ABSTRACT

FROM BODIES DISPLACED TO SELVES UNFURLED: A QUEER AND POSTCOLONIAL FILIPINO-AMERICAN THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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This dissertation articulates a theological anthropology that reflects the movement, ambivalence and meaning-making strategies of Filipino-American diasporic subjects. Through a queer and postcolonial reading of the baklâ—the effeminate gay male of Filipino popular imagination—I trace theological intuitions within the field of Filipino-American studies. The project articulates an anthropological vision that exposes apophatic turns in Filipino-American understandings of the human.

Martín Manalansán’s reading of “diasporic baklâ” will serve as the anthropological paradigm for this critical analysis. His description of the baklâ’s multi-layered engagement of gendered, economic, political, imperial, colonial and religious categories exposes a vision of the human that resonates with communities living in-between national and ethnic fidelities. I argue that the baklâ’s yearning for stability constitutes a theological intuition that illuminates the inherent queerness of diaspora. Simply put, Manalansán’s baklâ re-thinks assumptions about diasporic subjectivity that broadens theological reflections of Filipino-American life.

Wielding Manalansán’s work alongside the key theological texts by Rachel Bundang and Eleazar Fernandez, I suggest that the diasporic/baklâ body engenders an apophatic theology that “disclaims” affirmations of self to foster meaning. When they speak of subjects that hold in tension oppositional categories like empire/colony,
Fernandez and Manalansán illuminate Filipino-American subjects that not only resist empire, but also reconstitute displaced selves in moments of alienation. Like the bakâ who deploys “pagladlad ng kapa” (unfurling of false façade) to assert subjectivity, Filipino-American bodies unfurl the promised stability of empire to render diasporic subjects open to the possible. The “negative” turn of disclaiming thus becomes a moment for expanding understandings of self.
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...unfurl body

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My earliest memories of “America” were associated with the U.S. embassy on Dewey Boulevard—a broad thoroughfare along Manila Bay, framed by commanding sunset views and encroaching shanty towns at the water’s edge.\(^1\) When my father was offered an expatriate assignment to Guam, life as we knew it became entangled with the United States. It signaled the beginning of innumerable visits to government offices to straighten out residency, financial and property documents. This entanglement signified the taking on of “new selves” who over time gained greater fluency in the American English of empire than the Filipino idioms of our childhood.

As the literal gateway to America, the U.S. embassy was a place of fantasy and illusion. Emblazoned along perimeter walls were icons of promise and prosperity: the proud eagle that heralded imperial might; the crisp uniforms of military personnel that demanded allegiance to the lofty ideals of democracy. And before them stood the multitude: the rest of us—impeccably dressed, squeaky-clean and appropriately primped—who pored over copious documents, proofs of (Filipino) citizenship, as we sought entry into America. Mama and Papa would be nervous wrecks, self-conscious of their accents, their dress, the (in)sufficiency of their resources.\(^2\) They would remind us

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\(^1\) Named after Admiral George Dewey, the seaside boulevard commemorates the defeat of the Spanish colonial stronghold before American fleets in the Battle of Manila Bay in 1898. In the 1960s, this stretch of road was renamed Roxas Boulevard, after Manuel Roxas, fifth president of the Philippines.

\(^2\) It is a common practice among Filipino families to create phantom bank accounts whenever a relative applied for U.S. visa/entry. Pooling resources together, family members would “fatten-up” the bank account—temporarily named after the applicant—as proof her/his financial solvency, a requirement for travel and migration. Once the visa is granted, family members withdraw their contributions. I suggest that this practice offers a contemporary rendering of the Filipino practice of bayanihan (Tagalog, n., “to move from one town to another”)—where an entire community would literally carry a family’s hut from one town to another in a moment of transition, ensuring new beginnings for the family.
to sit quietly, to let them speak for us when our turn came to stand before embassy officers.³

Our regular forays to the embassy gave us an intimate view of the United States, of specific roles assigned to colonial bodies in order to buttress the fantasy of nation. Willingly, we peddled our pathetic mimicry of American culture. Flattening the sing-song cadence of our native dialects, we smiled before stoic embassy officials, dreaded guardians at the threshold. Both sides sought to outfox the other, re-establishing boundaries of empire with each approval/denial of visa. If there was ever any doubt about the in/accessibility of America, one had only to gaze at the winsome portrait of President Ronald Reagan to realize that imperial hospitality came at great price—of a life-long engagement with assimilation/alienation.

Literally and figuratively, displacement contours diaspora. It is not so much a yearning for a physical home as the elusiveness of the fantasy of home that undergirds the pain of displacement. The diasporic subject stands perennially at this edge of belonging, akin to a monk who secures the monastic enclosure by his very disavowal of “the world.” For many of us who have lived in America’s shadows, yearning for its promise of freedom, economic advancement and personal flourishing, citizenship unfolds not to stability, but to the relentless threat of displacement itself. In this sense,

³ For a long time, I always thought of Papa’s paranoia a tad exaggerated. After a recent conversation with Puring Mojica, my sister-in-law’s mother who maintained a long career in Manila’s U.S. Embassy, I realized that Papa’s overly cautious approach to the interview was, really, the desired posture for most visa applicants. According to Mojica, applicants were implicitly expected to exude confidence, clarity of purpose, even some semblance of fluency in English. Since the number of applicants far outnumbered the availability of entry permits, approval of one’s papers relied on more than the sufficiency of one’s documentation. Often, this meant that the approval of entry papers depended on subjective first impressions.
citizenship speaks not of belonging—not even of nation—but of bodies consolidated by expulsion, strangeness and alienation. Citizenship alludes to a set of “naturalizing” strategies deployed by diasporic subjects who grapple with the im/possibility of assimilation. Standing at the borders of empire, subverting the stable binary of in/out, diasporic bodies herald queerness. Thus, Filipino-Americans are essentially baklâ—the ambivalent, effeminate queer male figure of Filipino popular imagination—perennially unfurling selves to secure both multiple locations and untenable bodies.
I  Traces of Home and Self

And today we are indeed looking for bodies.⁴

In this dissertation, I reflect upon “subjectivity.” I discern the ways subjects are perceived, imagined and constructed within the context of Filipino-American diaspora—a space, concept and event that stretches across the Pacific, over the course of more than a century of postcolonial engagement. Within the parameters of the project, “subjectivity” alludes to multiple categories that belie a simultaneously coherent and fragmented self. I loosely wield politically charged terms such as body, self, identity, individual and community to illuminate a notion of the human that both embraces and disavows belonging. Subjectivity thus elides between individualism and communalism.⁵ Rather than a point of contention, I locate my work at these moments of

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⁵ As I will gradually illustrate throughout the dissertation, subjectivity—“selfhood” if you will—encompasses more than individual identity and location. Rather, the “self” is an amalgamation of relationships and negotiations that belie an inherently communal engagement. In doing so, I echo postcolonial feminist theologian and Christian educator Boyung Lee who complexifies the coherence of the individual self as theoretical basis for subjectivity. Juxtaposing Confucian communalism with Western/North American notions of individualism, Lee exposes the limits of “self” as a theoretical scaffolding for individual subjectivity. See Boyung Lee, “A Philosophical Anthropology of the Communal Person: A Postcolonial Feminist Critique of Confucian Communalism and Western Individualism in Korean Protestant Education” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Boston College, 2004).

Similar conversations concerning assumptions of discrete individual subjectivity thrive among scholars in the field of critical pedagogy. Problematizing the binary of teacher-student, critical pedagogy disrupts the flow of power between individual subject locations, rendering both teacher and student complicit in the production of knowledge and cultural values. In a sense, the line that demarcates individual subjects from community is, at best, suggestive. Helpful examples of these conversations are embodied in the following texts by bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994); and Ira Shor, *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
slippage that both destabilize subjectivity and expose its potential for broadening concepts of the human.

My reason for undertaking this study is personal: the bulk of my becoming took place in between empire and colony, at the interstitial spaces that displace bodies, of bodies in perennial search of home. In the years since I stepped foot outside the Philippines, I learned to see how alienation constitutes a process of consolidating identity. Conversely, I saw through the fragility of rootedness as grounding for meaning-making. By leaving “home,” it seems, one exposes not only its conceptual contingency—Is home about location? Is it about relationships? Or is it about the history of a people and place?—but the way in which selves, too, are imagined and validated—What does it mean to authentically belong to place, especially when one lives beyond its borders? What does this say about one’s fidelity to community?

Over time, these questions spilled onto pertinent areas and relationships of my life. Having taught all over the United States, I learned to see how my diasporic body mirrors the kind of alienated/unformed body one meets in the classroom. It is an encounter that piques at a fundamental search for meaning, compelling an outreach to another who stands equally prone to displacement. Teaching before Irish- and Italian-Americans in Boston, among Chamorus and Asian/Pacific-Island teenagers in Guam and with Ilokano, Kanaka Maoli and Polynesian students in Hawai’i, I embodied the outsider who spoke from within by virtue of a shared diaspora. Displacement resonated with my students; it served as the currency of our learning.

In the years since, my understanding of diaspora shifted away from exclusive considerations of history, politics and economics to diaspora as an event where new
kinds of subjectivities are imagined. In a sense, diaspora—that space between empire and colony—re-contours body and its location, expanding the ways subjectivity becomes manifest in diverse contexts.

Andrea Bieler offers a helpful paradigm for diasporic subjectivity that alludes to the self as “heightened presence.” For Bieler, selfhood comes into being in the same way that stage identities—constituted by set lines, actions and repetition—emerge. For actors and audiences, what transpires on stage is not a mimicry of the “real world,” but an iteration (exaggeration?) of the every day that allows audiences both time and space to re-view their lives. A successful performance enables actors and audience members to blur the line that divides the real from the un/hyper/sur-real. At these moments, that which constitutes “authentic” expands, bearing very real political implications for the everyday lives of those present.

Because diasporic subjects often muddle the line that separates home/real/authentic from exile/temporary/alien, they too evoke a “heightened presence” that critique the following assumptions of what constitutes an authentic self:

**Place.** Seemingly neither here nor there, diaspora unfetters the stability of one’s location. Similar to the ways stage actors blur the lines between what is real and

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6 Andrea Bieler draws from the work of Michael Meyer-Blanck to develop role that a “heightened presence” plays within liturgical spaces. See Andrea Bieler and David Plüss, “In this Moment of Utter Vulnerability: Tracing Gender in Presiding,” Unpublished Manuscript (Berkeley, CA, 2010), 7.

7 There are clear correlations between Bieler’s notion of “heightened presence” and Judith Butler’s “performativity” that I hope to unearth in the succeeding chapters. However, I would also like to assert a similar resonance between Bieler along with Homi Bhabha’s notion of mimicry and Gayatri Spivak’s “strategic essentialism” that will echo throughout my re-reading of Filipino-American subjectivity. These ideas will also be treated at length in the succeeding chapters. See Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge classics (London: Routledge, 2004); and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1999).
un/hyper/sur-real, diasporic subjects complicate the location of nation through their multiple political, economic, cultural and national fidelities. They obscure the very borders that delimit imperial sovereignty. Indeed, as I will later illustrate, diaspora’s conflation of home and exile allows Filipino-Americans room to expand categories of what it means to be simultaneously Filipino and American. More importantly, they expose the instability of location as a basis to constitute subjectivity itself.

Stability. To the extent that contemporary identity politics in the United States uphold gender, race, class and nation as essential to constitute self, diaspora subverts the stability of identity categories to assert subjectivity. The kind of


Likewise, Catherine Choy Ceniza studies the ways that healthcare, particularly in the field of nursing, reflects the migratory trends between host and satellite nations like the U.S. and the Philippines in Catherine Ceniza Choy, Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History, American encounters/global interactions (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

9 During a recent lecture on Global Memory at the University of California, Berkeley, Homi Bhabha offered a visual representation that blurred the distinct markings that separated life in New York City and life in Tel Aviv. Postcolonial engagement—manifest in contemporary political, militaristic and economic movements—obscures the particularity of location, culture and human experience. I suggest that diaspora—particularly in its late 20th/early 21st century form that is exacerbated by politico-economic drive—results to a similar blurring of location. See Homi K Bhabha, “On Global Memory: Thoughts on the Barbaric Transmission of Culture,” in (presented at the Forum on the Humanities and the Public World, University of California, Berkeley, CA, 2008).

10 The centrality of race/ethnicity and gender/sexuality in the U.S. cultural landscape is particularly apparent in the educational system. In recent years, key studies have been undertaken to impress the need to integrate these categories in all curricular levels. As examples, see The Teagle Working Group on the Pedagogy of Ethnicity, “Rethinking the Pedagogy of Ethnicity” (The Teagle Foundation of New York City and Washington University
body that emerges from these negotiations is inherently fragmented. Subjectivity is reduced to adjectives—I am Filipino, gay, middle-class, immigrant, religious, etc.—pointing to, rather than asserting the existence of a presence. What emerges instead is a body—a material con/text beholden to the undulations of economic, political and cultural categories that thrive between nations. But it is also a body rife with metaphorical possibility—the site at which selfhood can be intimated anew without attachment to categories of gender, culture, ethnicity and politics specific to one place, history or culture. Indeed, for immigrant communities, fidelity to nation is complicated, with the pull of one’s (native) home hedging against one’s interests in exile. Within such relationships, displacement and rootedness occupy central rather than peripheral concerns.

Diaspora forces one to both embrace categories of gender, ethnicity and class for


11 Reflecting on the role of “body” to address postmodern considerations of subjectivity in theology, David L. Miller suggests a way of looking at “body” as adjective. Drawing from Gaston Bachelard, Miller suggests that adjectivizing the body, in a sense, does not reduce it to a qualifier of the “noun,” i.e., the real. Rather, adjective and noun collude in expanding the theoretical composition of the noun/real itself.

In a similar way, to reconstitute diasporic subjectivity as “body” does not “de-personalize” the subject, but expands the theoretical space to reimagine what it means to be “self.” For example: when I claim to be Filipino, gay, immigrant, middle-class and religious, I allude not to fragmented qualifiers but to a new sense of wholeness that hold all in tension. See David Miller, “The Body is No Body,” in Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality, ed. Chris Boesel and Catherine Keller, 1st ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 140-143.
political participation—while simultaneously resisting these categories as the very conditions that limit one’s flourishing.¹²

Subverting the linearity of imperial narrative, Filipino-American bodies eke an existence at the edge, faithful both to the Philippines and the United States, obscuring the divide between center and periphery. Diaspora exposes the illusion of a stable identity and its seeming “failure” to perform—or more aptly, assimilate to—a specific place or nation. To reconsider this fetish for stability and place is to enter more hopefully into the inevitable amalgamation of what it means to live as both/neither fully “Filipino” and/nor “American.” By re-thinking diaspora as precisely the moment where “selves” subvert location and stable identities, I suggest that Filipino-Americans intimate a kind of anthropology that privileges displacement, alienation and strangeness in the process of meaning-making. Rather than “embedding” Filipino-Americans within the landscape of “America,” they expand the epistemological and political spaces that allow for Filipino and American bodies to exist.

¹² Represent-to-Witness, a summer youth program, developed by Michael James and Deborah Lee under the auspices of the PANA Institute at the Pacific School of Religion, employed a pedagogy they described as “social biography.” Beginning with a basic retrieval of a participant’s life narrative, the pedagogy encouraged one to connect the specificity of individual experience with broader social events—such as the Civil Rights Movement, the immigration policies of the 1960s, emancipation, etc. In doing so, individual narratives ground social movements to the particular, offering necessary critique to prevailing structures that limit the full potential of such transformative events. For a general overview of the program, see Michael D. James, “My Critical Journey,” Michael D James: Grassroots Critical Pedagogy, n.d., http://mjcriticalteaching.blogspot.com and Michael James et al., “Interview with Represent to Witness (R2W),” March 20, 2009.

II Traces of Filipino-American Bodies

I locate my work within the field of Filipino-American studies. It is an emerging field that has undertaken significant strides in the social sciences, headed by scholars such as Rick Bonus, Yen Le Espiritu, Reynaldo Ileto, Allan P. Isaác, Martin F. Manalansán IV, S. Lily Mendoza, María Root, Epifanio San Juan and Leny Mendoza-Strobel. The role of religious identity and culture has informed the scope of the field as well, with explorations undertaken by Rachel A. R. Bundang, Faustino M. Cruz, Eleazar Fernandez and Joaquín L. Gonzalez. While there have been attempts—particularly on the part of Bundang and Fernandez—to draw from their counterparts in the social sciences to trace a theology relevant to Filipino-American life, social scientists have rarely drawn from theology to inform their work. In this regard, what emerges is a field that is inevitably divided in its assessment of Filipino-American life.

13 In so claiming, I allude to the larger tension between the social sciences (that often include political science, ethnic studies and religious studies) and philosophy/theology. The closest “encounter” between Filipino-American ethnic studies and theology seems to occur at the level of theory. Deploying diverse iterations of critical theory, both fields problematize the location and existence of Filipino-American life. Excellent examples here would be Allan Pun zalán Isaác, *American Tropics: Articulating Filipino America*, Critical American studies series (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); and Martin F Manalansán, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*, Perverse Modernities Series (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). In the latter text, Manalansán explores the role of religious practice—the Santacruzan—in the constitution of queer, political bodies in diaspora.

14 The disciplinary tension between the “strong” and “soft” sciences is at play in the implicit division between social sciences and theology/religious studies (I will further argue that this tension is apparent too in the divide between religious studies and theology, with the latter constituting the “soft” version of academic research). I argue that beyond these disciplinary biases, scholars of Filipino-American life also contend with issues of scholarly legitimacy that often encourage a bias against fields that do not reflect the disciplinary hierarchy in the
My dissertation attempts to bridge this disciplinary divergence by suggesting that within sociological and theological engagements of Filipino-American life is a “theological intuition” that informs an anthropology latent both to the fields themselves and the actual communities to whom both areas claim accountability. Rather than articulating a theological framework, I trace the kind of subject that disclaims stable ethnic, gendered, cultural and national identities. I assert that in doing so, both Filipino-American social scientists and theologians actually allude to a body—an anthropological imagination, if you will—rife with theological possibility.

My reflections will rely primarily on the works of Manalansán, Bundang and Fernandez. Speaking from distinct disciplines, these scholars have early on delineated the location of a “Filipino-American” body as a site for diasporic meaning-making, establishing Filipino-American Studies as a legitimate discipline within the academy. My choice of Bundang and Fernandez is obvious. Aside from the fact that they are perhaps the only two theologians working on Filipino-American theologies today, they also significantly draw from ethnic studies and postcolonial theory to inform their theological analysis.15

My decision to focus on Manalansán is less apparent, especially in light of the fact that earlier scholars have already undertaken extensive studies on Filipino-American life. What distinguishes Manalansán’s contribution to the field is significant, however. By concentrating much of his early research on the diasporic baklå—the effeminate gay male figure of Filipino popular imagination—Manalansán intuits the presence of a “queer body” implicit in Filipino-American life. Secondly, by approaching the diasporic baklå as an anthropological phenomenon that arises out of imperial and gendered artifices, Manalansán pushes Filipino-American studies towards a critical engagement with queer and postcolonial theories. Thus, Manalansán’s baklå offers both a sociological and theoretical paradigm to seriously engage Filipino-American subjectivity as itself the construction of nation. Given the complex role that colonization, politics and economics play in theological studies, Manalansán’s baklå potentially re-thinks assumptions about diasporic subjectivity that could broaden theological reflections on Filipino-American life.

Boston College, 2002). Locating their research in Filipino-American faith communities, these scholars assume the stability of the Filipino-American cultural space. Categories of identity, religion, culture and ethnicity are left static, used as the material location for analysis. Wielding critical theory, Fernandez and Bundang problematize precisely these categories of ethnicity, race and gender that undergird their theological study.


From these early liberatory theological projects, scholars such as Marcella Althaus-Reid and Anne Joh have deployed critical theory to complexify the roles of nation, economics and politics in a people’s theological worldview. See Marcella Althaus-Reid, Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics (New York: Routledge, 2000); and Wonhee Anne Joh, Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).
Wielding Manalansán alongside Bundang and Fernandez, I reflect on the ways diasporic bodies expose the inherent queerness of Filipino-American experience. Moreover, I suggest that this queer body actually engenders a theology that “disclaims” affirmations of self to foster meaning. When they speak of subjects that hold in tension oppositional categories like empire/colony, periphery/center, developing/developed, satellite/center, feminine/masculine, in/out, Bundang, Fernandez and Manalansán highlight strategies of exposure/hiddenness that allow baklā/queer bodies to straddle the complex binaries of Filipino-American life. In the disclaiming of a (stable) body, Filipino-American subjects not only resist empire, but illuminate life-giving ways of reconstituting bodies in movement. The “negative” turn of disclaiming becomes itself a moment for expanding understandings of subjectivity.

III The Baklā: Traces of Apophatic Theology

Bundang’s, Fernandez’s and Manalansán’s deconstructive turns configure the theological strategy of this dissertation. Rather than constructing a theoretical scaffolding to identify, locate and prescribe a “Filipino-American theological anthropology,” I trace the ways these scholars—particularly Manalansán—deconstruct the category of “Filipino-American.” It is a movement towards the negative that, while prevalent in contemporary critical studies, has also gained ground in postmodern theologies. By illuminating the meaning-making strategies inherent in the disclaiming of this queer, diasporic body, I expose the apophasis of body latent in Filipino-American studies. By “apophatic,” I point to the deconstruction of body that characterizes the kind of theological meaning-making germane to Filipino-American
life. Building upon the insights of these scholars, I approach the question of body as itself a moment of negation, as the unraveling of imperial categories heaved on migrant bodies.

As an “apophatic project,” my dissertation evokes not the explicit “unsaying” of God’s abundant, hyper-real, transcendent name typified by early Christian thinkers like John of Damascus, Pseudo-Dionysius and Gregory of Nyssa. Rather, I take an intentional turn toward a poststructuralist/deconstructive reading of subjectivity, the kinds of bodies that John Caputo describes as “insubstantial quasi-beings like ashes and ghosts which flutter between existence and non-necesscence.”\textsuperscript{17} I summon the kind of body to which Catherine Keller alludes in her analysis of gender as itself an apophatic event.\textsuperscript{18} Echoing Caputo and Keller, I invoke the Derridean stroke of “saving the name” as a meaning-making strategy germane to diasporic bodies who stand at the threshold of recognition and invisibility.\textsuperscript{19} By suggesting that diaspora—as that space between “existence and non-existence”—expands the location of body itself, I attempt to “save the (Filipino-American) name (body).” The diasporic body is thus a potent site for social, political and epistemological transformation. For diasporic subjects who stand always on the verge of erasure, exposing the abundance of displacement reframes the alienation of selves towards the possible.\textsuperscript{20}


\textsuperscript{20} At my dissertation defense, Mayra Rivera Rivera offered an interesting paradigm for the kind of theologies implicit in the problematization of subjective stability: rather than speaking of
More than a critique or affirmation of a “Filipino-American identity,” my anthropological reflections speak of displaced bodies that incarnate the travails of Filipino-American life. By employing queer and postcolonial theories, I explore what this apophatic presence implies for the consolidation of community and theological meaning. At the heart of this claim lies the diasporic baklå as a metaphor for Filipino-American identity. Manalansán’s reading of *pagladlad*—literally, “unfurling”—as the temporal and conceptual moment of the baklå’s “coming out” amplifies diaspora’s potency to equivocate the narrative of empire. Within this queer body is a “fluid stability” that subverts immovable categories of self, nation and culture.

I assert that in this web of corresponding/contrary fidelities and ambivalent assimilations, diasporic bodies muddle the in/out binary that stabilizes citizenship. Thus they evoke the baklå’s corresponding subversion of the in/out binary that disciplines bodies—an apophatic gesture that reconstitutes identity, meaning and faith upon displacement. Ultimately, I suggest that this deconstructive turn allows for a kind of theological anthropology that resists universal—and disembodied—affirmations of the human. Rather than submit to prescriptive claims, this dissertation traces a “weak

God as “other”—as a category, phenomenon beyond human categories themselves—God emerges as the possible inherent in deconstructive/poststructuralist theological anthropology.

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21 Within Asian-American communities, Fumitaka Matsuoka locates an “amphibolous faith” that arises out of the “simultaneous existence of radically different epistemological and cosmological orientations in a person or in a community.” Strategies of meaning-making, in a sense, exposes a particular way of believing and particular understanding of self. For diasporic subjects, this implies a polyglot engagement of cultures, nations and epistemologies. See Fumitaka Matsuoka, “Crossing Boundaries: A Dim Sum Approach to the Question of Peoplehood,” Plenary Paper for Asian Pacific Americans and Religion Research Initiative (APARRI) 2008 (Berkeley, CA, August 7, 2008).

22 In my preliminary readings of theological anthropologies—especially those arising from traditionally “minoritized” communities—I discovered a strong inclination towards a kind of prescriptive theology that affirms human qualities specific to cultural contexts as a paradigm for
theology”—to borrow from John Caputo—that speaks more intimately to communities already displaced by migration and alienation.  

IV Reimagining Filipino-American Theological Anthropology: Methodological Traces

My proposal is not new. I venture into an interdisciplinary engagement with theology, philosophy and anthropology to trace an elusive body already latent in Filipino-American scholarship. What is particular to this project is my intentional privileging of the baklā as both the material and theoretical strategy for tracing an apophatic theological anthropology. I wield pagladlad as a heuristic lens for a poststructuralist reading of material culture. But more than a mere translation of critical theory to the Filipino-American context, I suggest that pagladlad’s double deployment of hiddenness/exposure illuminates a way of imagining diasporic subjectivity that bears theological implications for interstitial bodies. And so, I deploy queer and postcolonial


readings to expose the irruptive performativity of Filipino-American life, exposing the limits of bodily stability.

I trace an apophatic subject drawn from the reiterative potency of diasporic embrace and displacement. More than just individuals condemned to fragmentation, diasporic bodies evoke “hyperrealities”—Bieler’s “heightened presences”—openings to a reality bigger than that occupied by singular bodies and events. Thriving as they do in the realm of unsaying and apophasis, Filipino-American bodies disavow empire—in all its political, gendered, cultural and theological iterations—by remaining dispersed. It is upon such bodies that I glean a “weak theology,” traces of abundance at work in a world unfurled, expansive in their very impossibility.

The circular structure of the dissertation evokes the apophatic turn of its theoretical content. It is ultimately “baklå,” hedging in-between categories, assembling disparate concepts and methods to reconstitute an inherently fragmented event. Rather than proposing a linear argument for re-thinking Filipino-American identities, the dissertation engages the multiple voices of poststructuralist philosophy, anthropology and autobiographical vignettes to intimate the apophatic theology of diasporic life. Rather than an articulation of an alternative anthropological vision, I illuminate events in contemporary Filipino-American studies that already hint at bodies displaced, of selves unfurled into the possible.

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24 There is a clear connection here between what Bieler refers to as the implicit multiplicity of a “heightened presence” and David Miller’s notion of body as “adjective”—qualities, tracings and descriptions—that stabilizes the noun/real/substance. Miller, “The Body is No Body,” 140.
V  Tracing Boundaries: Chapter Outline

My dissertation opens with the “problem” of the Filipino-American subject. I study the ways this identity alludes to a web of relationships that penetrate colonial time, space and imagination. More specifically, I study the ideological mechanisms at work in the construction of diasporic subjectivity. I assert that as a conceptual location, “Filipino-America” subverts the empire/colonial binary, breaking open ideas of diaspora as a location of fantasy and abjection.

Drawing from interdisciplinary studies undertaken by Asian- and Filipino-American scholars, the first chapter traces the theoretical frameworks that constitute diasporic space, specifically: community practice,$^{25}$ the colonized subject$^{26}$ and the consolidation of American “nationalities.”$^{27}$ Together, these areas of study allude to a body that both consolidates—and is consolidated by—empire through its displacement, events of meaning that materialize out of diasporic confusion.

In the second chapter, I claim the baklā as a paradigm for re-imagining diasporic subjectivity. Relying on Manalansán’s ethnography of a Manhattan baklā community, I trace resonances between bodies displaced by diaspora and those stabilized by their anomalous gender/sexual location in the Filipino cultural universe. To the extent that “Filipino-American”—and as I will soon claim, even “Filipino”—straddles multiple

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$^{27}$ Isaác, *American Tropics*. 
political, cultural and religious fidelities, this signifier undermines the heteronormative economies foisted upon an already displaced body. Destabilizing the assimilationist thrust of mainstream America, Filipino-Americans expose the artificiality of “imperial-colonial monogamy” by their very engagement with multiple cultures, nations and economics. The “Filipino-American” is thus a polyamorous body that thrives out of diverse transnational, cross-cultural and polyglot relationships. S/he is a pimp, a whore, who sells her/his body to the highest bidder. In this sense, the Filipino-American self is baklâ—beholden to all and subject to none.28

Manalansán argues that as a material event, the baklâ emerges at the moment of pagladlad. In the third chapter, therefore, I read Manalansán’s analysis of a “baklâ Santacruzan” alongside Tomer Heymann’s film documentary, Paper Dolls, to illustrate the ways pagladlad consolidates both empire and diasporic bodies. For Manalansán, pagladlad evokes the perennial reconstitution of bodies that echo the broader performativity of nation. Pagladlad thus evokes not so much a definitive claim of self as the deployment of diasporic embrace/disavowal to stabilize an unruly body. Pagladlad “intimates” rather than declares.29 Ultimately, I suggest that as a paradigm for diasporic


29 In his close reading of early 20th century Asian/Filipino portraiture, Patrick Flores hints at these mechanisms of “intimation” at play in the theoretical construction of cultural artifacts. More than a direct claim upon the subject’s identity and social position, these early portraits allude to the national, cultural and religious interventions that constitute colonial life. These portraits thus “intimate” at complex relational webs, exposing fragmented selves who buttress the tenuous hold of empire. In a similar fashion, the baklâ—as itself an artifact of culture, gender and nation—“intimates” complex cultural and historical pieces that loosely hold empire
subjectivity, the baklâ destabilizes identity in ways that opens forth imaginations of the human. In this chapter, therefore, I re-conceive pagladlad as an intimating gesture that disclaims rather than prescribes, intuits rather than articulates. More than acquiescing to some fantasy of nation, pagladlad asserts an apophatic claim in its negation of stability and assimilation as grounding for subjectivity.  

In the fourth chapter, I discern theological intuitions latent in contemporary readings of Filipino-American life. Re-visiting Rachel Bundang’s and Eleazar Fernandez’s theological works, I suggest that their struggle with identity politics illuminates not so much an impasse but allusions to bodies that blur the difference between presence that is “real” and presence that is “un/hyper/sur-real.” In so doing, Bundang and Fernandez maintain a notion of diasporic instability that evokes éclosure, a bursting open to the strange/stranger/possibility. Rather than a critique, my reading illuminates the apophatic undercurrents in Bundang’s and Fernandez’s understanding of “Filipino-America” as a body constituted beyond national, ethnic, gendered and economic boundaries. What they claim about diaspora actually unsays bodies that


31 Andrea Bieler and David Plüss, “In this Moment of Utter Vulnerability: Tracing Gender in Presiding,” 7.
render diasporic subjects even more real, even more provocative in their capacity to break open enclosures of identity.

*Interlaced throughout the dissertation are my rememberings of bodies and voices displaced: my own, that of my parents, echoes of home and alienation. In ways that are at times awkward and poignant, these excurses evoke the diasporic body’s inability to be “put in place.” Thus they interrupt the narrative of theory, relentlessly pushing their way through the suffocating linearity of imperial discourse.*

I close my study with a simple claim: as a contested site of nation and selfhood, the “Filipino-American” body is baklå; it is an unstable body that thrives beyond the binaries of un/real, in/out and image/nation. What this unruly body proclaims is a relentless commitment to impossibility and an accompanying openness to hope that intimates the abundance of apophatic possibility.
Chapter 1
Where is Filipino and America?

I Locating Filipino-American Postcolonial Narratives

Identity, as I have argued, is often invented by chance or happenstance and becomes recognizable only in hindsight.\(^{32}\)

The task of defining Filipino-American subjectivity inevitably begins with the question of location. This is especially so because Filipino-American life is grounded upon the undulating terrain of diaspora—a place of spatial and temporal movements. Even before the phenomenon of Filipino-American life came to being, the notion of a “Philippine nation” itself has long been the site of political, cultural and conceptual contention.

From its early iteration as a Spanish colony, to its brief moment of independence before the U.S. colonial period and finally to its current incarnation as a nation buoyed by the remittances of its diasporic citizens, the Philippines has long contended with multiple national fidelities.\(^{33}\)

More than any other icon of nation, the national anthem, *Lupang Hinirang*—composed over the course of 50 years, in three different languages—evoke the kind of “polyamorous fidelities” to diverse colonial masters that most embody Philippine nationhood:

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\(^{33}\) Spanish *conquistadores*—first under Ferdinand Magellan and later under Miguel López de Legaspi—established the “Philippines” as both an imperial and political entity. By establishing alliances with leaders of existing *balangays* (village chieftains) throughout the archipelago, both Magellan and especially Legaspi succeeded in consolidating a permanent Spanish presence in the archipelago. The name *Las Islas Filipinas* alludes to its origins as Spanish spoil garnered under the patronage of Philip II of Spain.
Modeled after the Spanish *Marcha Nacional*, then reconstituted with lyrics in Spanish (1899), English (1938) and finally, in Filipino/Tagalog (1956), *Lupang Hinirang* articulates a complex negotiation of nation, identity, language and location. Its transtemporal and trilingual utterances subvert illusions of cohesion that underscores the foundation of the Philippine state. As an icon of nation, *Lupang Hinirang* attests to a presumably “stable national identity” as grounding for an elusive homeland.

