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VEXED TONGUES: Queer Pilipinx American Poetic Embodiment

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Abstract: This thesis embarks on the odyssey of queer diasporic Pilipinx, a journey that has hitherto been neglected in English literary studies. Set against the backdrop of multiple imperialisms and ongoing migration, this project attends to a complex array of issues discussed in contemporary queer Pilipinx American poetry, from the movement of both bodies and languages, to the loss of both the mother and motherland, to imagining both individual and collective liberation. In close-reading Kay Ulanday Barrett's *More Than Organs* and Aldrin Valdez's *ESL, or You Weren't Here*, my aim is to explore how queer Pilipinx American embodiment can be uprooted and mapped within a poetic landscape that dissolves boundaries between languages, voices, genders, temporalities, and worlds. These collections elucidate not only alternative ways of mourning and healing but also the breadth of queer, diasporic imagination that transcends neat categorization or stringent conclusions. This thesis proposes that queer Pilipinx American poetry can help us negotiate our legacies of loss in order to arrive at new, expansive possibilities of being, becoming, and belonging.

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*This thesis is for my queer Pilipinx kindred—
I hope you can hear your heartbeats pulse in between my words.*

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musings for loved ones

This thesis was written to the sounds, sights, smells, and tastes of: oat milk cortados, Mitski's *Laurel Hell* album, sunrises from my bedroom window, Sodoi Coffee, {m}aganda open mics, rereading Ocean Vuong, the first three seasons of *Gilmore Girls*, picnics at Willard Park, accidental audio messages, karaoke with Pil-Ams, roasted red pepper pasta, playing *we're not really strangers*, yerba mates at three am, spoonfuls of peanut butter, chaos in the MCC library, the PCN 46 musical soundtrack, & the sound of my friends' laughter.



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These spaces have held me in all my melancholy and wist and water— thank you for showing me the gentle energy of possibility. Because of you, here I am, dreaming my way to love.

ABSTRACT

This thesis embarks on the odyssey of queer diasporic Pilipinxs, a journey that has hitherto been neglected in English literary studies. Set against the backdrop of multiple imperialisms and ongoing migration, this project attends to a complex array of issues discussed in contemporary queer Pilipinx American poetry, from the movement of both bodies and languages, to the loss of both the mother and motherland, to imagining both individual and collective liberation. In close-reading Kay Ulanday Barrett's *More Than Organs* and Aldrin Valdez's *ESL, or You Weren't Here*, my aim is to explore how queer Pilipinx American embodiment can be uprooted and mapped within a poetic landscape that dissolves boundaries between languages, voices, genders, temporalities, and worlds. These collections elucidate not only alternative ways of mourning and healing but also the breadth of queer, diasporic imagination that transcends neat categorization or stringent conclusions. This thesis proposes that queer Pilipinx American poetry can help us negotiate our legacies of loss in order to arrive at new, expansive possibilities of being, becoming, and belonging.

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“When the “you” becomes the “we”
It transforms to a new form of perception
An inkling towards community
An inkling towards introspection.

When the “sarili” and the “sila” meet
It creates harmony
A beautiful one that sees its reflection when the eyes meet on the street
A beautiful one, like the fireflies of the forest, a picturesque symphony.”

*-Jennifer Co, Ardyel Lim, Liaa Melissa, Noreen Ocampo, Sasha Penano
{M}aganda Magazine, literary team 34
“KAPWA”*

INTRODUCTION

on legacy and language

To sing in the face of loss, we must begin from a place of creation. That is, how do we confront the horrifying truths of the world with the tenderness to transform them? How do we continue to choose life, not despite the past, but with the capacious acceptance of it? To say *hello, I will carry you as far as I can go* and place it carefully into the future's eager hands?

When surveying the Philippines' literary legacy, it is insufficient to identify this field solely by its continuous engagement with the country's multiple imperialisms and ancestral traumas. It is too reductive to collapse us into a monolithic narrative, circumscribed by oppression and exploitation, that seldom extends outside those bounds. Forced to return to the site of suffering, we are denied escape from these boundaries and dispossessed of imagining futurity. Our destiny is this death-driven purgatory in which our ancestors' pain becomes ours too, in which collective grief is housed in individual bodies, in which death becomes relived so much it marks our ways of being. We cannot look into a mirror without seeing the vestiges of imperial domination, neocolonial infringements, and political exploitation. To sever ourselves from these wounds seems impossible; we do not know who we are without them, we would not be who we are without them. Especially within the Philippine context, our claim to an 'authentic' Pilipinx is molded by the strands of Spanish colonialism, US imperialism, Japanese occupation; our pre-colonial features are blurred when combined with these circumstances. The Pilipinx body is a locus of historical, social, and political convergences and cannot be neatly aligned with just the Philippine nation nor just the Western diaspora. It is not incorrect to

point out these patterns of violence—and in actuality, they are essential in understanding the complex histories of the Pilipinx people— but it very quickly equates our community with trauma, as if we are destined to grief, to immobility, to perpetual death, and it keeps us from recognizing the newness that was born out of those violent encounters.

But how can we hold and begin to heal our vexed existences? Attuned to the violent institutions in which we live, we must understand how decolonial critique works against such Western matrices of power that urge the imperial episteme, assimilation, and perpetual suffering. I argue, as we seek to unsettle these dominant forces, the queer diaspora is especially crucial. Queer diasporic methodologies disrupt prescriptive, teleological formations of belonging and embodiment. It rattles the notion that selfhood and homemaking must be singularly oriented by the nation-state. These strategies allow us to create new frameworks for engaging with Pilipinx identity, and particularly, *multiplicity*, that center nonnormativity and collective liberation. Thus, if we are to reclaim our identifications, if we are to break out of these stringent paradigms, we must acknowledge that the issues and excesses of Pilipinx personhood hinge on decoloniality, border-crossings, and queer reorientation.

So, I ask, how do we write out of our imposed narrative, outside of mere cyclicity? How do we unburden ourselves from the weight of history's repetition? How do we "learn to speak alongside / silence?"¹ How can we "become / all of the things at the same time"?² How do we state who we were, who we are, who we will be? The answer, I suppose, is to create.

¹ Valdez, Aldrin, "Blue Bakla." *ESL, or You Weren't Here*. Nightboat Books, 2018, lines 52-54.

² Barrett, Kay Ulanday, "Mahal: a prologue." *More Than Organs*. Sibling Rivalry Press, LLC, 2020, lines 14-15.

how do we state who we are?

To begin, it is vital to note my use of *Pilipinx* to refer to the Philippine people, a moniker that emerged from social media exchanges between everyday queer, trans Pilipinxs in the diaspora and later arose in academic scholarship in 2017 (Barrett et al. 2021, 134). The usage of ‘X’ remains highly contested, tangled within the charged discourses of decolonization, the gender-neutral *Filipino*, linguistic imperialism, the “cultural appropriation” of *Latinx* and *Afro-Latinx*, precolonial gender-crossings, Western gender and sexuality epistemologies, etc. However, such scholarly and popular debates are over-saturated with input from cis, straight people of Philippine ancestry who remain hyper-defensive of the label *Filipino*. They seldom center the voices of queer, trans, non-binary, and gender-nonconforming Pilipinxs. To counteract this imbalance, “In Defense of the X: Centering Queer, Trans, and Non-Binary Pilipina/x/os, Queer Vernacular, and the Politics of Naming” spotlights the material realities of queer, trans Pilipina/o/xs and engages with the ongoing history of naming and violence. In this work, Karen Buenavista Hanna, Anang Palomar, and Kay Ulanday Barrett— one of the poets we will be examining in this project— frame the ‘X’ as a destabilizing force against the binary logics of both gender and cultural authenticity of the ‘here’ (United States) versus ‘there’ (Philippines). That is to say, *Pilipinx* resists cultural homogenization and makes space for multiple deviant identities that continually innovate. Barrett et al. also articulate the work of self-naming as radical imagination, as our identities are “a product of the social-economic-cultural-political-environmental forces that shape it, and has been cultivated as a marker for the kind of world in which we wish to live” (2021, 136). ‘X’ is a praxis of agency; it gives us dignity, community, and possibility. As I announced earlier, if we wish to write out of our imposed narratives, if we open up to

a world that allows for continued creations, we must engage in a mode of self-identification that registers such expansiveness.

However, I must note that my usage of *Pilipinx* is not a definitive denunciation of *Filipino* (I will use this term when the context warrants it) or a forceful imposition of the ‘X’ onto my community, but rather, it acknowledges our fluidity and ever-evolving forms of being. Especially since this work is wholly preoccupied with self-definition, bodies in transit, and imagining futurity, *Pilipinx* makes room for our multiplicities and transcendent existences. From the energies and urgencies of ‘X,’ let us turn now to our poets, self-identified Pilipinx Americans, as they construct their itineraries of border-crossings, body-mapping, mourning, homemaking, and (re)imagining.

the new odyssey

It has been in the field of poetry that some of the most striking interventions have been made in Pilipinx culture—José Rizal, José Garcia Villa, Ophelia Dimalanta, and Edith Tiempo to name a few. Continuing their radical work, I argue that contemporary queer diasporic poetry, in particular, has become a crucial entry point for engaging in decolonization and imagining liberation. So, this project turns its attention to two poets who harness this fictive world-making to dream and construct new ways of being.

Author of *When the Chant Comes* (Topside Press, 2016) and *More Than Organs* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2020), Kay Ulanday Barrett’s first admission into the poetry scene was through spoken word performance, community theatre, and 90s hip-hop and remixes. Their work, typically under the moniker ‘brownroundboi,’ is subsequently influenced by these spaces, in conjunction with their

activist work within queer, trans communities of color, migrant solidarity networks, and disability justice. Their first poetry collection is a riotous song of sickness and survival; it confronts the junctures of race, gender, and disability within the Philippine lineage and against the forces of the U.S. empire. Carrying these pulses, their second collection continues this line of reckoning. *More Than Organs* transports and transforms the queer diasporic body through the myriad realms of voices, temporalities, longing, grief, rage— reaching out to the undefinable.

A contemporary of Barrett, Aldrin Valdez is Manila-born, Brooklyn-based poet and visual artist, whose inaugural collection *ESL, or You Weren't Here* (Nightboat Books, 2018) also writes within the legacies and losses of Pilipinx history. They examine the seemingly untranslatable experience of living in-between languages, cultures, temporalities, and genders in pursuit of new registers of self-definition. This work follows Valdez's intimate narrative of immigration and reunification with their parents in the 1990s. It tracks their coming-of-age reckoning with the wounds of Spanish colonialism and American imperialism in addition to their awakening to the precarious conditions of diaspora and queerness.

Both of these poets grapple with the ineffable nature of their identities. *More Than Organs* and *ESL, or You Weren't Here* voyage through the ripples of rootlessness and belonging, loss and love, and healing and imagination, as they occupy multiple embodiments and are oriented at multiple audiences. In conversation with their literary predecessors, Barrett and Valdez write from the long legacy of radical QTBIPOC creatives. Their selfhoods are grounded in collective consciousness as they call forth the voices and vestiges of their personal and ancestral past. They focus heavily on the presence and absence of the body within spaces, and the textures of loss and (re)discovery.

Barrett's and Valdez's collections are organized into sections, labeled 'Isa' (one), 'Dalawa' (two), and 'Tatlo' (three), which track their journeys of displacement, migration, and home-building. Both poets also have a fourth section; but while Barrett continues their numeric chant in 'Apat' (four), Valdez titles their section 'SHUFFLED SIDES OF A CHANGING PAINTING.' The architecture of these books speaks to how measurements of time and counting construct the basic understanding of beginnings and endings. Though scaffolded by these systems, Barrett's and Valdez's poetry fracture, rearrange, and blur memory so as to create a new odyssey that arrives at nonteleological and nonnormative Pilipinx narratives. Moreover, they are preoccupied with the mysteries and opacities of the queer immigrant body in search of (re)definitions that refuse neat and singular categorization.

I argue that these writers transform the poetic landscape into an imaginative space to reckon with colonialism, imperialism, diaspora, and queerness that creates new, liberated ways of speaking, loving, and being. Thus, I ask: how do Barrett and Valdez speak to their particular histories while grappling with their diasporic present in order to construct a more radical, liberated future?

It is also crucial to note that Barrett's and Valdez's works carry multitudes of discourses and intersecting politics, such as but not limited to: Spanish colonialism, U.S. imperialism, Japanese occupation, violence, diaspora, assimilation, violence, Catholicism, Philippine mythology, gender and sexuality, transness, motherhood, biological and chosen family, mixed identity, disability justice, resistance, and liberation. Of course, there is a risk of diluting their poetic energies when extracting only a few of these threads for my own assessments. Thus, while I attend to the issues of the queer diasporic body, I aim to also leave room for various interpretations that include other analytic threads alongside my own examinations. Moreover, I do not seek to 'uncover' or 'expose' the meanings of

Barrett's and Valdez's pieces but rather offer multiple possibilities of reading and varying levels of understanding so as to illuminate their expansiveness.

Journeying through these collections, the various sections explore and discover how the convergences of language, migration, temporality, and queerness are evoked through Barrett's and Valdez's poetic sensibilities within specific episodes of their lives. My chapter titles— ISA, DALAWA, TATLO— mirror the section titles of *More Than Organs* and *ESL, or You Weren't Here*, framing our projects with our native tongue, Tagalog.

My first chapter, ISA begins at the place of origin and charts the courses of Barrett's and Valdez's poetics, studying how they mediate and blend voice and silence within the body in transit, the body in translation, the body in transformation. In the section, "cartography of sound," we will examine their inaugural poems, Barrett's "Mahal: a prologue," and Valdez's "Tagalog," as they deconstruct the dynamics of their native tongue within their migratory and queer existence. While Barrett begins with language and its breadth within the body, Valdez questions how language moves across oceans. Here, E. San Juan's *Filipino Writing in the United States: Reclaiming Whose America?* (1993) and R. Kwan Laurel's *'Pinoy' English: Language, Imagination, and Philippine Literature* (2005) are especially useful in looking at language's negotiation of space and selfhood that moves toward more inventive ways of speaking and being. The following section, "dislocated/mislocated," discusses the other side of the border-crossing. We must settle into Barrett's and Valdez's continual emergence within their coming-of-age poems— "Albany Park/Logan Square 1993-2000, Chicago IL" and "Blue Bakla," respectively. As they record their 'otherness' and precarious conditions, we arrive at hermeneutics of multiplicity and queer diaspora that echo Sonia Otalvaro-Hormillosa's politics of

dislocation/relocation in *The Homeless Diaspora of Queer Asian Americans* (1999). This chapter breaks open Barrett's and Valdez's multivocalities across geographic and temporal terrains as they set off into their particular odysseys.

