

**CARTOGRAPHY OF SOUND: BODY-MAPPING AND
BORDER-CROSSINGS IN KAY ULANDAY
BARRETT'S *MORE THAN ORGANS* AND ALDRIN
VALDEZ'S *ESL, OR YOU WEREN'T HERE***

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

When surveying the Philippines' literary legacy, it is insufficient to identify this field solely by its continuous engagement with the country's multiple imperialisms and ancestral traumas. It is too reductive to collapse us into a monolithic narrative, circumscribed by oppression and exploitation that seldom extends outside those bounds. Forced to return to the site of suffering, we are denied escape from these boundaries and dispossessed of imagining futurity. Our destiny is this death-driven purgatory in which our ancestors' pain becomes ours too, in which collective grief is housed in individual bodies, in which death becomes relived so much it marks our ways of being. We cannot look into a mirror without seeing the vestiges of imperial domination, neocolonial infringements, and political exploitation. To sever ourselves from these wounds seems impossible. We do not know who we are without them; we would not be who we are without them. Especially within the Philippine context, our claim to an 'authentic' Pilipinx is molded by the strands of Spanish colonialism, US imperialism, Japanese occupation; our pre-colonial features are blurred when combined with these circumstances. The Pilipinx body is a locus of historical, social, and political convergences and cannot be neatly aligned with just the Philippine nation or just the Western diaspora. It is not incorrect to point out these patterns of violence—and in actuality, they are essential in understanding the complex histories of the Pilipinx people—but it very quickly equates our community with trauma, as if we are destined for grief, for immobility, for perpetual death, and it keeps us from recognizing the newness that was born out of those violent encounters.

But how can we hold and begin to heal our vexed existences? Attuned to the violent institutions in which we live, we must understand how decolonial critique works against such Western matrices of power that urge the imperial episteme, assimilation, and perpetual suffering. I argue, as we seek to unsettle these dominant forces, that the queer diaspora is especially crucial. Queer diasporic methodologies disrupt prescriptive, teleological formations of belonging and embodiment. It rattles

the notion that selfhood and homemaking must be singularly oriented by the nation-state. These strategies allow us to create new frameworks for engaging with Pilipinx identity, and particularly, *multiplicity*, that centers on non-normativity and collective liberation. Thus, if we are to reclaim our identifications, if we are to break out of these stringent paradigms, we must acknowledge that the issues and excesses of Pilipinx personhood hinge on decoloniality, border crossings, and queer reorientation.

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

Author of *When the Chant Comes* (Topside Press, 2016) and *More Than Organs* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2020) Kay Ulanday Barrett's first admission into the poetry scene was through spoken word performance, community theatre, and 90s hip-hop and remixes. Their work, typically under the moniker 'brownroundboi,' is subsequently influenced by these spaces, in conjunction with their activist work within queer and trans communities of color, migrant solidarity networks, and disability justice. Their first poetry collection is a riotous song of sickness and survival; it confronts the junctures of race, gender, and disability within the Philippine lineage and against the forces of the U.S. empire. Carrying these pulses, their second collection continues this line of reckoning. *More Than Organs* transports and transforms the queer diasporic body through the myriad realms of voices, temporalities, longing, grief, and rage—reaching out to the undefinable.

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

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

presence and absence of the body within spaces, and the textures of loss and (re)discovery.

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

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

Epifanio San Juan Jr., like many Pilipinx American academics, holds up Carlos Bulosan as marking the inaugural experience of deracination and migration, birthing the 'Filipino writer.' In his work, *Filipino Writing in the United States: Reclaiming Whose America?*, San Juan Jr. discusses the "schizoid nature of Filipino subjectivity"³ that must grapple with ongoing coloniality, ethnic identity politics, and political expatriation. Philippine-Anglophone literature thus becomes a "phenomenology of exile,"⁴ wholly concerned with rootlessness and ceaseless departure. This eliminates possibilities for spaces of belonging, as the 'Filipino writer' can never be *home*.

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

Much like their antecessors, Barrett and Valdez are attentive to the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality as mediated by location and migration. They unfold the queer process of diasporic migration, figuring our bodies as resistances against dominant cultures, as manifestations of non-normativity. These

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

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

³ E. San Juan Jr. "Filipino Writing in the United States: Reclaiming Whose America?" *Philippine Studies* 41, no. 2. (1993): 150.

