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McNeely, Andrew

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Restless Debris: Ruination, Multicultural Politics,
and Post-Recession Visual Art

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Art

by

Andrew McNeely

Thesis Committee:
Professor Juli Carson, Chair
Professor Bruce Yonemoto
Professor Daniel Martinez
Professor Edward Dimendberg
Assistant Professor James Nisbet

2016

DEDICATION

To

Christine Marie

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Restless Debris: Ruination, Multicultural Politics,
and Post-Recession Visual Art

By

Andrew McNeely

Master of Fine Arts

University of California, Irvine, 2016

Professor Carson Irvine, Chair

This study examines how ruination functions allegorically in the work of Kevin Jerome Everson and Michelle Dizon. I argue that ruination in each of their practices must be understood as instances of pathological melancholia and as such their work yields insights into current challenges to multicultural solidarity. This study is also developed in conjunction with the exhibition *Restless Debris*, which focuses on class and racial politics attendant to ruin imagery in post-recession installation art between 2012 and 2014. This study is thus intended to advance the current discourse on the relationship between narratives of national decline, multicultural politics, and contemporary figurations of ruins in popular culture.

INTRODUCTION:
RESTLESS DEBRIS AND THE ANXIETY OF DECLINE

This study examines how ruination operates as a synecdoche for collective identity in the work of Kevin Jerome Everson and Michelle Dizon. I argue that ruination in each of their practices must be understood as instances of pathological melancholia and as such their work yields insights into current challenges to multicultural solidarity. In pursuit of this hypothesis, I will distinguish between two forms of melancholia; the first type stems from a trauma experienced directly and the second develops vicariously in the subject through the symptomatology of a close relative or intimate. This study is also a coda to the exhibition *Restless Debris*, which focuses on class and racial politics attendant to ruin imagery in post-recession installation art between 2012 and 2014.¹ Research suggests that ruin imagery within popular culture – imagery of decaying structures within the built environment – is increasingly becoming a means to articulate growing anxieties attendant to economic decline following the Great Recession. The art historian Dora Apel, the most visible proponent of this theory to date, also contends that such imagery serves the interests of policy makers that seek to unevenly distribute public resources along racial lines. Ruin imagery thus constitutes an expression of an emerging “anxiety of decline” that turns on a loss of faith in humanity’s progress and the belief that global catastrophe is not only inexorable but also imminent.² By conceiving of this anxiety as a global phenomenon, this hypothesis is built on the assumption that ruin imagery elicits a consistent set of meanings across divides of race, class, and culture. As a contribution to this

¹ For catalog and installation documentation see <http://uag.arts.uci.edu/exhibit/restless-debris>.

² See Dora Apel, *Beautiful Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2015), 1-12.

emerging discourse, I developed *Restless Debris* to contest this assumption by focusing on three artists who deploy ruins in their work from three different subject positions.

The exhibition's thematic exploration focuses on how spaces of ecological destruction or capital disinvestment are mobilized allegorically within the work of Kevin Jerome Everson, Michelle Dizon, and Ivor Shearer. Instead of highlighting work that decontextualizes and thus depoliticizes decay, either by over-determining its appropriation for philosophical or exclusively aesthetic purposes, I chose the three artists above for their thought-provoking strategies of integrating cultural history into the critical concerns of the present. For example, all three artists included a personal artifact that is interwoven into their respective installation, which either explore or provide commentary on the collective histories such objects are a product of. Ivor Shearer's installation *Shooting the Road* (2013), for instance, incorporates a soiled projection screen retrieved from a movie theater that was destroyed by hurricane Katrina. Michelle Dizon's work focuses on the impact of globalization on her native Philippines from her perspective as a member of the American-Filipino diaspora. Her contribution, *Perpetual Peace* (2012), is built around the historical and cultural conditions that gave rise to the use of "balikbayan boxes," a practice of remittance by the global Filipino diaspora. Kevin Jerome Everson's piece *American Motor Company* (2010) evokes narratives of the Northern Migration of southern Blacks to work in the American auto-industry. The piece's image, however, is appropriated from a family heirloom depicting the artist's uncle while on a military deployment that was taken when Everson's own family moved from their native Mississippi to Mansfield, Ohio. Everson's installation is also accompanied by two recent films that explore similar themes in Cleveland – *Fe26* (2014) and *Sound That* (2014) – which will serve as the core focus of my analysis of his work in this study. In short, *Restless Debris* is organized around artists who explore personal

identity through objects that conjure images of collective identity.

Conceptually, then, the entire exhibition was conceived to echo the “ruin” as a metaphor by foregrounding dichotomies of presence and absence between the installation’s material supplement and its corresponding immaterial video. I argue that each piece addresses the politics attendant to appropriating debris as ruins by supplanting “ruin gazing” as an aesthetic preoccupation with “ruination” as a conceptual operation. This political mandate thus places the exhibition in conversation with scholarship that explores how the representation of ruins within literary and cinematic narratives is increasingly becoming a means to domesticate economic and social fears following the Great Recession.

Today, Dora Apel observes, ruined landscapes, whether refracted through disaster, thriller, or horror genres, appear to not merely suggest collective pessimism about the trajectory of capitalism but also a burgeoning anxiety that turns on our inability to grasp its macroeconomic dynamics.”³ In Beautiful Terrible Ruins, she argues that recent manifestations of apocalyptic fictions conceal a pathological anxiety that speak to the specificity of our present vulnerability under globalized capital. For instance, just as the post-war alien sci-fi thriller was a popular theme in the face of the possibility of nuclear obliteration during the Cold War, the overwhelming popularity of dystopian narratives today “must be understood as critical responses to the contemporary anxiety of social unrest and economic decline coupled with a loss of confidence in progress and the state.”⁴ Apel takes specific aim at the explosive popularity of zombies on television and film, which for her, embody visions of dispossessed workers, reduced to bare life, and stripped of their self-determination. The ruined landscapes depicted in zombie films, as a form of fantasy or fetishization, she asserts, obscure the corporate culpability in the

³ Ibid, 132-136.

⁴ Ibid, 138.

creation of the present state of many urban centers and envision dystopia as humanity's natural trajectory. Equally worrisome, for Apel, is how present post-apocalyptic scenarios are invariably intermeshed with the urban landscape, underscoring the latent racialized subtext of the zombie as Other.⁵ Zombification, then, Apel argues, is an increasingly popular worldwide cultural theme that bespeaks the emergence of what she coins is a "global ruin imaginary" – a collective fantasy of capitalism's immanent destruction of the world that turns on an inability to imagine any alternative to it.⁶ The city at the heart of our current obsessions, she contends, is the image of Detroit, the paradigmatic symbol of failed modernity, and the center of the growing "ruin porn" photographic genre.

Ruin photography, she maintains, tends to capture images of a tranquil, already dead city that erases the existent – predominately Black – communities that are still struggling to survive in within depressed urban spaces.⁷ Therefore, ruin photography decontextualizes images of urban blight and construes decay as part of natural cycles of the built environment's reclamation by nature.⁸ Thus such imagery harms cities, like Detroit, by obscuring urban blight as the result of humanity's "natural" self-destructive destiny, and therefore absolves of guilt the largely corporate interests that led to the emergence of the northern urban black ghetto. Moreover, she states, these narratives feed into a covertly racial political discourse that buttresses the attitudes that seek to further disinvest from the urban environment. Landscapes like Detroit and its metaphoric register of the failures of modernity thus constitute for Apel the most pressing objects of critique in addressing the pathologies that hinder the advancement of collectivist politics. On

⁵ Ibid, 146-149.

