GANDA LAND, GANDA LABOR, AND GANDA'S LOVE: EMPIRE'S MILITARIZED INTIMACY OF TRANS-PINAYS

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Abstract

This paper investigates how the U.S. military-industrial complex in the Philippines sustains racialized and gendered sexual economies of capitalism that disproportionately exploit poor transgender Filipina women (trans-Pinays). It traces the historical foundations of these dynamics from colonial agricultural dispossession and liberal economic restructuring to contemporary security agreements and military basing. Through the lens of militarized intimacy, U.S. imperialism operates not only through territorial domination but through desires that eroticize and exploit the feminized colonial subject. Trans-Pinays, situated at the margins of legality and visibility, become effective laborers within these economies: desired yet disposable, visible yet unprotected. Understanding these systems of domination is essential to exposing how those systems sustain themselves through intimate acts of dehumanization. This article examines the complex interplay of American imperialism, militarized masculinity, and the commodification of trans-Pinays' bodies, using the 2014 murder of Jennifer Laude as a critical site of analysis. Jennifer Laude's murder is not an isolated act of transphobic violence, but rather an imperial crime that renders visible the violence embedded in capitalism.

Introduction

Those who knew her well called her "Ganda" —beautiful.[1]

She was the sister who would wear makeup even when she was just inside the house. She was the breadwinner of her family in Leyte, Philippines. She was the friend known to be confident in both her looks and personality. She was a proud transgender Filipina woman. She was Ganda. She was beautiful. She was Jennifer Laude.

On October 11, 2014, Jennifer Laude was at a disco bar, where she met Joseph Scott Pemberton, an American Marine. After having drinks together, they went to a motel. And, after they had arrived, Pemberton was the only one to leave. Later, the

[1] Katerina Francisco, "Remembering 'Ganda': The Tragedy of Jennifer Laude," *Rappler*, October 15, 2014, https://www.rappler.com/nation/72004-jennifer-laude-transgender-death/.

hotel staff found Laude half-naked in the bathroom, her neck marred with strangulation injuries, and her head leaning inside a toilet bowl. Jennifer Laude was assaulted, drowned, and murdered.[2] In the following days, Pemberton was arrested and invoked the "Trans Panic Defense" argument in court—a legal strategy where the revelation of an individual's transgender identity triggers a "panic" reaction.[3] His justification for violence against this unarmed woman was that he was caught by surprise and angered by Laude revealing that she is transgender. Through the work of activists, Laude's family, friends, and attorneys attempting to administer a sentence that would bring justice for Laude, Pemberton was found guilty. Despite this work, the then-president of the Philippines, Rodrigo Duterte, granted Pemberton an absolute pardon in 2020.[4] Six days after the announcement of the pardon, Pemberton was deported back to the United States, all while being simply discharged without even a court-martial, and allowed back in his country.[5] Jennifer Laude's killer is still alive and pursuing a normal life—all things Pemberton robbed her of on October 11, 2014.

Laude's murder by Pemberton is not just a singular act of violence but the consequence of a long-standing structure of domination. Capitalism, especially racial capitalism, "asserts that racism and colonialism are not epiphenomena of capitalism, but instead materially ground the very logic and practice of capitalist accumulation, dispossession, and exploitation."[6] In the case of the Philippines, it is the colonial domination of land and labor for militaristic purposes that disenfranchises Filipina women. The racialization of the colonial subject by deeming them lesser and pathologizing them is co-constitutive with the material, legal, and political practices of capitalism. Through the legal policies of creating military bases, mandating native land be used for them, and determining that there be an influx of military personnel, military abuse (and the subsequent pardoning and excusal of that abuse by the justice system) are intricately connected with racial capitalistic domination.

The lack of justice for Jennifer Laude is just one of the numerous cases of men in the military abusing Filipina women, particularly trans-Pinays. Following the

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[2] Michelle Abad, "TIMELINE: The Killing of Jennifer Laude and Release of Joseph Scott Pemberton," *Rappler*, October 11, 2022, https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/timeline-jennifer-laude-killing-joseph-scott-pemberton-release/.

