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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

# Critical Race Poetics and the Ghostly Matter of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

Communication and Ethnic Studies

by

Jason Magabo Perez

Committee in charge:

Professor Zeinabu Davis, Chair
Professor Patrick Anderson, Co-Chair
Professor John D. Blanco
Professor Boatema Boateng
Professor K. Wayne Yang

2016

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The Dissertation of Jason Magabo Perez is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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University of California, San Diego

2016

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to: my mother, Leonora M. Perez, & her dear friend, my tita/auntie, Filipina B. Narciso; my nieces & nephew—the next generation of storytellers, Isabella Imbuido, Christian Jay Doro Perez, Jasmine Perez, & Evangeline Perez; & the one who continues to humble me, to hold me, to teach me, & to learn with me, Carmela S. Capinpin. This dissertation, too, is written in memory of the fierce & fiercely beloved Pinay poet & wonder & sister-friend Elaine Joy de la Cruz (1978-2003).

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## PREFACE: CRITICAL RACE POETICS: DEFINITION

Throughout this dissertation, I consistently gesture toward and ultimately conceptualize and perform what I am calling *critical race poetics*. I have arrived at *critical race poetics* through an extensive practice-led inquiry in creative writing, poetics, performance, and documentary filmmaking. *Critical race poetics* is a theoretically-informed, experimental, qualitative research methodology that blends together narrative strategies of critical race theory and the poetry techniques of contemporary documentary poetics. *Critical race poetics* is grounded in the political goal of resisting and eradicating racist state violence in manners that are material and discursive, legal and cultural. *Critical race poetics* draws from critical race theory's insistence on 'looking to the bottom' as a way of assembling racial knowledges from various epistemological positions, and, in particular, as a way of foregrounding the knowledge of those who have been targets of racist state violence. *Critical race poetics* involves a deep interrogation and (re-) assemblage of archives of racial knowledges. *Critical race poetics* borrows strategies from performance auto/ethnography, oral history, archival research, literary and textual analysis, and discourse analysis in order to attend to the gaps in knowledge in present scholarship about racist state violence. *Critical race poetics* extends the work of those critical race theorists who in their own research and writing have experimented with narrative forms such as autobiography, fiction, poetry, and legal analysis. Specifically, *critical race poetics* primarily focuses on poetry and poetics as a way of expanding the methodological repertoire for critical race theorists and researchers in allied fields. Maintaining the political impulses of critical race theory—i.e. antiracist politics, 'looking to the bottom,' interdisciplinary analysis, narrative intervention and experimentation, rigorous self-critique, *critical race poetics* relies on the deployment of various poetry techniques from documentary poetics: cut-up; collage; interjections; appositions; oral histories; autobiographical lyric; critical and creative revising of the archive. In short, *critical race poetics* experiments with and imaginatively re-processes archives of racial knowledges. To be clear, the 'poetics' in *critical race poetics* refers to both a premise and a practice: on the one hand, 'poetics' refers to an antiracist politics of archival research and historical production; on the other hand, 'poetics' refers to the specific poetry techniques that documentary poetics affords. Blending the narrative strategies of critical race theorists with the poetry techniques of documentary poetics, *critical race poetics* offers researchers the opportunity to (re-) visit, (re-) assemble, (re-) evaluate, and (re-) animate archives of racist state violence. In doing so, researchers produce various kinds of racial knowledges that can help us reconsider the nonlinear, non-narrative, associative logics of racist state violence. Ultimately, what *critical race poetics* produces is a contingent, 'fugitive knowledge' that makes possible various kinds of discursive practices, performances, and community formations—all in the project of resisting and eradicating racist state violence.

**CRITICAL RACE THEORY**

+ = **CRITICAL RACE POETICS**

**DOCUMENTARY POETICS**

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not be possible without support from the following peoples: my life partner, Carmela S. Capinpin; my parents, Leonora & Epifanio Perez; Jeffrey & Rachelle Perez; Christopher Perez & Irma Imbuido; the entire Perez family & diaspora; the Capinpin family; the Magabo family; the original Freedom Writers Spoken Word Collective: Joy de la Cruz, Dianne Que, Christine Lucero, Vejea Jennings, Arash Haile, Rene Gube, Stephen Klass; my professors & mentors: Zeinabu Davis, Patrick Anderson, K. Wayne Yang, John D. Blanco, Boatema Boateng, George Lipsitz, Ross Frank, Junot Díaz, Carolyn Cooke, Edie Meidav, Sarah Stone, Roshanak Kheshti, Dayo Gore, Gabriel Mendes, Pierre Desir; the Hangouts: Sarita E. See, Faye Caronan Chen, Anthony Ocampo; my ethnic studies cohort: Vineeta Singh, R.X.A. Williams, Lea Johnson, LeKeisha Hughes, Maisam Alomar, Alborz Ghandehari, Amrah Salomon-Johnson, Mirna Carrillo; my communication cohort: Jahmese Forte, Cristina Visperas, Brie Iatarola, Erika Cheng, Monika Sengul-Jones; my collaborators: Gail Gutierrez, Erina Alejo, Christopher Datiles, Taylor Wycoff, Hector Ramirez, Vicci Apacible, Golda Sargento, Jamie Nalas, Gregory Manalo, Joe Cascasan, Alexandria Diaz de Fato, Mark Marcelo, Wilfred Galila; y más: Josen Diaz, May Fu, Blu Barnd, Charlene Martinez, Edwina Welch, Nancy Magpusao, Loralei Bingamon, Abraham Cajudo, Jaymar Cabebe, Leslie Quintanilla, Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, Christine Bacareza Balance, Thea Quiray Tagle, Alleluia Panis, Charlene Argate, Noel Salunga, Jon Salunga, Anthony Kim, Amanda Solomon Amorao, Gayle Aruta, Theresa Aitchison, Christa Ludeking, Zachary Dake. I'm certainly certain that I've left some people out & mis-categorized some of your/their wondrousness: but, & I say this from the depths of my heart: You are already know what it is, Fam.

Chapter 3 includes an excerpt from Jason Magabo Perez, "Crayoning the King: On Disciplining," in *Phenomenology of Superhero* (Minneapolis: Red Bird Chapbooks, 2016). The dissertation author was the sole author of this excerpt. Chapter 3 also includes an unpublished e-mail conversation between Jason Magabo Perez and Cesar Rodriguez: Jason Magabo Perez and César Rodriguez, e-mail conversation, February 19, 2010.

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# ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Critical Race Poetics and the Ghostly Matter of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*

by

Jason Magabo Perez

Doctor of Philosophy in Communication and Ethnic Studies

University of California, San Diego, 2016

Professor Zeinabu Davis, Chair
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Situated within the interrelated fields of critical race theory and ethnic studies and the emergent field of creative writing studies, this dissertation interrogates the ways in which racist state violence is researched, historicized, and reimagined. Specifically, I focus on *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* (1977), a court case in which two Filipina migrant nurses,

Filipina Narciso and my mother, Leonora Perez, were criminalized and framed by the FBI for poisoning and murdering patients at the Ann Arbor VA Hospital in Michigan. Focusing on this case, I pursue two critical impulses: I blend narrative interventions in critical race theory with contemporary practices in documentary poetics in order to conceptualize, propose, and perform what I call *critical race poetics*; and, in turn, I perform *critical race poetics* as an alternative mode for understanding *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* in particular and theorizing racist state violence in general. Guided by my mother's insight that "there is no American justice," I begin with an analysis of historical productions about *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, my own previous body of work included. Then, I perform *critical race poetics*—in the form of a poem cycle—as a way of rearticulating the cultural and historical significances of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. I argue that *critical race poetics* is a generative methodology through which archives of racist state violence are critically reassembled, reprocessed, and reanimated. And ultimately, through *critical race poetics*, I carry out my mother's theoretical insight that for her, for Filipina Narciso, and for other targets of racist state violence, American justice remains elusive, if not impossible.

# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The title of this dissertation is animated by a methodological strategy, a theoretical premise, and a specific object/site/moment of study. Deeply informed by critical race theory and sociologist Avery Gordon's meditations on the epistemology of 'haunting,' *Critical Race Poetics and the Ghostly Matter of* U.S. v. Narciso and Perez is first and foremost a work of historiography. Responding to provocations within the interrelated fields of ethnic studies and critical race theory and the emergent field of creative writing studies, I conceptualize, propose, and perform an experimental qualitative research methodology I call *critical race poetics*. Through *critical race poetics* I pursue and interrogate the "ghostly matter" of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* (1977), a court case in two Filipina migrant nurses, Filipina Narciso and my mother, Leonora Perez, were criminalized and framed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) for poisoning and murdering patients at the Ann Arbor Veterans Administration (VA) Hospital in Michigan.

While I remain committed to narrating a counter-history of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, in this dissertation, I am principally concerned with the ways in which knowledge about *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* has been produced. To put it simply, this dissertation is about knowledge production, about *how* one sets out to study and understand histories of criminalization and racist state violence, about *how* one attempts to trace a "haunting."[1]

[1] I use the term 'racist state violence' in order make *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* available to various critical vocabularies. I am mostly inspired by the work of Joy James, *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in U.S. Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). I also draw my understandings of 'violence' from Frantz Fanon, "Concerning Violence," in *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2005); Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Orlando: Harcourt, 1970); Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1986); Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008). For descriptions of the ideas of

This dissertation, too, is committed to the struggle over racial literacy, that is, the struggle over how knowledge producers analyze (and/or actively or unwittingly elide) the racializing processes and structures at play in historical moments of racist state violence.[2]

Consequently, I first examine the historical contexts and research frameworks employed by different knowledge producers, i.e. different narrators, myself included, who previously have sought to understand the deeper significance of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. Then, in response to these previous historical productions, I bring together the narrative strategies of critical race theory and contemporary practices in documentary poetics in order to conceptualize the foundations for *critical race poetics*, which I ultimately perform in order to produce a historiographical text—in the form of a poem cycle—that re-articulates the cultural significances of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*.[3]

To be clear, rather than prioritizing or privileging argumentative claims or theoretical insights about *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, which I no doubt provide to some extent in this dissertation, I am much more committed to experimenting with and demonstrating a critical and creative historiographical practice, in other words, a methodology, that invites scholars to imagine fresh and alternative ways to critically re-assemble and re-process archives of racist state violence and to reimagine the types of questions and desires one has in studying and knowing and relaying histories of racist state

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'haunting' and "ghostly matter," see Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 7, 8, 17.

[2] Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, *Critical Race Narratives: A Study of Race, Rhetoric, and Injury* (New York: NYU Press, 2001), 89.

[3] I borrow from Stuart Hall's understanding of "articulation" as the social and political production of connections and linkages between different concepts or phenomena. Stuart Hall, "On postmodernism and articulation," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, edited by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 141.

violence.[4] I perform *critical race poetics* to pursue what philosopher Michel Foucault might call "subjugated knowledges," what sociologist Avery Gordon later calls "fugitive knowledge."[5] I perform *critical race poetics* in anticipation of what the ghost might reveal. In what follows, I narrate the historical background and elaborate on the scholarly contexts from which this dissertation emerges.

### ***U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* (1977)**

During the months of July and August of 1975, up to 35 patients in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) at the Ann Arbor Veterans Administration (VA) Hospital in Michigan suffered breathing failures. Approximately 10 of these breathing failures were fatal.[6] Due to this alarmingly high number of such rare incidents and the fact that these incidents had occurred on federal property, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) took charge and launched an extensive, 10-month, one-million dollar investigation, employing approximately 200 agents nationwide.

Beginning in August of 1975, the FBI occupied the VA hospital for seven weeks, throughout which FBI agents, with the help of a medical team, scrupulously reviewed

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[4] Poet Audre Lorde writes: "For there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt." SEE Audre Lorde, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 39.
[5] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writing 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 81-82. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xviii.
[6] As historian Catherine Ceniza Choy has noted: there are different approximations from different sources. Different sources offer different approximations. For instance, the *Washington Post* on November 20, 1975 reported over 3 dozen arrests, 8 deaths; the *Chicago Tribune* on March 2, 1976 reported more than 20 mysterious arrests, as many as six deaths; and *Time Magazine* on March 22, 1976 reported 27 arrests and 11 deaths. *New York Times* reported on March 1, 1977 that were 51-63 arrests and 13 patients died. *Chicago Tribune* on June 26, 1977 reported 52 arrests, 13 deaths. Catherine Ceniza Choy writes that there up to 35 respiratory arrests—SEE Catherine Ceniza Choy, *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003).

medical records, interviewed patients, former employees and former medical residents, and questioned current hospital staff. In many instances, FBI agents relentlessly harassed and intimidated the hospital staff, particularly of color, and more specifically nurses.[7]

The FBI claimed that the suspect that they were after had injected the muscle relaxant pancronium bromide, its trade name Pavulon, into the intravenous tubes of the patients. Pancronium bromide was, as one journalist described, "a synthetic variant of curare, the lethal plant toxin used by South American Indians to tip poison darts."[8] Because the effects of pancronium bromide are immediate, the FBI argued that the suspect would have had to have been at the bedside of or at least in close proximity to the suffering patient. Thus, nurses and doctors were the central focus of the interrogations. It was later claimed, however, that hospital administrators encouraged FBI agents to pursue nurses and not doctors.

Although the FBI would not publicly identify any suspects until months later, two Filipina migrant nurses, Filipina Narciso and my mother, Leonora Perez, who were both on duty in the ICU during many of the breathing failures, who both had complied with FBI requests and willingly answered all questions, and who both, despite being intimidated and threatened by the FBI, maintained their innocence through and through, were targeted and repeatedly urged to confess very early on in the investigation.[9] As a result, both Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez were removed from direct patient care until the investigation

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[7] The number of incidents was uncharacteristically high. For a description of investigation: SEE Thomas C. O'Brien, "The V.A. Murders," in *Litigation* 11.15 (1984-1985): 15-19, 60-61; Choy, *Empire of Care*, 140.

[8] "Death Follows Art," *Time Magazine*, March 22, 1976, 55.

[9] On multiple occasions, Leonora Perez, my mother, has told me that she was harassed early on in the investigation. Narciso is quoted having expressed as much in O'Brien, "V.A. Murders," 15.

was resolved. Filipina Narciso was excused from patient care but remained at the Ann Arbor VA Hospital, and Leonora Perez relocated to the VA Lakeside Hospital in Chicago, Illinois, where she, too, would have no direct contact with patients.

In November of 1975, Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez were subpoenaed to testify as witnesses in front of a federal grand jury in Detroit, Michigan. In January of 1976, trusting that their testimony would alleviate them from suspicion, Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez, at this point having finally sought and secured legal counsel, testified before a federal grand jury.[10] Once again, the two nurses maintained their innocence.

By March of 1976, the federal government summoned and relied heavily on the deposition of Richard Neely, a terminally ill cancer patient who during the FBI investigation was under hypnosis when he identified Leonora Perez as the nurse at the bedside during his breathing failure. In a legal brief citing Neely's deposition, the FBI named Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez as prime suspects in the VA murders.[11] It turned out that Filipina Narciso's and Leonora Perez's appearance in front of a federal grand jury just months prior would be used as a pretext working against them.

Then, on June 16, 1976, the federal grand jury returned a 16-count criminal indictment charging Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez with five counts of murder, 10 counts of poisoning, and one count of conspiracy. While FBI agent Jay E. Bailey held a press conference and announced the indictment and charges, Filipina Narciso was being arrested outside of the Ann Arbor VA Hospital, and Leonora Perez, who at the time was

[10] My mother says that back then she believed that to seek legal counsel was to admit one's guilt. "This," she says, "is how it is back home in Philippines." SEE ALSO Narciso stating this in O'Brien, "V.A. Nurses," 15.
[11] "Nurse in Chicago accused in mass VA deaths," *Chicago Tribune*, March 2, 1976, 1.

nearly four months pregnant, was being arrested outside of the VA Lakeside Hospital in Chicago, Illinois. Filipina Narciso was initially denied bond and Leonora Perez's bond was initially set at $500,000. Leonora Perez's only son at the time, who was four years old, recognized his mother on the television screen and said, "That's my mom! They got my mom!"[12] Revisiting her diaries, Leonora Perez recollects the day of her arrest:

> June 16, 1976. A horrible day. The FBI came to my work and arrested me. I didn't do anything. The FBI was mean. They kept trying to get me to confess.…I was working morning in the VA. And then, there was something fishy because everybody said, "Do not leave." The head nurse of the hospital was always going to my desk and he said, "You can't leave 'til it's time to go home. You have to stay here." I said, "Okay, I'm not leaving." I'm not going, you know, anywhere. And then after that, like I have a hunch that something is happening, something is going on, but they're not telling me. So, when I went home, I was out on the street with a friend.…And then we were walking down, outside the VA already, and two big men was behind me. And then they were holding me. And they said, "Leonora Perez, you are under arrest for the crimes you did in Michigan." I said, "What crime? I didn't do any crime." And he said, ".…You have to follow us, ride my car, and if not, we'll drag you." I said, "No, I'll just follow you.".…They handcuff me. They put a jacket on my handcuff. Yeah, real handcuff, like this…[13]

Two weeks later, a federal judge ordered that Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez be released on a $75,000 bond provided that each of them meet certain conditions set by the court. Being that neither of the two Filipina nurses were citizens, they allegedly posed a potential flight risk. Eventually, with the support of local community groups and sympathizers, the nurses were released from Washtenaw County Jail in Ann Arbor.

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[12] Leonora Perez in conversation with author.

[13] Leonora Perez, Filipina migrant nurse and author's mother, reading her diaries aloud and reflecting, in conversation with author, May 2010.

For the remainder of the year, the legal defense team prepared for the trial. For months, Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez, alongside their legal defense team, read, organized, studied, and analyzed medical records, which for some patients were stacked one-foot high. The team also had to reread and make sense of more than a thousand statements from hundreds of witnesses taken during the FBI and grand jury investigations.[14] Leonora Perez remembers that while still awaiting trial she received death threats and harassing phone calls from a number of strangers. Leonora Perez remembers being harassed by, most notably and surprisingly, several Filipino callers. These Filipino callers would say to her: "You are a shame to the Filipino people."[15] Amidst all of this, in November of 1976, Leonora Perez gave birth to her second son. Any flowers and gifts that were sent to Leonora Perez while she was in the hospital had to pass a rigorous inspection.

Well before the case went to trial, *United States of America v. Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez* (i.e. *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*) had garnered widespread international attention from various parties. Across the U.S., activist groups and organizations such as the Narciso-Perez Legal Defense Committee, the Chicago Support Group, the Katipunan ng mga Demokratikong Pilipino (KDP), and the Philippine Nurses Association of America (PNAA) organized and mobilized in support of the two nurses. Additionally, support for Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez came from allied political organizations outside of local, national, and transnational Filipino communities. For example, the feminist publication, *off our backs*, would publish consistent updates and calls to action in support of the Filipina nurses. As one *off our backs* writer explained: "Everything in their case

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[14] O'Brien, "V.A. Murders," 17.
[15] Conversation between Leonora Perez and author.

indicates they are victims of a truly criminal justice system."[16] Each of these groups and organizations, motivated by sometimes very different political objectives, had concluded without question that the two Filipina nurses had been framed and racially scapegoated. To varying degrees, these groups and organizations simultaneously called for an end to racial discrimination, scapegoating, FBI frame-ups, and legal lynching. It was in determining the larger significance of the frame-up and scapegoating that these groups and organizations disagreed. While the KDP analyzed the case as a product of a larger historical frame of U.S. imperialism and racism, the PNAA developed and retained its focus on fighting for fair and just labor conditions for Filipino nurses.[17] Regardless of these different analyses, *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* proved to be a significant moment for the ongoing development of U.S. Filipino social and political consciousness.

Furthermore, the case caught the attention of communities in the Philippines and the Philippine Government itself. Farmers, nursing students, activists, and other sympathizers offered whatever monetary support they could for the two nurses. President

[16] Marcy Rein, "Filipina nurses framed," *off our backs* 7.3 (1977): 3.

[17] There are personal reflections by KDP activists who were involved campaigns in support of Narciso and Perez. In these reflections, KDP activists discuss how their involvement in the case helped politicize them. SEE Steven G. Louie and Glenn K. Omatsu, eds., *Asian Americans: the Movement and the Moment* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Press, 2001, 48-79. In the aforementioned book *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History*, Choy highlights contradictions and conflict amongst Narciso and Perez supporters. The KDP had a cultural arm called Sining Bayan who developed an agit-prop play about the trial of Narciso and Perez: SEE Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stages of Empire* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 87-90. I have been invited to speak at two regional conferences for the Philippine Nurses Association of America (PNAA). During each of these, I have come across PNAA activists who hold a different political perspective than the KDP. While the KDP was devotedly leftist in its analysis, the PNAA was primarily interested in fighting for the innocence of Narciso and Perez and fighting for the protection of Filipino nurses.

Ferdinand Marcos took a "deep personal interest in the case."[18] Film director Cesar Gallardo made a movie, *Dateline Chicago: Arrest the Nurse Killer* (1977), and stated that forty percent of the film's profits would go in support of Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez. Gallardo's film was loosely based on the Speck massacres, a 1966 case in which Richard Speck murdered several nursing students in Chicago, some of the victims being Filipina, the sole survivor also being Filipina.[19] In Gallardo's version, a Filipino policeman, played by the young Joseph Estrada, solves the case and avenges his sister's murder by traveling to Chicago and pushing the Speck-inspired character off of a platform. "There is a certain sad irony," stated Gallardo, "in the fact that the deaths of Filipino nurses 10 years ago at the hands of Richard Speck may help save the lives of two Filipino nurses today."[20]

By February of 1977, five of the total charges against Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez were dropped, two of the five murder charges remained. Without explanation, the federal government had dropped the Neely charge from the indictment. Again, the Neely charge was instrumental in facilitating the indictment in the first place. Still, later in the case, the FBI would use Neely's sworn testimony, a testimony which, as stated earlier, was collected while Neely was under hypnosis.

On March 1, 1977, the case finally went to trial. Judge Philip Pratt presided over the trial. In the middle of the jury selection phase, the *Detroit Free Press* revealed that a former nursing supervisor at the Ann Arbor VA Hospital, Betty Jakim, who suffered severe

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[18] According to his brother, Pacifico Marcos, Ferdinand Marcos took personal interest in *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. Pacifico Marcos is quoted in Ronald Yates, "Filipinos back accused nurses," *Chicago Tribune*, January 2, 1977, 5.

[19] Catherine Ceniza Choy writes about the Speck case. SEE Choy, *Empire of Care*, 121-139.

[20] Cesar Gallardo is quoted in Ronald Yates, "Filipinos back accused nurses," *Chicago Tribune*, January 2, 1977, 5.

depression, had reportedly confessed before committing suicide that it was she who was responsible for the poisonings and not Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez.[21] Although the defense was confident that this detail could completely derail the federal government's case against the two Filipina nurses, the trial ensued and the federal prosecution delivered its opening remarks by the end of March.

Federal Assistant Prosecutor Richard Yanko opened up the trial with his remarks. In a statement that lasted over two hours, Yanko laid out the details of the case. According to the defense, Yanko's tone was "forceful" and "menacing."[22] Leonora Perez wrote in her diaries that Yanko "was like a minister preaching."[23] Yanko stated: "History is in the making today, dark history, criminal history, history our ancestors never willed upon us."[24] From the very start, Yanko conceded that the entire case against Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez was based solely on circumstantial evidence. In other words, the government's narrative of the events of the summer of 1975 would cite not a single piece of hard evidence. "There is no smoking gun," admitted Yanko. "The evidence in this case revolves around putting together various clues."[25] The federal prosecution's main objective was to place Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez at the bedside of or in very close proximity to the patients who had experienced breathing failures. The federal prosecution was confident that by doing so they could strongly suggest to the jury that the two Filipina nurses were guilty.

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[21] "Nurse' hopes rise in VA poison trial," *Chicago Tribune*, March 14, 1977, 2.
[22] O'Brien, "V.A. Murders," 60.
[23] From Leonora Perez's unpublished prison diaries.
[24] O'Brien, "V.A. Murders," 60. Leonora Perez's unpublished prison diaries.
[25] Richard Yanko is quoted in "Trial for two nurses in VA slayings opens," *Chicago Tribune*, March 29, 1977, 6.

Throughout the 18-week trial, the credibility of the federal prosecution's case against Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez diminished. As mentioned above, the confession of Betty Jakim had sparked controversy in the media and put into question the validity of the FBI's claims. Additionally, one prosecution expert testified that pancronium bromide could be injected into the intravenous bags of the patients (instead of the intravenous tubes) which could have thus caused a substantial delay in the breathing failures.[26] This suggested that whoever injected pancronium bromide into the patients' intravenous tubes could have done so several minutes before the drug would have any effect. This detail put into question one of the founding premises of the FBI's case—that the suspect had to be nearby when the patient suffered a breathing failure. Later, a nurse witness would testify that very early on in the 10-month investigation Dr. S. Martin Lindenauer, chief of the hospital staff, had ordered the FBI to question nurses and not doctors. Filipina Narciso, too, charged that Dr. Lindenauer had attempted to force her to confess.[27] By early June of 1977, the federal prosecution dropped one murder charge for Leonora Perez and two nonfatal poisoning charges for both Leonora Perez and Filipina Narciso. With such developments, the defense predicted that the two Filipina nurses would eventually be acquitted of all charges.

Two key moments in the trial further inspired confidence in the defense. The first moment happened when a toxicology laboratory failed to find any traces of pancronium bromide in the system of John C. Brown, one of the patients allegedly murdered by Filipina

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[26] "Doctor Says V.A. Hospital Killer Might Not Have Been Near Victims," *New York Times*, April 6, 1977, 19.

[27] "CHIEF AT V.A. HOSPITAL A KEY FIGURE AT TRIAL: Witness Accuses Him of Ordering the F.B.I. to Focus on Nurses as Suspects in Murders," *New York Times*, May 1, 1977, 18.

Narciso and Leonora Perez.[28] The second moment happened toward the end of the trial when the jury heard for the first time a firsthand account of the events from one of the victims of the alleged crimes. William Loesch, one of the patients who suffered a breathing failure, testified that he believed Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez were innocent. In fact, Loesch described the potential suspect as a mysterious man in a green surgical scrub suit.[29] These two moments, the absence of pancronium bromide in Brown's system and Loesch's suggestion that the two Filipina nurses were innocent, continued to weaken the federal prosecution's already shoddy case against the nurses.

On June 28, 1977, the federal prosecution rested its case. In its seven-hour summation of the case, the federal prosecution dramatically shifted its theory and stated that murder, it turned out, had *not* been the motive of the two nurses. "The mystery of this whole incredible, mad, senseless scheme," alleged Assistant Prosecuting Attorney Richard Yanko, "is solved when one realizes that they did not want [their victims] to die. They did not set out to kill."[30] By the time the jury went into deliberation at the end of June, Filipina Narciso was charged with one count of murder and four counts of poisoning, while Leonora Perez was charged with one count of conspiracy and three counts of poisoning. Still, because of how the trial had unfolded, the legal defense team and both nurses remained optimistic about the outcome.

On July 13, 1977, after deliberating for 94 hours over the span of 15 days, the jury finally reached a verdict. From Leonora Perez's diary:

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[28] "Tests Fail to Show Drug in One of Alleged Victims of 2 Ann Arbor Nurses," *New York Times*, May 25, 1977, 21.

[29] "VA patient hints 'man in green' was poisoner," *Chicago Tribune*, June 17, 1977, 8.

[30] Richard Yanko is quoted in "Prosecutor Says Michigan Nurses Did Not Aim to Kill," *New York Times*, June 28, 1977, 10.

> July 13, Wednesday: Went to Det. Cadillac w/ Daddy only. Itay, Inay, Ellen and company did not feel like going so they stayed. On our way to the hotel we heard on WWJ Tom McIntyre that maybe today is the day of the verdict because when the jury went inside the courtroom they were not dressed in blue jeans like before but it could also mean they will eat lunch at the renaissance center. So we hurriedly drove and reached the hotel and we say Tom O'Brien. Had to order breakfast for us when Grace and Cora came down to say they need us right away. Tom checked with Shirley so we waited and comes Vicky running and hurry up that today is the verdict. So we hurried up to the 25th floor and dressed up. Called Ellen so the family can come. Cameras flocked around us and we reached court were the only ones they were waiting for. The courtroom was packed with reporters, supporters, etc. Before they started the lawyers went in to the chamber and they were told whatever the verdict is the girls will go home till 9am tomorrow.
>
> The 12 jurors came in and never looked at us. So the foreman handed in the verdict and the judge asked Steven Greenlay to read and read it. Narciso is found guilty on count 1 which is conspiracy, so I told myself my god I'm also guilty. They dropped PI's [a.k.a. Filipina Narciso's] murder and one poisoning. We were convicted on 3 counts of poisoning each and 1 count of conspiracy.
>
> Everybody was shocked, disbelief and stunned. We went in to the institute and never said a word. My parents came, I just cried when I saw my mother, Ellen & co. and most of all my 2 boys. We went home very very sad. Could not take it. Went to PI's to join for a prayer. Had interview w/ Kirk Cheyfitz and also Ann Arbor News. Met sympathizers. Home to Detroit.[31]

As Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez potentially faced life imprisonment on account of poisoning, a wave of protests in support of the two nurses continued. Protesters charged the FBI with racial discrimination and legal lynching. At one rally a few days after the verdict, Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez spoke out. "On the 13th day of July," said Filipina Narciso, "justice died." Leonora Perez said the she had simply "lost [her] faith in the American system."[32]

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[31] From Leonora Perez's unpublished prison diaries.

[32] Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez are quoted in "Hundreds Protest Conviction of Nurses in Poisoning," *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 1977, B4.

In mid-September of 1977, Judge Philip Pratt deferred sentencing for Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez and ordered them to 90 days of psychiatric examinations at the Federal Prison Camp in Alderson, West Virginia. Community groups such as the ones mentioned earlier—i.e. the KDP, the Chicago Support Group, and the PNAA—continued to organize in support of the two nurses. One source reports that the two nurses received support from communities in 33 cities in U.S., Canada, and Guam.[33] All the while, the legal defense team continued to insist on a retrial. Then, on December 19, 1977, Judge Philip Pratt granted a new trial to the defense. Judge Pratt wrote: "The Court finds that the overwhelming prejudice to the defendants arising from the government's persistent misconduct prevented the jurors from receiving the case free from taint."[34] Soon after Judge Pratt's decision, Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez were released. In the end, on February 1, 1978, the federal government, certain that they would not be able to convince a second jury to arrive at another guilty verdict, dropped its case:

> After giving careful consideration to the many factors involved, the United States attorney has decided that he should seek a dismissal of the case, rather than proceed with new trial.[35]

To this day, 40 years after the initial indictment and arrest of Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez, the mysterious case of the Ann Arbor VA Hospital deaths has never been solved, nor has the federal government admitted any wrongdoing or issued any apology or reparations to Filipina Narciso, Leonora Perez, or their/our families.[36]

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[33] "Filipinas win new trial," *off our backs* 8.2 (February 1978): 8.

[34] *United States of America v. Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez*, 446 F. Supp. 252 (1977). *Leagle*.

[35] Federal Attorney James Robinson is quoted in "Drop charges in VA hospital poisonings," *Chicago Tribune*, February 2, 1978, 6.

[36] While it was mentioned in *The Washington Post* that the nurses were studying the possibility of filing suit against government for damages, my mother claims that they would rather lay the whole

Less than a handful of scholars and researchers have conducted substantial works about *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. In the next chapter, I take a closer look at the extant works; for now, I simply mention their titles as preface: journalist Robert K. Wilcox's on-the-scene investigative journalistic account titled *The Mysterious Deaths at Ann Arbor* (1977); historian Catherine Ceniza Choy's detailed exploration and analysis of the case in her larger work *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History* (2003); and documentary filmmaker Geri Alumit Zeldes's Michigan State University-sponsored film *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez, & the Press* (2013). In my view, while each of these works present *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* in seemingly dramatically different ways, from different research contexts, from different theoretical and methodological vantage points, when read together they appear to operate under what seems to be a singular, over-determining "regime of truth."[37] Accordingly, *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* remains grossly understudied. Moreover, I consider *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* to be full of "ghostly matter" worth pursuing, for it is a history of racist state violence that haunts not only my family, but also subtly haunts the lives of contemporary U.S. Filipinos.[38] Again, I am interested in revisiting this case, tracing this haunting, for what the ghost might reveal.

## Central Research Questions

Even as I attempt to narrate a *factual* account of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* above, I am haunted by what I am unable to find, what I am unable to say, what I am unable to

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ordeal to rest than go through such public scrutiny again. "Philippine Nurses Weigh Suit against Hospital," *The Washington Post*, May 30, 1978, A10.

[37] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 133.

[38] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 7, 8, 22.

name. This dissertation, as I have stated, is first and foremost a work of historiography. As such, I base my endeavor into history on two conceptual impulses. To put it differently, this dissertation is motivated by two broader concepts regarding historical production: "haunting" and "archival power."[39]

First, as I have been emphasizing, I am interested in treating *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* as a 'haunting.' On the surface, the details of the case—i.e. the serial deaths, the mystery, the suspicion, the violence of it all—already suggest feelings of the ghostly. Still, I prefer to proceed with more a precise vocabulary for 'haunting.' In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination,* sociologist Avery F. Gordon conceptualizes 'haunting' as an indispensable and palpable aspect of contemporary social life. 'Haunting' is not about the invisibility of certain histories, or even the complete erasure of certain narratives. 'Haunting,' as I understand it, is about that which we know and feel and sense is there, for it is a "seething presence," yet it is a presence which we cannot fully quite register through our available vocabularies of knowing.[40] As Gordon writes:

> Haunting is an encounter in which you touch the ghost or the ghostly matter of things: the ambiguities, the complexities of power and personhood, the violence and the hope, the looming and receding actualities, the shadows of our selves and our society.[41]

I am drawn to Gordon's notion here of the ghostly 'encounter' and the ways in which such 'encounter' is saturated with the messiness of history.[42] Over the years, when it has come to studying *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* and its narrations, I have expected and encountered

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[39] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 27. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 55-57.
[40] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8.
[41] Ibid., 134.
[42] Trouillot writes: "History is messy for the people who must live it." SEE Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 110.

complexity and contradiction. I have expected to wrestle with the tension between the knowable and the unknowable: 'the violence and the hope.' In my view, to trace a 'haunting,' to pursue the ghostly, is not to be content with the horizon of knowing or intelligibility, rather, to trace a 'haunting' is to subject yourself to what the ghost may or may not reveal, what you may or may not immediately nor fully comprehend: the ambiguities. To trace a 'haunting' one must have access to the ghost, and that ghost must appear in some way, that ghost must be felt. As I will explain in detail in the next chapter, the making of a recent documentary film about *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, which I have mentioned above, *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez, & the Press,* confirms for me that a 'haunting' is undoubtedly taking place.

Gordon goes on to describe the oppressed past as "whatever organized violence has repressed and in the process formed into a past, a history, remaining nonetheless alive and accessible to encounter."[43] As I shall demonstrate, the oppressed and repressed past, the 'ghostly matter' of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, is alive, we encounter it, it haunts narratives of Filipino life, it wants to tell us or show us or make us feel something about racist state violence, about things we cannot assume to fully know.

Second, as I study what is accessible and available, as I make new sources—i.e. oral histories, family archives, etc.—accessible and available, I am curious as to how I might practically go about tracing this 'haunting.' That is, I wonder about the production of history, however messy and contingent it proves to be. With respect to these curiosities, I turn to the insights of the anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot in *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Trouillot's understanding of the past resonates with

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[43] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 65-66.

Gordon's. "The past," argues Trouillot, "does not exist independently from the present….the past has no content. The past—or, more accurately, pastness—is a position. Thus, in no way can we identify the past as *past*."[44] Trouillot's insistence that the past is a designation, a political position, itself a social production, and not a limiting empirical reality or periodization, suggests for me that *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, its contents, again, its 'ghostly matter,' looms in and for the *here* and the *now*.

What I find most useful about Trouillot's work are his insights on the concrete practice of making history, of historical production. Trouillot suggests that to understand the dimensions and workings of power in relation to the production of historical knowledge one must look into the intertwining of what he calls the "two sides of historicity."[45] In Trouillot's schema, the 'two sides of historicity' have to do with 1) the material sociohistorical process of what happened, and 2) what is said to have happened.[46] In other words, the 'two sides of historicity' have to do with the 'historical' event and the narrative(s) about that 'historical' event. Exploring historicity further, and maintaining that there is always a slippage between the 'two sides of historicity,' Trouillot discusses the concept of 'archival power.' In Trouillot's view, "archival power" describes the uneven power relations in the social process of historical production, the process of making sources, archives, and narratives, and the resulting silences.[47] I rely on the notion of 'archival power' to help me discern between the various historical productions exploring *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*.