Tracing incarnations of “Filipino” throughout Philippine colonial history exposes the multitudinous ways that empire is constructed and fortified over time. During the Spanish colonial period, *Filipino* was a label reserved for Spaniards born in *Las Filipinas*. With the rise of the *ilustrado* class—and the subsequent proliferation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tierra adorada</th>
<th>Hija del sol de Oriente</th>
<th>Su fuego ardiente</th>
<th>En ti latiendo está.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Patria de amores</em></td>
<td><em>Del heroísmo cuna,</em></td>
<td><em>Los invasores</em></td>
<td><em>No te hallarán jamás.</em></td>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land of the morning</th>
<th>Child of the sun returning</th>
<th>With fervor burning</th>
<th>Thee do our souls adore.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Patria de amores</em></td>
<td><em>Del heroísmo cuna,</em></td>
<td><em>Los invasores</em></td>
<td><em>No te hallarán jamás.</em></td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<th>Bayang magiliw</th>
<th>Perlas ng Silanganan,</th>
<th>Alab ng puso</th>
<th>Sa dibidib mo’y buhay.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Patria de amores</em></td>
<td><em>Del heroísmo cuna,</em></td>
<td><em>Los invasores</em></td>
<td><em>No te hallarán jamás.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lupang hinirang,</th>
<th>Duyan ka ng magiting,</th>
<th>Sa manlulupig,</th>
<th>’Di ka pasisiil.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Poet and soldier José Palma wrote a Spanish poem entitled *Filipinas* to suit the music of the *Marcha Nacional Filipina*. The poem was published for the first time in *La Independencia* on September 3, 1899. During the U.S. Commonwealth period, Senator Camilo Osias and Mary A. Lane translated the lyrics into English. On December 5, 1938, the Philippine Congress passed Commonwealth Act 382, which made the anthem’s English words official. The National Anthem, now called *Lupang Hinirang*, was finally sung in Pilipino on May 26, 1956. Minor revisions were made in the 1960s, and it is this version by Felipe Padilla De Leon, which remains in use today. Republic Act No. 8491 or the Flag and Heraldic Code of the Philippines confirmed that adaptation of the Filipino lyrics in 1998. The English and Spanish lyrics were not included in the act. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lupang_Hinirang](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lupang_Hinirang)

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35 This name signaled a social status below *peninsulares* (Spaniards born in the Iberian peninsula), above *mestizos* (people of mixed Spanish and indigenous blood) and well beyond the domain of *indios* (indigenous peoples).
of independence movements in the waning days of the 19th century—mestizo and indigenous leaders usurped the name “Filipino” to rally a people of distinct languages, ethnicities and religious traditions towards self-determination. As it uttered its existence before imperial Spain in 1898, “Filipino” mutated into a national identity that disengaged itself from the colonial master. This deracination of colonial allegiance encompassed the scaffolding of a Philippine post-colonial state constituted by church, government, culture and language. More than a new national label, “Filipino” evoked precisely the multiple categories that constituted life in the archipelago: a mix of indigenous and Spanish cultures, Catholic and native animist practices, multiple linguistic groups, local and transnational economies. This conflation of culture, religion, language and economy was the natural outcome of a colonial project that subjugated diverse groups of people under the one name of Catholic Spain. And so, as resistance efforts erupted towards the end of the 19th century, they emerged from religious and political sectors, local and provincial governments. The execution of three priests—José Burgos, Mariano Gómez and Jacinto Zamora—who spoke openly against Spain’s discriminatory policies concerning native-born clergy sparked a series of protests that most claim to have given rise to the Philippine Revolution itself.37 Indeed, these

36 At the height of the Philippine Enlightenment in the late 19th century, the ilustrados of urban Manila embraced the name “Filipino” for themselves, asserting the socio-political entity of mestizo-indigenous Filipinos before the Spanish empire. Having obtained the opportunity to study in Spain and so gain exposure to European Enlightenment ideas, these ilustrados—comprised largely of affluent mestizos—pushed for colonial autonomy and increased participation in the Spanish Cortes. It was a period of palpable nationalism that witnessed to the proliferation of diverse political and economic initiatives for the Philippine colony. See Eleazar S. Fernandez, Toward a Theology of Struggle (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1994), 10-11.

37 The role that religion played in multiple uprisings against Spain is widely recorded in popular texts on Filipino history. See Teodoro A. Agoncillo, History of the Filipino People, 8th ed. (Quezon City, The Philippines: Garotech Publishing, 1990). Likewise, Reynaldo Ileto traces the role of religious impulses inherent in the mutinies and uprisings that proliferated the Philippine
sentiments were eloquently articulated in José Rizal’s widely popular revolutionary novels—tirades against the complicity of church and state in the colonization of a people—*Noli Me Tángere* and *El Filibusterismo*.38

The fledgling Philippine nation enjoyed three years of independence before it was forcibly reabsorbed into a new empire in 1902. Under U.S. patronage, iconographies of “Filipino nationhood” were re-imagined, re-articulated and proliferated to bolster the colonial subject’s dependence on new imperial masters. The banned Philippine flag and anthem—commissioned by revolutionary-leader Emilio Aguinaldo during the Philippine-Spanish War—were reconstituted with English words upon Aguinaldo’s political rehabilitation by U.S. colonial masters. Rizal—a Chinese-mestizo ilustrado executed by Spaniards in 1896—was “selected” by U.S. overlords to “embody” the spirit of the Philippine revolution, a strategic move that redirected anti-American sentiments among Filipinos towards Spain. A national constitution was drafted and ratified in 1935, reflecting (mimicking?) the Enlightenment ideals of the U.S. constitution.39 Old Manila’s elegant *plazas* were reoriented towards America with

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38 While Jose Rizal’s importance for the Philippine revolutionary movement is uncontested, it is important to highlight that a good reason for the success of his two novels rests upon their ability to articulate largely implicit assumptions/issues concerning the role of the church in Philippine colonial life. Other *ilustrado* thinkers, particularly, Marcelo H. Del Pilar, have also devoted their writing to the issue. See in particular Del Pilar’s study of *frailocracia* (rule of government by Catholic religious orders) in Marcelo H. Del Pilar, *Monastic Supremacy in the Philippines*, trans. Encarnación Alzona (Quezon City: Philippine Historical Association, 1958).

39 Upon the declaration of Philippine independence in 1898, a national constitution was adopted by the national assembly in the town of Malolos, north of Manila. A rudimentary comparison between the 1899 and 1935 constitutions reveals the influence of American/European/
the construction of neo-classical edifices and grand boulevards reminiscent of Washington, D.C. (itself an ironic embodiment of the French Revolution’s rehabilitation of democracy).

By the time the United States granted independence to the Philippines in 1946, the iconographies of an American empire were deeply embedded in the country’s national psyche. As Epifanio San Juan insists, one cannot apprehend a Filipino identity without gleaning the specter of American imperialism hovering in the background. The empire is visible in its invisibility. The enduring presence of the U.S. in the Philippines prevails to this day, incarnated in economic and military treaties that bind the empire’s peripheral subject closely to the center. Within the span of a century, “Filipino” metamorphosed from an indigenous and mestizo collective into a nation frequently in contention with America.

U.S.-Philippine relations assume a paternalism that relegates the Philippines to a “junior state” in need of development and politico-economic support. The Philippines—and by extension, Filipino culture, worldview, values, democratic process—is understood to be just a “step behind” the much-desired American ideal. Within this disproportionate relationship, there prevails the modernist “idea of a single nature for all humans...[where] some are evidently ‘more mature’ than others.” Following Talal Asad, I assert that what constitutes the “Philippines” is really an amalgamation of temporal, political and social confluences that fragment already unstable bodies

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Enlightenment principles on the young nation. There prevails, for example, value for the sovereignty of the national subject and an explicit separation of (C)hurch and state (Article 5, 1899 version; Section 1/7, 1935 version). Filipino historian Teodoro Agoncillo traces the ways that revolutionary leader Emilio Aguinaldo sought U.S. military support to secure Philippine independence. See Agoncillo, History of the Filipino People.
constituted by memory, practices and rituals of nation.\(^{40}\) Thus, the idea that the Philippines is but a “ward” of empire ignores the fact that it too is a player in—and not just a byproduct of—contemporary American imperialism. It participates in the cultural, historical, political, philosophical and economic proliferation of the European Enlightenment itself.\(^{41}\)

It is important to assert that any notion of a Philippine nation speaks really of the West’s broader imperial/colonial project around the world. Indeed, San Juan asserts that: “[b]ecause the problematics of nation and nationalism have always been linked to Europe…the derivative nationalism of the ‘Third World’ becomes contentious for … postcolonial enthusiasts.”\(^{42}\) The act of naming a “Filipino nation” exposes therefore a mechanism of empire that transcends even the political boundaries of America itself. When European/“western” categories are imposed upon non-European/“western” bodies, the empire is reconstituted, expanding the realm of its social, political and economic jurisdictions. San Juan insists that the construction of Filipino nationhood—as a basis of ethnicity and nationality—exposes not the unity of this imperial entity, but its multiplicities. “Filipino” hearkens neither to the veracity of one’s ethnic origins nor to the stability of empire. Rather, this “national self”—the outcome of post-


\(^{41}\) Robert Young upholds the correlation of European culture with colonialism. He claims, “European thought since the Renaissance would be as unthinkable without the impact of colonialism as the history of the world since the Renaissance would be inconceivable without the effects of Europeanization.” This is a significant claim to the extent that it assumes the inevitable contribution of European colonies to the constitution of Europe itself. In a sense, the Philippines—as itself a multiply-colonized entity—fortifies empire by its very existence. See Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (London: Routledge, 1990), 119.

Enlightenment politics—deconstructs a center that thrives upon an originary myth. In this regard, San Juan echoes Bhabha’s problematization of the postcolonial subject: its existence challenges “excesses of modernity” insofar as they reveal “forms of modernity that are different from…European or western ones.”

“Filipino” thus challenges the myth of an independent nation able to hold its own within a federation of equally free societies. In reality, its autonomy is only possible to the extent that it participates in the agenda of empire itself.

In his highly acclaimed work, *American Tropics: Articulating Filipino America*, Allan Punzalan Isaác nuances San Juan’s observations by identifying Filipino national identity not only as a colonial product, but as a specific “turn”—(Greek) *tropos*—of American self-articulation. His analysis of U.S.-Philippine relations exposes the conundrum of postcolonial relationships: insofar as “Filipino” is constituted vis-à-vis the empire, so too are imperial entities grounded upon and fortified by its articulation of an opposing “double.” Drawing from Diana Fuss’s psychoanalytic metaphor, Isaác trumps the stability of an American trope and/or fantasy that thrives because it exists in opposition to its created other. As a prize of the U.S.-Spanish war, the Philippines participates in—not stands apart from—a colonial project that has broadened (and rendered more porous) the boundaries of the U.S. empire. Beyond its North American, continental domain, this empire clawed outwards to the Pacific, completing the European trajectory of westward expansion that began in the 15th century. It is this

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expansion beyond land, onto the undulations of current and tides that imposed the
empire onto an “indiscernible other” who stood in perennial need of discipline/control. In this sense, the signs that point to empire are themselves gestures of double-talk: they articulate into reality the might of an imagined center while revealing the master’s paranoia of its shadow. The empire and its colonies are not quite each other’s opposite. Indeed, during the latter half of the 20th century, this double-naming took on tones of economic co-dependence, with millions of Filipinos/Filipinas leaving the archipelago to provide necessary labor to bolster U.S. economic/political interests around the globe.

For San Juan and Isaác, diaspora and homeland are neither mutually exclusive nor do they hearken to a singular concept of “people-hood.” As a site for postcolonial reflection, diaspora—especially as it is incarnated in U.S.-Philippine relations—offers

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46 Isaác’s analysis offers insight to the efficacy of American-style public education in the Philippines as a powerful tactic of control over an unruly and diverse people. Beyond the thrust of the sword, it is the manipulation of mind, language and epistemology that rendered these natives recognizable as an “afterimage” of the American tropos. Ibid., 11.

47 In his study of Benedict Anderson’s Imagined Communities, Bhabha describes the subaltern subject as an agent of disclosure and truth-telling. The subaltern for Bhabha dismantles the stability of sign, exposing the arbitrariness by which signs of power, empire and center are constituted. By re-positioning the relationship of the subaltern’s “reality” with the language of empire, Bhabha defaces the impenetrable façade of power that sediments signage. See Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 226-232.

48 New York Times columnist Jason DeParle offers a sympathetic analysis of contemporary Filipino migration trends to the United States. He traces the effects of these movements—born primarily out of the economic policies of the Marcos regime in the 1970s—on Filipino families and the broader national economy. Beyond the economic gains of a few migrants, Philippine migration to the west, especially the United States, has essentially buoyed a national economy, safeguarding it from bankruptcy. DeParle is careful to point out, however, that such benefits have also fostered an inevitable dependence upon host nations like the United States. I will suggest in the third chapter that U.S. interests extend also to other countries—such as Israel—with whom the United States maintains economic and political alliances. See De Parle, “A Good Provider Is One Who Leaves.”
insight to the relationship between the imperial center and the periphery. Isaác’s metaphor of an American *tropos* echoes Bhabha’s notion of mimicry as a figure of imperial articulation, that is, the unveiling of a specter that exposes imagined binaries of the center and its margins. The mimic blurs the distinction between the real and the illusion. The power that emanates from the real/center relies upon the existence and perceived dependence of its after-image, the multitudinous others that warrant perennial discipline. The naming of empire is thus not so much the demarcation of geographical boundaries as it is a mechanism of multiple identity constructions.

II  Re-membering Filipino-America: Re-constituting Postcolonial Bodies

While San Juan affirms the need to expose the ideological binaries at play in the constitution of Philippine nationhood, he insists that these conversations bear direct implications for political and economic policies that affect the lives of people. Indeed, he relentlessly sheds light on the silent question that contours postcolonial critique: who bears the responsibility for deprivations within empire if the center itself is evasive,

49 Young suggests that demarcating the center/margin is really a gesture of *arrogation*, i.e., 
*[asking ‘away from’]*: “As Cixous suggests, the mode of knowledge as a politics of arrogation pivots at a theoretical level on the dialectic of the same and the other. Such knowledge is always centered in a self even though it is outward looking, searching for power and control of what is other to it. Anthropology has always provided the clearest symptomatic instance… History, with a capital H, similarly cannot tolerate otherness or leave it outside its economy of inclusion. Young, *White Mythologies*, 3-4.

50 Bhabha takes care to describe identity/cultural constructions as gestures of *enunciation*. Identity is not stable, not an idea that informs reality. Rather, it arises from negotiations of power and need. He observes how “…the epistemological is locked into the hermeneutic circle, in the description of elements as they tend towards a totality. The *enunciative* is a more dialogic process that attempts to track displacements and realignments that are the effects of the cultural antagonisms and articulations—subverting the rationale of the hegemonic moment and relocating alternative, hybrid sites of cultural negotiations.” See Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 255.
indiscernible? San Juan resists the conflation of empire and colony that stands implicit in both Isaác and Bhabha. Drawing heavily from Marxist commitment to material history, he holds the U.S.—as the embodiment of 20th century imperial project—accountable in the subjugation of a “Filipino people” (among others). He confronts what he perceives to be theory’s disengagement from material history, the further erasure of the subaltern beneath a fetish for ambivalence.51

While San Juan may take issue with postcolonial theory’s seeming indifference to material bodies, he upholds its resistance to hegemonic binaries. He acknowledges the inherent multiplicity of political engagements to which diasporic bodies are beholden: they are as much victims of empire as they are complicit in the empire’s becoming. San Juan thus affirms poststructuralism’s resistance to Hegelian dialectics as itself a political gesture. Indeed, he echoes Robert White’s assertion that “[t]he dialectical structure of oppositional politics no longer works for the micro-politics of the

51 In a critical parody of theory, San Juan offers his own turn on the poststructuralist buzzwords to expose the deeper material/political imperative of academic work: “Women of color are now chattel goods in jet-propelled slaveships, caught by the ‘violence of speed [that] has become both the location and the law, the world’s destiny and its destination.’ … No longer can we accurately analogize this diaspora to the Jewish or the African precedents. In this itinerary of deterritorialization, who are the interlocutors that can suture the signifiers of pain to the signifieds of simulacra and bytes in the electronic media? Who can chart the dematerialized flows of their anguish and dreams that finally congeal in battered cadavers? What listener in the transcendental realm of Lyotard’s differend can restore the lives of tortured victims like Gloria Ferlin (murdered in Lebanon), Angelina Palaming, Norma Barroga and Myrna Andrade (slain in Singapore), and Regina Loyola (killed in Hong Kong), just to cite the most recent incidents? Indeed, who can speak or negotiate for these identities no longer unstable, beyond the aura of the uncanny and the unheimlich, irrecoverable from their transcendental finitude? Where can one discover the differential subject/object position bereft of countermemory, of the delirious other within, of the ‘displaced shadow space’ that marks subaltern heterogeneity? These questions sound, to be sure, like mock-pastiches assembled from postcolonial and postmodernist wreckages of discourses that litter the graves of OCWs in their global odyssey. If they are counterfeits, where are the original stigmata of suffering, loss, defeat? If they are ventriloquistic, artificial and contrived, where are the authentic voices, the autochtonous signatures, the privileged seals of truth and authorized representation?” See San Juan, Beyond Postcolonial Theory, 226.
post-war period in the West. This is the context of Foucault’s critique of what he calls the sovereign model of power, of the idea that power has a single source in a master, king or class—and can thus be easily reversed. If such should be the case, I suggest that San Juan—while railing against the excessive verbiage of theory—tacitly affirms the correlation of theory and praxis that Bhabha upholds to be necessary for political action:

[T]he historical moment of political action must be thought of as part of the history of the form of its writing. … It is to suggest that the dynamics of writing and textuality require us to rethink the logics of causality and determinacy through which we recognize the ‘political’ as a form of calculation and strategic action dedicated to social transformation.

At a recent talk on “global memory,” Bhabha nuances the correlation of politics and writing by suggesting that memory—as perhaps an instance of the past encroaching upon the present—reconfigures and reiterates the transmission of cultural barbarism.

For Bhabha, barbarism refers both to the literal acts of violence that are repeated over time in specific communities and the forced imposition of past gestures, ideas and perspectives onto the present. In naming the violence that is in/advertently transmitted through memory, Bhabha alludes to “writing”—the reiteration and reconsideration of the past—as the vehicle on which present political actions are conceived, articulated and deployed. In the reiteration and re-writing of imageries, ideas and nations, subjects are re-membered. Echoing Miller, I suggest that insofar as such identities are reconstituted over and again by “past” images and ideas—forms of Bachelard’s

52 Young, White Mythologies, 5.

53 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 32.

54 Homi K Bhabha, “On Global Memory: Thoughts on the Barbaric Transmission of Culture.”
“adjectives,” if you will—they hearken really to colonial bodies that both produce and *usurp* the trajectory of the imperial agenda.

That said, locating the geopolitical and theoretical places where “America” is re-membered/constituted upon colonial bodies remains a critical tactic for political action. The U.S. thrives out of a carefully nurtured dependence upon its satellites, where “goodwill missions” perpetuate American after-images throughout the world. The construction of a Filipino nation for San Juan fortifies a colonial agent that de-stabilizes the cohesion of American imperial narrative. The “Filipino” cannot exist outside of the empire. And “America” does/can not exist independently of its satellites. Both exist in a simultaneous gesture of naming and erasure, re-membering and reinscription, one form of modernity rubbing against another. For San Juan, exposing the arbitrariness of the center/margin is the first step towards an ideological shift that could/must result to material transformation.55

San Juan’s ambivalence with political actions that hold the center/margin in tension inevitably reconsiders the role of subjectivity—and the implicit agency—that constitutes diasporic bodies. He alludes to a self that negotiates both empire and colony, neither entirely culpable for, nor a victim of, the postcolonial condition. In doing so, San Juan speaks of a subject that—again, to draw from Miller—adjects both the center

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55 Spivak undertakes a similar critique of theory’s implicit dismissal of (material) ideology: “The failure of Deleuze and Guattari to consider the relations between desire, power, and subjectivity renders them incapable of articulating a theory of *interests*. In this context, their indifference to ideology (*a theory of which is necessary for understanding interests*) is striking but consistent. Foucault’s commitment to ‘genealogical’ speculation prevents him from locating, in ‘great names’ like Marx and Freud, watersheds in some continuous stream of intellectual history. This commitment has created an unfortunate resistance in Foucault’s work to ‘mere’ ideological critique.” See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 273. (Emphasis mine)
and the periphery to assert its own becoming. It is a form of strategic essentialism that Gayatri Spivak identifies as necessary—and a dilemma—for political representation. In this sense, San Juan’s subject—to use Spivak’s words—“conceives of oneself as representative or as an example of something…[an] awareness that what is one’s own, one’s identity, what is proper to one, is also a biography, and has a history.” One stabilizes (essentializes) the self in an attempt to further political action between empire and colony.

Wielding an imagined, essentialized self hearkens not to an ontological existence but evokes a broader context that allows colonial subjects both to shape and critique political imperatives. The biography of an individual speaks of the broader social history of which one is a part. While Spivak sustains this ambivalence around representation, she also insists upon the necessary unspeakability of a/the subaltern as a perennial specter of (Western) epistemological and geopolitical domination. In a sense, she distinguishes the political imperative of subjects who are products, critics and victims of empire from the subaltern who stands outside the epistemological framework of empire. The presence of the subaltern is necessary to the extent that by alluding to

56 It is important to highlight that for Spivak, the dilemma of representation implies engagement with political action, i.e., it has specific effects upon ordinary lives. She asserts, in fact, that “…the relationship between global capitalism (exploitation in economics) and nation-state alliances (domination in geopolitics) is so macrological that it cannot account for the micrological texture of power. To move toward such an accounting one must move toward theories of ideology—of subject formations that micrologically and often erratically operate the interests that congeal the macrologies. Such theories cannot afford to overlook the category of representation in its two senses. They must note how the staging of the world in representation—its scene of writing, its Darstellung—dissimulates the choice of and need for ‘heroes,’ paternal proxies, agents of power—Vertretung. My view is that radical practice should attend to this double session of representations rather than reintroduce the individual subject through totalizing concepts of power and desire.” See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Outside in the Teaching Machine (New York: Routledge, 1993), 6.

57 Spivak considers the “margin” as a theoretical location of the unspeakability of the subaltern:
the pervasive nature of empire, she too exposes its limits; there is an *outside* to empire that is beyond its scope of influence. Rather than functioning as an irruption of what Bhabha calls the “barbaric transmission of culture,” the subaltern emerges as a silent/silenced specter who reminds the hegemony of its own instability. Spivak’s subaltern evokes not a colonial past, but the very real *present* of the colonial nightmare. And perhaps this is where San Juan stands in closest proximity to both Spivak and Bhabha. Ultimately, the problematic representation/re-writing of subjects cannot but interrupt the flow of imperial power and culture.\(^\text{58}\) But to the extent that San Juan imposes a political imperative on the Filipino-American subject, he assumes too that Filipino-Americans remain well *within* the contours of empire. Hardly the unspeaking subaltern, therefore, Filipino-Americans bear responsibility for the silencing—and eventual emancipation—of their own histories.

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“Let us now move to consider the margins (one can just as well say the silent, silenced center) of the circuit marked out by this epistemic violence, men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat. According to Foucault and Deleuze (in the First World, under the standardization and regimentation of socialized capital, though they do not seem to recognize this) the oppressed, if given the chance (the problem of representation cannot be bypassed here), and on the way to solidarity through alliance politics (a Marxist thematic is at work here) *can speak and know their conditions*. We must now confront the following question: On the other side of the international division of labor from socialized capital, inside *and* outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, *can the subaltern speak?*” See Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 283. *Emphasis in the original.*

\(^\text{58}\) In *Other Asias*, Spivak remarks how the “other”—located within empire—subverts the illusion of a shared epistemology that undergirds narrative of nation. She suggests that the “‘other’ is not simply a matter of imaginative geography but also of discontinuous epistemes.” See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Other Asias* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2007), 8.
III From National Identities to Everyday Bodies

In his research among Filipino-American communities in San Diego, Rick Bonus delineates the ephemeral spaces where Filipino diasporic identities are negotiated, discerned and articulated. Among his subjects—largely first and second generation Filipino-Americans—the notion of an ethnic identity is grounded as much upon the conception of an “American nation” as their memory of a “cultural home.” Bonus analyzes how Filipinos in the United States construct their identities against historical and contemporary realities to help understand not only the qualifications for who gets to be called Filipino-American and on what terms, but also the consequences of defining and negotiating Filipino-American-ness on the larger questions of citizenship and national belonging. … [they] unravel what it means to be Filipino and American at the same time.  

Throughout his ethnography, Bonus draws from key cultural practices to illustrate strategies for assimilation and resistance germane to Filipino-American life. Bonus highlights, for example, the ubiquity of sari-sari stores—the traditional village store—throughout San Diego, reincarnations of homeland that buffer against social and ethnic absorption. He also discerns adaptive strategies latent in the proliferation of Filipino-American social clubs—mimics of American civic organizations—as indicative of an accompanying commitment to (American) public citizenship. In the reiteration of these economic and civic practices, national boundaries and identities are constantly redrawn before and against each other. In doing so, Bonus articulates a notion of Filipino that expands the “ethnic body” towards multiple cultural and transnational spaces.

59 Bonus, Locating Filipino Americans, 2-3.
While he offers a generous assessment of the ways Filipino-Americans have re-created domains of Filipino life in San Diego, Bonus resists conflating their sense of communal identity with subsequent claims of a “Filipino ethnicity.” He observes in fact that

[t]he connection between ethnicity and identity is not inherent, though it may appear to be. …I stress the notion that relationships between ethnicity and identity are so completely the products of historical and contemporary interactions that the definitions of the terms and their links with each other are always shifting.

By distinguishing ethnicity as but one element in the construction of diasporic bodies, Bonus complexifies the role of race in diasporic life. Ethnicity, as it were, arises out of diasporic necessity; it evokes a simultaneous retrieval and disavowal of one’s “primordial origins.” Ethnicity, in this regard, emerges out of a series of cultural practices that stabilize their identities as Filipino in the United States. They are differentiated as Filipinos from Americans—and likewise establish their identity as Americans before other Filipinos (presumably in the Philippines)—by the imperative of developing cultural practices heaved on them by migration. For Bonus, naming a (Filipino) diasporic subject is an inevitable strategy against conflicting narratives of nation. Filipino-American subjectivity reinscribes multiple national narratives within the larger fantasy of America. The ethnicity of the “immigrant other” in this regard fortifies the ethnicity of whiteness that undergirds claims of an American body.

60 Ibid., 16.

61 San Juan upholds a similar position: “Even though we disavow ethnic revivalism and any claim to ‘primordial’ authenticity, the difficulties of negotiating the ambiguities of overlapping, interfused cultural spaces cannot be wished away. … The reason for this…is the finesse and ferocity of the colonial violence we have suffered under U.S. white supremacist power, a heritage filled with contradictions and paradoxes that needs scrupulous inventory to be surpassed.” San Juan, From Exile to Diaspora, 4.
As an example of postcolonial ethnography, Bonus’s analysis resists the “primordial nativism” that lurks beneath contemporary analyses of Filipino/Filipino-American life. Instead, he maintains ethnographic fidelity to the “every day,” tracing practices, turns and negotiations that straddle (rather than fortify) diverse political and cultural perspectives. In so doing, Bonus critiques empire from the “every day.” The specter of subalternity arises from the quotidian negotiations of diasporic life—from repetitive practices, habits and speeches that decry the threat of erasure. This is where Bonus and San Juan intersect to critique theory’s implicit dismissal of material history.

By “postcolonial ethnography,” I allude to scholarly practices in anthropology that problematize the location of the informant with the researcher. This exhibits a shift away from a perspective of the ethnographer as an “objective observer” untouched by her/his direct engagement with the informant’s context, experience and ideas. This trend was influenced largely by Clifford Geertz’s work on the role of symbol-making among a people’s articulation of culture. For more contemporary studies of the ethnographer-informant relationship, see Clifford Geertz, The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays (London: Hutchinson, 1975); and James Clifford, The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988).

Some examples of such kinds of work include Leny Mendoza Strobel, Coming Full Circle: The Process of Decolonization Among Post-1965 Filipino Americans (Quezon City: Giraffe Books, 2001); and Susanah Lily L. Mendoza, Between the Homeland and the Diaspora. Both Mendoza and Strobel were trained in the University of the Philippines in the 1970s, at the height of pro-nationalist sentiments that influenced an indigenizing approach to Philippine Studies. As students of psychology, Mendoza and Strobel were trained under the Sikolohiyang Pilipino movement, an emergent field that argued for a unique psychological analysis/system germane to Filipino culture.

Bonus’ notion of practice evokes Pierre Bourdieu’s habitus. For Bourdieu, habitus emerges when individual agents apprehend and perpetuate socially-sanctioned behavior through role anticipation and regulated improvisations. He asserts that within the habitus, cultural mores emerge not from any clear sense of agency but from a preexisting modus operandi on which individuals forge meaning. See Pierre Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 78-79.

Despite the transcultural and transnational globalization being trumpeted as signaling the “end of history,” the dialogue of nations will continue and national identifications survive well into the third millennium. … In this inter-state configuration, the Filipino diaspora explodes as a poignant cry of the nation aborted once more, quarantined, disseminated in the wilderness of bazaars, the voices of OCWs drowned by the hawkers and money-changers.  

While Bonus may regard the negotiations of his San Diego informants as moments of diasporic necessity, San Juan looks upon such strategies as the necessary “subalterning” of the Filipino colonial subject. Bonus’s study of the every day dismantles the imperial metanarrative while San Juan’s resistance to the hegemony of ideological structures lends a near-apocalyptic urgency to the malaise of Filipino-American life. Criticizing the ways that Filipino cultural artifacts are absorbed within mainstream (American) art and music, for example, San Juan decries how Filipinos remain “subalternized by putative rehabilitation. By subsuming Filipino works within American multicultural ethos, we continue to become subalternized.” For San Juan,

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66 San Juan, Beyond Postcolonial Theory, 219-220.

67 Much of San Juan’s critique against U.S. imperialism evokes a sense of urgency that echoes the nationalist movements pervasive in the Philippine political landscape in the Philippines. See for example, E. San Juan, U.S. Imperialism and Revolution in the Philippines (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). This sense of—what I term to be apocalyptical—urgency is apparent too in the early publication of Fernandez. See Eleazar S Fernandez, Toward a Theology of Struggle (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1994).

68 A good example of San Juan’s strategy is his rejection of the categorization of “Filipino-American cultural artifacts” as but sub-facets of “American life.” He problematizes, for example, the inclusion of Filipina-American novelists such as José García Villa and Jessica Hagedorn into the emerging pantheon of multi-cultural American literature as an iteration of Filipino “othering.” San Juan sees this as a problem both of Filipinos who wish to model themselves after the master and of the empire’s patronizing absorption of “subaltern subjects and cultures” into the hegemonic canon. In the case of Villa, San Juan asserts that, “Villa’s ‘disappearance’ [from the canon of 20th century U.S. literature] is but one episode in the allegory of the Filipinos’ pre-postcolonial ethnogenesis. The group’s persistently reproduced subordination arises from its belief that it owes gratitude for being given an entry visa, and that by imitating the successful models of Asians and other immigrants who made their fortune, it will gradually be accepted as an equal; at the same time, it cherishes the belief that it originated
living as a Filipino in America assumes either the invisibility of assimilation or perennial subjection to resistance. There is no middle ground. While Bonus does not completely disagree with San Juan, he asserts that fetishizing stable identities—a “primordialist” position—leads to a kind of cultural and political nativism that fails to address diaspora’s threat of absorption. In the same vein, he resists the “instrumentalist” position that regards identities as tools deployed to further individual and collective interests. To this, Bonus suggests “…moving beyond the strict demarcations and parameters of the primordialist-instrumentalist perspectives, [towards] a more complex, nuanced, and dynamic narration of ethnic identity formation.”

By highlighting the problematic primordial/instrumental binary, Bonus subverts the ethnocentric trope that undergirds the kind of “Filipino” that San Juan defends. By illuminating the ways practices like Pilipino Cultural Nights (PNC), beauty pageants and the sari-sari stores consolidate Filipino-American spaces, Bonus dis-members the fantasy of a singular “Filipino”—or in his case, “Filipino-American”—self who resists and thrives in diaspora. In a sense, Bonus exposes the insidious oppositional ideology at work in San Juan’s scholarship where categories of “Filipino” and “American” are forever cemented into ahistorical, unchanging political entities.

from a distinct sovereign nation enjoying parity with the United States.” San Juan, From Exile to Diaspora, 87-90.

69 Bonus makes the following distinction between primordialists and instrumentalists: “Primordialists emphasize that people naturally group themselves together out of a sense of primordial attachment, mostly in the form of original ancestry, culture and homeland. …Instrumentalists maintain that having an ‘identity’ in terms of belonging to a group arises from the ‘circumstantial manipulation of identities’ by individuals gathering as one to suit their collective interests.” See Bonus, Locating Filipino Americans, 16-17.

