemingly vanished from the archive, while also thinking through the ways these "secrets" connect us, make us witness to each other, even in the most tenuous ways.[3] Indeed, Campbell has stated that her work "lingers in the space between perception and cognition while questioning the veracity of narrative and the politics of *witnessing*."[4]

The following essay is an exploration of Campbell's excavation into our collective will to forget and what that brings to bear on Black, Indigenous, and Filipinx American life, specifically through an analysis of her work with Henrietta Lacks's immortal cell line. Given her interest in archival research, including what gets left out, obscured, or fictionalized in the archive, I approach Campbell's repertoire of work as a contestation against an imperial aesthetics that is intent on severing relationalities between Black, Indigenous, and migrant

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[2] The Brooklyn Rail, "NSE #419 | Crystal Z Campbell with Andrew Woolbright," YouTube video, 1:08:12, November 2, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mb0EID_NqAc.
[3] "Info," crystalzcampbell.com, accessed July 23, 2020, https://www.crystalzcampbell.com/info.
[4] "Crystal Z Campbell – Filipino American Artist Directory," *Filipino American Artist Directory*, accessed July 23, 2020, https://www.filamartistdirectory.com/crystal-z-campbell.

communities and peoples. Campbell's repertoire of work is an unsettling point of convergence, I argue, whereby Filipinx America is called on to witness the interconnectedness of imperial violence, anti-Blackness, and Indigenous dispossession. While I primarily explore Campbell's creative writing and works on Henrietta Lacks's immortal cell line (or the HeLa cells), I also explore some of Campbell's other works and ruminations, including her currently in-progress project entitled *Post Masters,* which is, according to the artist, her "most autobiographical work" as it explores, "the intersections between USPS and the US military through the lens of both Filipinx and Black histories." [5] I draw on Christen A. Smith's definition of witnessing as the act of, "recognizing that coming to know the stories of the dead incriminate[s] us all." [6] Pushed further, with regards to Black and Indigenous relationalities, Tiffany Lethabo King describes the act of "co-witnessing" as a

> truly ethical encounter … that enables people to not only mirror back pain but … implicate one another in our survival. However, also in the witnessing to understand with one another, one realizes that "innocence" does not exist within the lifeways of this hemisphere or the modern world. The endeavor of surviving under conditions of conquest is never clean. [7]

Inspired by King and Smith's definitions, in which witnessing is not only an ethical act of recognizing our own complicity in the death of others, but also an act of survival, commiseration, and possibility, I also access the method of "in sight" as described in Toni Morrison's 1998 novel *Paradise*, which I see as being parallel or in line with what Black feminist scholars call witnessing.

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[5] "Post Masters" *Creative Capital*, accessed February 6, 2023, https://creative-capital.org/projects/post-masters/.
[6] Christen A. Smith, *Afro-Paradise: Blackness, Violence, and Performance in Brazil* (Urbana: U. Illinois Press, 2016), 206.
[7] Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (Durham: Duke U. Press, 2019), xi.

In *Paradise*, a brown woman named Consolata who was taken from South America as a child now leads the convent Oklahoma she was raised in by nuns. Long after the nuns are gone, Consolata's convent becomes a place where women of all kinds come to hide from something – an abusive partner, an unfulfilling life, the scrutiny of their families and their communities, and, at times, themselves. Consolata has the power of "seeing in" or "in sight," – "something God made free to anyone who wanted to develop it…the dimmer the visible world, the more dazzling her 'insight' became." [8] Using the power of her in sight, Consolata instructs the women she shelters to look within themselves as a freeing act. In the end her in sight – her magic, her witchcraft – is a threat to the neighboring town of Ruby, a patriarchal, deeply religious, Black community that despises racial mixing and light-skinness, which many of the women in the convent threaten to bring to the town.

Paradise begins with "They shoot the white girl first." [9] The novel ends with all of the women in the convent being shot to death by male citizens of Ruby. The last passage of the novel returns to Consolata's "in sight" – we enter a world or an afterlife in which lives with a mothering figure named Piedad on a beach, resting and singing, awaiting new arrivals who will labor together with her to create, maintain, and evolve her "paradise," not unlike her time at the convent. Indeed, the final lines of the novel describe this labor of love: "When the ocean heaves sending rhythms of water ashore, Piedade looks to see what has come. Another ship, perhaps, but different, heading to port, crew and passengers, lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time. Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise." [10]

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[8] Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 247.
[9] Ibid., 1.
[10] Ibid., 318.

Consolata's beach could be anywhere – somewhere in the Caribbean, along the Pacific or Atlantic coast of North America, off the shores of the African continent, in Oceania, or perhaps in a Southeast Asian archipelago, like the Philippines. I have returned to the final passage of *Paradise* so many times because of the possibilities it holds. A paradise of waste, music, mothers, daughters, hope for what never was, new arrivals, constant change. A paradise that must adapt, that must always be sought after, worked on, built up. I have also returned to this passage many times, and to the idea of paradise, because paradise has, for so long, been an imperial fantasy weaponized to justify land and body extraction, Christianizing missions, educational programs, and genocide. For example, the famous English novelist Rudyard Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden," which called on the United States to take up the project of imperial expansion through the seizure of the Philippines as the country's first colony, accesses a language similar to what Morrison uses to describe paradise – the toiling of common folk to build new worlds, references to Indigenous lands and new arrivals, and the envisioning of freedom. However, Kipling's poem relies on an aesthetics of empire that Morrison's words imagine against – Kipling's paradise is premised on the savage Filipinx body, one that must be freed from bondage through tutelage under their betters ("The blame of those ye better, // The hate of those ye guard—"). [11] All this for the sake of the US's glory. Kipling's world is, in other words, not built on the utopic idea of communal laboring, kinship, and respect, like in Morrison's (or Consolata's) version of paradise: it is premised on an imperialistic and capitalistic paternalism. Where Kipling describes reward through domination, exploitation, and extrapolation, Morrison describes paradise through love, collective work, and sacrifice.