[3] Juan Paolo M. Artiaga and Christine Faith M. Tango, "The Transplantation of the Trans 'Panic' Defense in the Philippines as a Consequence of People v. Pemberton," *Ateneo Law Journal* 65, no. 2 (November 2020): 753–830, https://doi.org/https://ssrn.com/abstract=4246007.

[4] Regine Cabato, "Philippines' Duterte Pardons U.S. Marine Convicted of Murdering Transgender Woman," *The Washington Post*, September 7, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/philippines-duterte-pardons-us-marine-convicted-of-murdering-transgender-woman/2020/09/07/db0934ee-f0f2-11ea-8025-5d3489768ac8_story.html.

[5] Jason Gutierrez, "U.S. Marine Pardoned for Killing Transgender Woman Is Deported From Philippines," *The New York Times*, September 13, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/13/world/asia/philippines-us-marine-transgender-woman.html.

[6] Allan E. S. Lumba, *Monetary Authorities: Capitalism and Decolonization in the American Colonial Philippines* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 5.

coverage of Laude's death, journalists and the public alike pointed to the connections between the Laude case and the 2005 Subic rape case, where four American Marines raped a Filipina woman, but were quickly acquitted.[7] Not only did both cases involve Filipina women being confronted by gendered violence from American military members, but they also involved U.S.-Philippine geopolitical relations as the justification for uneven sentencing. This relationship continues to replicate gendered and colonial violence through its capitalistic history.[8] In the same vein, the Laude and Subic incidents are not isolated but are instead indicative of colonial and capitalistic power structures.

In April of 2023, the United States announced that it would have military access to four more locations in the Philippines, increasing the number of troops and bases, and strengthening U.S. military presence in the Pacific[9]—another colonial agreement for continued expansion of the American empire. As "base agreements contribute to empire-building," it becomes critical to understand that "without a more robust vision for consent and conscionability, that asymmetry will continue to perpetuate historical injustices."[10] For Laude, the asymmetries of Duterte's pardon, the U.S.-Philippine military agreements, and the increased presence of military men continue to be injustices that should not be relegated to the past, but understood as an ongoing project of capitalism.

The U.S. not only expands its own imperial control over Filipino land and waters, but also over Filipina women and their love, owning and desiring Filipina women. Today, Filipina activists are acutely aware of Filipina women's "commodification by the [U.S.] military, captains of industry, and [American] men looking for a taste of exotic—and eroticized—subservience."[11] This dynamic is made more prominent and exacerbated for transgender Filipina women (trans-Pinays) through both the lack of protections for transgender people in the Philippines

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[7] Reynaldo Santos, "LOOKING BACK: Daniel Smith and the Subic Rape Case," *Rappler*, December 1, 2015, https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/114585-looking-back-daniel-smith-subic-rape-case/.

[8] Jason Castaneda, "Why Duterte Pardoned a Murderous US Marine," *Asia Times*, September 14, 2020, https://asiatimes.com/2020/09/why-duterte-pardoned-a-murderous-us-marine/.

[9] Chad De Guzman, "U.S. and Philippines Announce New Sites for Military Cooperation: What to Know," *TIME*, April 4, 2023, https://time.com/6268379/philippines-us-military-bases-china/.

[10] Eliza Faye Lafferty, "'Control Without the Costs of Conquest': Reimagining U.S. Military Bases in the Philippines," *Georgetown Journal of International Law* 55, no. 2 (2023): 305–45, https://doi.org/https://www.law.georgetown.edu/international-law-journal/in-print/volume-55/volume-55-number-2-winter-2024/control-without-the-costs-of-conquest-reimagining-u-s-military-bases-in-the-philippines/, 345.

