



Abstract

“The houses are flying” is an exercise in what Trinh T. Minh-Ha calls “speaking nearby.” Minh-Ha is referring to an indirect use of language that addresses subjects without objectifying them. She is referring to a “speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without ... seizing or claiming it.”¹

This essay is an exploration of an ethic that is deep, ancestral, and embodied. In language legible to academia, it prioritizes opacity (after Édouard Glissant),² refusal (after Audra Simpson),³ and incommensurability (after Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang).⁴ These resurgent praxes hinge around uses of language that are in service of the refusal of colonial avenues of recognition.

I have visited the Philippines three times: once at fourteen with my mother and twice on my own since becoming an adult and being financially stable enough to. I am now estranged from my mother, and she is estranged from hers. Colonial dislocations and violences have fractured what Audre Lorde calls the “elegantly strong triad of grandmother, mother, daughter ... with the ‘I’ moving back and forth flowing in both directions as needed.”⁵ I feel the presence of this ancestral I between my ribs, but it is often intangible because of the stories, experiences, and proximity to kin and land that I lack. This essay is an attempt to write into that place.

Further, this essay is an endeavor to connect to lineages of work that have made my writing possible. I’m working in the tradition of Audre Lorde’s biomythography *Zami*, Akwaeke Emezi’s *Freshwater*, Shireen Seno’s *Big Boy*, and Kidlat Tahimik’s *Mababangong Bangungot*, to name a few—all works by Black and Brown artists who have constructed their own histories and lifeworlds from the few fragments available to them, blurring colonial distinctions of fiction and nonfiction in acts of ecstatic creation: Lorde’s narrative elaboration from her mother’s mention of the place Carriacou, a place that Lorde was unable to locate on the map for many years. Emezi’s steadfast grounding in their ontology and refusal of colonial pathologies. Seno’s attempt to recreate her father’s childhood based on stories he shared when she was growing up. Tatay Kidlat’s magic realist imagining of his life. In my work, I am attempting something similar by assembling a world out of what I can find.

Professor Sneja Gunew has written of the role of the writer in diaspora as “the inventor of community where community is conceived not in the sense of the nostalgic return to the past and a lost place but as the impulse forward, the potential carried by the seeding of diaspora hybridity.”⁶ Further, she calls such works endeavors to create ways of belonging that have not yet been established. It’s the highest aim of this piece (and this vein of work, larger than this essay) to at least denaturalize or, at most, rupture nationalism and its restrictive modes of belonging.

Keywords

diaspora, refusal, opacity

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- 1 Nancy N. Chen, “Speaking Nearby,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 8, no. 1 (March 1992): 87.
 - 2 Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 189.
 - 3 Audra Simpson, “The Ruse of Consent and Anatomy of ‘Refusal’: Cases from Indigenous North America and Australia,” *Postcolonial Studies* 20, no. 1 (June 2017): 19.
 - 4 Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (June 2012): 28.
 - 5 Audre Lorde, *Zami* (London: Persephone Press 1982), 7.
 - 6 Sneja Gunew, “Gendered Reading Tactics: Public Intellectuals and Community in Diaspora,” *Resources for Feminist Research* 1, no. 1 (January 2001): 57.





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The houses are flying

Romy Pacquing McCoy

MY FIRST TIME back and there's a "welcome home" cake covered in thick buttercream frosting.

I see Lola in the morning, in Lolo's silver wheelchair, facing the kitchen in the front room. Her hands are sandwiched between a small red pillow and a large plush white one with blue flowers. Her head rests on top, just the left side of her face visible. I touch her lightly, and she doesn't stir. I don't know if she's hurting or deep in sleep. The gray-blue cotton blouse she's wearing is too big for her now, tenting at the shoulders. When I saw her ten months ago, she was soft, plump, and saggy, like an overripe peach. Now, her legs are in knee-high compression socks and thinner than mine. I get onto the floor, squatting, and hold her arm gently, and her eyes blink open.