⁴ *Ibid.*

queer strategies draw upon the concerns that Martin Manalansan, Alice Y. Hom, and Kale Bantigue Fajardo examine in *Q&A: Voices from Queer Asian North America*. In this anthology, they explore the vicissitudes of queer Asian embodiment, especially in the spirit of José Esteban Muñoz's queer pedagogies, as they journey towards new horizons. These theorists are concerned with the queer economy of desire in motion. That is to say, they seek to pull apart the various entanglements within the politics of movement, as these moments of travel, of settling, of border-crossing, are weaved with “power and pleasure always; complicity and privilege oftentimes; resistance, decoloniality, radicalism, feminism, beauty, shame, loss, and resilience sometimes.”⁵ Within their poetics, Barrett and Valdez pivot between stillness and movement—a shifting that inflects the migratory nature of their own language. In other words, Barrett and Valdez claim linguistic hybridity that remains mindful of their ancestral inheritance, transient identities, and amalgamated present.

In situating themselves both within and against their predecessors, these poets seek an escape from the limitations of the ‘Filipino writer’ while also honoring the literary world created before them. And it is undeniable that the Pilipinx literary world is overwhelmingly molded by the complicated dynamics of English and standardized Filipino. Immersed in this, Barrett’s and Valdez’s poetry repudiates the seemingly straightforward binary opposition of the colonizer vs. the colonized tongue. Here, R. Kwan Laurel’s “Pinoy” *English: Language, Imagination, and Philippine Literature* is especially useful in grappling with the issues of bilingualism. He pursues a recalibration of this polarity because it thus provides “proof that English— as if there were only one and only one kind— can never be ours.”⁶ Signifying English as prescriptive, as the adversary to the Pinoy, fails to acknowledge that the standardized Filipino language is enforced as well. It wholly misaligns the ‘Filipino writer’ within the sole category of Tagalog linguistics, misidentifying all Filipinos as Tagalogs. If we were to follow this thread, are we to dispossess the Pilipinx-American of their languages, once again continuing this perpetual cycle of denial? As if in response to this question, Barrett and Valdez revitalize the pulses between English and Tagalog—or in Kwan Laurel’s words, they “choose to appropriate what the language offers us.”⁷ They are not begging for access to these modes of speech; they understand that these languages are ours already. They relocate the poetic landscape to an arena of liberating possibilities where we can realize the desire to transcend the colonial and colonized imagination. Barrett’s and Valdez’s language speaks not only to their vexed histories of trauma and loss but also to revolutionary potentialities. In transforming their ways of speaking, they acknowledge the capacity for new ways of being, thus refiguring poetry as a space of belonging.

⁵ Martin Manalansan, Alice Y. Hom, and Kale Bantigue Fajardo. *Q&A: Voices From Queer Asian North America*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2021), 9.

⁶ R. Kwan Laurel. “‘Pinoy’ English: Language, Imagination, and Philippine Literature.” (2005): 545.

⁷ *Ibid*, 550.

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

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

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

mahal, n.

> love

mahal, adj.

> expensive⁸

"Mahal" questions the *cost* of loving, making sacrifice intrinsic to the action. Though Barrett is wholly preoccupied with Brown, Queer, Trans prosperity, they refuse a certain blissful naivete that remains ignorant of institutional destruction and hostility. So "mahal" becomes the fulcrum of their politics; love requires a deep investment: it risks what Barrett calls "the heart pang, spirit ache, psychological gymnastics."⁹ To reach love's decadence, we must first taste the bittersweetness. "Mahal" desires bountifulness, desires access to the full range of human experience. In particular, Barrett speaks to queer love, one that struggles within and resists heteronormative societal paradigms. In conjunction with that, "mahal" also registers capitalist pressures, love as an expense, but also love as valuable. Queer love bears the brunt of systemic violence and stands on the frontlines of suffering. But it is in the

⁸ Barrett, lines 23-26.