[11] Bronwyn Winter, "Lily Pads and Leisure Meccas: The Gendered Political Economy of Post-Base and Post-9/11 Philippines," essay, in *Gender, Power, and Military Occupations*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2012), 101–24, 119.

and the social stigmas of being transgender; there is a heightened sense of exotic and erotic desire and dehumanization. Laude's murder exemplifies the profound effects of U.S. military presence in the Philippines and the dehumanizing legacy of the American empire, which continues to manifest in the racialized, gendered commodification of Filipino subjects—particularly trans-Pinays. These systems of militarism, commodification, and subsequent gendered violence do not act independently; rather, they function in concert to produce and naturalize particular forms of precarity and disposability. Given the increasingly hostile tensions in the South China Sea and the broader Pacific—the area that makes the Philippines a strategic military stronghold for the U.S.—it becomes imperative to interrogate the impacts of this rising militarism and ask: How has violence against transgender and cisgender Filipina women emerged through capitalism and imperialism in the context of the U.S.-Philippine military bases? By contextualizing Laude's murder within the broader geopolitical and economic structures of the trans-Pacific empire, I argue that Filipina women, especially trans-Pinays, have been rendered as both abject and desirable—produced by a colonial gaze that simultaneously fetishizes and dehumanizes them. In the case of Jennifer Laude, this murder is not an isolated act; rather, it's symptomatic of deeper structural relationships in which cisheteronormativity is a necessary condition of militarism. This colonial gaze is embedded in military policies, economic treaties, and cultural ideologies that trace back over a century, beginning with the American imperial control of the Philippines in the late 19th century.

I. The Beautiful Colony and the Cost of Empire

The United States' relationship with the Philippines is one steeped in paternalism and violence, shaped by a capitalist logic that sees land, labor, and bodies as extractable resources. An extraordinarily long and seemingly subtle history of capitalism is omnipresent in U.S.-Philippine relations. Though cloaked in the language of liberation, U.S. colonization of the Philippines was a project of capitalist expansion. Despite "freeing" the Philippines from its Spanish colonizers in 1898 during the U.S.-Philippine War, the U.S. continued to maintain its control as both a formal and informal colonizer for over a century. In the late-19th and early-20th century of American interference, the U.S. sought out colonies for sugar production, including in the Philippines, as the U.S. "[built] on what little the Spanish had accomplished, [... creating] an important sugar colony."[12] Firstly, there were "policies granting local elites some degree of political autonomy" for them to "protect their newfound economic

[12] James H. Galloway, "The Modernization of Sugar Production in Southeast Asia, 1880–1940," *Geographical Review* 95, no. 1 (January 1, 2005): 1–23, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1931-0846.2005.tb00189.x, 1.

interests."[13] Secondly, it occurred through "economic policies [that opened] Filipino agricultural resources to American investors and [controlled] Filipino access to credit and world markets."[14] Both of these legal and protective policies, from the creation of the Agricultural Bank in 1908 to the implementation of the Philippines Organic Act in 1902, ensured a stratification of labor, where Filipino and American elites worked to build their own wealth at the expense of peasant and working-class native Filipinos. As a result of American capitalism's necessity to maintain the extraction of land and labor for sugar and other agricultural production, newly formed class antagonisms were not only realized but also heightened in these two significant ways. The results of plantation-style capitalism created class stratifications that persist to this day. Women, especially in rural areas, have borne, and continue to bear, the brunt of economic disenfranchisement.