Amidst these poetic voyages, chapter two, DALAWA, then delves into the underworld and pointedly asks: how do we hold loss? In the same vein, how do we grapple with loss and avoid being devoured, avoid repeated suffering? But further, how do we deal with loss within an empire that demands assimilation and historical oblivion? Especially as we carry the palpitations of intimate and collective mourning in each of our hands, the section, "litany of loss," questions the various routes to transfigure such grief into resistance. Barrett's "While looking at photo albums: Christmas Eve, 2016" and Valdez's "Long Distance Images" render photographs as a vessel for grieving both their maternal loss and the loss of the motherland. Though they operate within the same landscape, they employ disparate methods of (re)entering their wounds and (re)imagining their ghosts. On the one hand, Barrett transforms their mother's absence into *presence* through their continual mourning and persistent return to the site of loss. On the other, Valdez herself is the one absent. What happens if you've been excluded from mourning? That is to say, they must grapple with not only the death itself but the physical and emotional distance from such losses. Thus, they detail these "long distance" photographs and attempt to discover entry points to access and return to these places of grieving. While they engage in different processes, Barrett and Valdez concentrate on their intimate sites of racial melancholia, reconfiguring its space from paralysis into potential paths to regeneration, a concept formulated by Wen Liu in *Narrating Against Assimilation and Empire* (2019). Since their grief collapses temporal boundaries by pulling the past into the present and the present into the past,

such rupture also calls for the disruption of contained locales and leads into a queerer strategy of mourning. Here I draw upon David Eng's *Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies* (1997) so as to capture how queer diasporic loss within the dominant structures of empire necessitates the dissolution of temporal and geographical borders so as to thwart the normative forces of inclusion and assimilation.

Finally, my last chapter, TATLO, settles within the collections' concluding poems, Barrett's "Tell a child about something that causes you fear or dread" and Valdez's "SHUFFLED SIDES OF A CHANGING PAINTING." Though this section titled "songs for a new world," reaches these poetic finales, we *must* refuse such tidy, teleological notions of conclusion and categorization. That is to say, to embrace nonnormative personhood means to open up to more beginnings, to imagine a liberated and perpetually expansive future. Therefore, when we reach the seeming end of Barrett's and Valdez's odyssey, we must continue to pull language, space, memory, and history apart to give space for the reconstruction and restoration of queer, diasporic embodiment. As noted by Martin Joseph Ponce in *Beyond the Nation* (2012), we must elude the neatness of fixed origins or endings if we are to envision a radically transformative world that has the capacity for continually emergent modes of being and belonging. Similarly, Thomas X. Sarmiento's *Peminist and Queer Affiliation in Literature as a Blueprint for Filipinx Decolonization and Liberation* (2018) also imagines alternative possibilities to the world in which we live. He asserts that the liberated Pilipinx world hinges upon the antiracist, anti-imperialist, and anti-heteronormative dynamics of Pinayism, or peminism. Centered on the concerns of Pilipinx non-men, this mode of analysis weaves together the discourses of race, queerness, place of birth, diasporic migration, and citizenship that are embedded in Barrett's and Valdez's works.

Overall, I want to expand on the critical understandings of queer Pilipinx American identity through an exploration of Barrett's and Valdez's contemporary poetics to dismantle the boundaries that constrain our multiplicities and open such borders to new possibilities. Through this, we can rethink and redefine our existences against the dominating logics of neoliberal assimilation, reductive singularity, and repeated suffering. As we arrive at new, expansive registers of being, becoming, and belonging, we can create, and sing together, songs of solace and sanctuary.

why would i hate my ever
metamorphosing body
that only embodies water
in its strong crashing waves,
in its beautiful blue swirls,
in its calm reflective ponds
i love my body.

am i not allowed to say that?

- *Allysa Abalos*, "i love the kisses on my skin the sun has gifted me"

ISA

So, from where, or from *whom* rather, do we begin? If we seek to unravel how contemporary poets, like Kay Ulanday Barrett and Aldrin Valdez, engage with, and expand out of, the complicated histories of the queer Pilipinx diaspora, we must first map out the incredible legacy of Pilipinx literary production.

Epifanio San Juan Jr., like many Pilipinx American academics, holds up Carlos Bulosan as marking the inaugural experience of deracination and migration, birthing the ‘Filipino writer.’ In his work, *Filipino Writing in the United States: Reclaiming Whose America?*, San Juan Jr. discusses the “schizoid nature of Filipino subjectivity” (San Juan 1993, 150) that must grapple with ongoing coloniality, ethnic identity politics, and political expatriation. Philippine-Anglophone literature thus becomes a “phenomenology of exile” (150), wholly concerned with rootlessness and ceaseless departure. This eliminates possibilities for spaces of belonging, as the ‘Filipino writer’ can never be *home*.

San Juan Jr. identifies the episodes of the Pilipinx odyssey: Carlos Bulosan as the terra firma, Bienvenido Santos and N.V.M Gonzalez as the loci of reconciliation and renegotiation, José Garcia Villa as the vehicle for counterhegemonic rearticulation, and Jessica Hagedorn and Fred Cordova as the move towards reclamation. After these waves of migratory writers, I position this project within our contemporary moment in which we can explore how Kay Ulanday Barrett and Aldrin Valdez poetry is inflected by this literary legacy, but at the same time, diverge from it. They, too, are preoccupied with the claim to ‘home,’ but their cultural productions are further troubled by the

double precarity of queerness and diaspora, thereby necessitating alternative epistemologies from previous Pilipinx artists. In other words, Barrett and Valdez are writing from, and out of, this lineage.

Much like their antecessors, Barrett and Valdez are attentive to the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality as mediated by location and migration. They unfold the queer process of diasporic migration, figuring our bodies as resistances against dominant cultures, as manifestations of nonnormativity. These queer strategies draw upon the concerns that Martin Manalansan, Alice Y. Hom, and Kale Bantigue Fajardo examine in *Q&A: Voices From Queer Asian North America*. In this anthology, they explore the vicissitudes of queer Asian embodiment, especially in the spirit of José Esteban Muñoz's queer pedagogies, as they journey towards new horizons. These theorists are concerned with the queer economy of desire in motion; that is to say, they seek to pull apart the various entanglements within the politics of movement, as these moments of travel, of settling, of border-crossing, are weaved with “power and pleasure always; complicity and privilege oftentimes; resistance, decoloniality, radicalism, feminism, beauty, shame, loss, and resilience sometimes” (Manalansan et al, 2021, 9). Within their poetics, Barrett and Valdez pivot between stillness and movement— a shifting which inflects the migratory nature of their own language. In other words, Barrett and Valdez claim a linguistic hybridity that remains mindful of their ancestral inheritance, transient identities, and amalgamated present.

In situating themselves both within and against their predecessors, these poets seek an escape from the limitations of the ‘Filipino writer’ while also honoring the literary world created before them. And it is undeniable that the Pilipinx literary world is overwhelmingly molded by the complicated dynamics of English and standardized Filipino. Immersed in this, Barrett's and Valdez's poetry

repudiate the seemingly straightforward binary opposition of the colonizer vs. the colonized tongue. Here, R. Kwan Laurel's *"Pinoy" English: Language, Imagination, and Philippine Literature* is especially useful in grappling with the issues of bilingualism. He pursues a recalibration of this polarity because it thus provides "proof that English— as if there were only one and only one kind— can never be ours" (Laurel 2005, 545). Signifying English as prescriptive, as the adversary to the Pinoy, fails to acknowledge that the standardized Filipino language is enforced as well. It wholly misaligns the 'Filipino writer' within the sole category of Tagalog linguistics, misidentifying all Filipinos as Tagalogs. If we were to follow this thread, are we to dispossess the Pilipinx American of their languages, once again continuing this perpetual cycle of denial? As if in response to this question, Barrett and Valdez revitalize the pulses between English and Tagalog— or in Kwan Laurel's words, they "choose to appropriate what the language offers us" (550). They are not begging for access to these modes of speech; they understand that these languages are ours already. They relocate the poetic landscape to an arena of liberative possibilities where we can realize the desire to transcend the colonial and colonized imagination. Barrett's and Valdez's language speaks not only to their vexed histories of trauma and loss but also to revolutionary potentialities. In transforming their ways of speaking, they acknowledge the capacity for new ways of being, thus refiguring poetry as a space of belonging.

Conversing with origins and legacies, Barrett and Valdez track the movement of language as it ebbs and flows between worlds; their heteroglossic attention records the threads of life and loss within migration. These poets carry with them the weight of all those who have come before, seeking to create meaning-making worlds shaped by intimate and collective experiences.

cartography of sound

How does sound move through our bodies, how is it housed on our tongues, how is it carried into the world? Kay Ulanday Barrett's *More Than Organs* offers a series of love letters toward "Brown, Queer, and Trans futures," chronicling the itineraries of Pilipinx American diaspora as we seek to embody wholeness. Attuned to the choreography of loss, this collection composes the melody of hope as it navigates the dynamics of vocal multiplicities and seemingly discordant reverberations. Barrett conducts a project that holds together the resonances of past, present, and future, a harmony that insists on shape-shifting and world-building. Their poems transport and transform between songs of loss to survival to heartache to anger, and always, always return to love, in all its complexity.

And it is with love that we begin. In the first poem of the collection, "Mahal: a prologue," acts as the waiting room, inviting the reader to find comfort in Barrett's words, in advance of the impending voyage. The poem itself is right-justified, at borders of the page, as if urging us to cross it, to turn over the page. But before, we do, Barrett's prologue announces the conflict of the Pilipinx writer as we attempt to speak to our migratory bodies and shifting languages. Right at the beginning, they reveal this dual experience as it is collapsed into the singular Tagalog term, "mahal." As they note, there are two definitions:

mahal, n.

> love

mahal, adj.

> expensive (Barrett lines 23-26)

“Mahal” questions the *cost* of loving, making sacrifice intrinsic to the action. Though Barrett is wholly preoccupied with Brown, Queer, Trans prosperity, they refuse a certain blissful naivete that remains ignorant of institutional destruction and hostility. So, “mahal” becomes the fulcrum of their politics; love requires a deep investment: it risks what Barrett calls “the heart pang, spirit ache, psychological gymnastics” (Barrett 2020). To reach love’s decadence, we must first taste the bittersweetness. “Mahal” desires bountifulness, desires access to the full range of human experience. In particular, Barrett speaks to queer love, one that struggles within and resists heteronormative societal paradigms. In conjunction with that, “mahal” also registers capitalist pressures, love as expense, but also love as valuable. Queer love bears the brunt of systemic violence, stands on the frontlines of suffering. But it is in the face of sorrow that we choose love, to understand its inseparability from pain and hold it anyway. Barrett declares: “We can be smitten and in pain. We can swoon and feel devastated too. We can hold complications” (Barrett 2020). Thus, in their poetic project, they confront and fully embrace complication, unafraid to present the multiple dimensions of personhood.

“Mahal” is simultaneously love and loss, and we claim both, all at once, the second the word is uttered:

this word is shifted in meaning
by tone, context, cadence. the word
becomes interchangeable, durable.
like an imposed tongue. like a pushed
out community. like forced migration. (6-10)

It is situated in liminality until it is “shifted in meaning / by tone, context, cadence”— that is to say, sound creates and transforms meaning. The tongue breaks open the space of knowing and

understanding; language expands to contain the immensity of multiple definitions. In this instability, the word also becomes “durable,” able to endure mercurial contexts and ever-shifting landscapes. When regarded in conversation with San Juan Jr.’s scrutiny of literary migration, “mahal” adopts the ‘Filipino’ odyssey and attempts to reconcile the elusive nature of home and departure. Barrett’s catalog of similes specifically names this conflict as the word’s fungibility signals a “pushed / out community” and a “forced migration.” The enjambment in the first splits “pushed” and “community” over the line break, an immediate emergence of rupture. The destabilized position of “community”— as it is detached and excluded from its verb— exhibits transience, precarity, the inability to settle. This is further asserted in the phrase “forced migration”; that is, movement unmarked by place, neither e-migrate nor im-migrate because we are no longer ‘coming’ and ‘going’ just moving, moving, moving. To be Pilipinx means to hold multiplicities of everything, means to be in constant motion, means to never rest. Neither e- nor im- but perhaps both at once, to know that arrival equals departure, to already hear the inevitable goodbye.

In the same vein, however, movement also speaks to breadth, to expansiveness, to find belonging that transcends physicality and tangibility. Pilipinx personhood allows for both interpretations of language and migration. For Barrett, it is “what it means to leave everything. / what it means to survive most things” (12-13). The anaphora uniting both sentiments asks us the relationship between leaving and survival, between loss and life. The resounding “everything” questions Barrett’s ambivalent “most things,” ponders what has not been survived if everything has been left. The present tense here announces the constancy of these circumstances, a continual leaving, a continual surviving. Barrett’s claim to duality embraces San Juan Jr.’s schizoid nature of the

'Filipino,' as they negotiate the politics of mobility within the force of exile. However, Barrett restructures this tension by acknowledging the mutually constitutive nature of these threads in figuring Pilipinx personhood. In this vein, we cannot simply choose between loss and survival and rootlessness and planting seeds: we must accept both. Barrett's end-stopped "everything" inflects finality, as if concluding with departure. But they instead assert continuation, breathing life in the space after the period. They declare survival even if that survival is not guaranteed; "most things" become enough. The term "mahal" entangles all of these complex threads of stillness and movement, of loss and life, into its dual definition. Barrett maintains complication, because to simplify requires reduction, and thus, misunderstands Pilipinx life.

"Mahal" is in transit, carrying with it love and its expenses. Barrett centralizes motion and mutation as they mold the various senses of this loaded term. At first, the instability of "mahal" is likened to an "imposed tongue" (9), a discomfort located inside the body. Here, Kwan Laurel's critique of exclusionary English erupts: how can we heal the wounds inflected in our voices? How can we reconcile with what has been forced onto us? In pursuit of restoration, *reclamation* even, must we forget this imposition? For Barrett, we cannot separate them; rather, we can "become / all of the things at the same time" (14-15) through the dual passageway of "mahal." The refusal of singularity deconstructs the barriers surrounding Pilipinx identity— to insist on the recognition of multiplicity, to be granted the right to be multiple, at all times. Barrett enhances this viewpoint as they delineate the shape of their linguistic motion: "different routes, traveling / along the same curve of body" (17-18). Here, the body is situated in stillness while languages voyage across its landscape, constructing intersections and roundabouts and various pathways of speaking. In laying claim to linguistic

hybridity, Barrett asserts their access to different levels of meaning-making. They adhere to Kwan Laurel's notion of "Pinoy English" as they refuse the reductive binary of the English vs. Tagalog opposition. Barrett holds both languages in their body, acknowledging the shifting struggle and joy that arises from their multivocality.

Lastly, it is essential to unfold the queerness of Barrett's "mahal." In particular, their interrogation of the limits and possibilities in this word calls attention to how we confront and endure our particularity and contingencies. Constituted by the multistranded modes of domination—capitalism, imperialism, neocolonialism, etc.—"mahal" recognizes the stringent borders of queer desire. To detach this from its adversity, to cling onto a sanitized version of love, dilutes its radical fervor and border-crossing energies. When Barrett collapses love and cost within the same word, they demand attention for the vexed genealogies and critical futurity of queer, racialized personhood. So, by the end of the poem, they return to this site of meditation. Reasserting the bifurcation of love and cost, Barrett confesses our unremitting sacrifices: "everything is at the expense / of this word" (19-20). They are unafraid to state these circumstances, unafraid of crossing the intersections of the political, historical, intellectual, and social. "Mahal" becomes their guide as they unfold language as a process of migration in which we find a home to settle in diasporic belonging. Thus, when Barrett delivers their dedication, "this book is for all of those who / know the breadth of this word" (21-22), they are speaking to beings of multiplicity, those caught between home and uprooting, those who taste both hello and goodbye in multiple registers, and those who know loss, and still, ultimately, hold love.