⁶ Ibid, 152.

⁷ Ibid, 75-79.

⁸ Ibid.

this point, the piece *Shooting the Road*, I contend, is an example of aesthetic production's agency in the discussion established by Apel.

Shooting the Road is a re-shooting of several of the locatable scenes of Director John Hillcoat's 2009 film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Road* (2006). McCarthy's novel is a post-apocalyptic narrative that focuses on a father and son's journey across a ruined landscape in search of a warmer climate. Along the way, the film's two protagonists must endure starvation and evade roaming gangs of cannibals in order to stay alive. Not only are *The Road's* themes relevant to Apel's concerns, but also it is important to note that the film's most sensational shots took advantage of the blighted communities of post-Katrina New Orleans and post-industrial towns near Pittsburgh for its mise-en-scène. Thus by appropriating a Hollywood fantasy film, Shearer's piece reveals how cinema sublimates real spaces of catastrophe that people still occupy. Moreover, like Apel, Shearer's work explores how decay fosters a passive complacency in the face of growing inequality. However, also like Apel, Shearer's work only focuses on the political implications of ruination from the subject position of the dominant white culture.

The connotations of debris, however, when taken up into symbolic meaning as "ruins," do not conjure a homogenous set of significations among all races and classes. Indeed, for something to be considered a "ruin" already implies specific racial and class positions that exclude from the discussion how ruination may be appropriated within cultural production to elicit different symbolic registers. In short, ruins mean different things to different people and thus Apel's thesis of an emergent "global ruin imaginary" is an incautious generalization that threatens to overlook the nuances of meaning debris signifies among the United States' minorities.

As a contribution, this examination will contest this generalization and further this growing discourse by analyzing the two ways in which ruins are figured metaphorically by Kevin Jerome Everson and Michelle Dizon. I have chosen to focus exclusively on these two artists for three reasons. First, Everson and Dizon have experienced some form of class or cultural assimilation in their lives. Second, they also depict ruination often – consciously and unconsciously – in their work, which suggests that decay elicits meanings that extend beyond the economic anxieties discussed above. Third, their work is highly autobiographic in a way that Shearer’s work is not. Thus, both Everson and Dizon serve as useful case studies to think through how national identity is projected, contested, or affirmed within cultural production by people of color. As such, I will examine how the figuration of ruins within the pieces *Fe26*, *Sound That*, *Civil Society*, and *Perpetual Peace* allegorize episodes of class or cultural assimilation. This study is thus intended to advance current discourse on the relationship between narratives of national decline, multicultural politics, and contemporary figurations of the ruin in popular culture. Last, this study in conjunction with the exhibition *Restless Debris* aims to serve as a platform to reflect on the challenges of emancipatory politics at a time when identity framed by national boundaries may be waning in significance.

I argue that ruin imagery does not merely bespeak growing anxieties over current economic or environmental trends but also represents manifestations of individuals *working through* their specific socio-cultural relationships to “America,” as an abstraction.⁹ The ruin as fetish cannot be dissociated from the social and cultural particularities that both reflect and implicate the people who endow debris with symbolic meaning. Put differently, rubble’s appropriation as “ruins” reflects not only growing pessimism but also conflicted emotions of anger, guilt, longing, and sorrow for those who have in some instances profited, albeit in a

⁹ My emphasis of “working through” is meant evoke the unconscious register.

conflicted manner, from the economic forces that ruination purportedly represents.

If ruins, as Apel argues, have become a cross-cultural fixation, then, what is required is a finer analysis of the affective relationships the ruin motif elicits in the face of cultural difference. Underlining all cultural productions that appropriate rubble as “ruins” are undertones of class anxiety that extends beyond divisions of race. I thus curated *Restless Debris* to explore how representations of ruins, even when mobilized critically, might conceal generational forms of guilt and trauma that are inextricable from the class position of such artifacts authors. It is my contention that furthering collective social struggle necessitates curatorial interventions that openly engage, explore, and provoke such conversations. In pursuit of these questions, it is necessary to briefly outline the theoretical tools that I will employ in my analysis.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: RACE, MELANCHOLIA, AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's meta-psychological theory of trans-generational haunting and Homi Bhabha's concept of fetish-as-suture provide a theoretical framework for this study. The above theories turn on the psychoanalytic concept of introjection, whereby the opposition within the organism between internal and external stimuli – in so far as both can be correlated to pleasure and un-pleasure – generates an ego vis-à-vis the organism's extra-corporeal world. Interiority and exteriority, as a psychical state is posited in the subject through a process of introjecting the source of its pleasure and projecting stimuli found to be un-pleasurable. Accordingly, Bhabha, drawing on a Lacanian reinterpretation of this process, applies it to discriminatory stereotypes within colonial discourse in order to theorize how such representations function to conceal *lack* and sustain fantasies of origin and identity.

In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha argues that the effectiveness of colonial power cannot be dissociated from the systems of narrative representation that reproduces desire for authenticity in the colonized.¹⁰ Colonial discourse construes the colonized as a unitary “subject peoples” whose differences can be codified into a fixed totality and thus rendered at once Other and yet still available to knowledge production. To this end, stereotypes within discursive production engender compulsive practices of fixation and disavowal for the colonial imagination. Colonial discourse mobilizes and circulates stereotypes as fetish objects, which mask deeper anxieties attendant to a subject's mythical relationship to his or her historical origination and identity.¹¹ This process accounts for what Bhabha sees as the productive ambivalence of methods of incorporation under Western hegemony, which tends to insure – if not rely on – its own

¹⁰ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 66-84.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 70-75.

failure.

Civilizing missions, and the pathological institutionalization of mimicry – whereby the state enforces a narcissistic demand to ‘Europeanize the savage’ – turns on a desire to appropriate the colonized in order to disavow them as objects of difference.¹² Ambivalence is thus the “menace” behind mimicry that threatens the colonizer’s authority. Mimicry is a necessary means for the colonial imagination to excite the anxieties undergirding national identity such that difference can be mastered. Therefore, stereotypes are ambivalent texts that allow for the staging of projection and introjection, in which narcissistic and aggressive identifications are exercised. As a Symbolic Order, then, colonial discourse sutures subjects into the collective fantasy of national identity by reproducing pathological practices of incorporation and disavowal in both the colonizer and the colonized.

Bhabha’s last point is especially salient to the two artists in this examination, because each negotiate cultural and racial identity in the face of ruination as a synecdoche for national identity. In addition, I shall consider how national identity is narrated within the oeuvre of the artist Michelle Dizon in order to isolate the sustained gaps that suggest forms of repression. This latter point requires a brief discussion of the work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, specifically their theory of trans-generational haunting.

Trans-generational haunting turns on the theory that trauma can be passed down generationally, not through the retelling of traumatic events, but through that event’s “unspeakability,” or “its” persistence as a gap in the self-knowledge of a subject’s past. In this scenario, the subject does not have to directly experience trauma to exhibit symptoms of its existence. On the contrary, symptoms can be reproduced between multiple subjects constituting what Abraham calls a “meta-psychological fact” or phantom that binds a group around

¹² Ibid, 86.

formations of collective pathological behaviors. In a similar fashion to the stereotype as a process of introjection/projection, the connection between unconscious anxieties in the subject's lived experience and a repressed or secreted trauma in his or her parent's past arises during the Oedipal process. Pathologies are transferred during the subject's separation from the mother/child dyad.