With its "beautiful" colony in the Pacific, the U.S. was open to maritime and oceanic trade routes that were not previously available, allowing for the greater trade of agricultural products and the opening of novel markets.[15] At the same time, the changing economic relations also removed rural farmers' control over the land, allowing the U.S. to codify its paternalism over the archipelago. Dr. Allan E. S. Lumba describes that due to "circuits laid down by the U.S. empire, economic experts [...] determined which people possessed the racial capacity to soundly make decisions over large-scale capital, and which people did not."[16]

The early decades of American rule were marked by the integration of Filipino agricultural production into globalized, capitalist markets. Sugar, hemp, coconut, and more became key exports, controlled through colonial economic policies applied in the Philippines, such as the American Homestead Laws, that dispossessed rural populations of land and turned fertile jungles into cash crop plantations.[17] American

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[13] Marco Antonio Guzman, dissertation, *Imposing Capitalism: Japanese and American Colonialism in Taiwan, the Philippines, and Cuba, 1890s–1920s* (2015), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5225g2bs, 84.

[14] Guzman, *Imposing Capitalism: Japanese and American Colonialism in Taiwan,* 84.

[15] In "An Imaginary* Interview with a Philippines Collections Museum Donor," the author imagines a conversation with a museum donor who refers to the Philippines as the "Beautiful, beautiful country of ours." This sentiment reflects both past and present tourism and paternalism that is mirrored in colonial writings such as Rudyard Kipling's "The White Man's Burden." Camille Ungco, "An Imaginary* Interview with a Philippines Collections Museum Donor," *Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement* 17, no. 1 (November 22, 2022), https://doi.org/10.7771/2153-8999.1256.

[16] Lumba, *Monetary Authorities: Capitalism and Decolonization in the American Colonial Philippines*, 5-6.

[17] David Max Findley et al., "Colonial Policy, Ecological Transformations, and Agricultural 'Improvement': Comparing Agricultural Yields and Expansion in the Spanish and U.S. Philippines, 1870–1925 CE," *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 11, no. 1 (June 27, 2024), https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-03310-z. Sabiha Iman Mohyuddin, "Female Migrant Labor in the Philippines: The Institutionalization of Traditional Gender Roles in the Name of Economic Development," *Pursuit: The Journal of Undergraduate Research at the University of Tennessee* 8, no. 1 (2017): 93–102, https://doi.org/10.7290/pur8sklw.

investors gained control over industries and infrastructure, while Filipino elites—often educated in U.S. institutions—were groomed to serve as intermediaries between imperial power and native labor.[18] Concurrently, the removal of native control over land subordinated rural farmers to a peasant and working-class subject position that pushed families and women into the outskirts of the market.

The cost of these imperial policies, which disenfranchised working-class Filipino populations, was the drastic increase in poor and peasant women being present in military base areas. Best exemplifying this is the migration of Filipina women to Manila for work as economic and sexual laborers, as "non-elite indigenous women had labor obligations that entailed long-term separation" from family and native communities.[19] Not only are Filipinos from poor, rural areas simply more prevalent as a result of uneven agricultural, land, and labor development, but rural Filipinos also face higher risks of prostitution or, at the very least, face increased risks of gendered exploitation. This is because, as Jean Enriquez, a member of the coordinating board of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women—Asia Pacific (CATW-AP), describes, the phenomenon of rural women being sexually exploited is due to factors in which "they have lost their land, there's not enough source of income, so clearly [soldiers exploit] also the poverty of the rural women."[20] As land was consolidated under elite control, rural women were pushed outside the formal, calculable economy, whether through domestic work, sex work, or migration to seemingly more economically opportune places.

Throughout its history, the globalization of labor and markets forced the Philippines into a never-ending imperial rule, through both the direct and indirect colonial control of Spain and the U.S. Despite the Philippines' internationally-recognized "independence," the nation still remains under U.S. imperial subjugation. It is because the latter—in order to maintain its title as a capitalist hegemon—*must* militarize its trans-Pacific trade routes in order to expand its influence and access to markets. And therefore, justifying its control through protectionism of a "weak," "small," and "beautiful" country.

II. Militarized Intimacy: Bases, Bodies, and Borders

By the mid-20th century, the Philippines had been transformed into a key U.S. military outpost in the Pacific. The Philippines presently hosts "one of the most significant and vast US military complexes in the world" with around 13,000 military

[18] Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

[19] Mohyuddin, "Female Migrant Labor in the Philippines: The Institutionalization of Traditional Gender Roles in the Name of Economic Development," 93-102.