I've got no pattern as of yet. I greet Lola in the morning. Two out of three days, she takes me into a wonderful, intense conversation that I'm too afraid to leave in case it doesn't happen like that again. Two out of three days, I take *tabo* showers with cool water in a grimy, sage-tiled bathroom with a rusty, long-unused showerhead that looks as though it'd be violent when turned on. One out of two days (today), a nimble, gray mouse scurries into the bathroom, squeaks (likely seeing me, a colossal brown monster), and bolts straight back out of the crack in the doorframe.

My reflection slips away from me. I don't care for mirrors, nor cameras. For the past year or so, in Australia, I looked at my body frequently. Here, I





feel I have no body at all. When I do, it's a nuisance. For a while, I felt I had control, noticed when I wanted to be and not noticed when I didn't want to be. Regardless, I garner attention.

On the Angkas, my driver tells me I'm maganda and drives a different route to the one I know, until I correct him and mention my friends are expecting me.

I don't remember too much of my first visit. My Lola had expected Ma and I to visit every year, but we only went once. I was fourteen at the time and affronted by the fact that I was urged to wear long pants and long sleeves despite the humidity. My cousin C reminded me that I'd spent a good amount of time just searching for high heels and other cheap ways to act like a girl. I imagine myself, shrunken, singing karaoke at our mango farm with a weak voice.

You're meant to be a good singer, C had chastised me.
I am sometimes, I replied.
My eyebrows were sparse from overplucking then.

I used to think I'd be a model, like one of those Fil-Aus mestiza beauties, like Anne Curtis. People stared at me in Manila. My presence had gravity. We'll get you scouted, Mom had said. I've got an aunt and she'll look after you.

This is my big break, I thought. All my life and all these white kids hanging shit on me and I'm finally gonna have one over them.

Anne Curtis would stand in front of a crowd and do anything, and people would cheer and clap for her. I saw a video of her in a deep red gown, singing "I Will Always Love You," after returning from my first visit. Blue lights whirl around her, and a pair of cishets dressed in white perform contemporary dance in the background. She lets out a strangled run, and the audience whoops. The camera pans to them, and they're





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chuckling as they clap for her, but it's not a nasty chuckle. They're all in on it.

She's never claimed to be good; she just loves it, and they love that she loves it. She smiles big and wide and swiftly extends her arms at the end, punctuating the performance. Some audience members smile back, dazed, then start clapping as though they've suddenly remembered they're supposed to.

I am still in awe of Anne Curtis. The potential to be loved so much that whole bands will back you, whole stadiums will fill to support you. But now, I also think, so many mestizas are famous for just being mestizas.

I spend days entering and re-entering an ukay-ukay, where I eye Pinoy Playboy issues and their spreads of pale, naked flesh. I take my cousin one day and she looks over the covers, saying repeatedly, she doesn't look full-Filipina.

They're selling boxes of old family photos, too, and I buy them in bulk. So many are akin to the ones I've seen of Ma. Except I have none of her.

My Lola cuts out an image Ma has mailed to her, a selfie I took at twelve years old on my first iPhone, and pastes it over a picture of me as a newborn nestled in my parent's arms. My collage family. The need to forge a connection after Mom stopped calling. It's the closest thing she has to an image of me now. It sits alongside grad photos of my cousins and pictures of her OFW children.

Two women on the stairs ready to board an airplane. Dressed neatly with similar hairstyles and similar smiles. They look alight with excitement, though there's something strained in their expressions. I do not want to talk about it. I know how it turns out.





In moments with Lola, bombastic, oversaturated reality TV a backdrop to her quiet, I see Ma's narrative unfurling before me, can situate myself in the world. My mother in the cement block outhouse, tabo-showering, escaping a house brimming with people. Can smell the mainit air of silog, candy red hotdogs and Spam that both repulse and make me insatiable, feel the slap of tsinelas and swollen blush mosquito bites spotting my legs.

First visit without Ma and it's been confronting in an unexpected way. My Lola cried to me the moment I arrived and asked me why my mother was so cruel as to never call, even after the death of Lolo, as if I had an answer. This morning, she asked again, and I told her the truth, and she cried and held me and apologized, said she didn't know anything was wrong because Mom had sent her beautiful pictures of me and that she wanted to offer me all the love I never had.