“Mahal” gives the reader the weight of love and loss, asks us to pocket them as we voyage into ceaseless movement, meandering through the spheres of our Lolos and Lolas, to our queer and trans siblings, to glimpses of a world to come.



Aldrin Valdez’s *ESL, or You Weren’t Here* carries a similar thematic preoccupation with bodies in transit and migratory languages as Barrett’s *More Than Organs*. However, their poetic odysseys diverge as they employ different strategies for reckoning with the queer diaspora. Their collections’ titles announce such a difference. While Barrett considers the body and seeks to exceed mere biological “organs,” Valdez registers language and absence (this is not to say these poets do not grapple with all of these themes, but it underscores the primary concerns of their work). In Valdez’s title, the notion of ‘English as a second language’ and the sense of absence— linked by the word “or”— herald the limits of language and the burden of distance. The collection reckons with the notion of wholeness, as they sit betwixt cultures, genders, temporalities, and worlds. In an interview with Sarah M. Sala for *BOMB Magazine*, Valdez confessed that this collection’s title calls forth the feeling that “being lost in translation is a kind of loneliness” (Valdez 2018). As readers, we bear witness to the mercuriality of their particularity but also to the translation and transformation of Pilipinx collectivity. Their work brings to the forefront the alchemy of nostalgia, resentment, grief, and imagination. Valdez finds the ability to sail through the churning and the chaos of their queer, diasporic existence, a tumultuous coming-of-age in protest and in pursuit of somewhere to call home.

Like Barrett, they also begin their collection with a meditation on their diasporic language-blending: the first poem, “Tagalog,” introduces both the intimacies and collectivity of movement,

calling forth their ancestral migration and Pinoy migration more broadly. Rather than situating their poem inside a singular word, Valdez spans the linguistic and ethnic complexities of Tagalog as a whole. Overall, the collection fuses the dynamics of San Juan Jr's narrative of exile and Kwan Laurel's Pinoy English in order to illustrate the inextricable entanglements of origins, movement, bodies, and languages. Since this collection is dedicated to their grandmother, Regina Feliciano Valdez, it is apt that the inaugural poem, "Tagalog," also begins with her origin story. But this origin is immediately complicated:

Nanay once joked that when it came time to move to the U.S.
she'd beg the pilot to turn back. Or she'd jump out of the plane

swim back to Manila. (Valdez, lines 1-3)

This beginning already signals a return— the grandmother earnest in her defiance. Her immigration to the U.S. unflinchingly calls upon her emigration from Manila, right away figuring these spaces in binary opposition. However, the play with temporalities here destabilizes this seeming depiction and ponders the tension between agency and involuntariness. Over the course of these three lines, Valdez slips through three different tenses which obscure this event of migration. The poem begins in the past, as the grandmother "joked" but then propels toward futurity in the phrase "when it came time to." So, Nanay understands this deracination as inevitable, as remarked by "when" rather than a hypothetical if. She is robbed of choice and sent into this forced migration, as though it is merely a chapter in the Pilipinx narrative, merely a rite of passage. Thereafter, the verbs fall into the conditional tense in "she'd beg" and "she'd jump" which obfuscates the overwhelming automatism at the start. These verbs push forth into the abstract, the imaginary, as if the Pilipinx odyssey presented in the first

line was simply myth. Notably, these visions are linked to the idea of going home; home becomes unfeasible, already inaccessible, though the migration has yet to occur. Moreover, the rupture between lines two and three demonstrates a sense of waywardness into liminality. Following this, in “swim[ming] back to Manila,” the line abandons the pronoun— Nanay becoming lost as she crosses borders. Valdez forges the impossibility of both arrival and departure, settling into the spaces between, that is, diving into the ocean.

It is here that the poem settles, caught in the whirlpool of diasporic sensibilities, yielding to the ever-shifting, ever-transforming dynamics of migration. Valdez then chants: “*langoy/langoy/langoy ka*” (6-8), calling us to swim, swim, swim. The italics in the repetition demand survival across the voyage, which thus collapses into the second person imperative “*ka*.” The pronoun signifier invites the readers into the poetic waves, a call to action to swim with Valdez’s swirls, ripples, surges. It expands diasporic movement out of the intimacies of Nanay’s narrative and encompasses the broader migrant community. The composition stretches across the page, white space breaching words, to accommodate the buoying of the linguistic and corporeal travel. As we follow their orders and “*swim with the river*” (9) Valdez identifies us through a series of broken, gradual definitions:

Sa ilog.

Taga ilog.

From the river.

Tagalog: People of the River. (10-13)

Valdez deconstructs Tagalog's endonym, delineating its geographical and linguistic convergences. They begin with "sa ilog" which utilizes the preposition "sa" meaning to, at, in, for, or on, and then linked to "ilog," or, river. In the next line, however, Valdez uses the more specific prefix "taga" as it precedes a place, "ilog," thus denoting residency in or around a place, district, area, or region. They exhibit the language's precision here, not satisfied with the mere prepositional marker, and articulating "the river" as *home*, not simply dwelling. Then, the final proclamation: "Tagalog: People of the River," entangling language, embodiment, and geography within one word. To speak Tagalog means to echo its people means to be rooted in pelagic existence. Thus, the aforementioned call to action— "*Swim with the river*"— Valdez underscores a sense of collectivity, of resilience, of already being at home.

Here lies the crux of Valdez's poetic project, as they reckon with the undulating forces of the in-between spaces. Immediately after defining "Tagalog," the intersection of locality and vocality arise in the grandmother's body: "Nanay / emerges from the water, cursing" (14-15), as she exclaims: "PUÑETA! / LECHE! / Tagalog curses feel good on her tongue" (25-27). Following the abandonment of the grandmother in the earlier line "swim back to Manila," she finally "emerges from the water" here, once again with her outspoken recalcitrance, "cursing." Interestingly, though Valdez demarcates them as "Tagalog curses," the profanities "puñeta" and "leche" are derived from Spanish, referring to "asshole" and "dammit." Moreover, the curses are written in Spanish, rather than their Filipino spelling 'punyeta' and 'letse.' As the poem slips into Nanay's voice, her words also shift into Spanish, however, this deviation is only evident when written, as they share the same verbal enunciation. On this note, Valdez pulls at the multiple imperialisms of the Philippines, uniting the streams of English and Spanish as it transforms standardized Filipino. Still, the declaration of "Tagalog curses" as

“feel[ing] good on her tongue” engages with Kwan Laurel’s claim to multilingualism. Rather than denying her the right to this kind of speech, the poem identifies them as Tagalog, allowing her to utilize what is already hers. Since Tagalog’s etymology crosses borders, these curses empower her to negotiate and navigate through various arenas. In addition, locating her within the water further emphasizes the inherent fluidity and transformative capacities of Pilipinx embodiment. Nanay’s charged outburst acts as proof of ownership to her languages, that these voices find home on her tongue.

Other forms of linguistic unfolding also emerge as the poem cascades down the page, focalizing the ebb and flow of multivocality. Inhabiting the border space for hybridity and possibility, Valdez prescribes “an embassy” and a “stuffy plane” as the convergence of “kanos & balikbayans-to-be” (18). Of course, the images of “embassy” and “plane” signify certain episodes of the diasporic odyssey, but there are two distinct characters here: those who are “kanos,” that is, Americans (derived from Amerikanos) and “balikbayans,” or repatriates. Valdez points out the routes of potentiality in these migratory junctures. Migrants can ‘become’ American, assimilate into its culture, or they remain perpetual foreigners, always fated to return home. Still, it’s essential to note that Valdez utilizes the Filipino slang for American, a term which demonstrates how the process of acculturation does negate their Pilipinx identity; in fact, it will continue to inflect their evolving particularity. Moreover, “balikbayans” are a complex category of identification. Inherently, they are estranged from the Philippines and are seeking a return to the homeland, but they are not required to have a visa or a return ticket to their country of citizenship. While the word “balikbayan” translates to “return” and “country,” and thus presumes departure, the ‘balikbayan privilege’ offers unremitting access to the

Philippines. At the same time, to become a “balikbayan” also means to be eternally Pilipinx. The process of becoming cannot consign to oblivion what we once were. So, in the arena of exodus, Valdez’s language still affirms Pilipinx identity, inextricable from our embodiment and undeterred by movement and governmental status.

Valdez’s collision of corporeality, geography, and linguistics erupts at the conclusion of their piece. They centralize Nanay once again, uncloaking the markers of identity and belonging indelibly tied to her body. Relocating out of the water and onto land, we find ourselves on the soles of Nanay’s feet, as she walks back to the Tondo district of Manila: “the skin on her callused heels is a map of broken streets & / syllables that fall like rain water on newly paved asphalt” (30-31). These lines illuminate the tension between fragmentation and wholeness— the fissures of “callused heels” figured as “broken streets,” “syllables” as cracks in the “asphalt.” The violence inflicted on Nanay’s body mutates into “a map” of brokenness, external structures carving out how the body moves through spaces. Amidst rupture, amidst suffering, we are trying to find home, to be at home in our bodies. Such a dynamic inverts in the following line; rather than space harming the body, language hurts space, as it becomes “rainwater” forming cracks, fractures, and damage onto the “newly paved asphalt.” Valdez acknowledges the transactions between these spheres of existence, unafraid to name violence, unafraid to desire healing.

Concluding with the broken syllables of Tagalog numbers illustrate the historical, linguistic, and bodily ruptures of the Pilipinx diaspora, as Valdez attempts to negotiate borders and define themselves against ocean-like forces. They attend to the multivocality, multicultural, multidimensional dynamics of identity, both individual and collective, within their poetic geography. This first poem,

“Tagalog,” surfaces the vexed intersections of migration, placing in parallel the movement of bodies with the movement of water, reflecting on the various ways in which we can make sense of our inherent multiplicities.

dislocated/mislocated

It is essential to unravel the threads of complication woven within Barrett’s and Valdez’s attention to Pilipinx migration. When untangling the constitutive parts of the queer Philippine diaspora, we must confront the ongoing violences of dominant structures within this world. In the aftermath of the inaugural migration, there is much to be said about the continuity of travel between more abstract sites. How do we represent the difficulties of queer diasporic belonging, and how do we continually emerge and transform in our Pilipinx bodies? What are the aches of misunderstanding, and how does limitation mark our voices?

As Barrett’s and Valdez’s poetic landscapes negotiate both abstract and concrete border-crossings, we can look to the ways Sonia Otalvaro-Hormillosa offers a critical awareness of various identities, instead of prioritizing simply ‘race’ or ‘nation.’ Expanding from San Juan Jr.’s Philippine odyssey and Kwan Laurel’s reclamation of linguistic blending, Otalvaro-Hormillosa’s *The Homeless Diaspora of Queer Asian Americans* concerns herself with the continued difficulties of arrival and reclamation within ongoing hierarchies of power. She is attuned to the shifting global positionalities within the dialectic relationship between privilege and (dis)location, ultimately seeking to register the “multiple, but homeless, diasporic consciousness” (Otalvaro-Hormillosa 1999, 106). She braids the strands of time, space, and ethnicity— following Jonathan Okamura’s categorization of the Filipino

American diaspora³— in her interrogation of desire, power, and subjectivity. Moreover, she converges cultural and sexual hybridity within Pilipinx American particularity, negotiating across these spheres in her exploration of deracination and home-building. We must understand Barrett’s and Valdez’s work within the framework of queer diaspora in order to resist and reimagine the constructions of race, gender, class, sexuality, and migration.

In their section *Dalawa*, Barrett narrates their personal history living in Chicago, Illinois, utilizing the acrostic form to illuminate their origin story. The English alphabet becomes the terrain for the nascent moments of queerness, loss, and reconciliation in “Albany Park/Logan Square 1993-2000, Chicago IL” (hereafter referred to as Albany Park). Barrett’s childhood neighborhood manifests as a place a multiplicity in which they can interweave the various registers of voices, bodies, and cultures. Immediately, they announce difference: “Accents, hard A’s ascending on the roof of the mouth” (Barrett line 1), an othering shaped by language, housed on the tongue. Their coming-of-age is marked by Tagalog particularities, that is, the phoneme of the “hard A’s” that arise again in the following line, “Boys brandish hard syllables, *Don’t be so bakla!*” (3). Language thus becomes weaponized, “brandish[ing]” the Tagalog slur “bakla,” a term that is typically translated to ‘queer.’⁴ These first two moments register the difficulty and violence of speech; it is here from which Barrett negotiates language’s possibilities of harming and healing.

³ See Okamura 2016.

⁴ This translation is usually seen as reductive. “Bakla” conflates sexual orientation and gender identity through the performance effeminacy, cross-dressing, same-sex sexuality, and lower-class status. On discourses related to “bakla” and other Pilipinx queer labels, see Garcia 2009; Blasius and Chu 2021.

Further playing with sound and meaning, they focalize on the term “miscreant” and catalog its various word associations:

Miscreant: noun, [mis-kree-uh nt]

(Migrant. Misplaced. Mapping. Misunderstood. Melancholy. Mahirap.) (33-34).

Rather than explicating its denotation, Barrett is interested in correspondences, in affinities, in constructing new meanings. Before glossing the alliterative listing, the concentration on “miscreant” must be examined; in other words, what is the burden of this word, and how does Barrett unpack it? According to the OED, *miscreant* can also be an adjective, but, here, the poem reduces it to a singular part of speech, as mere noun, not simply a description, but an *identity*. Moreover, Barrett sounds out its American pronunciation, as if refusing alternative ways of speaking, which gives rise to the internal and external conflicts of “miscreant.” The OED provides two meanings: 1) “an unbeliever; a heretic, infidel” or 2) “villain, scoundrel; a rebel, criminal, or felon.”⁵ Much like how “mahal” became the omphalos of Barrett’s prologue, “miscreant” enunciates the volatile strands of queer Pilipinx particularity, as it poses a threat against religious and legal morality. The intersection between queerness and diaspora burst forth here— in the realm of Catholicism, being “bakla” is an act of sinning; considering the politics of the ‘nation,’ being an immigrant is criminalized and repudiated. Within the parenthetical space, Barrett travels through several related terms, attentive to how they animate “miscreant.”