⁹ Kay Ulanday Barrett, "Q&A With Kay Ulanday Barrett," Interview by Alice Wong. *Disability Visibility Project*, April 12, 2020.

face of sorrow that we choose love, to understand its inseparability from pain and hold it anyway. Barrett declares: “We can be smitten and in pain. We can swoon and feel devastated too. We can hold complications.”¹⁰ Thus, in their poetic project, they confront and fully embrace complication, unafraid to present the multiple dimensions of personhood.

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

this word is shifted in meaning
by tone, context, cadence. the word
becomes interchangeable, durable.
like an imposed tongue. like a pushed
out community. like forced migration.¹¹

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

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

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Barrett, lines 6-10.

¹² Ibid, 12-13.

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

"Mahal" is in transit, carrying with it love and its expenses. Barrett centralizes motion and mutation as they mold the various senses of this loaded term. At first, the instability of "mahal" is likened to an "imposed tongue,"¹³ a discomfort located inside the body. Here, Kwan Laurel's critique of exclusionary English erupts: How can we heal the wounds inflected in our voices? How can we reconcile with what has been forced onto us? In pursuit of restoration—*reclamation* even—must we forget this imposition? For Barrett, we cannot separate them; rather, we can "become / all of the things at the same time"¹⁴ through the dual passageway of "mahal." The refusal of singularity deconstructs the barriers surrounding Pilipinx identity—to insist on the recognition of multiplicity, to be granted the right to be multiple, at all times. Barrett enhances this viewpoint as they delineate the shape of their linguistic motion: "different routes, traveling / along the same curve of body."¹⁵ Here, the body is situated in stillness while languages voyage across its landscape, constructing intersections, roundabouts, and various pathways of speaking. In laying claim to linguistic hybridity, Barrett asserts their access to different levels of meaning-making. They adhere to Kwan Laurel's notion of "Pinoy English" as they reject the reductive binaries of the English vs. Tagalog opposition. Barrett holds both languages in their body, acknowledging the shifting struggle and joy that arises from their multivocality.

Lastly, it is essential to unfold the queerness of Barrett's "mahal." In particular, their interrogation of the limits and possibilities of this word calls attention to how we confront and endure our particularity and contingencies. Constituted by the multistranded modes of domination—capitalism, imperialism, neocolonialism, etc.—"mahal" recognizes the stringent borders of queer desire. To detach this from its adversity, to cling to a sanitized version of love, dilutes its radical fervor and border-crossing energies. When Barrett collapses love and cost within the same word, they demand attention for the vexed genealogies and critical futurity of queer, racialized

¹³ Ibid, 9.

¹⁴ Ibid, 14-15.

¹⁵ Ibid, 17-18.

personhood. By the end of the poem, they return to this site of meditation. Reasserting the biformity of love and cost, Barrett confesses our unremitting sacrifices: “everything is at the expense / of this word.”¹⁶ They are unafraid to state these circumstances, unafraid of crossing the intersections of the political, historical, intellectual, and social. “Mahal” becomes their guide as they unfold language as a process of migration in which we find a home to settle in diasporic belonging. Thus, when Barrett delivers their dedication, “this book is for all of those who / know the breadth of this word,”¹⁷ they are speaking to beings of multiplicity, those caught between home and uprooting, those who taste both hello and goodbye in multiple registers, and those who know loss, and still, ultimately, hold love.

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

Aldrin Valdez’s *ESL, or You Weren’t Here* carries a similar thematic preoccupation with bodies in transit and migratory languages as Barrett’s *More Than Organs*. However, their poetic odysseys diverge as they employ different strategies for reckoning with the queer diaspora. Their collections’ titles divulge such a difference. While Barrett considers the body and seeks to transcend mere biological “organs,” Valdez registers language and absence (this is not to say these poets do not grapple with all of these themes, but this distinction underscores the primary concerns of their work). In Valdez’s title, the notion of ‘English as a second language’ and the sense of absence—linked by the word “or”—herald the limits of language and the burden of distance. The collection reckons with the notion of wholeness, as they sit betwixt cultures, genders, temporalities, and worlds. In an interview with Sarah M. Sala for *BOMB Magazine*, Valdez confessed that this collection’s title calls forth the feeling that “being lost in translation is a kind of loneliness.”¹⁸ As readers, we bear witness to the mercuriality of their particularity but also to the translation and transformation of Pilipinx collectivity. Their work brings to the forefront the alchemy of nostalgia, resentment, grief, and imagination. Valdez finds the ability to sail through the churning and the chaos of their queer, diasporic existence, a tumultuous coming-of-age in protest and in pursuit of somewhere to call home.