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[11] Ibid.

Throughout what follows, I use paradise differently from this imperial use of the word. Paradise here does not erase the land and its Indigenous stewards, nor is it meant to assert a universal fantasy for the future, but highlights the ways *many* paradises, on *many* lands, may be built – through contestation, adaptation, and continual uncertainty, both within and in relation to one another.

I wish to highlight the contestations and tensions from which we can imagine many paradises, like those Consolata dreams about, over and against the haunting of the US's imperial aesthetics, so obvious in Kipling's poem. Following Morrison's description of "in sight," the power to look within and see painful truths in order to imagine paradise, this chapter looks at just one provocation – Campbell's work with HeLa cells – to think through the complicities, crosscurrents, and mutual possibilities that arise when we recognize Black, Indigenous, and Filipinx American relationalities. This chapter is, in short, an act of witnessing, prompted by Campbell's work, of Black, Indigenous, and Filipinx American relationalities, and a lesson on how Filipinx America cannot only read between and beyond the lines of a haunting colonial archive that continues to obscure our incommensurate, yet no less intertwined and connected, histories, but also how our flesh can serve as an alternative archive.

I Live to Fight (No More) Forever: **The Immortality of Henrietta Lacks**

This section looks at the ways in which Crystal Z. Campbell's work *I Live to Fight (No More) Forever,* which ruminates on the life, death, and repercussions of Henrietta Lacks and her immortal cell line, grapples with the flesh as an alternative archive and cite of memory that exists in, "the space between perception and cognition," so that we can

"[question] the veracity of narrative and the politics of witnessing."[12] Campbell's 2013 solo exhibition *I Live to Fight (No More) Forever*, which was on view at the Artericambi Gallery in Verona, Italy, and then later at the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten in Amsterdam, Netherlands, is an exploration of the immortal cell line of Henrietta Lacks, a Black woman whose cells (taken without the consent of her or her family) have served as a cornerstone for medical and scientific research since 1951. HeLa cells have since been used in the development of the polio vaccine, cancer and AIDS research, and gene mapping. In the 1960s, Lacks's immortal cell line was launched into space in order to examine how the cells would react to zero gravity. Though her cell line lives on, Henrietta Lacks died of cervical cancer in 1951 in Johns Hopkins Hospital, one of the only hospitals near her that would treat Black patients. As I write this in 2023, Lacks's immortal cell line has lived outside her body for seventy-two years, more than double the amount of time Henrietta Lacks lived on this earth. In 2010, Rebecca Skloot's book *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* was published and, in 2017, a film of the same name starring Oprah Winfrey was released on HBO, sensationalizing the history of the HeLa cells to a general public. In an essay entitled "Portrait of a Woman: Notes Between Art and Science on Henrietta Lacks," which was featured in the feminist magazine *Girls Like Us*, Campbell reflects on the implications of the HeLa cells, stating:

> My creative research tends to fixate on historical incidents where the veneer of civilization begins to crumble. In the case of Henrietta Lacks, I was implicated in her narrative before I could comprehend its ethical dilemmas. I was injected with the polio vaccine and I have Henrietta Lacks to quietly thank. [13]

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[12] "Crystal Z Campbell – Filipino American Artist Directory."
[13] Crystal Z. Campbell, "Portrait of a Woman: Notes Between Art and Science on Henrietta Lacks," *Girls Like Us*, 2015, 62.

Interestingly, Campbell's rumination is also an act of implicating herself in the ongoing violence that has been wrought on Lacks and her family for over seventy years through the seemingly mundane action of being vaccinated for polio. Science – a marker of modern civilization – is also what marks our inhumanity. Indeed, Campbell calls attention to the ways in which Lacks's cells have been used, and continue to be used, in countless forms of scientific research despite their non-consensual removal from her dying, or socially dead, body. [14] As Campbell notes, we have all benefited from the forced labor of Lacks's flesh, flesh which, to draw on Hortense Spillers's theorization of "the hieroglyphics of the flesh," not only tells of an "American grammar" of violence, captivity, and objectification of Black flesh, but speaks to how that violence is carried down through generations. Lacks's flesh, in other words, tells a story that is neither new nor shocking – this story is in fact foundational to a US narrative aesthetics that preaches so-called emancipation, freedom, democracy. [15]

While the exhibition was centered on the bioethical dilemmas surrounding Lacks's immortal cells, *I Live to Fight (No More) Forever* also served to memorialize Lacks and her cell line without collapsing this narrative into one of retroactive celebration. Campbell's exhibition acknowledges the work of Lacks and her body, yet the violence of the HeLa cells' origins remains at the forefront of the work. For example, in *Portrait of a Woman I* and *Portrait of a Woman II*, works that showed in the exhibition, Campbell "nominate[s]

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[14] Orlando Patterson. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

[15] Saidiya Hartman explores "the changes wrought in the social fabric after the abolition of slavery and with the nonevent of emancipation insinuated by the perpetuation of the plantation system and the refiguration of subjection." Saidiya V. Hartman*, Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford U. Press, 1997), 116.