[20] Tica Moreno, "From 'Comfort Women' to Prostitution in Military Bases," Capire, July 18, 2023, https://capiremov.org/en/interview/from-comfort-women-to-prostitution-in-military-bases/.

personnel from the U.S. alone.[21] Even after formal base closure and supposed military withdrawal from the Philippines during the 1990s, various policies such as the 1999 Visiting Forces Agreement, the 2002 Mutual Logistics and Support Agreement, and the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement, allowed for ongoing military presence so that the U.S. might use the Philippine islands as "lily-pads" across the Pacific.[22] These policies then become the asterisks to notions of sovereignty in order to maintain military control—inherent parts of capitalism's colonial control. These agreements indeed facilitated continued U.S. military presence, and they also reflect the Philippines' strategic interests in combating Chinese coercion in the South China Sea: Following the 1992 base closures, Manila sought renewed cooperation to offset its limited defense capacity and respond to growing security concerns, particularly in the South China Sea and in domestic counterterrorism. Furthermore, the Visiting Forces Agreement (1999), Mutual Logistics and Support Agreement (2002), and Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (2014) served not only the U.S. interests but also provided the Philippines with military training, logistical support, and security assurances. Despite this, they still illustrate a form of asymmetry, yet they are mutually beneficial to both parties' interdependence rather than serving as unilateral control by the U.S. The Philippines does not always act in the interests of the Americans: Duterte, for instance, sought to abandon bilateral agreements with the U.S. and instead align (bandwagon) more to China at the first half of his presidency for economic reasons, thus showing that Philippines' foreign policy is not determined by U.S.' interests. The U.S.-Philippines agreements may not purely serve American interests, but the Philippines also had strategic reasons for entering them. In these instances, however, there is still an enduring asymmetry in the relationship that ultimately enables the exploitation of trans-Pinays by American military personnel.

As a result of these exceptional policies, Clark Air Base and Subic Naval Base have become some of the largest U.S. military installations outside of the continental United States. These bases do not only serve geopolitical aims; they also generate extensive local economies built around servicing American troops. The increased military basing and the protections for military personnel meant that more soldiers could abuse and exploit prostitution and sex work.

Through these agricultural and military policies, it is clear that the U.S. already felt entitled to Philippine land and labor; now, its policies allow it to feel entitled to Filipina women and their bodies. The economy surrounding U.S. military bases gave rise to a semi-formalized system of sex work, euphemistically called the "Rest and

[21] Jodi Kim, *Settler Garrison: Debt Imperialism, Militarism, and Transpacific Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 30.

[22] Kim, *Settler Garrison: Debt Imperialism, Militarism, and Transpacific Imaginaries*, 74.

Recreation" industry.[23] Women were economically coerced into sex work, both through poverty and systemic disenfranchisement. Transgender women, in particular, finding themselves excluded from mainstream labor markets, were funneled into sex work by transphobia and the lack of legal protections it engendered (i.e., the lack of employment protections, transgender affirming healthcare, legal recognition of their chosen name on official documents, and more).[24]

It is not only the absence of protections, but also transphobic legal conceptions that disenfranchise Filipina women. Best exemplifying this is Pemberton's use of the Trans Panic Defense in the case of Laude. As Christine Faith M. Tango and Juan Paolo M. Artiaga explain, Pemberton's high-profile use of the defense in the Philippines "would make the country an appropriate location for the cultivation of the defense and the continuation of its legacy, having literally been brought upon Philippine soil by an American."[25] The intentional utilization of these types of defenses exploits a legal system that already fails to recognize transgender women as women.

The usage of LGBTQ+ panic defenses in the U.S. is rooted in the notion that being queer is a mental disorder—a blatant display of homophobia and transphobia deemed acceptable in the American legal system, and is now entertained in the Philippines.