70 Ibid., 20.
By appealing to the every day as a locus for the constitution of diasporic bodies, Bonus affirms the materiality and particularity of political and economic interests. Thus he echoes Spivak’s understanding of strategy as working through “a persistent (de)constructive critique of the theoretical. ‘Strategy’ is an embattled concept-metaphor and unlike ‘theory,’ its antecedents are not disinterested and universal.”71 Bonus deftly employs a “strategic essentialism” that neither disavows nor fetishizes the specificity of Filipino-American life. Instead, he re-locates “Filipino” beyond the metanarrative of national and ethnic histories, and onto diasporic practices that traverse national borders, ethnic and political fidelities. Bonus’s notion of identity as multi-located affirms Bhabha’s critique of the static, unchanging narrative of an originary nationhood:

The “locality” of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as “other” in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The boundary is Janus-faced and the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new “people” in relation to the body politic, generating other sites of meaning and, inevitably, in the political process, producing unmanned sites of political antagonism and unpredictable forces for political representation.72

By locating his work, analysis and accountability among people who claim multiple locations, Bonus trumps the binary of we/them, self/other—a tendency that lurks in San Juan’s attempt to disrupt the (Western/European) metanarrative. Again, to echo Bhabha, Bonus asserts that “the ‘other’ is never outside or beyond us; it emerges forcefully within cultural discourse, when we think we speak most intimately and ‘between ourselves.’”73 Re-constituting diasporic bodies through cultural practices

71 Spivak, Outside in the Teaching Machine, 3-4.


73 Ibid.
destabilizes the notion of an originary home as a marker for authenticity. In this regard, Bonus confirms Isaác’s description of colonial spaces as “accessory and additive to the center, [as] transformative and [betraying] the fixity of American identity.”

IV Gleaning Queer Subversions in Filipino-American Bodies

Re-membering/constituting home in multiple locations—as a gesture of consolidating body—is fundamentally an act of fragmentation. In these negotiations, the colonial subject emerges as a “supplementary function in the Derridean sense of addition and replacement [contradicting] the notion that subjectivity is easily recognizable, quantified, isolated, then scientifically converted.” Spivak has once remarked that the potency of the subaltern lies in its ability to expose the implicit power imbalance within the act of negotiating identities. Speaking of the need to alter epistemic structures, Spivak asserts the need for the “student of the socius” to track “familiarity with ceaseless subalternization” to effect change in the human mind and within institutions.

In naming the “supplementary functionality” of the colonial subject, one apprehends the

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75 Ibid.

76 For a full account of her statement: “It seems unquestionable that sustainable change takes place if change in the human mind supplements institutional change. This conviction itself supplements the other, that institutional change (always in the broadest sense) brings change of mind—epistemic change. Both views seem right. It is only when the latter is projected by rather pre-critical notions of the mental theater and these projections begin to affect policy in a large-scale way that both familiarity with ceaseless subalternization and the lessons learned in the classroom begin to assert themselves. …The student of the socius must learn to track them, and having tracked them, write them in such a way that the readers of the indefinite future, unencumbered by our specific topicalities, may inhabit them, follow them. It is in this responsibility of writing that thought may become a textual blank for others to suture that makes the confident diagnoses of changes in the “structures of feeling” accompanying globalization banal.” See Spivak, *Other Asias*, 3.
myth of nation as independent, self-determined entities. The so-called “community of nations” is a fantasy that is exposed by the co-dependence of empire with its colonies. For Spivak, subaltern bodies confirm the fallacy of the modern subject who is perceived as an autonomous agent who forges her/his destiny unfettered.\textsuperscript{77} Identities are ideological constructions foisted upon very real bodies whose access to power is limited by imperial interests. Spivak’s resistance to subalternity serves, in some sense, as a protest to modernity’s thrust to stabilize unruly bodies who do not conform to empire.

Imagining the Filipino-American subject as diasporic body—itself an incarnation of subaltern resistance—emasculates that which Asad refers to as modernity’s fetish for progress, the West’s idealization of “development.” This is where Bonus’s turn to everyday practices, Isaác’s critique of the American tropos and San Juan’s insistence upon political materiality serve as useful critiques to the (American) postcolonial condition. Informed by the peculiar experiences of Filipino-American bodies, these scholars dismantle not only “Filipino” as a modern construction, but resist imperial tropes that fossilize and essentialize “Filipino/Filipino-Americanisms.”\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{77} Indeed Spivak asserts that “…the [assumed] permeability of global culture must be seen as restricted. … Cultural borders are easily crossed from the superficial cultural relativism of metropolitan countries, whereas, going the other way, the so-called peripheral countries encounter bureaucratic and policed frontiers.” The metropole, in a sense, is never just about the center. It speaks as much of the frontierlands that constitutes its borders. See Ibid., 33.

\textsuperscript{78} Methodological differences in approaching the inevitable essentialization of Filipino and/or Filipino-American subjects reflect differences in disciplinary methods as well. Using psychology and cultural/ethnic studies, Leny Mendoza Strobel outlines the parameters of Filipino subject formation through an analysis of loób, i.e., subject interiority that constitutes the “authentic subject.” See Strobel, \textit{Coming Full Circle}. Strobel’s methodological and disciplinary approaches are critiqued by proponents of critical theory who discern a clearly essentializing mechanism in her analysis. Strobel’s sister, S. Lily Mendoza, attempts to bridge this disciplinary divide between psychology and theory in her later study of the theoretical intersections at which Poststructuralism and Filipino Indigenization movements meet. See Susanah Lily L. Mendoza, \textit{Between the Homeland and the Diaspora}. 
Rearticulated as a multiple subaltern body, the diasporic Filipino of Bonus and Isaác reveals an alterity—the *other Asias* of Spivak’s imagination—that reminds the center of its own fragmentation. They critique/nuance San Juan’s tendency to form counter(meta)narratives against the West *while* echoing his commitment to material transformation. “Filipino” in this sense captures the movement of negotiation, not the impermeability of static identities.

My analysis of Bonus, San Juan and Isaác reflects the amorphous contours, limitations and possibilities that consolidate Filipino-American subjects. In speaking of/for/with this Filipino-American subaltern, I expose really the complementary and contradictory forces that collude to ensure its existence. Thus, I affirm the existence of a Filipino-American body—specter, really—who forever haunts avenues of power, the colonizing gaze turned inwards, towards empire. To the extent that imaginations of “Filipino-America” evoke multiple fidelities, I suggest a queering dynamic that subverts imperial binaries of center/margins, in/out, native/other. In a sense, the postcolonial subject enacts a type of polyamory that holds multiple personal, national and economic

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79 Spivak poses the possibility of even *playing* with naming as an act of political/identity subversion: “…one of the ways of resisting capitalist multiculturalism’s invitation to self-identity and compete is to give the name of “woman” to the unimaginable other. …For one of the ways to get around the confines of one’s “identity” as one produces expository prose is to work at someone else’s title, as one works with a language that belongs to many others. This, after all, is one of the seductions of translating. It is a simple miming of the responsibility to the trace of the other in the self.” See Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, 179.

80 Bhabha values both the process of exposing the multiplicity of the empire, and the subsequent commitment to engender new connections between “minority” communities who constitute the empire. For Bhabha, there prevails a political imperative in recognizing that the center and margins co-exist to form an imagined whole. Bhabha thus asserts that “[t]he most significant effect of this process is not the proliferation of ‘alternative histories of the excluded’ producing, as some would have it, a pluralist anarchy. What my examples show is the changed basis for making international connections.” See Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 8.
relationships in tension with each other.

To most Filipinos today, America conjures not the phantasm of a colonial master, but a benevolent *kuya*—an older brother—who stands ready to protect a younger sibling yet learning the measured steps of democracy. American largesse has long buttressed Philippine economic and political interests, ensuring its participation in an increasingly global economy. And yet, in the same gesture, the U.S. remains very much the arbiter of imperial interests upon the much-abused landscape of Philippine life. Just like a pimp who peddles a child to the highest bidder, America manipulates Filipino resources, economic desperation and cultural capital to buoy the center. The kuya, in this sense, is also the sinister figure who molests its ward for interests that transcend any perceivable and immediate benefit. This incestuous “marriage” of pimp/prostitute, older brother/younger sibling, empire/colony complexifies the flow of power and its seeming benevolence. Both ways of relating are problematic and necessary. The existence of “Filipino-America”—as both a constitution of nations and subjects—queers stable categories and so irrupts into the unidirectional flow of imperial power.

In the succeeding chapter, I elucidate the potency of this “queer gaze”—looking at and being observed—through a close reading of the baklā as a paradigm of diasporic subjectivity.81 Standing at the margins of seemingly stable gender and cultural categories, the baklā exposes the problems of diasporic location that I have argued here, that is, the *where* of one’s existence, the *how* of one’s negotiations, and the *imaginations* of one who stands at the cusp of belonging and disavowal. By proposing the baklā as a theoretical metaphor for Filipino-American diasporic subjectivity, I assert

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81 I derive the phrase “queer gaze” from Manalansá̱n who explores the different ways in which male homosexuality is understood, translated and manufactured across cultural and political divides. See Manalansá̱n, *Global Divas*, 5-9.
an understanding of body that holds multiple identity categories—national, ethnic, cultural, religious, gendered, economic and political—in tension with the other.
In the 1970s, a Tagalog film captured Filipino popular imagination for its in-your-face take on the baklâ. The story line was banal, predictable and for the most part, perpetuated shallow stereotypes of homosexuality. But one comical confrontation between a macho father and his ridiculously effeminate teenage son left many in stitches and me, much to think about.

The scene opens with a father dragging his son to a barrel filled with water. Rumormongers have just outed the boy to his family, and so the father is determined to force the truth out of his son (even though the boy is already swathed in a flowing psychedelic blouse!). With each dunk of his son’s head, the father barks: Walanghiya kang anak: Ano ka, babáe o lalake (You shameless son: What are you, woman or man)?! And with each gasp for air, the son exclaims, Babáe, pó (A woman, sir)! So even more furiously, the father pushes his son underwater, insistent that he assert his manhood. But each time, the boy protests piteously: Babáe akô (I am a woman)!

Finally, in dramatic flourish, the father dunks his son even deeper into the barrel, practically drowning the “woman” out of the boy. And he succeeds. Near death, weakly clutching at his throat, the son finally relents: Hindi pó akô babáe (I am not a woman). But before the father manages a triumphant smirk, the son sputters: …dahil sirena akô (because I’m actually a mermaid)!

As a young boy, I remember painfully guffawing along with the rest of the audience. I clearly appreciated the juxtaposition of truth and unveiling, power and abuse; the metaphor levied upon water as both a space of drowning and—as asserted by the self-proclaimed mermaid—life. There prevailed the recognition that being baklâ
assumed a man’s life-long wrangling for woman-hood, femininity. Just as its etymology melds “babāe” (woman) and “lalake” (man) into an awkward utterance, the baklâ embodies conceptual ambiguities in gender, identity and location. Within a culture that imposes clean distinctions between lalake/man and babāe/woman, to be baklâ implies participation in the undulating terrain of gender in-between-ness. The space for the baklâ exists in flux.

In many ways, the film—and its subsequent ubiquity in Filipino popular imagination—evokes an assumption not only about gender normativity, but the ways in which heterosexist and phallogocentric values underlie Filipino social, economic, religious and sexual cultures. This pervasive phallogocentric/heterosexism, in turn, calls to mind questions about Philippine colonial history and its effects upon the consolidation of cultural identity, its inevitable fortification of national—and as in the context of diaspora, ethnic—values. Actors within this socio-historical performance are complicit: neither entirely responsible for nor entirely absolved from the pervasive heteronormativity that makes life difficult both for baklâ and “straight” Filipinos. More than an ambiguous “gender space,” I suggest that the baklâ evokes too the profound im/possibility of diasporic life itself. In this vein, I assert that through his un/intentional

82 In my futile attempt to locate the film’s title and year of release, I found a slew of websites that alluded to this confrontation. In fact, one site dedicated to transsexual issues in the Philippines (TransLifeInManila.blogspot.com) featured a text of these lines in its opening page. Apparently, the infamous father-son exchange has since passed into popular lore, reincarnated as a “joke” that exemplifies the baklâ’s navigations in Philippine macho society.

deployment of sexual/gender peculiarity, the baklā not only subverts prevailing paradigms of normalcy, but also engenders new ways of re-thinking the human.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{84} Tagalog— the primary Philippine language that I will utilize in this paper— does not utilize gendered pronouns. To speak of baklā as either “she,” “he” or “it” presumes epistemological (and social) categories that may or may not easily translate across Filipino/a-U.S. cultural divide. While the baklā is defined as a definitive feminine space, self-identified baklā may or may not choose to see themselves as feminine and/or women. For the purposes of consistency, I will use the masculine pronouns “he,” “his,” and “him” in reference to the baklā.
CHAPTER 2
NEITHER FILIPINO NOR AMERICAN: DESTABILIZING QUEER SUBJECTS

This chapter will investigate the ways the baklâ—as a specific embodiment of a
gendered, Filipino/ethnic, colonial identity—reflects, reorients and shifts diasporic
subjectivity. Its ambiguous gender location within the Filipino cultural universe
provides an opening to reconsider identity construction as multitudinous, the product of
diverse communities, nations, ethnicities, cultures, genders, sexualities and ways of
meaning-making. In this sense, I suggest that the baklâ is inherently diasporic,
belonging to multiple locations and disavowed by his seeming fidelity to none.

As a metaphor for diasporic life, the baklâ exposes strategies of displacement
and rootedness that speak intimately of what San Juan calls the “Filipino experience,”
that is, practices of American mimicry constitutive of Filipino nationhood and
identity. More than a shadow of the “real”—an amorphous figure of popular

85 Numerous studies have been undertaken on the baklâ from various disciplines in the
Philippines. Some of the more notable ones include: a psycho-sociological study of Philippine
gay life by Margarita Go Singco Holmes, A Different Love: Being a Gay Man in the Philippines
(Pasig City, Philippines: Published and exclusively distributed by Anvil Pub, 2005); a
cultural/literary reading of the baklâ by J. Neil C. Garcia and Danton Remoto, eds., Ladlad: An
Anthology of Philippine Gay Writing (Pasig, Metro Manila, Philippines: Anvil, 1994); Danton
Remoto, Gaydar (Pasig City, Philippines: Published and exclusively distributed by Anvil Pub,
2002); and a study of HIV/AIDS and its effects upon the baklâ community in the Philippines by
Michael L. Tan, Shattering the Myths: A Primer on HIV, AIDS, and the Filipino, 1st ed. (Pasig

For the purposes of this paper, I will focus on Manalansân and García largely as they
offer one of the first (and few) theoretical analysis of the baklâ’s subject construction. García
writes from Manila, drawing from historical and critical sources to contour baklâ subjectivity.
Manalansân, on the other hand, locates his study in New York, thus complexifying the baklâ
narrative with diaspora.

86 By “Filipino experience,” San Juan refers to the accusation of American mimicry that
Filipinos supposedly deploy. He claims that “[m]ost Americans who have visited the
Philippines since 1945 confirm the trait of dependency: Filipino society is a nearly successful
replica of the United States—except that its citizens are mostly dark skinned, poor, Roman
Catholic in faith, and also speak a variety of American English. …Can we believe a mimicry or
facsimile is better than the original—unless the original itself has lost its foundational, originary
imagination—the baklā evokes an understanding of self that is constituted by reiterative cultural and gendered practices. These practices, conducted over the space of time, place and history, not only comprise the baklā’s performative milieu but also suggests an understanding of the human by their very unsaying of it. More than an affirmative anthropological vision, the baklā dis-claims notions of humanity that thrive upon fetish of binaries and stable categories. Drawing from the research of Martin F. Manalansán IV and J. Neil C. García, I focus on two mechanisms that demarcate baklā subjectivity and space: [1] coming out—pagladlad ng kapa/unfurling of the cape—and; [2] the accompanying strategy of “intimation” that privileges a relational/social/political body.

For García and Manalansán, pagladlad functions as a performative marker, the moment at which selfhood emerges from reiterative practices of gender, sexuality and—specifically in the case of Manalansán—diasporic ethnicity. In this chapter, I suggest that to the extent that subjectivity arises out of individual and social practices—such as familial economic obligations and the maintenance of respectability—the self “intimates” and/or hints at a body that stands “in relation to.” Patrick D. Flores defines this kind of intimation akin to “a disposition to impart, disclose, and co-suffer within a passional (as in Christ’s Passion) economy; it is a reciprocity of selves, a tendency to share a ‘structure of feeling’ (saloóbin, or Filipino for sentiment) and to render it present or presentable (palabás, or performance).”

As a moment of self-revelation, pagladlad renders self “presentable,” that is, obvious, exposed—real. It is a self that is performed for/by/out of a communal aesthetic virtue and become a simulacrum? Can Filipinos, unbeknownst to themselves, be better Americans than Americans?” See San Juan, From Exile to Diaspora, 5.

because it is fundamentally empathetic, that is, beholden to the needs and experiences of one’s community. The so-called “other” becomes “known” as an extension of the self. This hinting of self thus assumes an agent grounded within the broader performativity of culture. The baklå cannot be baklå outside of the Filipino cultural universe. More than just an identity marker, the baklå intimates a type of body that assumes communal agency. Notions of authenticity are therefore imposed upon a kind of body constituted by reiterated practices of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and nation.88

In this chapter, I re-read the phenomenon of Filipino-American life as baklå. More than a prescription of ambivalence, hybridity—even “multiple fidelities” around nation, ethnicity and meaning-making—I suggest that the baklå’s pagladlad evokes a way of unfurling and undoing abject bodies that broadens conceptualizations of the diasporic self beyond binaries of home/exile, empire/colony, master/colonial subject, and melancholia/meaning-making. More than an affirmation of diasporic existence, the baklå hints at a negation of body that breaks open imaginations for diasporic life itself.

I Neither Babáe nor Lalake: Intimations of Queer Subjectivity

While baklå is often translated as the Filipino version of North American/Western conceptions of “gayness,” Philippine-U.S. colonial history lends a problematic complexity to a body that has been constructed out of unequal colonial encounters. In

88 Judith Butler defines performativity as the “reiteration of [gender and cultural] norms [where] sex is both produced and destabilized in the course of this reiteration.” This is a telling description to the extent that it subverts the stability of a gendered and sexed body—if by “body” one refers to traditionally stable categories of biological gendered-ness. See Judith Butler, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex" (New York: Routledge, 1993), 10.
the West—a broad category that has expanded globally since the Second World War, extending to major urban centers like Manila—“gay” presupposes a sexual identity defined by the object of desire and the subsequent choice of sexual partner. It is the person with whom one sleeps that determines one’s sexuality. But scholars like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick note that as a category of identity, sexuality is a far broader concept:

It is a rather amazing fact that, of the very many dimensions along which the genital activity of one person can be differentiated from that of another (dimensions that include preference for certain acts, certain zones or sensations, certain physical types, a certain frequency, certain symbolic investments, certain relations of age or power, a certain species, a certain number of participants, etc. etc. etc.), precisely one, the gender of object choice, emerged from the turn of the century, and has remained, as the dimension denoted by the now ubiquitous category of “sexual orientation.”

Indeed, as a category of Filipino sexuality, baklê is determined less by desire than by a determinedly feminine comportment that informs profession, dress, socialization and gender performance. Even García, who tends to equate gayness with baklê, alludes to hyper-feminine behavior as the specific identity practice deployed by presumably gay men to secure their social space. “Gay” and “baklê” are thus not synonymous categories. In fact, García asserts that “[g]ays who are not engaged in identifiably baklê occupations, who are not irreducibly baklê in appearance and comportment…are precisely the ‘invisible’ gays who have escaped from the more coercive effects of homophobic domination.” In so claiming, García distinguishes the overtly effeminate

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90 García, xiv. See also Manalansán’s observation: “In other allegedly antecedent forms such as those in Latin American and Asian countries, participation in same-sex acts is not the crucial standard for being labeled homosexual or identifying as gay; rather, gender performance (acting
gay man—who is baklâ—from the more covert, “invisible” variety—who may not be identifiable, or even self-identified, as baklâ. The baklâ is determined by public comportment. Profession, speech, accent, and fashion sense define the baklâ. More pointedly, it is the baklâ—and not the straight-acting, “invisible” gay man—who suffers the brunt of homophobia.

Straddling the feminine/masculine binary, the baklâ not only blurs the clean delineation of babâe and the lalake, but also reinforces the boundaries of differentiation that separate the babâe from the lalake, and both from the baklâ. In essence, the baklâ’s existence buttresses the habitus in which the babâe and lalake—as distinct gender roles—stake their existence. By melding the social roles allotted for both the babâe and the lalake, the baklâ serves as a conduit for self-location: the babâe and the lalake recognize who they are (and are not) through the baklâ’s parody of femininity and subsequent rejection of masculinity. Correspondingly, the baklâ grounds his own meaning upon the very binary that leaves him bereft of clearly discernible sexual and gender categories.

For the baklâ to exist, he must occupy spaces of the babâe. This act of “embodying babâe” assumes an accompanying ontological claim as well: the baklâ sees

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Norwegian sociologist, Annick Prieur, undertakes a similar study of male effeminacy in Mexico City that echoes Manalansán’s assertions. See Annick Prieur, Memâ’s House, Mexico City: On Transvestites, Queens, and Machos (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

91 Pierre Bourdieu defines “habitus” as the dynamic of role anticipation and regulated improvisations as the context/place/moment where individual agents apprehend and perpetuate socially-sanctioned behavior. He asserts that within such engagements, cultural mores emerge not from any clear sense of agency but from a preexisting modus operandi upon which individuals forge meaning. See Bourdieu, Outline of a Theory of Practice, 78-79.
himself as “real,” with a sensibility that locates him squarely within the babáe’s social milieu. This is poignantly manifest in his self-perception as a *real woman* who must engender sexual partnerships with *real men*. Anthropologist Fennella Cannell illustrates this negotiation in her reading of everyday life in a small provincial town in the Philippines:

> [A]lthough baklâ sometimes call themselves “gays,” using the English word, they entirely reject the Western understanding of gay sexuality, that is, that gay men are those who desire other gay men. Most baklâ I knew had never heard of this definition of being gay, and they vehemently deny either that they would ever be attracted to each other, or that their boyfriends are gay in any sense. Baklâ say they are men “with women’s hearts” who therefore love men, and love to dress in women’s clothing and perform female roles.92

Validated by the fact of having “women’s hearts,” the baklâ easily usurps specific roles, professions—even spaces like the marital bed—allotted to women, daughters, mothers and wives. But a glaring fact remains: baklâ is not a (biological) babáe. His relegation to women’s spaces requires navigational skills to supplant the exclusive claim of biology upon gender. One cannot simply act baklâ and be embraced as a woman. The baklâ caricatures femininity; his performance of womanhood is seen as paradoxical. I suggest that more than just an “unreal” mimicry of the “real,” the baklâ intimates the very artifice of femininity itself.

Ultimately, the baklâ’s existence exposes the instability of the gender/sexuality binary in the Filipino cultural universe. As García observes, “the sense that [the baklâ] have male bodies, and that they are men, is never lost to them. Instead, it becomes heightened, albeit in a renewed and more subversive form, by the very act of putting on

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the clothes of women." Cannell’s study of the relational economy between the baklâ and his sexual partners further illuminates this conflicted dance around gender and sexual desirability:

[The baklâ’s] ability to keep a boyfriend will always be threatened by the fact that they have no womb and cannot bear a child... Because of this, they often look for younger boyfriends, to whom they become a kind of financial sponsor, paying for their education or to set them up in business, while nevertheless casting themselves in the role of housewife and emotional dependent.

Economic and social participation is key to the baklâ’s social belonging. He is considered, for the most part, a breadwinner. The baklâ is expected to funnel a good portion of his earnings to his lover’s and to the family’s upkeep. Devoid of direct m/paternal responsibilities, the baklâ is called upon to provide emotional support, to nurse and care for ailing family members. Rarely the absentee uncle, the baklâ assumes parental surrogacy in the care of his siblings’ children. A baklâ bears unspoken responsibilities that leave him beholden to expectations of success and/or virtue. He is embraced if he brings respectability to the family, disdained if his sexual proclivities warrant them shame. Thus, social integration comes at a price. Carefully crafted reputations and the exchange of money secure the baklâ body in community. The baklâ who turns his back on his family is walanghiya (shameless, sin vergüenza), devoid of symbolic capital.

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95 Bourdieu’s discussion of symbolic capital resonates deeply with the dynamics involved in the baklâ’s social navigation. By equating his worth to economic generativity, the baklâ enters into a relationship that commodifies his gifts in exchange for social acceptance: “Economic power lies not in wealth but in the relationship between wealth and a field of economic relations, the constitution of which is inseparable from the development of a body of specialized agents, with
More than just the baklâ himself, this “queer space” is secured by a community that colludes in this intentionally gendered performance of culture. The baklâ’s sexual partner, for instance, remains tenaciously lalake by his affective indifference and accompanying role as recipient of the baklâ’s financial largesse. Indeed, García observes that since baklâ assumes both feminine comportment and interiority

\[\text{A man who commits same-sex acts with another man remains “heterosexual” (that is, not-homosexual) so long as he does not act effeminately, dress up like a woman (or become fussy about his clothes), and so long as he is “emotionally detached” from his baklâ partner. Inner identity, or } \text{kalooban} \text{ and not external action, largely determines sexuality.}\]

People know they share the same bed, deriving pleasure from each other’s bodies. But the “boyfriend” only does it for the money, not love (supposedly); he’s the top, the one who penetrates (so he claims). The “boyfriend” stands little to lose; the feminization of his baklâ partner having long secured his public masculinity. Ultimately, a “baklâ identity” is fortified (confirmed?) out of their simultaneous participation in the queer subject’s social relations. The \text{kabaklåån} (baklâ-ness) of the queer body is essentially the kabaklåån of the whole.

Passive and relentless, breadwinner and nurturer, mother and uncle. The baklâ elicits a breadth of identities that ebb and fluctuate. More than likely he is gay, but in specific interests; it is in this relationship that wealth is constituted.” Bourdieu, \textit{Outline of a Theory of Practice}, 184.

96 García, \textit{Philippine Gay Culture}, 205.

97 In her study of gay male sexual behavior in Mexico City, anthropologist Annick Prieur observes a similar gender-role negotiation among her informants. See Prieur, \textit{Mema’s House, Mexico City}, 179ff.

98 It is interesting to note that as more baklâ migrate to the United States, many find themselves situated in spaces where their social navigational skills prove inadequate, archaic. The hyper-masculinity of gay men’s culture in the United States forces many baklâ to conform. Nonetheless, Manalansán observes that even in diaspora, the word ‘baklâ’ does not lose
comportment, he is obstinately babáe. Beyond the confines of femininity, the baklā must also perform the traditional roles of the lalake. In this regard, Cannell is right: the baklā can never be truly babáe because his effeminacy does not absolve him from the accompanying duty to provide for the family, to be breadwinner, to be lalake. Thus for Manalansán, the baklā’s capacity to bridge gender categories demands “a sense of self entrenched in the process of transformation.”\(^99\) The baklā must evolve, change and accommodate. Femininity forges for him a place within the lalake/babáe binary only to the extent that it affords him space to live. Unlike the mimicry of drag performers, the baklā’s “public persona” is intimately grounded upon an interiority that affirms womanhood. He acts as woman because he believes himself to be one. Tragically, he is also not blind to the even more painful reality that he is not. I suggest that in this incessant performance of femininity, what is perpetually re-inscribed is not the baklā’s anomaly but a uniquely Filipino gender performativity to which the baklā (as the parody of woman), babáe (as the subject of mimicry) and lalake (as the object of erotic/gender/economic desire) are complicit.

Ultimately, what stands at stake in baklā genderfuck is an “intimation” of masculine and feminine aesthetic that rubs against American/western categories of sex, gender and queerness.\(^100\) In the U.S./west, “gay” does not necessarily subvert the

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\(^99\) Ibid., ix.

\(^100\) While Flores reads “aesthetic” as the artistic, religious, economic and political sensibilities that contour the production and proliferation of culture—I extend his definition more broadly,
male/female binary. The implicit distinction between an unchanging gender and a shifting sexuality grounds the notion that individuals gravitate towards specific forms of sexuality. Sexual and gender negotiations—manifest in the trope of “coming out”—allude to an “authentic (gendered/sexual/interior) self,” a telos of subjectivity, so to speak. Ultimately, people fall, shift or ease into sexual and gender identities where they feel most “at home.”

In the case of the baklā, the trope of an “authentic (gendered/sexual) self” does not moor his identity. Pagladlad evokes not the revelation of a true self, but the deployment of a pusong babāe—the so-called “heart of a woman”—that secures the baklā’s specific practice of babāe.\(^{101}\) This illuminates a notion of gender that is, at best, suggestive. Lalake and babāe “hint” at an ephemeral man and woman. So long as lalake is rendered secure by his paring with babāe or the effeminate baklā; so long as the babāe can feign emotional dependence and maternal responsibility; and so long as the baklā can ease into the babāe’s social and affective spaces—gender categories exist within the domain of intimation. Gender elides into sexuality. Both slip into the other, exposing the tenuous grasp of a gendered and/or sexual identity upon a stubborn, unruly and queer body.

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\(^{101}\) Among many self-identified baklā, the idea of dating another (effeminate) baklā invites revulsion—a warped sense of homophobia and misogyny that rejects any intimation of desire for one’s own. In popular parlance, baklā who date (or even just desire) another baklā are called lesbiyanas (lesbians), kumakain ng sarili (cannibal, i.e. one who eats of one’s flesh). See Manalansán, *Global Divas*, 25.

These attitudes confirm Cannell’s observation of baklā subjectivity as fundamentally babāe (of the “straight woman” variety). In essence, baklā see themselves—and are understood to be—babāe. See Cannell, “The Power of Appearances: Beauty, Mimicry, and Transformation in Bicol.”
II Baklâ: Neither Gay nor American

Scored on the baklâ’s body is a colonial specter that unsettles the hegemony of white (hetero) sexuality. This of course is an inevitable conclusion for Manalansán’s reading of diasporic queer life. But for scholars such as Cannell and García, the notion that queer identification alludes also to an “ethnic” face/body/culture further subverts the clean division distinction gender and sexuality.

By tracing the baklâ’s cultural roots to the pre-colonial figure of the babaylán, García discerns gendered, sexual, social, political and religious categories unique to queer bodies in the Philippine cultural matrix. Embedded in the role of healer/nurturer, shaman/intermediary and seer, the babaylán suggests a feminine sensibility that transcends biological categories of sex. For García, the relevance of

102 García’s ambitious tracing of a so-called “Philippine gay culture” exposes, in a sense, the illusion of a stable historical and cultural category that translates across time and space. I will argue that his attempt to locate an historically legitimate sexual and cultural subject reveals precisely its evasiveness within equally amorphous ethnic and gender spaces. By drawing from pre-colonial historical figures to stabilize the baklâ, García implicitly argues for shifting cultural and gender categories. In this regard, he stands close to Butler’s notion of performativity in the construction of identity. See Butler’s discussion on the role of speech acts as themselves constitutive of identity, Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1999), xxiii.

103 The implicit claim of a “universal” Filipino culture is problematic, as I have earlier asserted. See again as examples Susanah Lily L. Mendoza, Between the Homeland and the Diaspora.; and Strobel, Coming Full Circle.

104 It is important to assert that while Filipino scholarship on the baklâ typically draws upon Babaylán as an historical and theoretical resource, this figure is fundamentally “feminine” in its social iconography. Thus, contemporary women’s movements embrace the Babaylán as a native precursor to feminist awareness in the Philippines. In a sense, an historical reading of this feminine figure—and the construction of gender in general—reveals the adaptive mechanisms that frame the articulation of a Philippine colonial narrative. See Mary John Mananzan, Woman, Religion & Spirituality in Asia (Pasig City, Philippines: Published and exclusively distributed by Anvil and Institute of Women's Studies, 2004); and Agnes N. Miclat-Cacayan, “Babaylán:
this historic-cultural memory lies in the establishment of a correlation between public comportment and an “interior self”—a critique of the “postmodern subject” wrought upon socially-constructed notions of subjectivity.\textsuperscript{106} By locating traces of the baklâ in the pre-colonial figure of the babaylán, García illuminates—stabilizes? justifies?—a “uniquely Filipino” gender/sexual structure that stands other to Western/U.S. queer life.\textsuperscript{107}

While Manalansán resists claims of an originary, Filipino, queer subject, he echoes García’s rehabilitation of the baklâ as an ethno-sexual category for diasporic Filipino gay men. Situated before the white narrative of North American queer life, the diasporic baklâ embodies both gendered and ethnic subjectivities that render them simultaneously assimilated and othered. Echoing William Hawkeswood’s analysis of “black, gay subculture,” Manalansán suggests that insofar as the baklâ must contend

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106 Foucault locates the emergence of “homosexuality” in the West at the end of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century where same-sex acts were reconceived as medical categories that defined specific subjects according to their objects of desire. This is an important assertion to the extent that “homosexuality” was essentially elevated beyond a behavioral category, to a manifestation of subjectivity—albeit deviated—itself. See Michel Foucault, \textit{The History of Sexuality}, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 43.