She offered for me to stay in the Philippines for university, and though I was grateful, I couldn't bring myself to eat out of anyone's hand. She held me against her breast, and I settled for awkwardly kneeling on the ground with my head on her heart, because when standing, she was too small, her seated on a plastic stool draped in a paisley nightgown. It was comforting to be with her like that, after so long. I've missed you my whole life, I said.

On my first and only visit with Ma, we took the sea journey to Magdiwang. When we were there, she decided to throw an eighteenth birthday party for my cousin C, except C didn't want one and I kept trying to tell her so, but she kept planning it bigger and bigger, inviting all my relatives on the island and neighboring islands, ordering shipments of spaghetti and passata and American cheese.

She got into a fight with my tito over the choice of my cousin's birthday cake. You could hear their voices down the street. He's the only person who meets Ma in volume and force.

Afterward, Ma told me we were leaving the farm to stay in a hotel, but I didn't wanna go. I skirted the fence and, with C's help, climbed atop a hut that housed our baby goats, and hid as best I could. I don't remember





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how they found me or got me down, but they promised I'd see my cousins the next day and we were only going away to sleep. C was crying uncontrollably, and I didn't know why.

When I realized, I tried to jump from the jeepney.

Ma tricked me.

Wanted to jump from the creaky ship and swim back to shore.

Find my way back.

Rehearsing how to get back to the farm in my head.

It's a vignette, a microcosm, for me wanting to go home when I can't.

Thinking I'll plummet for it.

Thinking I'll swim miles for it.

I stayed in bed for the remaining week of our visit. I was catatonic with rage and despair. I didn't talk to Ma, and I spent all my time on my phone flirting with boys back home. Lola was kind. My cousins were, too.

I remember this when Lola says in passing, your mom threw your clothes all over the floor, and your cousins were the ones picking them up.

My Lola lived on an active volcano, Mount Kanlaon, hiding during the Japanese Occupation with the mayor and several other families from Bacolod City. She had heard a rumble, thinking the volcano was going to erupt, until she saw a jet plane with "Australia" across its underbelly. The plane dropped boxes of canned Vienna sausage, Spam, and Spanish sardines that'd last them half a year.

Where the condensed milk can sliced through my right hand as I swiped for its last drops. My bloody finger, a sweet strikethrough. It's evidence of my time spent home. At school, I tell everyone that it's my favorite scar.





Before I left, Sampaguita said to me, you could stay and live here and be masaya. Or you can go back.

I've carried that everywhere.

I returned to Canberra after that first trip, with the streets so clean. They were so wide and the grass neatly trimmed at the roundabouts, and I thought, I'm so lucky to live here with these clean, clean streets.

After a fight and a hot shower, my hair falling out in clumps.

During a typhoon when Ma was small, Lola supposedly said to her, the houses are flying. I do not know if the statement was scaffolded by the privilege of a structurally sound home and if she was afraid, coaxing my mother into believing they were the main characters and they would be okay.

Flight and breath are recurring motifs in Kidlat Tahimik's autofictional film *Mababangong Bangungot*. When the Americans attempt to further their infrastructure projects in Kidlat's barangay, the winds of the nearby Amok Mountain prevent their completion.

While Kidlat's father fights for independence with so-called American allies, the United States is purchasing the Philippines for USD 20 million. After the war, he attempts to enter Manila and is met with military guards who inform him the city is now US territory. He takes a deep, deep inhale and blows with everything he can muster. The Amok winds are vested in his lungs. The military guards are knocked down like dominos. He makes it a little of the way in before one pulls out a rifle and shoots him dead.





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Today, Lola asked if I was still studying. I realized she'd forgotten what had happened. In that moment, it dawned on me that I'd already lost what I hoped for in coming. More long conversations. The opportunity to know each other. February was a mercy. Being held by her was a mercy. On my knees, squatting. I don't remember now.