Of course, “migrant” emerges first in this index of synonyms, and its connection to “miscreant” has been touched upon already. Moreover, the detachment from im- or e- reoccurs, as

⁵ “miscreant, adj. and n.” OED Online, Oxford University Press, December 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/119394.

aforementioned in the poem “Mahal: a prologue.” The notion of rootlessness and dislocation is further emphasized in the word “misplaced,” especially as Barrett figures the transnational subject as the object of this transitive verb. Not to mention, this word also holds multiple meanings that shift the dimensions of diasporic personhood: 1) To put (something) in a wrong place; 2) To put (something) in a place and forget its whereabouts; 3) To bestow on a wrong or inappropriate object.⁶ Barrett settles into the position of “something,” of “object,” stripped of activity. These denotations evince a kind of wrongness, errancy, negligence that is bound to the queer migrant body. Indeed, these markers give rise to being “misunderstood” and evoke a certain “melancholy” intrinsic to the nonnormative subject. To be “misunderstood” hinges on misperception and misinterpretation, an inability to ‘read’ the multicultural, multivocal person. Barrett acknowledges the potential indecipherability of their particular embodiment, as their complex intersections can result in linguistic slippages and confusion. “Melancholy” will be later explored in chapter two, but it is vital to note the relationships between unbelonging, misunderstanding, and sorrow. In many ways, “melancholy” is mutually constitutive of language and location. Lastly, Barrett concludes on the Tagalog word “mahirap” and its dual definitions of 1) difficult and 2) poor. Such a linguistic slippage points to their conviction that “Quezon City twang still sticks even after decades in America” (43). However, the term that arises signals two negative meanings. The diasporic subject is difficult to understand and is identified by deficiency, by lack, inadequate in their ability to represent themselves. Barrett unravels their ache here; they feel the bounds of hybridity’s opacity and language’s limits.

⁶ “misplace, v.” OED Online, Oxford University Press, December 2021, www.oed.com/view/Entry/119858.

If we are to understand language as Barrett's focal point, the dialectics of its limits and expansion announce the queer diasporic subject's ability to locate themselves within and against the world. The last lines of "Albany Park" reflect such questions:

As in what's supposed to consume you

when you grow up from nothing. (65-66)

Compositionally, Barrett ruptures and stretches their language, making room for potential answers to emerge from the gaps. They question the coming-of-age narrative, resisting the linearity of becoming and exposing continuing misfortunes in the aftermath of migration. How do you claim multiplicity when all you've ever had were empty hands? How do you expand enough to carry that weight? How do you move out of absence? These knotted introspections collapse in the poem's final word, "nothing," a reminder of origin. Here, in Barrett's confrontation with the absences of their childhood, they run into language's limitations to discover answers to these questions. In their Asian American Writers' Workshop interview with huiying b. chan, Barrett says: "I'm just trying to find answers, and the answers are beyond my own body." In light of the "nothing" permeating their origins, they understand that they must move beyond themselves and perhaps toward new ways of speaking. From "nothing," we must fill in the emptiness; we must understand Barrett's project to forge bridges of language to spaces of belonging. Or, as I've said earlier, we must *create*.



Valdez performs their own origin story in "Blue Bakla," a poem that journeys through vignettes of their childhood as they negotiate between silence and speech. Echoing the sentiments of slam poetry, they unfold their coming-of-age through numeric chanting (isa through sampu). The

poem attempts to grow roots in various spaces and times, inflected by the in-betweenness of voice in its conversation with Otalvaro-Hormillosa's notion of "homeless diasporic consciousness" (106). "Blue Bakla" illuminates conflicts of the voice, fluid in its slippages between Tagalog, English, and silence as the poem seeks to construct alternative ways of speaking. In an interview with Olive Casareno and Thomas Fink, Valdez reflects on this multiplicity, asking: "If you place two different languages together, what energy field might be created?" (Valdez 2019). In response, I ask: how do we build a home within that energy field?

We begin with water once again, but Valdez emerges out of its depths and onto land where their personhood becomes quickly troubled, as they realize that "the air is full of water" (Valdez, line 5) and exclaim, "all my borders are soaked!" (13). They register the seeming permanence of their mercuriality, the eternal border-crossing, the inescapability of rootlessness. Engulfed in water, to breathe and to speak is to do so *drowning*. The emphatic "all" indicates that Valdez's intersections, points of entry, entire landscape remain saturated with the tumultuous complications of migration. We cannot assume that there is an 'after' to migration; we cannot assume that silence dissipates once we are able to speak. We are "homeless," always traveling in-between voices and spaces, or as Valdez deliberates: "I seem to always be quiet" (41), but at the same time:

I am learning to speak

from, alongside

silence, writing

as drawing :

a curve
in the air,
my head
& name
aloud,
land,
the trees,

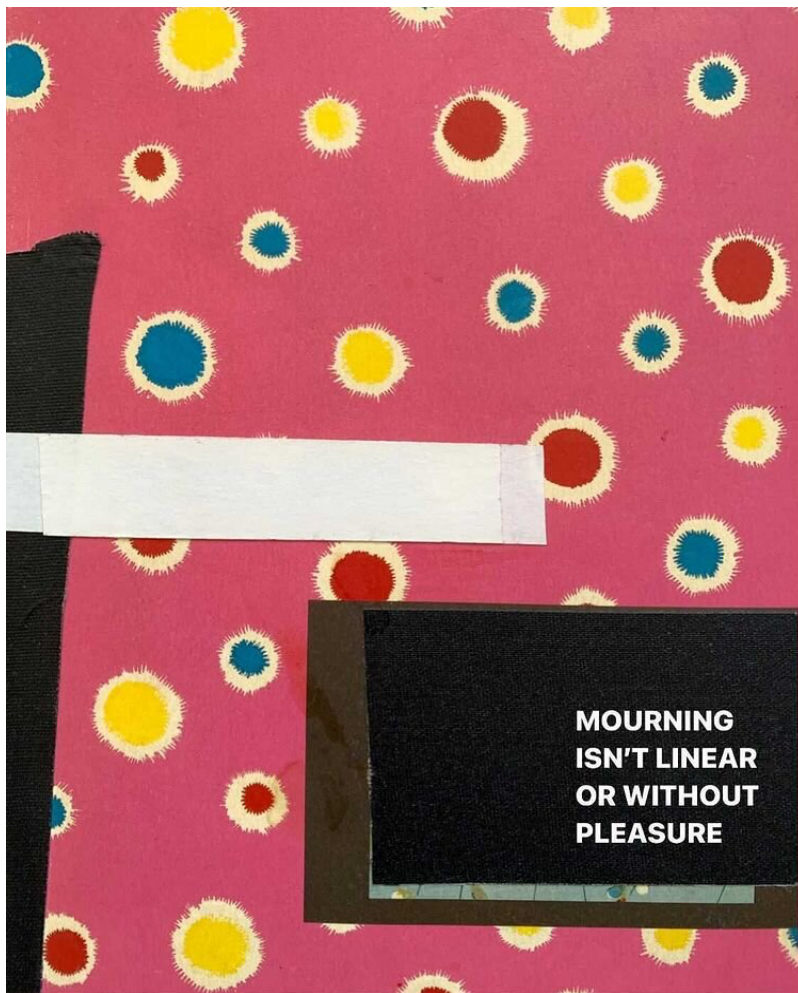
my feelings. (52-63)

Valdez situates this dissonance on the same page, unfolding the messy meandering of embracing and disrupting silence. “Quiet” becomes the point of departure, unrelentingly affective, even in the attempt to learn how to speak. This is to say, silence remains “alongside” still inflects the cadence of Valdez’s voice. Their antonymic associations, “from, alongside” and “silence, writing” hold together the forces of diasporic conflicts. The tension in the latter is quite straightforward, as Valdez’s writing seeks to reckon with silence. The other combination, however, is striking— “from” refers to both a spatial and temporal distance, “alongside” evokes a sense of coexistence and synchronicity. In other words, “from” reflects the sentiment of migration, to be from *somewhere* and no longer there, while “alongside” generates a sense of ongoingness. The comma flanked between these pairs provides a space for breath, transcending the spheres of silence and voice, of ending and beginning. Despite this, however, Valdez’s learning is overwhelmingly fractured. They split their “head” from their “name,”

unable to house their identity within their body. And this fissure is even detached from saying it “aloud,” as though it is unutterable, difficult to admit. Valdez then travels through the landscape; “land” and “the trees” as a wall between “aloud” and “my feelings” which registers the aches of (dis)location on selfhood. Once again, bodies, voices, and spaces are mutually constitutive in this catalog, demonstrating the inextricable convergences of queer, diasporic embodiment, and the complexity of its representation.

it's all just smoke in boxes the self is just a fog that reflects and reflects unto itself onto itself into itself and now i'm only comparing ghosts but i think all haunting is just the love with nowhere to go and i thought it would be easier by now for now right now but i'm finding growth is redundant and entangled and bargaining where i started. let me tell you something good to keep me up later to give me something to miss-remember us by.

-Jennifer Co, "loose shapes in the air"



[ID: A collage shows a piece of faded red paper, dotted with various sized circles in primary red, yellow, and blue. On top sits black, white, and brown strips of paper. In the lower right is a black piece of paper with white sans serif type that reads "MOURNING ISN'T LINEAR OR WITHOUT PLEASURE"]

"MOURNING ISN'T LINEAR OR WITHOUT PLEASURE," Aldrin Valdez, 2021.

DALAWA

How do we scrape off the taste of loss and leave the love there? An impossibility perhaps— grief dissolves on our tongues and tinges the cadence of our voices. While we may wish to exceed our traumatic bonds, we cannot sever these scarred limbs from our bodies. We must tend to these wounds; to disremember is to forsake life, is to move through the world, unknowingly zombified.

The push for historical oblivion coincides with neoliberal promises of assimilation, asking the racial subject to forget suffering and accept a conditional form of inclusion. It renders us incapable of stabilizing ourselves amidst the convergences of temporalities and nations. We reach a crossroads here: the path of white, heteronormative conformity or the path of racial melancholia. That is, on one hand, to lose and forget, or, on the other to lose and be possessed. The failure to resolve colonial and imperial trauma manifests as a wounded attachment to history and its remains, continually haunted by the terror and violence. It is from these wounds that we must inaugurate a critical examination of Asian American racialization.

Within Barrett's and Valdez's poetics, maternal loss becomes a holy terrain through which they grieve the collective loss of their motherland, embarking on an odyssey across space and temporality to cultivate possibilities for resolution. From this, they lament the continuance of queer loss; they unravel the structural forms of violence that result in these premature deaths, understanding the mutually constitutive relationship between queerness and diaspora. Their poetry fertilizes an expansive landscape for mourning, for conversing with the dead, for growing new selves even amidst loss. Though I have announced the necessity to move past a one-dimensional subjectivity of grief, it is

essential to understand that this is not a simple rejection of dominant ideology in the face of assimilation. Rather, we must reconfigure the possibilities for the racial subject.

Barrett and Valdez forge alternative voyages that engage with personal and collective losses in order to discover the possibilities for claiming multiple homes. Sadness inflects Barrett's and Valdez's language, saturates their poetic compositions, resides in the spaces in between words. Their wounded attachments are marked on their vocal cords— their body's refusal to adhere to a dominant conceptualization of happiness. Their poetry immerses itself within myriad losses as an abject denial of assimilationist placation.

From here, we must utilize an alternative conception of melancholia. Wen Liu does such work in *Narrating Against Assimilation and Empire* where it becomes a site for “subjectivity-making against colonial splitting of blackness and whiteness, erasure of imperial history, and the segregation of communities” (Liu 2019, 189). Liu interrogates the hegemonic future and the ghostly emptiness of racial positionality through a queered lens. In her analysis, queerness thus becomes a strategy for holding historical pain and constructing new visions of being. She calls for a move beyond “the bicultural blues of inadequate becoming” (180) and a reconfiguration of melancholia, to view it not as an eternal condition of grief, but as a refusal to embark on the presumed route of assimilation. To split and detach the diasporic subject from their nation of origin and their nation of settling recapitulates the reductive binary and impossibility of claiming home. It signals a lack, a thwarting of multiplicity. So, what do we do this narrative of homelessness? The loss of place becomes so interwoven in the process of Asian American racialization that Liu deems it more generative to define racial melancholia as “a refusal to ‘feel better’ under the current condition of neoliberal hegemony within which

happiness is narrowly defined” (181). Here, sadness becomes *resistance* rather than bondage, a way to expose and abscond the unlivable circumstances of white heteropatriarchy. Happiness within an oppressive state cannot contain an expression of joy that writes against the dominant narrative; here, happiness is a mode of assimilation, a masked invitation into the artifice of inclusion and equality. To this point, a complete estrangement from historical and collective loss risks the descent into this epistemological fog that obscures the continuance of death-driven institutions. Thus, Barrett and Valdez’s poetry demonstrates how racial melancholia can be, as Liu might describe it, a site of regeneration and readmission into lost spaces of violence and trauma.

Barrett and Valdez’s harness queer ontologies to make grievable the multiplicity of wounds and to make intelligible the possibilities of healing for diasporic bodies. David Eng offers a helpful template for how to consider Asian racialization and queer desire together— helpful for our analysis of Barrett and Valdez because he unfolds the dubious entitlements to home and nation and writes against the impossible arrivals of diaspora bodies. In *Out Here and Over There: Queerness and Diaspora in Asian American Studies*, he frames the claim to belonging as a yearning for “boundaries and contained sites,” as the satisfaction with a degraded version of being. We must repudiate the spatial metaphors of the United States, dismantling the melting pot ideology and normative notions of inclusion. Putting on the lens of sexual multiplicity and precarious identity, Eng reconsiders Asian racialization as indelibly fused with discourses of queer desire. He asks: “How does queerness as a critical methodology provide a theoretical vantage point for thinking out past, present, and future Asian American political, economic, and cultural practices?” (Eng 1997, 215). Through redefining kinship, queerness, and home, we can construct new, emergent identities that exceed the imperial parameters of

foreignness and citizenship. Imploring the process of disidentification from both the nation-state and the dominion of white heteronormativity, Eng instead looks to new, intimate affiliations. From this, the interweaving of queerness and diaspora reorients us to move toward more expansive considerations of Asian American identities and a “more extensive set of Asian American concerns and locales” (219). In other words, Eng asserts that the confluence of queerness and diaspora hinges on multiple sites of border-crossing, multiple places of belonging, multiple modes of being.

Barrett and Valdez interweave these conditions within their poetic projects, constructing the queer diaspora as not only an escape from unlivable conditions but also a portal to a space of homemaking. Originating in the realm of racial melancholia and of homelessness, they break open these conditions of loss, embodying resistance and transformation through their strategies of mourning.

In chapter one, we delineated the vital elements of Barrett’s and Valdez’s itineraries, immersed ourselves in their rootless origins and multivocalities. Our initial rendezvous began in their inaugural poems, “Mahal: a prologue” and “Tagalog,” as we learned the vocabularies that offer us admission on their poetic passages. In the same vein, we witness vignettes of their adolescences in “Albany Park” and “Blue Bakla” as a glimpse into identity constructions and affects of racialization. Now, as we have embarked on their odysseys, we must reckon with the losses along the way that render impossible the acts of arrival and return. But while simple acts of ‘arrival’ and ‘return’ are impossible, Barrett and Valdez do discover new modes of finding *home*. Barrett’s “While looking at photo albums: Christmas Eve, 2016” begins as an elegy for motherhood, reminiscing through photographic time capsules, and ultimately crystallizes into a meditation on how loss takes over Philippine lineages. Similarly

scrutinizing snapshots of familial life, Valdez's "Long Distance Images" questions what it means to be excluded from mourning, considers how photographs disrupt ephemerality, distance, and death. In these vigils, they coalesce the various strands of maternal deaths, seemingly insurmountable distances, and diasporic dialogues in their conversations with loss and absence.

litany of loss

As part of *Frontier Poetry's* Poet in the Mirror series, Barrett shares their approach to creating within a grief-struck lineage, strategizing ways to overhaul "a life rooted in rosaries" (Barrett, line 9), to rewrite the trauma plot of Pilipinx particularity. Holding the hands of family and friends and the losses etched into their palms, they say: "Maybe the bright moments I crave are how we feel that sorrow as poets surviving, and re-shift somehow, possibly together, and still write lines that re-imagine space, content, impact, a better world."