Henrietta Lacks as the Mona Lisa of our time."[16] Depicting two images laser cut into solid glass cubes, *Portrait of a Woman I* and *Portrait of a Woman II* call into question our ability to visualize Lacks as a simultaneously ubiquitous presence and obscured figure. One of the laser-cut images is of Henrietta Lacks herself, the other is of her cell line. Each glass cube rests on a wooden pedestal and is encased by a wooden square frame. These figures are reminiscent of tombstones, memorial sites, and graveyards. While this imagery signals death and memorialization, it also remains at odds with the portraits. In particular, the glass cube with the image of Lacks's immortal cell line suggests *life*, not death. The cells signal biomaterial, living organisms, and cellular growth. This is further exemplified in the materiality of the work itself; the glass cubes through which we are able to view these portraits of Lacks are reminiscent of glass slides used in laboratories to view organisms under a microscope. It is through these renderings of Lacks that these portraits hold in tension the dead and the living, memorializing the deceased Black body while calling on us to look closer at the multiplication and growth of cellular life/human flesh.

Lacks's contributions to Western medicine, like the Mona Lisa, are prolific. Yet, like the Mona Lisa and its innumerable reproductions, it is through this ubiquity that Lacks's image fades into the background. As Nicole R. Fleetwood has argued, "blackness … circulates … it fills in the void and is the void."[17] HeLa cells fill the spaces between us; the medical breakthroughs achieved because of Lacks's cells give us life and live within us. And yet, Lacks herself is a void. Seeing her in those spaces where she already exists seems

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[16] Campbell, "Portrait of a Woman," 63.; See image on Campbell's website: "Portrait of a Woman I, Portrait of a Woman II (2013)," *crystalzcampbell.com*, Image, accessed on May 9, 2023, https://www.crystalzcampbell.com/.
[17] Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: U. Chicago Press, 2011), 6.

incomprehensible, nearly impossible. The HeLa cells are held in abstraction, a disembodied materiality. Through this, Lacks's life and death become inconsequential or a "black absented presence," as Katherine McKittrick has described it.[18] The foundational role of Black bodies to our spatial realities are made invisible by rendering those bodies as outside of space, place, and time. The extraction of Lacks's cells without consent does just this. The "everywhereness" of the HeLa cells (how many of us have been vaccinated for polio?) obscures Henrietta Lacks, the Black woman. She becomes a faint, shadowy figure in the eminence of her immortal cell line. Lacks is seemingly everywhere and nowhere, alive and dead, fleshly remnant and (once a) human body. Campbell's renditions of Lacks in *Portrait of a Woman I* and *Portrait of a Woman II* illumine these tensions, asking us to bear witness to the circulation of Black flesh and the disavowal of anti-Black violence.

Another one of Campbell's images is entitled *I Live to Fight (No More) Forever*, the same name as the exhibition it showed in. The title of this work is noteworthy for its double meaning, which we can read in two different ways: *I Live to Fight Forever*, or *I Live to Fight No More Forever*. [19] This duality of meaning gestures towards what Campbell notes as the "strange dialogue in Henrietta Lacks' story about being publicly 'immortal' and privately 'dead.'"[20] In this piece, we see Lacks's immortal cells growing on the surface of a diamond, which has become their eternal resting place. "Diamonds are forever," notes Campbell, and so are the immortal HeLa cells, despite Lacks's death.[21] As *Portrait of a Woman I* and

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[18] Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, 2006), 33.
[19] See image on Campbell's website.: "I Live to Fight (No More) Forever (2013)," *crystalzcampbell.com*, Image, accessed on May 9, 2023, https://www.crystalzcampbell.com/.
[20] "Crystal Z Campbell: I Live to Fight (No More) Forever," *ATP Diary*, June 24, 2013, http://atpdiary.com/crystal-z-campbell-artericambi/.
[21] Ibid.

Portrait of a Woman II make evident, though Lacks ceased her subjective life/fight in 1951, her flesh/cells continue to live/fight in the absence of her body. Similarly, *I Live to Fight (No More) Forever* shows us how Black life and Black death are held in tension everywhere, all around us. This image forces us to confront anti-Blackness as ongoing, as existing on a continuum, as constituting "the wake" of Black death. Christina Sharpe theorizes that "to be *in* the wake is to occupy and to be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding."[22] In other words, Black chattel slavery cannot be understood as a relic of the past but as constituting our present moment. As Lacks exemplifies, Black bodies and Black death are consistently put to work by white supremacy and capitalism. And, with regards to the biomedical advances made because of HeLa cells, Henrietta Lacks's flesh has been put to work so that we may live. *I Live to Fight (No More) Forever,* as well as Campbell's portraiture of Lacks, disrupts our temporal understandings of Black death and suffering by resituating slavery as intimately intertwined with our present. Life and death converge. Lacks's flesh is immortal. It is forever. At the same time, Lacks's death is permanent. It too is forever. Value continues to be extracted from Lacks's flesh; the violence of its nonconsensual removal does not simply remain in the past but is instead reenacted each day that her cells continue to exist. Value is also extracted from Lacks's death. Her inability to claim her flesh renders her cells an abstraction. Lacks lived and died in the wake of slavery, and *I Live to Fight (No More) Forever* attends to the ways in which the immortal cell line circulates both life and death as part of the wake.