This is an expectation I haven't yet articulated. Now that loss feels imminent, I want to hear her stories, get her recipes. I want to save her in an iPhone note. When we sit in silence, I'm driven to record it. This is for me and not for her. I will never understand what it's like to ferry her to and from hospital, to be raised by her.

When I ask her which vegetables to put in lumpia, she tells me, whichever vegetables you want. It reduces me to tears.

It was so sudden.

I thought I had dengue fever.

I thought someone had hexed me.

I lost my ability to speak.

That real panic: that I cannot put the badness I feel into words.

Then what happened?

As I managed to talk I started to cry.

Wanting to close my eyes and open them and be in my room. It's the first time I had one to go back to.

There's an anchor, which means I'm dislocated. This knocks the air out of me.

I'm writing in the dark after my first attack since my last visit. Not sure if it's still going on. I read to calm down. Got lost in the digital for a while, which numbed me, eased the pain enough that I could pick myself up, walk barefoot, wait patiently for the cockroaches to pass to get to the basin. Retrieve the refrigerated filter water I bought in bulk. The suffering belongs. It is better than being hell-bent on fulfilling my expectations of





myself, how to be better for my Lola, how to expect less from someone who's dying.

Don't call her dying.

My microfiber towel is a ghost illuminated in the neighbor's outdoor light.

Tabi tabi po, I say, as we're traversing the forest. Tabi tabi po, and I say it a lot. It's like, please allow me to pass through this space, I mean no harm. Everywhere is thick with trees and spirits. We reach the Nailog River, and I hurl a rock into it. Careful, C says. If you throw a rock and hit one it'll hex you. You'll need to go to the witch doctor to recover.

Careful, Ma says, there are many criminals.

Careful, the sun will turn you brown and wrinkled.

Careful, you stay with your cousins.

I knew a guy, she says, his arm was sticking out the jeepney window. A pair of criminals who wanted his rings sliced his fingers clean off.

This is what I'm doing this time, C says. I'm letting you do what you asked for. I'm letting you go around on your own, how you like when you travel. You can meet the locals.

Solo travel sometimes results in me paying for my safe spaces, interactions with a new place purely at the level of capital, taking refuge in art galleries and well-rated restaurants. My interactions with what feels human starts there. With elite-funded history and food. It's sometimes enough to fill me up, just enough that I won't attempt to talk to anyone, pride myself on not needing company, marching around as though it's my sole purpose to walk alone.

And sometimes, like now, I'm sick with it. My body refrigerated and pristine in Pinto Art. This has long been getting old.





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I get into an ambiguous situation when my Grab driver doesn't unlock the car to let me out after we arrive at our destination.

My heart beats so fast I want to throw up. I call T and tell her, I'm here in Cubao, I'm in the car, and he won't let me out. He smiles and watches my fear with curiosity. Once he realizes I have family, he decides to let me go.

I tell C about sensations I have when I walk in different places. You know, Lola and your mom are the same, she says. Open third eyes. Maybe you've got it, too.

I ask Lola about this. She recounts a vision she had many years back, anticipating a tricycle accident. That day, she had avoided leaving the house and warned our family about it. The accident was bad, a man was killed when he hit his head on the pavement. She has always seen spirits, but closes her eyes when it happens now. I don't want to know these weird things, she says.

With this knowledge, I think of how Ma navigates the world. I think of her standing at the bus stop, muttering to herself within earshot of the crowd.

I'm sitting in our front room, and I see a white lady pass through our kitchen. She's a spirit of Manila, and I'm glad to finally encounter her. The stories about her vary, but the one I've heard is that she's a young woman raped by her taxi driver.

I used to be afraid of being haunted. All I knew were American horror films and their virtuous, brave heroes prepared to do whatever it took to eradicate the haunters who unjustly pursued them. Righting the wrongs, slaying the monsters, all as a means of containment.

For several years, I was haunted by a dead woman's name. Ma used to watch sex crime shows late into the night and force me to watch them too.





I tried so hard to forget it. A violence I didn't want to have absorbed. I thought maybe I should write it everywhere. Set it on fire.