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[44] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 15.
[45] Ibid., 24.
[46] Ibid., 29.
[47] Ibid., 103, 105, 116.

Through and through, I am committed to the material consequences of historical productions, specifically those historical productions that explore racist state violence.

Clearly, I turn to the work of both Gordon and Trouillot because both are deeply invested in the politics of knowledge production, the politics of the *how*. To reiterate, Gordon's formulation of 'haunting' offers me a critical vocabulary for what it is I am pursuing in this dissertation and Trouillot's concept of 'archival power' provides for me a rich analytical tool for understanding and critiquing the social production of history. Keeping these conceptual impulses in mind, I formulate my central research questions, which, on the surface, are quite simple.

In this dissertation, I seek to address the following with respect to *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*: What happened? What is said to have happened? In other words, what narratives exist? How have these narratives been constructed? That is, what have been the historical contexts of and the theoretical and methodological approaches to studying *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*? What are alternative approaches to studying the case? What might this case and the ways in which it has been and will be studied tell us about Filipino history in general and subject formation in particular? About racist state violence in general?

**Theorizing from the Bottom**

As a creative writer, performer, scholar, and educator, I wrestle with the politics of knowledge production. I continuously work at sharpening my critical vocabularies in ways that enable me to participate in and to explain my questions and practices within various discursive communities. What I have often found in the project of ethnic studies and its allied fields is a profound anxiety over the politics of knowledge production. Ethnic studies

scholars who claim activism to be central to their practice tend to talk much about making scholarly discourse relevant, about writing work that circulates more broadly, about the ways in which critical scholarship is or is not applicable to activist efforts. I am curious as to how we continue to be trained in language practices so far removed, so alienated, from our families and communities. While this dissertation does not seek to reconcile these contradictions, it does commit to a broader reading practice that refuses to make a clear and easy distinction between institutional and vernacular, or non-institutional, community-based knowledges. In fact, I am in pursuit of such "disqualified" and "subjugated knowledges."[48] I am indebted to those scholars who again and again have reminded us where and how to look for critical insight.

Critical race theorists have always grounded their work by 'looking to the bottom.' Critical race theorist Mari Matsuda describes "looking to the bottom" as "adopting the perspective of those who have felt the falsity of the liberal promise."[49] Matsuda goes on to further describe 'looking to the bottom' as a way of examining questions of justice not "from an abstract position but from the position of groups who suffered through history."[50] In terms of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, I 'look to the bottom' and try to better understand my mother's theorizations.

Along similar lines, Black feminist literary scholar Barbara Christian argues for a reconsideration of the enterprise of critical theory. Christian reminds us that people of color

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[48] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 82.
[49] Mari J. Matsuda, "Looking to the Bottom," in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*, ed. Kimberlè Crenshaw et al. (New York: The New Press, 1995), 63.
[50] Ibid., 63.

have always been theorizing. Arguing for the rich critical content found in literature by marginalized peoples Christian writes:

> Among the folk who speak in muted tones are people of color, feminists, radical critics, creative writers, who have struggled for much longer than a decade to make their voices, their various voices, heard, and for whom literature is not an occasion for discourse among critics but is necessary nourishment for their people and one way by which they come to understand their lives better.[51]

The stakes for theory, for Christian, are not a matter of critical discourse. Rather, the stakes for theory are a matter of strengthening and enlivening communities. Both critical race theorists and Barbara Christian remind us that there exist new sources of knowing that we often ignore in favor of institutional knowledges.

Avery Gordon suggests that to touch the ghost is to give way to what Foucault calls "subjugated knowledges."[52] I am interested in Gordon's explanation of 'subjugated knowledges.' Gordon acknowledges the two different meanings of 'subjugated knowledges' explained by Foucault: on the one hand 'subjugated knowledge' has to do with what institutional practices have repressed; the other form of 'subjugated knowledge' is "'disqualified,' marginalized, fugitive knowledge from below and outside the institutions of official knowledge production."[53] In this dissertation, 'fugitive knowledge' is the intellectual horizon, knowledge that escapes, knowledge that is contingent, knowledge that is perhaps irrepressible.

Thinking together critical race theorists' attention to 'the bottom,' Christian's reminder about people of color theorizing practices, and the notion of 'fugitive

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[51] Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Feminist Studies* 14.1 (1998): 69.
[52] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 82.
[53] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xviii.

knowledges,' I cannot help but turn back again to cultural critic Gayatri Spivak's question: "Can the subaltern speak?"[54] I am not here to answer Spivak. However, I have come to understand *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* a little differently as I have learned how to listen more intently. Thus, it is in the spirit of 'looking to the bottom' that I now offer the following anecdotes. These anecdotes, involving my mother, Leonora Perez, fundamentally inform the theoretical and methodological trajectories of this dissertation.

In 2001, I invited my mother, Leonora Perez, to speak at a Filipino American community festival at the University of California, San Diego. After she reflected on her experiences on stage she immediately was drawn to one information table in particular. It was a table for a radical organization advocating for political prisoners. My mother spent a good amount of time learning from young people about the movement to free Mumia Abu Jamal and all political prisoners. My mother later said to me, "There's no justice. It's like what happen to me, ano?" About a year later, I gave my mother the gift of *The Autobiography of Assata Shakur*. For about a month, I would see it on her nightstand, bookmarked and dog-eared as if she could not stay away from it. "You know," she said after she finished reading it, "There really is no American justice. The whites don't like the coloreds." And finally, in November of 2014, I called my mother to vent about the non-indictment of Darren Wilson, the police officer who murdered Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. I said, "Again. Another one gets away and a Black youth is dead." My mother, without fail, said, "There's no American justice, huh?"

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[54] Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson (University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313.

My mother's theory about what happened, about what is significant, is very simple: There is no American justice. There is no such thing as American justice. Even as she and Narciso were granted a retrial and were released from prison, my mother maintains: There is no American justice. From a theoretical standpoint, I follow up: If there is no American justice, if justice is an impossibility within the U.S. state, then what is there? What do we look for? What do we fight for? And how? From a methodological standpoint, my mother's critical imagination is very lyrical—it works via an associative logic. It is not a flattening or a metaphorizing or a violent analogizing of injustice and violence. Hers is theory from lived reality. Hers is theory 'from the bottom.' My mother links different historical moments of racist state violence and concludes with the same epistemological position: There is no American justice. This dissertation is guided by mother's critical lyrical imagination. My mother's lyrical imagination informs the architecture of this dissertation—how I assemble my bodies of literature, how I recall moments in my own thinking, how I move and search through the associative, the lyrical. In many ways, as I am indebted and inspired by my mother's thinking, this dissertation is not only a work of critical historiography, it wants more specifically and perhaps more accurately to be a lyrical meditation on American justice and its impossibility. I am not here to prove my mother's theory. I am here instead to carry it through, to work it out in my reading, analysis, self-reflection, and *critical race poetics*. My mother's theoretical guidance, her practice, her forms of 'subjugated' or 'fugitive knowledge,' as Foucault suggests, enables critical theory and insight to move forward.[55] My mother's insight gives way for this dissertation to unfold.

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[55] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 82.

**Overarching Methodology**

I have always gravitated toward an interdisciplinary practice. At times, I have romanticized the notion of moving toward an anti-disciplinary research practice, one that actively works to undo and not simply cross disciplinary boundaries. In any case, I am inspired by a few different reflections on interdisciplinarity.

In cultural theorist Chela Sandoval's work, I find generative her development of an oppositional politics. Sandoval describes the power of "differential consciousness" as "mobile—not nomadic, but rather cinematographic: a kinetic motion that maneuvers, poetically transfigures, and orchestrates while demanding alienation, perversion, and reformation in both spectators and practitioners."[56] Sandoval proposes the notion of a "tactical subjectivity," a mobile positionality. "This political subjectivity," writes Sandoval, "resides in a state of contingency, of possibility, readying for any event."[57] In seeking 'ghostly matter,' this dissertation demands various analytical or critical positions and tactics—multiple subjectivities. I find in Sandoval's conceptualization space for me to operate at any given moment as a creative writer, performer, critical scholar, educator, youngest son of Leonora Perez.

Discussing interdisciplinarity, feminist filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha states that "it is rare to see" the notion that one must speak from a position of authority "stretched to the limits, so that the fences between disciplines are pulled down."[58] To put this in a different way, disciplines must remain intact in order for interdisciplinarity to be recognizable. As I

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[56] Chela Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 43.
[57] Ibid., 180.
[58] Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Framer Framed: Films and Scripts* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 138.

think through *critical race poetics*, a methodology animated by disparate sites of critical activity, I wonder how such an endeavor might either subscribe to or attempt to 'pull down' disciplinary fences. In any case, my analytical work throughout this dissertation suggests at times the dissolution of disciplinary limitations.

The overall methodology of this dissertation is also greatly informed by performance studies and its attention to various kinds of epistemologies. Performance studies scholar Dwight Conquergood calls this "braiding together disparate and stratified ways of knowing."[59] Conquergood writes: "The promiscuous traffic between different ways of knowing carries the most radical promise of performance studies research."[60] It is this 'radical promise' that figures into my methodology. Throughout this dissertation, I shift from one way of knowing to another in order to more fully approach the ghostly. I imagine *critical race poetics* to deliver on the 'radical promise' of performance studies research.

In this dissertation, as I am instructed by various notions of interdisciplinarity, I employ different methodologies in my encounter with different types of archives and objects. Each chapter demands a different approach. In Chapter 2, I employ textual analysis in order to read the historical productions—journalism, history, and documentary film—exploring *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. In Chapter 3, I employ a *craft critique* to evaluate my own body of work exploring *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. In Chapter 4, I conceptualize *critical race poetics* through storytelling and through examining literatures in different scholarly fields. And lastly, in Chapter 5, the final chapter, I perform *critical race poetics*

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[59] Dwight Conquergood, *Cultural Struggle: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 41.
[60] Ibid., 33.

in pursuit of the 'ghostly matter' of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. Still, all throughout the dissertation, I narrate and reflect on my own work and intellectual trajectory. The vignettes and stories that I offer throughout are gestures and fragments of what I more clearly conceptualize in Chapter 4 and perform in Chapter 5 as *critical race poetics*.

**Provocations and Literatures**

In pursuit of the 'ghostly matter' of racist state violence, this dissertation responds to three disparate provocations within the interrelated fields of ethnic studies and critical race theory and the emergent field of creative writing studies. In my ongoing study of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, these three provocations have pushed me to interrogate my own research frameworks and practices as a critical scholar and a creative writer committed to racial critique.

First, I am challenged and inspired by current questions animating critical ethnic studies. In March of 2010, during the first Critical Ethnic Studies Conference at the University of California, Riverside, at the evening plenary on "White Supremacy and Settler Colonialism," ethnic studies scholar Dylan Rodriguez emphasized the importance of recognizing and working with the contradictions and the incommensurabilities among various communities in struggle. Drawing upon Foucault's notion of the "insurrection of subjugated knowledges," Rodriguez called for an "epistemological project of insurrection."[61] That is, Rodriguez called for an irruptive, unsettling, and insurgently

[61] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 81. Dylan Rodriguez, "Plenary on White Supremacy and Settler Colonialism," *Critical Ethnic Studies & the Future of Genocide: Conference*, UC Riverside, March 11, 2011.

critical intellectual practice. I continue to wonder what such a practice looks like: Would it push or *break* the limits of interdisciplinarity? Would it push or *break* the limits of official knowledge production? Taking my cue from the poet Audre Lorde, I argue that when it comes to *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, and I am certain for other moments of racist state violence, "there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt."[62] Thus, I believe that an 'epistemological project of insurrection' must consider various and alternative epistemologies, various and alternative ways of knowing, various and alternative modes of critique. In this dissertation, I turn to poetics, the intense study and practice of language, as one such mode.

Second, I return again and again to the ways in which critical race theory reminds us to ask questions about the production of racial knowledge. I conceptualize *critical race poetics* as an extension of the narrative interventions found in critical race theory and as a way of intervening (via interdisciplinary social science and humanities research) into debates about the racial politics of creative writing. I am provoked by legal and cultural studies scholar Carl Gutiérrez-Jones's invitation to compare critical race studies (which includes critical race theory) projects and artistic projects that "foreground struggles of literacy and its relation to effective racial remedies."[63] That is, I accept the invitation to not only compare the projects of critical race theorists and allied artistic projects but I argue that these projects—in all of their narrative, critical, and imaginative interdisciplinary

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[62] Audre Lorde, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches (Berkeley: Crossing Press), 39.

[63] Gutiérrez-Jones uses the term 'Critical Race Studies' to encompass a broader set of scholarship critiquing race. However, I am interested specifically in critical race theory because it is through theorists such as Derrick Bell and Patricia Williams (who identify with this movement) that I find inspiration. Gutiérrez-Jones, *Critical Race Narratives*, 89.

transgressions—exist within the same discursive community. I conceptualize, propose, and perform *critical race poetics* to address the question: How does one produce an artistic and/or literary project within the context of critical race theory?

Third, and relatedly, I engage contemporary debates about the racial politics of creative writing. In 2015, as a culmination of an extensive online dialogue about race and creativity, writers and artists Claudia Rankine, Beth Loffreda, and Max King Cap edited and published the anthology *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind.* While all of the reflections in the anthology are certainly worth critical attention, I am specifically drawn to the contribution of poet and critic Ronaldo V. Wilson. Wilson poses an incredibly generative challenge to those of us exploring, critiquing, and theorizing race through creative writing. Wilson asks: "HOW DO WE INVENT LANGUAGE OF RACIAL IDENTITY—THAT IS NOT NECESSARILY CONSTRUCTING THE 'SCENE OF INSTRUCTION' ABOUT RACE BUT CREATE THE LINGUISTIC MATERIAL OF RACIAL SPEECH/THOUGHT?"[64] How do we write the language of race? I suggest that *critical race poetics*, as a methodology and political strategy in rigorous pursuit of forms of 'subjugated,' insurrectionary, 'fugitive knowledges,' theorizes race and its contingencies and attempts to produce the raw 'linguistic material of racial speech/thought.'

Ultimately, I propose *critical race poetics* as a theoretical and methodological response to the common thread among the three above provocations: The desire for a

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[64] Ronaldo V. Wilson, "How do we invent the language of racial identity—that is not necessarily constructing the 'scene of instruction' about race but create the linguistic material of racial speech/thought?", in *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*, edited by Claudia Rankine, Beth Loffreda, and Max King Cap (Albany: Fence Books, 2015), 75.

radically alternative way to think through and produce *new* knowledges that examine the 'racial realisms' of our lives.[65] In building my response, to arrive at *critical race poetics*, I have turned and returned again to various fields and literatures.

This dissertation, as I stated above, is primarily a work of historiography. Furthermore, this dissertation is primarily concerned with the politics of historical production. As such, this dissertation is deeply informed by literatures in critical knowledge production and methodology. I have gravitated toward works that challenge me to think about the slippage between epistemology and methodology. In other words, I am intrigued by the overlapping tensions between how we come to knowledge and how we produce knowledge. My exploration of knowledge production relies heavily on vocabularies drawn from a few key scholars whose work I have briefly explicated above: cultural theorist Chela Sandoval; sociologist Avery Gordon; anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot; and philosopher Michel Foucault.

To reiterate briefly, I am interested in seeing through Chela Sandoval's theoretical and methodological strategy of "tactical subjectivity."[66] In my own work, I depend on 'tactical subjectivity' as a mobile positionality that enables me to generate widely interdisciplinary bibliographies, practice various modes of inquiry, perform different strategies of critique, and pursue disparate forms of 'subjugated knowledges.' Through such a mobile positionality, I trouble my already unstable relationship with history and knowledge production.

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[65] Here, I am nodding to Derrick Bell's concept of "racial realism." For Bell, through his fictional character Geneva Crenshaw, "racial realism" is about the cyclical/historical and economic struggle against oppression. Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 98-99.
[66] Sandoval, *Methodology of the Oppressed*, 180.

This dissertation, to reemphasize, is indebted to sociologist Avery Gordon's work on 'haunting.' My analysis is driven by a pursuit of the ghostly. Gordon defines "haunting" as "the sociality of living with ghosts, a sociality both tangible and tactile as well as ephemeral and imaginary."[67] To put this in another way, 'haunting' is an epistemology, a condition of thinking situated within the interplay of knowability/intelligibility and unknowability/unintelligibility. As the title of this dissertation suggests, I am gripped by the 'ghostly matter' of my mother's (and Narciso's) past. Drawing upon the work of critic Raymond Williams, Gordon suggests that "the ghostly matter itself is a historical materialism with its own particular mode of causality that does not usually look very much like context, influence, reflection. It looks like a structure of feeling."[68] Thus, the 'ghostly matter' of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* has to do with the historical contents that are sensed, felt, vaguely remembered, fading and emerging, undeniably present. If anything, this dissertation seeks to affirm that such 'ghostly matter' is worth pursuing.

In my endeavor into the shadows, into historical production, I am guided by anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot's work on power and historical production. Trouillot is thorough in his examination of historical production, identifying at every stage of the process all of the ways in which power produces the silences of history. In studying my mother's (and Narciso's) history, I continue to meditate on the notion that my mother, who provides for me insight not into her own past, but also insight into how to conduct my study, is "fully historical."[69] That is, my mother acts as both a subject of history within a

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[67] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 201.
[68] Ibid., 198.
[69] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 124.

particular sociohistorical process and as a subject of history with the capacity to narrate, reflect on, and critique that very sociohistorical process. Trouillot reminds me that "what history is matters less than how history works."[70] It is this reminder that helps me ground my study of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* as a work of historiography, an exploration of, critique of, and experimentation with historical production.

Throughout this dissertation, I repeatedly turn back over and over again to reconsider the broader endeavor of producing historical truth. I insist that certain research practices and knowledge productions sustain a dominant 'regime of truth' that reduces instances such as *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* to questions of innocence and guilt, truth and untruth, justice and injustice. I propose *critical race poetics* as a methodology for dis-articulating historical knowledge from that dominant 'regime of truth.' This effort is anchored in Foucault's claim:

> The essential political problem for the intellectual is not to criticise the ideological contents supposedly linked to science, or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by a correct ideology, but that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth. The problem is not changing people's consciousness—or what's in their heads—but the political, economic, institutional règime of the production of truth.[71]

For now, the rigorous pursuit and production of 'subjugated' and 'fugitive knowledges,' revelations of the ghostly, is but a small gesture toward a 'new politics of truth.'

Committed to racial critique, I situate this dissertation specifically within Filipino studies.[72] In the last decade or so we have seen an exponential increase in projects

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[70] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 28.
[71] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 133.
[72] I would be remiss if I did not mention some of the deeper citations that push my work on racial critique and critiques of settler colonialism. These are works that I do not take up explicitly in this dissertation but works that push my thinking to varying degrees at every step: Jodi Byrd, *Transit*

centralizing the lives and struggles of Filipinos in the U.S. and abroad.[73] Moreover, we have also seen among scholars from various intellectual formations and institutional locations a concerted effort to explore the parameters of the field of (critical) Filipino and Filipina studies, which encompasses works previously identified with Filipino American studies. The field, as once described by sociologist Robyn Rodriguez, is animated by a common and insistent critique of U.S. imperialism and colonialism and the violence of global/racial capitalism.[74] While I am committed to such critique in my broader research agenda, I am in this dissertation hoping to move the discussion toward the problem of methodology. Thus, I propose *critical race poetics* and my attendant poem cycle examining *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* as an intervention meant to expand the theoretical and methodological imagination of Filipino studies. I find this endeavor to be pressing as Filipino studies continues to emerge and define its political objectives and affinities.

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*of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2011); Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Boston: South End Press, 2005); J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, *Hawaiian Blood: Colonialism and the Politics of Sovereignty and Indigeneity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Dylan Rodriguez, *Forced Passages: Imprisoned Radical Intellectuals and the U.S. Prison Regime* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996).

[73] I have found insightful for other endeavors these projects: Rick Bonus, *Locating Filipino Americans: Ethnicity and the Cultural Politics of Space* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000); Yen Le Espiritu, *Homebound: Filipino American Lives across Cultures, Communities, and Countries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). Allan Punzalan Isaac, *American Tropics: Articulating Filipino America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Martin F. Manalansan IV, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Melinda de Jesus, editor, *Pinay Power: Theorizing the Filipina/American Experience*, (New York: Routledge, 2005).

[74] Robyn Rodriguez at the Critical Filipina/Filipino Studies Collective Symposium, UC San Diego, October 2013.

In what I consider to be a landmark publication in the field of Filipino and Filipino American studies, *Positively No Filipinos Allowed: Building Communities and Discourse*, co-editor Antonio T. Tiongson, Jr. recognizes the study of Filipinos in the U.S. academy to be a 'troubling presence.' "In both traditional and emergent disciplines," writes Tiongson, "the study of Filipino social formations on its own terms has yet to materialize, remaining outside the disciplinary focus and scope of these fields."[75] In many ways, I understand such a situation to signal the fugitive possibilities of Filipino studies. Thus, I insist that, at this conjuncture, Filipino studies continue to interrogate the dominant methodologies and 'regimes of truth' upon which it thrives.

As I will discuss in the next chapter, my contemplations on the historical subjectivity of Narciso and my mother are instructed by the work of two U.S.-based Filipino scholars trained in comparative ethnic studies. The work of both Dylan Rodriguez and Nerissa Balce urge me to think about Filipino subject production via relational processes of racialization. In Rodriguez's work, I find challenging his discussion of "Filipino affectability."[76] Extending the work of theorist Denise Ferreira da Silva, Rodriguez considers the Filipino subject to be vulnerable to and always conditioned by racial and genocidal violence. Balce identifies the Philippine-American War as "the originary moment for the recirculation of domestic grammars of Otherness that informed

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[75] Antonio T Tiongson, Jr., "Introduction," to *Positively No Filipinos Allowed: Building Communities and Discourse*, edited by Antonio T. Tiongson, Jr., Edgardo V. Gutierrez, and Ricardo V. Gutierrez (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2006), 3.

[76] Dylan Rodriguez, *Suspended Apocalypse: White Supremacy, Genocide, and the Filipino Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 8.

discourses on Filipino savagery."[77] Because *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* constitutes a moment of racist state violence within which these types of 'domestic grammars of Otherness' circulated, I find Balce's work and Rodriguez's work instructive as I think through the relationalities of racist state violence and of Filipino subject production. Balce's work and Rodriguez's work help me understand the production of the Filipino subject as always already sharing affinities with other groups. This, I believe, is important to consider when developing a politics of solidarity.

To that end, as I seek affinities with allied projects of racial critique, I employ the analytical premises and tools of critical race theory in this dissertation. Critical race theory was originally defined as:

> a movement of left scholars, most of them scholars of color, situated in law schools, whose work challenges the ways in which race and racial power are constructed and represented in American legal culture and, more generally, in American society as a whole.[78]

This dissertation is indebted to critical race theorists and their principled commitment to think about the theoretical and methodological possibilities of studying contemporary and historical racisms. Critical race theory understands race as foundational to U.S. society. I understand race, and its intersections and inter-articulations with class, gender, sexuality, and ability, to be foundational to understanding and examining *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. As I will show in the next chapter, this has not consistently been the dominant premise for exploring the case.

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[77] Nerissa Balce, "Filipino Bodies, Lynching, and the Language of Empire," in *Positively No Filipinos Allowed: Building Communities and Discourse*, edited by Antonio T. Tiongson, Jr., Edgardo V. Gutierrez, and Ricardo V. Gutierrez (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2006), 46.
[78] Kimberlè Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, eds., *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement* (New York: The New Press, 1995), xiii.

In addition to thinking through racisms and meditating on the hauntings of racist state violence, I look for the most appropriate mode through which to produce racial knowledge, i.e. methodology. Thus, I briefly turn to the earlier legal studies interventions of Richard Delgado. Arguing for the use of storytelling as a generative approach to studying law, Delgado insists that storytelling and counter-storytelling are "insinuative, not frontal; they offer a respite from the linear, coercive discourse that characterizes much legal writing.[79] Delgado's work is realized in the experiments of critical race theorists Derrick Bell and Patricia Williams, whose writings I read more closely in Chapter 4. Moreover, in my study of the narrative interventions staged by Bell and Williams, I have found illuminating legal and cultural studies scholar Carl Gutiérrez-Jones's study of Bell's and William's narrative interventions, what Gutiérrez-Jones's comes to term "critical race narratives."[80] 'Critical race narratives,' a methodology that is devoted to the study and critique of race and racism through interdisciplinary narrative experimentation, is a precursor to what I am calling *critical race poetics*.

Constructing this dissertation provides for me the opportunity to engage discussions in the still emergent scholarly field of creative writing studies. Scholars who have attempted to characterize the institutional identity of creative writing within the university, particularly within departments of literature, literary studies, and English studies, have acknowledged creative writing's peculiarity, and even its precariousness.[81] One scholar

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[79] Richard Delgado, "Storytelling for Storytelling for Oppositionists and Others: A Plea for Narrative," Michigan Law Review, Vol. 87, No. 8, Legal Storytelling (Aug., 1989), 2415.
[80] Gutiérrez-Jones, *Critical Race Narratives*, 12
[81] SEE Tim Mayers, "One Simple Word: From Creative Writing to Creative Writing Studies," in *College English*, Special Topic: *Creative Writing in the Twenty-First Century*, 71.3 (2009); Kimberly Andrews, "A House Divided: On the Future of Creative Writing," in *College English*, Special Topic: *Creative Writing in the Twenty-First Century*, 71.3 (2009).

focuses on creative writing's "strangeness" as creative writing programs are highly publicized and celebrated as a part of literature and English departments but remain ornamental to the disciplines of literature and English studies.[82] Literary critic D.G. Myers discusses the emergence of creative writing in the university as he suggests that, at its inception, creative writing as a discipline did not intend to produce official writers, rather it was envisioned as "an institutional arrangement for treating literature as if it were a continuous experience rather than a mere corpus of knowledge—as if it were a living thing, as if people intended to write more of it."[83] Furthermore, Myers emphasizes that the training of creative writers in U.S. university during the first part of the twentieth century aimed "to develop a whole set of powers in….writers: aesthetic responsiveness, the ability to handle ideas; in sum, the critical sense."[84] In other words, creative writing was imagined as always already a critical endeavor within the study and practice of literature. I highlight this detail because it affords me the capacity to bridge conversations among so-called critical scholarly disciplines and so-called practice-based or creative intellectual efforts. Still today, creative writing studies continues to be primarily concerned with the pedagogy of creative writing, specifically, the theories and practices of creative writers who teach students how to write.[85] In any case, I am interested in developing further my own (and my students') 'critical sense.'

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[82] Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "The Strangeness of Creative Writing: An Institutional Query," *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture* 3.2 (2003).
[83] D.G. Myers, "The Rise of Creative Writing," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 54.2 (1993): 278-279.
[84] Ibid., 295.
[85] SEE Tim Mayers, "From Creative Writing to Creative Writing Studies," *College English* 71.3, *Special Topic: Creative Writing in the Twentieth Century* (2009): 217-228.

In this dissertation, I am interested in two areas of creative writing and creative writing studies. Specifically, in Chapter 3, I demonstrate what English studies scholar Tim Mayers calls "craft criticism."[86] 'Craft criticism' is a type of critique that prioritizes the analysis of production over the interpretation of text. As Mayers notes: "Creative writing should, like literary criticism, strive to enter a conversation, one of history, lived experience, previous creative work, and previous scholarship commenting on creative work—a conversation that is both artistic and intellectual."[87] I perform a 'craft critique' within the context of studying racist state violence. That is, I employ 'craft critique' as an integral part of the development of my racial critique. This turns me back to one of the core provocations of this dissertation concerning the racial politics of creative writing.

As mentioned above, I think through Ronaldo V. Wilson's challenge to write the 'language of racial speech/thought.' In *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*, co-editors Rankine and Loffreda explain the 'racial imaginary' as "the way our culture has imagined over and over again the narrative opportunities, the feelings and attributes, the subjects and metaphors and forms and voices, available both to characters of different races and their authors."[88] The 'racial imaginary,' already at the core of ethnic studies scholarship and critical race theory, is what guides my inquiry into creative writing studies. In short, I extend the work of critical race theory, ethnic studies, and 'critical race narratives', to the field of creative writing and poetics.

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[86] Tim Mayers, *(Re)Writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and the Future of English Studies* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 30.
[87] Kimberly Andrews, "A House Divided," 248.
[88] Loffreda and Rankine, *Racial Imaginary*, 22.

Lastly, this dissertation is rooted in the critical and creative practice of poetics. Let me first acknowledge that there is a conversation that I have chosen to leave aside for the moment—it is a current and ongoing debate specifically about race and poetics. This lively debate stems from questions regarding the racial politics of what is deemed avant-garde or experimental literature. Surely, I am mindful of these debates in this dissertation but I will save such a discussion for a later effort.[89] As a scholar trained in the social sciences and humanities, I am interested in the ways in which researchers have conceptualized poetry as a method. Thus, I find invaluable communication scholar Sandra Faulkner's work on poetry as research. Faulkner surveys the ways in which poetry has been used to carry out social science and humanities research agendas. This, of course, is key to my intervention. Additionally, I also find instructive the diverse archival practices and strategies of contemporary documentary poets. This set of inquiries into poetics as methodology help me conceptualize the characteristics of imaginative and lyrical critique. In the end, poetics, *critical race poetics* in particular, exemplifies the critical, lyrical inquiry that can lead us to and elaborate 'subjugated' and 'fugitive knowledges.'

To summarize, the development of a *critical race poetics* involves self-reflection, a study and critique of methodology, of craft, of theoretical premises. Ultimately *critical race poetics* responds to the call for an epistemological project that is insurgently critical and imaginatively attentive to the politics, languages, and scenes of race.

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[89] The online articles by poets and critics offer a solid introduction to the debate: Cathy Park Hong, "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde," in *Lana Turner: A Journal of Poetry and Opinion*: http://www.lanaturnerjournal.com/7/delusions-of-whiteness-in-the-avant-garde; Daniel Borzutsky, "Delusions of Progress," *Harriet: A Poetry Blog*: http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2014/12/delusions-of-progress/; Simone White, "Flibbertigibbet in a White Room/Competencies," *Harriet: A Poetry Blog:* http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2014/04/flibbertigibbet-in-a-white-room-competencies/.

**Limitations**

This study of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* is limited in two key ways. First, I would like to make it clear that I intentionally focus on the story of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* as it has been told to me and understood by my mother, Leonora Perez. While I do not intend to ignore or erase the experiences of Filipina Narciso, I understand that my focused attention on my mother at times might seem to do so. There is too much hurt in this history. So I refrain from engaging Narciso's story because I imagine that she has her own story to narrate. Thus, I humbly await to hear what Filipina Narciso (a.k.a. Tita P.I.) might eventually tell us about her own experiences. My mother, too, refuses to speak on Narciso's behalf. Second, this dissertation employs poetics as critique. While I trust that I rigorously explain this, I foresee questions about the intelligibility of the results, the legibility of the eventual poem cycle. I see in poetics the potential for a new type of discursive practice. Some scholars, however, as they might be dedicated to the logistics of argumentative scholarship, might see poetics (and its seemingly open-ended contingencies) as a limitation. In the end, I intentionally refuse to explain or reflect on the poem cycle, i.e. the final chapter, because in this dissertation, I am not invested in the race for interpretation/hermeneutics.

**Chapter Overview**

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. In this first chapter, I have provided the historical background, and the theoretical and methodological impulses that deeply inform this dissertation. I have given a brief narrative account of the central motif, *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, and I have placed my own study within conversations about

historiography, Filipino studies, critical race theory, and creative writing studies. In Chapter 2, I provide a contextual and close reading of the extant major works that have explored *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*: the journalism of Robert K. Wilcox, the historical study by Catherine Ceniza Choy, and the documentary film by Geri Alumit Zeldes. Ultimately, I tease out what openings each work has left and I suggest theoretical and methodological directions that I take up in this dissertation. Ultimately, I argue for a methodology that dis-articulates the history of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* from the dominant 'regime of truth' upon which previous historical productions have been based. In Chapter 3, I extend my critique of extant narratives exploring *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* by critically reflecting on my own body of work from 2001-2015. This body of work comprises of poetry, performance, film, and video. Here again, I seek out what each work and the works as a whole leave open. Ultimately, this chapter serves as an inventory of the creative work which I aim to critically re-process and cut-up for the final chapter. In Chapter 4, I narrate my creative writing trajectory and ultimately engage the various sites of intellectual activity that have led me to conceptualize *critical race poetics*, which is the methodology I build throughout the entire dissertation and more fully elaborate on and perform in the final chapter. Chapter 5, the final gesture, is a poem cycle that draws from newspaper archives, ephemera, oral histories, court records, and previous critical and creative works. This is a demonstration, a performance, of *critical race poetics*. In the end, I refrain from reflecting on the poem cycle as that would defeat my pursuit of 'fugitive knowledge.'

# CHAPTER 2: NARRATIVES OF *U.S. V. NARCISO AND PEREZ*

## Introduction

This chapter focuses on various historical productions exploring *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. From 1975-1978, two Filipina migrant nurses, Filipina Narciso and my mother, Leonora Perez, resisted the FBI's allegations that they were guilty of poisoning and murdering several patients at the Ann Arbor VA Hospital in Michigan. Today, Narciso and my mother continue to resist such allegations. On May 21, 1981, more than three years after Narciso and my mother were released from the Federal Prison Camp in Alderson, West Virginia, more than three years after the federal government ultimately decided not to pursue a retrial against Narciso and my mother, I was born. Sometimes, I wonder whether my parents thought of my birth as a new beginning, or, at the very least, a reconciliation with the violence of the past. Our family still lived in Detroit. Our family still wanted to make this city, this geography, this decision, work. I imagine our family would have continued to live in Detroit had it not been for *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* and its haunting. I can only imagine *not* having to write these stories now. Or ever. But since *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* had happened, and my mother had at one point struggled to find a job in the region on account of her newfound fame, and since the case and its aftermath had a profoundly unsettling effect on both my mother and my father, we migrated west to Las Vegas by 1983.[1] While my father worked as a bellhop at Bally's Hotel and Casino in

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[1] My mother once told me that during a job interview in Michigan sometime after the trial an employer told her that he could not hire her because she was famous. Then, the employer showed my mother herself in an issue of *Time Magazine* and said, "See." In 2013, in Chicago, my uncle, one of my father's cousins, told me that my father was dejected after my mother's (Narciso's) trial. My uncle said that my father was so depressed that he was ready to give up on the U.S. My father would never reveal this to me himself.

downtown Las Vegas, my mother continued to work as a registered nurse at a private (*not* federal) facility called Desert Springs Hospital Medical Center. My eldest brother, the one who first noticed my mother's indictment and arrest on the television screen during the nightly news on June 16, 1976, was still in elementary school. And our middle brother, the one with whom my mother was pregnant during the indictment and arrest, was just about to begin kindergarten. In Las Vegas, I imagine my parents were hopeful that we had escaped it all, the memory, the grip and presence of the past. We stayed in Las Vegas for merely two years before migrating to southern California, first to Redlands, and finally committing to Oceanside. Yet still, Oceanside was not far enough from the past.

I remember the first time my parents tried to tell me about my mother's past. We were still in our rented townhouse in Las Vegas. It must have been a Saturday night because both my mother and father were off from work and it was rare to have both parents in the house at once. On such occasions, we would spread out bedsheets over the carpet of the living room, pop popcorn on the stovetop, blast the air-conditioning, and watch movies together. My father would always doze off. Then, he would suddenly wake up and pester my mother by asking and asking what was happening in the movie. My father would always ask of any movie regardless of whether it was *Superman* or the latest Richard Prior film, "Is that true story?" This night, though, was a little different. My parents decided to dig up and unsheathe from a plastic bag a very dense and dusty film projector and a large roll of 16mm film. I remember the hum and tick of the projector. I remember the blurry frames it projected onto the un-ironed, off-white bedsheet that was thumbtacked to the wall. We were watching footage of a protest. Of course, at the time, I had no idea it was a protest. Years later, I would realize that we had been watching footage of a protest from the time

of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. As we watched, my mother pointed out certain characters on the screen. Both of my older brothers remained quiet. All I could comprehend at the age of three was that something bad had happened to our mother. Something unthinkable. Something unspeakable. And these people on the screen, people brown, black, and white, people old and young, nuns and nurses, had gathered in support of my mother and Tita P.I. a.k.a. Filipina Narciso. Our parents seemed relieved to be sharing a fraction, albeit a curated tiny fraction, of the story. For years after that, from time to time, my eldest brother would mess around and state the *fact*: "Mom was convicted of being a serial killer." Growing up, I felt that *fact* somehow to be true and absolutely and egregiously false.