Butler’s later proposal concerning the construction of gender—and the gamut of questions that this assertion raised concerning her understanding of the materiality of body—complexified further what one means by “construction” especially in the constitution of a self. See Butler, \textit{Bodies That Matter}, xi.

Together, I suggest that Foucault and Butler exemplify a fundamental (postmodern) question inherent in queer theory concerning the elusive grounding of gender identification. By alluding to an “interior self”—as the location of what is real, the grounding of one’s external actions and social behaviors—García actually resists a notion of subjectivity that is somehow the “product” of culture.
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107 In doing so, however, García also hints at an “originary” concept of “Filipino-ness.” García’s commitment to a pre-colonial gendered subject secures an implicit claim upon a stable nationality that inadvertently exposes the specter of Philippine colonial history.
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with otherness, he undertakes (un)intentional shifts in subject position to ensure the
survival of his gendered and ethnic self.108 All aspects of identity are thus negotiable:
gender, race, class, even culture. Manalansán locates on the baklā a nascent resistance
against the recurring trope of Western social/cultural “progress.” By claiming
effeminacy as a form of “gay ethnicity,” the baklā wields a “premodern, prepolitical,
non-Euro-American queerness” that validates his “political consciousness, subjectivity
and [specific kind of] global modernity.”109 In this regard, the baklā disrupts the
colonial trajectory of temporal and social progress through self-essentializing strategies
that resist his translation to and subsequent assimilation in diaspora. Echoing Talal
Asad’s and Susan Abraham’s critique of “colonial development,” I suggest that the
baklā decenters empire through his embrace of precisely these “pre-modern categories”
that subvert the “white,” hyper-masculine trope of Western, gay, male culture.110
Conflating sexuality, gender and ethnicity as identity markers,111 the anachronistic,

108 Manalansán, Global Divas, 69.
109 Arnaldo Cruz and Martin F Manalansán, eds., Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the
110 See Abraham, Identity, Ethics, and Nonviolence in Postcolonial Theory, 52; and Asad,
Genealogies of Religion, 21.
111 Yen Le Espiritu and Anne McClintock undertake a careful analysis of the gender
constructions that take place alongside—not as an aftereffect of—colonial discourses. Both
assert that insofar as gender could be seen as fruits of the colonial project, it has also been
deployed precisely to secure colonial agency as well. See Yen Le Espiritu, Filipino American
Lives, Asian American history and culture (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); and
Anne McClintock, Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest (New
York: Routledge, 1995).
mestizo and polyamorous baklâ stands at the margins of modern gay discourse, the specter who haunts the assimilationist thrust of contemporary gay culture.\textsuperscript{112}

More than an inconvenient reminder of the empire’s illusion, baklâ subjectivity embodies a form of queer resistance in its embrace and disavowal of majoritarian culture. José Esteban Muñoz describes this subversion of the assimilation/alienation binary as \textit{disidentification}. For Muñoz, this gesture is “descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.”\textsuperscript{113} Such strategies are deployed not by extracting self from majority discourse, but precisely by embedding self in the constitution of culture. Thus, to disidentify is to

\begin{quote}
read oneself and one’s own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to “connect” with the disidentifying subject. It is not to pick and choose what one takes out of an identification. It is not to willfully evacuate the politically dubious or shameful components within an identificatory locus. Rather, it is the \textit{reworking} of those energies that do not elide the “harmful” or contradictory components of any identity is an acceptance of the necessary interjection that has occurred in such situations.\textsuperscript{114}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{112} In his autoethnography of Filipino gay identities/subjects in Australia, Bobby Benedicto locates several conditions (such as class status and economic access) that allow for Filipino-specific articulations of gayness to be translated—perhaps even assimilated—into a global gay culture. In so claiming, he alludes precisely to my claim that an assimilationist thrust exists within gay cultures themselves, bearing the potential to both subvert the heterosexist narrative of empire \textit{while} proposing an alternative (homo)metanarrative in its place. See Bobby Benedicto, “Rethinking Postcolonial (Homo)sexuality: Paul Virilio, Global Space, and Filipino Gayness,” \textit{English Language Notes} 45, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2007): 89-92.

\textsuperscript{113} José Esteban Muñoz, \textit{Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics}, Cultural Studies of the Americas v. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 4.

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 12. \textit{Emphasis mine.}
Disidentification shifts locations, re-establishes alliances in order to reorient the hegemonic thrust of majoritarian discourse. I suggest that as a “disidentifying figure,” the baklâ not only destabilizes empire but disfigures the very notion of identity itself.

III  

 Pagladlad ng Kapa: Unfurling Baklâ Performativity

In the late 1990s the word rampa (fashion ramp) conveyed a visual and conceptual significance among my baklâ friends in Boston. Long employed in swardspeak, rampa refers to the catwalk on which fashion models peddled beauty and desirability.\(^\text{115}\) We used the expression rarampa akô (I will go “ramping”) to articulate an imagined space at which we flaunted desirability, difference and beauty. To rampa was to put one’s self “out there,” performing an idealization of whom we would like to become (or already are).

In his ethnographic study of a diaporic baklâ community in New York, Manalansán identifies a similar phrase used by his informants that expresses this flaunting of a gendered/sexual self among his subjects: pagladlad ng kapa, loosely translated, “unfurling the cape.” Manalansán asserts that as a gesture of/play on exposure, this colloquialism takes on the potent signification of “coming out” that reveals the performative element of the baklâ. Many Filipinos, including scholars, believe that the clothes the baklâ wears are external signs of the inner core, of essential qualities of feminine sensibility and emotion…Therefore, the

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\(^{115}\) Swardspeak refers to a uniquely gay lingo popular among the baklâ. Manalansán locates swardspeak in the Filipino language Cebuano (sward, which in upper-class Cebuano urban talk means sissy). It is a fluid argot that changes as swiftly as popular culture, signifying mechanisms of social navigations for the urban baklâ. Manalansán elaborates: “I argue that Filipino gay men use swardspeak to enact ideas, transact experiences, and perform identities that showcase their abject relationship to the nation.” Manalansán, Global Divas, 46.
act of ‘unfurling’ does not actually reveal a secret self but rather an unfelt or unapprehended presence.¹¹⁶

For García, this unfurling of self takes on a specifically feminine turn as it evokes two events ubiquitous in Philippine popular culture: the bride’s donning of the diaphanous wedding veil and the beauty queen’s triumphant coronation with tiara, scepter and cape. In both moments, figures of femininity are held forth, standing at the cusp of hiddenness and recognition.¹¹⁷ More than the baklâ’s necessary negotiations around gender, sexuality, economics and desire described by Cannell, pagladlad assumes agency, and a specifically feminine one at that. Because that which is revealed is already “known”—and thus “apprehended”—by the community, the baklâ’s pagladlad confirms the community’s intuition about his queer-/otherness that, in turn, resists the implicit heteronormativity of Filipino culture. Pagladlad is both the embrace and disavowal of social relationships.¹¹⁸

In North American gay idiom, to come out assumes a hidden identity that is revealed. Exposure of this hidden-self results to the formation of new narratives; old language is rearticulated to accommodate a new epistemology. Often, coming out is imagined as the point at which silence is banished, speech retrieved. It is the moment at which sexual and gendered identities are declared, stabilized before/within

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 27-28.

¹¹⁷ García, Philippine Gay Culture, 117-118.

¹¹⁸ When I came out during my years as a graduate student in Boston, I relished every opportunity to set my difference “out there” for all to see. My friends called this the “bagong ladlad (newly unfurled) syndrome.” There were times when on a whim, and right in the middle of a busy city street, my friends and I would sashay and mimic the exaggerated gait of Christy Turlington. We would strike catwalk poses, vogue and shriek. To this day, I chuckle at the expressions of many who shook their heads in dismay at the three flaming baklâ who made rampa on the hallowed pathways of the Boston Commons.
phallogocentric discourse. But this narrative of self-affirmation implies, too, a stark withdrawal/rejection of heterosexist discourse. It assumes one’s removal—circumstantially or agentially—from the immediate web of one’s belonging. It is an all too common story among North American gay men that “coming out” often precedes or is precipitated by one’s physical departure from home. This implies severance of relationships and the accompanying imperative to re-create family among other queer folks in the “big city.” Coming out thus emerges as a seemingly solitary event within the context of pre-existing familial and communal relationships.119

Rather than proposing a distinct, cultural paradigm of “coming out,” I suggest that pagladlad illuminates an ambivalent agency that leads to the subsequent materialization of baklå bodies. The emergence of this baklå self occurs not at the initial moment of exposure. It arises out of an ongoing negotiation with shifting relationships, evoking the kind of agency that Sedgwick describes as “a performance initiated…by the speech act of silence.”120 For Sedgwick, coming out is as much born out of articulation as it the lack of—or resistance to—speech. The silence of the closet speaks as much of the phantasmatic power of heteronormative discourse as it does about the agency of the one coming out. Thus Sedgwick argues against delineations of life in the closet and life outside it as ignoring the multi-layered strategies that queer subjects deploy to foster

119 Butler’s reading of phallogocentrism arises out of her critique (tracing perhaps?) of feminist theory along the lines of Luce Irigaray and Simone de Beauvoir. For Butler, the trouble with the “paradigm” of phallogocentric discourse rests on the idea that the female body—always constituted as other—perpetuates, rather than dismantles the phallogocentric binary. The articulation or “making real” of the female body results to its own undoing/absorption as the “other” to the male body. I suggest that the coming out trope of North American queer life mirrors this contrapositionality where queer bodies are defined by their oppositionality to heterosexual bodies. See Butler, Gender Trouble, 16-18; 41.

120 Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, 3-4.
belonging and meaning. More importantly perhaps, the ephemeral quality of the closet—as a momentary location of hiddenness/exposure—illuminates the overall queerness of heteronormative relationships themselves.

To a significant extent, Sedgwick confirms the notion that unfurling exposes a reality/self that is already known. Coming out—pagladlad—implies not the act of “becoming self,” but the reorientation of existing fidelities to cultural and familial ties. Instead of situating self away from others, the baklâ/queer self forges new relationships in an already familiar space. This is especially so because in the act of unfurling, one retrieves, not forges, an unspoken reality that has long been felt by others.

If pagladlad is the moment at which selves are affirmed and “stabilized,” I suggest that it serves too as moments of one’s “materialization,” the time at which identities become embodied through the simultaneous critique and reinforcement of relationships. There prevails a repetitive quality to pagladlad that rejects the notion of coming out as a “singular event.” The queer body arises out of unceasing negotiations. This resonates profoundly with Judith Butler’s concept of performativity as arising out of reiterative gestures, actions and speech that consolidate individual and social bodies. Such gestures shift subjectivity—and identity—onto the realm of discourse, the product of correlative and conflicting narratives that result to the articulation of bodies. This is a significant move to the extent that it deconstructs the Cartesian binary of mind/interior and body/exterior/material as constitutive of the human. Within this paradigm, Butler critiques the preeminence of interiority as grounding for body/materiality. She decenters

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121 Ibid. Emphasis mine.

122 Butler, Gender Trouble, 17.
body in asking: “From what strategic position in public discourse and for what reasons has the trope of interiority and the disjunctive binary of inner/outer taken hold? …How does a body figure on its surface the very invisibility of its hidden depths?” Far from stabilizing identities and bodies, this awkward disjunctures of the inner/outer worlds is resolved in a “fantasy of incorporation” where

words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.

Performativity broadens the contours of material embodiment; it shifts body away from the exclusive hold of biology, expanding its theoretical structure in order to hold all social relations complicit in its materialization.

Ironically, Butler’s reorientation of body to discourse is critiqued for having obverse effects in political agenda that rely upon material bodies and contexts to advance social change. For proponents of feminist theory, in particular, retrieving material (female) bodies as sites of reflection and critique is pivotal for political action. For Butler, however, this fetish for stable, material (female) bodies merely reinforces the phallogocentric hegemony. Thus, she asks:

…how and why [has] “materiality”…become a sign of irreducibility, that is, how is it that the materiality of sex is understood as that which only bears cultural constructions and, therefore, cannot be a construction? What is the

123 Ibid., 171.
124 Ibid., 173.
125 Butler alludes to this in her preface to Bodies That Matter. See Butler, Bodies That Matter, ix ff.
status of this exclusion? Is materiality a site or surface that is excluded from the process of construction, as that through which and on which construction works? Is this perhaps an enabling or constitutive exclusion, one without which construction cannot operate? What occupies this site of unconstructed materiality? And what kinds of constructions are foreclosed through the figuring of this site as outside or beneath construction itself?\

Ultimately, Butler is concerned not so much with the preservation of materiality as she is with undertaking a critical reading of “materialities” that render bodies static, embedded within phallogocentric—and, in the case of queer bodies, heterosexist—discourses that privilege one set of bodies over another. Indeed, the specific potency of queer bodies—reconstituted over and again within the heterosexist framework—lies in their ability to dismantle the material grounding—the justification for the “real”—of presumably static bodies. In a sense, the queer subject’s odd reiteration of woman/man—through its problematic deployment of the butch/femme binary, for example—subverts the stability of heterosexism itself. As Butler asserts:

The replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called heterosexual original. Thus, gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy. The parodic repetition of “the original”…reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the idea of the natural and the original.\

By its very subversion of (male/heterosexist/phallogocentric) materiality, the Butlerian subject deploys an agency that is both constitutive and critical of its conceptual milieu. In its re-signification of materiality as discursive strategies, this queer body resists/subverts/haunts the determinism that desiccates all bodies.

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126 Ibid., 28.

127 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 41.

128 Geoff Boucher notes that Butler’s later conception of subject construction arises in conjunction with a “recognized other” that is primordial, pre-Symbolic and pre-social. He notes that “that the [latter Butlerian] subject, far from being narcissistic and guilty as she earlier claimed, is primordially open to alterity and should act responsibly for the good of the other.”
As a colonial figure, the baklâ similarly subverts the reiterative gestures of a cultural performativity specific to diaspora. In his constant reorientation of familial/communal relationships, the baklâ engenders a strategy of disidentification that

- subverts the illusion of a cohesive internal/external self;
- exposes the im/moral categories that contour one’s familial/communal relationships; and so
- destabilizes the stability of identificatory functions.

The process of unfurling illuminates therefore the complicity of an *entire* community in the construction of queer subjects. *Everyone* is baklâ.

Manalansán’s reading of pagladlad affirms the importance of social relationships in the construction of queer bodies. The baklâ straddles not the Cartesian divide of mind/body but the power dialectic of social subjectivity. One does not simply “unfurl and leave.” There prevail boundaries to which one is beholden as a member of a community. In this regard, pagladlad alludes to more than gendered and/or sexual roles and preferences; it invites consideration to the whole—the baklâ as son, brother, bread-winner, lover, artist and parent. In diaspora, the baklâ’s unfurling takes on even more complex ramifications because his “ethnic” self renders him forever strange, always at the cusp of belonging. And so, the baklâ heralds the unthinkability of marginal agents “fully within culture…[while] fully excluded from dominant culture.” More than consolidating a stable (read: assimilated) self, the baklâ disidentifies the ethnocentric,

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Insofar as this implies an emergent ethic within Butler’s performative theory, when the subject-other is conceived as pre-speech and pre-social, the subject not only destabilizes the notion of a stable-self-in-society, but assumes a subject that seems incapable of shifting the social system *itself*. The (agential) self is, in actuality, distinct from the construction of social systems, hence dulling the subject’s capacity to participate in political action. Geoff Boucher, “The Politics of Performativity: A Critique of Judith Butler,” *Parrhesia* 1, no. 5 (2006): 136.

phallogocentric and heterosexist corpus of his “host community,” destabilizing the larger social body by his very participation in it.

IV Santacruzan: Traces of Apophasis in Baklâ Bodies

Expanding Manalansán’s study—and perhaps pushing the determinedly political thrust of Muñoz’s disidentification—I suggest that as a site of identificatory practice, the baklâ body illuminates an ephemeral, momentary identity that is rooted in the very displacement of self and relationships. The baklâ, in a sense, does not allude to a stable subject, but one that negotiates between and within binaries: the self and community, heteronormativity and queer life, the Philippines and the United States, home and alienation. More to the point, by muddling the interior/exterior binary and subverting the temporal progression of coming out, the baklâ intimates a body that unsays gender, sexuality, culture, ethnicity, and empire. I assert that this gesture of unsaying (baklâ) bodies is itself constitutive of theological practice. The baklâ intimates an apophatic claim of the human.

In their lucid reflection on the apophasis of embodiment, Catherine Keller and Chris Boesel discern in the unsaying of body a “heightened tension…[that] comes by way of the dissolution of the hierarchically ordered binary—infinity/finitude—that is traditionally assumed to pertain in the relation between incomprehensible divinity and the material, creaturely world.”130 What transpires in the deconstruction of bodies is the...

130 Boesel and Keller speak of three “notches of heightened tension” when speaking of God and bodies. These tensions take the form of language: how does one speak of God simultaneously with bodies? This subsequently raises the second problem of God-language that, in turn, highlights the third “problem”—or promise?—of dissolving the binary between finitude and the infinite. See Boesel and Keller, Apophatic Bodies, 3-10.
blurring of categories and hierarchies that evoke the illusion of stability. In so claiming, both Keller and Boesel imply that apophatic bodies—far more than just the deconstruction of categories—actually expand categories of language, culture and perception that “contain” these bodies to begin with, bodies that blur the division between “infinity/finitude.” The apophatic turn of body, in this sense, intimates the capacity of material bodies to hint at abundance, transcendence, the “more.” Indeed, Keller and Boesel notes that “[t]he unsaying of the body in the name of the body… commissions the apophatic body not only as an enigma but as a concept.” And so, in the baklâ’s unsaying of anthropological categories, there emerges an invitation to instability that re-conceptualizes what one assumes of Filipino-American bodies themselves.

In the following section, I explore this gesture of unsaying through a close reading of Manalansán’s ethnography of a baklâ Santacruzan in New York City. I suggest that in his diasporic parody of nation, ethnicity, politics, religion and gender, the baklâ illuminates:

- the abundance of pagladlad and disidentification in the deconstruction of queer bodies; and
- the rehabilitation of “baklâ” as a site for apophatic meaning-making and theological intimation.

*Holy Cruising: Queering Nation, Faith and Self*

Each May, at the height of summer and well into the liturgical season of Easter, Filipinos converge in town plazas, public parks, even shopping malls to commemorate a religious event that doubly honors Mary, the Mother of God and reenacts Queen

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131 Ibid., 11.
Helen’s discovery of the “true cross.”"¹³² Literally named after the “holy cross” on which Jesus’ mangled body was crucified, the Santacruzan showcases the town’s most eligible bachelors and maidens in religious pageantry that is at once solemn and campy, an exaggerated iteration of religious and cultural iconography.¹³³ For procession participants, the Santacruzan signals more than prestige or social standing; it speaks of a coming of age, of one’s debut into the social order. And for spectators, the Santacruzan provides the opportunity to “cruise” the sexual landscape of the local village. Like most religious events, the Santacruzan is ambivalent space—a testimony to a community’s values and the subsequent parody of the gravitas that stabilizes them.

The trope of “coming out” that pervades Santacruzan structures a specific deployment of pagladlad. This moment of exposure/revelation, unfurling/coming out occurs within the phantasmatic spectacle of religious practice and the broader performativity of culture. In his ethnography of a gay Santacruzan festival in New York, Manalansán illuminates the different ways and moments that pagladlad heightens the cultural, political and religious tropes that unsettle queer bodies in diaspora.¹³⁴

¹³² While its origins are clearly Spanish, the Philippine version of the Santacruzan emphasizes the figure and prominence of St. Helena over that of her son, the Emperor Constantine who is credited with the legalization of Christianity in the Roman Empire upon the Edict of Milan in 313 CE.

¹³³ In an analytical survey of shifting definitions of “camp,” Mark Booth locates theater—or more appropriately, a theatricality—that unsettles Puritanical mores and values in 18th century Europe. Theatre is the site of exaggeration and frivolity, a dangerous antithesis to social morality. In the same vein, the Santacruzan evokes this setting aside of time and space for theatrical renderings, a subversion of social paradigms and worldviews in their exaggerated rendering. See Mark Booth, “Campe-Toi! On the Origins and Definitions of Camp,” in Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader, ed. Fabio Cleto, Triangulations (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), 179.

¹³⁴ Strange as it may sound, a “baklâ Santacruzan” is ubiquitous in the Philippine religio-cultural landscape; they are performed each year as a complementary—not antithetical—
Removed from the familiar moorings of home, this public event reorients imaginations of community, identity and nation.

Manalansán opens his ethnography by describing the festival “as the ‘Queen of All Filipino Fiestas’…a symbolic reenactment of the discovery of Christ’s cross by Queen Helena, or Reyna Elena, the mother of Emperor Constantine of the Holy Roman Empire.”¹³⁵ The series of muses or sagalas who accompany Queen Helena in her search for the true cross—“a constantly changing coterie of personages…[adapting] the ritual to changing historical and cultural contexts”¹³⁶—embody biblical and historical personages (like Judith, Constantine and Helena) and classical virtues that reflect community aesthetics (like Justice, Truth, Hope). All are feminine personifications, with the exception of Constantine, who is often portrayed as—and by—a child. The Santacruzan, in effect, offers a conveniently luminous platform from which the effeminate baklâ can flaunt the identificatory artifices at the heart of the Filipino religio-cultural universe.

In Manalansán’s ethnography, the baklâ sagalas conflate what would otherwise have been a serious practice of religious piety with their own parody of cultural, religious and political imaginations.¹³⁷ Within this hyper-sexualized religious pageantry, the “Queen of Justice” emerges in S&M leather, while the victorious savior/warrior rendering of a religious event. What lends Manalansán’s ethnography a compelling twist is diaspora and migration.

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¹³⁵ Manalansán, Global Divas, 128-129.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 129.

¹³⁷ Such localized innovations are typical; baklâ Santacruzans are prevalent throughout the Philippine landscape as an antithetical—and I would argue, complementary—parody of popular religious practices.
“Judith” stomps onstage bearing the severed head not of Holofernes, but of George H.W. Bush. The progression of religious images mimics political, religious and social discourse, trumping spaces of propriety, peddling alternative realities and contexts. Within the practice of religious devotion, the baklâ wields the symbolic tools of his socio-religious worldview to both affirm and critique the values of his cultural patrimony. And so, the baklâ’s commemoration of the Santacruzan serves as much a reaction to as a proactive remembering of one’s roots. This embrace/disavowal of a cultural, gendered and religious home is expressed most poignantly in the gravitas that accompanies the final emergence of Reyna Elena (Queen Helen):

The finale of the show [returns] to tradition as Reyna Elena and Emperatriz (the empress) [come] out dressed in traditional gowns and tiaras. Reyna Elena [carries] flowers and an antique cross as all Reyna Elenas have done in the past. There was no attempt at camp; rather, there was an insistence on, to use the word from vogueing, or house culture, “femme realness” in deference to tradition. Upon the ador(n)ed body of Reyna Elena, the baklâ elicits a pained fidelity to culture, society and gender. The prestige and nostalgia attached to the figure of Reyna Elena is apparent in participants’ extravagant investment of time and money to ensure a near-perfect mimicking of the “real” Reyna Elena. As Manalansán asserts, this is not time for camp. There is much reverence—and transgression—assumed in the baklâ’s performance of religion, femininity, politics and culture.

More than a religious spectacle, the Manhattan Santacruzan specularizes the performativity of Filipino culture. Deploying multiple identity locations, the

138 Manalansán observed that the careful selection of popular imagery to emphasize the Santacruzan theme of that year reflected the critical interplay of sexuality, politics, race, gender and colonial-critique in the Manhattan community. See Manalansán, Global Divas, 132-136.

139 Ibid., 132.
anomalously-gendered baklâ exposes the ambivalence of maintaining dual citizenships, beholden to diverse cultural cues, accountable to the economy of both the Philippines and the United States. In a sense, the Filipino-American body is “reduced” to intimations—echoing that which Miller (via Bachelard) refers to as “adjectives.” In his parody of the Santacruzan—exaggerated public rituals that de/proclaim communal values—the baklâ illuminates the ephemerality of cultural bodies, exposing them to reinterpretation, change, and critique.\textsuperscript{140}

Manalansán’s baklâ subjects “hint” at Filipino-American selves fluent in multiple cultural, economic, political and religious languages. They become recognizable to both Filipino and American contexts because they hold both categories—or locations?—in tension with the other. Indeed, Andrea Bieler and David Plüss imply that as performative gestures, cultures and identities arise out of a process of “recognition.” In their specific reading of gender performativity, both assert that “[g]ender performance happens in interactive processes of recognition…in which [one is] seen into existence as a particular gender [or identity] through the gaze of another person.”\textsuperscript{141} The notion that identities, genders and cultures are made real through ritual encounter elucidates the formidable genderfuck that Manalansán’s informants deploy in their parody of Santacruzan. There is an ambivalence in the Santacruzan’s ritual subversion because in their very critique of Filipino religio-cultural values, the baklâ participants herald an accompanying commitment to home. Their parody of the Philippine and U.S. political

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 127-136.

\textsuperscript{141} To a significant extent, Bieler’s and Plüss’ concept of recognition evokes the Bourdieuan “habitus” that I referred to earlier (see footnote 89). See Andrea Bieler and David Plüss, “In this Moment of Utter Vulnerability: Tracing Gender in Presiding.” \textit{Emphasis mine.}
landscapes only makes sense when they themselves are recognized as Filipino and American. Rather than pointing to the failure of assimilation, these baklâ hearken to an awkward (albeit necessary) fidelity to both places as a way to render themselves recognizable, to make themselves real. Kathryn Tanner suggests that such “failures” in stabilizing/affirming identity is really “…a failure of definition [that arises from] excessive love”\textsuperscript{142}—if by love, one refers to one’s embrace of context, of home(s). By redirecting the ethico-liturgical potency of the Santacruzan, the baklâ unsays the stability of national, gendered and cultural worldviews out of love—perhaps fidelity?—to an imagined home. It cannot be otherwise—for in his heart, the baklâ knows that the Santacruzan speaks as much of his world, his negotiations and his place of meaning as much as it illuminates his fragmented body.

\textit{Baklâ Santacruzan and the Unsaying of Filipino-American Bodies}

The potency of rituals like the Santacruzan to buttress/subvert meaning-making mechanisms is particularly compelling in the Filipino-American context where diaspora complexifies the conflation of religion and culture. Grounded upon five hundred years of Spanish/Catholic and American/Protestant colonial history, the Christian themes that structure Filipino symbolic, mythical and epistemological frameworks constitute the colonial condition itself.\textsuperscript{143} This colonial baggage complexifies the ethnic, national—


\textsuperscript{143} I make this claim fully aware that diverse religious traditions and histories intertwine to constitute even what is popularly perceived to be a peculiar brand of “Filipino Catholicism.” Chinese, Indian and Muslim influences—some predating the arrival of the Spanish \textit{conquistadores} in the early 16\textsuperscript{th} century—pervade Filipino religious sensibility. These do not even include the multiple native religious practices that have “survived” centuries of colonization. In a sense, what is considered “Filipino Catholic” is itself an amalgamation of
and I would argue, the gendered/sexual—orientation of the diasporic subject who turns to empire to reconsolidate self. Like the baklā, Filipino-Americans hint at clues, tracings and memories of home to allay the threat of diasporic erasure. It is the diasporic body who, in a sense, disperses home, reorients locations of subjectivity, and draws meaning from fragmentation itself.

The diasporic baklā’s deployment of religio-cultural signs—specific as they are to a given temporal space at which communities witness and proclaim—dismantle binaries of time (pre/postcolonial), gender (male/female), values (religious/secular), sexuality (heterosexuality/homosexuality), space (private/public) and politics (Filipino/U.S.). When he affects feminine speech to flirt with men, mimics the Virgin Mary, and revels in the campy glamour of beauty pageants, the baklā unfurls polyvalent identities that undergird Filipino-American subjectivity. As a gesture of pagladlad, the baklā Santacruzan unsays the very cultural trope from which it draws meaning. Thus, to claim that these baklā, by virtue of their gender-bending performance, act “transgressively” is to oversimplify the complex web of relationships that constitute Filipino-American life. Insofar as the Santacruzan embodies a determinedly

cultural and religious practices, a syncretistic phenomenon that evokes multiplicity rather than a cohesive religious identity. For a general overview of these diverse historical threads, see Agoncillo, History of the Filipino People. Agoncillo’s text has long occupied a privileged position in Philippine secondary and higher education curricula.

144 David Halperin asserts that Foucault’s fundamental contribution to “queer history” (and as I will argue throughout the paper, methodology) lies in his attempt to foreground the “historicity of desire itself and to human beings as subjects of desire.” In this sense, the complex construction of the baklā cannot be engaged unless one were to discern the contours of her/his desire within the social space. See David M Halperin, How to Do the History of Homosexuality (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 9; 15.

145 Manalansán illustrates this well in claiming that “selfhood and self-making is primarily about locating oneself in a circle of social relationships and obligations.” Manalansán, Global Divas, 41.
transgressive gesture against gender, religious and imperial norms, it evokes an
unceasing melancholy for “home”—stark reminders of alienation and exile. If this is the
case, the procession’s reiterative practice implies a performative ethic, that is, a
reiteration of norms that deconstructs, unsays and queers bodies. In a sense,
Manalansán’s Santacruzan serves more than a container for diasporic Filipino-
Americans to recall home. It is queer by virtue of its diasporic engagement with in-
between spaces. It is baklâ in its potent ability to unsay stability, empire, culture, gender
and faith.

In the succeeding section, I will illuminate the ways that baklâ—if considered as
an anthropological concept—illuminates apophatic elements in Filipino-American life. I
suggest that as a site for multiple national, cultural and political negotiations, the baklâ
evokes a diasporic subject who emerges most authentically from its very embrace of
and disclaiming of stability, home and identity.

V Baklâ Apophasis and the Ethics of Performativity

In a close reading of Butler, Marilyn Gottschall locates an ethical imperative in queer
performativity that speaks both of an inability “to step outside of this process that
shapes us” and the accompanying capacity to “reconfigure the ways in which we
understand ourselves and our moral decision-making capacities.”146 Apprehending the
need to “step out of context”—as seemingly impossible this may be—illumines/exposes
an agent able to shape the very hegemonic structures that engenders its existence. For

146 Marilyn Gottschall, “The Ethical Implications of the Deconstruction of Gender,” Journal of
Gottschall, the task of subject deconstruction assumes an ethical resistance not against culture itself, but against the potential sedimentation of subjects within hegemonic cultural tropes.

To a significant extent, Gottschall’s reading of Butler opens a way to interpret the baklâ Santacruzan as an *ethical gesture*, the demand to live and be seen—a veritable unfurling of an elusive self. To the extent that this unfurling speaks precisely of a social body, the baklâ intimates the broader cultural, communal, historical, and cosmic relationships that constitute his existence. And within this relational network, he hints at a dynamic of alienation—an othering of the self, if you will—before whom the “I” is reconstituted again and again by its grasping for meaning. More than a space of utter displacement, this “othering of self” imposes an ethical posture on the diasporic baklâ precisely because diaspora compels him to refuse a self sedimented by cultural categories. Rather than claiming an unchanging, essentialized and stable self, the diasporic baklâ intimates a subject who negotiates multiple relationships and cultural paradigms simultaneously. The baklâ embodies an ethic of performativity that locates the self within the very cultural matrix that it reconfigures.

By situating Gottschall’s reading of performativity alongside Flores’ notion of

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147 Mayra Rivera—drawing from Irigaray’s reading of Levinas—suggests that Levinas evades the ethic of transcendence in his capitulation to “deferral” as itself an implicit requirement of transcendence. She observes that “[t]ranscendence is for Irigaray neither deferral nor consummation, but a new outcome of the encounter mediated by Eros: new conception, rebirth, regeneration. …Irigaray challenges Levinas’s deferrals for always maintaining the separation from ‘the other in the experience of love.’ Levinas admits no time for returns and no space for communion. In his Ethics, there is only desire, not love.” See Mayra Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 90.

To a significant extent, I am inclined to impose on the baklâ a similar posture of deferral that refuses the consummation of the “I” with an “other.” Perhaps in this regard, I echo Levinas’ evasion (by way of Rivera and Irigaray) of an ethic of transcendence. What I propose instead is an ethic of performativity that speaks of bodies, apophatic these may be.
“intimation,” I suggest that latent in Filipino-American life is an implicit disruption of bodily stability that evoke the baklå’s compelling capacity to cull diverse cultural iconographies to constantly re-embody the self. This self is reconstituted in perennially “new bodies” that shift with undulating relationships and circumstances. If this should be the case, I suggest that such displaced bodies herald precisely the “heightened tension” between finitude and the infinite that Keller and Boesel claim for apophatic bodies. Located within this tension is an ethic of resistance that upholds—rather than disclaims—the instability of performativity itself.¹⁴⁸ The very task of deconstructing—or unsaying of—body expands its constitution, boundaries and relational locations. The diasporic body is thus more than a conceptual location for categories of ethnicity, gender or culture. The Filipino-American body is baklå in its disruption of binaries—of home/exile, Filipino/American, colony/empire; and it is apophatic in its ability to hold the finitude of its cultural specificity in tension with the infinite possibilities of diasporic life.