By way of analogy, the clinicians illustrate this process through a rereading of Little Hans' fort-da game in Beyond the Pleasure Principle as an instance where the subject represses attributes of the mother through the introjection of partial speech, the famous "oooo" or "there [I am]!" Introjection, in this case, is the primary operation through which the subject assimilates all the necessary attributes of the mother – warmth, nourishment, amnion, etc. – and redirects desire to the whole of the social world, or non-mother, in the child's gradual entry into language. The chronological continuity between the mother's repression of a shameful secret or trauma – manifesting itself in a variety of neurotic behaviors – is thus unconsciously assimilated by the child through the displacement of its libidinal charge onto particular words, images, and objects. The "unspeakable," therefore, haunts the subject like a phantom and reveals itself within patterns of speech or fixations.

For example, in "Notes on the Phantom," Abraham recounts a clinical experience where his analysand – an industrious young scientist who has taken up a fervent hobby of studying the genealogy of Europe's nobility – suddenly insults Abraham "in a fit of persecution" by claiming that, among other things, he is of "low birth" and likely harbors resentments towards his social station.¹³ Once the analysand regains his composure, and profusely apologizes for his outburst, further analysis uncovers manifest inconsistencies and gaps in his knowledge of his paternal

¹³ Nicolas Abraham, "Notes on the Phantom," in *The Shell and The Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 172-173.

grandfather's parentage. Abraham thus speculates that the young scientist's father was likely a bastard. The scientist's awareness of his father's possible illegitimacy is not the source of his unconscious anxiety. Rather, his father's concealment of this truth is transferred into the unconscious fixations of his son. The phantom, then, is an unconscious formation that has never been conscious, rather, its "compulsive return lies beyond the scope of symptom-formation...it works like a ventriloquist, like a stranger in the subject's own mental topography."¹⁴ In other words, what is transferred, which is to say, what causes the son to *act* out the anxieties of his father, is an unconscious fear of violating the parent's secret. The "phantom effect," then, Abraham concludes, functions like a "preservative repression" that *drives* the subject to act as the custodian of the parent's trauma. Stereotypes, which guarantee identity and the phantom that ventriloquizes the subject, as Anne Anlin Cheng argues, are powerful tools to describe how the racialization of subjectivity functions in America.

As Cheng reminds us, while American history advances through a declining succession of legalized racial exclusions, it also proceeds through a process of misremembering those prohibitions. To be citizens, she argues in *The Melancholy of Race*, America's minorities have no choice but to incorporate a dominant narrative of individualism and progress that is historically constituted through the denigration of people of color.¹⁵ To assimilate national identity is thus to live out a condition that Freud characterized as melancholia, whereby the subject denies the loss of an object by phantasmatically incorporating it into the ego. Unlike mourning, which is an acceptance of loss, a "getting over it," the melancholic denies loss *as* loss, and thus assimilates the lost object as grief. Put another way, the subject's conscious – determined – self-tormenting is driven by an unconscious pleasure in identification with the

¹⁴ Ibid, 173.

¹⁵ Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7-14.

“lost” object.¹⁶ Like Bhabha’s notion of mimicry, by incorporating the Other – that phantasmatic “lost” object barred to him/her – the minority subject participates in his or her own self-denigration and sadism.¹⁷ I will thus apply Bhabha’s concept of fetish-as-suture to Everson’s work and Abaham and Torok’s model of trans-generational haunting to Dizon in order isolate their unconscious investments in ruination.

By isolating the points of focalization within their work that reveal certain fixations, words, and patterns, I will argue how Everson and Dizon employ ruination as a synecdoche for a mythic America. Moreover, I will demonstrate how these myths are situated within larger allegories that are suggestive of pathological anxieties. Last, I will put forth a final claim as to what drives the artists to take up ruins in the fashion that they do. In so doing, I will show the political stakes that Everson and Dizon’s work raise, not only for multicultural politics, but also for the agency of aesthetic production.

¹⁶ Ibid, 8-9.

¹⁷ Anne Anlin Cheng, “The Melancholy of Race,” *The Kenyon Review, New Series* 19 (1997): 50.

RUINS AS STAGE: MELANCHOLIA IN THE WORK OF KEVIN JEROME EVERSON

Ruin, it would seem became an imperative for Kevin Jerome Everson's work between 2012 and 2015, evidenced by the fact that he made at least five films dealing with decay, either directly or indirectly, within this three year timespan. While references to ruination within *Fe26* (2014) and *Sound That* (2014) are nuanced, his films *Century* (2012), *Chevelle* (2012) and *Regal Unlimited* (2015) directly foreground decay as a process of fascination. These three latter films also reference an historical period that Everson seems compelled to return to often, namely, the Northern Migration of southern Blacks to work in the auto industry and the legacy of deindustrialization in their communities. Indeed, *Chevelle*, *Regal Unlimited*, and *Century*, which all allude to midcentury muscle and upscale family cars, intimate middle-class aspirations as well as a nostalgia for an era when the American auto-industry was still in its prime. This interpretation is further bolstered by the fact that all three films document the pancaking of these cars at junkyards, suggesting a political commentary of the deferred dreams of the working class. However, none of these concerns seem significant to Everson, who in discussion of *Chevelle*, remarks "I wanted to make something where it didn't have any people in it but...was all about black folk," continuing "[my] cousins made those cars...there's some kind of hand and touch in [them]...I was thinking sculptural."¹⁸ What on the surface strikes one as a poignant political statement is, in fact, a moment of deference paid to the passing of a skilled trade. Remarks like these have posed an interpretive challenge for critics who, as Ed Halter points out, tend to search for "the sociological verities that [they] wish to mine from anything

¹⁸ Terri Francis, "Of the Ludic, the Blues, and the Counterfeit: An Interview with Kevin Jerome Everson, Experimental Filmmaker," *Black Camera* 5 (2013): 198.

made by or about non-white cultures and the working class.”¹⁹ In agreement, I would add, the junk films’ very allure stem from precisely their ambiguous intentionality, which like Everson’s practice as a whole, frustrates a desire for Blackness to either be mobilized towards critical or exclusively celebratory ends. Put differently, it is the indeterminacy of Everson’s relationship to race and class that makes his work so compelling, however the content of that relationship is where Halter and I diverge.

Take for example, his piece *Emergency Needs* (2007), a two-channel installation in which a young woman reenacts a 1968 press conference held by one of America’s first Black mayors, Carl B. Stokes. This piece on the surface seems to be a celebratory tribute to a civil rights era Black figure. That is until, the viewer realizes the conference is a debriefing to the public after Cleveland’s catastrophic Glenville Riots, where a gun battle between Black nationalists and the police forced Stokes to call in the national guard to quell the uprising. *Emergency Needs* would thus appear to be a reflection on the lesser-known national histories where African-American civic advancement directly flew in the face of Black emancipatory struggle. In commenting on this work, Everson again confounds interpretation by asserting that his inspiration for the piece was Robert Rauschenberg’s *Factum I* and *Factum II* (1957).²⁰ Rauschenberg’s two famous and nearly identical paintings are formal experiments that undermine the medium’s singularity. Everson’s allusion to these paintings suggests that *Emergency Needs* is merely interested in the formal differences between an original and its replica. The paradox, then, between the piece’s separatist allusions and the artist’s decision to situate it within a Eurocentric art historical narrative suggests to the viewer that Everson fails to grasp the incommensurable concerns

¹⁹ Ed Halter, “The Practice of Everyday Life,” *Artforum*, April 4, 2011, accessed May 26, 2016, <http://artforum.com/film/id=28020>.