I begin this chapter with this particular story because it represents the earliest moment in my understanding of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. As I reimagine that early 1980s Saturday evening in a townhouse, in Las Vegas, Nevada, in a small living room, I meditate on the significance of my initial encounter with my mother's (and Narciso's) past. There, on an off-white, makeshift projector screen full of wrinkles and deep creases, played silent footage of a protest. There, underneath the Ilocano syllables of my mother and father, was the hum and tick of the film projector. There, as my mother and father narrated the significance of the mass gathering on screen, my mother and father, too, were longing for Detroit. My mother's (and Narciso's) past was introduced to me as a story about family and community, a story about a family and a community wronged by people in power. This, as I understand it now, was my first lesson in historiography: My parents took it upon themselves, a nurse and a bellhop, a mother and a father, migrants away from their respective, provincial *homes* in the Philippines, to incite for me what would become, throughout the early stages of my career as a creative writer and performer, over a decade

of studying, restudying, writing, rewriting, performing, recording, inventing, and reinventing poems, fictions, performances, videos, films, all attempting to grasp some aspect of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. (In the next chapter, I provide narratives and critical reflections on this entire body of work.) It was at three years old that I was first introduced to the idea that historical narratives, or narratives about a *past* that is not *now*, are elaborate productions, complex performances, collaborations of technology and imaginary, their own significant happenings within very specific cultural and historical contexts, forms of knowing that are inevitably limited by resources, intention, and consciousness.[2]

Throughout my childhood, my parents would toy with the idea of turning *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* into a blockbuster movie. My mother once told me that a white male journalist in the 1980s had approached her about writing a book detailing her and Narciso's story. Nothing ever came of that contact. My eldest brother used to joke that if someone eventually were to make a movie about *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, then my mother, Leonora Perez, should be played by Tia Carrere.[3] As I grew older, into and throughout my teenage years, and even into my years as an undergraduate student, I realized that the story of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* would never be known and would never really matter unless our family, or Filipina Narciso and her family, were to do something about it. In 2001, as a young student activist in need of a creative outlet, I wrote and performed my first poem, "Dear Mr. Yanko." As mentioned in the previous chapter, Federal Prosecuting Attorney

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[2] Anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot remarks that the past is a position and there is no substance in the past. Trouillot writes: "The past does not exist independently from the present." SEE Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 15.

[3] Tia Carrere is an American actress of Filipino, Chinese, and Spanish ancestry, who starred in films like *Wayne's World*.

Richard Yanko was the figure who decried in his opening remarks of the 'dark' and 'criminal' history of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. This first poem, as I will explain in the next chapter, was simply an open letter, a laundry list of grievances, to all racist Mr. Yankos. Later in 2001, I followed up with "My Mother's Story," a poem that conveys to its audience that such heinous anti-Filipino racism existed, too, in the 1970s, as it had in earlier eras that we had studied in our literature and ethnic studies classes.[4]

For the last 15 years or so, I have always carried this gut worry that some white male author would come forth to write—what readerships would be convinced was—the definitive story of my mother and Narciso. I was convinced that if a white male author could permit himself to write from the perspective of a geisha, then some inspired white male author, regardless of whether or not he was sympathetic to my mother and Narciso or all of the Philippines, could permit himself to narrate *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, from the perspective of a Filipina migrant nurse no less, simply because he found the story fascinating. And yes, I believe that such a literary act is a grave violation, a harmful, interpretive violence, as I am adamantly against white male authors claiming to *save* brown women and their narratives.[5] During college, I would attend conferences and community gatherings and would stumble into elder activists who had advocated on behalf of my mother and Narciso. For instance, in 2002, at the annual Filipino American National Historical Society (FANHS) Conference in Los Angeles, I met a handful of former

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[4] As an undergraduate student at the University of California, San Diego, I was fortunate to take a class on Filipino American history in which we learned about the racist violence against Filipino farmworkers in the 1920s and 1930s. The class: *Filipino and Mexican Community Identities*.

[5] Here, I am riffing off of Gayatri Spivak's notion of "white men saving brown women from brown men" in her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson (University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271-313.

members of the Katipunan ng mga Demokratikong Pilipino (KDP). These former KDP members fondly remembered *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* as a formative moment through which a Filipino American radical social consciousness emerged. In any case, in the midst of my worry, I gradually happened upon works and fragments of works invested in some aspect of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. This chapter, then, focuses on the most substantial of these works.

This chapter focuses on various types of historical productions that have attempted to analyze and tell the story of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. Since 1977, less than a handful of knowledge producers—a journalist, a historian, and a documentary filmmaker—have published or produced substantial works about *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*.[6] I have chosen three different types of works as a way of suggesting my understanding of history and its production. As anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us, professional historians do not have a monopoly on the production of history. Fiction writers, filmmakers, students, journalists, and members of various publics "augment, deflect, or reorganize the work of" the professional historian.[7] Historical production, thus, is always already collaborative,

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[6] I limit my study here to works that centralize *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. My criteria for *substantial*: Works that make *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* their primary object of study. Thomas C. O'Brien, defense attorney, talks about the case in a reflective essay about law practice. However, O'Brien's account does not represent any significant departures in theory, method, and insight, from the longer works I engage in this chapter. SEE Thomas C. O'Brien, "The V.A. Murders," in *Litigation* 11.15 (1984-1985): 15-19, 60-61. Other works that reference the case include: Steven G. Louie and Glenn K. Omatsu, eds., *Asian Americans: The Movement and the Moment* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 2001), 48-79. Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stages of Empire* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 87-89. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, as a creative writer and performance artist, I have produced a body of work that explores *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. I have decided to devote a separate chapter of this dissertation, *Chapter 3: Para sa Akin: A Craft Critique*, to introducing and critically reflecting on that body of work.

[7] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 25.

always already contentious. Attentive to Trouillot's reminder, in this chapter, and throughout this dissertation, I understand the production of history in its broadest, most interdisciplinary terms. Thus, I read the work of professionals—again, a professional journalist, a professional historian, and a professional documentary filmmaker—alongside the written and performative labor of my parents and my own work as an 'amateur' and 'professional' creative writer and performer. Reading journalist Robert K. Wilcox's on-the-scene investigative reportage in his book, *The Mysterious Deaths at Ann Arbor* (1977), historian Catherine Ceniza Choy's interdisciplinary account in her wider study of Filipino migrant nurses, *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History* (2003), and communication scholar and filmmaker Geri Alumit Zeldes's historical documentary film, *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez, & the Press* (2013), this chapter ultimately argues that together these extant historical productions about *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* have been limited by an overarching and dominant "regime of truth."[8] Subjected to this dominant 'regime of truth,' these works reduce *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, sometimes unwittingly so, to clear-cut questions of innocence and guilt, justice and injustice, truth and untruth. These historical productions continue to revolve around the same queries and thus reveal nothing necessarily *new* about the case. As a result, I am left with an opportunity and responsibility to expand both the theoretical and methodological imagination for studying *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. I suggest that a fundamental 're-articulation' of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, away from this overarching and dominant 'regime of truth,' is

[8] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writing 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 133.

imperative in order to most effectively attend to and perhaps even touch the 'ghostly matter' of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez.*[9]

In what follows, I first explain the questions, theoretical frameworks, and methodologies that guide my study of the historical productions exploring *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. Then, I analyze each historical production—Wilcox's, Choy's, and Zeldes's, respectively. Finally, I briefly sketch out potential theoretical and methodological trajectories, i.e. analytical possibilities, for this dissertation and for future inquiries into *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez.*

**Research Questions**

Here, in this chapter, I am most interested in the following questions: Who has produced narratives about *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* and what have been the motivations and objectives behind these narratives? What is the producer's research framework, i.e. conceptual/theoretical and practical/methodological frameworks? What materials and sources, i.e. evidence, does each producer employ in his or her or their narrative and analysis? What do these historical productions teach us or reveal to us about the case? And, additionally, given that my own broader intellectual project seeks to explore the production of the Filipino subject, I ask: What do these historical productions tell us about Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez as subjects of history?

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[9] I borrow from Stuart Hall's understanding of "articulation" as the social and political production of connections and linkages between different concepts or phenomena. Stuart Hall, "On postmodernism and articulation," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, edited by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 141.

**Theoretical Framework**

My analysis in this chapter is animated by insights from the areas of critical knowledge production and critical race theory. Bringing together ideas from these areas, I critique within each historical production about *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* the relationship between theory and method, that is, the relationship between what each historical production suggests (i.e. meaning) and how each narrative has been produced (i.e. approach).

As discussed in the previous chapter, I have come to shape my understanding of and desires to understand *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* around a specific critical vocabulary regarding historical production. This vocabulary is deeply informed by the work of sociologist Avery Gordon, anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot, and philosopher Michel Foucault. My reading of the historical productions in this chapter is facilitated through an understanding of 'haunting,' silence, and the politics truth.

Certainly, an indispensable conceptual impulse in this dissertation and in this chapter is the notion of 'haunting.' In *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination,* sociologist Avery Gordon searches for and sketches out a critical vocabulary for examining what is and what is not there, in other words, that which haunts and haunts. To write about 'haunting,' for Gordon, is to write a specific kind of story:

> To write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories. To write ghost stories implies that ghosts are real, that is to say, that they produce material effects. To impute a kind of objectivity to ghosts implies that, from certain standpoints, the dialectics of visibility and invisibility involve a constant negotiation between what can be seen and what is in the shadows.[10]

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[10] Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 17.

On the surface, *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, and its attendant details of collapsed lungs, dead bodies, poisoning, legal lynching, and suicidal witnesses, carries with it cries of the ghostly. As I read these select historical productions about the case, I am curious as to what haunts these historical productions, as to what rests in the shadows, as to what these historical productions presume to understand about the case. Moreover, I ask of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* a question that Gordon asks of all hauntings: "What paths have been disavowed, left behind, covered over and remain unseen?"[11] What paths, theoretical and methodological, are left open? Along those paths, might await the ghostly, might await new forms of knowledge.

Each of the historical productions I engage here establish different relationships to an archive. I am indebted to Trouillot's work on what he calls "the fundamental processual character of historical production."[12] In *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, Trouillot insists that "what history is matters less than how history works" and argues that "power works together with history."[13] I emphasize studying *the production* of different narratives about *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. In other words, I am interested in pursuing the question: How has *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* become history? As I study each historical production, I keep in mind the ways in which "archival power" is exercised.[14] In Trouillot's view, 'archival power' has to do with the narrative power to name sources as 'facts' and to assemble archives.[15] Trouillot defines archives as "institutional sites of

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[11] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 41.
[12] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 28.
[13] Ibid., 28.
[14] Ibid., 52.
[15] Ibid., 114.

mediation between the sociohistorical process and the narrative about that process."[16] In other words, archives facilitate the relationship between the materiality of what happened and the narratives about what happened. Archives enable certain kinds of narratives and historical productions. For each historical production I examine here, I inquire about the producers' archives, their assemblage and usage of sources and evidence, and the potential effects of such activity.

Regardless of the form or genre, each historical production about *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*—be it investigative reportage, interdisciplinary transnational and feminist history, or documentary film—commits to what Michel Foucault calls a "regime of truth."[17] Foucault writes: "'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it."[18] Basically, the production of truth, in this case, *historical* truth, is sustained over and over by structures and mechanisms of power. For the journalist, for the historian, and for the documentary filmmaker, the 'regime of truth' is maintained through disciplinary power, "the production of effective instruments for the formation and accumulation of knowledge—methods of observation, techniques of registration, procedures for investigation and research, apparatuses of control."[19] As I explore the 'regimes of truth' under which Wilcox's, Choy's, and Zeldes's narrative operate, I envision an alternative politics of truth, one that is not beholden to the fetishization of evidence or fact, one that is not a veiled 'apparatus of control.'

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[16] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 52.
[17] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 133.
[18] Ibid., 133.
[19] Ibid., 102.

Although each of the historical productions I have chosen to study here vary in their attention to race, I contend that *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* can teach us much about racist state violence and the racialization of Filipino subjects in the U.S. My definitions of racism continue to be informed by Michael Omi and Howard Winant. Omi and Winant move us to understand race and its contingencies through what they conceptualize as 'racial formations.' A 'racial formation' is "the sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed."[20] Thus, throughout my analysis, I keep in mind Omi's and Winant's claim that "race must be understood as occupying varying degrees of centrality in different state institutions and at different historical moments."[21] To put it simply, race (and racial projects) must be understood with institutional and historical specificity. In terms of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, it is important to think about the institutional and historical specificity of race both within the sociohistorical process of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* and within the moment of historical production. Put differently: while I am interested in the racializations that produce and are produced by *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, I am also interested in paying attention to the politics of racialization at the moment of research and narration. Such attention, I imagine, will reveal various and perhaps alternative significances of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* and the historical productions that followed. Such attention to the historicity of historical productions, I am certain, will yield the theoretical and methodological openings for an alternative critical pursuit.

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[20] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s*, 2nd edition (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55.
[21] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formations*, 83. Also, SEE Stuart Hall's "Gramsci's relevance for the study of race and ethnicity," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, edited by David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (New York: Routledge, 1996), 411-440.

As I continue to think through the racial dimensions of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, I treat 'race' not as an empiricism or objective truth but as a "rhetorical event."[22] Critical race theorist Patricia Williams suggests that we understand the relationship between race and the law in a more complicated and nuanced manner. Williams writes:

> That life is complicated is a fact of great analytic importance. Law too often seeks to avoid this truth by making up its own breed of narrower, simpler, but hypnotically powerful rhetorical truths. Acknowledge, challenging, playing with these *as* rhetorical gestures is, it seems to me, necessary for any conception of justice.[23]

Ultimately, my study is about rhetorical struggle. My study in this chapter is about the limits of certain kinds of rhetorical practices. Literary critic and legal scholar Carl Gutiérrez-Jones identifies such struggles as "struggles over literacy and its relation to effective racial remedies."[24] In analyzing the historical productions about *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, I engage in the struggle over racial literacy. How and why has *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* been studied and characterized in the ways that it has? To what consequence have these studies been produced?

To recap, my analysis in this chapter is motivated by a desire to pursue the 'ghostly matter' of historical production, to identify the silences, to critique the ways in which structures and mechanisms of power have determined the historical account of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. In my analysis, I think deeply about the competing notions of racial literacy and about how both my own critical readings and my own producing of narratives exploring *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* are located in a struggle over racial literacy. Whereas

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[22] Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 11.
[23] Ibid., 10.
[24] Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, *Critical Race Narratives: A Study of Race, Rhetoric, and Injury* (New York: NYU Press, 2001), 89.

some of the historical productions discussed below explicitly name race as an important factor in understanding *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, I characterize *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* as a moment of racist state violence. By doing so, I aim toward a more generative and relational understanding of the case and its afterlives.

**Methodology**

Informed by the theoretical frameworks above, this chapter is primarily a historiographical analysis of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. My reading of Wilcox's, Choy's, and Zeldes's narratives are grounded in a very simple reading practice. This reading practice draws from a poem by novelist and essayist James Baldwin in which he reminds us that:

> Imagination creates the situation,
> and then, the situation creates imagination.[25]

Baldwin's poetry reminds us of the dialectical nature of history. The imaginary, the available critical ways of knowing, the available epistemologies, creates the conditions and moments which in turn create (or reinforce) the imaginary. In studying the historical productions of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, it is necessary to examine this dialectic, for it gives insight into the objectives, and limitations and possibilities, of each historical production. I would be remiss if I did not recognize that Baldwin's dialectics of history is likely informed by Marxist dialectical historical materialism. However, I gravitate toward Baldwin's poetry precisely because of its lyrical qualities—its use of very simple end

[25] James Baldwin, "Imagination," in *Jimmy's Blues and Other Poems*, edited by Nikky Finney (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 32.

rhyme, its use of internal rhyme, its use of parallel syntax, and its use of 'and then' as a marker of the processual. Baldwin's poetry serves as a reminder that my own reading is contextual and bears its own rhythms, parallelisms, and structures. Baldwin's poetry pushes me to consider the ways in which historical narratives are produced within specific and unique cultural and historical contexts. Along the same lines, Trouillot cautions that "historical production is itself historical."[26] Taking this into consideration, I interrogate the politics of historical production, the implications of framing and narrating the 'historical reality' of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. In the section that follows, I provide a contextual analysis and close reading of the work of Robert K. Wilcox, Catherine Ceniza Choy, and Geri Alumit Zeldes, respectively.

**Historical Productions: Wilcox, Choy, Zeldes**

Each of the historical productions analyzed here emerge under different historical and institutional circumstances. As Trouillot suggests, the materiality of the sociohistorical process (i.e. events) sets the stage for what narratives (histories) are produced.[27] So, Wilcox's 1977 account, produced within the tensions and anxieties of the sociohistorical process itself, lacks the critical distance afforded to both Choy (2003) and Zeldes (2013), whose historical productions are completed decades later. Thus, it is necessary in my analysis below to discuss each work with respect to the historical and institutional context within which they are produced. Ultimately, what I hope to reveal in my analysis of these different works are the specific and unique ways in which power operates in the process of

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[26] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 145.
[27] Ibid., 29.

historical production. To that end, I begin with the historical production of Robert K. Wilcox.

Robert K. Wilcox continues to write and actively publish books primarily exploring themes of war. Wilcox began his career as a cub reporter for the *Miami News*. Searching for a second book to write in 1975, he began following the story of the mass deaths at the Ann Arbor VA Hospital. Wilcox claims that he was inspired by the book *Boston Strangler* and its exploration of a "city in terror." For Wilcox, the Ann Arbor VA Hospital was a "hospital in terror." Wilcox pitched *The Mysterious Deaths at Ann Arbor* to a publisher, Popular Library, received a "fairly large advance," and headed off to Detroit, which he describes as "a city destroyed in part from the 1960s race riots." Although, he believed his book to be a potential hit, the book received significant attention early on and then that attention abruptly faded. Wilcox suspects that the University of Michigan—the institution that sends many of its medical students and residents to the Ann Arbor VA Hospital, the institution who Wilcox claims was attempting to avoid bad publicity—is responsible for his book's failure.[28] Regardless of the book's obscurity, I am interested in its narrative content and the elements of its production.

What is important to consider here is the institutional and historical context of Wilcox's historical production. Wilcox's interest in the events that would eventually culminate in the court case *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* is one of sheer career opportunism. Wilcox wanted to write a book that would sell, a book about a 'hospital in terror.' This, I argue, immediately and clearly establishes the parameters that govern the historical

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[28] Wilcox's first book was about the shroud of Turin. The burial cloth wrapped around Jesus: *Shroud*. See author's website: www.robertkwilcox.com.

production. The central motivation behind the book is to make spectacular the unfolding events surrounding the Ann Arbor VA Hospital. Wilcox's later writing interests in war history suggests that his focus on the site of the Ann Arbor VA Hospital, a veteran's hospital under siege, takes precedent over any of the people involved in the investigation. Consequently, Wilcox's attention on the spectacular and the mysterious begins at the moment of conceptualizing the narrative. These motives frame his research inquiry.

It is also important to take into consideration that Wilcox is writing not only in the midst of the 1975-1977 investigation and trial, but he is writing at the heels of the Watergate scandal, at a time when the U.S. is dejected after its unsuccessful war against Vietnam, and during the ongoing FBI repression of American Indian, Black, and Chicano radicals. Not to mention, Wilcox also was writing in a moment when the search for Jimmy Hoffa's body and the trial of Patty Hearst were the stories saturating U.S. news media.[29] One can only imagine the narrative energy expected of journalism in that moment. One can only imagine how stories with such wide publicity are framed and reprocessed. Wilcox, as expected, is out to expose the 'truth' about what happened at Ann Arbor VA Hospital. As media scholar Todd Gitlin teaches us, news and media frames are premised on "persistent selection, emphasis, and exclusion." Gitlin suggests that frames "enable journalists to process large amounts of information quickly and routinely [...] for efficient relay" of information.[30] Wilcox's framing, thus, determines rather quickly, perhaps haphazardly, his sources and his evidence. Because Wilcox fails to make the racial politics of the moment

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[29] Catherine Ceniza Choy, *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History* (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), 140.
[30] Todd Gitlin, *The whole world is watching: Mass media in the making and unmaking of the New Left* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 7.

central to his investigation, the racial politics of the moment haunt his narrative. *The Mysterious Deaths at Ann Arbor* becomes a narrative and reproduction of racial power and racial anxiety. Conceptualizing his narrative around the notion of a 'hospital in terror,' reading court testimony and keeping track of the unfolding events through popular national and local news publications such as the *Detroit Free Press*, Wilcox arranges a narrative that delivers on its promise—it thrills, it spectacularizes, it delivers no explicit verdict, but it unwittingly suggests one.

From its title to its simply designed yet text-saturated cover to its opening pages, *The Mysterious Deaths at Ann Arbor* is presented and elaborated on as the "whole truth about the most chilling medical horror story of our time."[31] The cover of the book lists what appear to be important facts in the story and case of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*: "No apparent motive for murder"; "A drug that killed without a trace"; "Victims who were defenseless."[32] "Two Filipino nurses have been charged," the cover reads. "Judge for yourself who may be guilty."[33] *The Mysterious Deaths at Ann Arbor* frames the events surrounding *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* as undeniably a nonfiction horror story. Through and through, Wilcox's on-the-scene investigative reportage retains its very clear objective, its very simple theoretical premise—that someone must be held responsible for this horrifying crime. And that someone, according to Wilcox, could be "a monster, a person devoid of sentiment, and capable of snuffing out human life on an impulse."[34] In conjuring the imagery of monstrosity, of alienation, of inscrutable murderous non-persons, Wilcox

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[31] Robert K. Wilcox, *The Mysterious Deaths at Ann Arbor* (New York: Popular Library, 1977), Book Cover.
[32] Ibid., Back Cover.
[33] Ibid., Book Cover.
[34] Ibid., 252.

relies on the air of mystery that is structured into and organic to the genre of horror and suspense. It is important to pay attention to Wilcox's theoretical framing, which again, is the product of the genre of horror and suspense, because it helps us understand the limitations of Wilcox's narrative. To put this in another way, Wilcox's investigation, his desire to 'present the facts,' and his goal in allowing the reader to decide who committed the crime, his intense focus on the victims and the possible perpetrators, leaves little room for understanding the larger social, cultural, and historical context within which *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* is crafted. Wilcox prioritizes the crime and not the context. That is, Wilcox, following the conventions of horror and suspense, and as I suggested above, motivated by a writing career move, is fascinated with the spectacle of mass murder, and thus focuses his narrative energy in painting a scene of a thrilling murder investigation.

Historian Catherine Ceniza Choy, whose own narrative and analysis I take up later, critiques the ways in which Wilcox prioritizes the crimes committed at the Ann Arbor VA Hospital rather than focusing on the people involved in the story. Choy highlights Wilcox's depictions of the crimes as "a sinister blackness" and "one of the darkest possibilities."[35] Ultimately, Choy critiques *The Mysterious Deaths at Ann Arbor* for simply reproducing two racist images/tropes of the Filipina nurses: that of the 'inscrutable Oriental' and that of the 'native savage.'[36]

While I agree with Choy's critique, I believe that the more insidious representational violence in Wilcox's historical production is the framework through which Narciso and Perez emerge—through horror and suspense. Choy points out that neither of

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[35] Choy, *Empire of Care*, 147.
[36] Ibid., 148.

the nurses are central to the narrative—Filipina Narciso does not appear until page 120. A description of Leonora Perez does not appear until page 207. The book is 253 pages long. This narrative delay, a suspension of life story and detail, effectively denies Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez any semblance of personhood whatsoever. Wilcox performs an incredible amount of descriptive work prior to Narciso's and Perez's emergence as subjects/suspects in the criminal narrative that such descriptive work consequently displaces and diminishes the significance of Narciso's and Perez's life stories. Rather than giving Narciso and Perez narrative space as subjects, Wilcox's descriptions of the objects, the poison, the sinister blackness, the darkest possibility, the dead bodies, the creepy hospital, gets mapped onto Narciso and Perez. Narciso and Perez, then, are not subjects/suspects of the crime, rather, they are extensions of the objects of the crime, simply instruments of murder. Thus, in Wilcox's narrative, Narciso and Perez constitute what one scholar might call non-beauty, the vicious monster that violates the category of human.[37] I would like to turn my attention to the ways in which Wilcox describes the victims and the potential perpetrators. It is in the discrepancy between Wilcox's portrayal of victims and perpetrators that I find the representational violence inherent in Wilcox's use of horror and suspense.

There is a substantial discrepancy between the ways in which Wilcox describes the veterans/patients, i.e. the victims, and the two accused Filipina nurses, i.e. the perpetrators. It is within this discrepancy that Wilcox's desire to remain objective and to simply 'present the facts' goes unfulfilled. Again, because Wilcox's intention is to provide the reader with

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[37] Noel Carroll, "Ethnicity, Race, and Monstrosity: The Rhetorics of Horror and Humor," in *Engaging the Moving Image* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 88.

enough information so that the reader can judge the guilty, Wilcox's close attention to individuals is important. For Wilcox, someone has to be held responsible for these horrific crimes. Wilcox provides brief though very 'humanizing' portraits of the patients. Wilcox portrays the patients as "all-American, blue-collar men: 'farmers, factory workers, small-town men who spent long hours standing at an assembly line in Detroit auto plants or working small plots of land'."[38] Wilcox describes one of the patients as "robust", as "a former high school athlete and insurance salesman from Ypsilanti."[39] While it seems that he is simply offering basic biographical information of the patient, Wilcox is in fact offering a selective set of identity markers. Here, the patient is a local former high school athlete, an 'All-American' working class man. Wilcox attempts to provide a neutral account of the patient's background. However, Wilcox's focus on that which makes the patient an average, relatable American suggests that the suspected murderer, the perpetrator, is by turns a violation of that very relatable, American subjectivity, someone or something other than what the patient is. That is, Wilcox, in the first 120 pages, of a 253-page book, reconstructs the scenes of breathing failure and murder at the VA Hospital but also reinforces and restores an Americanness in the patients, and thus effectively implies that the suspected perpetrator embodies the negation of that Americanness. Wilcox's framing here moves beyond horror and suspense. Wilcox makes this story a story of American victimhood. In other words, within the framework of horror and suspense, of monstrosity and delay, Wilcox grounds the injury as an injury to American men, American peoples.

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[38] Choy, *Empire of Care*, 147; Wilcox, *Mysterious Deaths*, 22.
[39] Wilcox, *Mysterious Deaths*, 35.

This, then, makes the crimes that much more horrific—it is almost an act of war, war against a defenseless victim.[40]

Wilcox further amplifies the gendered American subjectivity of the patients when he finally describes the suspected perpetrators, Narciso and Perez. When Wilcox finally describes Narciso and Perez, he does so in such a way that neither Narciso nor Perez can emerge beyond, outside of, or beside the horror and suspense of the story. Drawing from newspapers, Wilcox describes Filipina Narciso as having a "relatively uneventful" life.[41] Wilcox describes Narciso's hair not as short and black; rather Wilcox inverts the description: "her black hair cut short around her ears."[42] Here, Wilcox emphasizes the black of Narciso's hair which is 'cut short.' The imagery here extends the imagery of the 'sinister blackness' of this 'dark possibility.' Wilcox describes Leonora Perez through the testimony of one of the patients: Richard Neely. Neely objectifies Perez and describes her height and says "she's thin, stacked nice."[43] What is most telling in Neely's description here is that Leonora Perez's hair, too, is black, and "down to her shoulders."[44] Wilcox writes that "Leonora Perez fit [Neely's] description. (Of course, so might other Orientals)."[45] Wilcox places the reader in an interesting position here: he assumes that the reader will trust without question Richard Neely's testimony. Thus, Leonora Perez in Wilcox's narrative is a product of the victim's testimony and thus Perez is already framed as guilty. That is, Perez, whose hair is also black, but a little longer, which suggests nothing about anything,

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[40] Wilcox, *Mysterious Deaths*, Book Cover.
[41] Ibid., 159.
[42] Ibid., 159.
[43] Ibid., 207.
[44] Ibid., 207.
[45] Ibid., 207.

is also simply an extension of the sinister blackness and dark possibility that Wilcox so diligently describes. Wilcox's portrayal of Narciso and Perez, focusing mostly on their black hair, and their inscrutability, further emphasizes Narciso's and Perez's otherness with respect to the Americanness of the patients. In other words, Wilcox places Narciso and Perez in the very frame he has been setting up: as the opposite of people like Neely, as the human though not human culmination of the horror.

In Choy's view, Wilcox represents Narciso and Perez as enigmas, through the tropes of "Oriental inscrutability" and "native savagery."[46] Wilcox describes Pavulon, a muscle relaxant, as "a poison derived from special tropical plants and used, for instance, by South American jungle Indians on the tips of darts shot to kill game."[47] I agree with Choy that Wilcox's racist representations indicate the mainstream racial anxieties about Filipinos. However, I would add that Wilcox's objectifying of Narciso and Perez—his focus on their black hair and build—is not simply out of narrative convenience. To put this in another way, Wilcox selectively describes Narciso and Perez through specific details. These details, I suggest, are simply repetitions/residues of the overwhelming loom of sinister darkness, dark possibility, and monstress savagery. In Wilcox's schema, Narciso and Perez are not merely foreigners with undeterminable motives to murder, rather, they are presented here as violations of the human, as monstrous, horrific. The fact that Narciso and Perez are not only framed as guilty, but they are framed as not worthy of human compassion (or composition), sympathy, or dignity, is a product of Wilcox's focus on the crime and who he emphasizes as the injured. Ultimately, due to Wilcox's seemingly neutral

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[46] Choy, *Empire of Care*, 148.
[47] Choy, *Empire of Care*, 148; Wilcox, *Mysterious Deaths*, 8-9.

theoretical premise—to present the facts and leave the verdict up to the reader—Narciso and Perez remain monsters awaiting their containment. While I discussed above the limits of the Wilcox's theoretical premise, I believe also that the form and methodologies used to present *The Mysterious Deaths at Ann Arbor* as on-the-scene investigative journalism deemphasizes some important aspects of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*.

Wilcox reconstructs the events that took place at Ann Arbor by citing newspapers and court testimony. It is this methodology of journalism, the imperative to tell the story objectively, and through the facts, that I find problematic. First off, Wilcox focuses all of his attention on the material generated around the case. After a depiction of horror and mystery in Chapter 1, in which he describes that the "hospital loomed dark and menacing," Wilcox states right at the outset of Chapter 2 that "The preceding is based on fact."[48] Wilcox assures his reader that his account, his reconstruction of events, is based on fact. This insistence on the facts occludes any other so-called facts that are not officially collected, that are redacted or made unavailable to the public at the time of Wilcox's writing. Wilcox's context for understanding the events, the frame of *now*, is naturally limited. To be fair, he is afforded no critical distance. But this does not excuse his narrative from its lack of critical gestures. Wilcox's narrative gives no adequate space for the debate happening around the case. Additionally, Wilcox uses the strategy or methodology of suspense quite well. As discussed earlier, Wilcox suspends detail, all the while foreshadowing what is to come, the monsters that emerge, Narciso and Perez, black-haired, uneventful, inscrutable, and quiet. To put this in another way, Wilcox assembles sources

[48] Wilcox, *Mysterious Deaths*, 7, 19.

readily available to him—newspapers, court records, etc.—and gleans insights from these sources through a lens of horror and suspense. This is important because through this methodology Wilcox cannot keep his narrative neutral or objective, nor can he even lead to what he claims to provide: "the whole truth."[49] That is, Wilcox's research, his investigation, is extremely limited, a partial, constructed, stylized truth. I would like at this point to specifically turn to the way in which Wilcox includes superficial historical research to describe Narciso and Perez. In the end, Wilcox's failure at giving adequate context makes his narrative less insightful than it suggests to be.

Because he is so focused on the present events, and so intent on making sure the reader has enough information to judge the guilty, Wilcox provides a very superficial and problematic account of Narciso's and Perez's background. In other words, Wilcox's historical research in his book is done hastily and haphazardly for the sake of very focused, on-the-scene investigative journalism. Exploring the allegation that Narciso and Perez were "attacking American servicemen for revenge," Wilcox writes about the Philippines as having been "under control" of Americans since 1898, when the Americans won the Philippines from Spain in the Spanish-American War.[50] Drawing on previous news articles exploring Narciso's and Perez's backgrounds, Wilcox then goes on to describe the process through which Filipina nurses migrated to the United States. On the surface, it appears that Wilcox is providing necessary context to understand the life stories of Narciso and Perez and thus to add a human dimension to their story. However, because Wilcox provides a very superficial history of U.S.-Philippine relations, and because he introduces what

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[49] Wilcox, *Mysterious Deaths*, Book Cover.
[50] Ibid., 160.

history he does give as a possible explanation for the murderers' motive, he instead forces a limit upon which a reader might rely on history to understand the nuances of the case. That is, Wilcox makes history insignificant in his on-the-scene investigation. I argue that history, the colonial relationship between the Philippines and the U.S., made the case possible, and thus must be integral to the narrative. Wilcox's obsession with the air of mystery, the pleasure of suspense and delay, clearly takes precedent over historical context. This is built into the form. I concede that *The Mysterious Deaths at Ann Arbor* is not intended as a historical text. However, I would be remiss if I did not include it as a part of our historical memory of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez.* Again, following Trouillot's reminder, Wilcox's professional investigative journalism cannot be discounted in our pursuit of history.

In summary, *The Mysterious Deaths at Ann Arbor* leaves us with two understandings *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez.* First, because of Wilcox's commitment to on-the-scene investigative journalism, the narrative remains limited to the horror and suspense of the present events, the sociohistorical process of what happened. History has no substantial place in Wilcox's narrative unless that history is used to speculate about Narciso's and Perez's motives. Second, Wilcox's focus on the subjects of crime and injury ultimately present Narciso and Perez as objects of crime and injury, as mediums for crime, as mediums for injuring. I find less useful a tracing of the silences in Wilcox's historical production; instead, what I hope to have demonstrated are ways in which Wilcox amplifies certain aspects of the events—the murder weapon, the ambience, the victimhood of these American veterans. Ultimately, Wilcox forces the reader into a premature verdict. *The Mysterious Deaths at Ann Arbor* presents Narciso and Perez as beyond guilty, as

uncontrollably savage, and exceedingly monstrous. These kinds of representations, I propose, can be just as damaging as the guilty verdict itself.

With much more critical distance from the sociohistorical process, i.e. the moment, of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, historian Catherine Ceniza Choy provides a more analytical accounting of the case in her 2003 historical project *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History*. Formally trained as a historian, Choy is currently a professor of ethnic studies at the University of California at Berkeley. Until Geri Alumit Zeldes's 2013 film, which I discuss below, Choy's inquiry stood as the only major academic undertaking to explore *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*.[51] What sets Choy's historical production apart from that of Wilcox is Choy's commitment to a politics of historical production. Admittedly, the endeavor of history is not the same as the enterprise of journalism. Still, the work of Choy and Wilcox are both part of the *history* of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. Choy envisions her work as contributing to a Filipino American history

> that is unafraid to cross national as well as disciplinary boundaries; that rigorously critiques the exploitative and enduring legacies of U.S. imperialism and colonialism in the contemporary lives of Filipinos and Filipino Americans; and that sustains, but also moves beyond, a critique of Filipino Americans as 'forgotten' Asian Americans through the analytical study of those terrains where Filipinos have made an impact on American society and global history.[52]

To put it simply, the transnational and interdisciplinary scope of Choy's work, and its attention to the enduring legacies of U.S. imperialism and colonialism, positions Choy's historical production fundamentally and in critical opposition to not only Wilcox's

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[51] As mentioned in the previous chapter, there are a few texts that mention *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* but do not treat the case as a primary object or site of study.
[52] Choy, *Empire of Care*, 14.

historical production, but to any narrative practice that elides the larger historical processes of racist, imperialist, and colonial violence. Again, Choy is a professor of ethnic studies. Ethnic studies, as an ongoing struggle, continues to broaden and deepen its analytical approaches in order to understand more deeply and perhaps transform the lived realities and experiences of indigenous peoples and people of color. "Ethnic studies programs," writes Evelyn Hu-DeHart, "grew out of student and community grassroots movements" in order "to challenge the prevailing academic power structure and the Eurocentric curricula of our colleges and universities."[53] Choy writes about Narciso and Perez at a historical moment in which ethnic studies has matured into an academic interdiscipline intervening in traditional disciplinary studies of race and its intersections with other structures and process such as class, gender, sexuality, and ability. At the time of her writing, Choy has available to her over three decades of critical scholarly insight into the structures and workings of racism and imperialism. A Filipina American feminist historian, Choy relates to *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* in a fundamentally different way than does Wilcox. This fundamentally different relationship, as I will show, informs Choy's alternative handling of the archive and her attention to certain details in telling the story of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. In some respects, Choy engages a similar arrangement of evidence that Wilcox worked with, i.e. newspaper accounts, but Choy also studies activist newspapers and Wilcox's book itself, and she also interviews nurses and activists who had an investment in the case at some point.