Barrett's "While looking at photo albums: Christmas Eve, 2016" (hereafter referred to as "While looking") immediately follows "Albany Park"— which means that, when we turn the page, we are transported from Barrett's origins of "nothing"⁷ to their confrontation with death. The mundane act of sifting through old photographs catalyzes their meditations on the circuitry of intimate and collective grief. The photo album becomes a vessel for traveling across both distance and temporality, coming up against the legacy of trauma interlaced into queer Pilipinx particularity. Even the look of the page mirrors the violence inflicted on the physical body: riddled with em dashes, the composition

⁷ "Albany Park," line 66.

stretches and mars the *poetic* body, creating a spectacle of rupture. Here, maternal death molds Barrett's melancholia; for them, the loss of the biological mother evokes the loss of the motherland, inflicting a double wound of "ocean salt and tear salt" (Barrett, line 17). Though compelled to sever such attachments and move forth, Barrett settles into their sadness, writing against the narratives of pragmatism and imperial happiness. Thus, loss becomes a locus of regeneration rather than mere tragedy, conversing with absence to wrest new possibilities for frenetic existences.



[ID: A curvy Filipina woman in make-up and tight dress descends from a staircase smiling. She holds the banister and glows. It's an older photo taken in the late 70s.]

Barrett, Kay Ulanday. [@brownroundboi]. "This is my mom." *Instagram*. 22 Nov 2021.
https://www.instagram.com/p/CWmskcPAw9V/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

"While looking" registers the yearning for home across time, distance, and mortality, negotiating the representations of such longing through language and movement. But how do we

name these absences? How can language encapsulate such breadth? In imagining intervals of loss, Barrett unfolds the difficulty of such an endeavor; they stutter through various insufficient definitions in pursuit of understanding. Each em dash becomes a moment of breath, coming up for air, but its ubiquity also creates an irregular pattern of respiration. It produces a sense of breathlessness, like a kind of hyperventilation, as we experience Barrett's melancholia and mourning. Their eulogy begins by dismantling the borders between past and present:

Before everyone died— in my family— first definition I
learned was— my mother's maiden name, ULANDAY—
which literally means— of the rain—and biology books
remind us—the pouring has a pattern— (1-4).

Calling forth the realm of “before” death, the poem unlocks the time capsule of Barrett's origins, reentering a realm where their family has not yet “died.” Immediately after naming death, the dash severs the line, a retroactive attempt to separate the “family” from their fate. The breach enacts a scene of rescripting. To replace their demise, Barrett returns to the nascence of their identities; their “mother's maiden name” is the genesis of their linguistic consciousness. The first line spills over to the following, but the enjambment refuses to carry the “I” there. Instead, Barrett's personhood, “I,” coalesces into the arena of familial loss. Ending with the fragment “first definition I” conjures the image of birth, asserts the creation of Barrett's subjectivity. The next line unfolds their conception, as their meaning-making commences with the mother. Identity construction does not begin with the self, rather, Barrett's “I” is tied to the surname “ULANDAY,” defined by lineage. Their existence immediately emerges as a figure of collectivity. As Barrett defines “ULANDAY,” this communal form

of being arises again; their surname “literally means— of the rain,” evoking both transformation— as moisture condenses into droplets— and amassment— as water gathers into sheets of rainfall.

Overall, the motif of water conveys fluidity, movement, and continuity, as water flows across vast distances but still is a component of nature’s cyclicity. Even the preposition “of the” indicates the relationship between a part and a whole, shaping Barrett’s personhood as a fragment of a larger identity. They then turn to the study of living organisms as a mode of understanding the body— its origins, behavior, physiology, and ultimately, the interconnectedness of all life. Barrett establishes these biology textbooks as reminders of collectivity, as “the pouring has a pattern,” permutations of what has come before. This poem’s first four lines manufacture the narrative circuitry of loss and life intrinsic to Barrett’s ancestry. That is to say, they begin with death, but this seeming finale transports us to the genesis of identity, unraveling the inheritance of names, movement, and grief.

The threads of identification further manifest in Barrett’s slippages through various definitions, a deconstruction of ‘Ulanday’s’ multiple dimensions. Such classifications act as refractions “of the rain,” changing directions as they pass through different embodiments of the ‘Ulanday’ name. Barrett translates: “namesake / means release— for my mother meant, flee— meant leave—” (4-5), pushing their appellation through several versions of existing; they traverse the borders between semantics. Of course, “namesake” elicits collectivity once again; it denotes a person “who shares the same name as someone previously mentioned,”⁸ emphasizing the heirlooms of movement evoked by “release,” “flee,” and “leave.” Though entwined with the subject of flux, continuing the water motif,

⁸ “namesake, n. and adj.” OED Online, Oxford University Press, March 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/124933.

these definitions consider the manifold forces of motion. That is, “release” engenders a hopeful tone— “to make or set free” and “to liberate from pain.”⁹ This term assumes a sense of confinement, of captivity, of being ‘behind bars,’ and Barrett renders their identity as a state of freedom. The “namesake” becomes salvation, dismantling boundaries of the body. To be free “from pain” particularly indicates a repossession of the soma, to exist in a body that no longer hurts. With this term, Barrett begins with the beauty in this inherited form of being.

But, from this, the moment of loss arrives. Rather than the connotations of “release,” the mother’s namesake “meant flee.” Moving away from the present “means,” the mother resides in the past tense, unable to cross the verbal threshold. “Flee” further demonstrates the permanence of her absence, signifying both “to run away from danger” and “to pass away quickly and suddenly, to disappear.”¹⁰ The mother’s death creates a wound within the “namesake,” and this ache becomes a part of the heritage, a lineage plagued by loss. Reckoning with this, Barrett attempts to forge alternative ways of bandaging this wound. Though they cannot grant their mother the present tense, still bound by the past “meant,” the poetic line ends with the contronym “leave” and its various phrasal verbiages. “Leave” can be both transitive and intransitive, and its meaning shifts depending on the preposition, ‘at,’ ‘in,’ ‘behind,’ ‘off,’ ‘out,’ ‘for,’ ‘with.’ Barrett makes room for multiple potentialities by simply stating “leave.” Parsing through these myriad meanings, its opposing definitions allow “leave” to situate itself between “release” and “flee,” to accommodate both forms of embodying the “namesake.” Though Barrett makes explicit the mother’s demise, granting her the state of “leave” creates

⁹ “release, v.1.” OED Online, Oxford University Press, March 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/161859.

¹⁰ “flee, v.” OED Online, Oxford University Press, March 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/71387

possibilities for her ghostly presence. Moreover, this word refuses singularity as it asserts that departing and remaining are not mutually exclusive— the mother’s absence is palpably present. Overall, this line acts as Barrett’s negotiation with Liu’s notion of racial melancholia, as they confront the mother figure, her death and her haunt. They harness the expanse of “leave” to have capacity for her resurrection, transforming the site of traumatic loss into a site of presence.

Barrett further unfolds the linkages between loss and location, constructing a dialogue between motion and stillness in the collective spheres of arrival, departure, birth, and death. Narrating the family’s migration stories— “one out of five— leave / to a new country” (10-11)— the verb “leave” reappears, this time connected to the preposition “to” and split by the enjambment. Its obscurity over the line break signals the contemplation of prepositions; that is to say, the isolated “leave” offers two paths, and the line break acts as moment of consideration, before claiming the “to.” The condition of “leave” becomes a rite of passage. Such an image further manifests in Barrett’s detailing of the migration process and their immediate return to the mother:

like checkpoints— which is what they know— which
is like a halt— not to be confused for— stop— which is what
happened to my ma’s breath— when she went home— for
the last time— I didn’t get to — hold her hand as she died— I
said I tried— just translates to— I couldn’t make it— in
time— (12-17).

When laying the script of their ancestors’ odyssey, Barrett divulges that “checkpoints” are “what they know,” referring to the migration episodes in which one reaches “a barrier where the movement of

traffic, people, etc., are checked.”¹¹ Their personhoods are tethered to borders. Still, Barrett clarifies that this only signifies “a halt,” a temporary stoppage, an interlude, rather than a more permanent “stop.” Much like how “release” illuminates a sense of liberation out of confinement, here, “halt” indicates a brief hindrance and suggests further progression. Cautioning against the conflation of “halt” and “stop,” Barrett confides that the latter “is what / happened to my ma’s breath” which indicates mere termination. The repeating em dashes also position us readers in the juncture between “halt” and “stop,” a positioning that illuminates our ability to start breathing again, while the mother has completely “stop[ped].” This echoes the mother’s aforementioned “flee,” further emphasizing the permanence of her death. In the same vein, the syntactic structure figures the mother into the object position; “stop” happens *to* her, rather than an action that she *does*. Furthermore, as Barrett comes to this event of death, the earlier, formal designation of “my mother” (2) transforms into “my ma.” At the site of tenderness, Barrett’s voice is imbued with adoration, childlike warmth, and love, no longer only inheriting her “maiden name” but also recording her “breath.” This term of endearment encapsulates the mother and child relationship that transcends mere appellation and becomes wholly embodied. The corporeal connection continues in “I didn’t get to— hold her hand as she died,” a line that fixates on maternal attachment and the inability to “hold” the loss— the absence manifests even before the moment of passing. Which is to say, movement and distance configure the relationship to mourning. This line’s syntax exemplifies such a sentiment: separated by the em dash, a symbol of severance, Barrett cannot occupy the same space as their mother.

¹¹ “check-, comb. form.” OED Online, Oxford University Press, March 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/31086.

Preceding the actual death, another form of departure takes place, as “she went home— for / the last time.” The mother returns to the Philippines, reentering a space that was once lost, laying claim, and settling into “home.” Barrett admits that “I / said I tried— just translates to— I couldn’t make it— in / time”— this explanation stretches over three lines, representing the vast distance Barrett could not traverse “in time” to return home. It precludes them from being present at their mother’s parting. Strikingly, Barrett doesn’t define the phrase “I tried,” instead, they “translate” it. Though the term “translate” suggests the conversion of words between languages, they don’t write “I couldn’t make it” in Tagalog; the phrase remains in English. Despite the signal to switch into the native language, the line roots itself in English— the language is as much evidence of disconnection as the actual words themselves. Here, Barrett doesn’t return to the mother, the motherland, or the mother tongue. Within these lines, Barrett reveals the difficulties of naming and negotiating with loss, especially as it is troubled by movement, distance, and the body.

Entering the aftermath of the loss, the poem revisits the image of water: the poet is tossed by the currents of melancholia and is trying to figure whether they are drowning or swimming within them. Barrett declares that “ocean salt and tear salt—are one and / the same” (18), collapsing distance and mourning into their embodiment. In this conflation, they regard the “ocean” and “tear[s]” as vessels to spaces of connection. In other words, to cross the ocean is to eliminate physical distance, and to grieve is to dismantle thresholds between life and death. Though the mother has died, to continue mourning her means she remains present, to continue aching means she still inhabits the ancestral body. As they acknowledge the role of water as a site of reimagining absence, they “learn to make myself a / harbor—” (19-20), morphing into a place of shelter on the coast for ships to anchor. For

Barrett, to become a “harbor” signifies proximity to the ocean, the sense of home, and the notions of both arrival and departure. On the other side of this transformation, the last lines of the poem are a call to action, a way to rethink questions of grief and re-enter spaces of loss:

you will pour your face & hands—& smother your
mother’s scream on everything—you touch— turn eyelids
into oars— go, paddle to find her (23-25).

Barrett immerses themselves into their melancholy, utilizing their grief as a mode of living. Recalling their fixation on bodies, the imagery of “face,” “hands,” “eyelids,” “scream,” and “touch” produce an overwhelming presence and active embodiment. Despite death, the mother remains “on everything—you touch,” which revises the formerly unrealized fantasy to “hold her hand.” The mother becomes embedded into Barrett’s palms. Moreover, to “turn eyelids / into oars” is to actualize the maternal longing, moving away from chimeras and into spaces of creation. Thus, the last line demands: “go, paddle to find her.” Here, Liu’s expansive strategy of racial melancholia manifests, as Barrett harnesses their sadness for the revitalization of not only the lost mother, but also of a new self. That is to say, they refuse the paralysis of grief, instead, using its landscape to renegotiate the tensions of stillness and movement and the interconnectedness of intimate and collective grief. By the end of the poem, they embark on their journey: in creating new ways of engaging with loss, the turbulent waters of melancholia are calmer now, and Barrett can “paddle” within them. The relationship to the absent mother concludes with hope, making room for possibilities of reconnection. “While looking” records Barrett’s reclamation of loss and their capacity to transform it into a site of discovery.

Engaging with the powerful affects of the pictorial, Valdez enacts a similar project to Barrett's "While looking" in their poem "Long Distance Images." They render the photograph a requiem for their lost loved ones, the solution to mourning across distance. Unlike Barrett, however, Valdez details the images, conducting their negotiations of loss underneath their prosaic descriptions. In Barrett's piece, the photographs remain unexpressed, residing in obscurity in preference of entering interiority. While these undetailed images open up to a space of intimate subjectivity— meandering through ruptures, semantic slippages, and overwhelming opacities— Valdez hands us their photo album as a mechanism of detachment. They experience the insufficiencies of lamentation and the asymmetries of reconciling past and present, wholly excluded from roots of melancholy. They embrace the "long distance" signification, as they reckon with both their grandmother's death and their own absence. Still, within their descriptions, Valdez glimpses at presence, dismantling the thresholds between life and death, mourning and celebration. The poem contains four photo series, "Wake," "Tatay," "Hospital," and "Living Room," interrupted by Valdez's musings on the narrative trajectory captured within these images, musings which call attention to "image anatomy," the changing of seasons, and "detail." "Long Distance Images" time travels, beginning with the grandmother's wake and then unfolding the episodes leading up to that moment of loss. In this structure, Valdez is not only distanced from the funeral procession, but distanced from the moment of death, too. The photographs transform into time capsules in order to rescue the grandmother from her fate, even if temporary. Valdez commences with the site of melancholy, and from here, embarks to explore alternate possibilities for writing loss.

While Valdez intersperses most of the photos with brief fragments of interiority, the poem refuses to disrupt the series of “*Wake Photographs*,” shaping a sense of wholeness and continuity within the realm of loss. The first section introduces us to the photo album and inaugurates the tension between inhabitation and estrangement:

Kuya shows me the long distance photographs
of the funeral past my curfew.
I can't sleep. My eyelids stream the gray photographs.
I am everywhere in the wake (Valdez lines 2-5).