²⁰ Nathan Lee, “About the Artist,” *Whitney.org*, April, 4 2008, accessed June 3, 2016, http://whitney.org/www/2008biennial/www/?section=artists&page=artist_everson.

Emergency Needs conveys. It is in Everson's peculiar contradictions that Halter sees a strategy for dodging the identity politics that so often Blackness is used to represent. Halter's critique, however, illuminates another aspect of how Black artists are often taken up to represent class estrangement within a dominant white art world.

Countering the routine political interpretation, Halter argues that the artist's interest in the working class bespeaks a deeper longing for a more honest and familiar way of life:

The resonance between the art of workers and the work of artists, a junction that Everson returns to again and again from different angles and by various methods, is not merely one of conceptual elegance. It should be felt – deeply – as a means of confronting and resolving the tensions and incongruities consequent to the sort of class migration of which Everson's own life is but one example. It speaks of an urge to bridge disparate modes of living. What may have its roots in personal history becomes a platform for reflecting on and analyzing larger patterns in the structure of society through work that, while drawn from life, nevertheless avoids straightforward autobiography.²¹

This passage, I contend, demonstrates a limited reading of Everson's work that aims to situate the artist's fascinations within a biographical narrative of social advancement and estrangement. Halter's assertion suggests that class ascension itself is the cause of the artist's thematic preoccupations. Halter's reading does not, however, speak to why Everson, beyond an interest in the working class, seems compelled to return to his native Ohio as well as narratives of the Northern Migration over and over again.

For example, *American Motor Company* (2010), an installation that is comprised of a billboard and a video documenting its installation along a highway, intersects these two interests through the figure of his uncle. The billboard in *American Motor Company* (AMC) is based off of the midcentury advertisements that southern Blacks would see along highways during the Northern Migration. The photograph of the artist's uncle, with which the billboard is constructed, was taken at a time when the artist's own family migrated between their native Mississippi and

²¹ Ibid.

the artist's birthplace of Mansfield, Ohio.²² Like *Emergency Needs*, then, *AMC* exhibits countervailing interests between nostalgia for the southern Black community's upward mobility and a sardonic connotation of its exploitation by American manufacturers. The ambivalence of this piece is further compounded by the fact that the original photograph captures his uncle while on a military deployment, which further conflates racialized exploitation with nationalist sentiments. Also important is the revelation that the man in the image is the artist's uncle did not initially figure largely in his statement for the piece.²³ Everson's burying of his uncle's presence in the work, I argue, bespeaks a deeper preoccupation outside of the working class that drives Everson's practice, namely, a compulsion to stage and restage a narrative of origins. I will argue through an analysis of his two films *Fe26* and *Sound That*, that Everson's work is symptomatic of a drive to repeat the fantasy of class ascension itself rather than the anxieties that stem from its realization. Everson's politically charged fixations and the counterintuitive references through which he discusses them represent an inability to fully assimilate larger American narratives of progress and self-determination in the face of the nation's history of racialized exclusion. Halter's assessment thus invites further speculation about how Black personas are taken up to reinforce dominant assumptions about African-American intra-class relations (a question beyond the scope of this examination). In further addressing the tensions in Everson's work, his two films *Fe26* and *Sound That*, when considered as a complete work, are particularly illuminating to how ruination is taken up from a Black subject position to allegorize a sense of national identity.

Fe26 (2014) and *Sound That* (2014) are two films that capture the ways in which Cleveland's Black community make a living from the city's decaying infrastructure and condemned homes. *Fe26* follows two men, Isaac "ipleeza" Chester and Jonathan "streets" Lee,

²² Kevin Jerome Everson (artist) in discussion with the author, November 2015.

²³ Ibid.

as they roam the city's blighted communities in search of manhole covers and abandoned houses, or "bandos," to pilfer for copper, steel, and aluminum. The film's opening sequences, in which Isaac and Jonathan brazenly steal manhole covers in broad daylight, foregrounds the climate of collective indifference to a neighborhood's wellbeing that decades of life under economic depression engenders. Cleveland, it is worth noting, is second only to Detroit in the rate of urban Black poverty. Moreover, the city was among the top 15 worst hit areas following the 2007 foreclosure crisis, a statistic whose impact is made palpably clear when one of the men exclaims: "The banks! They came through this motherfucker, did predatory lending; gave all the old people big ass loans they knew they couldn't pay off!" *Fe26* thus, in contrast to Everson's usual avoidance of political subject matter, foregrounds the antagonistic climate between the city of Cleveland and its Black communities. In other scenes, for example, the men stress how they are doing the neighborhood a favor by speeding up the city's process of razing the homes, thereby preemptively stopping the criminal activity that will inevitably take place in them. Or, they point to how scrapping is not stealing, because "[the city] is just gonna tear [the houses] down anyway." Indeed, as a whole, the film seems conflicted about the illegality of the men's profession. Everson places greater emphasis on their extensive knowledge of the selling price of various metals than on the morality of their choices. Everson's film thus raises difficult questions about what defines criminality in the face of communities enduring the fallout of catastrophes not of their making. While exploring these competing interests and provoking issues of moral ambiguity, he further refuses to offer closure on these questions, which is a narrative characteristic not repeated in *Sound That*.

If *Fe26* focuses on how Black people extract a living from Cleveland's decaying houses, *Sound That* captures how they make a living by preserving its deteriorating infrastructure. The

film follows the workday of an all Black team of the Cleveland Water Department as they navigate the city's streets in search of broken water mains. As with *Fe26*, Everson also appears enamored with the workers' craft in *Sound That*. Throughout the film, the camera focuses on the manner in which the men utilize a long slender rod, a "listening stick," in order to listen for subterranean leaks. In other scenes, the camera steadily fixates on the cryptic hand gestures the men use to communicate with a backhoe operator. However, *Sound That* seems specifically concerned with the subtle, often humorous, generational hierarchy between the veteran field workers and their younger less experienced teammates. In one such scene, a novice's repeated attempt to locate a broken pipe creates an opportunity for his elder supervisor to posture for the camera as he demonstrates his expertise. Likewise, in contrast to *Fe26*, nearly all of *Sound That's* scenes frame most of the men in the shot as opposed to focusing on individuals, which intimates an overall interest in the workers as a group. In this way, *Sound That* evokes a fraternal desire decidedly lacking in *Fe26*. Thus, thematically speaking, both films signify countervailing motifs – public servant vs. public nuisance, restorative vs. destructive, cooperative vs. individual – that turn on a deeper meditation of the *place* of the Black community within the larger structure of civil society. For this reason, I treat these two films as constituting one continuous personal meditation that – when considered as a whole – function allegorically and as such can be read metaphorically and metonymically. I will specifically discuss metonymy in terms of stereotyping as it is expressed formally within *Fe26* and *Sound That*, because aside from thematic continuities both films also exhibit similar aesthetic interests.

Aesthetically, Everson's films, in their disjointed rhythm and seemingly impulsive interests, strike one as driven by an ongoing dialogue with an inner self whose presence one captures in hints of interlocution between his subjects and the films' unseen camera operator.