Like Barrett, they also begin their collection with a meditation on their diasporic language-blending: The first poem, “Tagalog,” introduces both the intimacies and collectivity of movement, calling forth their ancestral migration and Pinoy migration more broadly. Rather than situating their poem inside a singular word, Valdez spans the linguistic and ethnic complexities of Tagalog as a whole. Overall, the

¹⁶ Ibid, 19-20.

¹⁷ Ibid, 21-22.

¹⁸ Valdez, Aldrin. “Through Our Vulnerabilities,” Interview by Sarah M. Sala. *BOMB Magazine*, November 30, 2018.

collection fuses the dynamics of San Juan Jr.'s narrative of exile and Kwan Laurel's Pinoy English in order to illustrate the inextricable entanglements of origins, movement, bodies, and languages. Since this collection is dedicated to their grandmother, Regina Feliciano Valdez, it is apt that the inaugural poem, "Tagalog," also begins with her origin story. But this origin is immediately complicated:

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

swim back to Manila.¹⁹

This beginning already signals a return—the grandmother earnest in her defiance. Her immigration to the U.S. unflinchingly calls upon her emigration from Manila, right away figuring these spaces in binary opposition. However, the play with temporalities here destabilizes this depiction and ponders the tension between agency and involuntariness. Over the course of these three lines, Valdez slips through three different tenses which obscure this event of migration. The poem begins in the past as the grandmother "joked" but then propels toward futurity in the phrase "when it came time to." So, Nanay understands this deracination as inevitable, as remarked by "when" rather than a hypothetical "if". She is robbed of choice and sent into this forced migration as though it is merely a chapter in the Pilipinx narrative, merely a rite of passage. Thereafter, the verbs fall into the conditional tense in "she'd beg" and "she'd jump" which obfuscates the overwhelming automatism at the start. These verbs push forth into the abstract, the imaginary, as if the Pilipinx odyssey presented in the first line was simply myth. Notably, these visions are linked to the idea of going home; home becomes unfeasible, already inaccessible, though the migration has yet to occur. Moreover, the rupture between lines two and three demonstrates a sense of waywardness into liminality. Following this, in "swim[ming] back to Manila," the line abandons the pronoun—Nanay becoming lost as she crosses borders. Valdez forges the impossibility of both arrival and departure, settling into the spaces between, that is, diving into the ocean.

It is here that the poem settles, caught in the whirlpool of diasporic sensibilities, yielding to the ever-shifting, ever-transforming dynamics of migration. Valdez then chants: "*langoy / langoy / langoy ka,*"²⁰ calling us to swim, swim, swim. The italics in the repetition demand survival across the voyage, which thus collapses into the second-person imperative "*ka.*" The pronoun signifier invites the readers into the poetic waves, a call to action to swim with Valdez's swirls, ripples, surges. It expands diasporic movement out of the intimacies of Nanay's narrative and encompasses the broader migrant community. The composition stretches across the page, white space breaching words, to accommodate the buoying of the linguistic and corporeal travel.

¹⁹ Aldrin Valdez, "Tagalog." *ESL, or You Weren't Here*. (Brooklyn: Nightboat Books, 2018), lines 1-3.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 6-8.

As we follow their orders and “*swim with the river*,”²¹ Valdez identifies us through a series of broken, gradual definitions:

Sa ilog.

Taga ilog.

From the river.