By re-thinking Filipino-American diasporic bodies as both baklå and apophatic, I expand the conceptual location of body beyond its historical, political or material space. The Filipino-American body becomes a site for abundant meaning-making, standing at the cusp of finitude/infinity. Indeed, Boesel and Keller assert that “[t]he coupling of apophasis and bodies…forges a heightened, ethically nuanced tension of obligation split between linguistic gestures toward a transcendent divinity on one hand, and flesh-and-

¹⁴⁸ Tanner asserts a contrary perspective in early Christian thought where “…an apophatic anthropology is the consequence of an apophatic theology.” For Tanner, a retrieval of this early Christian “apophatic body” offers a way out of the modern quandary of body as static, determined and stable. See Tanner, “The Image of the Invisible,” 118.
blood commitments to the embodied life of creatures on the other.”\textsuperscript{149} I assert that in the very “coupling of apophasis and bodies,” one exposes subjectivity to be inherently performative, a body with permeable contours.

Indeed, Manalansán’s baklâ evokes this performative, apophatic body in his ability to hold both finitude and infinity in tension with the other. Unshackled from static binaries of home/alienation, masculinity/femininity, sacred/secular, Filipino/American, the diasporic baklâ re-signifies a “heightened self” that reorients the diverse relationships that constitute his existence. Bieler and fellow liturgical theologian, Luise Schottroff, intuit a sacramental potency in this perennial reconstitution of bodies. More than material manifestations of discourse, such bodies evoke transcendence—the “more”—through the reiterative practice of recognition. In a sense, sacramental potency alludes not so much to the process of manifesting the transcendent upon material body as to what this reiteration of bodies and materiality point to. To the extent that subjectivity speaks of a quintessential search for and location of meaning, it “points to” a cosmic order or imagined possibility for the permeable self. Bodies are sacramental because, in a sense, they will always intimate at the “more.” Bodies and matter are not mere “props” to reveal the infinite. Bodies and matter are the very practices, locations and reiterations that “[gesture] toward a transcendent divinity on one hand, and flesh-and-blood commitments to the embodied life of creatures on the other.”\textsuperscript{150} It is not so much that bodies take the place of transcendence as that bodies


\textsuperscript{150} This is what Schottroff and Bieler define as the “sacramental permeability” of the material world. See Andrea Bieler and Luise Schottroff, The Eucharist: Bodies, Bread, & Resurrection (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 7.
speak of proximity to transcendence itself.

Ultimately, I suggest that Filipino-American bodies are apophatic because of their capacity to hold in tension both finitude and the infinite. Standing in-between nations, beholden to multiple social and political obligations, deploying diverse personal negotiations, Filipino-Americans point to the infinite—the “more”—that can only be discerned when one stands in-between, unsaying the very categories that sediment bodies and selves. This is the reason why the baklâ Santacruzan offers such a beguiling paradigm for diasporic subjectivity. “Ramping” across a clearly American stage, these Filipino-American subjects re-fashion the tension of home/alienation on their very bodies. In their simultaneous critique and embrace of the Philippines and the United States—their unsaying of home and alienation—they maintain an empathetic fidelity to multiple places that hearken to an expansion/abundance of self.

VI Unfurling the Infinite: Pagladlad as Apohatic Imagination

In their deployment of an ethic of performativity, the Manhattan baklâ re-orient s Filipino cultural and religious tropes against and within itself. One retraces heteronormativity in ways that are familiar, repetitive and new. Repetition of cultural practices evokes not the lunacy of entrapment, but a melancholic reach for the possible, a recognition that what is should not be.151

151 In her highly regarded analysis of the documentary, “Paris is Burning,” Butler points to strategies deployed by participants in drag competition to subvert the unidirectionality of power. Reflecting upon the tactic of “reading” as a way to deride another person, Butler notes that within drag performances, the potency of “being read” is disempowered in the blurring of gender, mythological, ethnic and class categories. I claim that in their gesture of “self-ridicule,” the baklâ participants of the Santacruzan resists against being read as anomalous, marginal—
Implicit within this performative ethic is an apophatic body that cannot but point to a transcendence that exposes the self’s instability. As a metaphor for diasporic subjectivity, the baklâ illuminates the impossible task of “pinning down” subjectivity itself, and releasing it to the probability of being mis/recognized. Straddling the binaries of lalake/babae, femininity/masculinity, the Philippines/United States, sacred/profane, Manalansán’s baklâ intimates not stability but ambivalence. By refusing the certainty of citizenship and promise of assimilation, remaining instead in the ephemeral space of unfurling—neither fully in nor out—the baklâ refuses that which Butler describes as “violences that a partial concept enforces.” Thus the baklâ “invokes category [in order to institute a provisional] identity [that] at the same time [opens] the category as a site of permanent political contest.”\(^{152}\) To re-think Filipino-American bodies as baklâ and apophatic offers a way to reconsider both diaspora as a site for political possibility, and \textit{diasporic subjectivity} as moments that intimate at the “more,” the infinite.

\footnotesize{completely understood. In the exaggeration of artificial binaries, they expose, rather, the tenuousness of subject categorization altogether. See Butler, \textit{Bodies That Matter}, 129.}

\footnotesize{\(^{152}\) Ibid., 222.}
My grandmother died after a lingering illness in early August 2008. For immediate members of our family, this compelled an immediate return home. My brother and I took the next flight to Manila in hopes of making it to the wake and the funeral scheduled at the end of the week. As soon as we arrived at Manila’s international airport, a sense of foreboding engulfed me. The anxiety increased the closer I got to the immigration gate. Huddled against other Filipinos on their way home, I worried that my papers wouldn’t pass muster, that somehow, I’d be set aside, examined and duly deported. Of course, the thought itself was silly. As a citizen of the United States, any deportation would have sent me right back to my place of origin—a veritable dream for thousands of Filipinos who have long gazed towards the United States for economic opportunity.

Needless to say, I successfully traversed the threshold with nary a glance from the attending officer. To him, I was just another balikbayan\(^{153}\)—one of thousands who return home each day lugging boxes teeming with all things “American”: electronic gadgets, souvenir shirts, imported toiletries, chocolates and the ubiquitous cans of Spam. What struck him as odd was the fact that beyond the clothes on our backs, my brother and I carried only small duffel bags: Namatayn pô kami, makikiramay hô (We lost a loved one and have come home for the funeral)—we quickly explained. Without too much fuss, we were shown the gates where an uncle waited to drive us home.

\(^{153}\) Balikbayan (Tagalog, n; “to return home”)—Balikbayan is the nomenclature designated to overseas Filipinos who return to homeland, either temporarily or permanently. Recognizing the significance of their remittances to the national coffers, the Philippine government has formulated incentives to simultaneously push Filipinos to leave home and encourage their return after earning much-needed dollars abroad. See De Parle, “A Good Provider Is One Who Leaves.”
As the child of expatriate parents, I spent a great part of my life passing through airports. While we always had appropriate papers, passage through immigration was a constantly anxious affair. My earliest memories of Papa involved him fretfully shuffling through Mama’s overnight bag, ever vigilant of our passports. Beyond a few minor instances where we were questioned just a tad longer than others, we almost always got through fine. I never really worried about the possibility of being set apart, let alone deported. The sense of foreboding that accompanied my latest entry to Manila was thus strange, unexpected. If anything, my status as a balikbayan—armed with hefty dollars to resuscitate a drowning economy—probably should have warranted me the red carpet. But still, I felt naked, observed and unworthy of admission.

Perhaps more than place and travel, the image of the immigration gate itself unfetters my confidence and sense of national belonging. Regardless of destination, citizenship or purpose, such gates expose the amorphous spaces between departure and arrival, the last hurdle before home. It is the moment at which pleasantries between

154 In 1984, the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration established the “Bagong Bayani” (New Hero) Award in recognition of achievements by overseas Filipino workers that buoyed national and global economies. The designation of this “heroic” status to those who leave home, family and culture in order to secure economic opportunity belies the ambivalence with which Filipinos approach the question (and necessity?) of migration.

This sense of ambivalence is most palpable at Manila’s international airport where balikbayan Filipinos are welcomed home with music, dance—and the much desired duty-free shopping privileges extended to a balikbayan for up to 24 hours after one’s arrival into the country. While most returnees embrace the perks that come with being a “balikbayan,” many know all too well the price with which that honor comes in the form of exile, alienation, worker abuse and at their most extreme, bodily harm at the hands of unscrupulous job recruiters and employers.

155 Of course, “home” in this regard is relative. I use the word to denote a place of desire, a goal, an imagined telos. Insofar as immigration gates contour boundaries of home/alienation, it serves as a mitigating mechanism for the displacement of diasporic bodies. Hence, gates offer either relief (through one’s passage) or increased anxiety (through its obstruction of home). For an interesting analysis of the ways “passage” through multiple locations re-contours identity, see Joanne Rondilla, “The Filipino Question in Asia and the Pacific: Rethinking Regional Origins
officer and traveler signal more than courtesy, but one’s negotiation with empire itself. The passage leaves one vulnerable, open to the possibility of exile and displacement.
CHAPTER 3
PAPER DOLLS: QUEER, STRANGE AND TRANSNATIONAL

Throughout the course of this dissertation, I have asserted that to speak of “Filipino diaspora” is to enter a world defined by multiple and simultaneous concessions around economy, location, culture and gender. A Filipino-in-exile stands as accountable to the homeland as the Filipino who is rooted in the geographical space of her/his cultural memory. Both bear the weight of 400 years of Euro-American colonization. Today, this colonial past contours and transcends the territorial limits of the Philippines, extending its boundaries beyond U.S. politico-economic interests, onto an increasingly more global economy. Filipinos can now be found in every corner of the planet, their remittances helping to buoy a significant portion of the Philippine economy. Indeed, Yen Le Espíritu claims that this

transnational perspective … provokes us to think beyond the limits of the nation-state, …to be attentive to the global relations that set the context for immigration and immigrant life. In this age of increasing worldwide interconnection, the boundaries of the nation-state seldom correspond to the transnational social, cultural, economic, and political spaces of daily life.156

Inevitably, it is impossible to speak of Filipino as a distinct national and cultural category without alluding to the specter of “America” looming in its shadows. Echoing Allan P. Isaác, I suggest that as a “reflection” of America, the Philippines participates in an imperial project that both broadens (and renders more porous) the boundaries of the United States itself.157 In a sense, the Philippines serves as a specific incarnation of empire—its “turning,” its manifestation—beyond the boundaries of nation. Wherever


157 Isaác, American Tropics, 10-11.
Filipinos travel to find work, seek political asylum and social advancement, they bring with them a brand of “American-ism” that re-establishes empire anew in their adopted homes. Within the global trajectory of increasingly de-centered economies, U.S. interests are buttressed—not necessarily diminished—by the constant migration of bodies engaged in work across the menial-professional spectrum. Unwillingly or otherwise, Filipino workers re-assert U.S. imperial interests across the globe by their very participation in a national economy defined by U.S. economic policies. Regardless of location—in the Philippines or abroad—to speak of “Filipino” is to speak simultaneously of “America.”

If this should be so, “Filipino” presupposes an unstable identity that alludes to multiple significations of body, location, ethnicity and selfhood. It speaks of bodies rendered baklā by their multiple fidelities, the kind of “queer” subjectivity that opens forth apophatic imaginations of the human. To illustrate this, I undertake a close reading Paper Dolls, a documentary about five Filipino baklā caregivers in Tel Aviv.159

158 Catherine Ceniza-Choy analyzes this reconstitution of empire through the formation/production/exchange of nurses between the Philippines, the United States and other so-called “developed” nations. See Choy, Empire of Care.


159 It is important to acknowledge that as documentary subjects, these baklā have already been “interpreted” through the subjective gaze of an Israeli friend and filmmaker, Tomer Heymann. His perspective privileges certain conversations, social negotiations and narratives. Thus, much of my exploration is framed within the already interpreted gaze of the non-baklā, non-Filipino, middle class and non-Catholic Heymann. This structure lends this project a potentially rich—and problematic—basis for exploration. At a recent presentation on the documentary, Allan P. Isaác offers an astute analysis of this film-maker—documentary-subject—viewer triangle that asserts the importance of the film for culling social and political “empathy” from Israelis towards foreign workers. See Allan Punzalán Isaác, “The Danger and Byuti of Transnational Belonging in Tomer Heymann's 'Paper Dolls',” in Guest Faculty Lecture (University of California, Berkeley, CA, 2009). Similarly, Martin Manalansán presented a lecture on the
Working away from home, these caregivers reconstruct the fantasy of the Philippines, of Asia and America on their problematically androgynous bodies. They trump the stability of nation, exposing the unsteady economic and cultural structures that reduce them to economic wards of “first world” countries. In their daily work as caregivers, companions to elderly Jewish men, weekend performers in drag shows, and friends to one another, these “paper dolls” expose the artifice of nation imposed upon their queer, “third world” bodies. Insofar as they evoke the problematic specter of the temporary migrant worker, they illuminate too the even more ominous phantom of (American) imperialism ubiquitous around the world.

As a site of diasporic reflection, the documentary reorients notions of home, stability and (ethnic or political) fidelity assumed of migrant bodies. But rather than a problematic engagement with “home,” I suggest that these “paper dolls” actually expand notions of stability and homeland that blur distinctions between the familiar and strange. Thus they evoke a type of stability that Leo Rudloff—speaking from the context of monastic life—describes as a fundamental de-fetishization of location. Read through this paradigm, the documentary illuminates a kind of apophatic body that arises dis/affect of care at work in the caregiver-patient trajectory. See Chase Dimrock, “April 19 Lecture, Martin Manalansan: "Travels of Disaffection: Labor, Affect, and Migration",” Kritik: A Public Forum on Theory, Culture, and Politics (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, April 21, 2010, http://unitcrit.blogspot.com/2010/04/martin-Manalansán-travels-of.html.

I would like to acknowledge Shaina Hammerman and Professor Naomi Seidman of the Center for Jewish Studies at the Graduate Theological Union for directing me to this film as a subject of study.

In an analysis of the film, Allan Punzalán Isaác describes the role of Israeli-Palestinian conflict in opening Israel’s doors to foreign labor. He asserts that although these caregivers live and work in Israel, they participate in the broader misogyny of global economics that lodge female bodies into specific kinds of work, largely service-oriented. They are complicit in the economic flow of U.S. interests in Israel and middle-east politics. See Isaác, “The Danger and Byuti of Transnational Belonging in Tomer Heymann's 'Paper Dolls'.”
out of the tension between belongingness and alienation.

I Paper Dolls: Ethnic, Gendered, Economic and Faith Performativities

While undertaking a study of Tel Aviv’s queer life, Israeli filmmaker Tomer Heymann stumbled upon a group of Filipino expatriates who comprised a drag performance outfit called the Paper Dolls. In the course of several months, Heymann befriended, followed, filmed and penetrated the glittering world of their extraordinary dance around gender, economics, religion and racism. In the process, he gained intimate familiarity not only with popular attitudes towards a variation of Filipino—and I would argue, Israeli—queer life, but also the stealthy concessions of illegal migrant workers in Israel.

Neither Men nor Women, Gay nor Transgendered

Five baklā comprise the Paper Dolls: Chiqui, Sally, Giorgio, Jan and Cheska. These “stage names” define the boundaries of their professional and personal domains.

Onstage, the Paper Dolls lip-synch divas like Madonna, Cher and Bananarama. Exaggerated gestures, elaborate costumes and outlandish makeup demonstrate their peculiar deployment of femininity for public consumption. Brief supplicatory rituals

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161 Tomer Heymann, Paper Dolls, Documentary (Heymann Brothers Film, 2006).

162 These are feminized versions of their legal names, e.g., Cheska is “Francisco,” Sally is “Salvador,” Jan is “Jacob,” and Giorgio is “Eduardo.” They wield these feminized names both on- and off-stage.

163 In the 1970s, a group of baklā female-impersonators named, “Paper Dolls,” dominated Manila’s nightlife. They performed at the Silahis International Hotel, catering largely to foreign audiences due to its proximity to the (then-named) Manila International Airport. I suggest that the popularity of the group in the increasingly visible gay “subculture” of the time informed the popular narrative of Filipino queer life, particularly as this relates to how baklā is understood as a cultural performance of the un/real babáe, that is, a “paper doll.” I suggest that—given their proximate ages—Heymann’s subjects drew from this cultural trope to re-establish their performance outfit (and personal personae) in Tel Aviv.
launch their every performance with prayers uttered in Tagalog, the language of home and perpetual marker of their alienation. But off-stage, they integrate seamlessly into the economics of Tel Aviv life, working predominantly as caregivers to elderly Israeli men; one runs a small hairstyling shop.

The line that demarcates their lives both on and off the stage is, at best, blurred. In comportment, speech and profession, the Paper Dolls uphold distinctly feminine personae, at least as this is understood in Filipino culture. But the clarity with which they wield femininity among themselves—or even before other Filipino expatriate workers—does not immediately translate to the broader world of Tel Aviv society.

Throughout the film, Israelis muddle through significations that insufficiently categorize them as “gays,” “daughter/woman” or “half-man/half-woman.” For the Paper Dolls, this gender-play is indicative of the broader cultural divide that establishes and subverts their identity as Filipino, Catholic foreign workers before Israel as a host nation of a simultaneously secular and Jewish culture.

Indeed, while Heymann and film commentators such as Gary Kramer of the San Francisco Bay Times loosely label these baklâ as “transgendered,” “gay” or “transsexual,” the Paper Dolls do not necessarily see themselves as such. They are, first and foremost, Filipino. They are baklâ. As I have pointed out in the previous chapter, Manalansán cautions against carelessly substituting one cultural label for another:

My non-usage of the transgender identity category is due to the dissonance it creates vis-à-vis the baklâ… . The majority of my informants … [draw] on the baklâ as a social category and as a pool of meanings in analyzing everyday events.

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in terms of the intersection of race, gender and sexuality. In some situations, baklâ [symbolizes] Filipino queerness while gay [symbolizes] white queerness.¹⁶⁵

Manalansán’s semiotic prudence resonates with the Paper Dolls’ careful maneuvering around their self-designation as “women” who reside in men’s bodies. Femininity for these baklâ was a reality they lived daily, but it remains a context negotiated around diverse relational dynamics. When asked if he saw himself as a man or woman, Giorgio—the only hairdresser among them—unapologetically exclaimed, “a woman of course”; and Jan, who could not be openly baklâ before his elderly Orthodox employer, expressed embarrassment at having to change in and out of dresses each time he arrived at his place of work.¹⁶⁶

Documentary interviews reveal that for these Tel Aviv baklâ, femininity constitutes a manufactured entity that they conspicuously impose upon male bodies. They embody a feminine stereotype that is formed in part by Filipino cultural frameworks. It is a category defined as much by comportment (they dress in women’s clothes), profession (they work as caregivers and hairdressers) and hobby (they perform as female-impersonators).¹⁶⁷ Their chosen nomenclature signals the intentional deployment of an identifying mechanism that situates them in clearly feminine/feminized bodies. Thus Giorgio clarifies for Heymann: “We are called paper

¹⁶⁵ Manalansán, Global Divas, 24.

¹⁶⁶ Since the Paper Dolls recognize and so embrace the “in-between-ness” of their gender signification, I will use both feminine and masculine pronouns as appropriate to each Paper Doll’s self-understanding. It is important to note that such linguistic distinctions are not applicable to Tagalog. Gendered pronouns do not exist in the language.

¹⁶⁷ It is interesting to note that throughout the documentary, the issue of desire and sexual attraction comes up only once: Sally, who is perhaps the most feminine of them all, spoke of her relationship with an Arab taxi driver who initially thought her to be a woman. The relationship proved mutual and lasted for four years. Inevitably, he left Sally to marry an Arab woman.
dolls because it [paper] is not real. It’s not a real man or a real woman. The paper isn’t real. If you make a doll, it’s not real, it’s only paper.”

As fantasies of an imagined femininity, the Paper Dolls acknowledge the constructed nature of their sexual/gendered and cultural existence. They occupy women’s professional spaces, assume feminine comportment and respond to feminine significations, but they are also not the women they purport to be both on- and offstage. By reiterating feminine signage, the Paper Dolls materialize an imagination of “woman” upon bodies that cooperate in the creation of a broader, globalized, Filipino self.

Their daily interactions iterate practices that assemble specifically gendered and ethnic bodies.

While the Paper Dolls do not easily identify as transgender or gay, they do assert space within the queer world of their diasporic universe. Sally’s attendance at Israel’s

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169 While it is tempting to assert that these baklā’ parody of femininity reflects a specifically Filipino stereotype, the film shows them easily straddling between Filipino and —for lack of a better term—“western” representations of femininity. Among the pantheon of “western divas” they mimic, for example, the Paper Dolls also parody traditional representations of Filipino women, e.g., a Muslim princess from Mindanao, the infamous Imelda Marcos and Darna, a Filipina superhero.

170 Butler defines “iterability” as a “regularized and constrained repetition of norms.” Performativity is thus comprised of a series of repeated actions that so construct a reality that even subjects believe of themselves. See Butler, Bodies That Matter, 93.

171 Fennella Cannell observes this dynamic in her study and interactions with baklā in the Bicol region of the Philippines. She observes: “It is significant that although baklā sometimes call themselves ‘gays,’ using the English word, they entirely reject the Western understanding of gay sexuality, that is, that gay men are those who desire other gay men. Most baklā I knew had never heard of this definition of being gay, and they vehemently deny either that they would ever be attracted to each other, or that their boyfriends are gay in any sense. Baklā say they are men ‘with women’s hearts’ who therefore love men, and love to dress in women’s clothing and perform female roles.” See Cannell, “The Power of Appearances: Beauty, Mimicry, and Transformation in Bicol,” 241.
first Gay Pride and her simultaneous longing to perform at a popular gay club attest to this. They prance around categories of gender (male/female), sexuality (homosexual/heterosexual/bisexual/transgender), culture (Filipino/Israeli), even religion (Catholic/Jewish). The crossroads at which they encounter Tel Aviv’s queer world serves as a compelling locus of engagement: by claiming seemingly feminized bodies, they resist others’ perception of them as the odd amalgamation of the feminine and the masculine.\textsuperscript{172} It is a cumbersome dissonance that they wield with calculation. While most pass as women, not all Paper Dolls dress in distinctly feminine clothing. And when people openly ask about their sexuality, they simply shrug off the inquiry, at times even simply claiming to be (straight) men or (authentic) women, depending on how well they pass in either body.\textsuperscript{173}

Because baklā and gay are not transposable for the Paper Dolls, they trump western/Israeli/European conceptions of gender, particularly its incarnation upon the Filipino/Asian body. During a rare opportunity to perform at TLV, Tel Aviv’s most popular dance club, the Paper Dolls confronted a world with which they assumed easy resonance. Sharing the stage with female impersonators and erotic male dancers, they

\textsuperscript{172} Unfamiliar with Israel gay culture, I was fascinated by an assumed notion of masculinity attached to one’s identity as a gay man. When the Paper Dolls were called “half men-half women,” this implied a distinct category in itself—a step beyond/outside homosexuality that reiterates their alienation even in Tel Aviv’s gay subculture. From various film footages, one discerns an understanding of homosexuality based on genital/sexual behavior rather than the deployment/subversion of gender signage more typical in the Philippines. Tomer Heymann, the film director, self-identifies as gay but does not live as woman. In fact, he initially found the Paper Dolls’ cross-dressing “disgusting.” The awkward label “half man-half woman” evokes therefore Tel Aviv’s larger cultural discomfort with the baklā as neither fully men, nor comprehensibly gay.

\textsuperscript{173} For the Paper Dolls, the labels, “man” and/or “woman,” connote an inherent heterosexuality against which “gay” and “baklā” are hedged. To publicly affirm their “manhood” therefore is akin to claiming a heterosexual identity.
stood out as inadequate “representations” of popular gay culture in the West. An Israeli drag performer dismissed them as not the real thing: "Filipino drag? That’s not Filipino drag. If you were in the Philippines, you’d know it isn’t. Those are amateurs from the Central Bus Station." Further regarded as “insufficiently Asian” to reflect the evening’s East Asian (Japanese) theme, they were forced to dress in kimonos, wait by the club entrance, bow deeply and welcome guests as dutiful geishas. Being baklå and Filipino, as it were, proved inadequate to the club’s exotic ambience.

In telling ways, the Paper Dolls’ ethnic and gender significations collided with the club’s chimera of the submissive Asian. Thus the imposition of Japanese aesthetics upon their already Asian bodies implied less a failure to meet standards of professionalism as the more awkward hurdle of translating Filipino (queer) bodies within (Israeli) queer culture. By asserting the right to perform at the definitive queer space of their adopted home, the Paper Dolls confront the challenge of making self understood. And having proven to be incomprehensible, they were reduced to insufficiency, strangeness and, in a very literal sense, alienation.

The culture shock they encountered at TLV hearkens to the complex colonizing discourse that renders subaltern bodies beholden to Western/heterosexist standards. In a sense, their problematic presence subverts the presumed hegemony of the west. Robert J. C. Young discerns tension within this disjuncture of self-representation that destabilizes the location of the colonial master himself: “Under colonialism, the colonial copy becomes more powerful than the indigenous original that is devalued. It will even

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be claimed that the copy corrects deficiencies in the native version.”

By failing to uphold assumed standards of what it means to be Filipino, gay, even a drag performer, the Paper Dolls were actually contending with an imagined projection of Asian femininity imposed on them by the club’s owner, manager and patrons. Claiming identities that resisted stereotypes thus generated counter-reactionary tactics that forced the baklā to comply, concede and so adapt. Within minutes of their public debut, the Paper Dolls lost credibility as baklā, as Filipino drag performers and as “appropriate” representations of the exoticized Asian. But it was a rejection deflected by the simultaneous assertion of self: the baklā did not passively acquiesce to the imposition of an imagined “Asian femininity” upon their bodies. They pandered to the club owner’s whims and submitted their ethnic and gender significations to the façade of the submissive geisha. Yet it was a tactic undertaken to avoid the deeper threat of erasure and further expulsion. As Chiqui declared: “After our performance at TLV, we realized that we should stay within our community. We should give up the dream of performing in those big places. It’s not for us.”

Thus, they would continue to perform, but in safe spaces that would no longer threaten nor silence their right to be. Essentially, Chiqui upheld a posture of acquiescence that actually insisted upon otherness that did not leave him—and the Paper Dolls—qualified as defective gay/Filipino/Asian men.

From the Stage to the Strange

The Paper Dolls’ traversal of polyvalent feminine representations extends beyond the stage and onto the mundane. Of the five, only Sally is able to live openly before Haim,


176 Sally, Interview with Tomer Heymann. See Heymann, Paper Dolls.
her employer. She describes their relationship as candid, supportive, akin to that between a doting father and a favored child:

I’m like his only daughter … He knows what I am. He doesn’t care … [Before I started working here] I spoke to him and his son. I said … this is who I am. If you accept me, you’ll get to see how I work. If not, I’m sorry. He treats me like a man. But I dress this way (like a woman). He doesn’t care.’’

But relationships such as these are not the norm. There are times when the Paper Dolls’ feminine signage engenders direct discrimination. And at a particularly excruciating scene, an Israeli taxi driver breaks into a tirade after an encounter with Jan and another baklā: “Two disgusting creatures, I don’t know what to call them! They disgust me as men and as fake sleazy women. I can’t even describe it.” He goes on to disparage all Filipinos as disgusting [and] stinky … [who come from] a very poor country. For a dollar and a half, you can have two Filipinos for the night. You don’t know if you’re taking a lady-boy until you check where they put the toilet paper. They hide their dick so deep inside their ass, that you can’t tell a thing. You think you’re with a total babe, and she is a babe! Then suddenly you get the cock, you beat her up, throw her out of the room and everyone makes fun of you for a week. I don’t like them, they steal … they’re disgusting. Homosexuality is natural for them. That place is the devil’s cradle, the origin of all evil.’’

Indelibly carved upon the Paper Dolls’ bodies is a hotly-contended colonial discourse that melds economy, colonial racism, misogyny and homophobia. Whether or not they intend to do so, the Paper Dolls bear the inevitable obligation of representing a kind of (acceptable) “Filipino-ness” before strangers. In ironic and painful ways, these baklā—who were insufficiently Asian before a ravenous club culture—now embody the “strangeness” of an entire nation and the “immorality” of all sexual minorities. They

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177 Ibid.

become, in effect, personifications of ethnic and gender deviation. In their daily
encounters, therefore, the Paper Dolls engage in a continuous process of
incomprehension and misappropriation. Young qualifies this power-struggle as a
false translation [that] … involves a representation of another culture without
reference to the original, as, for example, in stereotyping, where the writer or the
artist even sometimes goes to the length of creating the image of what the
colonizer [expects] to find—such as the fantasy of the colonial harem. 179

When the Paper Dolls “play along” to popular feminine and Asian stereotypes, and so
concede an apparent agency, they expose the tedious negotiations that fortify the
gender, ethnic and economic hegemonies of their diasporic world.

The matrices at which the Paper Dolls construct femininity illuminates Butler’s
notion of identity formation as “a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to
produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter.” 180 Theirs is a
materiality—a body—that emerges out of disjunctive worldviews, culture shock, and
the failure of translation between diverse notions of gender, ethnic and economic
signage. It is not so much that the baklâ is an anomaly (I would argue, in fact, that he is
not strange in the Filipino gender universe), but that his signage is unintelligible in new
lands, in the empire. 181 What for the baklâ may signal an essential and obvious

179 Young, Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction, 141.

180 Butler, Bodies That Matter, 11.

181 By claiming that the baklâ is not strange in the Filipino context, I do not imply that he occupies a value-neutral category of gender. Being baklâ in fact entails specific negotiations around acceptable feminine comportment, expressions of desire and the fulfillment of specific responsibilities to one’s family and community. Failure to uphold these obligations results to derision, discrimination, perhaps even expulsion. Cannell alludes to this capricious dynamic in observing that for a baklâ to maintain romantic relationships, for example, he must serve as his partner’s financial sponsor. While the baklâ clearly occupies a unique space within Filipino culture, he is also ironically expected to assert a right to be there. See Cannell, “The Power of Appearances: Beauty, Mimicry, and Transformation in Bicol,” 241.
femininity belies, really, a more problematic engagement with otherness. Thus, while
the Paper Dolls may resonate with popular categories of “transgendered” and “gay,”
these too can never fully evoke the comfortable familiarity that the word “baklâ”
ensures for each of them, that is, a clear conception of self as men with “female hearts.”

II  Embodying the Feminized Economy of Filipino Diaspora

The intersection at which the gay-, feminine- and baklâ-worlds converge structures the
epistemological matrix on which gender, sexuality and economy operate in the
diasporic lives of the Paper Dolls. As migrant workers, these caregivers participate in
the prevailing “feminization” of contemporary Filipino labor. Raquel Z. Ordoñez roots
this phenomenon in globalizing dynamics that privilege the material hegemony and
consumption of industrialized societies. As powerful states transcend national
boundaries to monopolize industry, impoverished nations are forced to channel their
labor resources towards service professions that exacerbate economic dependence. For
Ordoñez, this trend encourages the migration of nurses, maids, nannies and licensed

Stereotypically located within the feminine domain, care-giving professions
provide space from which Filipinos channel culture, fortify memory, and reconfigure
patterns of economic exchange.\footnote{Ibid., 134-135.} This frames the context from which the Tel Aviv
baklâ assemble and assert agency in a foreign land. It is also the material from which
they define epistemological conceptions of Filipino sexuality/gendered-ness and challenge popular Israeli conceptions of Filipino ethnicity. This dual accountability to communities both internal and external to their cultural milieu illuminates the awkward burden of signifying Filipino corporeality to Tel Aviv employers, friends and adversaries.

And so, the Paper Dolls speak on behalf of more than 70 million Filipinos, reiterating and trumping stereotypes of Filipino masculinity (and by default, femininity) in the Middle East. While exile presages their economic and political dependence on the host nation, I will argue that it is this tension between agency and impotence that structures creative negotiations around gender, ethno-national and economic autonomy. Furthermore, it is these quotidian engagements that disclose the even more insidious misogyny of globalization to which Filipino OFWs, especially women, are subject.

In order to understand the conditions that frame these baklâ’s’ lives in Tel Aviv, one must situate their travails within the broader economic interactions that configure Philippine relations with the West in the last 30+ years. Jason DeParle asserts that while Filipinos have long maintained a history of migration, contemporary movement patterns originated from economic policies initiated by the dictatorial regime of former President Ferdinand Marcos in the 1970s:

Clinging to power through Martial Law [Marcos] faced soaring unemployment, a Communist insurgency and growing urban unrest. Exporting idle Filipinos promised a safety valve and a source of foreign exchange. ... Marcos sent technocrats circling the globe in search of labor contracts. Annual deployments rose more than tenfold in a decade, to 360,000.184

Perhaps by sheer luck—or genius—these initiatives provided Filipinos avenues for

184 De Parle, “A Good Provider Is One Who Leaves.”
much-needed capital regeneration. Skilled and unskilled labor opportunities proved plentiful. Doctors, nurses and other medical professionals were recruited to work in the United States while engineers and construction workers flocked to the saturated oil-fields of Arab nations. As East and Southeast Asian tiger economies flourished, affluence demanded an accompanying need for entertainers. And so, along with maids, nannies and chauffeurs came performers, dancers and singers, who populated the growing tourism industries in Japan and Singapore. Filipinos left home to reap economic gains; indeed they seemed destined to serve as the world’s archetypal domestic help.\(^{185}\)

Recent commentaries on the phenomenon point to stark demographic shifts that essentially re-locates ten percent of the Philippine population into diaspora.\(^{186}\) Nonetheless, such trends also witness to the attainment of hoped-for economic advantages. Indeed, Filipino journalist, Elvira Mata observes that

from Jan. 1 to Nov. 21, 2006, a total of 1.01 million OFWs left to work in over 180 countries, representing a growth rate of 12.4 percent over the same period last year. Remittances also rose to $9.11 billion during the first nine months of the year, which is a 14.4-percent growth rate over the same period in 2005.\(^{187}\)

And DeParle similarly asserts that,

The Philippines, which received $15 billion in formal remittances in 2006, ranked fourth among developing countries behind India ($25 billion), China ($24 billion) and Mexico ($24 billion) — all of which are much larger. In no other sizable

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\(^{185}\) This is not an exaggeration. In Spain and Greece, the word “Filipina” is used to refer to one’s maid. Even in the documentary, Jan spoke of his employer as having hired another “Filipino” (caregiver) to replace him.