The films' editorial concerns, likewise, bear little narrative logic beyond that of an interest in capturing the passing of a day. As scholar Michael B. Gillespie has observed, the impulsivity of Everson's work strikes one as the "discarded reportage of an incident" whose unplanned feeling endows his films with the magnetic quality of the "historiographic trace."²⁴ Open and fragmentary, *Fe26* and *Sound That*, in their receptivity to the banal, mundane, or quotidian trivialities of everyday life function almost like aide-mémoires that possess connotations of a lack of inhibition. However, the idiosyncratic formal devices that give Everson's films their immediacy – leader flares, jump cuts, in camera editing, etc. – are curiously unevenly distributed between each film.

Whereas Everson introduces formal experiments into *Sound That* intermittently, *Fe26* is rife with distortions. For example, both films experiment with asynchronous sound, however, in *Fe26* the dislocations of the subjects' voices are far more pronounced and occur with greater frequency. *Sound That*, in distinction, due to its nearly inaudible soundtrack, scarcely takes any interest at all in the dialogues between the subjects under observation. Instead, *Sound That* privileges sight over sound, whereas speech, in *Fe26*, is markedly repetitious. The most prominent of these repetitions is the phrase "they're just gonna tear it down anyway" reinserted into the film's soundtrack intermittently throughout the narrative.

Thus, the above phrase, uttered in order to justify scrapping as a victimless crime, intimates Everson's preoccupation with it as an expression of resignation and cynicism. There is, then, subtle expressions of judgment in *Fe26* that are articulated through a series of deformations that literally disassemble Isaac and Jonathan's onscreen representations into component parts of speech and image. These manifest deformations, unevenly expressed between both films, operate

²⁴ Michael B. Gillespie, "To Do Better: Notes on the Work of Kevin Jerome Everson," (supplementary essay), 69. *Broad Daylight and Other Times: Selected Works of Kevin Jerome Everson*. DVD. Video Data Bank, 2010.

reductively – which is to say that they are metonymic projections of stereotypes – and further condense around a latent meditation of the Black community’s obligation to the city. There is, then, an unconscious allegory unfolding between these films that, whatever its meaning, appears conflicted about the men in *Fe26* that does not extend to the subjects in *Sound That*. Here, it is important to reiterate the significance of scrapping, for unlike municipal work, Isaac and Jonathan belong to the social stratum that Marx termed “the lumpenproletariat” – those individuals cast out by industry, in a sort of social limbo.

In *Sound That*, however fragmented, the unfolding of the film provides some sense of closure, with the concluding scene depicting the men pounding a manhole cover back into place, suggesting the completion of a job well done. In contrast, *Fe26* begins and ends with the stealing of manhole covers, underscoring not only the cyclicity of Isaac and Jonathan’s lives but also its Sisyphean nature. Thus, Everson’s choice of framing *Fe26*’s narrative as a repetition suggests a deeper need to suspend the metaphoric connotation the men’s representations elicit for him. Put differently, there is something about Isaac and Jonathan, as stereotypes, that courts a kind of repetition compulsion for Everson. Moreover, in spite of all the director’s unheard prompts that call upon the scrappers to discuss the circumstances that led them to their profession, they are never invited to speak about how they envision scrapping to improve their lives. A question, therefore, arises as to what is it about Isaac and Jonathan’s unproductive labor that compels Everson to sympathize with their struggles only to deny them of any futurity? I argue that the fixations at play in these two works, or I might say, their “tensions and incongruities,” function to mark differences that strengthen the most common of bourgeois myths – individualism, progress, and civic responsibility. This is to say, then, that on a conscious level Everson identifies with their plight but on an unconscious level he metonymically reduces them in order

to exemplify prejudices regarding the social strata they occupy. In so doing, *Fe26*, in spite of its vague concerns, inscribes class anxieties onto the bodies of Isaac and Jonathan, which are absent in *Sound That*, and thus speaks of an affirmation of the meaning of public work over private interest. Everson avoids the emotions that Isaac and Jonathan elicit and as such he must exact violence on them, by disassembling their image. In short, the deformations in *Fe26* are symptomatic of a process of disavowal that stems from an unconscious identification with Isaac and Johnathan. Perhaps, this is why *Sound That* has a subtle romantic air to it; Everson's work is exemplary of Cheng's melancholic subject – a subject who denies loss as loss and thus identifies with a phantasmatic object in order to repress the lack at the core of his or her anxieties.

For example, *Sound That* delights in the fraternity of the workers and yet remains at a cautious distance from investigating the personal narratives that consumes *Fe26*. This is to say that, whereas the scrappers can be reduced to the *effects* of racialized poverty, the municipal employees in *Sound That* are cast as perfectly at home in their social station. Never is there a moment where the director calls upon the men to discuss their treatment by their employers nor the world at large in the same way that *Fe26* obsesses over. The men in *Sound That* are thus suspended as an ideal image that can be incorporated and mastered. There is, then, concealed behind Everson's interests in labor and craft, a desire to fortify values of civic responsibility and self-determination that bespeaks a core introjection of the ideology of the state. I stress this point only to render more transparent what has otherwise been the artist's opaque political agenda. Important, however, is the fact that Everson is compelled to exercise these values within the larger historical legacy of the Northern Migration suggesting an inability to fully affirm them. There is, in other words, something about the Northern Migration specifically that drives Everson to repeatedly return to its symbolic meaning within the Black community.

Returning to the subject of introjection, as Bhabha reminds us, what drives the dominant culture's injunction to refashion the colonized as a "recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite,*" is an ambivalence towards the actual incorporation of the dominated.²⁵ Mimicry, in as much as it visualizes Western power and ideology, is a disciplinary device whose real function is to repress the anxieties that difference induces in the national imaginary of the colonizer. Following Bhabha, Cheng argues that the stigmatization of the colonized as partial-presence is introjected by the racialized subject and thus he or she inherits colonial ambivalence by internalizing a core belief of his or her "incommensurability" with a national ideal.²⁶ Put differently, the subject's ascension to the customs of the dominant culture is paradoxically driven by a core conviction that his or her attempts are utterly doomed to failure. And this belief persists whether or not it actually accords with the subject's reality. The fantasy of ascension itself, then, takes on the shape of a trauma that needs to be repetitiously staged and restaged in order to repress a deeper anxiety that turns on the wounds of colonialism itself. And, I argue this is exactly what compels Everson to return to narratives of industry, migration, or capital disinvestment over and over again in his work. In *Fe26* and *Sound That*, specifically, ambivalence turns on an allegory about Cleveland's Black community that, however indeterminate, nonetheless repetitiously stages aspirational images of cooperative labor only to undercut them. It is through this lens that one can approach how ruination functions within his work. Short of being an anxiety of decline, Everson's work provokes larger questions about how the loss of communal identity, the kind that single-industry towns historically afforded people who only recently, relatively speaking, were granted citizenship by the state. At this juncture, I would like to return to the subject of the "ruin" as a

²⁵ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 86.

²⁶ Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 80.

synecdoche of collective identity through a brief consideration of Everson's junk film *Chevelle* (2012).