Valdez details the migratory essence of the “long distance photographs,” occurring between separate places; even though they can now enter the realm of the photo, they remain distanced from the real thing it captures. They heighten this sense of detachment as they identify the image’s subject: “the funeral past my curfew.” Of course, the notion of being past “curfew” alludes to the twelve-hour time difference between the Philippines and New York. The possessive pronoun “my” attached to it further exemplifies Valdez’s specific estrangement from their family; the funeral procession takes place at a time and place where they cannot be. Moreover, “curfew” also refers to “a restriction imposed upon the movements of the inhabitants of an area,”¹² which figures Valdez’s disconnection as a result of institutional regulations, of systems that exceed the boundaries of individual movement. That is, to assert “my curfew” is to call forth the history of governmental sanctions on migration. Valdez’s distance from their family is structural; their stillness is imposed. The dynamics of migration and diasporic existence figures their inability to return home, their inability to connect to their family except through photos. Thus, in their attempt to enter a space of coexistence, Valdez steps into the

¹² “curfew, n.” OED Online, Oxford University Press, March 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/46020.

“wake photograph;” and says “I can’t sleep;” they are trapped in a state of wakefulness. Accessing this alternative form of connection, they attempt to eliminate the vast distance—“I am everywhere in the wake”—filling in the emptiness of their embodiment. Here, Valdez yearns to cross the borders not only between nations, but also between life and death.

However, this desire cannot fill all the absences. In *“Wake Photograph 2,”* Valdez concedes the limitations of their imagination: “Her hands are under where I can’t see them. / I am thousands of miles away” (11-12). Though the photo becomes a portal to togetherness, it cannot access all the elements of reality, as the grandmother’s “hands” remain unseen; a veil persists. They are “under,” which suggests a sense of burial, being underground and unable to be reached, to be seen. Even though Valdez can see themselves “everywhere in the wake,” they are still “thousands of miles away.”

Collapsing distance exists only in imagination here, it stays unrealized. Still, they try again, moving away from the condition of “wake,” Valdez asserts: “When I close my eyes I am my cousins” (14) and “I am the neighbors carrying the coffin. I / am Morong Street” (17-18). Valdez discovers these transfigurations not in the photographic portals, but by closing their eyes. Unlike before, they don’t endeavor to transport themselves into the realm of Philippine life, but they transform into people that are already there (“my cousins”), even the place of the funeral procession (“Morong Street”). But these conversions remain ephemeral. That is to say, they first become their “cousins,” family who share the ache of this grief. However, this embodiment is insufficient, now, becoming the “neighbors carrying the coffin” in order to participate in the act of mourning. Still, this relationship remains lacking. Thus, they become “Morong Street,” no longer a person but transformed into the literal site of loss.

However, they announce is difficulty of this becoming— “I have never walked this far from / home. It

is so crowded”— though they want to embark on their journey “from home,” the immensity of grief is too heavy to carry. Here, the arrival seems impossible. Within this photo series, Valdez demonstrates the complicated limitations of viewing imagination and transformation as mechanisms of healing. Escaping melancholia is not simple, not straightforward; it necessitates reckoning with temporality.

Moving away from the “*Wake Photograph*” series, Valdez must grapple with the ways in which the grandmother’s death reshapes both past and present. In the section titled “*January*,” they detail the difficulty of negotiating death through linear time: “I am baffled by before & after. January is a new word / without her. November is still here though” (27-28). The boundaries between “before” and “after” dissipate, as the present slides back into the past, and the past haunts the present. Loss ruptures linearity, entangling the threads of grief, time, language, and embodiment. In other words, to contain this trauma within language is a vexed endeavor— how can we name this grief? How can we hold it on our tongues? For Valdez, their grandmother’s death defamiliarizes language, as “January” becomes unfathomable, a space of unknown. The line break between “January” and “without her” exemplifies the grandmother’s inability to enter this space, confined in “November,” the month of her departure. However, Valdez becomes haunted by “November,” as well. Though temporally, it is “January,” “November” demands presence, its affects still linger. Overall, loss inflects all elements of existence, warping time, and even time travel.

Valdez represents this dynamic external to the grandmother’s death in the photo series “*Tatay*.” They track collective grief through their grandfather, how historical trauma becomes lineage, becomes an heirloom of hurt. *Tatay 1* recounts the grandfather’s migration to New York and the legacy of loss he carries with him; Valdez indexes his promises: “To follow. To America. To take care

of us” (33). The infinitives situate the grandfather within the field of possibilities, unactualized but aspiring. The distance from home and resettlement in America opens up to these potentialities, but physical escape is not enough, the past arrives still. This is evident in “*Tatay 2*,” as Valdez describes the grandfather in his sleeping state: “There are bullets / falling in his toes. It’s a long time ago tonight” (50-51). Here, the grandfather’s dream returns to the Japanese occupation of the Philippines. He embodies this violence, as the “bullets” fall “*in*” (emphasis added) rather than *on* him, a prepositional difference that illustrates how our bodies are scarred by imperial history. Furthermore, “tonight” travels back to “a long time ago”— once again dismantling the borders between time, spaces, and mortality. The grandfather relives these traumas as they continue to permeate the present, evident of the difficulty to hold these tensions, to house these memories in the body. Though painful, the readmission into the sites of violence and sorrow can pave the possibilities of rebirth. With this, we can rediscover lost people and places, if even for a moment.

Traveling further back in time, Valdez steps into the “*Hospital Photograph*,” the nexus of both life and death. Its location signals the beginning of the end, foreshadowing the grandmother’s death, but the return to the hospital room means the return to a time when she is not yet lost. Valdez suggests her fragility, how she struggles to live against a harsh background: “There are times when she is still living interspersed / with gray & glare. There she is” (40-41). Though the present tense of “is” renders her emphatically alive, Valdez understands the “gray & glare,” the obscurity and decay of this state. Within this image, Nanay sits within the thresholds of temporalities, on the blurry line between life and death. Despite this unstable condition of “living,” her presence allows for reconnection, for understanding and renegotiating the trajectory of her loss. This rebirth continues in “*Living Room*

Photograph 1,” as Valdez details that “she’s alive again resting on the sofa” (64). Of course, the poem’s liveliest location is the “*Living Room*.” Not tethered to the certainty of death as in the “*Wake Photographs*” nor its imminence in the “*Hospital Photograph*,” these photos reside in the everyday and the habitual, a place that assumes another day, assumes more time. Marked with “again,” Valdez acknowledges the living room as the locus of revitalization, a return from the dead.

The rebirth continues in “*Living Room Photograph 2*,” invoking and refiguring the funeral imagery from “*Wake Photograph 1*.” In the photo, the grandmother “wears a rosary, rests on diagonal layers of pillows” (72), which transfigures the funeral procession. In the earlier image, Nanay is literally laid to “rest” with her “rosary” during her burial. Here, it is the same position, but now, she is alive. Though the image does not wholly heal the wounds, it still reshapes the event of loss, constructing visions of life as a method of mourning. That is to say, Valdez’s photographs become vessels to reenter the past, to speak with the dead, to write alternative narratives in order to rethink the tensions between absence and presence. The poem ends on an ambiguous note— “Is she clasping letters are those bills meds instructions / prayers?” (75-76)— that emphasizes the uncertainty around the “letters” that she grasps to steady herself. However, this unresolved setting allows for multiple answers, multiple scenarios. The lack of commas in-between options grants Nanay expansiveness and allows her to exist in different ways. Valdez imagines her with the capacity to hold all of these things— she could be writing “letters,” reconnecting across distance; she could be paying “bills,” proof of habitual life; she could be taking “meds,” a process of healing. Valdez ends with “prayers?” isolated in the final line, the question mark troubles these potentialities, but the poem still concludes with hope. Overall, the

reconciliation of loss and life remains precarious, but Valdez utilizes pictorial reflection as a method of return, traveling back to a space that has not yet been lost and lingering in possibilities.

In “Long Distance Images,” Valdez demonstrates that their particular Philippine odyssey necessitates time travel, moments of temporality-bending energies, in order to heal tender wounds, to speak with what has been lost, to fill absences. Mourning is not linear. Thus, to arrive at understanding requires the mapping of movement and stillness in order to contextualize distance and loneliness. They figure photographs as manifestations of racial melancholia, as they witness and reimagine how people occupy spaces, how emptiness permeates the image. These negotiations make possible new configurations of loss, reshaping melancholia into a realm of liveliness. That is, memories are not frozen in time, even those captured in photographs: new knowledge and contexts inflect these old memories, making them anew, a rebirth of sorts. On multiple levels and in multiple localities, Valdez traverses the dimensions of longing and healing, confronting hurt and isolation. “Long Distance Images” rewrites the litany of loss: from here, it is imagined, we can create a new world with alternative modes of mourning and emerging, generate new ways of being.

what does it mean to survive distance
and arrive on the other side of danger

//

what does it mean to get comfortable
with feeling out of body

and the thought that you could always drown

//

we met only because oceans opened
and swallowed our mother's languages whole;

//

these distances between our eyes
grant me peace of mind

//

and i miss who i was
when we meant everything to each other

//

do you remember when we lived on the edge of our dreams?

//

i let you go / i bid you farewell

(please don't forget me)

//

i wish you the joy of a life
you deserve to live

- Liaa Melissa, "notes on goodbye"

TATLO

While holding onto the palpitations of loss, we need to ask ourselves the difficult, necessary question: *If you close your eyes and imagine the most joyful and liberated version of your life, what does that world look like? How can we create that world?*

These questions become bookmarks within the Pilipinx literary legacy, become pulses in the margins as the page continues to turn over, become ripples in our ongoing odyssey. Despite multitudes of linguistic, compositional, and aesthetic choices, despite myriad sites of border-crossings, time travel, and home-building, every artist echoes the same thing— we yearn for a life of radical, collective love. In all our voices, we see a way to survive, we see a way to dream. So, even in our turn to the world to come, we must *return* to love.

And in this return, we can repudiate the tidy, teleological finales that many such visions of futurity may offer. Both Barrett and Valdez orient, disorient, and reorient their poetics to imagine and cultivate a future that lies beyond binaristic understandings of being and belonging and remains strange and estranging to normative embodiments. Even as we move through their collections chronologically— beginning with the places of origin, crossing through moments of migration, grappling with losses, then seeking home in a world beyond— we must register the queerness of their diachronic and synchronic threads. When we reflect on what has come before and envision what lies ahead, we risk the one-dimensional convention of conclusion— the sort of conclusion that Martin Ponce’s *Beyond the Nation* describes as “suspiciously tidy, unduly pessimistic, or unconscionably optimistic.” Ponce’s research charts the complex crossings of Philippine nationalism, queer

modernism, and transnational radicalism as they are articulated through literary representation and cross-cultural poetics. He employs a queer reading practice in engaging with Philippine and American literary traditions to unfold the potentials for moving beyond colonial complicity and assimilation. To that end, as queer diasporic persons living in between nations, languages, temporalities, voices, and bodies, Barrett and Valdez do not subscribe to any form of neatness, we cannot prescribe clear categorization of our multiplicities. Thus, to envisage queer Brown liberation is to embrace the messiness of our convergences and our contradictions.

Barrett's and Valdez's nonnormative particularities signal the incommensurability of a neat, antiseptic world with that of queer diasporic embodiments. Their multivalences, as mediated through voice, geography, and the body, generate alternative modes of knowing that surpass and elude the default concern to authenticate and represent cultural identity. Especially attentive to expansive geographies and itineraries, "queer connotes both desire and inquiry" (Ponce 2012, 27) that conducts a critical reckoning unconsolated by fixed origins or endings. In fact, Barrett and Valdez foster a sense of corelessness; they unsettle Pilipinx personhood from the threat of singularity predicated upon the nation and resettle into unfinished territory that opens up to multiplicities and alterities. They envision a world where queerness is bursting through its borders.

As I conclude this project with Barrett's and Valdez's closing poems, we must remain cognizant of the poems' roles as entry points in imagining futurity rather than static corollaries. Against the backdrop of chapter one's interwoven speech and fluid bodies and chapter two's melancholia and (re)emergence, chapter three considers how these confluences permeate and permutate language, space, and memory. This interweaving is vital for both understanding the

multiple dimensions of the queer diasporic body and for dreaming toward a more radical world. In the previous sections, we unfolded the ways in which Barrett and Valdez inhabit multiple, evolving identities spanning many geographies and temporalities. Now, as we turn towards futurity, these poets elaborate a version of the world that not only honors their multitudes but also considers the way they are multiply oriented toward several audiences. In other words, their projects act as expressive practices of connectivity, mediated through queer desire, nonteleology, and ongoing metamorphosis. Barrett's "Tell a child about something that causes you fear or dread" is emphatically wounded, still saturated with the losses we held in "While looking." But it is from that melancholic pulse that Barrett opens up to alternative imaginings of grieving, healing, and loving. That is to say, even in their radical dreaming, they refuse tidy conclusions contingent upon the severance from grief and instead root themselves in the magnitude of messy existence. In a similar vein, Valdez's "SHUFFLED SLIDES OF A CHANGING PAINTING" is an earnest embrace of their in-betweenness, their unfinishedness, their queer inhabitance, and evolution. Jumbled in their sequencing, they also harness the poetic time travel we encountered in "Long Distance Images," attentive to space, time, and the body's mercuriality. Valdez undertakes a fracturing, splitting, and rearranging of time through memory and dreaming, so as to blur and obscure beginnings and endings. In this last chapter, we now settle into Barrett's and Valdez's closing sections not as ending points but as entryways to kaleidoscopic potentialities.

Furthermore, as Barrett and Valdez proffer visions of a radically transformative world, we must understand how their focalization on the networks of antiracism, anti-imperialism, and anti-heteronormativity stems from peminist sensibilities. We must weave in the analytics of peminism (or Pinayism), as a lens through which diasporic and gender-sexual complexity inform Pilipinx liberation.

Barrett's and Valdez's work "aims to look at the complexity of the intersections where race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, spirituality/religion, education, educational status, age, place of birth, diasporic migration, citizenship, and love cross" (Sarmiento 2005, 141). Entrenched in the interconnectivity of peminist critical theory and queer affiliations, Sarmiento also moves 'beyond the nation' in his exploration of how Pilipinx racial bodies are particularly gendered and sexualized against normative configurations and white imperialist notions of queer. He posits contemporary diasporic Pilipinx literature as the entry point in engaging with decolonization and forming alternative archives to colonial knowledge. This process, Sarmiento argues, resides within literature; thus, Barrett's and Valdez's fictive world-making instantiates an arena where we can "imagine differently the world in which we live" (100) allowing us to dream and desire a capacious and permeable existence.