\(^{186}\) De Parle, “A Good Provider Is One Who Leaves.”

country do remittances loom as large as a share of the economy. Remittances make up 3 percent of the G.D.P. in Mexico but 14 percent in the Philippines.\textsuperscript{188}

Such developments are ambivalent heralds of progress, however. For as remittances buoy a struggling national economy, these also prolong dependence on the crippling lending policies of the United States, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

While millions of Filipinos profit from the economic bounty of transnational labor exchange, Epifanio San Juan, Jr. spurns these trends as mere perpetrations of neoliberal economic policies that leave former colonies culturally and economically enslaved upon colonial masters like the United States:

In a world system of historical capitalism, the relations between peoples and nation-states [like the United States] … [are] characterized by inequalities at all levels. Contradictions between oppressor and oppressed over-determine cultural/ideological, political, and economic exchanges.\textsuperscript{189}

As industrialized nations accumulate economic power, so are non-industrialized countries forced to embrace policies that allow their participation in the global economy. With burgeoning populations, labor-exportation becomes the economic norm for most third world states. Little to no capital is necessary and the vast availability of labor renders recruitment and exportation affordable. Unfortunately, exporting human capital also essentially leaves countries like the Philippines impoverished of much-needed intellectual resource. It is this drainage that ineradicably entrenches poor nations even more deeply within the West’s consumerist greed.

For Ordoñez, the rise of transnational economies encourages an accompanying

\textsuperscript{188} De Parle, “A Good Provider Is One Who Leaves.”

feminization that shapes the local economies of non-industrialized nations like the Philippines. She claims in fact that

[w]hereas the earlier wave of overseas workers, mainly to the Persian Gulf, consisted predominantly of male construction workers, the OCW population has recently become increasingly female. The Philippine Overseas Employment Agency estimated that in 1991…52% of all OCWs were women. More than half or almost 60% of these were employed as domestic helpers in more than 175 countries.\textsuperscript{190}

This feminizing trend, Ordoñez asserts, emerges from a longer historical thread that binds globalization and Filipino colonial history with the cultural and economic enslavement of women. The imposition of a Europeanized/patriarchal worldview upon a presumably matrilineal society has resulted to the construction of a schizophrenic femininity that stripped the Filipina of social capital while leaving her beholden to the financial upkeep of the domestic sphere:

By [political and religious] statutes, she is subservient to her husband. … By tradition, however, the woman possesses substantial authority in the family, as well as equally enormous responsibilities. She manages the family finances and makes major family decisions; she is the principal caregiver.\textsuperscript{191}

Given her colonial history, the Filipina is thus further subjugated beneath already problematic globalizing economies. She may be better trained and educated, but the limited options available to workers from poor countries force her to assume service professions that require minimal education and training, e.g., nannies, maids and caregivers. Bereft of substantial options and obligated by familial devotion, the Filipina thus leaves home to engage in work that sometimes falls short of her professional

\textsuperscript{190} OCW pertains to “overseas contract workers.” Essentially, OCWs and OFWs are interchangeable categories that refer to the same group of Filipinos who leave home for overseas employment. See Ordoñez, “Mail-Order Brides,” 135-136.

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., 134.
As more Filipinas leave home, Filipino men have also had to amend professional options in order to participate in shifting economic trends. Such was the case in 2004, when newly-minted doctor Elmer Jacinto shocked the nation by both topping the Philippine medical board exams and then leaving for the United States to work as a nurse. Sacrificing personal and professional prestige, Jacinto followed a path that was becoming all too common among young, highly-educated professionals. With more and more students pursuing six-month caregiving licensing programs, the esteem attached to traditionally male-dominated medical, legal and academic professions significantly dwindled. And so, the feminization of transnational economies traversed boundaries of gender and national identities. Both women and men—indeed, entire peoples—stood beholden to a global and insidious misogyny to ensure survival.

*Contending with the “Submissive Asian”*

As objects of the Western gaze, South/East Asians embody either idealized representations of a “cultural other” or insufficient expressions of culture, progress and humanity. This is the very discourse that pegs an idealized femininity upon the

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192 In the 1980s, during the heyday of Arab affluence, one of my aunts journeyed to Dubai to work as a nanny and maid for a family with two children. While her sojourn yielded lucrative financial gains, she often observed how part of her work necessitated tutorial services in English, Mathematics and the Sciences. As the bearer of a college degree, she enjoyed significant influence over the education of her employers’ children.

Among her many anecdotes, I remember one as both particularly humorous and poignant. At an early point in her work, she approached her (female) employer about the need to develop better hygiene. Her mistress proved receptive; and so, my aunt taught her the value of using deodorant, partaking of daily showers/baths. I thought it interesting that in doing so, my highly-educated and well-traveled aunt served as a transmitter of (Western) cultural practices to her “exotically-other” Arab employers.

“submissive Asian” who willingly submits self to the supremacy of the Euro-American master. Espíritu sees this emasculating process of objectification contouring the West’s encounter with Asia.¹⁹⁴ Imposed upon contemporary globalization, this racism exacerbates an enduring misogyny within the already complex transactions of the Global North/Global South, rich/poor and women/men. The assumed inadequacy of Asian virility results to a castration that renders Asians both exoticized and anomalous. Espíritu rightly claims that it is such constructions that have long demonized Asian men (and by extension, women) before the dominant culture:

Racist depictions of Asian men as lascivious and predatory were especially pronounced during the nativist movement against Asians at the turn of the century. The exclusion of Asian women from the United States [for example], the subsequent establishment of bachelor societies, and the relegation of Asian men to “women’s work” eventually reversed the construction of Asian masculinity from “hypersexual” to “asexual” and “homosexual.” The contemporary model-minority stereotype...emasculates Asian American men as passive and malleable.¹⁹⁵

As baklâ caregivers, the Paper Dolls arbitrate a remarkable space within the feminized world of Filipino diaspora. On the one hand, their work as caregivers perpetuate a role that is expected of women in the Philippines. In so doing, they participate, too, in the emasculation of Filipino men who are expected to work in traditionally masculine professions such as engineering, construction and medicine (as doctors not nurses). Given this social matrix, it is unsurprising for most to see baklâ—like millions of Filipinas—leave the Philippines to work as caregivers. This

¹⁹⁴ Since their 19th century migration to the United States, Asian men have had to incarnate an oppositional paradigm to the idealized masculinity of the dominant Euro-American male. Before the sturdy, solemn and intrepid hypermasculinity of the (white) American cowboy stands the slim, docile figure of the Asian minion who kowtows to please his white master. See Espíritu, Home Bound, 128-129.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 129.
phenomenon merely affirms already pre-existing gender and cultural obligations to which the baklā stands accountable.

Rendering the Nation Impotent

The liminal spaces that contour the Paper Dolls’ gendered lives parallel an economic limbo that is framed by their status as “visiting workers.” Legal residency relies upon continued employment; if fired, the baklā loses the right to live and work in Israel. Yet it is essential for them to remain so as to assert economic agency within the broader oppression of inevitable poverty.\(^\text{196}\) Lashed upon this loosely constructed matrix, workers are exposed to abuse, protected neither by the Philippines nor their host country. The Philippine government’s dependence upon remittances leaves it with few options save to ostensibly attempt to protect its citizens. DeParle observes that among Filipino technocrats, migration is considered a given, not a problem to be solved:

The political issue is not migration but migrant safety. The formative moment in OFW history, its Alamo, was the 1995 hanging of Flor Contemplación, a Filipina maid in Singapore. … President Fidel Ramos’s calls for mercy failed, and the martyred maid’s coffin received a hero’s welcome at home. Congressional elections followed, and the new Legislature passed what is variously called Republic Act 8042 and “the migrant workers’ Magna Carta.” It pushed the government’s responsibilities beyond migrant deployment to migrant protection.\(^\text{197}\)

The bane of current government policies lies upon their doubly-humiliating task of encouraging Filipinos to both leave home and send back their hard-earned remittances

\(^{196}\) As with most OFWs, the Paper Dolls rely upon Philippine agencies that facilitate their recruitment to North American and European countries. Sometimes, as in Cheska’s case, such agencies fail to provide the necessary legal protection to ensure their safe residency in foreign lands, leaving OFWs vulnerable to deportation. At the end of the film, Cheska is inevitably deported. He blames the recruitment agency for its failure to provide him the appropriate paper work to remain in Israel.

\(^{197}\) De Parle, “A Good Provider Is One Who Leaves.”
to resuscitate a sputtering national economy. Failing to engender confidence among its people, the national government renders OFWs both economically and politically orphaned, banished to a diaspora devoid of political agency.

Ultimately, the agony of OFWs stands not upon their problematic vulnerability in diaspora alone. It is located rather upon the enslavement of an entire nation upon an internally- and externally-imposed poverty that drives a people to exile. If viewed within the multi-tentacled power relations between industrialized and non-industrialized societies, globalization operates a regulatory mechanism that sears an all-consuming patriarchy on a world economy that perpetuates the hegemony of industrial/consumerist nations like the United States over non-industrial/labor-exporting nations like the Philippines. In choosing to leave home and children to care for the offspring of foreign masters, the Paper Dolls—along with thousands of other Filipinos who work as nurses, nannies, maids, performers and sex workers abroad—incarnate a broader enslavement upon bodies already mutilated by greed, racism and misogyny. They stand as people perennially displaced, bereft of home, simultaneously accountable to many and none.
III Unfurling Open Diasporic Enclosures: The Stranger at the Gate\textsuperscript{198}

For diasporic bodies such as the Paper Dolls, stability stands as both the thesis and antithesis of one’s existence. It represents the elusive home for which one longs and the limited space of opportunity from which one escapes. In a sense, stability constitutes the epistemological concept that allows for diasporic bodies to exist.

In the second chapter, I suggested that baklā bodies are made real through pagladlad. More than a singular event of becoming, pagladlad implies a repetitive practice of resistance to clear categorizations in the re-consolidation of self. Gender, ethnicity, class, nation and economics are destabilized in the unfurling of queer bodies. As an anthropological concept, pagladlad reorients identity, location/home. I suggest that as a practice of consolidating/stabilizing body, pagladlad offers a reconsideration of stability away from the problematic binary of home/alienation. Instead, pagladlad intuits a self always open to possibility, re-shifting location as a way to reconstitute self. In a sense, a self unfurled reorients identity towards a negative claim, an apophatic turn that opens the body to abundance.

In this section, I explore pagladlad as a theoretical paradigm for destabilizing the staticity of place. I assert that padladlad speaks of place in ways that hold

\textsuperscript{198} In 1994, theologian and LGBT activist, Mel White, wrote an autobiography that he entitled, \textit{Stranger At the Gate}. It describes a life-long engagement with the religious right and a simultaneous commitment to create space for LGBT people of faith. White’s image of a “stranger standing at the gate”—one perennially present and menacing at the same time—evokes a resonant theme among Benedictine scholars concerning the importance of the “outside world” in the fortification of the monastic enclosure. I will elaborate upon this later in the chapter. See Mel White, \textit{Stranger at the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America} (New York: Plume, 1995); and Michael Casey, \textit{Strangers to the City: Reflections on the Beliefs and Values of the Rule of Saint Benedict} (Brewster, Mass: Paraclete Press, 2005).
home/diaspora, enclosure/alienation in tension. It implies a kind of stability that reorients subjectivity towards an ironic instability defined by changing relationships, context and accountabilities. Benedictine monk and theologian Leo Rudloff suggests that as grounding for identity, “place” augurs a fundamental ambivalence. Drawing from his experiences in monastic life, Rudloff re-imagines place as stabilitas, invoking a central tenet of Benedictine life that situates “stability of place” as necessary for the constitution of monastic subjectivity. For Rudloff, stabilitas heralds a singular commitment to the life, fidelity, resources and security of the monastic community: “By it a monk promised to remain until death in the community that had accepted [her/his] profession. Thus, stability [ensures] the permanence of the monastic foundation itself as well as the relative fixity of its population.”

Unlike the implied staticity of stability, however, stabilitas embraces the ambiguity of human encounters in the formation of monastic bodies. One becomes a monk, in a sense, out of the irregularities wrought upon the self by the diversity of personalities and histories that individual monks bring to community life. Stabilitas engenders less the implied uniformity of monastic discipline as a perennial reconstitution of self open to the strangeness of another. Thus, the monastic enclosure—the place inside the walls that herald stability, uniformity and cohesion—is,

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200 As the keystone to monastic discipline, stabilitas signifies Benedict of Nursia’s rejection of peripatetic practices that typified 6th century monastic life. Terrence Kardong accurately observes that Benedict’s critique of so-called “private monks”—lent to roaming, bereft of community life and accountability—is drawn from the earlier Rule of the Master (RM). Both RM and the Rule of Benedict (RB) thus prescribe guidelines specific to cenobitic life. See Terrence Kardong, The Benedictines, Religious Order Series vol. 1 (Wilmington, Del: M. Glazier, 1988), 13-14.
in reality, constituted by bodies always on the verge of deconstruction. Viewed in this way, stabilitas echoes the potency of pagladlad to simultaneously destabilize, consolidate—and so, queer—seemingly incomprehensible bodies.

As a mechanism for consolidating (monastic) bodies, stabilitas functions out of the inside/outside matrix that constitutes the monastic enclosure. Stabilitas organizes a flow of “biopower” that absorbs individual impulses within the collective.201 But as a practice of fraternal commitment, stabilitas contends with individual lives that “constantly escape” the disciplinary mechanisms of the monastic rhythm.202 Stabilitas thus leaves the monk exposed to that which is unknown in another.203 This dual

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201 In the 3rd chapter of the Rule, Benedict cautions against the dominance of individual desires over the common good: “Individual desires have no place in the monastery and neither inside nor outside the walls should anyone presume to argue with the abbot. If he dares do so, he should be punished according to the Rule. ” The role of desire—as I will illustrate further—is ambiguous in its tendency to sway the monastic subject away from God and its accompanying necessity in the cultivation of singular devotion to God. RB 3, Benedict of Nursia, The Rule of St. Benedict, 51.

I would claim that as an incorporating principle for monastic life, stabilitas evokes the complex, systemic and all-encompassing corporealization that undergirds Foucault’s biopower. Foucault describes “biopower” as a series of “concrete arrangements (agencements concrets) that would go to make up the great technology of power in the nineteenth century.” Michel Foucault, The History of Sexuality, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 140.

202 Within this construction, individual bodies are subsumed within the broader mechanics of social progress, where the social body itself evokes a life-impulse that perennially attempts to absorb individual/local/singular entities within the larger collective. Foucault, in fact, asserts that “[i]t is not that life has been totally integrated into techniques that govern and administer it; it constantly escapes them.” There prevails therefore a sense that as a systemic mechanism, biopower stands in constant vigilance of disruptive elements within the social body. See Ibid., 43.

203 I suggest that this curious repulsion/attraction to the strange illustrates what Mayra Rivera calls a “theological attitude” that opens one to wonder. As an “unknown and uncircumscribed spirit,” wonder situates one before the simultaneously attractive and threatening strangeness of another. See Mayra Rivera, “Glory: The First Passion of Theology,” Unpublished Paper (Pacific School of Religion, February 8, 2010), 2.

For Rivera, wonder posits an inherent ambiguity that is particularly apparent from the posture of decolonial critical thought. : “Here lies the crucial difference for decolonial engagements with wonder.” Echoing Nelson Maldonado-Torres, Rivera asserts: “If the most
embrace of life within/outside the enclosure complexifies the consolidation of subjectivity. Rather than a unidirectional, panoptic mechanism that forces individual monks towards conformity, stabilitas engenders a process of subject consolidation that embraces both the familiarity of the common life and the strangeness of individual impulses. In this regard, subjectivity emerges at the margins of the enclosure itself, where stability of place is elusive, suggestive at best.

_Pagladlad of Queer Bodies and the Dis-enclosure of Place_

When Manalansán—and to a certain extent, García—locate the emergence of baklā in her/his pagladlad, they hearken to an understanding of body that is stabilized by its very location in-between belonging and alienation. Pagladlad—like stabilitas—speaks of place in perpetual transition. The baklā who must negotiate between seemingly contradictory gender tropes evokes the diasporic subject who literally lives in ephemeral places that deploy multiple languages, categories of culture, economic and political fidelities. At such moments of intense negotiation, the self arises out of an unending wrangling for place, voice and access. Existence, in a sense, arises out of spatial tension.

_basic ontological question is ‘why are things rather than nothing’, the question that emerges in this context and that opens up reflection on the coloniality of being is ‘Why go on?’ The cry is its existential expression. To approach the concept of wonder—and consequently of glory—from the perspective of the cry of injustice demands careful consideration of wonder’s inherent ambiguities.” See Ibid., 12._

204 This commitment to listening is particularly apparent in the interpretation of abbatial authority practiced by monks of Weston Priory, a monastic community founded by Rudloff in 1953. In _The Living Rule_, Weston articulates a key quality of an abbot as relying upon the “ability to gather the consensus of the brothers, to draw them together in fraternal relationship, to be an agent of unity in the community.” See RB 2 of Leo Rudloff, O.S.B., “The Living Rule of Saint Benedict as Lived by the Monks of Weston Priory,” Unpublished Manuscript (Weston, Vermont, Early 1970s), 8.
Jean-Luc Nancy’s exploration of *dis-enclosure* as a deconstruction of Christian monotheistic paradigms offers a critical metaphor to what I mean by “place” as constitutive of *pagladlad*.\(^{205}\) I suggest that as reconsideration of spatial stability, *pagladlad* subverts the binary of in/out, familiar/strange that constitutes queer embodied-ness. For Nancy, the enclosure—if conceived as physical/epistemological space—refers “not [to] the name of a thing, but of that *outside* of things thanks to which their distinctness is granted them.”\(^{206}\) In a sense, the enclosure speaks as much of what thrives *beyond* the containment of place as that which breathes within. The enclosure comes to being simultaneously within and outside the *borders* that constitutes its existence.\(^{207}\)

The image of “enclosure” is central to Rudloff’s theory of place as it literally refers to the spaces and moments that constitute monastic life. Engaged in repeated gestures of establishing and re-establishing belonging, the enclosure secures the illusion of spatial integrity.\(^{208}\) For the monastic body therefore, the enclosure heralds both to what takes places *outside* the walls as to the rhythm that configures life within. There

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\(^{205}\) While Nancy’s *Inoperative Community* offers a parallel critique to community life, the image of a *dis-enclosure* as space/episteme that both “contains” and “opens” more closely evokes the image of an ambivalent enclosure that Rudloff prescribes as central to the constitution of monastic subjectivity.


\(^{207}\) In a sense, when Nancy speaks of dis-enclosure, he implicitly alludes to an enclosure comprised of distinctions and separations that render subjects fragmented, reconstituted “into an interlacing of networks.” See Ibid., 160.

\(^{208}\) In an earlier study, Nancy speaks of communal subjectivity as being discerned only upon one’s apprehension of another’s death. In a sense, we glimpse belonging only from our encounter of total alienation. I will devote more space to this in another section of the chapter. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, Theory and history of literature v. 76 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
stands at the monastic gate the perennial threat of the unknown, a veritable stranger rendered real by its disavowal. Ultimately, enclosures herald openings—intrusions as it were—that subvert integrity of place. For Rudloff, this ambivalent enclosure is precisely the undulating terrain of stabilitas.

In its deconstructive unfurling of queer bodies, pagladlad alludes also to the spatial ambivalence of “diasporic enclosures.” Like the monastic self who is forever haunted by the stranger at the gate, the baklâ body is porous, rarely ever contained in static categories of gender, culture and home. Thus, when Manalansán’s baklâ trump assumptions of (white) queer life—and when the Paper Dolls resist the imposition of an essentialized Asian-self on their unruly, migrant bodies—they locate a multivalent place that transcends the suffocating limits of their diasporic enclosure. Indeed, this encounter with limitation, border-crossing and threshold is potent. In her reading of Nicholas of Cusa’s “cloud of impossibility,” Keller alludes to the moment of revelation—pagladlad? unfurling?—that arises out one’s encounter with limits, impossibilities and boundaries: “Within the [impossibility of the] cloud, the revelation of the closure is the opening. The wall becomes for a moment penetrable as a cloud.”

To a significant extent, Keller’s “conflation” of this impenetrable wall with the diaphanous cloud evokes Nancy’s understanding of enclosures not as place, but as éclosure—moments of emergence and irruption that threatens the integrity of the enclosure itself. In a sense, any claim of enclosure implies the accompanying possibility of éclosure. Rather than a relentless hold upon stability, the limits/boundaries of the

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enclosure suggest the “disassembling…[of] enclosed bowers, enclosures, fences.”

For Nancy, dis-enclosure subverts not the enclosure, but unfurls the delusional stability of place itself—“from sudden upsurge to implosion, from burning to extinction, and from dilation to retraction and reabsorption before the new éclosure.”

IV Theological Éclosure: Re-Membering Diasporic and Queer Bodies

Drawing from Manalansán’s and Heymann’s ethnographies, I suggest that baklā subjectivity rests upon its deployment of pagladlad—the unfurling of static (gendered, ethnic, national and economic) categories. I identify “place”—its iteration as stabilitas and enclosure—as a central concept in illuminating the potency of pagladlad to constitute self. Echoing Nancy, I assert that to the extent that pagladlad both embraces and unfetters the stability of place, it speaks really of moments of irruption and possibility. Pagladlad speaks therefore of éclosure—a reconsideration of the materiality of subjectivity itself. The diasporic body, in a sense, evokes more than place, but moments of emergence.

In the following section, I expound on pagladlad by highlighting such moments of emergence in the quotidian engagements of the Paper Dolls. I suggest that in the process of pagladlad, these baklā illuminate an éclosure—a latent apophasis and

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210 Nancy’s notion of “dis-enclosure” is drawn from his deconstructive reading of Christianity/monotheism vis-à-vis atheism. In a sense, he argues for a retrieval/reorientation of Christianity and monotheism as “useful” paradigms to address contemporary concerns around “being” and “faith,” a reconsideration of the implied distance between Christianity and atheism. While my work wields dis-enclosure as a critical lens to reinterpret monastic enclosure, I suggest that doing so also augurs for a retrieval of stabilitas as a useful paradigm to address anxieties around shifting identities. See Nancy, Dis-Enclosure, 161.

211 Ibid.
theological sensibility—that undergirds their negotiation with diaspora. I claim that in their unfurling of selves, these baklâ engage the theological imperative of re-membering/reconstituting subjectivity anew.

_Disruptive Prayers_

In one of the most poignant moments in the film, the Paper Dolls are seen gathered in a circle before the pounding walls of a dance club. They stand to perform the weekly drag routine for which they’ve become famous among Tel Aviv’s expatriate Filipino community. But before going onstage, they bow their heads, each uttering a prayer of hope in Tagalog or English. Beneath billowing polyester gowns, magnificently coifed wigs and exaggerated eyelashes, the Paper Dolls hold their silence sacred, oblivious to the bacchanalia around them, beholden only to God. This juxtaposition of the sacred with a determinedly secular—even highly erotic—realm is hard to ignore. It is a moment of disquiet that channels an unpredictable, abundant presence.

More than just an odd moment of religious observance, this moment of prayer disrupts the Paper Dolls’ broader engagement with Tel Aviv life. The prayer represents not a moment of calm/integration/assimilation, but chaos/fragmentation/alienation. They pray in a language foreign to the people of their exile—exposing the culture clash that Paper Dolls confront in the every day. As a performance of queer life and postcolonial subjectivity, their prayer unveils the potency of memory in allaying threats of diasporic erasure. Their deployment of memory retrieves familiar tropes that secure their fast dissipating existence in exile. By praying, they speak both old and new identities into reality. They re-member/constitute selves.

The sense of prayerful gravitas that opens the Paper Dolls’ performance mirrors
the potency of the baklā Santacruzan to stabilize bodies. Both events deploy memory to “ritualize” home and so consolidate dispossessed bodies. These complementary gestures of parody and commemoration illuminate the tricky dance around ethnic, gender and religious categories that materialize queer and diasporic bodies. For the Paper Dolls, religious devotion—itself an iteration of Filipino ethnicity—grounds them before the strangeness of Tel Aviv. For the Manhattan baklā, the Santacruzan obscures the complicity of empire with colony, heterosexism with homophobia, real and the unreal. Drawing from familiar cultural practices, these baklā erect culturally specific representations of self, nation—even God—to assuage the threat of diasporic absorption. Oppositionality thus gives birth to a kind of community, identity, familiarity and bodies that

[determine a] mode of apprehending the social world; [predisposing one] to organize the social world according to the same logic of polarity and thus to produce social as well as cognitive distinctions. … This social function of the classification logic of symbolic representation generates, therefore, a political effect to the extent that the social groupings identified are hierarchically differentiated and therefore legitimated.\textsuperscript{212}

For both the Paper Dolls and the Manhattan baklā, the act of remembering home establishes existence. One becomes real, re-membered—rendered more present—in the parody of self and nation.

Avishai Margalit asserts that as a strategy for consolidating bodies, memory evokes more than the literal act of remembering. He distinguishes between collective memory as that experienced by all present and shared memory as that which transcends

the historical time and place of specific events.\textsuperscript{213} For Margalit, the generation of shared memory through anecdotes and the passing on of narratives allows for an ethic to emerge. It also allows for an event to be \textit{reinterpreted} and \textit{re-read}. Only when individual/collective experiences have been shared can a sense of obligation be possible. Only when memory has been shared can empathy, forgiveness—and its opposite, forgetting—be extended to another.\textsuperscript{214} I suggest that as an ethical prerequisite, shared memory blurs the imagined distinction between individual and social bodies. It also muddles the imagined distance of the past with the present, leaving \textit{all} agents complicit in the unfurling events of the moment.

In their parodic engagement of nation, the Manhattan baklā affirm and disclaim the colonial narrative of both the Philippines and the United States. But more than that, they re-fashion this narrative—a form of collective memory perhaps?—with their specific interpretation of colonial phenomenon. Thus, what begins as a reiteration of a presumably collective experience unfolds into a reconfiguration of these very narratives to reflect the specificity of their ethnic, gendered and colonized bodies. A “shared memory” is formed on the very stage that allow these baklā to both embrace and disclaim their affinity to a native/adoptive culture and nation.

\textsuperscript{213} Avishai Margalit, \textit{The Ethics of Memory} (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2002), 50-51. For Margalit, shared memory arises out of the proliferation of information between bodies present at events and those absent. Margalit illustrates this by highlighting the consolidation of a distinctly American identity post-September 11.\textsuperscript{213} Through the passing on of narratives, accounts, anecdotes, 911 transgressed boundaries of time and place to amalgamate a shared \textit{American} experience. One needn’t have been present at/near Ground Zero in order to have shared in the trauma of an entire nation. Margalit also argues that the gesture of shared memory consequently unfolds into a memory of emotions as well, moments at which past events and occurrences become reconsolidated by the reliving of feelings. See Ibid., 108.

\textsuperscript{214} Ibid., 193.
In a similar manner, when the Paper Dolls resist opportunities for assimilation, when they deflect the imposition of heterosexist binaries on their ambiguously-gendered bodies, they also manipulate the imposition of an imperial/heterosexist narrative on their bodies—narratives that could be argued to ground a nation’s “collective memory.” Far more than just a weekend hobby, therefore, their impersonation of American/western female performers before an expatriate Filipino—and at one point, Israeli—audience suggests the reorientation of the collective narrative into specific acts of resistance that embody the Paper Dolls’ shared memory. Rather than products of a collective memory, both the Manhattan baklå and the Paper Dolls contour the framework of their own re-membering.

Bieler and Plüss suggest an inherent liturgical sensibility implicit in this dynamic of re-membering. For Bieler and Plüss, “presence” arises out of the interaction between bodies who stand on stage/altar with those who sit among the audience/congregation. The kind of presence that unfolds from this encounter renders bodies heightened. In a sense, when an audience/congregational member projects a self onto the body of a presider/actor, the location of one’s body/identity/self expands. One’s presence is heightened. One discerns a resonant desire, perspective, hope, even ethic with the actor/presider. It is this shared space of “heightened presence” that allows for common values to emerge. Like Margalit, Bieler and Plüss trace an implicit ethic within the formation of expanded identities and bodies. In a similar way that shared memory reconsolidates social and individual bodies, memory—ritualized through cultural performativity—renders selves even more real.

In provocative ways, what lends transformative potency to the public/personal travails of both the Manhattan baklā and the Paper Dolls rests upon their ability to cull some form of reaction—pathos, sympathy, rejection, love—from the diverse audiences of their lives. These baklā—occupying determinedly distinct locations and experiences—re-constitute themselves *in relation to* the communities with whom they live, work, love and resist. The kind of subjectivity that emerges each time the Manhattan baklā parody nation, each time Paper Dolls impersonate Madonna and work as baklā caregivers, is a product both of their cultural, gendered and national narratives and the specific cultural constructs of their host communities. In short, the kind of baklā bodies they herald will forever be specific to Manhattan and Tel Aviv at that given time. Their very “presence” is liturgical to the extent that it evokes possibility specific to that moment alone and no other. It cannot be re-generated nor repeated. Like Nancy’s éclosure, these baklā bodies speak, in a very real sense, of momentary opportunities for emergence.

*Paglaladlad, Memory and the Abundance of Presence*

For a diasporic subject yearning for home, stability implies the incessant and repetitious creation of place, meaning and identity. It is a practice of sharing memory that allays one’s absorption into the narrative of empire. Re-membering the diasporic body echoes a dynamic of pagladlad in one’s ability to hold both home and exile in tension. Alienated and in perennial search of integration, the diasporic body draws from the other’s foreignness to calm the alienation of one’s own location. Mimicking the other’s strangeness, the diasporic self expands static representations of body, blurring the distinction between the real and the reflection. *All* becomes mimesis. As Bhabha asserts:
What emerges between mimesis and mimicry is a writing, a more of representation, that marginalizes the monumentality of history, quite simply mocks its power to be a model, that power which supposedly makes it imitable. Mimicry repeats rather than re-presents…216

And so, bakhâ bodies emerge out of padladlad by blurring the lines of what constitutes “reality” and “mimicry.” It is a grasping for an impossible stability to the extent that the mimic unfetters reality by her/his repetitive imitation of it. The mimic unfurls the stability of body to more than what it is presumed to represent/reflect/copy. In this regard, mimicry is really a space of abundance in the same way that pagladlad unfurls queer bodies towards the more.

When the Paper Dolls impose their “imagined” feminine, Asian bodies on the hypermasculine, heterosexist milieu of their Tel Aviv life, they dismantle fantasies of gender, nation and economics structured by the (American) West to control foreign, queer bodies. Indeed, the brilliance of the Paper Dolls lies not in their successful reiteration of female impersonations, nor in their professional assimilation in Tel Aviv society. The potency of their mimicry lies in that singular moment of failed performance where they were exposed as misrepresentations of the Israeli/Western fantasy of Asian, feminine submissiveness. The disdain extended to these “amateur drag performers from the Central Bus Station” exposed not their inauthenticity, but the hypocritical artifice of progressive, Tel Aviv, queer life itself. In their failure to uphold the fantasy of Asia, the Paper Dolls destabilized the racism, sexism and imperial iterations of Israeli queer life. They exposed a “heightened presence”—an unruly body made abundant—that left all complicit in the prejudices of an idealized global world.

216 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 125. Emphasis mine.
More than just dismantling hegemonies, the fissures that stability of place exposes portend éclosure—moments of emergence. Unruly, diasporic and queer bodies irrupt the seamless articulation of empire. Imperial narrative can no longer contain the abundance that strange encounters herald. Indeed, Derrida highlights the limitation—and accompanying necessity—of language to comprehend the ineffability of differential encounters. Reflecting on the name of God, Derrida alludes not so much to encounter as “this bottomless collapse…this endless desertification of language.” What arises from the threat/fear/limitation implied by one’s apprehension of strangeness is abundance, an éclosure that escapes the categorical clasp of language. In contention with alienated selves, the Paper Dolls witness therefore to elusive bodies who both demand—and resist—the promise/silencing of naming. Theirs is a body situated in the constant state of unfurling, selves who stand forever threatened by mistranslation. But confronted by impossibility, they open up conceptions of self that transcend categorical limits of ethnicity, gender, culture and nation. The via negativa—the apophatic—intimates at possibility. Resisting the illusion of assimilation, the Paper Dolls illuminate the potency of their queer bodies to dis-member the narrative of nation. But this mimicry (as it were)

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217 Derrida, *On the Name*, 55.