Again, the allure of Everson's films are tied to his political indeterminacy and his refusal to offer anything of an essence or ontology of Blackness. However, I contend that concealed behind Everson's fascination with craft and form is a deeper conflict of class ascension in the face of national history. *Chevelle*, a single-take fixed shot of two cars – a Pontiac Grand Am and a Chevelle – being crushed by a compactor speaks to this longing. Sensing political undertones in this piece, historian Michael B. Gillespie confronted Everson in an interview about his relationship to Black industrial labor, to which Everson replies:

I'm not sure if I can speak on the auto industry because I'm not a historian. But, I'm hip to the Revolutionary Black Workers and their contributions to the working folks. I also know about the experiences of my family members who worked in the General Motors stamping plant in my hometown, Mansfield, Ohio. The workers made a huge contribution to the economy of the city...The initial idea [for *Chevelle*] was that I wanted to film automobile parts and to create art that was formed from those materials. I treated the Chevelle as a found object. It's a General Motors car that was probably made at the Fisher Body Plant in my hometown. I wanted the framing of the image to emphasize the door panels because the hands of my cousins most likely touched those panels as they worked in the factory. There was black labor that worked overtime on that Chevelle. That Chevelle used to give black folk a job in Mansfield. They built it, drove it, and pumped gas in it. So, crushing the car shifts it from one form of creation. The form changes as I use the materials to create sculpture, a post-industrial sculpture.²⁷

One sees in this passage, a *working through* of all the issues under discussion, namely, Everson's ambiguous relationship to Black separatism, his puzzling incorporation of European aesthetic values, his complex views of the Black community's relationship to civic life, his problematic working-class nostalgia, his conflicted relationship to his own class ascension but most importantly, his inability to acknowledge that he is making films about decay. Indeed, it appears he stumbles over this point as he awkwardly states "So, crushing the car shifts it from one form of creation" but then fails to finish the clause with: "to another." Put differently, deindustrialization persists as a rupture in the assenting fraternal narrative of collective Black

²⁷ Quoted in Michael B. Gillespie, "2 Nigs United for West Compton: A Conversation with Kevin Jerome Everson," *Liquid Blackness: Blackness, Aesthetics, Liquidity* 1 (2014): 47.

identity that Everson believes himself to be product of. Furthermore, his desire to find in the Chevelle's panels the "hands of my cousins" bespeaks a melancholia that cannot affirm that such a mythic narrative never existed.

I have argued above that Everson's two works *Fe26* and *Sound That* constitute a continuous personal meditation on the meaning of citizenship for Cleveland's Black communities. Furthermore, I have demonstrated how Everson's work exhibits a desire to create formally oriented depictions of American history that reveal a consistent set of pathological fixations, which intimate the artist's struggle to fully incorporate such narratives. I belabor Everson's problematic relationship to history not in order to dismantle it but on the contrary to highlight this fantasy's function as a coping mechanism, and the place of ruination in it. Ruination in Everson's films function as a kind of stage for an assenting phantasy of Black citizenship. However, such a narrative must play out repetitiously, because it is an operation of a pathological ambivalence that represses a founding introjection of Blackness's incommensurability with the state.

RUINS AS TIME: MELANCHOLIA IN THE WORK OF MICHELLE DIZON

Although intimations of ruination in Michelle Dizon's work are observable in her films that predate the Great Recession, it is not until the debut of her film *Civil Society* (2008) that she explicitly foregrounds debris as "ruins," and thereafter, taking on a variety of valences, returns to them again in her installation *Perpetual Peace* (2012). This latter work traces the generational and ecological impact of globalization on the Philippines, by interweaving personal and familial narratives of her ancestral home with the archipelago's colonial history. Ruination, as a metaphor, is thus taken up within both works in order to describe her affective and temporal experiences of displacement and cultural assimilation. Therefore, because she explicitly couches her work within a vocabulary of degradation and loss, she cannot be understood in the melancholic sense that I have outlined above. Nevertheless, I argue her work does exemplify a ventriloquized form of melancholia that can be characterized as a trans-generational haunting. In order to demonstrate this, it is necessary to trace the development of the ruin motif in her thought as it is articulated within *Civil Society*, *Perpetual Peace*, and her dissertation – Vision in Ruins – written in the intervening years between both works.

The installation *Civil Society* is an essayistic rumination on citizenship and racialized oppression that interweaves the 1965 Watts riots, the 1992 Los Angeles riots, and the 2005 Clichy-sous-Bois uprising following the deaths of Bouna Traoré and Zyed Benna. A teenager and resident of Culver City during the 1992 uprising, Dizon's piece is a meditation on official historical narratives, personal memory, and collective trauma as a member of the Filipino diaspora. After being shaken by Clichy-sous-Bois, her production of the piece allowed her to explore why she remembers so little of the violence following the acquittal of the L.A. police

officers that beat Rodney King.²⁸ The infamous Rodney King tape – the only clear memory Dizon has of that period – makes up the cornerstone of her film that braids together a self-reflective travelogue of Clichy-sous-Bois’ blighted community, an interview with the sociologist, Nacira Guénif, a fragmentary diaristic monologue of 1992, and multi-lingual juxtapositions that play with conjunctions of different languages. Underneath the veneer of her political project, however, is a strong sub-narrative that Dizon is haunted by her apparent indifference to the 1992 violence evidenced by her inability to recall it. Over and over, Dizon asks herself whether she did not see the violence because she chose not to or because she was taught not to. As a person of color, specifically, she wonders why she did not see *herself* in the plight of Los Angeles’ Black community. Thus, Clichy-sous-Bois provides a landscape through which she confronts 1992, the experience of cultural assimilation, and the ideological structures that engender intra-racial conflict. However, of specific concern to this project is how Dizon uses ruins metaphorically to describe the irreparable rupture she, as a daughter of immigrants, feels in the present.

A year after 2005, while navigating a section of the banlieues that presumably Benna and Traoré lived, Dizon recounts how a local confided in her: “[that] at first, all anyone wanted to see was a policeman dead.” However, even in “the logic of vengeance,” Dizon recites, the scope of the retribution necessary does not account for all of the murdered. It is at this moment where the film’s political aims turn to the question of representing the impossible, namely: the infinite violence that has been wrought by colonization. Or, in other words, the violence that still persists in the present, in the daily lives of those who are the product of colonialism’s legacy. The lesson of Rodney King, Dizon asserts, is that justice lies outside the frame, beyond what is visible. And, on this point, Dizon wonders: “what kind of history would we tell if we were freed from

²⁸ Michelle Dizon, *Vision in Ruins* (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2011), vi.

representation?” Fifteen years after 1992, “between us and them,” Dizon recalls: “I stood outside myself, I watched myself, this perpetual exile.” As a woman of color and a child of immigrants, she emphatically asserts to the viewer: “...you know nothing.” To which the film’s final sequence states:

Fifteen years have passed.
And I see ruins.
The ruins have nothing to do with cities...ashes...hints of an orange sky.
The ruins are in myself.
Part of myself, I leave for the wind.
I am in ruins.

In 1992, “there was in fact nothing to see,” to continue to look towards the past, she reminds us, is to let it slip away, and:

...no, every part of me says ‘it must live on.’
You tell me, you understand.
I’ve created a space to grieve.