Though I have endeavored to disentangle and disclose Barrett's and Valdez's vexed poetics (which are preoccupied with the queer diasporic/peminist dialectic), it is imperative to maintain their irreducibility, heterogeneity, and opacity. That is to say, although we can ascertain the thematic undercurrents of Barrett's and Valdez's creations, we must avoid the prescription of a singular and delimited pathway toward a decolonized, liberated future. To render them wholly legible means to violently translate and dilute their embodiments; to render them wholly recognizable undermines their project of transformation and transcendence. So, following Ponce's repudiation of "easily discernable resolutions" (2012, 221) Barrett and Valdez refuse the temptations of neat conclusions and allow queer diasporic subjectivities to be "incomplete and indeterminate" (231). This state of flux, of the unfinished, acknowledges the excesses of being that open up to new possibilities for becoming. In

remaining undone, we elude the stringent paradigms of singular categorization and hegemonic definition that foreclose alternative, expansive modes of living.

songs for a new world

Barrett's last section, "Apat: four," concludes with three consecutive poems that address individuals from their writing family or cultural work community. "For Brandon" is an elegy to William Brandon Lacy Campos; "Tell a child about something that causes you fear or dread" is written in gratitude to Samiya Bashir; and "What I learned after moving" concludes the collection with an acknowledgment for Rhoda Rae Gutierrez. Barrett invokes collective love within this poetic finale, calling forth the sentiments of "Mahal" with which we began. From the waiting room, to crossing spatiotemporal boundaries, to holding grief, to seeking and building home, the pulses of mahal inflect Barrett's poetic language and landscape. By following their odyssey into the shapeshifting realms of loss and joy— and arriving, marvelously, at the same place we departed— we, too, have shapeshifted.

The penultimate poem, "Tell a child about something that causes you fear or dread (hereafter referred to as "Tell a child"), finds Barrett stepping out of their particularity and composing a song of collective survival and love, one that revels in beauties, severities, and discords. The poetry collection concludes with the seismic archiving and interweaving of heartbreak, movement, and abundance; Barrett threads tendrils of hope and nourishment against the chant of ongoing violence and ancestral trauma. Feeling the palpitating immensity of grief, "Tell a child" is insistent and persistent in its desire to breathe to life a world of resistance and celebration. Barrett reveals these underpinnings in their interview with Alice Wong for the Disability Visibility Project, asserting that *More Than Organs*

commemorates love and loss, pain and convalescence, presence and movement. Thinking about queer diasporic ancestry and futurity, they rejoice:

Our ancestors have laid groundwork for us to be here. I hope my book contributes to some salve that we aren't alone. We are all just trying to be bountiful, breath by breath, and I want you to know that I uplift that you're trying. That even when you might not want to be here, that here you are, here you wonderful magical person, here. Just be here. (Barrett 2020)

Though our amalgamated present has been hostile for multiply marginalized folks, we must re-map and reevaluate the here-ness and beyondness of our bodies. As we pursue a world capacious enough to hold us, the deep, bountiful breath becomes a necessary reminder of our power to churn out more life. Thus, in "Tell a child," Barrett converses with our descendants, endowing them with the heirlooms of hurt and healing. Overall, this poem becomes a lesson of legacy, respite, and renewal, in which we can cultivate roots and create lineages in between and across languages, spaces, and bodies.

The grief-stricken heartbeats in Barrett's former sections inflect the love letters to Brown, Queer, and Trans futures that conclude *More Than Organs*. Barrett commences within their racial melancholia, continuing to harness it as a site of intimate and collective discovery: "It's ok to / be just wound / sometimes" (Barrett, lines 1-3). The fractured prose exemplifies here how the vibrations of loss have tinged Barrett's poetic cadence. Split over three lines, the assertion itself reels from rupture; the wound cannot be contained, its surplus spilling into and saturating the stanza. Notably, there is a distinct lack of pronouns in this section, as Barrett dissolves their subjectivity into the infinitive "to be" so as to speak toward a collective experience of despair. The claim to this trauma reinforces our discussion in chapter two: we must not wholly evade grief, rather, we must unravel its reflexive promises if we are to inhabit our multidimensionality. Especially as we have unfolded the dynamics of

Barrett's melancholia as a portal for regeneration and readmission into lost places, the permission to embody "just wound" affirms the queer diasporic subject's right to self-identification, right to refuse the neoliberal urge to "feel better" (Liu 2019, 181). To be "just wound," on our own terms resists the inadequate definition of happiness within white heteropatriarchal systems. Yet, the temporal marker of "sometimes" also recognizes the need to transcend the trauma monolith, a sentiment we have elaborated upon in chapter one. To critically hold melancholia is to necessarily construct alternative routes to thriving, rather than mere survival. Ultimately, this stanza articulates the constituents of queer Pilipinx embodiment; we negotiate the forces of loss and love in our ventures through various intimacies, legacies, geographies, and temporalities.

In accordance with expansive modes of being, Barrett catalogues the myriad shapes in which our woundedness can manifest:

To gape, cry, rock,
shiver, rumble, ramshackle,
shake ancestors in your sleep.

To be part dead.
Razor, lash, hang,
to be the thing that flails,
to be cathedral, to be gravestone.
To speak cobweb. (4-11)

Shifting from the straightforwardness of the first stanza, Barrett now floods their lines with overwhelming excess, and in particular, an excess of movement. So, to be "just wound" does not mean to be consigned to stillness; here, the poem lists the vast possibilities of embodying grief, its asyndeton and repetition illuminating such multitudes. The continuing index of infinitives, instead of the typical

pronoun/conjugated verb relationship, illustrates the capacity of these actions to encompass various subjectivities. In other words, these lines allow for multiple inhabitances, allow for a collective occupation and reconfiguration of the pronoun space. The poem's second stanza conveys the earthquakes of grieving— "gape," "cry," "rock," "shiver," "rumble," "ramshackle," various seismic activities that evoke rupture. These words are attuned to the violent convergences between sound, space, and the body, transforming the "wound" into numerous forms with varying degrees of emotion and disruption. This catalog urges our grief to be raucous and turbulent, an emphatic refusal of silence and stillness. These terms can also act as nouns, adjectives, and verbs, which reflects Barrett's shape-shifting sensibilities and their desire to hold all of language's possibilities. Furthermore, these terms are collectivity tied to the same infinite marker, "to," rooted in the same semantic origin. Even though each word points to a different mode of mourning, the entanglement within the marker "to" arouses connectivity. In addition, without any syntactic divisions, each motion bleeds into the next, the excesses of grief culminating into the sixth line: "shake ancestors in your sleep." Here, Barrett invokes legacy as a space to grapple with both intimate and collective melancholy, this interconnectedness dissolving the boundaries between wakefulness and slumber, movement and stillness, past and present. The realm of dreaming becomes a site of readmission into the past, which forges possibilities for rediscovering and reconfiguring loss.

In negotiating with the haunt and hurt, Barrett thus announces another transformation. They have just been shaking ancestors, awakening those who have passed, but now they ask us "to be part dead," to transcend clear delineations of mortality, to inhabit loss as much as it inhabits the body. The next set furthers this descent into violence. By becoming "razor, lash, hang" and "the thing that flails"

we are asked to mutate into weapons; we have moved from being “just wound” to now *inflicting* wounds. The ambiguity of “the thing” also foregrounds the action “flails,” which allows an assortment of objects to settle into the space of “the thing.” In this third stanza, the project of multiplicity continues, especially as “wound” transforms from noun to verb, breaking open the word’s various dimensions. The following line, “to be cathedral, to be gravestone,” refers to the Catholic rituals of worship and burial as it blends together the spaces of life and death and the heavens. The embodiment of “wound” insists upon this multiplicity and expansiveness, rendering accessible all forms of moving, speaking, and being. From this, Barrett announces their new language— the ability “to speak cobweb.” Of course, “cobweb” indicates a kind of necromancy, a dialogue that traverses mortal realms as it communicates and revitalizes the dead. Connecting to the aforementioned “ancestors” and “gravestone,” language becomes the medium through which Barrett can reenter lost spaces. Moreover, the “cobweb” language also refers to the complexities and intricacies of queer diasporic vocality, as vast permutations of intersecting identities and experiences inflect our speech. Overall, Barrett’s infinitives within these stanzas weave a tapestry of violence, not only settling into grief but wholly becoming it. The claim to these verbs of rupture once again utilizes wounded sites as entry points for alternative ways of mourning and moving that transcend the contours of the individual body. The many metamorphoses here blur the threshold between hurt and healing, voice and body, and life and death.

The intertwining of loss and life in these first few stanzas echo Barrett’s deconstructed dimensions of “mahal”— the sacrifice and spirit ache, but also the salve and solace. In order to conceptualize a world beyond singularity, we must return to mahal, as it hungers for abundance even while reckoning with absence. This praxis of hope becomes the refrain of *More Than Organs*,

composing a song that dreams past survival. Now harnessing the first-person pronoun, Barrett confesses the aphorism of queer, trans, Brown existence: “Let me tell you: / to die everyday is the kind of pulse that makes / music...” (12-14). As we have witnessed their personal itinerary unfold throughout this collection, Barrett, tinged with the tonalities of grief, attests to the ability of creation despite of, and also *from*, loss. Death, the big and small mourning, the everyday grief— these are the necessary heartaches, the necessary bleeding that proves we’ve lived. Barrett’s queer, diasporic symphony demands musical complexity, balancing melodies, polyphonies, modulations, improvisations, and even discordances. From our traumatic pulses, we can orchestrate alternative routes of healing that harmonize with our frenetic modes of living.

Continuing this thread of creation, Barrett casts another transfiguration, bodies now becoming bodies of text:

Be the book as it opens,
closes, folds in on itself, on the same
paragraph. Be the underlined stanza
whose body bursts syntax scars naked. (15-18)

Slipping from the infinitive into the imperative, Barrett underscores the crucial connection between embodiment and language; they signal a kindred metamorphosis as voice inflects the body, as body shapes the voice. This circuitry of storytelling obfuscates the boundaries between reader and writer, beginnings and endings, accounting for the mutations and the remapping of the body as it “opens,” and “closes,” and “folds.” Such an act of bending reflects the repudiation of clear demarcations, unable to neatly align with narrow categories. Now delving into the pages themselves, Barrett urges us to become “the underlined stanza.” We are asked to become active readers here: to take up the work of

“underlin[ing]” and calling attention to the ways language spark something in us. Barrett emphasizes the linkages between embodiment and language and ultimately collapse them into one kind of “body.” Molded into stanza, our “syntax” refers to “the order and arrangement of words in a particular sentence or text, as judged for correctness, elegance, comprehensibility.”¹³ To translate ourselves into the textual body demonstrates the process of how we are made legible— how do we articulate our particular personhoods? Hence, to have “syntax scars” is to have been wounded by syntax and to still bear the mark of having been rearranged for the sake of someone else’s clarity, someone else’s version of ‘correctness.’ Moreover, to show such wounds “naked” announces the unapologetic condition of these continual modifications, of these explosive “bursts.” Furthermore, the notion of “burst[ing]” also connotes a sense of uncontainability within any syntactic permutation. In other words, language fails to apprehend, much less represent, the body’s expansiveness. Still, as I mentioned before, this opacity acknowledges our irreducible nature; the wounds remain as we arrive at new languages, new geographies, and new transformations. Thus, the textual body is stripped “naked” and becomes scarred in its continual endeavors to discover alternative ways of speaking that can hold such multidimensionality.

Barrett carries the tendrils of love, wounds, ancestry, and language as scarred and stitched within the body, as they recount the narrative trajectory of queer diaspora:

Love body when it emblazons family curse,
when you are bad joke at the table,
when you are shuffled scrapes of
forks, the weirdo told shut up,

¹³ “syntax, n.” OED Online, Oxford University Press, March 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/196559.

forsaken. (20-24)

The use of the second person “you” situates these experiences outside of Barrett’s intimate recollections and into a shared, collective history. Much like the collection itself, this stanza begins with “love” and renders it the omphalos of being, the anaphoric “when” tethered and returning to its harbor even despite the moments of othering. Here, Barrett imagines a family dinner, conscious of their embodiment’s unsuitability within this setting, the body marked by and inheriting an ancestral legacy of “spiritual and temporal evil.”¹⁴ The external soma already anathematized, it also taints language, becoming a “bad joke,” failing to elicit amusement, and instead, turning into an object of derision and ridicule. In the aftermath of this “bad joke,” the silence that follows is broken by the “scrapes of forks” scratching out an uncomfortable music. The body thus dissipates into pure cacophony and produces abject displeasure, becoming a mode of existence met with aversion. The index of transformation concludes with the “weirdo” identification, overtly nonnormative, strange, *queer*. Carrying the noise of “jokes” and “scrapes” (and the earlier sounds of “gape,” “cry,” “rock,” “shiver,” “rumble,” “ramshackle”), these sounds collapse into silence, forced to “shut up,” rendered unable to speak. Lastly, the body is “forsaken” (with the word itself, isolated in the final line, wholly abandoned and renounced). This stanza narrates the hostile episodes of queer diasporic particularity, emphatically marked by the repeating “when,” which exhibits the inevitabilities of hurt. Such a sentiment furthers Barrett’s motif of “mahal,” as they unfold the dialectic between “love” and violence. The “when”-ness, the certainty of sorrows, necessitates a return to love, as evidenced by

¹⁴ “curse, n.” OED Online, Oxford University Press, March 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/46132.

Barrett's use of the imperative. Barrett urges us to "love body" when it undergoes these transfigurations, to "love body" in all its shapes, to allow the dissonant "scrapes" and the silence to intonate the musical pulses of our larger symphonies. Still, how do we continue forth from this forsaking, this loss, and this loneliness? How can we inhabit the vastness of "mahal?"

"Tell a child" concludes with a rhapsodic chant of metamorphosis, as Barrett bewitches the poetic space into a rebirth and reimagining of the world in which we live. They call forth the myriad themes of their collection, weaving together "mahal," mourning, language, and collectivity. Anchored to the single word "let," they offer various possibilities for the queer diasporic future:

Let lonely make a lens so clear you become intergalactic.

Let residue be a blanket you shed every season.

Let your gaze be salve & sign of the cross.

Let you be words a stranger waits for.

Let love be a bunker you crawl into.

Let you guffaw, let you cackle.

Let you be last one left.

Let you be last one.

Let you be last.

Let you be.

Let you.

Let. (24-35)

Holding onto the abandonment of "forsaken" from the previous stanza, Barrett harnesses "lonely" as a portal to cosmic magnitudes, from isolation to connections that transcend galaxies. The alliterative "l" here also opens up language to celestial bodies as the repetition intertwines the forces of solitude and the universe through the "lens" of perception. Forging a "lens so clear" signifies a visual correction; it means to reshape and create new ways of seeing that register our multiplicity, that witness state of

being “intergalactic.” Moreover, “intergalactic” conveys not only a kind of vastness but also the position of in-betweenness, refusing boundaries and neat alignments even at the cosmic level. This elusive embodiment continues in the following line, as “residue” is “shed every season” which illustrates an ongoing, cyclical metamorphosis. The act of “shed[ding]” indicates a discarding, and in an animalistic sense, it refers to the outgrowing and subsequent stripping away of skin. In dialogue with that practice, Barrett weaves the “residue” of the past into a “blanket,” into a protective layer that temporarily comforts the body but must soon be “shed.” However, “every season” the body outgrows these layers. Thus, to “shed” the “residue” means to let go of an embodiment that no longer fits. Such a process epitomizes the queer, nonteleological existence, a way of being that remains unfinished and boundless. The next few lines announce various routes toward solace and healing, traveling from spiritual salvation to linguistic support, to “mahal,” and then to pure euphonious joy. Barrett invokes the “sign of the cross,” as the “gaze” turns into sacramental, a form of prayer that channels God’s grace. Much like the “lens” becoming “intergalactic,” perception here also reaches the peripheries of divinity. Our “gaze” manifests as “salve,” as a site of healing wounds. Then, resonating with the pulses of “mahal,” Barrett transforms “love” into “a bunker,” into a place of shelter from violence. Lastly, calling forth the poem’s immense cacophony—orchestrations of “gape,” “cry,” “joke,” and “scrapes”—the concluding stanza bursts into “guffaw” and “cackle,” boisterous in its declaration of queer diasporic joy.