This transplantation of the defense is indicative of the latent military ties of the U.S. empire and its stronghold on Filipino legal, social, and economic systems. These systems reinforce unending cycles of poverty and exploitation. Furthermore, poverty is not just a backdrop; it is part of the mechanism of capitalism that makes rural and working-class women vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

III. Trans-Pinays and Exotic/Erotic Labor

Despite the U.S. historically painting Filipinos as "uncivilized" and "savages" through past and present colonial and capitalist propaganda (for instance, Charles L. Bartholomew's political cartoons that include racist, paternalistic depictions of the Philippines), Filipina women's abjection became simultaneously disgusting *and*

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[23] Sachiyo Yamato, "Prostitution and Feminisms: Integrating the Subjective Accounts of Power for Women in the Philippine Sex Industry" (dissertation, 2000), https://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/s4/f2/dsk2/ftp01/MQ60693.pdf.

[24] The Human Rights Situation of Transgender People in the Philippines Submission of the Society of Transsexual Women of the Philippines (STRAP) to the 13th Session of the United Nations Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review, accessed June 15, 2025, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/session13/PH/STRAP_UPR_PHL_S13_2012_SocietyofTranssexualWomenofthePhilippines_E.pdf.

[25] Artiaga and Tango, "The Transplantation of the Trans 'Panic' Defense in the Philippines as a Consequence of People v. Pemberton," 753–830.

desirable.[26] They became a perverse pleasure, an exotic commodity to consume. U.S. troops stationed abroad engage with local populations through gendered and racialized economies of desire, wherein Filipina women are constructed as both hyper-feminine and sexually available—a dynamic exacerbated for trans-Pinays, whose bodies are viewed through a lens of both fascination and revulsion. The Trans Panic Defense exemplifies this: there is a fascination with romancing the colonial subject; yet, when tension is created by the revelation of transness, violent revulsion is unjustly accepted as a common reaction. In the context of Jennifer Laude's case, Pemberton was in the Philippines as a result of joint military operations. He sought out Laude for her beauty, but was appalled by her transness. Transgender women's hypervisibility in global and local sex economies contrasts sharply with their invisibility in terms of legal and social protections. Trans-Pinays face heightened discrimination in employment, housing, and healthcare, driving many toward sex work, overseas employment, or performance industries.

The colonization of the Philippines did not merely seek territorial control; it was also a project of desire. Missionary, anthropological, and travel texts illustrated feminized depictions of the archipelago and its people, often portraying Filipinas as sexually available, emotionally malleable, and naturally subordinate.[27] These texts did not merely reflect colonial ideology; they epistemologically produced and circulated it, making the subjugation of the Philippines intelligible through metaphors of tutelage and intimacy. This economy persists in the global circulation of Filipina women's bodies, whether this figure is reproduced as a domestic worker, mail-order bride, care laborer, or sex worker. In each instance, the colonial image is sustained: the Filipina as a commodity, a subject to whom the Global North feels entitled to intimacy.

Trans-Pinays are simultaneously inserted into and excluded from this image. Their gender legibility—whether or not they are "passing"—becomes a matter not just of social acceptance but of physical survival. The politics of visibility and legibility here are deadly: the more visible the trans-Pinay is as a site of non-normativity, the more likely she is to be targeted. And yet, trans-Pinays remain indispensable to the very economies that marginalize them. They perform emotional, sexual, and aesthetic labor, even as that labor is disavowed, criminalized, or erased.

Furthermore, Pemberton's use of the Trans Panic Defense in the murder of Jennifer Laude is not merely a legal strategy that disenfranchises trans-Pinays, but a chilling articulation of what Eric Stanley theorizes as *overkill*—a mode of violence that

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[26] Susan A. Brewer, "Selling Empire: American Propaganda and War in the Philippines," *Asia-Pacific Journal* 11, no. 40 (October 2013), https://doi.org/10.1017/s155746601303489x.