[53] Evelyn Hu-DeHart, "The History, Development, and Future of Ethnic Studies," in *The Phi Delta Kappan* 75.1 (1993): 51-52.

In a chapter titled "Trial and Error: Crime and Punishment in America's 'Wound Culture'," in her longer study *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History*, historian Catherine Ceniza Choy compares two mass murder cases involving Filipina migrant nurses during the 1960s and 1970s, one of the cases being *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*.[54] Choy's interest in *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, that is, her theoretical premise, is to examine the politics of representation and the ways in which these highly publicized court cases made more visible the process of Filipina nursing migration in the U.S. More specifically, Choy suggests that earlier representations and narratives of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* (like Wilcox's) were indicative of larger cultural and political contexts. Choy sets out to "illustrate how the representations of Filipino nurses in these cases reflected the dynamic stereotypes of Filipino nurses, stereotypes steeped in a culture of U.S. imperialism."[55] Choy focuses on the ways in which Filipina nurses emerge as representative figures in the U.S. popular imagination. What is important about Choy's analysis is that it rereads the discourse surrounding *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* within a broader historical context. This, as I have shown, is something Wilcox's historical production fails to do, both on account of Wilcox's lack of critical distance from the events and on account of his motivation to quickly and haphazardly turn out a highly marketable mystery and thriller. Critiquing Wilcox's and the prosecution's representations of Narciso and Perez, Choy argues that the racially denigrating representations of Narciso and Perez were a product of a long history of U.S. imperialism.

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[54] The other case involved Richard Speck, who murdered eight student nurses in Chicago, two of them being Filipina and the lone survivor also being Filipina. SEE Choy, *Empire of Care*, 121-139.
[55] Choy, *Empire of Care*, 12.

Furthermore, Choy highlights the contradictions inherent in the narratives that framed Narciso and Perez. "The phenomenon," writes Choy, "also provides a useful lens to view the contradictions of late twentieth-century American cultural history—specifically, the American public's obsession with certain kinds of violence and its erasure of U.S. imperial violence."[56] I find this moment in Choy's analysis to be extremely generative. Choy calls out the contradiction here—the American public, she argues, was/is obsessed with spectacular violence, which often overshadows the violences, in fact, erases the violences, cultural and physical, discursive and material, of U.S. colonialism and imperialism. The context provided by Choy and her attention to the violence of imperialism and its many attendant violences helps me imagine for my own work an even wider analytical lens, one that helps me potentially rearticulate *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* beyond the constitutions of Filipino American history. Instructed by and indebted to Choy's analysis, I confidently read *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* as a moment of spectacularized racist state violence. As such, I seek a different genealogy for understanding the case and for understanding the production of the Filipino subject. Choy's work reminds us that Wilcox's historical production is limitedly singular, immediate, and specific—Wilcox's work is a work of journalism, but a specific kind of journalism that has no interest in the way history or social constructions such as racism, classism, and sexism figure into the narrative.

In her exploration of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, Choy specifically discusses the Filipino subject as partly a production of media spectacle. Choy writes:

> Thus, despite their Americanized professional training and needed skills, Filipino immigrant nurses Narciso and Perez emerged as dark, dangerous,

[56] Choy, *Empire of Care*, 123.

> and conspiratorial Filipino natives with the propensity to harm their American patients in the context of this politicized demographic change.[57]

Choy proceeds to critique Wilcox's representations: "While Wilcox highlighted Oriental inscrutability as a possible explanation for Narciso's and Perez's criminal behavior, the nurses' racialized identities as Filipinos offered an additional explanation: native savagery."[58] Choy's analysis here is important because it identifies two different interpretive violences: Orientalism and anti-indigenousness. By identifying the ways in which Wilcox's work and other discursive productions conflate histories, Choy makes clear the mechanisms through which U.S. racisms deploy an arsenal of discursive violences. For Choy, Wilcox's work and the work of the federal prosecution racialized Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez as enigmatic and monstrous savages. This finding lends itself to the style of critique of Filipino subject formation put forth by ethnic studies scholars Dylan Rodriguez and Nerissa Balce, who both recognize the Filipino American subject as being produced through relational racializations. (I discuss further the work of Rodriguez and Balce in a later section of this chapter.)

Of important note, especially in my analysis of Zeldes's work below, Choy pinpoints the ways in which power operates in the courtroom. Choy writes: "The authority of these professionals grounded a complex, highly circumstantial, and politically charged case with rationality, order, and objectivity."[59] This, for Choy, is the interpretive violence performed by the prosecution. This is similar to what Black studies scholar Joy James calls

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[57] Choy, *Empire of Care*, 122.
[58] Ibid., 148.
[59] Ibid., 141.

a "prosecutorial performance" of the state.[60] In Choy's study, professionals, that is, the scientists and medical practitioners employed by the FBI, have what some believe to be a valid claim to truth. In many ways, I see the relationship to evidence, which is based on a desire for *truth*, to be exactly the same for the prosecution (i.e. the federal government, the FBI) and Wilcox. I find generative Choy's critique of rationality and objectivity as I pursue the 'ghostly matter' of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* because such critique signals a need to develop and operate from alternative epistemological standpoints.

As mentioned above, Choy's exploration of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* is premised on a rigorous commitment to a purposefully feminist and interdisciplinary practice of historical research and writing. Performing close readings of cultural texts, news sources, and court records, drawing from activist ephemera, and conducting interviews about the activist interest in the case, Choy's critique constitutes and models a robust, interdisciplinary approach to historical production. While I have every intention of using Choy's work as a generative point of departure, I believe that Choy's commitment to the above historical practice, one that draws upon mostly official records and published objects of knowledge, is precisely what could be limiting about Choy's account. Through history, Choy offers counterpoints to what a Wilcox-like historical production does and is. History, even as its political commitments are transnational and feminist and sympathetic to Narciso, my mother, and other struggling Filipina nurses, subscribes to a certain 'regime of truth'—that Narciso and Perez were victims of racism. While I certainly agree that this is

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[60] Joy James, *Resisting State Violence: Radicalism, Gender, and Race in U.S. Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 133. While Joy James uses this term to describe the brutal history and spectacle of lynching of Black people, I believe that "prosecutorial performances" extends to other quotidian and spectacular violences within legal contexts.

true, it still does not enable new understanding. Trouillot exposes such limitations in any historical production: "Power is constitutive of the story….the historians' claimed political preferences have little influence on most of the actual practices of power."[61] *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, in Choy's study, does not become a simple question of innocence and guilt, which brings our understanding leaps further than Wilcox's journalistic account does. Choy's study, however, remains trapped in a different reduction: *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* hinges on the question of justice and injustice—the case serves as evidence of a past racism. Because of its handling of and its relationship to the archive, Choy's analysis has purchase in particular discussions that characterize history as that which has been recorded somehow, the evidentiary. Because of such limitations, we cannot move our understanding of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* beyond questions of Filipino migration, representation, and history. We cannot move our understanding of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* as evidence of anti-Filipino racism, a unique racist state violence against a professional laboring class of predominantly women. While she briefly mentions that some of the support of Narciso and Perez came from communities outside of the Filipino community, Choy is unable to make claims about any racial solidarities forming in the historical moment because the archive is absent of evidence for solidarity, for collaboration, absent of the raw material to make a relational analysis.[62] Of course, to be fair, this is not the scope of Choy's project to begin with. I point to these limitations as a way of foregrounding what I hope to explore in

[61] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 28.
[62] Choy mentions that the Chicago Support Group was not a Filipino-only organization. Choy, *Empire of Care*, 165.

Chapter 5 of this dissertation. I see here, through Choy's work, an opening for experimental gestures and speculative critique.

To reiterate, Choy's account is primarily situated within a specific historical context, that of Filipina nursing migration, and is committed to a specific politics: feminist, transnational, ethnic studies. However, as she presents *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* as simply a case study to illuminate larger historical processes, she unwittingly deemphasizes the significance of the case. Here, I am not critiquing Choy's decision to use *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* as an example per se, I am instead taking issue with historical productions that use these moments merely as representative. Those types of historical articulations disavow too many paths, leave to the side and in the cracks too many ghostly complexities. What would happen if we were to read *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* through various frameworks—i.e. racist state violence, interracial solidarities? What if we were to produce something other than a narrative of racist state violence, something that is clearly an examination of racist state violence, but the form of this something is not readily intelligible? How do we study historical moments, court cases, pivotal happenings, on their own terms? Still, I find promise in what exists in and beyond the shadows, I find promise in the ghostly.

The most recent historical production about *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* is an academic journalistic study—a documentary film originally produced by Michigan State University Technologies in 2013. Through archival research, ethnographic interviews, and dramatic reenactments, drawing upon thousands of pages of FBI files acquired via the Freedom of Information Action (FOIA), the regional Emmy-award winning documentary film *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez, & the Press* attempts to 'reconstruct' the events from 1975-1978. This documentary film is directed by Geri Alumit Zeldes, a U.S. Filipino scholar,

documentary filmmaker, professor and director of journalism graduate studies at Michigan State University. Zeldes's body of work includes scholarly articles and documentary films about representations of gender, race, and religion in U.S. news media.[63] Two contextual details come to mind as I begin reading *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez, & the Press*: 1) Geri Alumit Zeldes produces this journalistic film within a research institution and thus has available to her Catherine Ceniza Choy's work, the additional texts that mention *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, and secondary texts in Filipino American history, and 2) Zeldes, in the so-called postracial era of Obama, acknowledges that: "Race, gender and religion as separate variables slightly to profoundly impact our selective processes."[64] As I demonstrate in my analysis below, the film *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez, & the Press* inadequately makes use of available research and frameworks of study. I use 'inadequately' here because Zeldes's objective is to produce something *new*—she embarks on a project of discovery. Reflecting on *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez, & the Press*, Zeldes states, "I feel like I've unearthed a trove of experiences unheard and buried by 40 years."[65] Ultimately, I argue that Zeldes's film simply reproduces in high definition the mystery and suspense of Wilcox's book. That is, there is nothing *new* and 'unheard' within Zeldes's historical production. I maintain that due to the fact that Zeldes's journalistic-historical methods are anchored to a dominant 'regime of truth' we are unable to see anything beyond the reproduction of the same narrative over

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[63] Via Michigan State University:
http://cas.msu.edu/people/faculty-staff/staff-listing/name/geri-zeldes/
[64] Via Michigan State University:
http://cas.msu.edu/people/faculty-staff/staff-listing/name/geri-zeldes/.
In one article, Zeldes and other scholars show how race informed media representations in presidential elections.
[65] "Geri Zeldes: Documenting 'Newness'", in *MSU Today*: 360 Perspective:
http://msutoday.msu.edu/360/2013/geri-zeldes-documenting-newness/

and over again. And there is something so very haunting about the continuous reproduction of this same narrative.

As a scholar committed to the activist project of ethnic studies, I feel it would be politically irresponsible for me to proceed with my analysis without divulging my brief, tangential relationship to this historical production. In 2011, I was contacted via e-mail and eventually agreed to a phone conversation with a communication professor who was making a film about *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. It was Geri Alumit Zeldes. Zeldes had tracked me down after having noticed some announcements of my work on various websites. If I remember correctly, Zeldes took notice that I and a choreographer in the Bay Area, Alleluia Panis, had received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) to create a work that centered *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. At first, it seemed that Zeldes was polite and considerate of my family's history. When she asked if she could interview my mother, I respectfully declined on behalf of my mother. I was certain that my mother had only been comfortable in sharing her story because up until that point her story had been mediated through my work. To be sure, I double-checked with my mother shortly after my conversation with Zeldes and my mother confirmed that she did not want to talk to anyone she did not know or trust. Still, I saw in my meeting Zeldes an opportunity to collaborate with others interested in my mother's (and Narciso's) case. So, I agreed to be interviewed myself.

Months later, I met with Geri Alumit Zeldes at a hotel in San Diego. Zeldes, her mother, and her brother were in town for a wedding. Zeldes, in the company of her family, screened for me a rough five-minute cut of the film that she and her students had been working on. I was impressed—the archival material was clear, clearer than anything I had

been able to get access to, and the intention was humble: Zeldes was exploring the politics of press coverage. What I remember in that moment perhaps changed the course of Zeldes's film. Commenting on the rough-cut, Zeldes's brother said that it would be much more interesting if we could hear the other side, if we could hear what the FBI had to say. That way, Zeldes's brother assured, the story would be more balanced. For some reason, I dismissed Zeldes's brother's desire for objectivity and assumed Zeldes to have a much more critical orientation toward documentary filmmaking. I knew, too, that my own scholarly and artistic work were fundamentally different; so, I agreed to stay in touch with Zeldes about her film. Before we parted ways, Zeldes asked again: "So, can I interview your mother?" Again, I respectfully declined. This time, though, I had a strange a feeling. Was Zeldes simply chasing a story? Was Zeldes simply another Wilcox-like journalist wanting only to tell a compelling story?

In October of 2012, Zeldes gathered some resources and flew me out to Michigan State University for the 9th Annual International Conference of the Philippines (ICOPHIL).[66] There, I would perform my one person literary performance, *The Passion of El Hulk Hogancito*, as part of the major plenary. The plenary would also include a screening of a rough 30-minute version of Zeldes's *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez, & the Press*. The film was screened as a preface to my performance. The film displayed traditional documentary filmmaking—talking heads, archival footage, narrative layering. The new development in this longer version was that Zeldes had tracked down and interviewed two

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[66] ICOPHIL was originally an anti-Marcos scholarly endeavor. I was insecure about my U.S.-centric work. I did find it odd that Zeldes would assume her film and my own work to have a place in that conversation. Not because our work did not belong, but because I knew that Zeldes was not familiar with my work and that she was not interested in the Philippine aspects of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez.*

FBI agents who had been involved in the case. To recall, there were hundreds of agents who worked on the case to varying degrees. Both of these former agents insisted that my mother and Narciso were undoubtedly guilty. Both former FBI agents held firm in their conviction. This, I felt in my bones, in my throat, in my breath, was a ghost signaling a haunting.[67] After the screening, Zeldes invited her students, every single one of them white, to the stage. They talked about their interests in the film. They talked about the struggle to balance the various perspectives of their interlocutors/interviewees. One student suggested that the FBI agents were simply "honest men who were doing their jobs." I was enraged! Still, I performed my show and Zeldes's students documented it. However, after the show, I kindly declined to sign a waiver. I imagine Zeldes planned to use that footage in her film. I was terribly overwhelmed and unsettled.

The following morning, I set up a meeting with Zeldes and her students to process what I was feeling. We sat on the lobby couches of the conference venue. In the end, Zeldes and I had a clear and profound disagreement on what documentary film was supposed to be. She was an advocate of 'objective' storytelling. I believed and continue to believe in no such thing. In a humble critique, I asked her students to consider how the families of Narciso and Perez and the community in the room the night before could be affected by seeing the FBI holding steady their conviction that Narciso and Perez were guilty all along. "This," I confessed them, "could be traumatizing." At the end of our meeting, in which I declined to be interviewed once and for all, Zeldes stood up and said, "You know what, Jason? We just want to get the story out." I nodded and said, "I understand." Later that day,

[67] "The ghost is just the sign." Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8.

I met Michael Price, one of the core members of the Narciso-Perez Legal Defense Committee, and a dear friend to my parents. Michael Price admitted that he, too, was disgusted with Zeldes's film and its lack of critical engagement with the FBI.

Since our encounter in Michigan, I have not interacted with Geri Alumit Zeldes. I was afraid that I had brought my family closer again to the FBI. Months later, Zeldes e-mailed me a few times to notify me of the success of her film and asked if I would reconsider my mother being interviewed for the film. I refused to respond. In October of 2013, Emily Lawsin, a Pinay lecturer at the University of Michigan, contacted me about screening Zeldes's film at an event for the Filipino American National Historical Society (FANHS) in Detroit, Michigan. I agreed to have my own work screened alongside Zeldes's. I put out the following statement to the community that attended the screening:

> October 13, 2013
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> Dear Community:
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> I hope this finds you thriving. I would like to thank both the Filipino American National Historical Society Michigan Chapter (FANHS-MI), the Paaralang Pilipino Language and Cultural School and the Philippine American Community Center of Michigan (PACCM) for inviting me to share my work with you all.
>
> ABOUT MY WORK
>
> My mother is Leonora M. Perez, one of the two Filipina nurses who in 1976 were framed by the FBI for the murder and poisoning of several patients at the Ann Arbor VA Hospital. For over ten years, I have struggled to tell my mother's story. I've spent considerable time rummaging through my mother's personal archive—a flimsy blue plastic bin full of court records, letters of support, clippings of both community and mainstream newspapers, activist flyers, photographs, archival footage, my mother's prison diaries, and other artifacts from the case. I've also for countless hours interviewed and have had impromptu storytelling sessions with my mother. As a result, I have written several poems, experimental monologues, hundreds of pages of an unfinished novel, a one-person performance, and a

play-in-progress funded by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). In recent years, I have written, directed, and edited two film experiments exploring what *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* continues to mean for my family, for our families, for our communities.

Today, I'd like to share with you my most recent exploration: *Leonora, archive of* (2013). This film presents a series of ongoing experiments in documentary film and performance. It imaginatively employs archival objects, personal interviews, and my mother herself as both the subjects and objects of history. Please note that this film is deliberately a work-in-progress.

Telling my mother's story remains for me a lifelong pursuit.

Through my website, I will soon be sharing my extensive body of work that explores my mother's history. I invite you to join me in my creative process as I continue to struggle with the politics and ethics of telling my family history, of telling our community's histories. Feel free to subscribe to my monthly newsletter so I can keep you updated on the progress of my work. Please know that I'm always available to discuss with you my work and that I'm especially eager to meet those of you who were involved in the campaign to support my mother and Tita P.I. It is humbling to share my work with you, to hear your stories, and to build community with you. It is humbling to learn of my mother's story not only through her and our family, but also through our communities. And it is certainly redemptive to know that people like Mike Price, and people like you, continue to support my mother, Filipina Narciso, and our families.

BRIEF NOTE RE: *U.S. V. NARCISO, PEREZ & THE PRESS*

I would like to make it clear that I, on behalf of my family, do not endorse *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez & the Press* in any way whatsoever. Although I've seen earlier versions, and then a working draft of the film at the International Conference of the Philippines (ICOPHIL-9) at Michigan State University last October, I was never offered a copy or a link to the final version of the film. I simply ask that you, as the audience, as the community, question the ethical practices upon which this film is based. I simply ask that you continue to struggle over the representations of our community's histories. I strongly encourage you to consider: What impact does a film like *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez & the Press* have on our communities? How do we keep researchers and journalists accountable to our families and communities as they pursue our histories? In the name of university research and journalist integrity, the filmmakers of *U.S. v. Narciso-Perez & the Press* have been inattentive to my family's concerns and perhaps to your own concerns as well. Yet still, the film presumes to reconstruct our history. The film

> presumes to tell an objective truth. Again, I would like to make it clear: My family and I refuse to endorse this and any future iteration *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez & the Press*.
>
> I sincerely hope to connect with you soon.
>
> Ingat po kayo,
>
> Jason Magabo Perez [68]

I anticipate future encounters with Geri Alumit Zeldes and her film.[69] For now, I offering a closer reading of the historical production, the documentary film *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez, & the Press.*

I am convinced that Zeldes's film and the many narratives floating about it suggests a haunting. The conceptual and theoretical premise of the film resembles Wilcox's in its straightforwardness. Zeldes admits that she was simply surprised by the story and thus needed to find out for herself what *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* was all about. Zeldes describes the conceptual and theoretical framework and perspective of her film:

> An American Studies Professor at Michigan State University suggested that I create a documentary film about how two Filipina nurses were convicted in the 1970s of poisoning patients in the Veteran's Administration Hospital in Ann Arbor. I pursued the film to fulfill my curiosity. I hadn't heard about the case, which is quite remarkable as I grew up in Flint, MI, located an hour away from the hospital, I attended the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, I'm Filipino, and a dozen of my family members are in the medical field.[70]

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[68] Jason Magabo Perez, *Community Statement* for Filipino American National Historical Society Michigan Chapter (FANHS-MI), the Paaralang Pilipino Language and Cultural School, and the Philippine American Community Center of Michigan (PACCM), October, 13, 2013.
[69] In fact, there are talks of an hour-long version titled *That Was a Crazy Summer*.
[70] Geri Alumit Zeldes, Scholarly Statement for *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez, & the Press*, in *Journal of Video Ethnography* 1.1 (2013).

What is significant in this scholarly statement is that Zeldes admits that she pursued the film simply out of curiosity. However, like Choy, Zeldes has a different relationship to the story than Wilcox. Zeldes qualifies her curiosity on the basis of a recommendation by an American studies professor and on the basis of her being Filipino and from Michigan. It is clear that Zeldes is not the same type of investigative journalist as Wilcox. As I mentioned, Zeldes has a significant amount of critical distance from the sociohistorical process of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. In addition, Zeldes has at her disposal Choy's very thorough analysis. Actually, Zeldes even cites Choy's work as a "key scholarly reference."[71] I highlight Zeldes's conceptual and theoretical framework here because, as I will demonstrate, such a premise, un-critical and left to the machinations of traditional documentary filmmaking, what Foucault might call the 'apparatuses of control,' inevitably leads to the reproduction of the same narrative, inevitably articulates the story to a dominant 'regime of truth.'[72]

The language that Zeldes uses to describe the film relies on the dominant 'regime of truth,' a regime committed to empirical facts and the stories and historical intelligibilities enabled by such facts. Zeldes's film 'reconstructs' the events. Documentary film scholar Bill Nichols's early work is instructive here. In discussing expository modes of documentary film, Nichols writes: "Rather than the suspense of solving a mystery of rescuing a captive, the expository documentary frequently builds a sense of dramatic involvement around the need for a solution."[73] Full of dramatic reenactment, but still intent on solving a mystery, Zeldes's film commits to the same style of suspense—less tempered

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[71] Zeldes, Scholarly Statement.
[72] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 131.
[73] Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality: Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992), 38.

by imagery of the monstrous—as Wilcox. Zeldes's approach leads to no new insight about the case. The film relies on the excitement that *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* is remarkably not a well-known court case. The film for Zeldes seems to say: *Isn't this understudied history so fascinating?* While this approach makes sense and is common for popular documentary films that seek to recover pasts, this approach is inadequate in the context of academic research, which is Zeldes's primary context of production. The film unwittingly serves as the visual expression of Wilcox's and the FBI's account, all committed to the same dominant 'regime of truth.' The study of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* in Zeldes film moves us backward: There is a lack of analysis and a limiting commitment to objectivity. *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez, & the Press* does not reiterate Choy's critique of racial injustice in the case; rather, Zeldes's film much more dangerously transports us back to Wilcox's premise: Are Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez, after all this time, in fact, guilty?

It is clear in *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez, & the Press* that Zeldes wants to provide an objective, balanced account of the history. Thus, in the film, we see and hear various interlocutors/interviewees in order to balance out the archival news footage: Michael Price, aforementioned member of the Narciso and Perez Legal Defense Committee and eventual friend of my mother and father and Narciso; Kirk Cheyfitz, *Detroit Free Press* journalist who was sympathetic to Narciso and my mother; Dr. Michael McCleod, African American doctor and former resident at the Ann Arbor VA Hospital and a suspect in the case during the earliest phases of the FBI's investigation; Mary Bresnahan, a communication scholar;

and two former FBI agents, Greg Stejskal and Gene Ward.[74] The racial and gender make-up of this arrangement of interlocutors—four white men, a black man, and a white woman—suggests that we only get a very limited 'balanced' perspective. There are no Filipino interlocutors! To have Filipino interlocutors should be a necessary criteria as the film attempts to 'reconstruct' the events of the case. That my mother and Narciso are from the Philippines and their supporters were predominantly Filipino is too large of a fact to not pursue rigorously. In naming and identifying the film's sources, what Trouillot calls the first instance of historical production, Zeldes chooses to de-racialize the narrative.[75]

At one point in the film, Kirk Cheyfitz, the *Detroit Free Press* journalist says that the optics of the case worked against the federal government. He says that watching the news coverage of the trial and witnessing the events of the courtroom in 1977 one would see:

> Large white men surrounding, leaning over, questioning, examining, these two tiny Filipino women. The optics of that said racism, intimidation. It said here's this huge organization popularly known as the United States of America putting all of its weight into convicting these two women of this terrible crime…just that visual didn't help the government's case.[76]

Regardless, the very optics of the case, which supposedly worked against the government, still enabled a guilty verdict. Here, Cheyfitz says that the performance of racist state violence hurt the government. I focus on this because the question of whether or not race

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[74] I had seen in a prior version interviews with a Tagalog professor who was active in the community during *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. According to a source, this Tagalog professor asked to be removed from the film.
[75] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 26.
[76] Geri Alumit Zeldes, *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez, & the Press* (San Francisco: Kanopy Streaming, 2015; originally produced by Michigan State University Technologies, 2013).

mattered in the case implicitly comes up for debate in the film. Even a Narciso and Perez sympathizer such as Cheyfitz claims that race worked against the government—that the government was injured in that instance! What is implied here is the film's rhetorical position on race: Race is controversial. This, I argue, is where Zeldes fails to understand Choy's analysis. *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez, & the Press*, just as my own work seeks to do, participates in the struggle over racial literacy about *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. Whereas Zeldes's film makes race questionable, I seek the questions that race produces.

In the spirit of objectivity, *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez, & the Press* employs no voiceover narrative. Instead, the film allows the historical narrative to unfold as different interlocutors give their impressions of the case and as archival news footage reports the story. This gives off the illusion of objectivity, a collective democratic discourse. The film, as mentioned above, establishes its credibility through the knowledge and reflections of scholarly experts like Mary Bresnahan, journalists like Kirk Cheyfitz, and former FBI agents. What I find interesting in the editing of the documentary film is that the two FBI agents are given a substantial amount of airtime, of narrative space, seven minutes of a film that is less than 30 minutes long. This was one of the major concerns I expressed to Zeldes and her students. Through and through, the story of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* has been predominantly structured around the FBI's framing. The FBI assembled the case against Narciso and Perez. The FBI called in their sources, assembled their evidence/archive, and crafted the story. When I met with Zeldes and her students I reminded them that we already knew what the FBI said—what the FBI said is what led to the guilty verdict. I urged Zeldes and her students to reconsider involving the FBI in their film. In its fascination with the FBI's narrative authority, *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez, & the Press* aligns itself with the federal

prosecution, almost 40 years later, and continues to subscribe to the same dominant 'regime of truth.' Aligned with state power, the film hovers over the same question: Are the nurses innocent or guilty? At many instances in the film, the FBI agents say without a doubt in their minds, with so much conviction and certainty, that Narciso and Perez are guilty. This serves as a clear demonstration of the 'archival power' of the state. These moments of the film illustrate "the material weight of mention."[77] Reproducing Wilcox's investigative modes, Zeldes's contemporary documentary film also reproduces Wilcox's conclusions. The "seething presence" within Wilcox's narrative haunt, too, Zeldes's more recent narration.[78]

The last aspect of Zeldes's documentary film that I would like focus on is the visual economy of the narrative. Like most traditional documentary films, throughout, there are moments in which the audio track of interviews plays atop reenactments, recordings of newspapers, and archival news footage.[79] I see this as an attempt to provide a cohesive narrative. Yet, I also see this attempt happening at the expense of a deep understanding of history. For instance, there is moment in which a vocal description of the alleged injection of Pavulon plays over footage of some acontextual intravenous bag. Juxtapositions like this are dangerous for they assume a sort of "reality effect."[80] Such a performance of objective truth prevents our ability to look deeply into the case. The film instead pays closer attention to the spectacle and horror, and fails to even notice the social production of race, the

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[77] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 54.
[78] Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 8.
[79] *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez, & the Press*.
[80] Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 41.

racialization of subjects. All in all, Zeldes's methodology, or the methodology of traditional documentary filmmaking, results in a faulty and problematic claim to 'truth.'

*U.S. v. Narciso, Perez, & the Press*, produced in the era of the so-called post-racial, delivers on its promise: it reconstructs the events of 1976. Furthermore, it reproduces the spectacle so that again we get no new story, no new information. The film clearly fails to pick up where Choy left off even though it cites Choy in its scholarly statement. I do not attribute the shortcomings of the film to Zeldes herself for Zeldes (like all producers) simply seeks to understand phenomena and events. Rather, I focus here on the operation of power inherent in the production of documentary narrative. Regardless of intention, the story, through its framing, through its technologies, will produce the same insights. We are left to decipher what actually happened and whether or not my mother and Narciso are guilty. This is the dominant 'regime of truth' that I am desperately hoping to challenge and even escape.

All in all, each of these historical productions, regardless of political intention, submit to a specific kind of historical knowledge, one that articulates the archive as evidence in order to make a claim to truth. Again, Trouillot insistently reminds us that power operates through the production of history, through all of the stages of historical production—the making of sources, the making of archives, the making of narratives, and the making of history.[81] This leads me to think about how to develop a historical and historiographical practice through which I rethink the objective/imperative of history at every stage of production. What might it mean to move the archive toward the limits of

[81] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 26.

history, and even, toward the limits of fiction? How might such a move provide a different politics of truth?

## 40 Years Hence: New Directions

In thinking about the ways in which the above historical productions have examined *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, I consider that which is available to me as a critical scholar, a creative writer, and as the youngest son of Leonora Perez, 40 years after my mother's (Narciso's) initial arrest and indictment. Both Wilcox and Zeldes promise to reconstruct the mysterious events at the Ann Arbor VA Hospital. Because of its commitment to objectivity and the conventions of documentary storytelling, Zeldes's documentary film falls short of providing *new knowledge* about the case. Instead, the film reifies the same mystery, suspense, and 'archival power' found in Wilcox's narrative. Pushing my work, Choy's historical production operates through a similar methodology, yet with different political objectives. Choy's attention to the ways in which spectacular violence erases imperial violence provides an analytical opening. I would like to pick up where Choy leaves off and rethink the significance of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* as a moment racist state violence that we must find alternative ways to attend and to understand.

As a reminder, too, this dissertation is premised on my mother's theorization that American justice does not exist—American justice is impossible. If I do not seek justice, what is it that I seek? What, then, are the new rubrics for understanding histories of racist state violence? What, then, are the new politics of truth? How do we reflect such a critical endeavor in our research?

In this rethinking, I am instructed by cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall's understanding of 'articulation.' For Hall, an 'articulation' is "the form of the connection [between ideas and/or discourses] that *can* make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions."[82] Drawing upon the work of Ernest Laclau, Hall reminds us that "we need to think the contingent, the non-necessary, connection between practices."[83] I am thinking of at least two different kinds of re-articulations here that are worth pursuing. First, *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* can be articulated beyond of the domain of Filipino American history, which, ultimately, I think can tell us much more about the relational characteristics of the Filipino subject. Second, *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, as a story of power and the state, as a historical production, has been articulated to a 'regime of truth' that disallows new knowledges to emerge. While I have the privilege of sharing in this dissertation my mother's emergent, insurrectionary knowledge, I believe that including her into the archive as evidence is not enough. Thus, I am after a re-articulation of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* and its historical contents, its 'ghostly matter,' toward a new discursive and performative practice, perhaps what performance studies scholar D. Soyini Madison has called, 'a performance of possibilities.' D. Soyini Madison writes:

> In a performance of possibilities, the possible suggests a movement culminating in creating and change. It is the active, creative work that weaves the life of the mind with being mindful of life, of merging text with the word, of critically traversing the margin and the center, and of opening more and different paths for enlivening relations and spaces.[84]

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[82] Hall, *Stuart Hall*, 141.
[83] Ibid., 142.
[84] D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2012), 196.

The objective in a 'performance of possibilities' is to 'enliven relations and spaces' and not simply to prove the truth of history. *Critical race poetics*, I will argue, moves us into that space of possibility. To rearticulate the Filipino subject in the U.S. is to reconsider its conditions of emergence, to explore new avenues for understanding its meaning, perhaps its contingencies, and attend to it with a set of different epistemological stakes and standpoints.

In characterizing *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* as a unique 'temporality of Filipina/o racialization,' which I believe aligns well with Michael Omi's and Howard Winant's and Stuart Hall's urge to think about racializations within their historical specificity, I have found that a relational approach to studying racist state violence lends itself to the type of re-articulation I mention above.[85] The relational study of racist state violence with respect to Filipino subject formation is critically important because such a study potentially reveals an emergent politics of solidarity. Filipinos in the U.S. and abroad are situated at the nexus of overlapping colonial, settler, and racial projects. I turn to the work of ethnic studies scholar Dylan Rodriguez for his discussion of "Filipino affectability."[86] Extending the work of Denise Ferreira da Silva, Rodriguez challenges us to think about the Filipino as an *affectable I*, a subject incapable of escaping the effects and logics of genocide without aligning itself with colonial and settler genocide. Rodriguez writes:

> The Filipino condition within the historical flux and political geographies of the early twentieth century is more accurately characterized as the production of (and experimentation with) a structurally contingent

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[85] Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation*, 53-76. Hall, "Gramsci's relevance," in *Stuart Hall*, 411-440. Burns, *Puro Arte*, 14.

[86] Dylan Rodriguez, *Suspended Apocalypse: White Supremacy, Genocide, and the Filipino Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 8.

> 'affectable' racial figure—this is, the characterization and logic of Filipino affectability is essentially experimental and unfixed.[87]

In other words, for Rodriguez, the Filipino subject is unfixed, its productions are contingent, always subject to the conditions of racist state violence and genocide. What I find most useful in Rodriguez's work is its call to rearticulate the Filipino subject with an understanding of its contingencies, its experimental qualities. I am cautious, however, that the framework of 'Filipino affectability' potentially misreads forms of Filipino world-making that remain un-intelligible within our critical vocabularies. For instance, the fact that despite being thoroughly violated by the U.S. state both Leonora Perez and Filipina Narciso continued to work and build a life in the U.S. is not necessarily evidence that the two align themselves with the violence of the settler state. I need only to point back to my mother's theory—despite all that she has encountered in the last 40 years, she embodies a generative cynicism about the notion of justice in the U.S.

The contingency of U.S. Filipino subject formation is perhaps most clearly articulated and grounded in the work of ethnic studies scholar Nerissa Balce. Balce provides the historical argument that Filipino representations were based on anti-Native and anti-Black racisms. Balce identifies the Philippine-American War as "the originary moment for the recirculation of domestic grammars of Otherness that informed discourses on Filipino savagery."[88] In terms of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, it is important to think about the conjuncture, 1975-1978: the frame-up and continued incarceration of Leonard Peltier;

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[87] Rodriguez, *Suspended Apocalypse*, 10.

[88] Nerissa Balce, "Filipino Bodies, Lynching, and the Language of Empire," in *Positively No Filipinos Allowed: Building Communities and Discourse*, edited by Antonio T. Tiongson, Jr., Edgardo V. Gutierrez, and Ricardo V. Gutierrez (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2006), 46.

the FBI's aggressive attack against social movement radicals; and the war in Vietnam. To consider this conjuncture is to think about how the production of a confused discourse relying on Orientalism and savagery (i.e. the discourse performed by the federal prosecution and extended by Wilcox) becomes mapped onto Narciso and my mother. I wonder, then, if in the (relational) hurt of history lies an opportunity for us to rethink Filipino (American) politics as intrinsically coalitional.