218 Indeed, Derrida suggests that in the gesture of “saving/preserving” God’s name—abundance—one undertakes a simultaneous disavowal, an exception, a process of un-saying: “They name God, speak of him, speak him, speak to him, let him speak in them, let themselves be carried by him. Make themselves a reference to just what the name supposes to name beyond itself, the nameable beyond the name, the unnameable nameable. As if it was necessary both to save the name and to save everything except the name, save the name [sauf le nom], as if it was necessary to lose the name in order to save what bears the name, or that toward which one goes through the name. But to lose the name is not to attack it, to destroy it or wound it. On the contrary, to lose the name is quite simply to respect it: as name.” See Ibid., 58.
comes at a price: unable and unwilling to concede, they stand forever at the gate, perpetual specters of nation. They are bodies who stand in limine, in diaspora. But far more than mere negations of self, these queer bodies unsay the stability of identity, an apophatic turn that unfurls such bodies to éclosure, the more.
Chapter 4
Re-membering Baklā: Re-constituting Filipino-American Selves

I Pagladlad: Unfurling Location of Filipino-American Bodies

The basic question about “peoplehood” is simply: what brings people together—the question of the consciousness and values that lie at the foundation of people coming together in America—and by implication, what keeps us apart.219

Otherness is multiple in its singularity.

The Other is always already implicated in infinitely complex relations: sexual relations are always also political, ethnic, and economic relations. The transcendence of the Other might thus be imagined as that infinite relationality that appears to us at the present time, in this particular encounter, but that extends beyond it, in time as well as in space.220

More than a claim of identity, “Filipino-America” evokes multiple locations engendered by a complex—and at times problematic—relation between the Philippines and the United States. In contemporary global trends, this U.S.-Philippine liaison is complexified by transnational relations born of politico-economic necessity. Certainly, the lives of the five Paper Dolls attest to this dynamic intersection of nation, ethnicity, sexuality and religion that both reflect and transcend immediate correlation between Philippine economics and U.S. transnational interests. Inevitably, I assert that diasporic bodies draw from displacement, ambivalent relationships and apophatic meaning-making to consolidate selves. The question of peoplehood is as fundamentally economic and political as it is theological.


220 Rivera, The Touch of Transcendence, 95.
To the extent that Filipino-America problematizes the location of bodies, it deconstructs the stability of “identity.” I suggest that seeing the phenomenon/category of “Filipino-America” as baklâ deconstructs identity towards a dis-claiming of stable bodies—of selves rendered “othered” in ways “already implicated in infinitely complex relations: . . . political, ethnic, and economic.”

As diasporic theologians working in multiple disciplinary locations, Bundang and Fernandez draw from the ambivalence of race, empire and democracy to outline a theological framework that breathes life into the problematic phenomenon of Filipino-American life. Whether Bundang speaks the double language of ethnic studies and theology or Fernandez wields theology as a hermeneutic lens to illuminate liberative intuitions in American life, both confront the assumption of identity as starting point and conclusion of Filipino-American life. But there is more to “Filipino-America” than being Filipino-American. As a categorical marker of imperial identities, “Filipino-America” exposes a type of performativity—the heightened presence that Bieler and Plüss suggest to be sacramental, evocative of a reality beyond the confines of material embodied-ness. If indeed this “Filipino-American identity” arouses sacramental sensibility, it cannot but speak of very real and material bodies that are themselves channels for abundant meaning-making.

As I have illustrated at points throughout the dissertation, this kind of elusive/dis-claimed body echoes what Keller and Boesel describe as the crux of embodiment, where “language—our own daily referentialism, or our poetic indirection,

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221 Ibid.
or our theos logos—makes contact with its world, becomes body, becomes flesh.”222

More than postmodern reductions of bodies to discourse, these apophatic bodies illuminate ways to reconsider identity beyond its material location. The awkward utterance of a “Filipino-American” body resists a categorical determinism in ways that exposes the temporariness of cultural construction itself.

Indeed, Manalansán’s provocative reading of the baklâ elucidates the simultaneous instability and possibility of materially contingent bodies. In his ethnography, the baklâ emerges not only as a cultural and gendered figure, but as a paradigm of personhood that disclaims the presumed/hoped-for stability of its Filipino-American home. Situated alongside Bundang and Fernandez, Manalansán intimates an unhomely body that privileges displacement for meaning-making. The baklâ is not a static cultural icon. It reconfigures diaspora as moment for imagination—suggesting a notion of body as an event that “can result in a disintegrating destabilization and a diminished recontextualization just as well as it can create an opening to the future.”223

To expand Caputo, therefore, this baklâ, queer and diasporic body breaks out of the ontological boundaries mandated by culture, location and context. The body moves into the realm of event where it is beholden through snippets of moments, unfurled only at a given time and place. Ecce corpum, indeed.224

222 Boesel and Keller, Apophatic Bodies, 10.


In this chapter, I explore baklā as an anthropological paradigm for a Filipino-American theology. It is an apophatic claim to the extent that in its resistance to the imperial fetish for stability, the baklā intimates a self open to diverse and abundant meaning-making. Indeed, as Bonus asserts, Filipino-Americans construct identities that both consolidate and disclaim belonging. In this regard, the concept of baklā assumes less that grasping for “belonging” as of standing in/out; it intimates the unfurling of simultaneously disclosed/enclosed selves as a strategy for subject construction. Filipino-American bodies destabilize—unfurl—Filipino and America to multiple locations.²²⁵ Offering more than a coherent conception of self, baklā embodies an elusive stability that dismantles Filipino-America’s double fetish for assimilation and alienation.²²⁶

**Pagladlad: Discerning Baklā Event**

In one of his moist poignant reflections of diasporic life, Manalansán narrates the ways displaced persons re-root selves over and again in the imagination of home. This takes a literal turn in his analysis of a living space occupied by one of his baklā informants in Greenwich Village:

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²²⁵ Carlos Bulosán, early 20th century Filipino writer in/of America, critiqued the monolithic stability of the United States in his social/autobiographical work, *America Is In the Heart*. Perhaps more than other (emergent) voices of Filipino-American life, Bulosán opened a way to re-establish Filipino-American subjects in the heart of empire by reorienting the contours of America itself. Rather than forcing diasporic subjects to conform, he re-envisions America anew as inherently a phenomenon of *loób*—heart—authentic selfhood. See Carlos Bulosan, *America Is in the Heart; a Personal History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1973).

²²⁶ Bundang has questioned the tendency of Asian-Pacific American scholarship to “pander” to emergent postmodern questions of identity. While she problematizes the liberal optimism of multiculturalism (*we’re all in this together!*), she also resists the implicit resistance to identity that postmodern thought proposes. Indeed she has asked: “If we are postmoderns, does this mean we are post-multicultural and hence ‘post-identity’—post-religious, post-ethnic—so that these facets of identity are merely touchstones or ghostlike reference points rather than being hard, fixed, or concrete?” See Bundang, “Disruptive Personhood: Rethinking the Construction of Community and Identity in Asian/Pacific American Feminist Theo-ethics,” 171.
Alden’s apartment consists of two parts or sides, the American side with the [Herb Ritts, naked man] poster and sofa and the Filipino side with the altar and family pictures. He said that by crossing the room, he traverses two boundaries of his two selves: Ang parte ng apartment na ito, ay parang Pilipinas. O sashay lang ako ng kaunti to the other side, balik ako sa Amerika. Kasi, ganyan ang feeling ko: palaging pabalik-balik kahit hindi totoong nag-babalikbayan. [This part of the apartment is like the Philippines. So I only need to “sashay” to the other side and I am back in America. That is how I feel, going back and forth even if I have not gone home (balikbayan).]

Manalansán describes the challenge of living in dual locations as leaving one doubly alienated from home and family while simultaneously longing for them. It is telling that insofar as Alden laments his national displacement, diaspora offers him a semblance of stability as well. Living away from the Philippines, Alden discerns a clearer sense of self-location, more at home in exile than the home of his imagined memories. Indeed, Manalansán observes that Alden’s “at-home-ness” in exile embodies a common trope among his informants, a collective practice of reconsolidating selves away from the travails of an earlier life:

> Despite difficulties of immigrating to America or migrating to New York and subsequent sense of displacement, many expressed a sense of and contentment with the distancing effects that their movement and travel have generated.

> For Filipino-Americans like Alden, migratory displacement offers a salve for the “originary” alienation that one confronts in the native home—a particularly keen issue for baklå who occupy already ambivalent spaces within the Filipino cultural universe. Displacement constitutes part of the human condition; what diaspora does is exacerbate this alienation before the promise of assimilation and stability. But rather than merely

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227 Manalansán, *Global Divas*, 95.

228 Ibid., 96.

229 While he reflects more intentionally on the broader experience of Asian-Americans, Matsuoka offers the image of a “second tongue” as constitutive of life lived at the nexus of
alienate, diaspora constitutes an opportunity to re-create an “imaginary home” that ameliorates the pang of exile. These diasporic baklā stabilize and re-member selves through self-differentiation and the articulation of a shared memory. It is a self defined as much by nation as sexuality, as much by occupation as class, as much by home as alienation. More to the point, Filipino-American bodies are neither ever truly Filipino nor truly American. Diaspora renders such bodies fragmented, multiply-located, queer.

Diasporic bodies cannot but be skilled with multiple engagements—a craft learned, no doubt, from straddling cultures, languages, genders and nations. Indeed, Bundang asserts that diasporic bodies really only come about through remembering, leaving one “at an eternal yet unfixed point of being, everywhere and nowhere, ‘everywhen’ and ‘nowhen,’ all at once.” For Bundang, destabilization forces one to grasp at a different kind of self-articulation, a way of seeing self through the remembrance of home, elusive this may be. This kind of self-articulation implies a coming to being that recalls the momentary quality of pagladlad. When bodies are unfurled, one exposes parts of self while leaving other aspects hidden. One never really dispenses with one identity in favor of another. Rather, pagladlad allows one to take on multiple selves, exposing the constructive nature of identity itself. This is what renders the baklā both alluring and problematic. It is what allows the Paper Dolls to

multiple cultural and epistemological worlds. Far from the promise of assimilation, immigration exposes the parody of nation and stability. For Matsuoka, this dislocation evokes a sense of sympathy (in the sense of being able to share another’s pathos) that generates transformative dissent in dissonance. I will discuss this further in relation to Avishai Margalit’s work on “shared memory” later in the chapter. See Matsuoka, “Learning to Speak a New Tongue: Imagining a Way That Holds People Together.”

simultaneously straddle the masculine/feminine (and to add to that, baklâ/gay, Philippine/Israeli, Filipino/Asian) divide(s) in their work as caregivers for elderly, Jewish Orthodox employers. Pagladlad evokes a play of appearance at the ephemeral boundaries of reality and fantasy. Unlike the trope of a singular “life-shattering-coming-out-event” implicitly understood in North American gay idiom, pagladlad situates one forever at the cusp of hiddeness and exposure. One stands in limine—at the threshold of becoming, exposed only at varying degrees, over a period of time.

More than any claim of stability, pagladlad alludes to movement, the negotiation of space, time and body that Bundang discerns in diasporic life. It is a self that repels ontology by its very atemporality and dislocation. Caputo hints at the potency of this “non-ontological” turn in his own musings about God. He reimagines (divine) selfhood/body as event, a series of irruptions that elude the stability of “name.” Similarly, I suggest that padladlad gleans this elusive subject—a body akin to Caputo’s event—presupposing “both a horizon of possibility and expectation and the possibility of shattering.”232 If this should be the case, the baklâ who deploys pagladlad evokes too Caputo’s ambivalent un/naming of body as event. Rather than forcing one’s queer body onto heterosexist and phallogocentric matrices, the baklâ disclaims them with each

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231 This is a gross oversimplification of the gender-binary that contours the Orthodox world. Naomi Seidman actually argues that the practice of sexual segregation in Judaism fosters transgressive engagements that blur categories of gender and sexuality: “The romances described in these cultural productions are made spicy by their religious and sexual transgressions, but they are also enriched by what is available only by sexual segregation: a camaraderie, equality and authenticity their writers imagine as native to the homosocial scene, and suspect is impossible in the spaces modernity has constructed for courtship and romance.” See Naomi Seidman, “The Erotics of Sexual Segregation,” Unpublished Paper (Center for Jewish Studies, Graduate Theological Union, 2010).

swish of the *kapa*, his unfurling of multiply re-constituted selves. What unfolds is a body rendered “more real”—*hyperreal*—because of its inability (refusal?) to be rooted in time and place.\(^{233}\)

### II Filipino-American Theologies: The Lure of Identity Politics

In contemporary Filipino-American studies, there prevails a relentless quest for location, the tacit assumption that one is never truly here nor there.\(^{234}\) This search for the “where” undergirds questions of identity, culture, economy and political activism. It is a quest that signifies a peripatetic epistemology, of a self forever in transit, never quite at/in home anywhere. In an eloquent reflection of this “peripatetic home,” An Youn Tae imagines the diasporic subject as a “shuttling object between multiple worlds…carrying a split image of self and ceaselessly crossing multiple borders.”\(^{235}\) This liminal subject—standing between place, guarding the past and present—exposes the ambivalence of “Filipino-American” as a category of self. S/he illuminates the folly of diaspora, resistant to the inebriating lure of postmodern un/belonging.

San Juan—perhaps more than other scholar of Filipino-American life—cautiously treads the romanticization of the in-between as an engagement of presumably equal locations, agencies and powers. Invoking the painful history of Filipino/American

\(^{233}\) Ibid., 11.

\(^{234}\) Excellent canonical examples here would be works by Bonus, *Locating Filipino Americans*. And Espíritu, *Home Bound*.

relations, he rejects the lure of liminality, resists being “the hyphen between Filipino and American” as a hard lesson

…learned by the Manongs; by Pablo Manlapit, Chris Mensalvas, and Ernesto Mangaong; by the veterans who fought the Japanese aggressors in defense of U.S. territorial possessions; by young men recruited into the U.S. navy; by Silme Domingo and Gene Viernes, murdered by a heritage of subservience and mendacity…

As a justification for (political/national) belonging, location suggests a meaning-making strategy that exposes this desperate grasp for stability, for An’s “peripatetic home.” It is this very desire for the impossible that propels the diasporic subject towards queer space, what Sedgwick calls the “vicinity of the transformative.”

Bundang and Fernandez draw upon this displacement to theologically reflect upon the travails of Filipino-American life. Both unravel the complexity of “Filipino-American” identity by reimagining “Filipino” as an ambivalent location within “America” (empire/diaspora), situating this claim within their broader theological question of belonging. A rudimentary reading of their texts exposes multiple

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236 San Juan, From Exile to Diaspora, 35.

237 Mayra Rivera alludes to the importance of wonder—what I apply in this context akin to “desire”—as a basis for theological attitude. It is an ambivalent place, “[b]ut the ambivalence of wonder runs deeper. It is not simply that wonder and curiosity often emerge from similar desires and merge into one another, or that they produce positive and negative effects. A recalcitrant ambiguity issues from the fact that wonder produces both awe and terror: awe at the realization that there is something rather than nothing, a world that we cannot account for; terror at the strangeness of that world…” I suggest that this desire for the more—open to both awe and terror—evokes precisely this “vicinity of the transformative” to which Sedgwick insists. See Rivera, “Glory: The First Passion of Theology,” 16. Emphasis mine.

238 This second point offers a place of imagination for postcolonial theologies of Filipino-American life. Engaging diverse disciplines in Filipino-American and Asian-American studies, Bundang and Fernandez stubbornly theologize across seemingly disparate fields. More than disciplinary arrogance, this gesture reveals the struggle of Filipino-American studies, as a distinct academic discipline, to remain within traditional boundaries of study.

Beyond Bundang and Fernandez, other scholars have followed a similarly stubborn trajectory in their reading of Filipino diaspora. Gemma Tulud Cruz, for example, has
conceptions of diaspora: where they speak, for whom and with whom they write reveals divergent/consonant engagements with empire.\textsuperscript{239} But for each one, community accountability undergirds this quest for location, home and place. They uphold tenacity to historical and communal rootedness that is reinscribed over and again in their personal and scholarly displacements.

Drawing from his experience as a religious and political activist in the Philippines, Fernandez devotes his early project to unearthing the historical construction of “Filipino” as a vantage point for theological reflection.\textsuperscript{240} He traces the ways imperial/colonial Christianity serve as both a site of colonization and avenue for national/ethnic consolidation. It is this insistence upon a stable “Filipino self” that structures his engagement with Filipino-American life. For Fernandez, there persists a

undertaken an ethnographic and theological study of Filipino domestic helpers in Hong Kong (see Gemma Tulud Cruz, “In Search of Promised Land: Religion in the Life of the Filipina Domestic Workers in Hong Kong,” Unpublished Paper (American Academy of Religion, Chicago, IL, November 2008).)


\textsuperscript{239} For the purposes of this dissertation, I rely heavily on Bundang’s two early articles on Filipino-American religious life and Fernandez’s dissertation that was later published into his first book. See Rachel A. R. Bundang, “This is Not Your Mother’s Catholic Church: When Filipino Catholic Spirituality Meets American Culture,” \textit{The Brown Papers} III, no. 1 (October 1996): 1-15; Bundang, “Home as memory, metaphor, and promise in Asian/Pacific American religious experience”; and Fernandez, \textit{Toward a Theology of Struggle}.

\textsuperscript{240} This is a careful claim. Insofar as Fernandez finds value in retrieving historical sources—precedents, if you will—he does not assume their staticity nor use in justifying an originary location for the emergence of a “Filipino” identity. More importantly perhaps, it is important to assert that like other “minority” scholars writing about “minority contexts,” historical foundationalism is inevitable. History “stabilizes” the context being read/studied; it bridges the minoritized/silenced “other” into the common language of academic discourse.
liberationist imperative at the intersection of material/political interests and theological reflection. He espouses a critical hermeneutic that draws from the contextual methodology of Gustavo Gutiérrez, Rubem Alves and Paul Ricoeur.\textsuperscript{241} While he writes as a scholar in the United States and engages the scholarship of so-called “Western/U.S. theologians,” Fernandez locates his work clearly within the historical and geographical contours of the Philippines.\textsuperscript{242} He upholds a clear accountability to a people and nation engaged with empire.

Defining herself as a member of the 1.5 generation, on the other hand, Bundang focuses her reflections on the religious culture of Filipinos in the United States, explicit in recognizing the centrality of diaspora in the articulation of Filipino subjectivity. She engages the racial politics that characterize U.S. life, locating her scholarly accountability at the spaces where critical theory, ethnic studies and liberation theologies critique the simplistic tropes of ethnic diversity and multiculturality.\textsuperscript{243} In this regard, Bundang stands unbothered to an originary “homeland” as Fernandez is

\textsuperscript{241} Fernandez, *Toward a Theology of Struggle*, 182-187.

\textsuperscript{242} I make this claim carefully. Fernandez’s early work, *Toward a Theology of Struggle*, is clearly located in the Philippine theo-political landscape. In his latter texts, primarily, *Reimagining the Human*, Fernandez more intentionally addresses faith/church issues affecting immigrant communities in the United States, engaged in conversations with U.S. thinkers. In my recent conversations with him, Fernandez reiterated his fundamental commitment to Philippine interests. His current work in the Methodist church focuses on ministries directly affecting the Philippines.

\textsuperscript{243} In his description of an “emerging canon” within Asian American biblical hermeneutics, Liew counts Bundang—alongside scholars like Frank Yamada, Jane Iwamura, Jeffery Kuan, and Roy Sano—among a recognizable crop of scholars who embody the canon of Asian-American theologies. This illustrates the contexts from which—and before whom—Bundang theologizes. In a sense, she stakes a collaborative claim within the scholarly community of Asian-American scholars who constitute “mainline” North American (East-Asian) ethnic (theological) studies. See Liew, *What Is Asian American Biblical Hermeneutics?*, 7.
grounded in one. While her notion of “Filipino” certainly draws from the same historical and contextual assumptions as Fernandez’s, Bundang agitates its epistemological framework: “Filipino” cannot simply refer to shared history, shared ethnic roots, shared language and memory. It is both none of that and all of that. As a member of a “bridge” generation, Bundang unravels the seamless stitching of ethnic and religious identities in the weaving of a Filipino-American self. Indeed, she claims “…how much Roman Catholic Christianity is part of my family’s legacy to me, as well as my identity as a Filipina American. Its beliefs, practices and values are so deeply woven into the cultural fabrics that clothe me.” More than just a geopolitical marker, “Filipino” and/or “Filipino-American” augur multiple locations, moments of epistemological irruption.

Indeed, if Fernandez engages the scholarship of Filipino theologians and historians to root his “theology of struggle,” Bundang embeds her work within the broader context of Asian/Pacific American history, religion, experience and culture.

244 I claim this tenuous distinction with care. Bundang is keenly aware of the implications of her location as a 1.5 generation Filipina-American for her scholarship. However, she recognizes too that drawing from a specific cultural space—in her case that nebulous location in-between the United States and the Philippines—inevitably ties her to this “originary homeland” in ways particular to those raised in two nations.


246 Liberation Theology serves as the scaffolding upon which Fernandez constructs a “theology of struggle.” Engaging key Filipino theologians such as Edicio dela Torre and Carlos H. Abesamis situates Fernandez at the heart of theological conversations that characterized Filipino-Catholic concerns in the 1970s and 1980s. Fernandez, Toward a Theology of Struggle, 34ff.

Within this framework, there is an implicit temporality that contours their placement of home/ethnicity: exile is not synonymous to diaspora. The longer one lives away from the “originary home,” the more identity becomes entangled in a web of contradictory and multiple discourses. The exiled enters diasporic time when ethnicity, class, gender and nations are reoriented towards empire. Bundang writes determinedly from diaspora, cautioning against strategies that pit presumably cohesive (colonial) subjects against empire—a methodological assumption that undergirds much of Fernandez’s early work. Bundang, the diasporic scholar, thus challenges the stability of “community identity” as basis for political action. She rejects “racial knee-jerk reactions to social inequality and asks what claims the traditional rallying cries of ‘activism’ and ‘community’…legitimately have upon theory and praxis.” Being (ethnically) Filipino, in a sense, does not legitimate one’s politics nor justifies one’s accountability to an originary community. Diaspora trumps questions of authentic location and belonging.

In his later writings, Fernandez disrupts the stability of this Filipino(American) self by resisting the implicit unidirectionality of diaspora: more than a movement from

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248 Bundang observes that, “‘Exile’ implies that there was an element of force or coercion—and hence limited agency—in the displacement. … ‘Diaspora,’ on the other hand, has more latitude and distance, both in terms of time and sentiment. It makes itself felt in multiple ways within what is ostensibly a single homogeneous community. It implies that one has a choice of staying or going and allows for the possibility that one may or may not have loyalties to the ultimate place of origin. Bundang, “Home as memory, metaphor, and promise in Asian/Pacific American religious experience,” 94.

249 In a sense, I would assert that this would be E. San Juan’s position as well—resistant as he is to the easy absorption of “Filipino” to America.

one home to another, diaspora *multiplies* one’s sense of belonging. He reorients “Exodus-*toward-Egypt*” to illustrate that …the term *exodus* carries not only its ordinary meaning of “flight” or “migration” but also its positive biblical connotations of “release” and “liberation.” For Filipino-Americans, exodus from their homeland has meant release from poverty and fatalism—an exodus toward a land of wealth and opportunity. The irony, however, is that this exodus has as its destination the homeland of their colonial masters, where they are able to share in the cornucopia of their masters’ blessings but also remain colonized in brazen as well as subtle ways every day of their lives.\(^{251}\)

In so exposing the multidirectional thrust of diasporic relationships, Fernandez critiques …the oppressive and triumphalistic dimensions of the Exodus-from-Egypt event, proposing an alternative Asian American hermeneutic of “Exodus-*toward-Egypt*” with the United States being the “Egypt” of unfulfilled dreams and nightmares for Asian Americans seeking a better future.\(^{252}\)

Fernandez thus resituates his “Filipino theology of struggle” in multiple places, blurring boundaries of nation. His later work, *Reimagining the Human*, exemplifies the expansion of this Filipino-American body outwards, towards the global.\(^{253}\) Recognizing the need to “transcend [specific] ethnic concerns,” Fernandez defines the points at which “Filipino” and “Filipino-American” identities separate/collude.\(^{254}\) The “Filipino” of Fernandez’s project thus moves *between* exile and diaspora, between the margins of empire and its amorphous center. The “Filipino-American” of Bundang’s and

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Fernandez’s imaginations is anything but stable. S/he is displaced, dislocated and peripatetic.

III Unfurling Filipino-American Theologies:

From Identity Politics to Apophatic Bodies

As theologians deeply engaged with race, ethnicity, empire and gender, Bundang and Fernandez cannot but confront identity politics to articulate a theological vision relevant to Filipino-American life. But in doing so, both fall prey to the relentless longing for place and the imperative of naming that which is distinctly Filipino as a means of resisting colonial absorption. Indeed, both scholars grapple with this simultaneous fetish for/repulsion of cultural particularity. In his later works, Fernandez addresses this by veering away from proposing distinctly Filipino responses to issues of justice. Instead, he articulates a “universal” anthropology that appeals more broadly to an implicitly shared human condition. Bundang, on the other hand, destabilizes the prominence of identity for theological reflection by grasping at awkward alliances with mujerista, womanist and Asian/Pacific Island theologies to broaden the specificity of her theological location.

This contentious dance between theologies that embrace embodied identities and those that transcend their cultural particularity is upheld by Catherine Keller as necessarily calling

… attention to the needs, the desires, the contexts of our constructed materialities; to the humiliations that distribute crucifixion more freely than any eucharist. In theological form they remain indelibly plural, solidaristic but stubborn in their differences, forming an inharmonious chorus that has too few or too many proper names: liberation, Black, feminist, womanist, mujerista, gay,
and lesbian theologies.255

Indeed, both Fernandez and Bundang struggle to articulate a kind of theology committed to shifting circumstances and alliances. At certain moments, they intimate imagination, at others, they merely re-inscribe fetish for “social location” that dulls the transformative scope of their theological musings. But far from examples of how not to do theology, Fernandez and Bundang intuit a path towards an embodied theology resonant with diasporic life itself.

Caputo offers a way beyond the limitations of “location” to reimagine identity politics not as an impasse, but an opportunity to re-conceive a kind of theology that corresponds specific contexts with broader, universal concerns. Asserting that God’s name evokes an event rather than definitive claims upon divine nature, origins and telos, Caputo suggests that affirmations of divine nature or ultimate things—what he calls, “strong theologies”—are only possible alongside the impossibility of claiming anything about God. For Caputo, the impossibility of fully articulating God implies a “weak theology” that imagines “God” as event, apprehended by intuitions, hints and gleanings. Thus, the act of “naming God” provides

a kind of temporary shelter [to events] by housing them within a relatively stable nominal unity. Events...are uncontainable, and they make names restless with promise and the future, with memory and the past, with the result that names contain what they cannot contain.256

By shifting the theological task away from naming, labeling, defining, grounding and stabilizing God, Caputo rehabilitates the significance of apophasis. Strong theologies only hint at divine unfoldings and are thus exposed to be, at best, tentative suggestions.


Caputo’s apophatic turn—dismantling fetish for the “name”—bridges the particularity of bodies with intuitions of universal claims. Within this paradigm, specific contexts open forth a way to engage “big questions” without falling prey to universalizing—idolatrous—claims about divinity, humanity and reality.

I suggest that each time Bundang and Fernandez lament the impossibility of affirning stable claims specific to Filipino-American life, they fundamentally hint at the simultaneous need to affirm and disclaim this context. They struggle—again, to echo Caputo—to anchor “uncontainable” events, even temporarily. By re-naming Filipino-American subjectivity as baklā—in limine rather than in situ—I assert that claims about Filipino-American identity inevitably hints at bodies discernible only as events. Indeed, Bundang has often written of an elusive self that is materialized only upon a community’s shared memory, a self born of sym-pathos.257 This diasporic body stands at the threshold of becoming, engaging a posture of pagladlad that resists the illusion of stable bodies and places.

Fernandez and Bundang exemplify tensions in identity politics prevalent in the emergent field of Filipino-American studies and theologies. The Filipino-American body cannot be denied its existence. Context and particularity are important to the extent that they (temporarily) locate bodies, and (temporarily) name contexts of injustice and possibility. But to stand in limine also means never fully crossing beyond the threshold of what is, to remain in an ambiguous place of belonging/disavowal,

257 Avishai Margalit alludes to a sense of “shared memory” that allows communities to draw upon a common pathos, and eventually a shared ethic. Shared memory is different from collective memory to the extent that the former implies an agency of sorts. One need not have been present at an event to “share” in its effects. Margalit uses the example of the 911 attacks as an example of a shared American memory that consolidated a ethic of war/aggression/defense in the post-911 world. See Margalit, The Ethics of Memory, 107-108.
exposing the very instability of culture itself. In this regard, the Filipino-American
diasporic body cannot but be queer, discernible only in the event of its unfurling. S/he is
baklâ.

*Pagladlad: Unfurling Stability*

In one of the most moving sequences in the documentary, the Paper Doll, Sally, speaks
of the irony of her lot: forced to leave home in order to financially support her aging
mother, she extends filial affection and duty to Haim, her dying employer. Neither fully
happy nor entirely alienated, Sally manages to foster meaning in the in-between spaces
of her existence. She conveys a simple contentment, a sense of relief that comes with
accepting the opportunities and limitations of her diaspora.

This awkward juxtaposition of home and exile on the body of a baklâ caregiver
exposes the necessity and fantasy of stability for diasporic subjects. Stability offers an
elusive promise of home that propels one through the travails of displacement. It is a
phantom, a stark reminder of one’s “‘inability’ to stop mourning…[but also] a positive,
perhaps even creative, ploy to ‘resurrect’ a ‘buried’ past into one’s present social
engagements and political struggles.”²⁵⁸ But more than just the promise and bane of
diasporic life, stability suggests a process of meaning-making that is germane to
diaspora.

To a significant extent, the baklâ hints at the potency of this ambivalent
longing—melancholy, if you will—that resists fetish for stability. Queer subjectivity
alludes not to immovability and staticity, but to possibility. More than a desperate
grasping for stability, the baklâ gravitates towards a negative claim, a deconstructive

yearning for the im/possibility of every fully grounding self. In this regard, the baklâ echoes Bundang’s gesture of re-membering as constitutive of diasporic embodiment. The self that emerges from memory trumps binaries of familiar/strange, past/present, real/illusion. Diasporic bodies are unfurled outwards, into the realm of possibility.

Because the baklâ embodies a negative claim about the dis/location of self, the anthropology it imagines resists deterministic, teleological and unidirectional claims of the human. Instead, the baklâ engages pagladlad, a scattering of self and proliferation of multiple events that hint at a cohesive body of multiple relationships. In this regard, the baklâ—again to borrow from Caputo—stands “always on the track of a ‘hyperessentiality’…” In their illumination of this hyperessential self, diasporic bodies expose the performativity of culture and its multitudinous categories of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion and morality. Like the baklâ who must cull from qualities of babâe and lalake to exist, diasporic bodies draw from diverse cultural frameworks to assert self. Thus, Filipino-Americans usurp historical/ontological claims of “Filipino” and “American” to assert the reality of their lives in-between.

More than just “insubstantial quasi-beings like ashes and ghosts which flutter between existence and non-existence,” Filipino-American subjects embody very real histories and experiences caught in conflicting geopolitical and historical circumstances. To the extent that Fernandez and Bundang critique the theological, philosophical and economic hegemonies of the West, they do so in an affirmation of

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260 Ibid., 2.

261 Ibid.
“Filipino-American” bodies. This is what makes it possible to bridge Fernandez’s resolute politics with Bundang’s affirmation of memory to claim self. It is the sense of “rootedness” to history/ontology and the simultaneous affirmation of “displaced (forgotten) selves” that allows Filipino-American communities to draw from collective memory to both engender political action and alleviate diasporic alienation.

Ultimately, the significance of holding both this definitive and elusive claim of “Filipino-American identity” lies in its capacity to forge meaning-making strategies. To claim stability—no matter how fleeting nor temporary—grasps at the heart of what if means to be embodied. It stretches the already strained diasporic body beyond the confines of the moment, into the possible. One stands open to fragmentation. I suggest that Bundang’s and Fernandez’s contention with identity politics reflects precisely this kind of fragmented self forced to stand outside the self—ex-stasis—in one’s encounter with strangeness. It is when this self is unfurled that bodies become materialized, made real, rendered ecstatic. This unfurled self witnesses to the life-giving potency of negativa, an apophatic openness to the im/possible.

IV Apophatic Possibilities: Filipino-American Theologies as Baklâ

Apophatic theology has little to (un)say about bodies, whereas it speaks volumes about that which it deems worthy of unsaying.²⁶²

If the becoming-theologies of embodiment are to fulfill their own promise, indeed even to remain credible to their own authors, a dose of negative theology laced with deconstruction will tender, I suggest, a needed tonic.²⁶³


²⁶³ Ibid., 28.
The baklâ hints at a postmodern subject who displaces the unidirectional flow of time, event and history. The distinctions of past/present, in/stability, home/exile are muddled, rendering bodies forever uprooted, thrust into what An poignantly describes as peripatetic life. In such moments of decentering

[t]he imaginary of spatial distance…throws into relief the temporal, social differences that interrupt our collusive sense of cultural contemporaneity. The present can no longer be simply envisaged as a break or a bonding with the past and the future, no longer a synchronic presence: our proximate self-presence, our public image, comes to be revealed for its discontinuities, its inequalities, its minorities.264

In its muddling of history, time and body, baklâ attests to a self in movement, fleeting fidelities reconfigured at each turn of circumstance. For Filipino-American bodies, this means that living/working in the Philippines, the United States, Europe and the Middle East expands the contours of diaspora. One becomes a “universal”/transnational figure by the particularity of one’s quotidian negotiations. What emerges from this atemporal, peripatetic self is a figure that subverts the stability of ethnicity, gender and history.