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[22] Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 13–14.

It is important, however, to recognize that Campbell's work does not make itself immediately legible upon viewing, if at all. As we see with *Portrait of a Woman I*, *Portrait of a Woman II*, and *I Live to Fight (No More) Forever*, Campbell's works constantly slips between visually recognizable parts and abstraction. In the case of *I Live to Fight (No More) Forever*, for example, Campbell's image of biological matter on diamond appears sterile and abstract upon first glance. A floating diamond against a black background. We take this abstraction for granted, but there is something unsettling and uncanny about the image. The diamond is not smooth but appears to be rough and flaking. What should be a clean and geometric shape suddenly takes on an organismic quality. As a viewer, we realize there is something more going on here, but we are unable to read the image. It is illegible, much in the same way that Lacks remains illegible in our public memory. Yet, it is there, *she* is there, despite our inability to understand it. Lacks is everywhere and completely absented all at once. Lacks is visually present but still remains outside our grasp of the knowable, the legible. We *are* looking at Lacks when we look at this image, bringing us to the impossibilities and incommensurability of Black abjection and Black flesh in our current moment.

By looking at Henrietta Lacks's cells and their immortality, Campbell's work allows us to think through the flesh as a site for imagining other forms of existence, ones that flourish and thrive in an archive that remains illegible under the haunting of imperial aesthetics. For example, Alexander G. Weheliye discusses the flesh as a site of alterity. Citing Giorgio Agamben's theorization of bare life and the phenomenon of the Muselmann (inmates of Holocaust concentration camps on the verge of death), Weheliye argues that "while their bodies might no longer exist in the world of Man, the Muselmänner's relational flesh speaks,

conjures, intones, and concocts sumptuous universes that are silenced when the Muselmann is confined to the status of an exceptionally disembodied example."[23] Put differently, flesh speaks (of survival, of the otherwise), even when the body is dead or on the verge of death. Through the flesh, we can "summon forms of human emancipation that can be imagined but not (yet) described." [24] Campbell's *I Live to Fight (No More) Forever* takes us to the site of the flesh so we can imagine the otherwise.

However, there is another obvious, although understated, meaning in the title of the Campbell's work – *I Live to Fight (No More) Forever* is most certainly a nod to the famed words supposedly spoken by the Nez Perce Chief Joseph in his surrender to the US Army in 1877. Chief Joseph's words, "I will fight no more forever," have been dramatically memorialized (in history and in Hollywood) as the end of the Nez Perce War and, in many ways, the triumphant end of Indigenous ways of life. Indeed, the Nez Perce War began when several bands of the Nez Perce and their allies refused to give up their lands or to be moved onto reservations. By referencing this historical moment, *I Live to Fight (No More) Forever* might reflect the ways in which "U.S.-based antiblack violence [is] a modality of white supremacist social ordering, at times parallel and other times overlapping with the genealogy of genocidal anti-indigenous violence" that Dylan Rodriguez has described in his analysis of the Filipinx American condition. [25] However, the silence on this connection in the exhibition and from the artist may also speak to something more pernicious about archives, memory, and public history – that even in our attempt to uncover hidden, obscure, or rewritten

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[23] Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke U. Press, 2014), 121.
[24] Ibid., 127.
[25] Dylan Rodriguez, *Suspended Apocalypse: White Supremacy, Genocide, and the Filipino Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 209.

histories, we may also uphold the continued violence of the archive against another. That in witnessing the violence wrought on Black flesh, and in implicating Filipinx life in the process, Campbell may simultaneously be contributing to the silencing of Indigenous dispossession that becomes the grounds upon which such a witnessing may occur. So where do we go from here?

Fleshy Archives

Grappling with the haunting aesthetics of empire on Filipinx America so often can look like the desire for multicultural inclusions and celebration – romanticizing Filipinx American celebrities, bending towards the impulse of assimilation, advocating for inclusion and visibility within an imperial aesthetics that relies on your own abjection. This is also an empire that produces a "cacophony of competing struggles for hegemony… [that] cloud attention from the underlying structures of settler colonialism that made the United States possible as oppressor in the first place," as Jodi Byrd has argued, and that exists in the wake of Black death, as Christina Sharpe has contended. [26] How can one attend to the abjection of Filipinx America, and that haunting history and aesthetics, while also witnessing the cacophony of settler colonial logics and the wake of chattel slavery? In other words, how does Filipinx America listen to the specters of our own haunting without falling into a trap meant to obscure other forms of violence – indigenous dispossession and the trafficking of Black bodies – that are foundational to the operations of US empire expansion, and exploitation. How do we avoid what Quynh Nhu Li, looking at Asian-Indigenous relations in

[26] Jodi Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), xvii., Sharpe, *In the Wake*.

the Americas, calls "settler racial hegemonies" or the ways "consent within the contact of settler colonialism can often manifest in the formation of liberatory dissent." [27] Perhaps one way to further think about these contestations and possible alternatives to them is to return to the HeLa cells, vaccine research, and the flesh.