I am not interested in proving or disproving the above theoretical threads in this dissertation. Instead, I introduce them as analytical possibilities. Moreover, these are theoretical premises through which I perform *critical race poetics*.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided a historiographical analysis of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. Specifically, I analyzed the ways in which *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* has been researched and narrated in three different types of projects: Robert K. Wilcox's investigative journalistic account in *The Mysterious Deaths at Ann Arbor* (1977); Catherine Ceniza Choy's feminist historical analysis in *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History* (2003); and Geri Alumit Zeldes's documentary film *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez, and the Press* (2013). I argued that each of these projects provide different theoretical insights into the ways in which we understand the cultural and political implications of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. Whereas Wilcox's investigative journalism—in the service of narrating 'the facts' through mystery and suspense—denies personhood to Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez, thereby casting them instruments/objects of mass murder, Choy's feminist history of the case provides a wider analytical framework that

enables us to rethink *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* and the lived experiences of Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez within the context of U.S. racism, labor migration, and imperial violence. And lastly, Zeldes's film, which bears a title that promises a critique of U.S. media and its relation to the state, unwittingly reproduces the mystery and suspense that drives Wilcox's 1977 on-the-scene account. Each of these projects, too, I argued, deploy research methodologies that limit what can and cannot be said about the case. To put this in another way, regardless of whether *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* is explored and recounted through investigative journalism (Wilcox), interdisciplinary history (Choy), or documentary film (Zeldes), the existent historical accounts are limited in what they reveal. These accounts are subject to a dominant 'regime of truth' that traps history. When read together, these accounts keep *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* within a limited historical frame of questioning: What happened? Who is guilty and of what? In the end, I suggest that starting from my mother's theoretical provocation that justice in the U.S. does not exist pushes us to imagine alternative articulations of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* in particular, and Filipino subject formation in general.

## CHAPTER 3: PARA SA AKIN: A CRAFT CRITIQUE

### Introduction

In the previous chapter, I focused on various historical productions exploring *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. In this chapter, I turn to critically reflect on my own body of work that explores the case and its afterlives. Since 2001, from my unique position as the youngest son of Leonora Perez, parallel to my engagements with the historical productions analyzed in the previous chapter, I have studied, restudied, written, rewritten, performed, recorded, invented, and reinvented poems, fictions, performances, videos, films—all in an attempt to grasp some aspect of my mother's (and Narciso's) past. Drawing upon the emerging field of creative writing studies, I refer to the self-reflexive exercises in this chapter as constituting a *craft critique*, a type of critique which I characterize more clearly below. Through this *craft critique*, I do the following: critically inventory my body of work on *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*; retrace my own trajectory as a thinker, researcher, writer, and performer who has been consistently concerned with—perhaps 'haunted by' describes the experience more accurately—with the complex and 'ghostly matter' of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*; and simply provide the background information for some of the raw material from which I draw and critically reprocess into the poem cycle in Chapter 5 of this dissertation.[1]

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[1] Two works that come to mind that are not within creative writing studies but I would argue could inform the ways in which creative writing studies approaches *craft critique* are Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Framer Framed*: *Film Scripts and Interviews* (New York: Routledge, 1992) and Isaac Julien, *Diary of a Young Soul Rebel* (British Film Institute: London, 1991). These works, as a series of interviews and diaries, offer up insights on each artist's practice and critical commentary on larger social, political, and economic themes.

The title of this chapter borrows from the title of one of my video-performance projects: *para sa akin: autohistoria* (2012). Tagalog: *para sa akin;* English: *for me*. This chapter is ultimately for me. I am interested in sketching this self-history only insofar as it enables me to think through the longer trajectory of my own creative and critical historiographical practices. Again, I have attempted to make histories of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* for well over a decade. And this dissertation is no different—this dissertation is yet another attempt at making history; it is a product of and reconciliation with previous attempts.

**Research Questions**

Toward the works I catalog here, I ask the following: What have been the central motivations behind my storytelling and performance practice? How has the intrinsic tension between form and content, methodology and theory, become central to my exploration of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* in particular, and Filipino American history in general? And just as I had asked when reading the work of Wilcox, Choy, and Zeldes, I ask here toward the body of this work: How do certain 'regimes of truth' figure into my own practices? For the most part, I have happened upon forms, genres, and practices. This chapter provides me the opportunity to revisit the motivation behind each work and to explore the trajectory of my thinking and practice. In the end, I hope to make clear that my previous creative and critical practices have pushed me to explore *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* through a more clearly conceptualized and performed methodology—what I am terming *critical race poetics*. In other words, this chapter illuminates the ways in which

my previous creative and critical engagements with *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* prefigure this very engagement, this dissertation.

## This is How the History Begins for Me

I opened the previous chapter with a story about my first encounter with my mother's (and Narciso's) past. There, in that Las Vegas living room, geographically far from Detroit, affectively living out the past, my mother and father, a nurse and a bellhop, incited my lifelong pursuit of the 'ghostly matter' of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* and gave me (at three years old) my first lesson in the politics of historiography. It was at a young age that I was first introduced to the idea that historical narratives are incredibly elaborate productions, complex performances, collaborations of technology and imaginary, their own significant happenings within very specific cultural and historical contexts, forms of knowing that are inevitably limited by resources, intention, and consciousness. Here, in this chapter, I would like to provide an account of how the histories of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* and their ongoing productions begin once again, and again and again and again.

It is June of 2001 and I am an undergraduate student at the University of California, San Diego. I belong to a community of student activists who are full of questions, rage, and longing. I belong to a community of student activists who are at once fighting for the democratization of public education and at the same time fighting for a living wage for custodial and other service workers.[2] For much of my life, I have known my own father to be a janitor. One day, I head home from school to our home in Oceanside and find my

[2] Here I am referring to the Justice for Janitor's campaign led by the Students for Economic Justice and the local chapter of the SEIU worker's union.

parents in the kitchen. I rant to them about how upset I am that janitors do not earn a living wage. Both of my parents smirk. My father decides to get a ladder and bring it into the garage. He climbs to the storage area and brings down a blue plastic bin. He returns to the kitchen and presents the blue plastic bin. It is caked with dust, it is flimsy, and it smells of old, chemical plastic. "Here," my mother says, "This is for you." (This is the closest to an inheritance I will ever receive.) I pry open the stubborn lid and begin rummaging through its contents. Inside the bin is our family archive from that terrible moment, *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*: correspondence; copies of legal documents; my mother's diaries on yellow legal notepad; VHS cassettes of camcorder footage recording the news; that reel of 16mm film from that 1980s Las Vegas night; rare community and activist newspapers; clippings from national and local newspapers; letters of support; receipts for legal fees. This, in the context of my desire for some semblance of justice for working class peoples, is how the history begins again for me.

For years, I had urged my mother to write her memoir. I would buy her journals, encourage her to take creative writing classes at the community college, and gift to her books of inspiration—for example, in 2004, I gave her *The Autobiography of Assata Shakur*. While I did not intend my mother to relate directly to Assata Shakur's story, my mother, after having read Assata Shakur's story, concluded: "There really is no American justice." Still, my mother never ventured out to write her own memoir.

In the summer of 2005, having just completed my first year as an MFA student in the Writing and Consciousness Program at New College of California, while I was studying Tagalog through an immersion program in the Philippines, my program director, a former anti-Marcos activist and journalist, Ate Susan Quimpo, realized that Leonora Perez of *U.S.*

*v. Narciso and Perez* was my mother and said to me: "You have to write this book!"[3] Ate Susan explained that this was a widely publicized court case that for many Filipinos definitively shattered the American Dream. "This," Ate Susan urged me, "is going to be your life's work." I would wrestle with this proposition for months, now years, now over a decade.

In December of 2005, while in the last year of my MFA program, I finally submitted to the task. I was living in Oakland. It was nighttime. Through my kitchen window, I watched the traffic pile up on 580. I called my mother. She still lived in Oceanside.

"'Nay," I said.

"Ano?"

"I'm going to write a novel," I said, "a novel about your history."

"Of course you are," she said. "That's why you're getting MFA, di ba?"

From that point, I embarked on what seemed to be a never-ending intellectual and emotional journey. Hundreds of pages later, I have yet to complete the novel. Many projects later, I have yet to finish studying my mother's (and Narciso's) past. In fact, I am here now, formally studying, because I have failed to establish a healthy and productive relationship with the form of the novel and the contents of history. In any case, I have come to realize that in many ways, as I have produced poems, fictions, performances, videos, films, I have been living and practicing the novel and history this entire time. This chapter documents that living and practice. This chapter, and this dissertation, however, are *not* the novel.

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[3] Susan Quimpo shares her own political histories in the family memoir, *Subversive Lives: A Family Memoir of the Marcos Years* (Manila, Philippines: Anvil, 2012).

**On Craft Critique**

> Whenever I intellectualize what I (attempt to) do in my own work, I'm haunted by the specter of Carlos Argentino Daneri, the librarian, the poet, the know-it-all from Jorge Luis Borges's short story "The Aleph." The narrator describes Carlos Argentino Daneri as "authoritarian but also unimpressive." Daneri simultaneously recites & shamelessly applauds his own intellectually crafty poetry. "Daneri's real work," suggests the narrator, "lay not in the poetry but in his invention of reasons why the poetry should be admired." Daneri is his own best critic & publicist. I caution against ever becoming as wiggity wack as Daneri; however, I'm certain that my Catholic-inspired self-deprecation is merely a variant of Daneriesque self-applause. In any case, you should know, these fears guide my hesitations, & I'm super suspicious of our becoming the Carlos Argentino Daneris of our day.[4]

In taking critical inventory of my body of work, I am drawn to two similar but separate fields of inquiry. I am interested in the ways in which communication scholars such as Norman K. Denzin have rigorously shaped the contours and built the vocabularies of emerging methodologies in qualitative research. It is within Denzin's conceptualization of what he calls the "critical democratic storytelling imagination" that I give myself permission to allow my own storytelling imagination, full of recollection, perhaps contradiction, perhaps deliberate and unwitting revision, to continue guiding the unfolding of this chapter, but also to guide this entire dissertation. As Denzin writes: "The critical democratic storytelling imagination is pedagogical. As a form of instruction, it helps persons think critically, historically, and sociologically."[5] Relatedly, I hope to situate the questions I raise toward my own body of work within the context of ongoing conversations

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[4] Jason Magabo Perez, "Crayoning the King: On Disciplining," *Phenomenology of Superhero* (Red Bird Chapbooks, 2016). References to Carlos Argentino Daneri are from Jorge Luis Borges, "The Aleph," in *The Aleph and Other Stories*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Viking Penguin, 1998), 118-133.

[5] Norman K. Denzin, *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* (Thousand Oaks, SAGE Publications, 2013), 456.

in both arts-informed research and creative writing studies. The vocabularies of arts-informed research have helped me return to my previous body of work with a new, more systematic way of learning about what that previous work has made possible for my current creative and critical practices. Lastly, because I situate this chapter and dissertation in part within the emerging field of creative writing studies, I wish to explore in this chapter, in this critical inventory, what English studies scholar Tim Mayers calls "craft criticism," and the provocations regarding race and creative writing raised in the edited collection *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*.[6] As a creative writer and performer within ethnic studies, and as an ethnic studies scholar within creative writing studies, I find that together these areas of inquiry help me bridge the conversations about the politics of race in creative writing circles and the politics of creative/imaginative knowledge production amongst critical social science and humanities scholars. Below, I provide an overview of the concepts and conversations that instruct my inquiry in this chapter and explain how these concepts and conversations, separately and together, inform my current practice. Ultimately, I draw from these conversations in order to return to my own body of work with a fresh analytical lens that helps me see with a renewed sense of purpose the limitations and possibilities of the histories of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez.*

As I return to my previous creative practices with the sensibilities of a critical scholar, I seek a vocabulary to better understand how to proceed as a both a creative practitioner and a critical scholar, or better yet, how to simply proceed without having to justify the relationships between both intellectual identities. I find the area of arts-informed

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[6] Tim Mayers, *(Re)Writing Craft: Composition, Creative Writing, and the Future of English Studies* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 30.

research to offer a beginning. In the *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research*, Audra L. Cole and J. Gary Knowles make the distinction between arts-based research, which typically gives us critical insight into art practices, and arts-informed research, which employs artistic methods in order to carry out research agendas in the social sciences and humanities. Cole and Knowles explain that "the central purposes of arts-informed research are to enhance understanding of the human condition through alternative (to conventional) processes and representational forms of inquiry, and to reach multiple audiences by making scholarship more accessible."[7] This dissertation demonstrates qualities of both arts-based and arts-informed research. However, I am much more invested at the moment in trying to understand the production of history and historical methodology. Thus, I am much more interested in keeping at the center the endeavor of arts-informed research. In terms of arts-informed research, Cole and Knowles suggest: "The *methodological integrity* of the research….is determined in large part by the relationship between the form and substance of the research text and the inquiry process reflected in the text."[8] *Critical race poetics*, I argue, is a methodology that emerges from a tension that I have been consistently working through: the tension between methodology and theory, form and content. I have been pursuing answers to the question: What is the appropriate *form* of historiographical experiment that will enable me to produce *new knowledge* about *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*? To be clear, I do not simply wish to uncover new details about the case and related events;

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[7] Ardra L. Cole and J. Gary Knowles, "Arts-Informed Research," *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research*, edited by J. Gary Knowles and Ardra L. Cole (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2008), 59.
[8] Ibid., 61.

rather, I hope to move the historical details in a different direction, toward an alternative discursive and/or performative practice, eventually toward a *critical race poetics*.

As I have participated in discussions about creative practice and production within research-based conferences such as Association Asian American Studies (AAAS), Critical Ethnic Studies Association (CESA), and American Studies Association (ASA), and in discussions about critical concerns within practice-based symposia and conferences as such the Associate Writers and Writing Programs (AWP), I have identified a common thread: Those of us interested in bridging our creative and critical research agendas are in need of a broader, more interdisciplinary vocabulary in order critically examine and reexamine our practices and productions. I find that bringing together the concerns of critical knowledge production in ethnic studies with the emerging field of creative writing studies is generative in fulfilling this need. Creative writing studies is a peculiarly located institutional formation of creative writers who are intent on thinking through the meanings of practice, pedagogy, and research as it pertains to creative writers in academia.[9] I am particularly interested in the thread of creative writing studies that has to do with research. This is not to say, however, that I see practice and pedagogy as completely separate inquiries. Much of what I think through in this dissertation has as much to do with the end goal of working with students more effectively and the goal of critically understanding my practices than it does with the goal of only thinking through the politics of historical production.[10] So, in this dissertation, in this chapter, I take up a simple question: How does one conduct research

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[9] Shirley Geok-lin Lim, "The Strangeness of Creative Writing: An Institutional Query," *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature, Language, Composition, and Culture* 3.2 (2003).

[10] An important model for creative writers critically reflecting on pedagogy is Katherine Haake, *What Our Speech Disrupts: Feminism and Creative Writing Studies* (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 2000).

within creative writing studies? I imagine such a project requires approaches that are practice-led and critically self-reflexive.

To that end, in search of a model for this chapter, I turn specifically to the novelist Inez Baranay's article "Six Texts Prefigure a Seventh," which was published in the edited collection, *Creative Writing Studies: Practice, Research, and Pedagogy*. Baranay works with a simple premise: To study one's own previous works might lead to insight into how one arrives at new or emerging work. Baranay writes:

> If a writer examines her previous books taking into consideration her latest one, she finds new ways of reading them, new ways of understanding what the author who wrote them had achieved. And she can find in the earlier output a pre-figuring of the novel that followed.[11]

What I find interesting here is that Baranay distinguishes between a past self-author and a current self-author. In making this distinction, Baranay attempts to establish her self-criticism as a valid practice that works toward an objectivity. Here, I am not interested in interpreting my own work in this way. What is different about my own approach is that I am focusing on the tension between theory and methodology, content and form. This tension, I suggest, is a product of my own position as creative writer, critical scholar, and as the youngest son of Leonora Perez. Through what forms and methodologies have I been able to explore concepts and develop theories regarding *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*? I am not quite interested in the language of achievement and success—I am much more interested in how and why forms fail, rather than how works themselves fail or succeed. I am more interested in how and why a new form might emerge out of previous practices

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[11] Inez Baranay, "Six Texts Prefigure a Seventh," in *Creative Writing Studies: Practice, Research, and Pedagogy*, edited by Graeme Harper and Jeri Kroll (Tonawanda, NY: New Writing Viewpoints, 2008), 64.

and experiments. In any case, Baranay's article models the type of inquiry useful for creative writers and artists. Baranay argues: "My study of my own texts shows that even their author can provide new insights when reading older texts in light of the new."[12] I argue that such a self-study is a wholly separate endeavor than interpreting (via solely textual analysis) one's own work. In my view, *craft critique* demands attention to processes of production. *Craft critique* is ultimately about craft, about what one does, the process, thus, the methodology.

What Baranay performs in her article in many respects aligns with what creative writing and English studies scholar Tim Mayers calls "craft criticism."[13] For Mayers, 'craft criticism' "refers to critical prose written by self- or institutionally identified 'creative writers'; in craft criticism, a concern with textual production takes precedence over any concern with textual interpretation."[14] To put this in another way, 'craft criticism' constitutes the critical exegesis that creative writers produce about their practice. At this moment, I understand 'craft criticism' to serve as a sort of *meta-text*—the text that lays out the conditions of possibility for past, current, and ongoing practices and emergent works. 'Craft criticism' concerns itself with production over interpretation, practices over text. In my *craft critique*, while I do pay attention to some textual elements of my previous work, I look back to my previous work in order to track the characteristics and the details of my methods. Mayers go on further to define "craft criticism [as] engaged theorizing about creative production—theorizing that arises from and is responsive to the social, political,

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[12] Baranay, "Six Texts," 64.
[13] Mayers, *(Re)Writing Craft*, 34.
[14] Ibid., 34.

economic, and institutional contexts for creative writing."[15] Mayer's definition of the theoretical work performed through *craft criticism* matches well with anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot's claims about historical production. Both Mayers and Trouillot believe that production, be it historical and/or creative, has its own social, political, economic, and institutional contexts, its own historicity.[16] Certainly, this dissertation, and all that has led to it, has its own historical implications. Having just established the ways in which I understand *craft critique*, I would like to turn my attention to an aspect of creative writing studies that I think demands closer attention and is certainly most relevant to the concerns of this dissertation—the racial politics of creative writing.

This dissertation works through the relationship between race and creative writing, i.e. the racial politics of creative writing. Specifically, for this chapter, I am interested in how this relationship has figured both explicitly and implicitly into my own work. The anthology *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind* (2015), edited by fiction writer and American studies professor Beth Loffreda, poet and critic Claudia Rankine, and artist Max King Cap, explores: "how race enters writing, the making of art, as a structure of feeling, as something that structures feelings in the moment of encounter, that lays down tracks of affection and repulsion, rage and hurt, desire and ache."[17] It is significant to note that Loffreda and Rankine draw upon Raymond William's notion of 'structures of feeling.' For Williams: "Methodologically, then, a 'structure of feeling' is a

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[15] Mayers, *(Re)Writing Craft*, 46.

[16] Michel Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 145.

[17] Beth Loffreda and Claudia Rankine, "Introduction," *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*, edited by Claudia Rankine, Beth Loffreda, and Max King Cap (Albany: Fence Books, 2015), 18.

cultural hypothesis, actually derived from attempts to understand such elements and their connections in a generation or period, and needing always to be returned, interactively, to such evidence."[18] To put this in another way, a 'structure of feeling' is an attempt at explaining knowledges and experiences that are derived from the materialities of social and political processes but do not always register so clearly to a single or easily definable epistemological standpoint, or ideology. In drawing from the methodology, or 'cultural hypothesis,' of 'structures of feeling,' Loffreda and Rankine query the affective sociopolitical tensions regarding the racial politics of creative writing. In this chapter, I present my work through a *craft critique* in order to think through the racial politics of my own practices. What are alternatives to writing what poet and critic Ronaldo V. Wilson calls "the scene of instruction" when it comes to race?[19] In other words, how do writers pursue a "language of racial identity" that is not intended to simply teach readers about racism?[20] Wilson's challenge leads me to ask: How do we dis-articulate the language of race from the sole purpose of instruction? I have heard so often from writers of color that they are tired of explaining themselves and teaching their readers about racism. Poet Audre Lorde suggests that anger is a generative mode for responding to racism: "My anger is a response to racist attitudes and to the actions and presumptions that arise out of those attitudes."[21] To invent a language of racial identity would require drawing upon various

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[18] Raymond Williams, "Structure of Feeling," in *Marxism and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 132-133.
[19] Ronaldo V. Wilson, "How do we invent the language of racial identity—that is not necessarily constructing the 'scene of instruction' about race but create the linguistic material of racial speech/thought?", in *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*, edited by Claudia Rankine, Beth Loffreda, and Max King Cap (Albany: Fence Books, 2015),75.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 124.

epistemological standpoints. It would also require attempts to convey information along many different registers, affective registers included. Poetics, specifically *critical race poetics*, works toward such language.

Through the conversation about the racial politics of creative writing emerges an opportunity to retrace the genealogy of creative writing studies and *craft critique*. While I do not take this up in this dissertation, I would like to bookmark the following intervention: creative writing studies and *craft critique* could shift its attention to wider set of literatures and literary practices. When I set out to justify and write this chapter, I could not help but think of the following works that bring together the critique of race and the study of craft: Langston Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain"; James Baldwin's "If Black English Isn't a Language, Then Tell Me, What Is?"; David Mura's "A SHIFT IN POWER, A SEA CHANGE IN THE ARTS: Asian American Constructions"; Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*; Audre Lorde's *Sister Outsider*; and the always politically inciting *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* edited by Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga. Each of these works, in their own unique approaches, wrestle vigorously with the racial (and classed and gendered) politics of creative writing. I contend that these examples offer models for those of us creative writers who might pursue *craft critique* as a way of thinking about the racial politics of our own practices. Saving that discussion for a future intervention, I now return to my own work.

### Exploring *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* 2001-2015

During my years as an undergraduate student at the University of California, San Diego, spoken word poetry became the vehicle through which student activists would

develop and express their political voice. Through spoken word, we confessed our frustrations, we gave testimony, we shared struggles, we spoke 'truth' to power, and we performed our knowledge. When my mother and father gave me the blue plastic bin, our family archive, I had no idea what that would lead to. I knew that I wanted to tell people about my mother's (and Narciso's) past, but I was at a loss for form, for strategy, for method. One afternoon in 2001, I brought a VHS cassette from the archive over to a friend's house in Mira Mesa. I asked two of my dear friends, Rene and Christine, both of whom were part of the early development of my social and political consciousness, to watch the VHS cassette with me. The cassette contained footage of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. From 1976-1977, someone with a camcorder, who I now know as Michael Price, the activist and friend of my parents who I mentioned in the previous chapter, recorded a television set playing the news broadcasts of the investigation and events leading up to *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. Rene, Christine, and I watched the footage from beginning to end. The images were shaky, distorted, scrambled, and off-centered. Again and again, we would see my mother, in a white short-sleeved polyester nursing uniform, in black hair, in black shoes. The image was at times too bright. In some frames, my mother was merely an outline. In others, she was only her black hair, the darkly colored sweater covering her hands, and her black shoes. In most frames, all we could see was that my mother was probably there, in the scene, in the street, emerging, fading, then emerging again, still walking and walking.

Afterwards, Rene said, "I can't believe that happened."

"Imagine," Christine assured, "how often this happens to people of color. To women of color."

"I think I want to write a poem about this," I said. "A poem that my mother and I will perform together."

Back in 2001, I could not foresee that I would be embarking on a long-term engagement with the writing and performance of this history. For over a decade, I have attempted to tell my mother's (and Narciso's) history. The ongoing search for forms of historical inquiry is demanding in both critical and creative ways. I have up until this point operated as if the critical and the creative act are diametrically opposed, as if some form of critique does not inherently exist in the creative act, and as if some form of creative production is not imagined through critique. In any case, I provide here some critical reflections—a reconciliation with previous attempts at making history.

**Dear Mr. Yanko**

FORM: Poetry, Performance
DURATION: *Approx.* 7 min.
LOCATION: La Jolla, CA
YEAR: 2001

I wrote this poem as my initial response after watching the camcorder footage mentioned above. Written as an open letter to the Federal Prosecuting Attorney Richard Yanko, whose name consistently shows up in my mother's diaries, and whose face consistently appears in our personal news footage archive, "Dear Mr. Yanko" was my attempt to speak back to power. In "Dear Mr. Yanko," I playfully present Yanko as a racist white supremacist responsible for the plight of all people of color regardless of historical moment. For me, Yanko represents the hurt of my mother's (and Narciso's) history. In the poem, I reference our ongoing struggle in support of janitors, our ongoing struggles to

improve public education. I would now characterize the poem as essayistic in its scope, rageful in its affect, and playful in its historical claims. I performed this poem for the first time at a *Pinaytration* event. (*Pinaytration* was a feminist publication that centered Pinay and women of color feminisms in its critique of the university and the larger society.) I am convinced that this inciting work, "Dear Mr. Yanko," this work that enabled over a decade of experiments to unfold, could have happened in no other way. I am convinced that in the poem lives a political urgency, a desire to speak back to power, a desire to make history matter in the present, a desire for historical reckoning. While it is all too easy to be critical of those younger, perhaps politically immature sensibilities, it was also undeniably necessary as part of my writing and my social and political consciousness. As I said, I conflate many political struggles in this poem and I perhaps would revisit such a practice now by looking more deeply into the relationalities and dialectics of those histories. Still, I knew early on that it was important to link my mother's (and Narciso's) past to a broader struggle. This poem taught me about how to respond to the urgency of writing. The epistolary form proved effective in that I was able to direct my critique and rage toward a specific audience.

**My Mother's Story**

FORM: Poetry, Performance
DURATION: *Approx.* 00:02:30
LOCATION: San Diego, CA
YEAR: 2001

I wrote "My Mother's Story" with a little more focus. I wanted to hone in on the details of the history. "My Mother's Story" is a track off my independently produced spoken

word EP, *Yesterday Mourning*. With the help of my dear friend and collaborator, Arash "Shammy Dee" Haile, I recorded eight spoken word tracks that explored themes of Filipino American history, spirituality, and war. "My Mother's Story" is an abridged biography of my mother. The poem begins with media soundbites that explain my mother's (and Narciso's) arrest, and the subsequent guilty verdict. Then, I initiate the poem: "My mother's story / begins in her land."[22] Throughout the poem, I reference the violence of Filipino migration. I attempt to convey to the audience that my mother grew up poor in Philippines, migrated to the U.S., and found the American nightmare. While in this poem I do not reference other historical moments in the way that I did in "Dear Mr. Yanko," I still attempt to tell the story in the context of a larger history of colonization and racial injustice. I recognize the subjectivity of my mother—*her* land is not necessarily *my* land. Thinking transnationally, without the vocabulary of transnationalism, I characterize this poem as not about history, but about struggle and Filipino identity. In writing this poem and performing it at various open mics, performances, in cafes, bars, and other performance venues, I had a limited (or at least unclear) understanding of the context and historical moment of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. But still, the form of spoken word afforded me an opportunity to 'teach,' to develop a pedagogy.

I performed this poem in 2003 at the annual Festival of Philippine Arts and Culture (FPAC) in San Pedro, California. After walking off stage, I encountered an elderly Filipina woman, a lola, who gently grabbed both of my hands and looked me in the eyes. We stood there for a few seconds. She said nothing. But I thanked her. That moment reminds me that

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[22] Jason Magabo Perez, "My Mother's Story," *Yesterday Mourning*, CD (2003).

poetics and performance offer certain possibilities. Those kinds of moments make the endeavor of history-writing all worth it. I imagine she felt nostalgic, she revisited something she knew about, and there and then happened a sense of affirmation. (I write poetry in part for those who will never read a history book.) I would go on to perform "My Mother's Story" over and over for a few years. What I had come to learn in those performances was that I harbored a deep anxiety about telling my mother's (and Narciso's) history in one all-encompassing, definitive poem. Every performance was a desperate attempt to make history available. Given that Filipino American studies courses were not and are still not in abundance, our poetics and performances gave us the opportunity to reflect and produce historical knowledge. Still, I am learning how to distill the many historical moments that make up history and how to experiment with the representation/process of those distillations.

**Hope-Filled Hands**

FORM: Documentary, Performance
DURATION: *Approx.* 00:12:00
LOCATION: La Jolla, CA
YEAR: 2003

Figure 3.1: Scene from Pilipino Cultural Celebration (2003).

This experimental monologue was written for the annual Pilipino Cultural Celebration at the University of California, San Diego. The monologue was part of a longer work that explored the relationship between colonialism, trauma, and the dreams of history. Filipino American studies scholar Theodore S. Gonzalvez has characterized such productions as "complex performance experiences and a largely improvised kinetic education in Philippine and Filipino American cultures."[23] In these productions, there always exists the strong desire to educate the cast and the audience, and to be included in the narrative of a larger history, be it U.S. and/or Filipino. In this scene, "Hope-Filled Hands," the protagonist of the play, who is referred to as the anonymous *Dreamer*, finds himself in Leonora Perez's prison cell. In a very haunting way, the specter of Leonora Perez recites her diaries. She narrates entries from her arrest all the way up to the verdict. Then, she says she's stuck. In this history. She urges Dreamer to remember what happened to her. For this monologue, I sampled fragments from my mother's prison diaries. Mostly a

[23] Theodore S. Gonzalvez, *The Day the Dancers Stayed: Performing in the Filipino/American Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 89.

monologue, the scene also involves Dreamer's curiosity about history. While at the time I did not name it as such, here was a work in the form of documentary performance, of experimental nonfiction. I would ask: what can we learn about Filipino American history from this sort of intimacy, from this type of personal, familial archive? Still, I had my limitations. This scene was still part of a larger narrative. Thus, I edited down my mother's prison diaries into a series of chronological moments. As I reflect on it, "Hope-Filled Hands" was an attempt to connect the past with the present through a specific archive. In handling this archive for the first time in my creative work, I was attentive to my mother's voice and have only recently realized its proximities to my own aesthetic sensibilities. Certainly, my approach to the archive, through a politics of intimacy, figures into this entire dissertation.

**Someday they will remember our names:**
**The Patty Heart Chronicles & Other Sympathies**

FORM: Collage, Poetry, Visual Text, Printed, Chapbook
LENGTH: 11 Pages
LOCATION: San Francisco, CA
YEAR: 2006

By the time I was graduating, I had not revisited my mother's story all throughout my MFA program. For some reason, I felt that I wanted to gather skills and techniques, develop a practice, before I could begin seriously committing to exploring *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. I wrote and assembled this chapbook as a seminar project during the final semester of my MFA program. The seminar was titled "Unlocking the Voice." Throughout the semester we would explore the notion of voice by engaging poetic fragments from

disparate sources. In this work, I utilized fragments from my mother's prison diaries and fragments by the poet Sappho in order to examine this history. I was aware on the surface that *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* occurred around the same moment in which Patty Hearst was on trial. Patty Hearst was/is the daughter of a magazine mogul and was kidnapped in the 1970s by and eventually came to support the Symbionese Liberation Army, a radical leftist group in the U.S. In assembling this chapbook, I wanted to explore how *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* somehow existed within the seams of popular histories such as that of Patty Hearst. Thus, in addition to using fragments of my mother's prison diaries, I also employed images from the newspaper archive and found images via the internet. I wanted to think about *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* as an occluded, overshadowed history. The juxtapositions of popular culture with moments from the archive of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* suggested potential histories that did not yet have a form. I remember the first time I presented this work to my cohort. My dear friend, a white woman, a feminist, applauded the work and said: "Your mother is so funny. I like when she says, 'The FBI was mean.'" What I find humbling and offensive in this moment is my dear friend's condescension. My mother, as she wrote her diaries, did not have a strong facility with the English language. Thus, her simple expressions, were complicated and difficult to achieve. This, I am certain, has turned me back to the questions of language, of audience, of the performance and production of narrative. Not only did I learn in this moment that my mother's (and Narciso's) past had to do with racism, but I also learned that in my approach to history I have to come to terms with the racial politics of language, of creative production. As I look back today, the critical juxtapositions and the speculative histories that emerge in this chapbook reveal themselves as pretexts to this very dissertation.

**The Passion of El Hulk Hogancito**

FORM: Fiction, Documentary Film, Performance
DURATION: *Approx.* 00:55:00
LOCATION: San Francisco, California
YEAR: 2009

Figure 3.2: From *The Passion of El Hulk Hogancito*, 2009.

What began as a playful lecture about my own procrastination, about my inability to write the first words of my novel about *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez,* turned into a semiautobiographical multimedia literary performance that I would tour and perform for several years at various venues and universities across California, and even as a plenary address, as I mentioned in the previous chapter, at the International Conference of the Philippines (ICOPHIL). First produced by Kularts, a nonprofit arts organization in San Francisco devoted to Philippine and Filipino American arts, *The Passion of El Hulk Hogancito* tells the story of Hasón, a *fictional* narrator, who cannot stop crying. Hasón brings his mother, Leonora Perez, a formerly convicted serial killer, to his second grade Show and Tell. Hasón asks his mother if she can help him stop crying. Throughout the

story, fragments from the history of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* interrupt Hasón. This work is aesthetically simple: basically, with the help of my writing mentor, the Hulkster, a 24-inch plastic Hulk Hogan doll that I have kept since my early 1980s childhood, I read chapters from my novel-in-progress, chapters that are essentially fictional memoirs. As I narrate, I project images of newspapers and family album photographs on the screen behind me. *The Passion of El Hulk Hogancito* is an exercise in fiction writing and performative storytelling. The narrative is violently interrupted by historical fragments. This work is a monologue, a lecture, and a performance. I also include in this performance a filmed short interview with my mother in which she concludes: "There is no justice in this country." Because this work exemplifies an autobiographical and disjointed and indirect and affective approach to history I would characterize this as what Asian American historian has called a "family album history."[24] For me, a 'family album history' is an intimate history, full of fragmented episodes, inconsistencies, but ultimately full of world-making. Through *The Passion of El Hulk Hogancito*, I have been able to work out the tensions between the many practices I pursue: fiction, poetics, performance, documentary filmmaking, history.

Early on in my touring of this work, I was challenged to articulate my practice and politics. In 2010, I was invited to perform this work at the University of California, Santa Barbara. During the post-performance question and answer session, I met a sociology graduate student who expressed a genuine appreciation for my work. Soon after, that same student e-mailed me and we had a very insightful exchange. With this former student's,

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[24] Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 93.

now professor's, permission, I include below the entire e-mail exchange, for it gives insight into the development of my practice:

> Jason,
>
> hey man, I just wanted to say thanks for the dope performance.
>
> I just wanted to say that when hearing you perform/present your work, I felt a lot of vivid emotions, which I suppose says something about the way you were able to tap into yourself, that made me tap into my own experiences and emotions. For instance, when hearing you speak, I remembered the times that I got fucked with in elementary school, I remembered the impotency and suppressed rage that I experienced, and I also remember the racial/ethnic convergences and tensions that I felt while growing up in Daly City (near top of the hill, by DC BART and SF State). I also felt some of sincere affection and veneration for my own mother as I heard you narrate the story of a young Filipino and his own relationship for his mother. I dunno, I suppose this is all my way of saying that you really got something going if you're able to make people 'feel' your story through their own story. And that was just some of the ways I, just one person in your crowd, was able to connect; other people were able to make these other unique emotional/ rational connections with your work. Although I'm just a layperson, relative to the field of literary criticism, much props.
>
> One question, and I know you're hip to it...but where is white supremacy in the story? I do not say this to antagonize nor to dismiss, because I think you've got some dope shit to say and share (which you demonstrated both through the performance of your work as well as in the q 'n' a session). Rather, I ask to play the worst devil's advocate for a bit. That is to say, I see the hierarchies within race, gender (and, that being said, within racialized masculinities), but what keeps the person experiencing your performance from writing this off as a bunch of black kids, asian kids, and raza kids hating each other, somewhat absent of whites?
>
> Now, let me qualify that question, albeit having already asked it, by saying that I remember growing up in Daly City and that we didn't ever really see whites, and rather, we didn't always experience racial tensions along a vertical axis of white/ POC. That is, we didn't always see the bosses who hired some immigrant parents while passing over black parents. We didn't always see the cops who would try to create beefs between youth of different backgrounds. We also didn't always see, at that young age, how elites would seize differences between different communities of color and

try to exacerbate them into conflicts.

Rather, we felt 'some' serious shit along a horizontal axis, between the fissures of people of color lumped together in working-class communities. I remember being called names and being fucked with by fools, as well as doing some of the same myself. I think I might have to think this out a bit more, because we did have a largely white staff running our elementary school, a staff that, in retrospect, was disciplining us and submitting us (as well as our elder family members) to practices rooted in deficiency theory while we sometimes picked on each other about our differences. That being said, we would also have these discussions which interest me now...discussions where we started asking what our "nationalities" were, and sort of accepting these differences while backing each other to fuck with our teachers.

I dunno, I guess its a complex set of relationships, and, while I ask that earlier question, I appreciate how you show some real honest and real ways that we experience race, class and gender as 80's babies.