[27] John Lee Candelaria, "'Dainty Hands Do Useful Work': Depicting Filipino Women in Japanese Wartime Propaganda," *Plaridel Journal of Communication, Media, and Society* 18, no. 1 (June 2021): 111–45, https://doi.org/10.52518/2021.18.1-06cndlra. Roland Sintos Coloma, "White Gazes, Brown Breasts: Imperial Feminism and Disciplining Desires and Bodies in Colonial Encounters," *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education* 48, no. 2 (April 2012): 243–61, https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230.2010.547511.

exceeds the act of murder to annihilate the subject symbolically, socially, and ontologically. In strangling Laude and subsequently drowning her, Pemberton demonstrates a commitment not only to ending her life, but to erasing her being—an act that is both materially brutal and semiotically saturated. Stanley notes that overkill "names the technologies necessary for, and the epistemic commitment to, doing away with that which is already gone," signaling how transgender bodies, particularly those racialized as trans-Pinay or Filipina, are forced to exist in a paradox of hypervisibility and disposability.[28] This violence cannot be abstracted from the conditions that produced it: the ongoing entanglements of American imperialism, militarism, and capitalist commodification of gendered subjects. Pemberton's very presence in the Philippines was the result of the Visiting Forces Agreement—a bilateral security pact steeped in the logic of colonial dominance and economic asymmetry. His encounter with Laude was not incidental but structured by these imperial arrangements: a white U.S. Marine stationed in a post-colony seeking pleasure from a feminized, racialized subject whose economic precarity was in part shaped by that same imperial order.

Within this imperial schema, the trans-Pinay becomes a figure of both desire and revulsion, a "perverse pleasure," as colonial capitalism constructs her simultaneously as object and threat. The Trans Panic Defense, then, is not just a juridical maneuver but a narrative of whiteness and imperialism reasserting its dominance through the erasure of the "unthinkable" transgender Other. This defense finding traction in the Philippine court system—under the shadow of American military influence—further underscores colonial residues in Filipino legal infrastructures, where U.S. servicemen have long enjoyed impunity. Overkill, in this context, is not only corporeal excess but a political and ontological one: it is the empire's necropolitical logic made manifest. As a result of that necropolitical order, the trans-Pinay must be doubly killed: firstly as a subject who defies the colonial-imperial ordering of gender and race, and secondly as an economic and sexual object whose commodification can only be sustained through her dehumanization. Pemberton's violence, therefore, is emblematic of a broader imperial economy that thrives on the production of abjection, the circulation of racialized sexual labor, and the elimination of those who exist at the juncture of these exploitative systems.

The intertwining of the U.S. military-industrial complex and the global sex economy is not a peripheral phenomenon—it is foundational to the operation of the American empire through concepts such as the Rest and Recreation industry. Nowhere is this clearer than in the Philippines, where the apparatus of militarism is saturated with the gendered logics of desire. The so-called Rest and Recreation industry around U.S. military bases is not simply a site of leisure; it is a node of imperial extraction, where local populations are rendered disposable in both economic and affective registers. Filipina women, in exchange for their labor, would receive passage

[28] Eric A. Stanley, *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2024), 33.

entry to the United States, or alternatively, for their love, marry an American man as a pathway to obtaining citizenship status. In these scenarios, military men would engage in predatory practices, directly contributing to the exploitative and informal economy of sex workers and women. These women circulate literal money as laborers and contribute to the sexual economy as prostitutes, as their love becomes eroticized and commodified. These dynamics intensify in military contexts, where cis-heteronormative environments fetishize the exotic while policing gender deviance. Pemberton's actions toward Laude are emblematic: he sought pleasure, but responded with violence when his own masculinity was seemingly threatened.