In September 2019, just before the COVID-19 pandemic began and nineteen years after the country was declared free of the disease, the Philippines announced a polio outbreak amongst children, an outbreak that the World Health Organization (WHO) declared over nearly two years later in June 2021. Testing on sewage and waterways in Metro Manila and Davao City showed that a vaccine-derived variant (VDPV2) of the poliovirus was present, and the government began the process of vaccinating all children, even if they were not affected by the disease. The vaccine-derived virus mutated from the oral polio vaccine (OPV), which uses a live, weakened form of poliovirus. In some cases, the OPV strain mutates in the gastrointestinal tract and can spread in communities that are not widely vaccinated and where public sanitation and hygiene is poor. [28] What is meant to save lives and eradicate a virus, in this case, can also become the source of further illness and debilitation – not because the vaccines do not work, but because of the uneven and improper distribution these vaccines in communities that are determined to be less-than-human. Had the entire community been vaccinated, then the likelihood of the mutation spreading would

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[27] Quynh Nhu Le, *Unsettled Solidarities: Asian and Indigenous Cross-Representations in the Américas* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2019), 4.

[28] "Detection of circulating vaccine derived polio virus 2 (cVDPV2) in environmental samples – the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States," *World Health Organization*, September 14, 2022, https://www.who.int/emergencies/disease-outbreak-news/item/2022-DON408#:~:text=Vaccine%2Dderived%20poliovirus%20is%20a,live%2C%20weakened%20form%20of%20poliovirus.

have decreased significantly. What does it mean that a mutation of polio occurred from the vaccines that were created with the help of HeLa cells, not because the vaccine does not work, but because some had access to it, while others did not?

HeLa cells were also used in studying COVID-19 (SARS-CoV-2) in the efforts to create a vaccine to combat the lethal virus amidst global shutdowns, work-from-home orders, overflowing hospitals and other medical institutions, and the exploitation of "essential" workers. HeLa cells have arguably saved many lives during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, as the successful development and dissemination of vaccines and booster shots from Moderna, Pfizer, and other companies have indicated, though at the cost of Henrietta Lacks's autonomy. Even so, before and even after the invention of such vaccines, some bodies were already relegated to a space of danger and peril. For example, in the US, while Filipinxs and Filipinx Americans comprised just 4% of registered nurses in the country, they accounted for almost a third of all COVID-related deaths among registered nurses. [29] This is not because the vaccine or other safety precautions, such as masking and isolating, do not work, but because of the precarity of the Filipinx laboring body and its relegation to a space of social death. Similarly, at the onslaught of the COVID-19 pandemic, residents of Navajo Nation were impacted hard by the virus, facing higher rates of illness compared to the rest of the US, due to a lack of infrastructure, funding, and the large number of multi-generational households. [30] With the recent announcement that President Joseph Biden plans to end the

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[29] Rosem Morton, "The Corona Crisis: The Coronavirus Crisis: Filipino American Health Workers reflect on trauma and healing on COVID's Frontlines," *NPR*, November 9, 2021, https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/11/09/1052062334/covid-filipino-american-health-workers-burnout.

[30] "COVID-19: Disproportionate Impact on Navajo Nation and Tribal Communities," *County Health Rankings & Roadmaps*, July 9, 2020, https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/online-

COVID-19 national and public health emergencies in May 2023, those without insurance may have to pay for future vaccines out of pocket. Black, Hispanic, and American Indian and Alaskan Natives experienced higher rates of COVID-19 infection and death compared to white people throughout the pandemic, likely due to employment status and type, access to transportation, and living in multi-generational/multi-familial homes, illuminating how the President's decision to end the COVID-19 emergency is an extension of the already precarious and perilous position BIPOC have been put in over the last three years. Furthermore, these statistics reveal how some bodied simply do not have access to health and safety, and that something like the COVID-19 vaccine, or the polio vaccine for that matter, both past and present have been accessible only to those deemed worthy of saving. The inventions and discoveries brought about through Lacks's flesh have often been withheld from, or irresponsibly disseminated, to those who needed them most.

Yes, Campbell makes clear the ethical dilemmas of the HeLa cells – "I was injected with the polio vaccine and I have Henrietta Lacks to quietly thank." [31] Henrietta Lacks' flesh lives on in the flesh of those who have been vaccinated for polio or COVID-19. And though many, not just Filipinx Americans, have benefited from this medical breakthrough, Campbell's implication of her own body in this narrative is, in itself, an act of in sight – to look within and see how one's own living flesh carries in it the pain and death of another. But for those who never receive these vaccines, they too carry within their flesh the history of Henrietta Lacks and those bodies who have been abjected and violated in medical and scientific history. Not being worthy of a vaccine – whether it be due to lack of infrastructure,

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and-on-air/webinars/covid-19-disproportionate-impact-on-navajo-nation-and-tribal-communities .

[31] Campbell, "Portrait of a Woman," 62.

insurance, wealth, or national access – echoes Lacks's own journey to secure medical treatment for her cervical cancer. Lacks's options for care were limited in the time of Jim Crow. We cannot possibly know if wider access and greater care would have saved her life, but we can speculate. We can also speculate that had she gone to another hospital, perhaps HeLa cells would have never been discovered at all.

What would life be like without the HeLa cells? We could imagine that the polio vaccine might never have been discovered, or a COVID vaccine would never have been developed. What would our world look like then? Regardless, another person would have suffered, as so many others have done in the past – from the Tuskegee Syphilis Study in which hundreds of African American men with syphilis were left untreated in order to be studied, to New Mexico's tuberculosis sanatoriums and the spread of the disease to Indigenous and Hispanic residents – all in the name of medical and scientific advancements meant to benefit those deemed worthy. [32] Modern Western medicine has always decided which bodies were worth saving, and which flesh was worth sacrificing for the sake of another.