Look man, I know we're all busy, so if you don't have the time to respond to all the shit I just wrote, don't trip (assuming you even cared to! lol). If anything, take away the sincere statement of much props. Its a dope piece of work and I can't wait to see what comes next. One day I hope to go back to the Bay (South San Francisco and Daly City) to work with young people of color at a community college, and hopefully I can work something out to bring talented folks such as yourself to talk with them.

peace,

C.

---

C.,

I am humbled by your props and willingness to engage me. I appreciate deeply your insight and your "reading" of the work. Believe me, it's a rare occasion that someone asks me about or builds with me on the ideas of my work to this degree. I welcome it and it is important for me as a "cultural worker" to hear/read what the community is thinking. And I'm glad you found something useful in it, whether it was imaginary or material or both. I write for you and folks like you, for real, man. I'm always mad excited to see brothers like you taking on the institution in order to come back "home" and work with our youngsters.

So, again, a humbly humble thanks to you, brother.

Your search for white supremacy in the work is most definitely on-point. I'll try to answer this in the many ways that I have thought about it as I have revised, performed, revised, cried, and cried again. The "back-story" of my mother's arrest, which actually provides the political and personal imperative of the young narrator to investigate his crybaby nature, serves to highlight how white-powered institutions such as the hospital and the "justice" system actually work to exploit in any way possible brown folks. I didn't provide enough room for an all-out assault on these institutions other than the fact I show a slide at the beginning that tells the FBI to fuck off. However, though subtle and implicit and only seconds-long, the appearances of both the white lawyer and white news anchor having the end-all authoritative voice on the formalities of the case suggest who does the talking for and about my moms and the other nurse. This is not solely a critique of racist media practices and how they take away our voice but also plays on the tensions white people have with each other on how to deal with our immigrant brownness. We don't even get to say shit about ourselves. We are damned and saved by these motherfuckers. These motherfuckers get to tell our story. Excuse the diction. I'll continue to discuss the filmed sequences of the show in order for those parts to make greater sense in the scheme. The film that shows in middle, the one where my moms reads from her prison diaries, is played down as comedic and at the same time shows a resilient brown woman who in the face of this all found moments to laugh and be alive and to maintain a lifelong cynicism about American justice. I remember you pointing to this moment to me after the show. I'm glad you took note. That resilience, that ability to laugh still and live still, is a direct "fuck you" to the white jury that convicted her. She says, "It was horrible" while she also kinda says, "We had fun." Of course at the end, this living and hoping (being alive and not killed or being poor savages to be saved or apologized to) is extended through song, through the intimacy of Patsy Cline's "Crazy," which 1) is a song I used to sing with my moms and 2) provides a title that is fitting to my moms's one piece of advice throughout the story: Don't think about the troubles of this world for you will go crazy. The troubles are these racial tensions along the horizontal axis you mention between the black and brown kids. Remember, she says this in the car when the narrator is embarrassed as he sees the peewees. The filmed sections are but 8 minutes of the 60-minute show. Oh yeah, at the start of the performance, the silly search for a writing mentor in a wrestler points to and criticizes certain white-dominant narratives: Orientalism and slavery.

So, how do I (re)present/critique white supremacy in the rest of the show?

Fuck. This was difficult to handle. I know I tread the dangerous waters of representation when I'm being honest and real about the racial and gendered

tensions going down amongst ourselves in our working class communities. I think it's a valid fear: Filipinos/people of color can't misread my work and white folks most definitely can't misread my work. I can't have that! That's the worst to me. My partner says that white people will eat my shit up. And I wonder if I'm not railing on them as much as I should be. In the end, I have no control over this but here's what I'd decided along the way. So much of the discussion about literature and "reading" this particular show is about this notion of finding a way of telling the story of a brown kid and his brown mama. The mock-lecture on postcolonial literature and the praising of the Hulkster openly welcome the contradictions that Filipinos face. The work announces itself as postcolonial yet continues to subscribe to this very colonized practice of seeking guidance from the dude you compared to Zeus. Here, there's a nihilistic view (a young and immature one) that the young narrator has about white patriarchy. For him, the writer, me, I guess, white patriarchy sometimes seems and feels overwhelmingly inescapable. That's real talk. Yet, despite this feeling, all along the way, the young narrator retaliates (through language) by ridiculing whiteness and white people who can't even speak English. He shows how Rachel Carson, a white woman, was a more fitting historical figure, according to his teacher, than his own mother. Yet, he still holds that his mother is the one he is to impress, not the teacher, or Rachel Carson. Also, this narrator has out-Englished white society in a way. The narrator and his mama are the center of the story. This is critical to the survival of the story, of our stories. In earlier versions, there was a huge white presence, in the form of the teacher talking so damn much, and other white kids who mocked and mocked the narrator. I even blurred out the white faces in one of the images in order not to provide them a significance. The decision to tell a story centered on the brown narrator and his brown mama marginalizes white bodies and dis-empowers the notion of a white-owned white-characterized white-centric narrative. Yes, it can be read as a counter-narrative, or counter-dominant narrative. But infinitely more importantly, it is OUR narrative, OUR history. Not the white peoples' story. They exist, no doubt, and their superstructures are the implied cause of the local tensions, but notice how the white characters don't warrant sympathy or even a second glance.

In the end, I feel that it was much more important for me to un-invite white folks into the conversation. I surely don't write for them. I don't even want to give them enough time to identify themselves in the story. They may eavesdrop on the conversation but they certainly do not belong. I know I sound anti-white or culturally nationalistic but my writing decisions with this particular story come from a lot of rage and heartbreak. I know whites exist. You know they exist. My mom knows they exist. White supremacists feel entitled to that: to existing over and beyond us. So, why give them further satisfaction by giving them attention in my story?

In no way am I trying to dismiss your search for a sharp critique of white supremacy in the work. It's a concern I always have about mine and others' work. But, I will say that this speaks much more to the way we have been trained to read literature about our communities. We too often attempt to identify where we as people of color stand in relation to the white superstructure, thereby giving them the center. And this is our natural tendency, I mean, they've committed all kinds of intellectual wrongs on us. Shit, the Thomasites came to the Philippines and skillfully institutionalized the popular fiction that the U.S. was never at war with us. Even today, Filipino youths don't know about that war! The mess runs deep! I used to feel that I had to see white supremacy to chant it down. I don't believe this is true for me anymore. I think there's something much more powerful in a self-determined literature that knows its decisions and acts on its own terms. That lives on its own. Even though the horizontal tensions between the black and brown kids in the story gives off the impression that we fight a lot or experience a lot of animosity toward each other, it is for US to figure that shit out, without the colonizer present, no? We can heal ourselves, no?

So, the absence of whites is mad strategic and my intentions of putting our folks in higher and brighter relief may have some negative backlash since, in this way, we have the potential to become spectacle for white audiences. But again, I'm not concerned with healing with them. They are not part of who I imagine to be in community with. I'm concerned with connecting with folks like you. And if I can have conversations like this because of some shit I wrote and read aloud, then let's get down. For real for real.

To be safe, I included no bloodshed in the fight between the black kid and the narrator; there's actually a moment where the narrator curses the white girl (it's gendered for sure but I do have remind myself that the narrator's eight.) At the closing, so purposefully, when the narrator fights the white kid named Slobber Johnny, the narrator draws Johnny's blood onto his gloves. It sounds evil, yes: white boy blood. It's a small but sweet revelatory victory for the narrator.

The novel (which is getting way too damn long) has clearer and extended critiques along a vertical racial/class/gender axis. I plan to have open letters to white writers and the lawyers and the FBI and historians. It's like a series of battle tracks!

Yo, thanks for reading through this and inviting me to digest and process out some of my thinking.

By the way, what are you studying at SB?

Word,

Jason [25]

**You Will Gonna Go Crazy**

FORM: Fiction, Multimedia Play
DURATION: *Approx.* 01:25:00
LOCATION: San Francisco, California
YEAR: 2011

Figure 3.3: Flyer for *You Will Gonna Go Crazy*, 2011.

[25] C., e-mail correspondence with author, February 19, 2010.

In 2010, I was invited by Kularts, the nonprofit arts organization who helped me produce and premiere *The Passion of El Hulk Hogancito*, to submit with them an application for a Challenge America Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Upon receiving the grant, Kularts would commission me to write the work. Kularts, run by executive director and dance choreographer Alleluia Panis, pushed me explore further *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez.* I continued to move away from the novel and into performance and theatre. In *You Will Gonna Go Crazy*, I extend the narrative of *The Passion of El Hulk Hogancito*. Drawing from four chapters from the draft of my novel, I created a 'play.' Director Alleluia Panis casted the play with performers who would fill certain roles as my brothers, my father, my mother, schoolyard bullies, and classroom kids. Ultimately, the story treats *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* as a backdrop, or perhaps as a condition of possibility, for an intimate family history about class and violence. Originally, I had intended to simply write a history of the case. For the NEA grant application, I wrote this:

> In June of 1976, two recently-immigrated Filipina nurses, Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez (the author's mother), were accused of murdering ten patients at the Ann Arbor Veteran's Administration Hospital in Ann Arbor, Michigan. After an extensive trial guided by racist accusations, manipulated and funded by 1 million FBI dollars, the two nurses, referred to as "slant-eyed bitches" during the process, were convicted on three counts of poisoning. Eventually, at the appeal of the defense and based on the FBI's gross misconduct, the decision was overturned and the nurses were freed. *U.S. v. Narciso-Perez* serves as a critical point in the history of America, demonstrating that post-1965 immigrants, professionals full of hope and wonder for the land of milk & honey, continue to dream in the face of American racism. In addition, this story re-surfaces today as an important narrative in the complex, national debate surrounding immigration and immigration reform.[26]

[26] Kularts, "Project Narrative," Application Grant, National Endowment for the Arts Challenge America Grant, May 2010.

Still, just I had in previous works, I approached this project by indirectly attending to the history of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. So, I only obliquely addressed issues of immigration. I focused mostly on my own, or Hasón's, *coming-of-age*. I borrowed from popular culture and narrated in the style of Kevin Arnold of *The Wonder Years*. I utilized music themes that were inspired by one of my mother's favorite songs, Patsy Cline's "Crazy." The vignettes, or chapters, or acts, were straightforward narratives. However, as interludes, I included videos and performances that pulled from our family archive of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. *You Will Gonna Go Crazy* was/is a novella in performance. Still, my mother's (and Narciso's) history remained as backdrop. Surely, it was clear that there was a connection between the hurts of history and the family narrative. But these connections and gestures were undertheorized and now that I think about it grossly mishandled. At the time, I was not ready to dig into the archive deeply. What I learned from this project, however, was that there are tensions between the layers of history I am trying to explore—my own historicity, the materialities of the sociopolitical process of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, and even the historical experiences of various communities. I have found that the form of a theatre play, even though *You Will Gonna Go Crazy* did not unfold like a play, could not hold these tensions together. Thus, I have turned back to different forms to experiment with the archive.

**para sa akin: autohistoria** [27]

FORM: Poetics, Oral History, Digital Video Essay
DURATION: 00:03:56
LOCATION: La Jolla, CA
YEAR: 2012

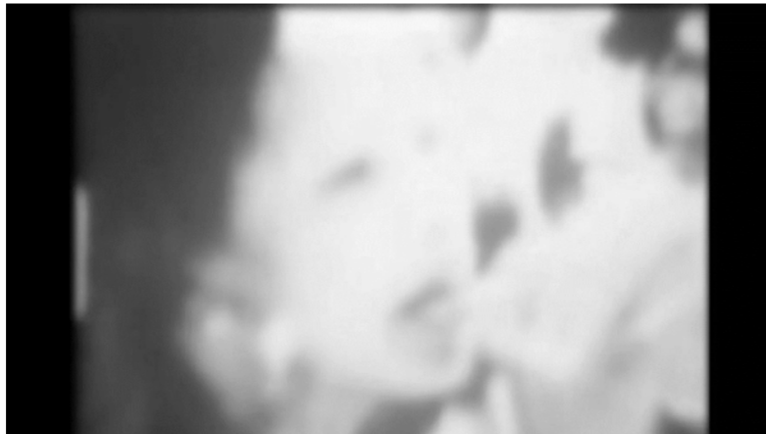

Figure 3.4: Video still from *para sa akin: autohistoria*, 2012.
CLICK ON IMAGE TO VIEW PROJECT.

In the previous chapter, I shared the story about my brief encounter with Geri Alumit Zeldes, the director of the documentary film *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez, & the Press*. This work, *para sa akin: autohistoria*, was conceptualized and edited in response to that encounter. I should also note that this is the first project that I produced with my current set of theoretical and analytical vocabularies. Thus, my search for a *critical race poetics* perhaps is best embodied in this project: *para sa akin: autohistoria*. This video experiment was first created as a final project for an ethnic studies graduate seminar: *Pedagogy and Popular Culture*. In this rather short video experiment, I sample from various sources: our family archive; informal interviews with my mother; and the spoken word poems "Para sa

[27] Jason Magabo Perez, *para sa akin: autohistoria*, edited by Jason Magabo Perez (San Diego: N/A, 2012): https://vimeo.com/98105972.

Isang Mahal" and "Letter to Our Unborn Children" by the pan-Asian American spoken word hip hop group I Was Born with Two Tongues. I consider this work to be what poet, essayist, and activist Gloria Anzaldúa termed 'autohistoria.' As one scholar puts it: "Creating interwoven individual and collective identities, writers of autohistoria-teoría blend personal and cultural biographies with memoir, history, storytelling, myth, and other forms."[28] At the time, too, I was thinking through the politics of historical intelligibility. I was drawn to the ways which Native American anthropologist Audra Simpson discusses 'ethnographic refusal.' Simpson introduces the term 'ethnographic refusal,' i.e. when the tape recorder is [turned off], when ethnographic truth is strategically hidden or denied, the anthropological limit. I am interested in the historical/historiographical limit. "Rather than stops," writes Simpson, "or impediments to knowing, those limits may be expansive in what they do not tell us."[29] In sections that involved voice but no image, image without voice, and a layering of voice and image, I attempted to refuse a clear-cut narrative. Instead, I wanted to reflect abstractly on my own relationship to *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. Coming out of the encounter with Zeldes, I was not ready to reveal any of my family's history so willingly. Certainly, historical production involves the revealing and concealing of historical 'truth.'

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[28] Ana Louise Keating, "Gloria Anzaldúa (1942-2004)," *The Women's Review of Books* 22.1 (2004): 1, 3.

[29] Audra Simpson, "On Ethnographical Refusal: Indigeneity, 'Voice,' and Colonial Citizenship," *Junctures* 9 (2009): 78.

**Leonora, archive of** [30]

FORM: Oral History, Performance, Documentary Film
DURATION: *Approx.* 00:07:00
LOCATION: La Jolla, CA
YEAR: 2013

Figure 3.5: Film still from *Leonora, archive of*, 2013.
CLICK ON IMAGE TO VIEW PROJECT.

I began this project with the question: What does it mean to make, stage, and/or perform history? I set out to explore yet again the process of producing narratives about *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez.* In pursuing the problematics of 'making history,' I considered issues surrounding ethnographic practice, performance, and objecthood. Thus, I kept in mind my commitment to examining these problematics by structuring *Leonora, archive of* around certain reading and archival practices.

For this project, I identified objects of this historical moment. I chose three objects from my mother's personal archive: a campaign T-shirt from the case; a blanket that my mother crocheted while in prison; and a photograph of my mother, my father, and my mother's parents standing outside of the Detroit courthouse, awaiting the verdict. I was

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[30] Jason Magabo Perez, *Leonora, archive of*, directed by Jason Magabo Perez (San Diego: N/A, 2013): https://vimeo.com/95343863; https://vimeo.com/95343864; https://vimeo.com/95343862.

drawn to these objects because they have been a part of my consciousness since I was a child. Yet, I understood these objects as simply part of the everyday, part of the background of our family's home. I was particularly inspired by feminist scholar Sara Ahmed's discussion of intellectual labor and *the background*. "So," writes Ahmed, "if phenomenology is to attend to the background, it might do so by giving an account of the conditions of emergence for something, which would not necessarily be available in how that thing presents itself to consciousness."[31] I wondered about the conditions of emergence of these objects—what does this T-shirt, this blanket, this photograph bring up for my mother? How can these objects explain or facilitate an understanding or a relationship between me, my mother, and her (and Narciso's) history? Her and my and our family's and our community's shared past? I used these objects to facilitate an intimate conversation between my mother and me.

For three weeks, I interviewed my mother about these objects. I recorded the oral history interviews and anticipated using them for a video/performance project. I took up questions and practices of ethnographic refusal through various modes of performance. In particular, I found generative again Simpson's discussion of the 'ethnographic limit.' What does it mean to tell a history through the strategy of refusal, through a strategy of making the narrative unknowable, intentionally illegible within certain registers? What did it mean to interview my mother in her home and then invite others to eavesdrop on the conversation? How could I complicate the interview process? What does a performance

[31] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 38.

practice look like when it refuses to offer viewers/readers/strangers to participate/share in certain intimacies?

I edited the interviews and then decided to shoot/record a performance. We recorded the performance in the ArtSpace of the UCSD Cross-Cultural Center. With a team of close friends who happened to be artists, I played with the form of documentary storytelling. For one set of scenes or experiments, I directed my mother to interact with the objects (i.e. T-shirt, blanket, photograph) while an edited version of our previous interviews played through the speakers. For the second set of scenes or experiments, I directed my mother in reading/performing text from less personal archival objects—i.e. the indictment, the verdict, and the nonfiction journalistic book I discussed in the previous chapter, *The Mysterious Deaths at Ann Arbor*. It was my intention to explore various modes of storytelling as a way of pursuing the historical moment.

After this project, I was left with a few meditations, a few questions that I continue to address through an examination, a critical playing with performance and documentary. *Leonora, archive of* was a generative product and process for thinking through the problems of making history and engaging intimacy. In *Leonora, archive of*, I attempt to dislocate my mother's story from the past, and also explore Diana Taylor's notion of "the hauntology of performance."[32] How do the archival objects with which I am working haunt the present? How are these objects haunted themselves? If I consider my mother to be what Filipino American studies scholar Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns calls a "Filipina performing

[32] Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 20.

body,"[33] how do I understand my mother's own body as an archival object? As a haunting? As I continue to pursue the 'ghostly matter' of my mother's (and Narciso's) past, I think about how these objects, and our family archives, including my mother as object of colonial and state and legal violence, speak a particular history from their "the multiple histories of arrival"?[34] If *para sa akin: autohistoria* enables me to pursue more vigorously a *critical race poetics* then *Leonora, archive of* has reminded me of the ways in which I might play with the endeavor of oral history in order to evoke a politics of refusal and pursue an objective of historical un-intelligibility.

**Sympathies for Leonora & Filipina (Poems)**

FORM: Poetry, Performance, Video
DURATION: 00:05:27
LOCATION: La Jolla, CA
YEAR: 2013

I had the wonderful opportunity to collaborate with some undergraduate students who were taking a communication/media production course with Professor Zeinabu Davis at UC San Diego. Having access to production equipment and to a large production crew, I decided to continue my experiments with performance and the archive. For this project, I simply resurrected a few old poems that I had written throughout the years. Some of these poems were cut-ups, sampling text from legal documents, oral histories, and from newspaper headlines from the archives of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez.* I was simply interested in the ways in which vocal interpretation, or elocution, could reanimate the

[33] Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stages of Empire* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 2.
[34] Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 43.

archive. As I approach the poetics of Chapter 5 of this dissertation, I maintain that the strategies of cut-up and also the premise of the poems being recited or performed aloud at some point informs the kinds of juxtapositions and experiments I employ.

**Sympathies for Leonora & Filipina (Interview)**

FORM: Performance, Photography, Documentary Film, Installation
DURATION: N/A
LOCATION: La Jolla, CA
YEAR: 2013

Figure 3.6: From the set of *Sympathies for Leonora & Filipina*, 2013.

While I set out to create yet another experiment involving performance and documentary film, I have yet to edit the footage from this project. My intention in this project is to build the archive with my niece, the granddaughter of Leonora Perez. Essentially, with the help of a few undergraduate students, I built an installation that consisted of a wall full of newspapers from my family archive. Then, I staged a discussion between my niece and my mother. In this project, I am exploring performance, intimacy, and the haunting backdrop of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez.* Although the project remains

unedited and ephemeral, I will say that I learned a great deal about filmmaking as I shot this project. Through this project, I heard my mother for the first time ever admit that while at work as a nurse, she always remembers her past. She admitted that she is always haunted by the FBI's accusations. I wonder if it was the very professional set up of equipment that helped my mother reveal such an insight.

**We are just a stranger here**

FORM: Oral History, Poetry, Performance, Documentary Film
DURATION: 00:08:25
LOCATION: San Francisco, CA
YEAR: 2015

Figure 3.7: Film still from *We are just a stranger here*, 2015.

By the time I created this project, which is the most recent of my documentary film and performance experiments, I had developed a methodological vocabulary around performance, refusal, and representation. In conceptualizing *We are just a stranger here*, I studied films that I argue bring together the methodologies of performance ethnography

and experimental documentary film.[35] The work of Trinh T. Minh-ha has been instructive as her films work to "[expose] its [own] politics of representation."[36] Specifically, in my film, I am informed greatly by Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* (1989) in which she stages a reenactment not of past historical events in Vietnam but instead she restages the interview and turns the ethnographic interview into a fiction. This film is heavily cited in *We are just a stranger here*. I am also informed by the performative gestures in Isaac Julien's *Looking for Langston* (1989), Rea Tajiri's *History and Memory* (1991), and John Akomfrah's *Seven Songs for Malcolm X* (1993). Each of these films practice a poetics of archival research that is aesthetically complex and provocative. In my estimation, these films circulate as rigorous research projects commenting simultaneously on the aesthetic-politics of representation and narration and the historiographies of racist state violence, war, and queer raciality. Ultimately, this filmography, for me, represents a methodology that blends performance ethnography and documentary filmmaking. In *We are just a stranger here*, two performers deliver a monologue based on oral history interviews I have had with my mother. While the performers narrate the events of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* in a straightforward manner, the fragments of the archive—photographs and news footage—appear in a second frame (in a diptych) or are layered over the performer. I am indebted to my co-editor, Vicci Apacible, for helping me realize the technical aspects of the project. In addition, I assembled a poem using the text of the original 16-count criminal indictment against Narciso and my mother and Wilcox's

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[35] My understanding of *performance ethnography* is drawn from Dwight Conquergood, *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis*, edited by E. Patrick Johnson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), and D. Soyini Madison, *Critical Ethnography: Method, Ethics, and Performance*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2012).
[36] Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Framer Framed*, 114.

journalistic account in *The Mysterious Deaths at Ann Arbor*. With this project, I have come to understand the play of refusal and intelligibility. I am interested in experimenting with traditional narrative techniques with occasional lyrical irruptions. Such a texture, I hope, challenges us to reevaluate our own relationships to historical narratives.

**Critical Themes**

The central motivations behind my storytelling and performance practice have revolved around themes of intimacy and the politics of historical production. In the body of work discussed above, I have simply moved from poetry to fiction to performance to video (back) to performance to documentary film. Each of these forms have afforded me an understanding of historical production. Each of these forms, too, have afforded me an understanding of how one pursues the 'truth' about *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, and about Filipino American history in general. I consistently run up against this tension in my work: the claims to 'truth' embedded in historical production and the contingent nature of knowledge produced through artistic or literary methodologies. I find the politics of refusal to be generative in developing *critical race poetics* because it enables the researcher to respect his, her, or their interlocutors, which could be both people and perhaps even the objects, the ghostly, the archive. I am interested in *critical race poetics* as I envision it pushing the archive toward the historiographical limit. I understand, too, that my previous work operated with a hazy theoretical premise. I was committed to a dominant 'regime of truth'—I wanted to identify the past, I wanted to name the haunting and use it as evidence. This is not why I am currently interested in the notion of 'haunting' or in examining racist state violence. I see 'haunting' as generative epistemological position through which new

forms of unexpected, contingent critique might emerge. This ultimately leads me to think about literature and art practice outside of a solely literary context. Thus, I turn to critical race theory and more specifically, *critical race narratives*, for a stronger political and theoretical premise, and as a way to think through a new methodology of racial critique that is certainly literary but is also heavily indebted to social science practice: *critical race poetics*.

## Critically Re-Processing the Archive

The body of work discussed in this chapter is the extended pretext to this dissertation and certainly to the contents, i.e. the poem cycle, found in Chapter 5. Legal scholar and literary critic Carl Gutiérrez-Jones claims that critical race narratives "[cannibalize] various disciplinary and professional languages," which, in turn, allows for a "critical reprocessing" of the ways in which racial knowledge is produced.[37] I would like to critically reprocess the archive discussed in this chapter, the body of work, into the poem cycle. That is, I draw from this archive some of the raw material I use to construct poems in Chapter 5. Ultimately, I hope to reconcile these previous attempts with the most current attempt (i.e. this dissertation) to explore *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. I hope, too, that with a stronger theoretical premise, that my critical reprocessing of fragments of this body of work will be put in the service of producing more explicit racial knowledge.

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[37] Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, *Critical Race Narratives: A Study of Race, Rhetoric, and Injury* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 15.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have discussed the parameters of *craft critique* and through *craft critique* have catalogued and reflected on my body of work from 2001-2015. What I have found is that I have been committed to a dominant 'regime of truth' but have attempted to move away from that 'regime of truth' by experimenting with various forms of performance and storytelling. Sampling ideas about methodology from the fields of documentary filmmaking, performance studies, and creative writing, I turn in the next chapter to critical race theory and poetics to more clearly explain what I have been working toward all along.

**Acknowledgments**

This chapter includes an excerpt from Jason Magabo Perez, "Crayoning the King: On Disciplining," in Phenomenology of Superhero (Minneapolis: Red Bird Chapbooks, 2016). The dissertation author was the sole author of this excerpt. Additionally, this chapter includes an unpublished e-mail conversation: Jason Magabo Perez and César Rodriguez, e-mail conversation, February 19, 2010.

# CHAPTER 4: TOWARD A CRITICAL RACE POETICS

## Introduction

In the two previous chapters, I analyzed historical productions exploring *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, then I critically reflected (through *craft critique*) on my own body of work exploring *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. In each chapter, I identified the available theoretical and methodological possibilities for my current work on *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. Ultimately, I suggested that *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* could be re-articulated toward a theoretical framework outside of the scope of Filipino studies. My contention is that in order understand the ghostly complexities of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* we must read its contents within a wider context of racist state violence. In terms of methodology, I suggest that we might dis-articulate the court case from the dominant 'regime of truth' in order to produce *new* knowledge. Previous historical productions have willfully (and, for Choy, unwittingly) reduced the case's significance to clear-cut questions of innocence and guilt, justice and injustice, truth and untruth. These previous historical productions revolved around the same types of queries and thus revealed nothing necessarily *new* about the case. In this chapter, I conceptualize what I am calling c*ritical race poetics*. *Critical race poetics* is a way of performing the above dis-articulations and re-articulations. Bridging the methodologies of critical race theory and the strategies of contemporary documentary poetics, *critical race poetics* is part of the struggle over racial literacy and the rigorous pursuit of "fugitive knowledges."[1] In what follows, I first recount the scholarly provocations that have led to my critical pursuit for a methodology. Then, I discuss the

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[1] Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), xviii.

strategies of writing that instruct me in this pursuit. And lastly, for the bulk of the chapter, as I discuss the fields and insights that move me toward a *critical race poetics*, I also narrate my own trajectory in creative writing and consciousness. All in all, this chapter puts into clearer terms the endeavor of *critical race poetics* that I perform in the next chapter.

**Scholarly Provocations**

This chapter responds to the scholarly provocations that I mention in Chapter 1. I would like to take a moment to recap. Firstly, I am interested in pursuing *critical race poetics* as a response to ethnic studies scholar Dylan Rodriguez's provocation during the first Critical Ethnic Studies Conference in 2010: Rodriguez called for an "epistemological project of insurrection."[2] Drawing upon Foucault's notion of an "insurrection of subjugated knowledges," Rodriguez emphasizes the importance of recognizing and working with the contradictions and the incommensurabilities among various communities in struggle.[3] Taking my cue from the poet Audre Lorde, I argue that when it comes to *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*, "there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt."[4] Thus, I believe that an 'epistemological project of insurrection' must consider various and alternative epistemologies, various and alternative ways of knowing, various and alternative modes of critique. Poetics, the intense study and practice of language, is one such mode. Secondly, I conceptualize *critical race poetics* as an extension of the narrative

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[2] Dylan Rodriguez, Plenary on White Supremacy and Settler Colonialism, *Critical Ethnic Studies & The Future of Genocide: Conference*, UC Riverside, March 11, 2011.
[3] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writing 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1981), 81.
[4] Audre Lorde, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches (Berkeley: Crossing Press), 39.

interventions found in critical race theory and as a way of intervening (via interdisciplinary social science and humanities research) into debates about the racial politics of creative writing. I am provoked by legal and cultural studies scholar Carl Gutiérrez-Jones's invitation to compare critical race studies (which includes critical race theory) projects and artistic projects that "foreground struggles of literacy and its relation to effective racial remedies."[5] That is, I accept the invitation to not only compare the work of critical race theorists and allied artistic projects but I argue that these works—in all of their narrative, critical, and imaginative disciplinary transgressions—exist within the same discursive community. Attending to the contemporary debate about the racial politics of creative writing, I return again to poet and critic Ronaldo V. Wilson's questioning about the "language of racial identity."[6] I suggest that *critical race poetics*, as a methodology and political strategy in rigorous pursuit of forms of subjugated, insurrectionary, and fugitive knowledges, theorizes race and its contingencies and attempts to produce the raw 'linguistic material of racial speech/thought.' In this chapter, I extend the work of critical race theory to interrogate creative writing practices; and I offer poetics as a way to bridge these sites of activity.

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[5] Gutiérrez-Jones uses the term 'Critical Race Studies' to encompass a broader set of scholarship critiquing race. However, I am interested specifically in Critical Race Theory because it is through theorists such as Derrick Bell and Patricia Williams that I find inspiration. Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, *Critical Race Narratives: A Study of Race, Rhetoric, and Injury* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 89.

[6] Ronaldo V. Wilson, "How do we invent the language of racial identity—that is not necessarily constructing the 'scene of instruction' about race but create the linguistic material of racial speech/thought?", in *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*, edited by Claudia Rankine, Beth Loffreda, and Max King Cap (Albany: Fence Books, 2015), 75.

**Notes on Writing Strategies**

In this chapter, I employ several different research and writing strategies in order to conceptualize or move toward a clearer understanding of a research and writing methodology that I am calling *critical race poetics*. Specifically, I am drawn to and exploring together what feminist literary scholar Jane Gallop refers to as "anecdotal theory," what legal and cultural studies scholar Carl Gutiérrez-Jones terms "critical race narratives," and what performance studies scholar Della Pollock explores as "performance writing."[7] These three research and writing strategies—conceptualized within distinct but interrelated intellectual formations, i.e. literary criticism, the intersections of legal studies and literature, and performance studies—arrive at a shared conclusion that in writing, in the act of narrative, emerges theory, emerges critique. Thus, in this chapter, I write autobiographical vignettes alongside conventional scholarly prose as an attempt to work toward (and in some ways work through) the theoretical and methodological premises and critical possibilities of *critical race poetics*. I bring together my own epistemology of writing, i.e. my trajectory of creative writing and consciousness, and my current concerns with research and creative writing praxis. I wish to examine the politics of writing about racist state violence. Ultimately, I am pursuing a methodology, a *critical race poetics* that enables to me to examine the racial implications of the very historical conjuncture that founds this dissertation project, the case of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. And in my pursuit,

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[7] See Jane Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002); Carl Gutiérrez-Jones, *Critical Race Narratives: A Study of Race, Rhetoric, and Injury* (New York: NYU Press, 2001); Della Pollock, "Performing Writing," in *The Ends of Performance*, ed. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane (New York: NYU Press, 1997), 73-103.

I cannot help but put into practice the insights I come across. That is, this chapter simultaneously defines as it develops a *critical race poetics*.

If 'anecdotal theory' "honors the uncanny detail of lived experience," and performative writing is itself a *doing*, and critical race narratives prioritize the lived experiences of people of color, then, I am certainly certain, at the very least, that I am writing and writing in this way.[8] While I find the concept of 'anecdotal theory' to be useful, I think Jane Gallop misses an important part of Barbara Christian's critique as Gallop uses Christian's work as a point of departure. In the very title of Christian's "The Race for Theory" is the term 'race.' For Gallop, 'anecdotal theory' is about the exorbitant, the excessive. I argue that Christian is already stating that the everyday theorizing performed by people of color through storytelling and parable and poetry has been considered excessive and thus delegitimized. Christian writes:

> For people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing (and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often found in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity? [9]

Building on Christian's intervention, I would like to theorize from the quotidian violence of racism, making such violence (material and discursive) central to our theoretical practice, rather than dismissing that quotidian violence of racism (or micro-aggressions of racism) as simply an exorbitant alter-subjectivity from which to theorize.

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[8] Gallup, *Anecdotal Theory*, 2.

[9] Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Feminist Studies* 14.1 (1998): 68.

Much of my rationale here for juxtaposing autobiographical vignettes and critical analysis resembles what I mentioned in the previous chapter as the "critical democratic storytelling imagination."[10] I read each of these interventions—Christian's, Gutiérrez-Jones's, and Pollock's—together as permission to proceed. With such permission, I allow my own storytelling imagination, full of recollection, perhaps contradiction, perhaps deliberate and unwitting revision, to continue guiding my pursuit of *critical race poetics*.

**My Poetic Turn: Vignette**

In early 2001, I sat in the backseat of a blue-green Honda Accord and wondered: What will our daylong activist meetings ever amount to? What is truly meant by *protracted struggle*? As we drove down Genesee Avenue, away from the predominantly wealthy, predominantly white city of La Jolla, toward Clairemont Mesa, where we lived, where Black, brown, and immigrant families lived, I wondered: What is the objective of our exhaustion? To what end do we hustle? We passed Governor Drive, Highway 52, Clairemont Mesa Boulevard, then up the hill toward Cotixan, Home Depot, and the DMV. Empty paper cups, neon plastic straws, and rose petals floated in the gutter. Families were hustling flowers at the intersections. Migrants in hats and jeans were waiting patiently for work. The formerly incarcerated in orange reflector vests were selling newspapers. The sun was shining against a pinkish sky scattered with a few clouds. Rene, a political science major, a theatre minor, a student leader, was driving. Christine, also a political science

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[10] Norman K. Denzin, *Collecting and Interpreting Qualitative Materials* (Thousand Oaks, SAGE Publications, 2013), 456.

major, also a student leader, sat in the passenger seat.[11] In those days, we were coming into our consciousness as student activists at the University of California, San Diego. In those days, we were driving up and down the coast of California to meet with a broad coalition of students about restoring affirmative action in the University of California; we were on the verge of launching a statewide campaign for Filipino American studies; we were fighting for a living wage for campus janitors and custodial workers everywhere.[12] In 2001, all we knew was the practice, the labor, the fight, the overwhelming excitement and exhaustion, the hours of meetings, the paper bags full of lukewarm French fries, boxes of cold pizza, Hamburger Helper, cheap beer, and espresso, the symptoms of premature activist burnout—we had no time or template for reflection, and sometimes no time or need for the classroom.

"Have you listened to this *BLU Magazine* compilation?" asked Rene as he drove on.[13]

"No," I said.

Christine had.

"You have to listen to this spoken word piece," said Rene.

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[11] Rene later became a high school theater teacher and is currently a comedian and full-time screenwriter in Los Angeles. Christine later became a high school history teacher in her hometown, Vallejo, California, and now is an assistant vice principal at a middle school in Fairfield, California. I mention these dear friends because they were present during a formative moment in my political and artistic consciousness. We grew up together.

[12] In 2001, we were fighting for the repeal of the standing policies, SP-1 and SP-2, which banned Affirmative Action programs in the UC system in 1995—this preceded the passing of Proposition 209 in 1996, which effective Affirmative Action in California. Concurrently, we were building a base for what eventually became the California Coalition for Pilipina/o Studies. We were also fighting, and they are still fighting today, for a living wage for janitors through the Justice for Janitors campaign which at the time was led by the local SEIU chapter.

[13] *BLU Magazine* was an early 2000's publication that explored the radical legacies of APIA culture and struggle.

"It's powerful," said Christine. "There's something about it."