In an interpretation of this passage, the writer Rose Salseda argues that Dizon’s assertion “it must live on” indicates the artist’s belief that immigrants “must resist the pressure to forget [their] roots” as they assimilate the dominant culture’s norms and values.²⁹ Salseda also understands Dizon’s appropriation of ruins to signify the absence in the historical record of the stories of marginalized people that shape our present, in other words, those “ruins that remain to be seen.”³⁰ She writes that “in the end, [*Civil Society*] makes visible the politics of seeing that elide the experience of marginalized peoples and sheds light upon the racism and xenophobia that continue to shape life and death across the globe.”³¹ I diverge from this interpretation by contending that *Civil Society* is an allegory that turns on a phantasmatic loss that is engendered by the experience cultural assimilation. Whereas, Salseda sees Dizon’s work as a struggle to render the truth visible, I argue that what is highlighted in this piece is how seeing is inflected by

²⁹ Rose Salseda, “Vision in Ruins: Michelle Dizon’s *Civil Society*,” *Contemporary*, April, 18, 2016, accessed May 29, 2016, <http://contemporary.org/vision-in-ruins-michelle-dizons-civil-society/>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

feeling. As Dizon herself asserts in her dissertation, representation cannot capture the whole of the experience of displacement:

When one [is] bound to notions of appearance and visibility, one is also bound to notions of freedom and autonomy that occupy not only the discourses of art but of western liberalism and its claim to transparency. The artist who works from the place of the dispossessed, the dislocated, the exiled, knows that their work is not solely to make visible [the effects of war and globalization] because this assumes that it is only the realm of visibility toward which one should aspire. Instead, the work is to remain allied with invisibility, a struggle to keep the temporal energy in the work.³²

The legacy of the Rodney King tape, as I interpret Dizon to be framing it in *Civil Society*, is not the revelation that people see differently, but that feeling conditions seeing, and if cultural assimilation is anything, it is the legislation of how a person feels. It is through this lens that I would like to reread *Civil Society's* final passage – “I’ve created a space to grieve.”

The meaning of “grieve” in the above passage evokes two meanings. It can be understood in the common sense of creating a space for mourning; however, it can also be understood as to cause bodily discomfort or pain. What Dizon strives to create in *Civil Society* is a space to feel what cannot be shown – a core feeling of loss that pervades the *present* – and as such her work strives to induce a sense of mourning in the viewer. Over the course of working on the film, she remarks that she increasingly understood “that one of the primary struggles in which postcolonial and diasporic visibility is engaged is a struggle for memory as it vitiates the present.”³³ In other words, that which “vitiates” the present is the inexplicable presence of something forgotten that is nevertheless “deeply felt” in her being.³⁴ In this figuration, then, Dizon deploys the “ruin” to signify the affective debris inscribed in her very body that erupts – like memories – at different junctures in her life and unmask the present as somehow broken or fragmented. Key, here, is that these eruptions are troubling because she cannot ascribe any specific referent or image to

³² Michelle Yap Dizon, *Vision in Ruins* (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2011), 51.

³³ *Ibid.*, ix.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

them in her memory.³⁵ I outline Dizon's description of "diasporic memories" as affective eruptions in order to highlight that, however opaque her description is of these moments, they are nevertheless clearly instances of Freud's theory of deferred action.

Freud developed the concept of deferred action (*nachträglichkeit*) in order to describe how the subject's psychological processes organize and extract meaning from his or her lived experiences. In his famous 'Wolf Man' case study, Freud recounts how his analysand suffers from a recurrent childhood dream in which he wakes up to see a pack of white wolves staring at him while sitting on tree branches outside his bedside window. After further analysis, Freud speculates that the dream is actually an allegory that functions to repress a 'primal scene' – i.e. an unconscious trauma that stems from the child's witnessing of a sex act that the analysand did not consciously comprehend. Freud further speculates that his analysand likely witnessed coitus between two animals later in childhood (perhaps white dogs) and thus displaced the meaning from the latter event retroactively onto the first.³⁶ The dream thus suggests, Freud contends, something fundamental about how the mind works, namely, that the vast majority of lived experience is taken in by the subject unconsciously only to then be deferred and shaped into meaningful "memories" through processes of revision in the present.

Deferred action, when applied to Dizon's notion of ruins as instances of rupture, speak to moments of traumatic passage that connote cultural assimilation, but that can only be *felt*, and in her words, not pictured. What I contend, then, is that Dizon likely never experienced these ruptures firsthand but rather incorporated her parents' experiences of assimilation through the manner in which they narrated their hopes, dreams, fears, and aspirations between their present

³⁵ Sigmund Freud, "From the History of Infantile Neuroses ("Wolf Man")," in *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 408-415.

³⁶ J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1973), 111-114.

lives in the U.S. and their past lives in the Philippines. This theory turns on the increasingly temporal register ruins take as Dizon moves into her latter work, and specifically how allusions to time are interwoven into her childhood perceptions of the Philippines, as an abstraction.

Dizon writes about this shift and how it informs the way she conceives of ruination in the concluding chapter of her dissertation. While laying out her theoretical mandate for applied post-colonial video practice – that she characterizes as “vision in ruins” – Dizon states:

On the other side of the Pacific, for the descendants of the diaspora, those born and/or raised in the imperial center, the ruins are both temporal and spatial. It is the country in which one has arrived, not the place from which one has left. It is the language that one speaks now, not the language that was spoken then. It is the life to be led here, not the life as it had been led there. For the generation of individuals who are born or spend their childhood ‘here’ as opposed to ‘there’, there is no there there. The Philippines of my world was where calls were made, boxes were sent, people came and went—but it was locked away, sent to the past by the *present*. I am speaking of the deep intimacy of the politics of time as it shapes experience.³⁷

In the passage above, Dizon’s description of “here” and “there” come off as a series of injunctions spoken by an unidentified speaker, for example “It is the life to be lead here” or “It is the language that one speaks now.” Not only is displacement “temporal and spatial, but as the phrrase “locked away” suggests, the Philippines, as a narrative element, within Dizon’s own reconstruction of the past, falls outside of her experience of being in the world. As Paul Ricoeur reminds us, one’s experience of being-in-the-world is inextricable from the forms of narrative representation through which we endow time with meaning.

Time, he argues, “...*becomes human to the extant that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence.*”³⁸ In other words, time is “real” only in so far as it can be reconstructed in narrative representation, and narrative representation is the means through which one experiences *being* in time. Thus, I argue that Dizon’s personal experience of a *fragmented being* is actually a

³⁷ Michelle Yap Dizon, *Vision in Ruins*, 91.

³⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative: Volume One* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 52 (italics in original).

childhood repression of the temporal incongruities that her parents negotiated between two nations, which she carries forward in a melancholic fashion. The inter-generational trauma, I have discussed above, is further suggested in *Perpetual Peace*.

The complete installation consists of a central video juxtaposed by two supplementary components: a contextualizing wall text and three balikbayan boxes, or remittance boxes, that the artist's mother would regularly send back to relatives in the Philippines.³⁹ The installation's wall text informs the visitor that Dizon's initial intention was to show "how peace in the United States is upheld by wars elsewhere." Her father's untimely death, while in production, however, redirected her political agenda towards a more philosophical investigation of what the term "peace" means on a far larger scale of time. In pursuit of this question, Dizon cut *Perpetual Peace* as a philosophical meditation on national identity as it is refracted through geologic time.