These fleshy connections between Black, Indigenous, and Filipinx people extend beyond the implications the HeLa cells, though Henrietta Lacks's immortal cell line and the work of Crystal Z. Campbell help us access these connections, albeit in imperfect and

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[32] Jennifer Levin, "The lungers' legacy: Tuberculosis patients in New Mexico," *Pasatiempo (The Santa Fe New Mexican)*, May 6, 2016. https://www.santafenewmexican.com/pasatiempo/books/readings_signings/the-lungers-legacy-tuberculosis-patients-in-new-mexico/article_ac84c0eb-9da9-5edf-b207-baadc0406f73.html., "The Syphilis Study at Tuskegee Timeline," CDC, accessed February 6, 2023. https://www.cdc.gov/tuskegee/timeline.htm.,
Also see C. Riley Snorton, "Chapter 1: Anatomically Speaking: Ungendered Flesh and the Science of Sex" in *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

contentious ways. As Nerissa Balce argues, for example, during the Philippine-American War, the Black press and African American soldiers fighting in the Philippines found a kinship in the struggles of the Filipinx native and mobilized this relationality in their contestation of US racial politics, especially at a time when Jim Crow and the spectacle of lynching reigned supreme.[33] In particular, the "trope of black skin," as Balce puts it, is not only visually abjected during the war in American political cartoons that depicted Filipinx natives as Black, unruly, child-like, and queered bodies, but also became a foundation for building solidarity between Black Americans and Filipinx natives, who saw a kinship in the racialization of their skin. [34]

Likewise, the native Filipinx has always been depicted as proximate to Indigenous North Americans, as Sarita See has argued, as a way to make the Filipinx body and artefacts make sense in US archives – by imagining the Filipinx body in this way, parallel to the Indigenous peoples of America, there is justification for US imperial expansion into the Asian continent. [35] Indeed, we see this proximity in the Rudyard Kipling poem that opens this chapter, in the description of the Filipinx people as "new-caught, sullen peoples, // Half devil and half child," or in President William McKinley's interview with the Christian Advocate on the acquisition of the Philippines as a territory, in which he claims, "there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our

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[33] Nerissa Balce, *Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 93–94.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Sarita Echavez See, *The Filipino Primitive: Accumulation and Resistance in the American Museum* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 28.

fellow-men for whom Christ also died." [36] This language of civilizing a savage people by bringing them Christianity and putting them under the tutelage of a paternalistic colonizer is reflected in the attempts by the US to retroactively narrativize the settlement of the West as one that brought Indigenous peoples education and civility. Woodrow Wilson, for example, stated in a "message to all the Indians" as a part of the 1913 Expedition of Citizenship to the North American Indian that, "the great white father now calls [Indigenous Americans] his brothers, not his children…you have shown in your education and in your settled ways of life staunch, manly, worthy qualities of sound character," is a similar story of paternalism and refusal to acknowledge to violence of US expansion, conquest, and empire. [37]

Both the abjection and primitivizing of the Filipinx body through Blackness and a proximity to North American Indigeneity is a racializing aesthetic that haunts Filipinx America to this day. But there also lies possibilities in these crossings and adjacencies. I want to avoid making simplistic connections – that Filipinxs were seen as Black, or that they were compared to Native North Americans, and thus we should have solidarity with one another. We should seek solidarity with one another, but not through such reductive connections which flattens out the differences of settler colonialism, chattel slavery, and US benevolent imperialism. [38] Instead, by highlighting the ways the aesthetics of US empire has been

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[36] General James Rusling, "Interview with President William McKinley," *The Christian Advocate,* January 22, 1903.

[37] Alysa Landry, "Woodrow Wilson: 'The Great White Father Now Calls You His Brothers,'" *Indian Country Today*, September 13, 2018, accessed February 6, 2023. https://ictnews.org/archive/woodrow-wilson-the-great-white-father-now-calls-you-his-brothers.

[38] Indigeneity in the Philippines continues to be a fraught and tenuous subject throughout the diaspora, particularly with regards for the diasporic desire to claim a lost indigenous identity or past. Not only has this fueled an entire industry of travel and tourism to the "homeland" in the Philippines for Filipinx Americans and other diasporic populations, but it tends to obscure a history of violence towards indigenous peoples in the Philippines. As Adrian De Leon has

implemented in similar, interconnected, and incommensurate ways across the Atlantic, through the North American continent, across the Pacific to the Philippines, I want to highlight our entanglements with one another and, in an act of what Saidiya Hartman calls critical fabulation, think about alternative, unintentional moments of witnessing one another that have been shared between Black, Indigenous, and Filipinx peoples – whether it be soldiers in contact with Filipinx natives during the Philippine-American War, Filipinxs potentially meeting Indigenous North Americans while displayed at the St. Louis World's Fair, or a Filipinx nurse caring for a Black or Indigenous patient during the COVID-19 pandemic. [39] I want to look at, as Allan Isaac so wonderfully puts it, "forms of living show how selves go out of bounds beyond the economic contract to transform even momentarily self, others, time, and their surroundings." [40] Witnessing each other, looking inwards at our own flesh and the memories they may carry, and imagining what paradise might look like for all of us – that is what I am trying to do here.