Rene took out the CD from its white cardboard casing, placed the CD in the disc man, pressed the disc man cover down until it clicked, and pushed the disc man adapter tape into the cassette player. Then, Rene turned up the volume and put on "Letter to Our Unborn Children":

> because freedom was more than bread
>
> because not to say was to vanish
>
> because no one believed we existed [14]

Immediately, I was captivated, and I can tell that Christine and Rene were re-captivated by the way they shifted in their seats. Maybe it was the simple use of parallel structure, the resistance to the sentence, the brokenness, or the polyvocality of the poem. Here were three succinct theses on freedom, voice, and subjectivity, on why we had to do what we were doing. For four minutes and seven seconds and for the duration of that car ride, and for several hours, several days, several weeks, months, years, several repeats, I Was Born with Two Tongues, a group of four young Asian American poets from Chicago—Dennis Kim (Korean American); Emily Chang (Chinese American); Anida Yoeu Ali (Cambodian American Muslim); and Marlon Unas Esguerra (Filipino American Muslim)—incited in each of us a renewed language, a renewed sense of self and community, a renewed sense of struggle, a vocabulary to interpret all that we were fighting for, all that made us wonder and wonder: How do we fight the long fight, the protracted

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[14] I Was Born with Two Tongues, "Letter to Our Unborn Children", in *Broken Speak* (Asian Improve Records, 1999).

fight?[15] Eventually, we would never have to press play again, for we would memorize every moment in that poem, and we would cite that poem in every aspect of our work:

> because this fits in the ball of my fist [16]

In "Letter to Our Unborn Children," I Was Born with Two Tongues examines the contradictions and struggles of Asian American histories through rupture, vocal rounds, layering, cacophony, and manifesto. The Two Tongues begin the poem with and deploy the powerful refrain of the conjunctional "because":

> because there is no language to say it
>
> because it is the destruction of language [17]

Speaking that which is unspeakable, that for which there is no language, and destructing and disassembling and fragmenting mainstream historical narratives of Asian American experience, I Was Born with Two Tongues articulates the conditions of possibility for the psychic terror and material struggle of their future children. I Was Born with Two Tongues reminds us that our anger is ours, that "we were figments of white imagination," that "brown is beautiful," that "yellow is beautiful," that "complacent means joyless," and that "love is a roar."[18]

"Letter to Our Unborn Children" is not only a performance of incredible poetic and vocal dexterity, but it is also, more importantly, a sophisticated theorization of Asian American experience that is simultaneously empowering and pessimistic, all at once historical and contemporary and futuristic. This poem argues not simply *about* but *for*

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[15] I Was Born with Two Tongues identified themselves with these racial/ethnic and religious markers.
[16] Two Tongues, "Letter to Our Unborn Children."
[17] Ibid.
[18] Two Tongues, "Letter to Our Unborn Children."

Asian American struggle in the U.S. and Asian struggle abroad. This poem is about survival.

In this poem, I Was Born with Two Tongues models for us a generative methodology. Through poetics and performance, they theorize and document the racial, the gendered, the classed, the dead, the alive, the transgressive. Through poetics and performance, they theorize and embody a sophisticated pan-Asian and cross-racial solidarity. They speak toward and perform within a futurity in broken, fragmented, articulate, yet resentful, and very carefully rendered English because for them "silence is the absence of freedom."[19]

In 2001, Rene, Christine, and I happened upon these poetics because we needed to name the language we were carrying in our lungs, in our throats, in our bones. In "Letter to Our Unborn Children," I Was Born with Two Tongues answered every un-ask-able question we never even know how to ask. I have known since then that I will continue to re-turn to the analytical power of poetics for what it does for us.

### On Creative Writing Studies

My pursuit of *critical race poetics* is also a response to contemporary debates in creative writing and creative writing studies. Still an emergent scholarly field, creative writing studies continues to be primarily concerned with the pedagogy of creative writing, specifically, the theories and practices of creative writers who teach students how to

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[19] Ibid. It should also be noted that I Was Born with Two Tongues inspired an entire generation of APIA spoken word artists and activists. This legacy continues through the *APIA Spoken Word Summit* which happens every other year in different U.S. cities.

write.[20] While I think this is a crucial point of entry to talk about creative writing critically, I find the framework of pedagogy in creative writing studies to be limiting. My pursuit of *critical race poetics* is guided by thinking about how the process and product, the practice and text, of creative writing serves a pedagogical function. Moreover, creative writing, especially those practices and texts intensified by the racial, facilitates a pedagogy of race. In the anthology *Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind*, editors Claudia Rankine and Beth Loffreda argue against the idea that "the imagination is a postracial, a posthistorical and postpolitical utopia."[21] As I mentioned a few times before, I am provoked specifically by poet and critic Ronaldo V. Wilson's question about inventing the language of racial speech/thought without constructing a moment of instruction about race. In other words, how do writers of color write the racial without being limited by the pedagogical impulse to teach readers (who are avowedly colorblind) about racism?

**Your Writing Is Too Emotional: Vignette**

In 2001, you spend hours and hours on a political science paper about racism and gentrification only to find that your white male teaching assistant has written in the bluest of ink and sloppiest of handwriting at the top of your paper, above the coffee streaks, below the staple, next to the standard heading: Your writing is too emotional.

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[20] See Tim Mayers, "From Creative Writing to Creative Writing Studies," *College English* 71.3, *Special Topic: Creative Writing in the Twentieth Century* (2009): 217-228.
[21] Claudia Rankine, Beth Loffreda, and Max King Cap, eds., *The Racial Imaginary: Writers on Race in the Life of the Mind* (New York: Fence Books, 2015), 16.

**On Critical Race Theory**

I turn to theory because of the "hurts of history."[22] I turn to theory, as bell hooks does herself, as a "location for healing."[23] I turn to theory in order to imagine alternative modes of knowing, of doing, of being. Through theory, I can imagine what is possible. Through theory, I can recall and revise history. Through theory, I can feel—I can be unapologetically 'too emotional'. "I theorize," writes Jane Gallop, and I would add that I, too, theorize, "in order to better negotiate the world within which I find myself."[24] I turn to critical race theory in particular because of its unwavering commitment to dismantling and eliminating racism and all systems and forms of violence and oppression. Critical race theory enables me to explore the racial dimensions of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. Critical race theory demands that I read *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* as a significant historical conjuncture in Filipino American and U.S. racial history, as what Filipino American studies and performance studies scholar Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns has called a "temporality of Filipino/a American racialization."[25] I commit my work to a critical race theory that is deeply "informed by active struggle and in turn informs that struggle."[26] In other words, I am committed to the dialectical tension between theory and practice, between thinking and

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[22] Historian and ethnic studies scholar George Lipsitz once expressed to me that the "hurts of history are far too vast for any of us to attend to on our own."
[23] bell hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Practice," in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 59.
[24] Gallup, *Anecdotal Theory*, 15.
[25] Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stages of Empire* (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 14.
[26] Mari J. Matsuda, Charles R. Lawrence III, Richard Delgado, and Kimberlè Williams Crenshaw, *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, and the First Amendment* (San Francisco: Westview Press, 1993), 3.

action, the tension of praxis. I am committed to the praxis of relational Filipino American history-writing, history-making.

Drawing its analytical strength from preceding intellectual and political movements, critical race theory emerged during the mid-1970s.[27] Early critical legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, and Richard Delgado joined efforts and in 1989, in the company of other critical legal scholars and activists, held their first conference in Madison, Wisconsin.[28] By the early to mid-1990s, scholarship in critical race theory had substantial circulation as many essays had been published in various law journals throughout the U.S. With the landmark publication of *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings that Formed the Movement* (1995), legal scholars and activists Kimberlè Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, in an attempt to provide a working though not exhaustive definition of their collective efforts, described their project as "a movement of left scholars, most of them scholars of color, situated in law schools, whose work challenges the ways in which race and racial power are constructed and represented in American legal culture and, more generally, in American society as a whole."[29] While initially comprising mostly of legal scholars and activists positioned within U.S. law schools, critical race theory has become generative for scholars and activists working in fields and (inter-) disciplines such as education, sociology, communication, history, literature, cultural studies, and ethnic studies. These fields and

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[27] We can see influences and departures from Critical Legal Studies, Black Arts Movement, Third World Liberation Front, *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981). See also Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York: NYU Press, 2001), 4-5.

[28] *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 4.

[29] Kimberlè Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Gary Peller, and Kendall Thomas, eds., *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement* (New York: The New Press, 1995), xiii.

(inter-) disciplines, in turn, have come to inform critical race theory. I have come across legal scholars and practicing lawyers invested in critical race theory who frequently present papers and participate in activist and scholarly conversations outside of the context of law school, at interdisciplinary conferences and meetings held by organizations such as the Critical Ethnic Studies Association and the American Studies Association.[30] I consider critical race theorists' focus on racial power in both 'American legal culture' and 'American society as a whole' to serve as an invitation, an invocation, to other scholars, writers, and activists examining moments of racist state violence or more broadly committed to racial critique to take up and engage critical race theory.

Of important note in the description quoted above is that critical race theorists focus on the construction and representation of race and racism in U.S. society. In other words, critical race theory prioritizes the struggle over racial discourse in the law. Moreover, critical race theory examines the material consequences of such racial discourses. Critical race theory presents racism as "structural" and "cultural," and "as deeply psychological and socially ingrained."[31] "The law," as legal scholar Mari J. Matsuda reminds us, "consists of language, ideals, signs, and structures that have material and moral consequences."[32] Because of this focus on racial discourses and their 'material and moral consequences', which essentially is a struggle over culture, a cultural struggle, it makes sense that critical race theory commits to a subjective, "interdisciplinary and eclectic," and historically and

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[30] During the 2014 American Studies Association conference in Los Angeles, I sat in on a panel in which legal scholars such as Cheryl Harris and Kimberlè Crenshaw presented work that connected legal precedent with media/cultural representations of race.
[31] Matsuda et al., *Words That Wound*, 5.
[32] Mari J. Matsuda, "Looking to the Bottom," in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*, ed. Kimberlè Crenshaw et al. (New York: The New Press, 1995), 66.

contextually specific analytical practice that draws from and participates in conversations within and across various scholarly disciplines.[33] This, I believe, is but one opening for creative writers (and other cultural producers) committed to racial critique to align themselves with critical race theory. Critical race theory, I believe, offers creative writers the opportunity to develop a specific, directed, politically informed, critical antiracist position and practice. In the instance of this dissertation, critical race theory makes possible a rereading of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* and its attendant narratives. Such a rereading challenges the logic of historical narratives like the documentary film *U.S. v. Narciso, Perez, and the Press*, which espouses a narrative logic that elides the deeper, more fundamental questions of racial and legal violence in the service of providing a so-called objective, balanced, and cohesive account of history.

Among its many foundational principles and theoretical premises, critical race theory "recognizes that racism is endemic to American life."[34] *Racism*, not simply *race*, in the words of Derrick Bell, is an "integral, permanent, and indestructible component" of U.S. society.[35] To put it simply, racism is at the foundation of American society. I would further argue that racism, too, is at the foundation of U.S. literary and cultural practices. Specifically, from a critical race theory approach, racism founds creative writing and creative writing studies. A critical race theory approach to literary practice involves the struggle over the racial discourses inherent in the practice and pedagogy of creative writing and cultural production.

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[33] Matsuda et al., *Words That Wound*, 6.
[34] Ibid., 6.
[35] Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), ix.

Now it is not only important that creative writers committed to racial critique understand that race is endemic to American society. It is crucial, as critical race theorists have suggested, to consider one's positionality as a scholar and writer. As mentioned previously, critical race theorists 'look to the bottom' in order to adopt perspectives "of those who have seen and felt the falsity of liberal promise."[36] Too often, those who have seen and felt this falsity are people of color. Given the racial hierarchy of the U.S., critical race theorists look to the lived experiences of people of color. Critical race theory draws from what Mari Matsuda calls "a new epistemological source for critical scholars: the actual experience, history, culture, and intellectual tradition of people of color in America."[37] Hence, I look to my mother, my immediate and extended family, and community first and foremost in order to understand the cultural and historical implications of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. Critical race theory demands that I not only make visible but rely heavily on these 'new epistemological sources.'

Perhaps what is most provocative about critical race theory for creative writers committed to racial critique is critical race theory's attention to how one 'looks to the bottom,' that is, how one develops methods and practices for looking to and speaking from the bottom. Some critical race theorists use "personal histories, parables, chronicles, dreams, stories, poetry, fiction, and revisionist histories to convey [their] message."[38] In other words, critical race theorists deploy a wide range of cross-genre and interdisciplinary critical and creative writing strategies in order to interrogate the role of race and racism in

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[36] Matsuda, "Looking to the Bottom," 63.
[37] Ibid., 63.
[38] Gutiérrez-Jones, *Critical Race Narratives*, 71.

the production of subjectivity and the production of knowledge. This is to say that critical race theory, at least the projects in which I am interested, is always already creative, always already available as a bridge between creative writing and critical scholarship about the racial. Furthermore, critical race theorists call for "a greater attention to questions of audience—for whom [are they] writing and why?"[39] The question of audience has great implications for the writer of color and other marginalized writers. For and to whom does one write, speak, perform?[40] In the mainstream history of literature and creative writing, it can be argued, rarely have people of color been the ideal audience. It is important to note here, too, that within the related but different intellectual and political formation of Black feminism, literary critic Barbara Christian asks: "For whom are we doing what we are doing when we do literary criticism?"[41] I would extend this question to creative writers: For whom are we doing what we are doing when we write creatively about the experiences of our communities?

We see, too, that some critical race theorists are not only interdisciplinary in their analytical practice, but experimental in their critical, cross-genre prose. Writers such as Derrick Bell and Patricia Williams borrow heavily from literary and creative writing strategies in order to provoke further dialogue about racism. I contend that the form and the theoretical premises of critical race theory provide creative writers tools to develop a

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[39] Matsuda et al., *Words that Wound*, 5.

[40] In 2006, during a Fiction Workshop at the Voices of Our Nation (VONA) Writing Workshops for Writers of Color, Dominican novelist Junot Diaz challenged us to think about audience. Audience is a tool, he said. Who do you write to? Also, in the preface to *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America*, Black fiction writer and essayist Kiese Laymon writes the tension of writing for audiences with different capacities for literacy. SEE Kiese Laymon, *How to Slowly Kill Yourself and Others in America* (Chicago: Agate Bolden, 2013).

[41] Christian, "The Race for Theory," 77.

provocative antiracist praxis. This praxis, primarily expressed in this dissertation as a research methodology, is what I am calling *critical race poetics*.

In conceptualizing *critical race poetics* as a research methodology, I find instructive the work of education scholars Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso, who have argued for a research methodology that is firmly grounded in critical race theory, what they call a *critical race methodology*. Solórzano and Yosso define *critical race methodology* as "a theoretically grounded approach to research that […] foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process." In other words, Solórzano and Yosso argue for making race and racism central during every stage of the research process, i.e. development of research questions, design, data collection/fieldwork, analysis, and presentation. Furthermore, Solórzano and Yosso suggest that a *critical race methodology*: challenges traditional research frameworks and practices; emphasizes the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality; and offers transformative solutions to racialized, classed, gendered, and all forms of social subordination.[42] Following the lead of Solórzano and Yosso, I expand on the work of critical race theory and extend the notion of a *critical race methodology* to creative writing and creative writing studies. To be clear, I conceptualize *critical race poetics* as a *critical race methodology*. Thus, *critical race poetics* makes race and racism central to debates about the practice, pedagogy, and research of creative writing and creative writing studies. Moreover, *critical race poetics* interrogates race, class, gender, and sexuality as they structure and are structured by language, form, narrative, pedagogy, publishing, and other aspects of creative writing and creative writing studies.

[42] Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yasso, "Critical Race Methodology: Counter-Storytelling as an Analytical Framework for Education Research," *Qualitative Inquiry* 8.1 (2002): 24.

While I recognize that such a race-conscious and critical approach to creative writing is by no means new, I find it necessary for creative writers committed to racial critique to engage the "racial realism" within which they are positioned.[43] To put this in another way, racial epistemologies, and specifically the racialized literary imagination, from a critical race theory perspective, produce and are produced by the creative writer. This, I think, puts us creative writers in a very troubling position, for we must confront our own literary imaginings of race and racism, which, as the author Toni Morrison might suggest, are inextricably linked to the white supremacist imaginary. "For both black and white American writers," Toni Morrison reminds us, "in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language, and the work the writers do to unhobble the imagination from the demands of that language is complicated, interesting, and definitive."[44] This inescapability of 'racially inflected language' extends, too, to all writers who work in the context of the U.S., within and against the dominant U.S. racial imaginary. A *critical race methodology* for creative writers, *critical race poetics* does not seek to escape the racialized, gendered, and classed paradigms and theories of creative writing and creative writing studies; rather, *critical race poetics* rigorously challenges those paradigms and theories with the intention of 'unhobbling the imagination' and making possible alternative and nuanced modes of racial critique.

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[43] Here, I am thinking of a few formative essays that have provoked my thinking on race and creative writing practice: Langston Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" and David Mura's "A Shift in Power, A Sea Change in the Arts: Asian American Constructions." Each of these essays explore the tension between racial abjection and white normative definitions of *art*. "Racial realism" is the idea that racism is permanent in American society. SEE Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism* (New York: Basic Books, 1992): 93-108.

[44] Toni Morrison, *Playing the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 12-13.

**On the Uses of Anger: Vignette**

We are on stage, in the middle of Price Center Plaza at the University of California, San Diego. It is Filipino Awareness Day.[45] It is an ordinary day in March 2003. We want to take up some space. Price Center Plaza is loud and obnoxious. Only a small crowd is paying attention. My friend Dianne is performing a poem protesting sex trafficking and the exploitation of Filipina women.[46] Dianne says, "We are not for sale." Later, we learn that a white male student had said during Dianne's poem: "How much? I'll pay." Our dear friend, Joy de la Cruz (1978-2003) has heard the white male student.[47] Joy de la Cruz is in all black—black T, black jeans, black Asics, black plastic eyeglass frames. Joy de la Cruz puts down her tote bag, jumps on the stage, and grabs the mic. Joy de la Cruz says, "To the man who thinks we are for sale. This is dedicated to you." Joy de la Cruz proceeds to recite a poem in a way that none of us have heard before. With so much fire, so much rage, so much political intention, Joy de la Cruz stares at the white male student and delivers her poem "Come on." "Don't come," the poem starts, "with come on lines." "Don't come" is playful in its indictment of the white patriarchal fetishization of Filipina and other Asian women.[48] We are captivated by the force of Joy de la Cruz's voice, the critique living in the performance of what she says and how she says it. Joy de la Cruz understands that as a

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[45] Kaibigang Pilipino, the mainstream Filipino American student organization at UC San Diego, would organize Filipino Awareness Day in March in order to educate the campus community about Filipino culture and struggle.

[46] At this point, the central organizing unit for against the exploitation of women and children was the militant feminist organization Gabriela Network, or GABNet.

[47] Joy de la Cruz (1978-2003) was a Pinay feminist poet and community activist and dear friend of mine and many. Sadly, Joy de la Cruz died in a car crash in 2003. To see more context for Joy de la Cruz's work, please see George Lipsitz's foreword in *Youthscapes: The Popular, The National, The Global*, ed. Sunaina Maira and Elisabeth Soep (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

[48] Joy de la Cruz performs her poem in the tone of "Not Your Asian Fetish" by Anida Yoeu Ali and Emily Chang of I Was Born with Two Tongues.

woman of color, her response to racism and sexism is anger.[49] We want these poetics to heal, to help us survive.

## Looking to the Bottom

If critical race theory, and by extension, a *critical race methodology* such as *critical race poetics* is committed to 'looking to the bottom,' then it must be understood that "how we read and narrativize has everything to do with how we see 'the bottom.'"[50] To put it simply, the forms and methods and practices of *critical race poetics*, the *how*, is crucial for theorizing and thinking from and through 'the bottom.' Critical race theorists emphasize the importance of storytelling or narrative as a vital form of inquiry in the classroom, courtroom, and in published scholarship. Critical race theorists use storytelling to examine the "interplay of power and interpretive authority" between professor and student, lawyer and client, writer and reader.[51] Critical race theorist Richard Delgado claims that stories from and about 'the bottom,' or what many theorists refer to as 'counter-stories,' are "insinuative, not frontal; they offer respite from the linear, coercive discourse that characterizes much legal writing."[52] It follows, then, an 'insinuative' and 'not frontal' discourse enables a more generative conversation, one that is not limited by the logics of simply argument and counter-argument, one that is not necessarily beholden to a specific 'regime of truth.' Moreover, Richard Delgado claims that "stories attack and subvert the

[49] Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 124.
[50] Gutiérrez-Jones, *Critical Race Narratives*, 82.
[51] *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 45.
[52] Richard Delgado, "Storytelling for Oppositions and Others: A Plea for Narrative," *Michigan Law Review* 87.8 (1989): 2415.

very 'institutional logic' of the system."[53] In *Critical Race Narratives: A Study of Race, Rhetoric, and Injury*, legal and cultural studies scholar Carl Gutiérrez-Jones draws attention to these "narrative interventions" staged by critical race theorists.[54] As I have referenced earlier, these 'narrative interventions,' as deployed by writers such as Patricia Williams and Derrick Bell, include a wide range of interdisciplinary literary and creative writing strategies such as autobiography, parable, fiction, and poetry. These literary and creative writing strategies enable a nuanced and subjective critique from what Gutiérrez-Jones calls a "proximate relation to racial injury," i.e. a critique from 'the bottom.'[55] In formulating *critical race poetics*, I am indebted to the work of Gutiérrez-Jones for his critical attention to not only the *what*—i.e. the substantive critique—of critical race theory, but also the *how*—i.e. the methodology—deployed by critical race theorists.

Gutiérrez-Jones's interdisciplinary study of 'critical race narratives' is invaluable for *critical race poetics* for three key reasons. First, Gutiérrez-Jones identifies in the work of critical race theorists like Derrick Bell and Patricia Williams the ongoing problematics and tensions of language. Gutiérrez-Jones reminds us that "language is a social phenomenon that requires actors to wrestle with each other at every turn, even if certain assumptions about language are rigorously naturalized."[56] The concession that language is an ongoing social struggle is significant for all creative writers. This ongoing social struggle demystifies any conception that creative writing is asocial, somehow removed and above politics, history, and struggle. For those of us creative writers committed to racial critique,

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[53] Delgado, "Storytelling for Oppositions and Others," 2429.
[54] Gutiérrez-Jones, *Critical Race Narratives*, 14.
[55] Ibid., 69.
[56] Ibid., 81.

we must be careful, as Gutiérrez-Jones might suggest, of reifying certain interpretive, representational, and structural violences of creative writing. For Gutiérrez-Jones, the stakes of critical race theory's narrative interventions are high. Gutiérrez-Jones suggests that these narrative interventions make up a "broadly conceived political intervention through the reference to, and practice of, certain kinds of storytelling."[57] Second, Gutiérrez-Jones underlines the fact that the narrative interventions of critical race theory are uniquely experimental and interdisciplinary. Gutiérrez-Jones claims that critical race narratives "[cannibalize] various disciplinary and professional languages," which, in turn, allows for a "critical reprocessing" of the ways in which racial knowledge is produced.[58] Such interdisciplinarity is instructive for creative writers, especially as we might practice *critical race poetics*, because it challenges us to broaden our bibliographies, so that we can produce a literature, as the poet Bhanu Kapil might put it, that is made and processed from non-literature.[59] This would, in turn, widen the field of critical race theory and creative writings about race, thereby potentially expanding the discursive community committed to racial critique and invested in antiracist struggle. As Gutiérrez-Jones claims: "Interdisciplinary work at its best leads practitioners out of [their] comfort zone and into speculation."[60] That is, the power of interdisciplinary work is in its imaginativeness and inventiveness. *Critical race narrative* draws its analytical power from its risk to speculate about the past, present,

[57] Gutiérrez-Jones, *Critical Race Narratives*, 73.
[58] Ibid., 15.
[59] Poet Bhanu Kapil suggested this strategy at a creative writing conference: *From Trauma Catharsis: Performing the Asian Avant-Garde*, California Institute for Integral Studies, San Francisco, CA, August 2014.
[60] Gutiérrez-Jones, *Critical Race Narratives*, 17.

and future of the racial.[61] Third, Gutiérrez-Jones widens his analytical lens in order to think about the connections between different discursive communities. Treating critical race theory's narrative inquiries and interventions as works of both legal scholarship and literature and creative writing, Gutiérrez-Jones invites comparisons, as I mentioned previously, among "[critical race studies] and artistic projects: projects that foreground struggles over literacy and its relation to effective racial remedies."[62] In suggesting a comparison between critical race studies and artistic projects, Gutiérrez-Jones asks us to imagine a solidarity amongst antiracist discourses and struggles beyond disciplinary limitations. *Critical race poetics* is an acceptance of this invitation, an invitation that suggests a radical optimism about the usefulness of reading and thinking together legal scholarship and artistic/cultural production. *Critical race poetics* prioritizes the struggle over racial literacy—i.e. how racial injury is narrativized, how racial injury is adopted, how racial injury is addressed. Gutiérrez-Jones provides a strong basis from which to conceptualize *critical race poetics*: the rigorous confrontation of normative language practices; speculation through the interdisciplinary and the experimental; and the insistence on the struggle over racial literacy.

While I feel that at this point in my conceptualization *critical race poetics* still appears to be much like what Gutiérrez-Jones is calling 'critical race narratives,' I would like to emphasize my use of the term and modality of *poetics*. I understand *poetics* to simply denote the extremely close attention to the politics and uses of language. *Poetics*, in my

[61] I'm inspired here by poet Ching-In Chen's notion of "speculative poetics," which is based on both documentary poetics and the political imaginaries of speculative fiction.
[62] Gutiérrez-Jones, *Critical Race Narratives*, 89.

view, enables a few different practices than *narrative*. Because *narrative*, at least in the critical race theory sense, has been used to describe different types of storytelling, *narrative* limits what critical race theorists can do with language. I argue that *critical race poetics* encompasses an even wider range of literary strategies, not just interdisciplinary narrative strategies, but strategies of the lyrical, of documentation and witness, of fragmentation, of extended meditation, and of speculation. *Critical race poetics* is thus not tethered to *narrative* and storytelling; rather *critical race poetics* presents what Patricia Williams calls a "rhetorical event."[63] *Critical race poetics* interrogates racism through and without narrative. In short, *critical race poetics*, pauses and critically reprocesses the racial as an historical yet at times non-narrative event. What this means is that *critical race poetics* offers *rupture* and *distillation* and *apposition*, techniques I employ later, as crucial strategies for challenging traditional racial logics and the narrative impulse to tell the story about race and racism. *Critical race poetics* enables me to look to and speak 'from the bottom' in multiple, sometimes disaggregated, instances.

## Reading Critical Race Narratives

I would like to reflect upon two critical race theory projects whose methodologies are generative for both scholars and creative writers committed to racial critique who seek to write an alternative, more broadly legible, and experimental prose. In particular, I turn back to writers who I have mentioned above: Derrick Bell and Patricia Williams. Each of these authors take up the enormous task of theorizing the centrality of racism and through

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[63] Patricia J. Williams, *Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 11.

their writing strategies throw into question the ways in which racial knowledge is produced. Each author rigorously interrogates his or her own subjectivity and insistently commit to speaking 'from the bottom.'

In *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice*, Derrick Bell examines the mythology of the Black civil rights struggle. Through a series of dialogues, or 'Chronicles,' between the fictional heroine, Geneva Crenshaw, a Black feminist legal scholar, and the narrator, a legal professor himself, Bell elucidates questions about various aspects of civil rights struggle: reparations, voting, education, affirmative action, etc.[64] Through these Chronicles, Derrick Bell ultimately suggests that such struggle has resulted in nothing but the normativizing of ongoing racial inequality. Furthermore, Derrick Bell argues that the gains of the civil rights movement have always been subject to and contingent upon the needs of white supremacy. Derrick Bell's form, his writing apparatus, his methodology, is a most relevant aspect of his book for this dissertation.

Bell develops what he calls 'Chronicles' in order to explore the contradiction and tensions inherent in any discussion of race and the law. This book contains ten metaphorical tales that take the form of extensive and impassioned dialogues between Geneva Crenshaw and the narrator. "The Chronicles," writes Bell, "employ stories that are not true to explore situations that are real enough, but, in their many and contradictory dimensions, defy understanding."[65] Bell insists on presenting a complex dialogue that 'defies understanding,' that provokes dialogue and discussion in new and hopefully generative ways. This type of

[64] Derrick Bell, *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 6.
[65] Ibid., 7.

rhetorical position is instructive for critical scholars of race who simply hope to break open new ground for conversation. For me, Bell's insistence on new conversation lends itself to the endeavor breaking away from an old politics of truth. The impulse to make solid, immovable claims is replaced with the political objective of moving the conversation into new places. Bell takes up this rhetorical position and uses "tools of not only reason but of unreason, of fantasy."[66] Here is where Bell's methodology, one that is rigorously critical, grounded in historical and legal scholarship, but also informed by the forms of folktales, science fiction, and fantasy, proves useful for writers and researchers committed to racial critique. It is the speculative and the imaginative that I think are worth exploring further when tracing relationalities of racism and racist state violence. The situations, as Bell suggests, are real enough so that we can have a critical and informed dialogue about solutions to dismantling racism.

Also deploying imaginative writing techniques, Patricia Williams pushes autobiography and legal criticism to their limits in *Alchemy of Race and Rights*. Much of Williams's project is about the search for a vocabulary to examine racism in the law. In a response to her sister, Williams writes: "I am trying to challenge the usual limits of commercial discourse by using an intentionally double-voiced and relational, rather than a traditionally legal black-letter, vocabulary."[67] A 'double-voiced and relational' vocabulary gives Williams the space to explore her own subjectivity as she thinks through topics such as the politics of property law, the inherent racisms of the law school classroom, and racialized crime. "I would like to write," Williams says, "in a way that reveals the

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[66] Bell, *And We Are Not Saved*, 5.
[67] Williams, *Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 6.

intersubjectivity of legal constructions, that forces the reader both to participate in the construction of meaning and to be conscious of that practice."[68] In deploying interdisciplinary analysis and literary strategies such as autobiography and poetry, Williams exposes the subjective qualities of lawmaking; that is, Williams consistently through her own position within the text refutes the notion of the law or any legal construction or narrative as objective. Williams re-conceptualizes the 'objective truth' of the law into a "rhetorical event."[69] By turning race and the law into 'rhetorical events,' Williams makes way for what Carl Gutierrez-Jones calls the 'struggle over literacy.' This is the very struggle, a struggle over discourse, a struggle over racial literacy that I am committed to as I think through *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez.* Focusing our attention to the limitations of the legal rhetoric of racism, Patricia Williams in many ways invites other legal scholars to experiment with their own critical legal practices.

These two critical race narrative projects, Derrick Bell's *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice* and Patricia Williams's *Alchemy of Race and Rights*, are ambitious in their critique of legal racisms but also in their implicit, and at times explicit in Patricia Williams's case, critique of the ways in which knowledge about the racial is produced. Each of these projects, when positioned within a genealogy of creative writing, problematize the rhetorical and narrative strategies that govern the story or logics of race and racism. Reading Bell's and Williams's work as creative writing *is* my intervention into creative writing studies. Still, I find critical race narratives, nominally and practically, to find its limit in its commitment to narrative. The lyrical and associative, which are typically

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[68] Williams, *Alchemy of Race and Rights*, 7-8.
[69] Ibid., 11.

discussed in the domain of poetics, are also crucial strategies for thinking through the complexities and intensities of racism.

## On the Racial Anxieties of Creative Writing: Vignette

In 2004, I sit in a writing workshop, in a converted apartment, above an auto repair shop, on Valencia Street, in the Mission District, in San Francisco. It smells faintly of fresh paint and burning motor oil. I am a first year MFA student in the Writing and Consciousness program at the New College of California, an experimental activist college that also houses programs in Experimental Inquiry, Women's Spirituality, and Activism. At this point, I am prone to writing cross-genre work without having a clear sense of my transgressions. Now, my cohort is arguing over my extensive use of footnotes. I include footnotes in my work because I cannot expect any non-Filipinos to be familiar with all of my historical references. I include footnotes as a favor.

"Perhaps," says one white student, "you can change the footnotes into endnotes and then put them in the back of the book on a perforated page so that the reader can tear out the notes if needed. Right now, they're distracting."

I am frustrated.

This white student really does believe my history to be ephemeral, discardable, worthy of momentary engagement, but ultimately not a solid piece of the writing.

My Dominicana homegirl from New Jersey, on the other hand, says: "I enjoyed the footnotes. I found them helpful. It's fascinating how your history of colonialism intersects with my own."

Here I am left with a dilemma: To and for whom do I write? Who is my reader?

I will spend the next two years attempting to gain the favor of white readers just so I do not have to hear certain criticisms. I will spend the next two years seeing how the production of literature is discursively violent—students of color end up dropping out, fed up with the mishandlings of race by both white professors and white students.[70]

**On Audience: Vignette**

Throughout my MFA years, I learned a few things about the white (and avowedly colorblind) readers and writers I would call colleagues and friends. White (and avowedly colorblind) readers did not like to read dialogue written in dialect. Basically, I stopped deleting letters and misspelling words so that white (and other non-Filipino) readers could better understand the narrations and desires of my Filipino characters. One of my white professors (they were mostly white) asked me if I could instead contextualize my Tagalog so that any non-Tagalog speaking reader could understand the language in context. White readers also hated my use footnotes—they thought I was lazy, but I also thought they were lazy! During the summer of 2005, I studied Tagalog in the Philippines.[71] I wanted to make sure I knew Tagalog well enough to strategically use it in my fiction. Upon returning to New College to finish the MFA, I began to better and more effectively and fluidly and fluently contextualize my Tagalog. During one workshop in which my cohort was discussing a story about my dying grandmother, my colleague, James, a middle-aged white man who would consistently receive backlash from the white feminists about his portrayal

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[70] For an incisive account of racism in MFA programs see Junot Diaz' article "MFA vs. POC" in *The New Yorker* (April 30, 2014).

[71] I studied Tagalog and Pilipino culture through the Tagalog On-Site Program, a program in which we studied Tagalog and Philippine political history through cultural immersion.

of women, said to me with all sincerity and celebration: "You really nailed the Tagalog in this one. It is perfect."

## Poetics as Research

In this dissertation project, I would like to "reposition poetry as a social practice."[72] The methodology of 'poetics' in *critical race poetics* holds together and in tension various perspectives on poetry. Drawing broadly from the work of qualitative social science researchers who use poetry writing at various stages of the research process and specifically from creative writers who argue for a political practice of poetics, I emphasize the critical possibilities in poetry that are not readily available through *narrative* practice.[73] Ultimately, I find most generative the various research and writing strategies available through poetics.

In *Poetry as Method: Reporting Research through Verse*, communication scholar Sandra Faulkner suggests that the social practice of poetry writing offers an alternative research methodology that challenges theories and paradigms of scientific writing. Sandra Faulkner suggests that poetry is "autobiographical and scholarly."[74] That is, inherent in the practice of poetry is the tension between a researcher's subject position and her, his, or their scholarly claims. Here, I find instructive two different claims regarding the positionality of

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[72] Philip Metres and Mark Nowak, "Poetry as Social Practice in the First Person Plural: A Dialogue on Documentary Poetics, *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 12 (2010): 16.

[73] In terms of theorizing poetry as political, I am thinking specifically of Filipino American poet Serafin Syquia's 1976 essay "Poetry and Politics," *Liwanag* (San Francisco: Liwanag Publishing, 1975), 178, and Black lesbian mother woman warrior poet Audre Lorde's 1980 speech/essay "Poetry is Not a Luxury," *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 36-39.

[74] Sandra Faulkner, *Poetry as Method: Reporting Research through Verse* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2009), 26.

the researcher. First, as mentioned earlier, critical race theory emphasizes speaking or writing from a 'proximate relation to racial injury.' In other words, *subjectivity* matters. Second, I find useful, too, the ways in which performance studies scholars have conceptualized the *'I'* of the researcher, in particular with respect to autoethnography. Performance studies scholar Tami Spry conceptualizes the researcher's positionality as the *performative-I*. "The *performative-I*," writes Tami Spry, "is a negotiation of representation with others in always emergent, contingent, and power-laden contexts."[75] The position of the poet as composer or performer of texts shapes the ways in which data is gathered and critically re-processed. In terms of *critical race poetics*, this 'negotiation' of contexts is important as it suggests the terms through which one attends to 'the bottom.' Faulkner points out the commonalities shared between the approach of poets and social scientists. "Both," writes Faulkner, "ground their work in meticulous observation of the empirical world, are often self-reflexive about their work and experience, and possess the capacity to foreground how subjective understanding foregrounds their work."[76] Faulkner uses the term 'research poetry' to encapsulate the various uses of poetry in the research process. For Sandra Faulkner, poet-researchers use poetry as a method for reading and inquiry, i.e. a reading practice, and as a method of representation, i.e. writing practice. Poet-researchers use techniques such as collage, cut-up, mash-up, and extraction of primary materials. Faulkner writes:

> Poets' reasons for engaging in archival, historical, and interview research as the basis for their poetry range from desiring to use and create a voice beyond the individual, wanting to explore intersections between the

[75] Tami Spry, *Body, Paper, Stage: Writing and Performing Autoethnography* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 54.
[76] Faulkner, *Poetry as Method*, 34.