The baklâ caregivers who comprise the Paper Dolls embody the kind of porous subjectivity that flourishes before impossible situations. Certainly, one can argue that in their acquiescence to the West’s/Israel’s cultural/sexual/economic hegemony, these baklâ foreign workers have, in essence, lost selves. I suggest, rather, that these moments of fragmentation actually expand selves able to “enfold”—to use Keller’s term—contradistinctive experiences, values and histories. They thus participate in difference without succumbing to the lure of assimilation. They succeed in reconstituting fragmented selves, finding a way out of the aporia of exile. Indeed Keller suggests that

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264 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 6.
“perhaps the passageway through the impossible is not freedom in a void but in the porous, the literal opposite of an aporia.”

When identities are grounded in shared experience, memory and history, one enters a broader collective that un/enfolds to a common ethic. The sense of sym-pathy disrupts the stability of one’s grounding; the individual self is enfolded into the world of the similar/differentiated other. Apprehending the other’s mystery leaves one unfurled. The diasporic body’s “coming out” thus never ends. The diasporic body enters ecstatic time, what Chela Sandoval describes as a falling into “what is ‘intractable,’” to a state of being not subject to control or governance.” In such moments, the ecstatic and displaced subject stands before the “‘no-place’ of the abyss [where] subjectivity [becomes] freed from ideology as it binds and ties reality...where the political weapons of consciousness are available in a constant tumult of possibility.” For Sandoval, this moment of falling constitutes love; it is pagladlad. In their displacement of self, community and nation, baklâ bodies lose stability in the profound act of impossible loving.

I suggest that more than a “new way” of embodying Filipino-American identities, the baklâ haunts the already presumed enclosures of Filipino-American life. Indeed, by destabilizing location as a category of identity, Fernandez and Bundang

266 Chela Sandoval, Methodology of the Oppressed, Theory Out of Bounds V. 18 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 142.

267 In his helpful foreword to Jean-Luc Nancy’s Inoperative Community, Christopher Fysk identifies the Heideggerian trace that contours Nancy’s understanding of community. According to Fysk, Nancy’s version of Dasein emerges out of its apprehension of another’s death. This encounter with mortality—a recognition of one’s affinity with and alienation from another—exposes one’s alterity, the utter sense of individualism that renders one vulnerable, exposed. But it is also this this exposure that leads to an “opening to community [where] outside ourselves, we first encounter the other.” See Christopher Fysk and Jean-Luc Nancy, “Foreword,” in The Inoperative Community, Theory and history of literature v. 76 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), xvi.
already reorient identity towards events of re-membering—unmooring personhood to moments and opportunities to re-constitute self. “Filipino-America” undergoes a pagladlad of multivalent bodies. It maintains simultaneous fidelity to multiple homes and divergent relationships. It is displaced in its very insistence upon stability. “Filipino-America” is outed as multi-located, omni-cultural, polyamorous.

To the extent that Filipino-America heralds diasporic multiplicity, its very existence illuminates meaning-making strategies that intuit apophatic claims of self. Indeed, what distinguishes Bundang and Fernandez from “mainstream” scholars of Filipino-American life is their commitment to the displaced self as locus for theological meaning-making. While postcolonial and queer theorists have long problematized the phenomenon of Filipino-American life, Bundang’s and Fernandez’s theological turn exposes the anamnetic potency of a body rendered unnameable. By rearticulating diaspora as a site for re-membering, diaspora could be said to evoke an implicit liturgical sensibility. More than yet another narrative of diasporic life, the inherently baklâ Filipino-America disrupts the catachrestic trap of identity. What emerges instead is a sacramental self that points to im/possibility.

Re-membering/constituting the Apophatic Baklâ

Ultimately, the baklâ illuminates the artifice of imperial culture. But more than that, he exemplifies how this grasping at a “real self” constitutes a fundamental part of diasporic possibility. This ontological displacement is difficult to miss in the painful and

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268 Spivak upholds a similar premise in her postcolonial critique of essentialist identity politics: “Postcoloniality as agency can make visible that the basis of all serious ontological commitment is catachrestical, because negotiable through the information that identity is, in the larger sense, a text. It can show that the alternative to Europe’s long story—generally translated as “great narratives”—is not only short tales (petit récits) but tampering with the authority of storylines.” See Spivak, Outside in the Teaching Machine, 65.
humorous narratives of the Paper Dolls, or in the Reyna Elena’s parody of self, empire and power in the baklâ Santacruzian. To the extent that cultural and religious practices secure the memory of a people—per Bundang—these diasporic bodies expose too the anamnestic turns that make real the travails and histories of Filipino-American lives. The baklâ’s proximity to the imagined real (Lacan’s Symbolic?)—knowing fully well that one could never be truly babáe nor lalake, Filipino nor American, neither here nor there—underscores the potency of the remembered home in the fantasy of self.

Speaking specifically of the instability of gender/sexual identity, Butler asserts that “[t]he injunction to become sexed [or real] in the ways prescribed by the Symbolic always leads to failure and, in some cases, to the exposure of the phantasmatic nature of sexual identity itself.” For Butler, participation in this Lacanian Symbolic leads to the irruption of sexuality and inevitably, identity itself. She regards this as an ambivalent failure “symptomatic of a slave morality that disavows the very generative powers it uses to construct the ‘Law’ as a permanent impossibility.” In a sense, the failure to structure a stable self—a location from which to resist, generate and transform—constitutes both the impossibility and possibility of diasporic selfhood.

For Manalansán, the baklâ hearkens to an understanding of self that undulates as relationships, circumstances and power dynamics shift. The baklâ is always in a state of pagladlad. In this regard, Manalansán echoes the ambivalence around identity that undergirds Bundang’s and Fernandez’s theological projects. Problematic it may be, displacement is that which allows the baklâ to thrive in foreign shores; alienation

269 Butler, Gender Trouble, 72.

270 Ibid., 73.
trumps the stability of home, freeing the queer subject to re-create—perhaps even more accurately, re-member/constitute—self anew. This critical remembrance unfurls a self who thrives at the diaphanous boundaries of reality and fantasy. There is a performative dynamic to this engagement—where that which is real is exposed as a representation, a parody, a mimic. But with this comes, too, a sacramental potency, where repetitive practices point to a reality larger than that immediately apprehended. There is an insistent grasping at a hyperreality the fuels liturgical repetition, what Elizabeth Stuart refers to as gestures that “points to [death’s] defeat.”

Neither here nor there, the Filipino-American body is veritably queered in her/his relentless quest for rootedness. More than An’s rhizomatic home—grounded as it is upon expansive and multiple roots—Manalansán’s, Bundang’s and Fernandez’s “Filipino-America” digs deep into communal remembering and multiple fidelities, rooted in its resistance to fragmentation.

\[271\] In this regard, I draw from Homi Bhabha who exacts this same ambiguity around identity as mimicry. For him, mimicry is “constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal.” See Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 122.

On August 6, 2010, my parents boarded their final flight from Guam to Manila. After an expatriate life of thirty years and a few days, they have finally retired and so returned to a decrepit family home they’ve spent the past two years refurbishing. While the occasion typically invites gratitude, thanksgiving—and the perfect excuse to throw a humongous fiesta—my parents’ final departure evoked melancholy. Having encouraged all their children to create lives in the continental United States, Mama and Papa have pretty much lived alone on Guam for the last decade, with few friends to accompany them. And so, as they turned the lock of our island home for the last time, Mama and Papa left Guam in largely the same circumstances they arrived 30 years ago: with few friends to welcome/send them off, engulfed by an ambivalent sentiment of home and belonging.

In my family, “home” has long been an elusive fantasy that has contoured our personal and professional lives. Papa’s transnational career brought the family to a variety of places, each more exotic than the other. The higher he climbed the corporate ladder, the more we grew accustomed to calling different houses, towns, cities—even schools—iterations of “home.” Of these all, Guam offered a balance of familiarity and
opportunity: it was close enough to Manila to ensure proximity to homeland, and “American” enough to engender economic promise for the family²⁷³.

Though it took a while for me to realize it, Guam had early on become a token of stability in my peripatetic life. Regardless of where I went to school, where I found work, with whom I found love, summers were always spent with Mama and Papa on an island haven far removed from the metropolitan enclaves of my professional life. It offered quiet, rest and healing—a salve—to the hectic undulations of diaspora. Guam embodied stability each time I undertook shifts in career and vocation. Like a torque strengthened by the force of a turning wheel, Guam stabilized a body left dismembered by changes and shifts in life circumstances. Mama and Papa’s departure, to some degree, shattered the fantasy of stability that Guam guaranteed. For both of them, Guam offered but an economic opportunity on which to secure the family’s future. Beyond that, Guam was a place of exile, abandoned when the time to return home arose.

To a certain extent, my parents’ departure hearkens to the temporal fissure that divides our two generations. Home is constituted upon time—and the relationship to land, people, culture and history that contour these temporal moments. For Mama and Papa, these relationships have long been forged in the memory of their youths, their families and communities. For me, such groundings were hewn on an island home far

²⁷³ Guam’s colonial relationship—perhaps more than other “postcolonial” arrangements—illustrate the continued ambiguity between what constitutes colonial and post-colonial engagements. Catherine Lutz argues that U.S. citizenship on Guam, for example, illuminates the ambivalence of citizenship itself as a marker of imperial borders, subjects and bodies. As one of many Filipinos who flowed into Guam for economic opportunities—and obtaining US citizenship in the process—my father embodies, in many sense, the porousness not only of imperial boundaries, but of Guam as itself a spectre of empire. See Catherine Lutz, “US Military Bases on Guam in Global Perspective,” The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus (n.d.), http://japanfocus.org/-Catherine-Lutz/3389.
removed from Manila. And so, home and diaspora do not constitute the same thing for us. My home—the place of rest for my diasporic body—is my parents’ exile. And for me, the Philippines—the geo-cultural space of my parents’ home, the land of my birth—evokes nothing more than a fast receding childhood memory. The Philippines of my imagination is expansive; it has porous borders, contouring too the frontiers of empire.

I have long been taught to look back to the place of one’s beginnings as a prerequisite for future journeys. I’ve always found this an ambivalent notion. As life paths diverge, as worlds expand, the past becomes hazy, the place of one’s origins reduced to a fantasy of stability. Past and present blur. If this should be so, how does one define “place of origin”—itself assuming that one is going “somewhere else”? How does one allay the threat of alienation that comes with apprehending a time and place “yet-to-come”? More than a simple adage, perhaps this call to “look back” alludes to a deeper wisdom: In our grasping at the past, we fetishize not so much its stability as acknowledge its elusive impossibility. Recognizing the failure of our reach, we release its tenuous hold on the present, rending open the impossibility of what is to come. We look to the past in order to break open imaginations of our future.

I hope that Mama and Papa have departed well: hearts freed, aching bodies released from the travails of necessary work, spirits opened. In their abandonment of “my” home, place and grounding, I hope they re-nourish their own roots in the familiar earth of their childhood home. I am sad to see them leave but grateful for—ever mindful of—their ultimate sacrifice on our behalf: by deracinating their lives, Mama and Papa taught us how to root our bodies deeply in soils both familiar and strange, nourished by relationships that transcend confines of time and place. Adios estaki.
1  **Unfurling Epistemological Boundaries and Locations**

I opened this dissertation with a narrative of displacement, questions of location, stability and bodies that constitute subjectivity. In the unfolding of these reflections, diasporic bodies—rendered baklâ in their unmooring—illumined a kind of displaced subjectivity that alluded to hyperreality, an encounter with abundance. Keller asserts that as a location for the infinite, the body is anything but stable, singular, promptly rooted. Instead, one *gleans* only the “essence” of what one is. One intuits only the larger reality to which these elusive, apophatic bodies point: “For the infinite unfolds into the bodily manifold of the world. …Thus—precisely at the fold of embodiment—it exceeds its own impersonality…”

Throughout the dissertation, I have traced readings of Filipino-American life—specifically by Manalansan, Bundang and Fernandez—to illustrate that, more than any specific claim upon the human, the question of “Filipino-American theological anthropology” is really about bodies impossibly displaced into the possible. In this regard, what transpires out of my analysis is an uneasy acquiescence to diasporic embrace and displacement as simultaneous strategies for identity consolidation. While theoretically clumsy, resituating identity upon displacement reaffirms the untenability of “strong”—again, to draw from Caputo—anthropologies that affirm the stability of human nature. I problematize what one means by place as constitutive of body. Beyond geographical location, I assert that place is fundamentally epistemological, intimating a

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way of understanding the world. This shift to the epistemological is pivotal to the extent that it exposes how diaspora reorients the “grounding” of subjectivity towards context—events of one’s becoming. Context is not the same as place; it does not point to stability. Indeed, Marcella Althaus-Reid observes how at a time when Third World theologians have made contextuality a hermeneutical key, it is sad to notice how contextuality has remained linked to the geographical more than the epistemological. By epistemological contexts we mean the fact that ways of knowing relate to each other.\(^{275}\)

By reconsidering place and context as epistemology, I question assumptions about the body in a way that destabilizes cultural, political and economic hegemonies. More than just “products” of culture, economy and politics, bodies re-contour these categories through resistance, acquiescence and negotiation.

I re-visit these epistemological assumptions by exploring apophatic impulses in the Filipino-American subject latent in Manalansán’s, Bundang’s and Fernandez’s scholarships. What emerges as a gesture of politico-historical retrieval for Fernandez is reconfigured in the form of liturgical re-membering for Bundang. Together, they invoke the simultaneous sense of belonging/disavowal that undergirds Manalansán’s pagladlad. Standing from divergent disciplinary locations, Bundang, Fernandez and Manalansán expose the profound sense of displacement that defines and disclaims Filipino-American life. Reorienting Filipino-American bodies/anthropology/culture/life to events and contexts rather than place deconstructs the constrictive parameters of identity paradigms that staticize self. Pagladlad—as a strategy to affirm and disclaim

\(^{275}\) Althaus-Reid goes on to say that “That was, by the way, one of the key factors in the work of the Zapatistas, who, using the Internet, were able to connect people belonging to the same epistemological context no matter what their geographical situation.” Marcella Althaus-Reid, *The Queer God* (London: Routledge, 2003), 25-26. *Emphasis mine.*
(queer) subjectivity—transgresses the presumed limits of ontology.\textsuperscript{276}

As I conclude this chapter, I highlight key insights that suggest at a reorientation of diasporic displacement towards possibility. Without meaning to reduce the complexity of their analyses to pithy claims, I suggest that when Bundang, Fernandez and Manalansán grapple with “Filipino-American” lives, they speak of bodies that are inevitably unruly and elusive. But they articulate bodies that are also abundant with theological meaning, relevant for communities in search of grounding. Thus they cannot but grasp at an unnameable entity; they cannot but disclaim a body rendered fragmented by the displacement of diaspora. It is the impossibility of stabilizing this diasporic self that constitutes the potency of pagladlad as a paradigm for subjectivity. Neither in nor out—bodies only partially and momentarily revealed—the Filipino-American body stands forever unfurling, a reminder of the impossibility of stability.

\textit{Filipino-American Life and the Displacement of Empire}

It is easy—even tempting—to “leave” Filipino-America as both here and there, a phenomenon of abjection and belonging. And yet, as Bundang and Fernandez—more so the latter—assert, this ambiguously multi-located self is problematic in its presumed inability to endure diaspora. \textit{Place is important in contexts of ambiguity; naming place}

\textsuperscript{276} Perhaps this is the reason why I describe “Filipino-American [queer] anthropology” as a \textit{reorienting}—rather than “disorienting”—dynamic. While Ahmed would use both terms interchangeably, I assert that Filipino-America’s fidelity to a specific historical contexts—however one locates these within the colonial-imperial spectrum—reflects the implicit rootedness inherent in the image of “reorientation.” Filipino-America is not “just” phenomenon. In Filipino-Americans’ search for home, one refines a keener sense of directionality (reorientation) rather than loses it (disorientation); one broadens the contours of home in order to stabilize self-displacement.

In a slightly more expansive way, Ahmed would assert that “[m]igration could be described as a process of disorientation and reorientation: as bodies ‘move away’ as well as ‘arrive,’ as they re-inhabit spaces.” See Sara Ahmed, \textit{Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 9.
resists the threat of erasure that comes with migrant life. For San Juan, this resistance demands a political imperative given the very real, very embodied disparity that configure Philippine-U.S. relationship: “No matter how they try, Filipinos cannot be Americans as long as the common American identity is racially and unilaterally defined.”

To describe Filipino-American life as displaced is thus a naming of material injustice, the exposure of unequal geopolitical relationships that render home and people alienated, marginalized and estranged. Thus San Juan cautions against the aporia of postmodernity where “binary opposites turn out to be double binds (I am both American and Asian, and many other things)—virtually disabling ruses of complicity, self-incriminating games of co-optation.”

As a figure of agential ambivalence, the baklâ offers an antidote to San Juan’s fear of a disembodied “postmodern aporia.” Embodying individual, social and epistemological displacement, the baklâ intimates the potency of standing in relation to as a way of imagining the human. More than just occupying the “middle space,” as it were, the baklâ thrives as difference, as alter/native to the norm. It is this ambivalent engagement of place that animates pagladlad as an event of emergence, éclosure. Through the unfurling of ethnic, gendered and cultural categories—their exposure as momentary negotiations to the extent that pagladlad exposes only parts of self at any given time—the baklâ disrupts the flow of power undergirding imperial trajectory.

As a colonial presence at the heart of empire, Filipino-American life channels the baklâ as a figure of potent displacement. Speaking the fluent English of the master, familiar with tropes of imperial/transnational economies, Filipino-Americans stand as

277 San Juan, *From Exile to Diaspora*, 15.

278 Ibid., 46.
imitations of the American dream. Most days, we seamlessly engage the trappings of America, apologists for capitalist values. But in the same breath, Filipino-Americans stand at its margins, our sing-song accents betraying strangeness, immersed in the nightmare of migration itself. Like the baklā who thrives forever at the threshold of babāc/lalake, illusion/reality, Filipino-Americans cannot but unfurl categories that buttress empire. Our existence outs the empire as weak, built upon illusions of equality, a racist oligarchy justified by the fantasy of democracy.

Queer Phenomena and Traces of Apophatic Fidelity
To the extent that Bundang and Fernandez straddle multiple locations to root diaspora, they disorient the stability of diasporic bodies, rendering all bodies—Filipino and American—complicit in the fortification of empire. Such bodies, to draw from Sara Ahmed, exist in/allude to/create a queer phenomenon that reorients bodies and locations.279 By re-thinking the ways colonial subjects participate/resist in the imperial project, Bundang and Fernandez subvert the us-versus-them binary that contours liberationist politics and theologies. Instead, they commit to a longer-term, repetitive and cyclical subversion of empire that slowly chips away at the illusion of stability.

Like the baklā whose existence within Filipino culture exposes the folly of its phallogocentric/heterosexist world, diasporic subjects thrive within empire, unraveling the integrity of national boundaries. Elizabeth Stuart discerns in these queer dislocations a liturgical repetition that blurs the imagined divide between the material world—the

279 Ahmed emphasizes the importance of disorientation in order for us to see “the impact of the experience on the orientation of bodies and spaces. …The point is what we do with such moments of disorientation, as well as what such moments can do—whether they can offer us the hope of new directions, and whether new directions are reason enough for hope.” See Ahmed, Queer Phenomenology, 158.
given, the “what is”—and that infinite possibility that points to apophatic abundance.

Following this intuition, I suggest that in the unfurling of ethnic, national and
gendered categories, Filipino-American bodies channel the same hyperreality that
Caputo discerns in the apophatic: both are sacramental in their reorientation of body
towards “the more.” They speak of selves that transcend limits of political action. They
imagine bodies that make meaning out of fragmentation. Perhaps this is what Stuart
refers to in arguing for a “queer theology [that cannot but be] an identity-based
theology,” if by “identity” one assumes a coherent, unchanging entity.\(^{280}\) The kind of
theology that arises from the unsaying of body affirms not the existence of certain
bodies, nor of particular understandings of God and the world. What unfolds, instead, is
an intuition towards possibility, the opening of singular bodies to broader imaginings of
self. This is a pivotal intimation for diasporic subjects to the extent that diaspora almost
always forces one to grasp at assimilation, a kind of perverse fidelity to empire forced
upon unruly (migrant) bodies.

Indeed, in their struggle to articulate a definitive “Filipino/Asian-American,”
feminist, liberationist, postcolonial theology/ies, Fernandez and Bundang resist the
allure of assimilation. Rather, they point to the ways Filipino-American bodies uphold
polyamorous fidelities to multiple homes, nations and histories to consolidate
fragmented selves. This is the reason why the balikbayan (“back to the homeland”) box—the ubiquitous traveling accessory of every Filipino-American traveler—evokes
the ambivalence of homeland for diasporic bodies. These boxes contain goods—all
things American/Western/imported—accumulated by diasporic Filipinos to lug with

\(^{280}\) Elizabeth Stuart, “Queer Theology,” in *Gay and Lesbian Theologies: Repetitions with
them on their next trip home. These boxes represent not only the fruits of one’s labors, but tokens of empire now shared physically with loved ones in the homeland. More than an affordable way to transport gifts, balikbayan boxes blur the binary of home/exile. Straddling as they do in-between scholarly and political commitments, Fernandez and Bundang illuminate the kind of stabilitas that Leo Rudloff imagines for monastic grounding: a self perennially exposed to and constituted by one’s encounter with the strange.

The baklâ’s apophatic turn intimates the kinds of theologies that thrive intuitively in diasporic contexts. Regardless of their problematic grasping at stable identities, contextual theologies remain important for communities easily absorbed within the hegemony of empire. Such theologies demand profound commitment to ambivalence, an openness to queer imagination that embraces the possibility of unsaying. Reflecting upon the potency of apophasis in feminist constructive theology, for example, Sigridur Gudmarsdottir asserts that abdicating from claims/affirmations point not to hopelessness, but to abundance, the reorientation of bodies towards the more, the infinite. In a sense, apophatic theologies speak of boundlessness—the more—simultaneously “[disclosing] the liminality of every affirmation about God and [destabilizing] any discourse that objectifies God.”

If this should be case, the seeming impasse that lurks beneath Bundang’s claim for a more collaborative, ethnically-relevant Asian-American theology and Fernandez’s proposed reimagination of an expansive theological anthropology point, really, to the

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apophatic possibilities of Filipino-American theologies themselves. Bundang’s and Fernandez’s relentless commitment to diasporic location and its attendant challenges belie a baklā phenomenology—to draw from Ahmed—that broadens locations of body, easing the fragmentation of dispersion. Indeed, nowhere is this diasporic displacement/abundance more apparent than in the unruly bodies of Manalansán’s baklā who stubbornly plant selves at the frontiers of nation, forging spaces in no-man’s land because manhood/nationhood themselves are precisely just that, illusory.

Standing at the cusp of near erasure, insisting upon the necessity of cultural practices to re-member/consolidate fragmented bodies, diasporic Filipino-Americans reinscribe selves anew at each turn, at each re-negotiation with empire. This cyclical performance constitutes an implicit resistance to death that Stuart categorically describes as liturgical, a veritable entry into that which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick longingly calls the “vicinity of the transformative.”

II  Not so Final Unsayings: Filipino-American Diaspora as Baklā

Finally, then, apophatic bodies always signify at least the carnal reality, the spatiotemporal perspective, of anyone who is unsaying anything: the body, for instance, of the apophatic mystic.

But that perspective turns knowingly upon itself, at the crux of embodiment, at the point where the inexhaustible excess, ever exceeding language, swerves into word even as word turns into flesh.283

282 Sedgwick’s use of “shamelessness” as an image for transformative possibility is poignant given Filipino culture’s aversion to shame (Walang-hiya—“shameless” is all too common pejorative denoting one’s dismissal of common values). Jay Johnson clarified that Sedgwick’s claim connotes a humble acknowledgment of the immensity assumed in any attempt at authentic transformation. In a similar sense I do not exact the burden of social transformation upon the baklā alone. But his social (and personal) liminality certainly forges for him opportunities for birthing. See Sedgwick, Epistemology of the Closet, 22.

Planned or otherwise, there is a profound confluence of bodies, narratives and conflicting emotions that inform the final composition of this chapter. As my parents re-settle into their imaginations of home, I am left to consider yet again the quandary of displacement so ubiquitous to diasporic life. Where is home, indeed? And how does one re-imagine identity each time the stability of one’s life shifts, reorients to directions both familiar and strange?

Inevitably, these reflections suggest that diaspora—despite its tendency to silence and discipline otherwise problematic bodies—offers a way to reorient selves towards possibility. Diaspora alludes not so much to a phenomenon outside culture, but of a reality that constitutes one’s cultural home itself. To the same extent that monastic enclosures are consolidated by its very acknowledgement of, openness to and welcome of the stranger—culture, nation and homeland are made real by diasporic bodies that “guard” the limits of these imagined spaces. Diaspora is necessary in the configuration of nation. Diaspora is as complicit in the imperial project itself.

But the transformative potency of diaspora lies in its relinquishment of stability as an imperial fetish. This is only possible when diasporic subjects recognize both the lure of assimilation and the equally problematic posture of resistance. This is where the figure of the baklā offers a critical gesture to empire. Situated clearly within the Filipino cultural universe—a figure both embraced and disavowed—the baklā portends an unceasing dislocation that forever reminds one of the temporariness of cultural tropes. More than just a subversion of gender, sexuality, even religious categories, the baklā severs the Filipino cultural universe from its presumed moorings in time and history. If expanded to serve as an imagination of diasporic subjectivity itself, the baklā offers a
way to break through the impasse of an elusive stability—whether in the form of assimilation and, as I have argued, perpetual alienation—all too easily imposed upon bodies and identities.

By reorienting Filipino-American life towards baklâ positionality—again invoking Ahmed’s “queer phenomenology”—I illuminate what is already latent in the constitution of diasporic bodies: their capacity to break through the cycle of determinism; their ability to see through the temptation of assimilation foisted upon unruly subjects; and their unyielding resistance to material injustice. What emerges from this reorientation is a queer body who lives within the problematic context of exile, the stranger who secures the borderland by its very haunting of it. Rather than acquiescing to estrangement, the diasporic subject broadens the confines of one’s “enclosure.” These become spaces of profound meaning-making; the disclaiming of body becomes a theological intimation of éclosure.

*Short Time: The Immor(t)al Baklâ Body*

Apophatic turns are poetic. In their very unsaying, words become porous, ideas and images intuiting moments of éclosure. Perhaps it is appropriate to end this reflection with a re-reading of Jaime An Lin’s *Short Time*, a melancholic affirmation of baklâ embodied-ness. More than an expression of queer resistance, the poem conveys a sense of apophatic agency that I find helpful in illuminating the theological potency of the baklâ as a site for deconstructive imagination. Reflecting on the presumed immorality of baklâ life, Lin exposes the meaning-making possibilities inherent in the embrace and disavowal of baklâ as an event of queer/diasporic subjectivity:
Tonight you are the dream  
Who walks in my waking sleep,  
Who bears miraculously  
The shaped voice motion of remembered love.  
How can I resist the reckless.

Leap from the world  
Of furtive bushes and tunneling headlights,  
To this room no less anonymous,  
Of thin walls, thinning mattresses,  
Where we grapple and thrash  
Like beached sea creatures  
Breathing the dry unfamiliar air?  

When you stand to go, I ease myself  
Into the hollow your body leaves.  
I press the faint smell of you to  
my face.

O Christ, were I loving you  
Drinking your blood, eating your flesh!  

But the morning betrays nothing.  
The chair in the corner stands mute,  
The mirror repeats your absence.  
When the curtains are flung back  
To let the harsh light in,  
The bed looms empty.

I am finally all I have.284

In these verses, Lin unveils the baklâ’s as a complex convergence of identities constituted by contradictory cultural and religious values, gender and sexual expectations. He plays with stereotypes, pandering to popular sentiments about the baklâ’s sexual proclivities.

By entitling his piece, Short Time, Lin accentuates the immorality of the prostitute-haranguing, motel-frequenting baklâ who thrives in the furtive shadows of

284 Lin, “Short Time,” 151-152.
Manila’s moral universe. And yet, it is this very *immorality* that secures the baklâ’s eschatological possibility, his *immortality*, so to speak. It is the baklâ who encounters Jesus; he who drinks of God’s essence (in the sacred blood, the semen?); he who eats of God’s flesh (the divine penis?). To speak loosely of this is shocking. But to describe such surreptitious encounters in defiantly sacramental terms transgresses epistemological frameworks that sustain the propriety of Filipino religious and cultural narratives. Ultimately, what lends poignancy to this poem is the fact that it ends with the baklâ lying alone in his bed, naked, devoid of any cultural significations that validate his existence. He no longer needs to grasp at femininity to exist; he no longer needs to claim a mermaid-like self to breathe. Even the God with whom he shared bed was gone. The baklâ stands alone with his shadows, free at last to be.

Lin’s words of subversion exemplify the baklâ’s compelling capacity to expose the performative potency of identity, gender, body and place. When Lin exposes the pleasurable contours of sex (and sometimes, its accompanying losses), he not only affirms its goodness but also re-enfleshes the ambivalence of *all* human encounters. He disengages the profane/mundane binary that imprisons Filipino cultural mores—epistemological structures that stabilize culture, values, bodies and distinct notions of self. By prescribing a seemingly “immoral” stance, Lin more than unfurls the untenability of cultural and religious claims, he *echoes the inherent diaspora, alienation and possibility that stand latent in queer bodies*.

Indeed, there is a profound sense of relief that accompanies the ambivalent body

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285 In Manila street-talk, *short time* refers to the length of time that one spends in a motel with a prostitute. Since motels charges by the hour, the amount of pleasure one derives from the encounter depends both upon the availability of cash and the desirability of one’s partner.
who is able to stand both in and outside one’s cultural home. But this relief comes at a price: openness to the possible assumes that the stability of the moment is precisely that, momentary. Perhaps there is much to be gleaned from Rudloff’s stabilitas that could alleviate the anxiety of this relentless displacement. For Rudloff, stabilitas speaks to an openness grounded upon community:

Stability is not so much a matter of place…as it is stability in the community to which we commit ourselves. This commitment is so solemn it is akin to the commitment people enter into in matrimony. It is a life commitment.286

By reorienting stability towards community—even in the hotly contested language of “matrimony”—Rudloff argues for a notion of self that is multiple, body multi-located, dispersed in its very engagement with otherness. Speaking as he does from the seemingly stable confines of the monastic enclosure, Rudloff stands witness to the undulations of human relationships. To the extent that monastic stability witnesses to life at the boundaries of embrace and disavowal, it speaks of diaspora. And to the extent that diaspora speaks ultimately of imagined boundaries that constitute belonging, it speaks of the limits and possibilities of the human condition. Diaspora is queer.

At the end of the poem, Lin’s baklâ reaches across an empty bed in the emerging light of morning—“I am finally all I have”—an apophatic cry that speaks of the dual impossibility of isolation and interrelatedness. Baklå bodies arise out of ambivalent engagements that allow for dis/locations. Far more than any claim to self, the pain of these ephemeral engagements point to the impossibility of consolidating body independently of others, of strangers. Diaspora, if anything, reminds us of this inevitable need for others—whether this takes place in the context of an embrace, even

286 Rudloff, O.S.B., “The Living Rule of Saint Benedict as Lived by the Monks of Weston Priory.”
of alienation. But rather than a point of resignation, this negative longing—alluding to need, to lack, to lacuna—opens forth a sense of anticipation for the unexpected gifts of the possible. In the fragmentation of displaced and disoriented bodies, we grasp at a reality far more palpable, beyond the elusive imaginations of subjectivity itself.

287 Reflecting upon apophatic bodies, Catherine Keller alludes to a sense of enfolding—her term to describe one’s participation in another—that constitutes bodies. This participatory posture leaves one’s infiniteness intact, neither absorbed nor dissipated in one’s engagement with another. Speaking specifically of God, Keller makes this claim as a way of preserving divine wholeness in its participation in the limited confines of human bodies. This enfolding, in a sense, blurs the boundary of the infinite with the finite, expanding the contours at which bodies—divine or human—exist. She asserts that: “For if God is infinite—or at least not what Hegel would dub a bad infinite—how can we conceive of any boundary where God ends and the world begins? But God’s difference is not diminished but heightened in this meditation. The infinite is so different, so other, from any and all creatures as to be non aliud, not-other. Aha, one mutters, whether in inquisitorial or conspiratorial glee: pantheism after all. But the apophatic engine is roaring, with a rather formidable logic of its own. ‘Infinity is incompatible with otherness; for since it is infinity, nothing exists outside it. ... [I]nfinity ... exists and enfolds all things and nothing is able to exist outside it. Consequently, nothing exists that is infinity’s other.’” See Keller, “The Cloud of the Impossible: Embodiment and Apophasis,” 35.


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