To Witness

Through *I Live to Fight (No More) Forever*, Campbell offers us a way to look inwards and outward to see the connections and entanglements, however messy, between Filipinx America, Blackness, and Indigeneity. Christen A. Smith's reconceptualization of the

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argued about the 1997 Indigenous People's Rights Act in the Philippines, for example, "[the act] introduced a convoluted bureaucratic mechanism through which Indigenous peoples must navigate in order to assert their claims to traditional ancestral lands." Adrian De Leon, "Indigeneity, Diaspora, and the Violent Business of Atavism," *Episteme*, accessed February 6, 2023. https://positionspolitics.org/indigeneity-diaspora-and-the-violent-business-of-atavism/

[39] Saidiya Hartman. "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 1-14.

[40] Allan Punzalan Isaac, *Filipino Time: Affect Worlds and Contracted Labor* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022, 17.

act of witnessing is, again, useful to consider – as a decolonial tactic, "witnessing is watching, placing oneself in solidarity with the struggle of the people, peeling back the layers of hidden social meaning that are embedded in the practice of racialized, colonial violence, and politically investing oneself in the active pursuit of the demise of the colonial system." [41] To return to Morrison's work and the concept of "in sight" and Tiffany King's provocation that "conquest is never clean," we might also consider witnessing as an act of looking inward – not as an act of individualization, but as an act of implication or "how selves go out of bounds." [42] What would it mean if we looked at our own complicity in violence against ourselves and violence enacted on others? And, more importantly, how might such an act allow us to imagine paradise?

Crystal Z. Campbell's newest project, currently a work in progress, is entitled *Post Masters*, and it asks a central, extremely fraught, question: "What does it mean to become American?" Drawing on her own history working for the United States Postal Service (USPS), as well as her parents' history working for the same institution, Campbell says that "Post Masters is [her] most autobiographical work. It is an experimental film, performance, painting and publication project looking at the intersections between USPS and the US military through the lens of both Filipinx and Black histories." [43] While the project has yet to come to fruition, it already prompts one to think of the many connections between USPS,

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[41] Smith, *Afro-Paradise*, 183.
[42] King, *The Black Shoals,* xi., Isaac, *Filipino Time*, 17.
[43] Victoria Santos, "Distinguished visiting scholar earns 2022 Creative Capital Award," *UBNow*, April 22, 2022, https://www.buffalo.edu/ubnow/stories/2022/04/campbell-creative-capital-award.html.

Filipinx American and Black postal workers, and US westward expansion and settler colonialism. [44]

Perhaps the question should not be, "what makes us American," but "what is our relationship to being American (or Americanness)?" Desiring Americanness, assimilation, recognition, even citizenship, often further implicates us in the suffering of another. I want to end, then, by proposing that to witness does not have to mean we are all the same, nor does it mean that we have to work towards some universal future. What if paradise is not something in the future at all, but the act of witnessing together and working for our shared survival under a system that not only separates and isolates us from each other, but that also pits us against one another? What if survival looks different for all of us, and what if our tactics constantly change, so that we may survive in ways that do not cause more harm for the other? For Filipinx America, to witness must start with our own haunting – reckoning with the spectral remnants of our reality as a part of larger entanglements will allow us to imagine our survival as being beyond our own selves.

[44] Cameron Blevins, *Paper Trails: The US Post and the Making of the American West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

CONCLUSION

While editing the first draft of this dissertation, it was announced on February 2, 2023 that the United States and the Philippines had come to an agreement that would allow the US to expand its presence in the archipelago by establishing four new Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) sites, a supplemental agreement to the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), which has been in effect between the two nations since 1999. The agreement is part of an ongoing attempt to counter Chinese global power and threatens to not only upset the tenuous "peace" in East and Southeast Asia, but undoubtedly brings with it fearful anticipation of what violence may come for the Philippines as a direct consequence to the increase of US military personnel in the country. Indeed, the VFA and EDCA have, despite the ending of the Military Bases Agreement in 1991, assured that the United States has had a permanent presence in the Philippines since the 1990's. And before the 1990's, the Philippines was a territory of the US and later the site of the two largest US naval bases in the world through the Military Bases Agreement. Through all of these iterations of US military occupation in the Philippines, sexual violence, murder, poverty and labor exploitation have remained constant. One of the most notable recent consequences of this relationship is the murder of Jennifer Laude, a trans Filipina woman, who was killed by United States Marine Corps Lance Corporal Joseph Scott Pemberton in October 2014, shortly after the passing of EDCA in April 2014. But before Laude, many more had been raped and trafficked, some were killed, red light districts were erected, and perpetrators have walked away with little to no consequence.

I began this dissertation with an excerpt from Gina Apostol's novel *Insurrecto*. It feels fitting that I end by reflecting on a quotation from an op-ed she wrote for the *New York Times* in 2012. She begins the piece by saying, "the Philippines is haunted by its relationship with the United States," and later she asserts, "bursts of anxiety over the [military] bases' return pop up every time America finds a new enemy." [1] Even in 2012, over a decade ago, Apostol names the anticipation of what so many felt was inevitable, or perhaps the dread that something never really ended – EDCA would go into effect two years after the op-ed was published, and this year EDCA will expand to four new sites, the locations of which have yet to be disclosed. Following the announcement on February 1st of this year, Apostol wrote another op-ed for the *New York Times* entitled "Dancing With America Has Been a Curse for the Philippines." In the op-ed Apostol calls our current moment "some tragic 'Groundhog Day'" and remarks on the eerie and uncanny juncture the Philippines and Filipinxs find themselves in, witnessing not only the return of the Marcoses and their legacy of dictatorship with the election of President Ferdinand "Bong Bong" Marcos Jr., but also the continued "creeping occupation by the US military under the guise of East Asian security." [2] Apostol's premonitions about the expansion of US military presence in the Philippines and the haunting of history is, in the end, the affect I have tried to pin down throughout the chapters that have preceded.