In this context, relationships between Filipina women and U.S. military men—whether transactional or genuinely romantic—are deeply shaped by imperial asymmetry. Access to U.S. citizenship, even the mere fantasy of it, becomes an effective economic lure. Trans-Pinays often find themselves caught within what Neferti Tadiar terms the "remaindered life," where survival depends on circulating in spaces that are simultaneously discarded or devalued by neoliberal capitalism and formal state economies, but also serve as political horizons of care.[29] Here, love itself becomes labor, and desire becomes infrastructure. Women's erotic labor fuels imperial presence, and American servicemen extract not just physical pleasure but emotional submission, fantasies of control, and gendered domination from Filipina women. Pemberton's encounter with Laude thus cannot be reduced to a singular act of transphobic violence; it must be understood as a metaphor for a longer history of imperial sexual economies in which the feminized postcolonial subject is always already positioned as violable.

Laude's murder exemplifies the violent contradictions at the heart of this sexual-political economy. Pemberton, as the embodiment of imperial masculinity, seeks pleasure from the colonized transgender Other. Yet, his desire is structured by revulsion and fragility. The moment Laude's gender non-normativity disrupts the fantasy of heteronormative consumption, Pemberton reacts with lethal force. His violence is not merely personal—it is the structural expression of queer subjects' inclusion within the metropole's tolerance, which depends on the expulsion or erasure of others in the periphery. In this sense, Laude's death is not just a hate crime, but an imperial crime: a moment in which the converging forces of militarism, racial capitalism, and transphobia erupt in brutal clarity.

This imperial crime cannot be disentangled from the longer colonial genealogy of gendered and racialized domination, for capitalism constructs these contradictions with ruthless efficiency. As Tadiar has observed, love is no longer a reprieve from labor, but another modality through which labor is extracted.[30] Jennifer Laude existed at the intersection of these violent systems: both as worker and lover, both Filipina and transgender, both desired and despised. Her murder by Pemberton is not an

[29] Neferti X. M. Tadiar, *Remaindered Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).

[30] Tadiar, *Remaindered Life*.

aberration; it is the logical outcome of a system that renders trans-Pinays both hypervisible in the circuits of imperial pleasure and invisible in the domains of legal protection, citizenship, and personhood. What remains after her death is not just grief, but the enduring silence of a world that consumes difference while punishing those who embody it. Her death, like many others, marks the horizon of capitalist militarism—a regime that no longer requires life to sustain itself, only the ongoing circulation of subjects rendered killable.

Capitalism thrives on these intimate inequalities. In turning love into labor, the global economy extracts value not only from what bodies produce, but also from how they are desired. Jennifer Laude's death crystallizes how capitalist militarism consumes such contradictions, leaving behind only silence.

Conclusion

In the wake of Jennifer Laude's death, activists mobilized not only for justice but for memory. Organizations such as GABRIELA and other LGBTQ+ coalitions across the Philippines protested Pemberton's release and demanded structural reforms to the Visiting Forces Agreement and Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement. They called not only for the prosecution of one man but for the dismantling of the imperial infrastructure that made her murder possible. Activists have also turned to art, performance, and storytelling to preserve Laude's memory and critique the systems that failed her. Plays, documentaries, and murals across the Philippines and throughout the diaspora carry her image, reminding Filipinos that the violence of the empire is not only historical—it is ongoing.

The death of Jennifer Laude is not an anomaly; rather, it is a symptom. Her story reveals how the intersections of capitalism, militarism, and imperial desire converge upon the most vulnerable, rendering their lives disposable. It challenges us to rethink sovereignty, not only as a matter of national borders, but of bodily autonomy, gender self-determination, and economic justice. Throughout over a century of colonization, the power relations imposed by capitalism have shaped the material conditions of Filipino property to be one of imperial garrisons and laying waste to once-beautiful land. As a result of the militarization of Asia and the Pacific, Filipino labor is being removed to rural areas and concentrating capital. Filipinos fall susceptible to exploitation where the colonial and capitalistic desires of artificially imported military men consume the love of women, trans-Pinays, and Jennifer Laude—Ganda.

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