From here, the poem slowly draws to a close, repeating the same message, but shedding the last word with every following line. In this finale, Barrett urges for the continued presence, the ‘hereness,’ of the queer diaspora, asking the world to “let [us] be.” Even as the poem concludes, the anaphora

allows us to linger, sustaining, for a little while longer, the song of metamorphosis and emergence. Barrett folds up their meaning-making powers until we are simply left with “let.” The singular imperative, “let,” creates a blank space to be filled, asks us to finish the rest of the sentence. Barrett offers many different versions but still makes room for the vast possibilities of the sentence’s ending. “Let” itself transforms into the infinite and undefinable future that we desire, cultivating the bountiful realm of kindreds and beloveds who continue to re-map, re-spark, and reimagine. In the aftermath of the poem’s milieu of hurt, the last stanza dares new dynamics of being that exceed mere survival, makes wishes upon our constellated embodiments, and illuminates our inherent multiplicities.

Beginning with the pulses of “mahal,” (re)mapping the body in transit, and traveling along with the circuitry of loss and life, we now disembark from Barrett’s poetic odyssey and unearth their imaginings of a world to come, a world unfinished, a world expanding toward all forms of being—those that remain rootless, those that transcend loss, transcend tense, especially those that are not yet here.



Valdez’s fourth section in their collection is devoted to the long and singular poem, “SHUFFLED SLIDES OF A CHANGING PAINTING,” which consists of 30 sections sequenced in a manner that is aleatory, hard to parse. Valdez’s project culminates in this irreducible meditation on space, time, and language, a reckoning with and reconfiguration of evolving, polymorphous bodies—undefinable, indeterminate, earnestly queer. They emphatically reject chronological and teleological strictures, employing the jumbled arrangement to reflect the shiftiness of memory and poetic portals between temporalities.

The poem's thematic pulses and title take inspiration from Robert Gober's artwork, *Slides of a Changing Painting* (1982-83). Over the course of a year, he repeatedly painted, photographed, and scraped off the same small piece of plywood, engrossed with the motifs of pipes, drains, landscapes, and the human chest. Gober selected 89 images to construct his visual memoir, a reanimation of the painting process that "replaces the single finished object with a series of dematerialized images, all absent and none more authoritative than another."¹⁵ These images become both present and absent in the same moment, made to appear and disappear; they establish a haunting reverberating within and throughout the piece. Gober eludes the limitations of completion as his fragmentation produces a "dematerialized" self that transcends circumscription. Conversing with such preoccupations, Valdez's "SHUFFLED SLIDES OF A CHANGING PAINTING" produces textual portraits that repudiate singularity and embrace the "queer, bakla, phaeton-like" multiplicity (Valdez line 13). In its architectural disorder, the poem, too, revels in ghostliness, each fragment bleeding into the next. When Valdez calls forth Gober's artistic ingenuity within their poetic detours, they speak to the collective enterprise of existing liberated from the restraints of hegemonic definitions.

Though Valdez amalgamates 30 different fragments to produce this shuffled poem, we will only look at a select few— "6," "28," and lastly, "3"— as these textual paintings chart their poetic odyssey, from border-crossings, to multivocality, to intimate and collective losses, to (re)imaginings of the world. As the collection culminates into this grand finale, Valdez returns to the Pinoy coming-of-age. Through these sections, they track their growing awareness of, and language for, the queer

¹⁵ The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Collection Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. T. B. Walker Acquisition Fund, 1992.

“They-child” disrupts the realm of darkness in pursuit of a “familiar body,” a mode of existing no longer strange or isolating. That is to say, they seek a way out of their loneliness. However, this desire for connectivity in a world of singularity shape-shifts “they-child,” mutating them into a person on the brink of arrival— “someone I could get to know”— into a person molded by departure— “*a person who is about to leave.*” And perhaps, they— the child figured by absence— has “already left.” Valdez witnesses the origins of their odyssey as their “childself” negotiates their emergence without the capacities of multiple languages, genders, or geographies. Reoriented in their childhood, they speak directly to their former version:

Hoy bata! I tell that self, you try so hard not to feel

abandoned.
& I remember

them, queer, bakla, phaeton-like, staring at the Manila sun one morning
as though they could see more than its yellow haze.

Perhaps,
as in darkness, searching
in light for a body their body
remembered. (10-18)

Valdez demands their childself’s attention, exclaiming “*hey, child!*” and rationalizing their motivations through the desire to forsake solitude. Valdez affirms their past self in acknowledging this fear of abandonment and the yearning to thwart its hazards. They rupture their poetic composition here, stretching across the page and across several lines so as to avoid being “abandoned.” However, the line

break between “feel” and “abandoned” suggests that “you try so hard not to feel,” wholly detached from emotions in order to elide the pang of isolation. Despite such efforts, “abandoned” and “I remember” occupy the same side of the page which reveals the pulses of loneliness that contour memory. Still, from this solitude, Valdez catalogs their embodied presence of “them, queer, bakla, phaeton-like,” identifying with nonnormativity, in-betweenness, and multiplicity. The first three terms are explicit in their radicality, whereas “phaeton-like” invokes the Greek myth of Phaeton, the son of Helios. His ambition to drive the sun-chariot was fatal, as he lost control of the horses, set the world ablaze, and was subsequently struck down by Zeus. Phaeton was punished for his transgressive desire to incarnate such divine power. Perhaps destined for a tragic ending, the childself looks toward the horizon. But, subverting the narrative, Valdez imagines beyond the “Manila sun” and “its yellow haze,” in pursuit of potential worlds that exceed the mere mist of this one. The terminal lines register this continued exploration, situated on the other side of the page— the words, too, searching for new places to settle. Its double-spaced composition reveals the emptiness entangled with language and embodiment, holding the tension between “light” and “darkness.” This dilated landscape also makes space for transforming bodies and hints at possibilities for discovery and creation from places of absence.

“61” elaborates upon diasporic Pilipinx loss— the loss of the mother and the motherland— and reveals the undercurrents of violence and grief that shape our search for home:

To say so much loss precedes us is to ask, where

in this prone body does each—leaving, expanding

bullet, pacific-

cation, fire, water-cure, bomb, march, English

word—reside? (1-5)

Against the backdrop of chapter two's concentration on loss and temporality, this fragment questions how such threads continually (re)shape our positionalities and vocalities. In other words, how do we hold loss in our bodies? Valdez suggests that to apprehend the "loss [that] precedes us" means to explore the various ways in which history hurts and haunts the present. The absence is palpable here, each line ruptured and stretched apart, reflecting the cruel circumstances of queer, diasporic existence. In addition, describing the body as "prone" refers to "the inclination or tendency or predisposition"¹⁶ to these violences, asking to locate and unfurl the wounds. In the second line, Valdez collapses the notions of migration and metamorphosis— "leaving, expanding"— into the same space, the comma rendered a temporary breath between the initial border-crossing and the subsequent transformation. The remaining losses register the tremendous trauma that constructs the Pilipinx person, glossing over the homeland's history of warfare and terror. "Bullet," "pacific- / cation," "fire," "water-cure," "bomb," and "march" allude to the horrible crimes and ongoing wounds of the Philippines' multiple imperialisms. More specifically, "water-cure" refers to the form of torture used by American soldiers on Filipinos during the Philippine-American War, while "pacification" refers to the U.S. establishment of military, political, and economic control of the Pilipinx people after the war. Moving forward in the timeline, "bomb" refers to the American bombing that devastated the Philippine capital in the Battle

¹⁶ "prone, adj." OED Online, Oxford University Press, March 2022, www.oed.com/view/Entry/152519.

succumbing to the prescribed narrative, they offer “another beginning”— and they propose this new beginning in their terminal poem so as to spurn definite conclusions. They invite us, the readers, into their imagined world, a place of connecting with kindred souls, and thus, “the painting changes.” This moment of collective intimacy reshuffles the painting, reinvigorating it with new meanings and interpretations. Notably, in the first iteration of “SHUFFLED SIDES OF A CHANGING PAINTING,” digitally published in Issue 12 of The Poetry Project’s annual literary magazine *The Recluse*,¹⁷ this fragment “3,” did not exist— the original version had a different ending altogether. But, with this addition, Valdez actualizes their capacity for expansion, creating more ways of moving across languages, temporalities, borders, voices, genders, worlds. Perhaps, there will continue to be more beginnings, and the painting will shuffle again.

Throughout their poetic project, Valdez negotiates the embodied strands of ancestral inheritances, migratory existences, and fractured temporalities. They unfurl a story that questions what it means to be whole, painting a multi-hyphenate world, marked by displacement and distance, intimacy and longing, resistance and beyondness. They seek to create debris, to register the strands of metamorphosis, obscurity, and intricacy inherent in their queer embodiment. In imagining a future that allows for these indeterminacies, we must reimagine the paradigms of being, becoming, and belonging. *ESL, or You Weren’t Here* asks us to join its momentum, to alchemize our multiplicities to become more alive versions of ourselves, toward the unknown, the undefinable, the uncontainable.

¹⁷ Valdez, Aldrin. “SHUFFLED SLIDES OF A CHANGING PAINTING (after Robert Gober).” *The Recluse, Issue 12*, The Poetry Project, 2016, www.poetryproject.org/publications/the-recluse/issue-12/from-shuffled-slides-of-a-changing-painting-after-robert-gober.

CONCLUSION

where do we go from here?

I suppose, contradictorily, we have arrived at an ending. But much like Barrett's and Valdez's poetry collections, we can transform this conclusion into a *return*. We can look back at all the difficult ground we've treaded through, all the turbulent waters we've swam in, and still, we have so much ahead of us. What can we make of our voyage, our losses, our discoveries? How do we speak of them with our vexed tongues?

Coming up against the precarity of the queer Pilipinx body within narratives of continued displacement and trauma, Barrett's and Valdez's poetry mapped out itineraries of resistance and imaginative rewritings. They embrace multiplicity— of languages, cultures, and nations— within an empire that imposes singularity and reduction, breathing life into all bodies in transit, bodies in translation, and bodies in transformation. However, their endeavors remain troubled by the reality of ongoing violence; they do not pretend that representation or reclamation is enough to escape the seemingly perpetual state of trauma. Rather, they reject the cruel, imperial logics of grief and capaciously accept these complications. Barrett and Valdez assert the vitality of loss and melancholia within both their personal histories and our collective Pilipinx legacy, in pursuit of paths toward healing alternative to the dominating forces of repeated suffering or neoliberal assimilation. It is from these energies that they urge us to imagine a more transformative world for queer diasporic liberation. That is to say, they open up to more possibilities and more beginnings. Even as their collections come to a close, they continue to chant their boundlessness.

Thus, in rejecting neat conclusions, we arrive at a deeper understanding of the queer Pilipinx body's elusiveness and expansiveness. Though we must acknowledge the instability and incompleteness of such understandings, we can better speak to the moments of border-crossings, homemaking, and imagining. *More Than Organs* and *ESL, or You Weren't Here* carry the heartbeats of the queer diaspora's pasts, presents, and futures, helping us negotiate our legacies of loss and love in order to arrive at new, radical modes of being, becoming, and belonging. So, we are left with alternative ways of speaking about our rootlessness, our mourning, and our emergence. The call to creation remains, as we continue to sing in the face of loss, as we continue to carry the breadth of "mahal," and as we place everything into the future's loving hands.

Against the backdrop of overwhelming silence, I have situated myself into a largely understudied field and have sought to make visible the histories and futurities of my queer, Pilipinx American community. Here, I must admit, I am exhausted— physically, emotionally, mentally, linguistically— yet there is still so much more to do. I am aware of the severe dearth of Pilipinx literary studies that has made my thesis endeavor particularly challenging. I am aware of the enormity of Pilipinx contributions that we have yet to give our due attention. I am aware of the gaps in my own analysis, of the threads of disability justice, mixed identities, mythology, etc. that I have not weaved into this body of work. And even now, I am aware of the inadequacy of *my* words, in its 85-page enormity, to reach epiphanic delineations of Barrett's and Valdez's poetics. I asked many questions, and we are left with many more, and there are even those that are not yet here. This insufficiency, however, is attuned to Barrett's and Valdez's ever-expanding, time-traveling, metamorphosing embodiments that continually reshuffle and remix their creations. Any attempt to make conclusions,

to categorize, or to capture their work wholly misunderstands them and undermines the purpose of this scholarship. That is the beautiful truth of this project: the queer, diasporic Pilipinx cannot be confined.

It is time: we must disembark from this odyssey now— perhaps we have arrived at new waiting rooms, new waters, new homes, new mahals, new photographs, new songs, new dreams, and new worlds. Still, as we hold these pulses in our bodies, we will continue moving and expanding. So, I hope to see you again soon, at the next beginning.

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EPILOGUE

a cento for Pilipinx dreamers

to begin again: we can ask each other more questions¹⁸
an inkling towards community
an inkling towards introspection¹⁹
but maybe i ought to say thank you more
or maybe only louder like with feeling like with voice like with something
we know will stay.²⁰

you held me the way hands hold water
spilling, slipping through cold fingers²¹
and i am looking,
in the same grass
where you once stood
asking: *am i too young*
*to feel this way*²²

how else to describe the chaos that ensues in your life?²³

i am no good with departure, and i'm writing from a future we'd never
recognize anyway.²⁴
but do you remember when we lived on the edge of our dreams?²⁵
i think it stains red and snips each breath, sinks
into your cells²⁶

how can we not love our bodies
embodying the Revolution that will
come to be.²⁷

¹⁸ Johan Lorraine Alvarado, "dead-end to lovers' lane."

¹⁹ Jennifer Co, Ardyel Lim, Liaa Melissa, Noreen Ocampo, Sasha Penano, "KAPWA."

²⁰ Jennifer Co, "loose shapes in the air."

²¹ Isabela Colmenar, "waterways."

²² Hannah Estolano, "did you mean."

²³ Celeste Noelle Bustria, "gravity."

²⁴ Jennifer Co, "loose shapes in the air."

²⁵ Liaa Melissa, "notes on goodbye."

²⁶ Silayan Camson, "set."

²⁷ Allysa Abalos, "i love the kisses on my skin the sun has gifted me."