The video component is structured around five thematic intervals that cohere around Dizon's disembodied voice as she surveys the complex interrelationships between the Philippine's ecological catastrophes, government corruption and free-trade exploitation. As the viewer drifts across the islands oneiric landscapes contemporary political issues are isolated by Dizon only to draw attention to the seemingly endless layers of history around which they take shape. Moving indiscriminately between the neoliberal present, the colonial past, and even further back into geologic time, Dizon's film recasts human history as a natural force carving out the contours of the earth's surface. Her voice, a guide through these spaces, pauses at certain signposts to help orient the viewer's journey, such as: the remnants of Mount Pinatubo whose eruption hastened America's demilitarization of the Philippines only to then set the stage for its

³⁹A "balikbayan" box is a corrugated box that members of the Filipino diaspora regularly send to relatives back home. The boxes are usually filled with merchandise and other gifts that are either unavailable or too expensive to purchase in the Philippines. These boxes have therefore taken on a cultural significance as a practice of gift giving. The use of such boxes began to rise in the 1980s when a large migration of Filipinos left the Philippines in search of work abroad.

re-colonization through free trade agreements; Mindanao's bullet riddled landscape where government elites, with the help of American foreign aid, have been waging on ongoing war to squash the Muslim minority's separatist movement; a ruined river, whose contamination from the mining activities of multi-national corporations has led to the protracted displacement of entire communities; and finally, Manila's oldest cemetery, whose ghosts reflect the absence of millions of migrant workers who have left home in order to support their families from abroad. *Perpetual Peace* is thus an installation that urges the viewer to see him or herself in time(s) in order to, as the text states, allow "for many more ways of seeing to emerge." Such traces of time can be felt in the abrasions covering the remittance boxes in the installation whose passage across the Pacific – not unlike Dizon's journey to bury her father's ashes – echoes the meaning behind their name, "balikbayan," or repatriate. Most important, though, is Dizon's treatment of the balikbayan box in Interval One, which I contend, offers insight into how the schisms of temporality that I have speculated on above may have manifested in the artist's everyday life.

After a prefatory statement, in Interval One: Translation, where Dizon metaphorically introduces the film by admitting her own inability, as a foreigner, to bear witness to the injustices that plague the Philippines, she turns to affirm that: "...all that [she] can bear witness to is the tear in the fabric of time and space where the past does not proceed the present and where what we know as the present is made up of so much absence." Following this moment the frame opens up to reveal Dizon's mother packing a balikbayan box where she continues:

Balikbayan, 'return to country,' it is the name given to those who have been nationalized elsewhere. It is also the box that I watched my mother pack several times each year. It was a ritual of sorts. As the miles stretched to years and then to decades, my mother said across the Pacific: 'as far as I am I have not forgotten you.' Amnesia means that there's nothing to forget because there's nothing to remember. The Philippines was the place that we had left, not the place where we were going. It was what needed to be escaped, not where one might hope to go. It was a place of the past and not of the future.

Running through both passages above in a condensed fashion are all of the themes that are manifest throughout Dizon's work. In the first passage she makes reference to a rupture as a "tear in the fabric of time" and how this gap means she has nothing to forget "because there's nothing to remember," which suggests that this is not an experience that she possessed herself. Rather, this rupture was experienced second hand through parental narratives that asserted the "Philippines was the place that we had left" not where "we [are] going." Moreover, such narratives played out repetitiously as "a ritual of sorts," where Dizon's mother negotiated two temporalities, because as far as she was she had "not forgotten you." The Philippines, then, in her autobiographic reconstruction, functions almost like a lost sibling whose repression was necessary in order to leave her parents' past behind and introject the narrative time of life in the U.S.

What I am suggesting, then, is that what was "a ritual of sorts" was in fact a form of the mother's mourning for a lost object that Dizon, under the injunction to assimilate, incorporated into her own ego. And, thus the mother's mourning is ventriloquized through her daughter in the form of melancholic symptomatology. Put differently, the mother's desire for a lost object is assimilated into the unconscious of the daughter and redirected as a fantasy of presence. Here, it is necessary to distinguish between introjection and incorporation.

While close in meaning to introjection, incorporation, Abraham and Torok argue, must be understood as an instance where fantasy serves as a shortcut to psychic reconciliation when the subject is unable to properly individuate him or herself from a lost object. This is likely because the object was lost before introjection, or healthy mourning, could take place. The ego, then, they argue, recovers its investment in a lost object by constructing a fantasy to sustain the illusion of its presence. As Maria Torok explains:

While the introjection of desires puts an end to objectal dependency, incorporation of the object creates or reinforces imaginal ties and hence dependency. Installed in place of the lost object, the incorporated object continues to recall the fact that something else was lost: the desires quelled by repression. Like a commemorative monument, the incorporated object betokens the place, the date, and the circumstances in which desires were banished from introjection: they stand like tombs in the life of the ego.⁴⁰

To rephrase the above passage in terms of this study, then, if for example, Everson's introjection of state myths compels him to metonymically disassemble images of difference in order to master them, then, Dizon, under the injunction to assimilate, necessarily had to disavow her mother's grief in order to repress the anxieties attendant to being a subject of difference. Thus, Dizon's compulsion to return to this "ritual of sorts" in *Perpetual Peace* functions like a primal scene of her failure to properly introject national identity. Grief, then, is incorporated into the unconscious as guilt, and thus reveals itself as melancholia.

In overview, then, I have argued that the philosophical trajectory that is traced from *Civil Society* to *Perpetual Piece* must be understood as a broader attempt to confront and reconcile anxieties attendant to assimilation. However, key to this contention is that these anxieties stem from traumas that have less to do with the direct experience of geographic displacement, but rather how cultural forms of mourning are incorporated by succeeding generations. Incorporation is thus necessary under the younger generation's injunction to assimilate, however, this process thus takes on the form of trauma, which by extension manifests itself as melancholia. On this point, I will conjecture that what was so troubling to Dizon following Clichy-sous-Bois, in 2005 was not a perceived indifference to 1992, it is the guilt that is necessarily entailed in the process of assimilation itself – the fantasy that allows one to forget him or herself as a subject of difference, and thus not *see* themselves in the Other.

⁴⁰ Maria Torok, "The Illness of Mourning and the Fantasy of the Exquisite Corpse," in *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis Volume One* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 114.

CONCLUSION

In the pages above I have outlined two forms of melancholia as it is expressed both consciously and unconsciously within figurations of ruination. I argue that ruination in Kevin Jerome Everson's films stage fantasies of class ascension in order to repress a core anxiety of his incommensurability with dominant representations of national identity. I also argue that Michelle Dizon deploys ruins metaphorically in order to describe a conscious feeling that is a symptom of an unconscious incorporation of her parent's experience of cultural assimilation. The two ways these artists appropriate and give symbolic meaning to ruins necessitates a more dynamic set of theories to account for the pathological beliefs ruination engenders in subjects than current discourse has provided. Ultimately, however, I have undertaken this analysis in order to understand my own investment in ruination, namely, how the politics attendant to race and class is negotiated by contemporary artists in ways that do not merely shore up the wounds of history through critical approaches that focus on "racial identity." Rather, I am interested in works that demonstrate how – as Ann Anlin Cheng insightfully observes – we are all "racially entangled."⁴¹ The issues put forth by Everson and Dizon's work – both intentional and unintentionally – I argue, point in the direction of how such conversations of racial entanglement can be provoked within the field of aesthetic production.

⁴¹ Anne Anlin Cheng, "American Racial Grief, A Reprisal," *Huffington Post*, March 17, 2016, accessed June 3, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/anne-a-cheng/american-racial-grief-a-r_b_9467348.html.

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