A few years ago, when her name drifted back, I thought, why forget it? To commit something to memory, a form of justice. Dissemination, another form of justice. Give the haunting attention. Ask it for mercy.

Lola says, I want to finish Lolo's biography before I go. I go.... (She trails off for a minute, then laughs.) You know where I go.

I write these biographies so the next generations know they have not been dropped from heaven.

I thought I was dropped from heaven before I spoke to you, I say.

But now you realize you cannot be dropped from heaven.

My Lola gives me the albums of my mother, says she doesn't want them anymore. Later, she decides to keep a single album from when my mother was very small. She laughs as she switches between calling Ma monster and mother, noting the few letter difference.

I don't know what purpose I have in taking my mother's photo albums home. It will not revive the person I never knew. I will carry them in proximity to me. Keep them in my undie drawer, post them on my story.

I've only modified the prayer Mom taught me with endless reallys. I never even understood what some parts of it meant, still don't now.

Papa Jesus, Mama Mary, please bless me and my family, I recite in my head as I lay in the dark. Please keep me and my family always safe, really really really really safe, healthy, really really really really healthy, and happy, really really really really really happy.

I was so afraid the things I loved would be taken away. I had frequent nightmares about my parents dying in freak accidents. I prayed as an incantation to secure my attachments. I prayed for people to live. I prayed for them to fall in love. I didn't pray for them like I do now. I do not attempt to sway a life's course. I pray for Lola's treatment to be working





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as it should. I pray that she maintains her ability to write. I try to think of her desires and not mine.

I pray, and I am not really talking to anyone up there. I am just thinking. I am communing with the part of myself that loves.

In *Land to Light On*, the poet Dionne Brand writes the land but simultaneously gives up on land. Brand wants “no fucking country, here or there and all the way back, I don’t like it, none of it, easy as that.”

I understand my Lola when she holds up photos to me to say, these are the proof. I have a daughter, and she was happy. I wished for the love between my parents so hard with my 130-centimeter tall self, my hands joining theirs as we walked around the pond. First willing them to touch mentally, before I initiated it. I needed this from them so much it embarrassed them. You two are meant to be in love, I thought to myself. You two are my only family in this whole, big country.

Going on walks was what I thought would save us back then. My mother in the sun. My mother moving her limbs through the world. Walking as the antidote to shame.

We’re sitting on the porch the morning after Typhoon Phanfone rips through Baler.

You see them on the TV waving at the cameras during the floods, as they’re being carried downstream by the current, M says.

We were colonized for 500 years, ha?

It’s like, after colonization—

it’s like, when disaster hits, you just keep living.

Mababangong Bangungot ends with Kidlat realising his true strength lies in his lungs. He has spent a long time in Paris with an American who wanted





his very own jeepney driver and had flew Kidlat over for this purpose. When Kidlat arrived in Paris, he was awed by capitalist infrastructure.

But a new supermarket is being built near his apartment, and it puts his only friend, a French lola who owns a market stall selling eggs, out of business. First, he is exasperated. Then he is enraged.

He transmutes spaces, stripping them of their capitalist function. He gazes at a trash incinerator attached to the new supermarket with wonderment and climbs inside. Given its size, he envisions that three to four families from his village could live inside. Kidlat, where does your true strength lie ..., a voice booms. His solemn expression stretches into a broad, confident grin. He blows hard. The voice again: The sleeping typhoon must learn to blow again. The incinerator ascends with the force of his breath. He flies himself home.

In this way, the film and I met while traveling in opposite directions. Deciding I was accountable to Naarm, I returned to land burning. Not in the right way. My immune system surged and never eased. Hundreds of years of colonial land mismanagement taking root in my lungs. I am not exempt from what happens to Country.

On Google Earth, I manage to visit Magdiwang again for the first time. I tried for many years after my trip, but it wasn't available, considered too obscure to be added to the virtual rendition of the planet. I float from the ocean to the port. Trace my way from the port to our barangay. Find my way back to our farm. A dream fulfilled several years late. Tabi tabi po, I say as I approach the Nailog River. I'm as weightless as a ghost.

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