Tagalog: People of the River.²²

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

Here lies the crux of Valdez’s poetic project as they reckon with the undulating forces of the in-between spaces. Immediately after defining “Tagalog,” the intersection of locality and vocality arise in the grandmother’s body: “Nanay / emerges from the water, cursing,”²³ as she exclaims: “*PUNETA! / LECHE!* / Tagalog curses feel good on her tongue.”²⁴ Following the abandonment of the grandmother in the earlier line “swim back to Manila,” she finally “emerges from the water” here, once again with her outspoken recalcitrance, “cursing.” Interestingly, though Valdez demarcates them as “Tagalog curses,” the profanities “puñeta” and “leche” are derived from Spanish, referring to “asshole” and “dammit.” Moreover, the curses are written in Spanish rather than their Filipino spelling ‘punyeta’ and ‘letse.’ As the poem slips into Nanay’s voice, her words also shift into Spanish; however, this deviation is only evident when written as the words share the same verbal enunciation. On this note, Valdez pulls at the multiple imperialisms of the Philippines, uniting the streams of English and Spanish as they transform standardized Filipino. Still, the declaration of “Tagalog curses” as “feel[ing] good on her tongue” engages with Kwan Laurel’s claim to multilingualism. Rather than denying her the right to this kind of speech, the poem identifies them as Tagalog, allowing her to utilize what is already hers. Since Tagalog’s

²¹ Ibid, 9.

²² Ibid, 10-13.

²³ Ibid, 14-15.

²⁴ Ibid, 25-27.

etymology crosses borders, these curses empower her to negotiate and navigate through various arenas. In addition, locating her within the water further emphasizes the inherent fluidity and transformative capacities of Pilipinx embodiment. Nanay's charged outburst acts as proof of ownership to her languages, that these voices find home on her tongue.

Other forms of linguistic unfolding also emerge as the poem cascades down the page, focalizing the ebb and flow of multivocality. Inhabiting the border space for hybridity and possibility, Valdez prescribes "an embassy" and a "stuffy plane" as the convergence of "kanos & balikbayans-to-be."²⁵ Of course, the images of "embassy" and "plane" signify certain episodes of the diasporic odyssey, but there are two distinct characters here: those who are "kanos," that is, Americans (derived from *Amerikanos*), and those who are "balikbayans," or repatriates. Valdez points out the routes of potentiality in these migratory junctures. Migrants can 'become' American, assimilate into its culture, or they remain perpetual foreigners, always fated to return home. Still, it is essential to note that Valdez utilizes the Filipino slang for American, a term that demonstrates how the process of acculturation does negate their Pilipinx identity; in fact, it will continue to inflect their evolving particularity. Moreover, "balikbayans" are a complex category of identification. Inherently, they are estranged from the Philippines and are seeking a return to the homeland, but they are not required to have a visa or a return ticket to their country of citizenship. While the word "balikbayan" translates to "return" and "country" and thus presumes departure, the 'balikbayan privilege' offers unremitting access to the Philippines. At the same time, to become a "balikbayan" also means to be eternally Pilipinx. The process of becoming cannot be consigned to the oblivion of what we once were. So, in the arena of exodus, Valdez's language still affirms Pilipinx identity, inextricable from our embodiment and undeterred by movement and governmental status.

Valdez's collision of corporeality, geography, and linguistics erupts at the conclusion of their piece. They centralize Nanay once again, unclanking the markers of identity and belonging indelibly tied to her body. Relocating out of the water and onto land, we find ourselves on the soles of Nanay's feet, as she walks back to the Tondo district of Manila: "the skin on her callused heels is a map of broken streets & / syllables that fall like rain water on newly paved asphalt."²⁶ These lines illuminate the tension between fragmentation and wholeness—the fissures of "callused heels" figured as "broken streets," "syllables" as cracks in the "asphalt." The violence inflicted on Nanay's body mutates into "a map" of brokenness, external structures carving out how the body moves through spaces. Amidst rupture, amidst suffering, we are trying to find home, to be at home in our bodies. Such a dynamic inverts in the following line; rather than space harming the body, language hurts space as it becomes "rainwater" forming cracks, fractures, and damage onto the "newly paved asphalt."

²⁵ *Ibid*, 18.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 30-31.

Valdez acknowledges the transactions between these spheres of existence, unafraid to name violence, unafraid to desire healing.

Concluding with the broken syllables of Tagalog numbers illustrate the historical, linguistic, and bodily ruptures of the Pilipinx diaspora, as Valdez attempts to negotiate borders and define themselves against ocean-like forces. They attend to the multivocality, multicultural, multidimensional dynamics of identity, both individual and collective, within their poetic geography. This first poem, “Tagalog,” surfaces the vexed intersections of migration, placing in parallel the movement of bodies with the movement of water, reflecting on the various ways in which we can make sense of our inherent multiplicities.

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

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