> personal and the historical, wanting to take the role of 'poet as archivist' or activist, to the use of poetry as resistance and to write what is missing or 'unlanguaged' in dominant discourse.[77]

Faulkner contends, and I agree, that a close attention to craft is important when thinking about poetry as research. So, it is not only enough for the writer to 'cannibalize' different kinds of primary sources. Sandra Faulkner argues that "poetic truth cannot be *only* an extraction of exact words or phrases from interview transcripts or our personal experience, but rather it requires a more focused attention to craft issues. A failure to engage in artistic concentration by not considering craft seems to me a rejection of poetry as a method."[78] Thus, carefully considered issues of the line, of imagery, of metaphor, of tone, of caesura and enjambment, of meter, and of other poetic devices and strategies is central to a poetic and critical methodology such as *critical race poetics*. This is how the 'unlanguaged' becomes language, as performance, as experiment, as argument, as testimony, as question. *Critical race poetics*, as I use it in this dissertation to reimagine a specific historical conjuncture, is grounded in the historiographic impulses of poetics.

**Documentary, History: Poetics**

*Critical race poetics* is my attempt to anchor 'poetics as research' to a very specific political-intellectual movement, critical race theory. I am provoked and inspired by the poet Ed Sanders's 1976 manifesto, *Investigative Poetry*, and the contemporary discussions

[77] Faulkner, *Poetry as Method*, 36.
[78] Ibid., 75.

about the literary movement, 'documentary poetics.' Each of these views of poetry's responsibility and possibilities make clearer Faulkner's own argument for 'poetic truth.'

In *Investigative Poetry*, the poet Ed Sanders calls upon poets "to begin a voyage into the description of *historical reality*."[79] In other words, Sanders calls upon poets to take on the role of historian. Sanders describes the methods of the poet-historian. For Sanders, the poet-historian is to encounter primary materials and create what Sanders calls 'verse grids.'[80] The 'verse grids' provide the raw material for collage and cut-up poetry. In the simplest of ways, I take Ed Sanders call to heart: I am writing a critical history/historiography of *U.S v. Narciso and Perez* through a poem cycle. While I am inspired by the energy in Sanders's call, I am quite skeptical of its optimism. Sanders argues that *investigative poetry* is:

> freed from capitalism, churchism, and other totalitarianisms; free from racisms, free from allegiance to napalm-dropping military police states—a poetry adequate to discharge from its verse-grids the undefiled high energy purely-distilled verse-frags, using *every* bardic skill and meter and method of the last 5 or 6 generations, in order to describe *every* aspect (no more secret governments!) of the historical present, while aiding the future, even placing bard-babble once again into a role as shaper of the future.[81]

Essentially, Sanders claims *investigative poetry* to exist outside of the oppressive structures of capitalism and racism. I imagine *critical race poetics* to be a humbler enterprise, for it recognizes its own limitations as it critically re-processes a language produced by and still within the context of U.S. racial and colonial structures of language. I turn to contemporary discussions of *documentary poetics* for a less utopian vision for poetics.

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[79] Ed Sanders, *Investigative Poetry* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1976), 7.
[80] Ibid., 34.
[81] Ibid., 11.

*Documentary poetics* is avowedly political and thus provides a clearer inroad for me to think about a poetic research methodology that has specific political commitments. Documentary poetics is a "creative, interdisciplinary methodology."[82] In an insightful dialogue on poetry as a social practice, poets Philip Metres and Mark Nowak describe the political impulses, imperatives, and limitations of *documentary poetics*. "Documentary poetry," claims Philip Metres, "is fundamentally concerned with cultivating historicity, nor is it averse to the pedagogical or didactic."[83] Documentary poetics is unafraid of the political, does not put itself above political struggle, and responds to Ed Sanders's earlier call for investigative poetry. Later in the dialogue, Nowak describes his work as 'labor history with line breaks'; he argues that "the documentary poems" is a "subgenre not only of poetry but also of labor history."[84] This characterization, I think, rearticulates poetry not simply as artistic or literary, rather, poetry, in this estimation, is critical, intellectual, and historical. I would integrate, and I think Gutiérrez-Jones might do so as well, projects in *documentary poetics*, and *critical race poetics* by extension, into bibliographies of critical race and labor studies. To put it simply, the poem cycle in the next chapter is not solely a work of critically informed creative writing, rather, I imagine Chapter 5 to be considered a critical intervention into Filipino and Filipino American historiography and the historiography of U.S. race and racism.

Moreover, *documentary poetics*, a research-based poetics, opens up the archive, as it "selects and manipulates documents and artifacts, just as any 'creative' nonfiction must

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[82] Poet Donovan Kuhio Colleps in "Two Pacific Decolonial Docu-Poets Walk into a Tiki Bar," in *Tracking/Teaching: On Documentary Poetics* (Essay Press, 2015), 5.
[83] Philip Metres and Mark Nowak, "Poetry as Social Practice in the First Person Plural: A Dialogue on Documentary Poetics," in *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 12/13 (2010): 10.
[84] Ibid., 11.

involve poiesis, fashioning. The primary materials are de-accessioned: they become collage, mash-up, braided stories or imagined voices."[85] For the Chamorro ethnic studies scholar and poet Craig Santos Perez, *documentary poetics* "encouraged [him] to conceive of and activate documents in different ways, as well as to explore a plentitude of archives (real and symbolic, written and oral) in order to weave political, historical, religious, and cultural contexts into [his] poetry."[86] In other words, *documentary poetics* enabled Perez the opportunity to critically reprocess documents and talk story as a method of decolonization. "Decolonial documentary poetry," claims Perez, "is a refusal to remain silent, a refusal to be erased from the archive."[87] Such a definition of poetics, one that is specifically invested in the handling and making and remaking of the archive of colonialism and racism mirrors much of what anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot says about the archive. The archive, for Trouillot, is manipulatable, always already contingent and political. "In history," writes Trouillot, "power begins at the source."[88]

What some practitioners identify as the limitations of *documentary poetics*—its inability to provide a utopian writing and research practice—is intriguing. "So the strengths of documentary poetry," argues Philip Metres, "its attention to preserving a history, its instructionality, its architectures—also risk the violence of silencing, naming, excluding that documentary poetry attempts to redress."[89] The risk of collage and selective fragmenting, the critical reprocessing, perhaps, is the most critical, and contingent, aspect

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[85] *Tracking/Teaching: On Documentary Poetics*, vii.
[86] Ibid., 6.
[87] Ibid., 9.
[88] Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (New York: Beacon Press, 1995), 29.
[89] Metres and Nowak, "Poetry as Social Practice," 13.

of *critical race poetics*. Again, this mode of writing and research is much more interested in its provocations and hypotheses, rather than any clear, succinct argument. We find this to be the case in the work of writers interested in the narrative interventions of critical race theory. Poetics, its ability to distill and fragment texts and narratives, provides us an opportunity to examine the racial in ways that elide clear, linear narrative, in ways that ask us to think of the objecthood, the momentariness, the lyrical implications of racism, racist state violence.

**My Inner Critic: Vignette**

In 2006, you are in a Fiction Writing workshop with Junot Diaz. You are at the VONA (Voices of Our Nation) Writing Workshop, the first writing workshop in the U.S. dedicated solely to writers of color. The first question Junot Diaz asks you is this: Who is your inner critic? You identify your critic as a reader who dismisses sentimentality and melodrama, a reader who dismisses stories for being too heavy-handed and political, a reader who is against the enterprise of healing. Then, Junot Diaz asks you: Who is your audience? To whom do you write?

**Seeds of Critical Race Poetics**

It is not my intention to locate exhaustively *critical race poetics*, to trace exhaustively a genealogy of texts that commit to a critique of theories of the racial and to an interrogation of racial rhetoric. Rather, it is my intention to gesture toward such an endeavor. While it would be important to look at all poetic and literary texts that hold together a critique of the content/theory and form/methodologies of studying race and

racism in order to develop new sets of questions about the racial, I think for this dissertation, I am much more interested in developing *critical race poetics* as a heuristic that suggests strategies and methods for practicing critical race theory through poetics. We can trace *critical race poetics* along very politically specific literary and artistic movements such as the Harlem Renaissance, Black Arts Movement, Third World feminisms—the movement that brought into being *This Bridge Called My Back: Writing by Radical Women of Color*, and even contemporary movements such Asian American spoken word, through which I Was Born with Two Tongues emerged.[90] Each of these movements were anchored in specific antiracist, feminist, and anti-imperialist social movements. The texts and practices produced within these literary movements are important for creative writing studies and critical race theory. On the one hand, these texts offer strategies and pedagogies for creative writing studies that center the racial and commit to antiracist projects. That is, text and practices within these movements bring the critical race theory intervention directly into creative writing studies. On the other hand, these texts make available for all antiracist scholars and writers a wide range of intellectual practices and aesthetics. Here, I am thinking specifically of work by poets such as Amiri Baraka, Jayne Cortez, Ntozake Shange, Cornelius Eady, and Nathaniel Mackey. Ultimately, these poets interrogate racism through sophisticated aesthetic calculations, calculations, I think, would help critical race theorists expand their repertoire of methodologies. For now, I will bookmark the making of such a bibliography for future projects. For this dissertation project, I will sketch out some trends in what I am thinking about in terms of *critical race poetics*.

[90] It could also be argued that I Was Born with Two Tongues incited the Asian American spoken word movement.

**Reading Contemporary Poetics**

I locate aspects of *critical race poetics* within the poetic strategies used by many contemporary poets of color. Specifically, for this chapter, I would like to reference the work of Craig Santos Perez, a native Chamorro poet who I mentioned above as a practitioner of 'decolonial documentary poetics', and Claudia Rankine, a Black feminist poet originally from Kingston, Jamaica, whose poetics resemble critical lyrical essays.

In Craig Santos Perez's work, I find useful his commitment to documentary poetics as a way of handling the archive of colonialism. In the third book in his series, *from UNINCORPORATED TERRITORY*, which is titled *[guma']*, Craig Santos Perez explores the complexities of his native home, Guam, or Guahan. In particular, Perez 'critically re-processes' the language of historical documents, talk-story, personal narrative, and official testimony in order to examine the social, psychological, and environmental impact of rampant U.S. militarism and colonialism in Guam. For instance, in *"ginen* [trans. from] fatal impact statements," Perez curates a series of public comments from an environmental impact hearing. In this poem, a native Chamorro public defends its ancestors, calls out the hypocrisy of the U.S. government and military, and humbly asks questions about how much more damage their land can sustain.[91] While Perez's strategy here seems simple, it is fiercely critical, incisive, and politically necessary. The simple though also intelligently assembled series of native voices here reinforces a sense of solidarity and urgency. I imagine this strategy, a seemingly straightforward strategy in documentary poetics, one

[91] Craig Santos Perez, *from UNINCORPORATED TERRITORY [guma']* (Richmond: Omnidawn, 2014), 25.

that curates voices 'from the bottom,' to be extremely useful in my own project, and in *critical race poetics* in general.

Additionally, Perez ruptures the syntax of personal narrative with fragments of language sourced from archival material. We can also think of this as a sort of critical apposition of fragments. For instance, in "*ginen* [trans. from] ta(la)ya", Craig Santos Perez narrates his migration history with interruptions: "My family migrated *removed* from Guam *[we] have* to California in 1995…"[92] To read this narrative without the italicized '*removed*' and '*[we] have*' would be to read a traditional migration story to the U.S., to California. However, because of Perez's desire to reframe such a migration, such a movement, such a displacement, he inserts these terms (*removed* and *we have*) from personal histories written by native Chamorro authors, terms that signify native removal and dispossession. It is in these slight interventions, these critical appositions, which are actually profoundly evocative, that I find Craig Santos Perez's archival and documentary work to be generative for *critical race poetics*. I ask: What happens in the critical apposition of 'racially inflected language' that is drawn or sampled from different sources? What questions arise? What does this help us understand about the history and salience of racism in the U.S.?

Attentive to official narratives and popular discourses about racism, though in a different way, Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* also proves generative for *critical race poetics*. The book cover of *Citizen: An American Lyric*, which is a 1993 artwork by David Hammons, suggests that this work is timely. The artwork displays a

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[92] Perez, *from UNINCORPORATED TERRITORY [guma']*, 21.

severed hood from a black hooded sweater—this clearly is an allusion George Zimmerman's murder of Trayvon Martin. Throughout the book, Rankine explores racial violence in all of its quotidian forms. Rankine narrates moments in which racial fears play a central role in how she has been misunderstood and accused—in her narration, her very presence is a threat to white people. Rankine writes: "The past is a life sentence, a blunt instrument aimed at tomorrow."[93] Claudia Rankine's narrative is quick yet meditative, direct yet capacious in its insistent questioning. In many ways, whether Rankine is critiquing media representations of Black women like Serena Williams, or honoring Trayvon Martin, or the Jena Six, her narration resembles that of the critical race theorists I mentioned earlier.[94] Through a lyrical and associative logic, Rankine explores from a specific subjectivity the insidiousness of racism in contemporary U.S. society.

All in all, both Craig Santos Perez and Claudia Rankine offer possible strategies for the narrative, associative, and documentary aspects of what I am hoping to do in *critical race poetics*. In Perez's critical handling of the colonial archive and Rankine's lyrical movements between critiques and stories of quotidian and media racisms, I find the basis for practice in *critical race poetics*.

### On the Racial Consumption of Creative Writing: Vignette

In August 2014, just weeks after Darren Wilson shot and killed Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, I participated in symposium at the California Institute of Integral Studies in San Francisco, California: *From Trauma to Catharsis: Performing the Asian*

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[93] Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), 72.
[94] Ibid., 37, 92, 98.

*Avant-Garde*. I was inspired by the questions posed by some of the writers and performers in attendance: How is the idea of the avant-garde racialized? What impact does this have on our work? Much of the conference, to some of our dismay, however, stemmed from some writers of color feeling marginalized in predominantly white experimental poetry scenes. All weekend, we heard about the various ways in which writers of color would seek out experimental poetry as a strategy to remain illegible and distant from white structures of language and poetic practice. The white writers in attendance were inspired and humbled by our grievances, our resistances. Then, in a stroke of irony, a white male poet took to the microphone at the very end of the symposium. First, the white male poet railed on the then recently passed Maya Angelou for her lush poetic optimism. Then, to some of our surprise, after having heard so many Asian American writers talk about the struggle for solidarity, the struggle for identification, the white male poet recited that he was metaphorically Black, indigenous, and queer, and thus in solidarity with everyone. I stepped out of the room. Where had we gone wrong in the symposium? Why had this white male poet been convinced that this, this claiming, this claiming and erasing, this occupying, was the best way to perform his solidarity and sympathy? The symposium became the 'scene of instruction'—another moment in which white writers learned about and consumed and produced racial violence.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to pursue *critical race poetics* through two parallel processes—on the one hand, I offered critical reflections on the fields (i.e. critical race theory, creative writing studies, and poetics) that I draw from in order to conceptualize

*critical race poetics*; and the other hand, I narrated through autobiographical vignettes my own experiences of writing and reading *race*. *Critical race poetics* is a heuristic—my attempt to give a vocabulary to what I see as a connection between critical race narratives and documentary poetics, my attempt to draft a working vocabulary for what I intend to do and write in the next chapter of this dissertation.

C*ritical race poetics* draws from and is committed the following:

1) The theoretical premises of critical race theory. I am after a methodology that is grounded to the political goals of resisting and eradicating racist state violence in manners that are both material and discursive, legal and cultural, which are not separate.

2) The interdisciplinary and experimental impulse of critical race narratives. I am committed to the premise that the positionality of the researcher and writer matters. I am also inspired by the ways in which critical race theorists critically re-process conventions and narratives in order to produce racial knowledges that demand attention, that solicit ongoing critical dialogue.

3) The political commitments of documentary poetics. In this dissertation project, I am invested in the question: How do I examine histories of racist state violence? Documentary poetics gives me an opportunity to handle the archive, to reread the archive and to critically re-process and perform the

archive in refreshing ways. This endeavor is important because it widens our repertoire for researching, producing, and making useful, hopefully, 'fugitive knowledges' about racism.

In the final chapter of this dissertation, I offer a poem cycle that demonstrates *critical race poetics* as it pursues the 'ghostly matter' of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez.*

# CHAPTER 5: IF WE DON'T KNOW HOW TO SAY: A POEM CYCLE

## Preface

In this poem cycle, I critically re-process sections from the narrative of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* that I provide in Chapter 1 and from the work I catalog and reflect on in Chapter 3. Drawing from newspapers such as the *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, oral history interviews conducted with my mother, the original text of the federal criminal indictment, *The Mysterious Deaths at Ann Arbor*, and soundbites from U.S. news media, I explore select moments in the story of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. Through cut-up, collage, critical interjections/appositions, and playful revisions, I perform *critical race poetics* in order to interrogate the archive of *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez*. Ultimately, this poem cycle initiates a longer project that I hope to pursue and develop further in the future. For now, this poem cycle and its attendant foregrounding narratives throughout this dissertation serve as a fully realized experiment in *critical race poetics*.

**Citation**

How will you proceed

to cite

more directly, more ethically,

the blood, the bone-deep, the fractures

of subject & object,

of violence & violated,

of Filipino & American, of

dead & deadened,

of detonated & diasporic living,

of life, of delay &

suspense? How?

& through what method?

**Conditions, Fatal**

Let us return & return: It is July & August of 1975

35 20 27 51 63 52

American male American

dead

veteran veteran veteran veteran patients veteran veteran veteran veteran

American male American

in the ICU

at the Ann Arbor VA Hospital

suffer breathing suffer breathing

suffer breathing failures—

suffer breathing failures

(contract & explode, deflate—this is America, so lonely—sleep)

10 of these 8 of these 11 of these 6 of these 13 of these

breathing failures → American veteran (patient)

(contract & explode, deflate—this is America, so lonely—sleep)

fatal

American veteran ← fatal

**What Really Happen**

we, says my mother, did not do those crime

okay hold okay hold na okay

let me tell you what happen, anak

what really happen

I work in Ann Arbor VA

in Michigan in ICU

okay okay

every time there's code

in the hospital

an ICU nurse

has to come to bring the cut-

down

tray of course

we gonna do that because

that's our job, di ba?

in that time in whatever floor there's a code!

how come it's all the time? something is happening, di ba?

how come they're all dying?

maybe it's anesthesia in ER maybe

it's too hot maybe no air-con

then one night

on August fifteen nineteen seventy five the date

we have three code in ICU

three!

one after

the other

one stop breathing

we don't know if it's heart or respiratory or what

it's code blue

then we're not done with this one—

& there's another

coding here!

o God! could you imagine?

that night

we got it settled

after work / we were so so tired

& then—

**On Lands Acquired**

these breathing failures occur on

federal property (o, God! could you imagine?)

on lands acquired (imagine) for the use

of the United States of America

on lands acquired (blood) for the use

of the United States of (blood, imagine, o, God!) America

on landmarks acquired (imagine, blood)

for the use of the United Statistics of America

so, takes

(fuck the) FBI

charge

**August 1975: FBI occupies VA: A Research Project**

*cost:* $1,000,000 (plus…)

*duration*: 7 seven weeks

*analysis*: medical team & medical records

*research*: interviewed patients, former employees & residents

*methodology*: questioned interrogated harassed intimidated frightened

stood over: "are you a religious person?"

current (brown black brown) hospital staff

current (brown women brown) hospital staff

**We Don't Speak the Language**

they said, says mother, they wanted

to talk to me    downstairs

who?                                the  FBI

I'm afraid        because                    that's FBI!

we're just a stranger here

we don't speak the language

how can we express our self?

how can we explain

what we want to say

if we don't know how to say?

those FBI always ask & ask:

did you administer that medicine?

I said: no

just say it was your friend, they said, the other Filipino nurse

no, I said, she didn't do anything

**FBI Claims**

suspect injected

pancronium bromide, muscle relaxant, Pavulon, into

IV tubes of patients

pancronium bromide was

a synthetic variant of curare

the lethal

plant toxin

used by (not white people) South American Indians

used by (savages)

to tip poison darts

**Ways to Describe the Murder Weapon**

*for journalist Robert K. Wilcox*

pancronium bromide

a muscle relaxant

Pavulon

lethal plant extract

the tip of (a savage's) poison arrow

a syringe, poison: woman's weapon

approx. 5'4" tall & 130 pounds

her black hair cut short around her ears

Manila, Philippines: jungle, hot, steamy

thin, stacked nice

five two, five four

black hair, down to her shoulders

the darkest possibility
a sinister blackness
a monstrous savagery:

the enigma of the little Filipino

**Richard Neely Sees Shadows**

March of 1976: federal government

relies heavily

on deposition of

a terminally ill (white) cancer patient (under hypnosis) Richard Neely

who identified

"all I can see, all I can see…is me hanging on the side of that bed hollering for nurse…it

just seems like shadows…like you have to pass someone in the dark"

Leonora Perez

at his bedside

during breathing failure

"Describe the girl," said an agent, "the Filipino girl."

**Leonora, Accused**

Nurse in Chicago accused of Mass VA Deaths Inquiry into 11 Hospital Deaths Names 2 Nurses as Key Figures Death Follows Art Describe the girl, the Filipino girl, Leonora Perez Filipino in Hospital Inquiry Describe Describe Names as 11 Filipino girl, Deaths Key Follows Death Perez of Deaths Figures Nurses the as girl, 11 accused VA into 2 Key VA Art Art girl, VA Key girl, Nurses Filipino Key Leonora the Perez girl, Leonora of Inquiry VA 2 girl, the as the Deaths VA Key Death girl, Names as Death Figures Filipino Names Key Nurse girl, into Inquiry in the VA Death Death the Figures Names Hospital Death Figures Mass Follows Filipino Perez Filipino 2 Death Follows Death Art Figures Filipino the

**Indictment, Interruptions**

That beginning on or about or something like the first day, we think, we imagine, we suppose, of July, not August, yes July, of 1975, & continuing up to & including the 15th day, that's when we got there, yes? of August 1975, in the Eastern District of Michigan, Southern Division, FILIPINA NARCISO, is that spelled, right? a/k/a "P.I.", they say that stands for Philippine Islands, & LEONORA PEREZ, a/k/a "Leonie", defendants, Filipino, monstrous savagery, enigma, darkest possibility, poison, hererin, did willfully & knowingly combine, conspire, confederate, is that a word? & agree together, yes, together, we need to get them both, together, not separate, with premeditation, deliberation, & malice aforethought, with each other, not individually, & with diverse other, enigmas, others, others, persons, & nonpersons, monsters, to the Grand Jury unknown, unseen, unproven, to commit, willfully & knowingly, the following offenses against the patients, no → offenses against the United States of America: mingle poison, murder patients, conspire willfully & knowingly against—

**June 16, 1976: A Horrible Day**

June 16, 1976, my mother says,

a horrible day—the FBI came to my work &

arrested me

I didn't do anything

the FBI was mean

they kept trying to get me        to confess

I was working morning in the VA

& then

there was something fishy

because everybody said,

"do not leave"

the head nurse of the hospital

was always going to my desk

& he said, "you can't leave 'til it's time to go home. you have to stay here."

I said, "okay, I'm not leaving."

I'm not going, you know, anywhere.

& then after that, like I have a hunch

that something is happening, something

is going on, but they're not telling me.

so, when I went home

I was out on the street with a friend

& then we were walking down

outside the VA already

& two big men was behind me

& then they were holding me

& they said, "Leonora Perez, you are under arrest for the crimes you did in Michigan."

I said, "What crime? I didn't do any crime."

& he said, "…You have to follow us, ride my car, and if not, we'll drag you."

I said, "no, I'll just follow you."

they handcuff me

they put a jacket on my handcuff

yeah, real handcuff, like this…

**1976**

They're just a couple of slant-eyed bitches. Black & white. Screen static. White sound. Mini-dish satellites. Disrupt. Fame. The Price Is Right. Michigan Wolverines lose the Rose Bowl. Patients die in Ann Arbor VA Hospital. Poison pushed into their tubes. Two Filipino nurses questioned in Ann Arbor. In Chicago, handcuffed. *Thick Tagalog tongues, un-English*. Screen static. Jimmy Carter auditions for the role of president. White sound. Starsky & Hutch. Don’t go breaking my heart. Elton John. Number One. FBI accuses Filipino nurses of murders. Prosecutor Yanko states: Today is a dark history. Criminal history. Dark brown skin & black hair. White static. News. Of possible Beatles reunion. America rejoice! Happy Days here again. Patty Hearst found guilty of bank robbery. Leonard Peltier is arrested for the shooting of two FBI agents at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. Leonora Perez & Filipina Narciso deemed killers. Witnesses admit being hypnotized by FBI. Two girls being crucified. White noise. Capital Punishment ruled constitutional. Not inherently cruel. Citizens clap. Others cry. Viking I lands on Mars. Snapshots of Leonora and Filipina. FRAMED. White noise. White noise. White noise.

**The Two Nurses**

the two nurses have been indicted as killers five counts of first degree murder poisonous substance the procedures used by the FBI were a model five counts of first degree murder they're just a couple of slant-eyed bitches the procedures used by the FBI were a model the two VA nurses Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez they're just a couple of slant-eyed the two VA nurses Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez they're just a couple of slant-eyed Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez guilty for Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez two Filipino nurses accused of murdering hospital patients guilty for Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez poisonous substance the two nurse have been indicted as killers

**Verdict**

July 13, Wednesday: Went to Det. Cadillac w/ Daddy only. Itay, Inay, Ellen and company did not feel like going so they stayed. On our way to the hotel we heard on WWJ Tom McIntyre that maybe today is the day of the verdict because when the jury went inside the courtroom they were not dressed in blue jeans like before but it could also mean they will eat lunch at the renaissance center. So we hurriedly drove and reached the hotel and we see Tom O'Brien. Had to order breakfast for us when Grace and Cora came down to say they need us right away. Tom checked with Shirley so we waited and comes Vicky running and hurry up that today is the verdict. So we hurried up to the 25th floor and dressed up. Called Ellen so the family can come. Cameras flocked around us and we reached court were the only ones they were waiting for. The courtroom was packed with reporters, supporters, etc. Before they started the lawyers went in to the chamber and they were told whatever the verdict is the girls will go home till 9am tomorrow.

The 12 jurors came in and never looked at us. So the foreman handed in the verdict and the judge asked Steven Greenlay to read and read it. Narciso is found guilty on count 1 which is conspiracy, so I told myself my god I'm also guilty. They dropped PI's [a.k.a. Filipina Narciso's] murder and one poisoning. We were convicted on 3 counts of poisoning each and 1 count of conspiracy.

Everybody was shocked, disbelief and stunned. We went in to the institute and never said a word. My parents came, I just cried when I saw my mother, Ellen & co. and most of all my 2 boys. We went home very very sad. Could not take it. Went to PI's to join for a prayer.

Had interview w/ Kirk Cheyfitz and also Ann Arbor News. Met sympathizers. Home to Detroit.

**Justice**

On the 13th day of July,

says Filipina Narciso,

justice died.

I lost

my faith,

says Leonora Perez,

in the American

system.

**from *Leonora, archive of***

1. This shirt was made by the support group of the VA nurses in support for us for the fundraising that they did in Michigan during that case. I didn't know they did this. When I saw it, I went to the flea market…and everybody was selling this for five dollars…in support for us…and the funds went into to the Narciso-Perez fund, defense fund. And they sold this there. And…I didn't know…and they said, "Oh, I have my face there." So it was for…and then they gave me one. That was…uh…after we were convicted…we were doing…maybe not…I can't remember…if it's after or before 'cause we're getting support for…from all the people. When I see it now, I couldn't believe…that, you know…one of those days I will be in this, you know, in this kind of shirt…and then being, you know, advertise in U.S., you know, United States, you know, very big country. I kept this for so long so it will be one of my souvenirs…so when, you know, I grow old and I'm already gone, my children can—I can pass it to my children and there's a story to it.

2. Okay, this photograph was taken I think June 14, 1977. Or, June 29, 19—I cannot remember the exact date but this is front of the federal court in Detroit. On the picture is my husband, Epifanio Perez, Jr., Nanay Maxima Castillo Magabo, and my dad, Anacleto Magabo. You can see what I was wearing on this. I was the one who sewed that. And also on Nanay's jacket. I learned how to sew because I was so bored I had no job. After the trial. in the morning. I go home. I have nothing to do. So I just…learn how to sew. And…every time I go to the court I have a new dress, new coat. because I sew it at night. They were worried when they're coming, Nanay and Tatay, because they cannot they…they said, How can we go there when Leonie cannot pick us up, she's in jail…she thought I was still in

jail…and he said, we can't remember Jun's face…yeah…and after that, they came over, and we pick them up in the airport, Nanay and Tatay was surprised because I was there. I was not in jail. And they were happy, you know, to see us. Tatay said, What ha—they were crying, he said, "What happened?" I said I don't know, they just got me. I said I am innocent. I didn't do anything. And Tatay said, O I should just—Why are you the one going? I should just go to jail for you. He cried when I…they arrested me. He didn't know that I got arrested. He was coming home from work. We will meet in the babysitter in Chicago because we drop Chris off in the babysitter…I take the…he…I take train going to the VA. And then Dad drives to his work and then when we go home I take the train and stop there and we meet there and then we go home to Evanston and that time I did not…he was waiting and waiting I did not come he they went home him and Chris and my friend called her…him…he said, O, don't wait for Leonie, he…she's arrested. she's now in the county jail in Chicago. Chris saw me in TV, the 5 o' clock news…he said, That's my mom with the FBI! But the night before, Chris was playing cop and he tries to handcuff me all the time…and he said, You're guilty…he was doing that! because you know how loko loko Chris is…he…he played cop and he said, I am the FBI…I'm gonna. That. I hate that (pause) Man, he said to that big FBI Russo and Gunter, yeah, he said, I hate that, he got my mom, and that was already flashing in Chicago because they got us already and they said, Two nurses indicted. Only God knows, you know, we're innocent even if the people say we're guilty, I…I did not do anything

3**.** Just testing it…okay…we gonna start now. What do you wanna know? Everything or nothing? Crochet—CrocheTED? Crocheted? CrocheTED? What is it? Crocheted blanket.

How did I have this? I was interested doing this…because I met a friend there in jail…she has been there a long time…she had seniority…she has a nice room…she…that's where I learn how to crochet this because she's too busy and I saw it and this is nice. And I said, why don't you—I—I will just do that. I'll just copy it…And keep myself busy because PI said she wanna keep herself busy by playing volleyball…she played with the inmates, I did not play…I was the scorer. Ever y time she goes play, I go with her and I was carrying this one crocheting. The federal prison is all the way where the trees are…all barb wires, it's surrounded with fences. And then, when we check in…all the inmates were looking at us…because it was on the news…that the two nurses who were convicted will be sent to Federal Prison in West Virginia. So, when we arrive, all of them are looking at us…they were in the living room, they said, Oh, you are the nurses who killed those patients. how many did you kill? that is how they ask PI, they ask me, so, we did not say anything, we just went in…I was so nervous I was so afraid I don't know what to do a lot of people then they uh we had to do the examination like to check in mug shots you know uh check everything your shoes everything you naked you go take a shower naked both of us me and PI take your picture after you shower (laughing) and it's all mug shot it's all ugly and then you face the camera they take the picture and then they showed us our room…they said, you guys can have a nice room here if you've been here a long time and we said no sir we don’t plan to stay here and we don't want any seniority in this place we wanna go out—we wanna go home tomorrow we don't wanna stay here I kept it because it's my souvenir and also it's very, you know, historical for me, this is—this is my comfort you know blanket while I was there you know it give me comfort, you know.

**Return: A Volta**

In this: a volta, a violence

through which Leonora,

my mother,

walks & walks

a monstrous savagery

in & out of the camera

frame, from there, then, a past,

a sinister blackness

to here, now, this production:

white polyester nursing uniform,

the enigma of the little Filipina

hair straight, hair black, a black

sweater draped

over her handcuffs—

let this her brown be a waiting,

let this her brown be

a warning:

that dark history

that criminal history

that darkest of possibilities

that volta, that violence.

**Some Notes on the Poems**

This poem cycle samples and reconfigures and reprocesses lines and fragments from various sources:

"Conditions, Fatal" draws its details (i.e. estimated numbers of breathing arrests and deaths during the summer of 1975) from: Joel D. Weisman, "Two Nurses Subpoenaed in VA Deaths," *Washington Post*, November 20, 1975; "Nurse in Chicago accused in mass VA deaths: Chicago nurse named in mass VA deaths," *Chicago Tribune*, March 2, 1976; "Death Follows Art," *Time Magazine* 107.12, March 22, 1976; Martin Waldron, "Trial Starts Today for Two Nurses in Michigan Hospital Deaths," *New York Times*, March 1, 1977; and Ray Moseley, "Were nurses angels of mercy…or death?: Bizarre VA nurse trial heads for jury," *Chicago Tribune*, June 26, 1977.

"What Really Happen" contains text pulled from a series of oral history interviews between the author, Jason Magabo Perez, and his mother, Leonora Perez, April 7, 2010 – May 26, 2010.

"On Lands Acquired" reconfigures the original text from the 16-count federal criminal indictment against Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez. Additionally, this poem interjects fragments of oral history interviews between the author, Jason Magabo Perez, and his mother, Leonora Perez, April 7, 2010 – May 26, 2010.

"August 1975: FBI occupies VA: A Research Project" gathers its details about the investigation from Catherine Ceniza Choy, *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

"We Don't Speak the Language" contains text pulled from a series of oral history interviews between the author, Jason Magabo Perez, and his mother, Leonora Perez, April 7, 2010 – May 26, 2010.

"FBI Claims" draws its details from two sources: Joel D. Weisman, "Two Nurses Subpoenaed in VA Deaths," *Washington Post*, November 20, 1975; and Robert K. Wilcox, *The Mysterious Deaths at Ann Arbor* (New York: Popular Library, 1977).

"Ways to Describe the Murder Weapon" samples and reprocesses text from Robert K. Wilcox, *The Mysterious Deaths at Ann Arbor* (New York: Popular Library, 1977).

"Richard Neely Sees Shadows" pulls its details from two sources: "Nurse in Chicago accused in mass VA deaths," *Chicago Tribune*, March 2, 1976; and Robert K. Wilcox, *The Mysterious Deaths at Ann Arbor* (New York: Popular Library, 1977).

"Leonora, Accused" recycles text from the following: "Nurse in Chicago accused of mass VA deaths," *Chicago Tribune*, March 2, 1976; "Inquiry into 11 Hospital Deaths Names 2 Nurses as Key Figures," *New York Times*, March 3, 1976; "Death Follows Art," *Time*

*Magazine* 107.12, March 22, 1976; Robert K. Wilcox, *The Mysterious Deaths at Ann Arbor* (New York: Popular Library, 1977).

"Indictment, Interruptions" reconfigures the original text from the 16-count federal criminal indictment against Filipina Narciso and Leonora Perez.

"June 16, 1976: A Horrible Day" contains text pulled from a series of oral history interviews between the author, Jason Magabo Perez, and his mother, Leonora Perez, April 7, 2010 – May 26, 2010.

"1976" quotes Richard Yanko as he is quoted in Thomas C. O'Brien, "The V.A. Murders," in *Litigation* 11.15 (1984-1985): 15-19, 60-61.

"The Two Nurses" samples and reprocess soundbites from the author's personal/family archive of found footage, which was first used as a part of the film *para sa akin: autohistoria* (2012) by the author, Jason Magabo Perez.

"Verdict" contains text from Leonora Perez's unpublished diaries.

"Justice" quotes from "Hundreds Protest Conviction of Nurses in Poisoning," *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 1977.

"from *Leonora, archive of*" contains the transcripts from the film series titled *Leonora, archive of* (2013), an experiment in oral history, performance, and documentary filmmaking by the author, Jason Magabo Perez.

"Return: A Volta" samples text from Robert K. Wilcox, *The Mysterious Deaths at Ann Arbor* (New York: Popular Library, 1977).

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