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[1] Gina Apostol, "In the Philippines, Haunted by History," *The New York Times*, April 29, 2012, https://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/29/opinion/sunday/in-the-philippines-haunted-by-history.html.

[2] Gina Apostol, "Dancing with American Has Been a Curse for the Philippines, *The New York Times*, February 7, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/02/07/opinion/us-philippines-china-military-curse.html.

The narrative of friendly relations and long-time allyship between the US and the Philippines has long obscured the violent history of genocide, sexual and gender violence, resource and labor extraction, colonial tutelage, and military violence in the Philippines. These things alone are haunting, but the explicit obliteration of these acts from popular US history and American cultural memory, along with the racial pathologization and forced assimilation of the Filipinx American diasporic subject, has created a unique structure of haunting. This haunting is built on an aesthetics of "colonial unknowing" – it finds its foundations on what it refuses to acknowledge, and so we inevitably feel the grounding of that foundation under our feet, though we are not supposed to be able to name it. [3]

Throughout this dissertation, I have approached various kinds of cultural productions by or about Filipinx Americans as forms of spectral evidence that illumine these haunted realities. In chapters 1 and 2, I explore the haunting of imperial aesthetics on Filipinx America by looking at ghostly figures and bitter rage in an era of multicultural celebration, neoliberalism, and diasporic assimilation. In chapter 1 and through an analysis of *The Assassination of Gianni Versace*, I argue that Filipinx America continues to be haunted by imperial representations of the Filipinx body as an abject and primitive figure and in chapter 2, I assert that *Bitter Melon* works against the assumption that proper assimilation is tied to positive affective responses (such as happiness), and instead shows how ugly affects within queer diasporas, such as frustration, bitterness, and anger, can be productive in determining empire's haunting. Through the examples of *Assassination* and *Bitter Melon*, I discern a queer impossibility to comport to imperial temporality/spatiality and affective belonging. In

[3] Manu Vimalassery, Juliana Hu Pegues, and Alyosha Goldstein, "On Colonial Unknowing," *Theory & Event*, 19.4 (2016).

chapters 3 and 4, I look at what haunting can teach us about going beyond ourselves, to think about our connections to other places, both deemed foreign ("America" or dispossessed indigenous land) and home ("homeland" or the Philippines), and to other peoples. Chapter 3 looks at the epochal presidencies of Donald Trump and Rodrigo Duterte to understand the historical and current relationships between the US and the Philippines or the Filipinx to America. Examining the queercore punk band Aye Nako and the filmic and photographic documentation of Duterte's extrajudicial killings, chapter 3 argues that the sometimes ineffable anger, frustration, and sorrow felt between and across the Philippines and its diaspora can be heard in excess to, as the waste of, or as a form of spectral evidence in empire's haunting. In chapter 4, I look at the artwork of Crystal Z. Campbell and draw on Toni Morrison's "in sight" or what Black feminist scholars have called witnessing to assert that we can see the incommensurate, yet no less intertwined, histories and ways of being for Black, Indigenous, and Filipinx diasporic subjects living through US imperial haunting, as well as how we might imagine paradise(s) with and alongside one another. Through these final two chapters, I grapple with what it means to imagine paradise against a colonial definition of the idea and towards a messy, contentious, but no less joyful and lovely, myriad of paradises for those who are haunted by the violence of the US.

In the introduction, I think through what Filipinx American critique could be and, rather than explicitly name it in each chapter, I hoped to show it through the analyses or, in other words, the ways I grapple with my own sense of being haunted when I experience the TV show, film, music, photography, literature, and art that I have compiled in my archive. This dissertation is my attempt at exploring Filipinx American critique as a method for approaching US historicization and knowledge production about the Philippines.

I end this dissertation with the announcement of the four new EDCA sites in the Philippines, not only because of its uncanny timing with the writing of this dissertation, but because it feels, like Apostol says, like a version of the film "Groundhog Day" (a film which, ironically, begins on February 1st) in that it feels like we are repeating the same thing over and over again in a never-ending time loop. Perhaps haunting as a structure can also be defined in this way because it often feels like the same things keep happening, over and over again, like déjà vu, though you can't quite place why it feels so familiar or close to home. We repeat the same lines, the same mannerism, we recite the same narratives, and play the parts expected of us in our haunted realities.

What would it be like to look within ourselves and see the things the repetition of our haunting hopes we forget? That knowledge is already there, buried under layers of repetition in the stories we have always been told, the images we have always been shown, and the feelings we have been commanded to feel. This dissertation is my own act of "in sight," a process I began before I even knew it, when I was in elementary school and wondered why my dad was white, when I was in high school and wondered why the Philippines was mentioned in my US history text book a total of three times, and when I was an undergraduate student who was told point blank by a fellow student in an ethnic studies course that "Filipinos eat dog! It's true, my friend from Hawai'i told me once." This dissertation has been a form of praxis: an attempt at finding patterns, connections, crosscurrents, the repetition that I have always seen but never really acknowledged. It is not necessarily an act of undoing, but a process of acknowledgment.

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