

**TRANSPACIFIC VIBRANCY
LISTENING ACROSS ASIAN AMERICAN AND CHICANX TEXTS**

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INTRODUCTION

Vibrant Transpacific Histories



Figure 1: "Cabrillo Monument Visit," Marietta Reyes Obille, 1964, The Pakinggan Archive.

Prologue: "Cabrillo Monument Visit"

In the photograph, it is 1964—my grandparents' second day in the United States. My grandfather, Teofilo Barron Obille, is pictured here because of the US Navy. As of June 31, 1964, he has been stationed at the Naval Air Station Miramar in San Diego, California as a Machinist's Mate, accompanied by my grandmother, Marietta Reyes Obille. The couple is just four months

married. To commemorate their arrival, family friends from their hometown, Cavite City in the Philippines, have taken them to a national park, the Cabrillo National Monument. The monument, established in 1913, is located on a high cliff on the Point Loma Peninsula with panoramic views of the ocean and San Diego. During their visit to the monument, they would have seen Coronado Island to the south, home to the Naval Amphibious Base, Air Station, and Supply Center as well as tourist attractions like the famous “Hotel del” and expensive beachfront properties. (Later in the decade, family members emigrating from the Philippines would live in military housing on the same island.) Turning inland, they’d see the Naval Training Center at the edge of the bay below—a site built in the Spanish Colonial Revival architectural style for the housing and training of recruits and A and C school sailors. (Later, from 1972 to 1980, my grandfather would be employed as Company Commander of the training center. After 1997, when the training center would be decommissioned, replaced with Liberty Station, viewers looking down from the monument could see a commercial development of bars and eateries, artists’ workshops, and boutiques.) Under clear skies, my grandparents could glimpse Tijuana along the southern coastline and the mountain range that cuts across the US-Mexico border. At the base of the cliffs, they’d see rough surf (waves rolling over rocky terrain that, over the years, would claim the lives of Mexican migrants on trawler boats from Baja California, seeking to enter the US by way of water).¹

At the top of the cliff would be the fourteen-foot-tall statue of the conquistador himself. They’d stand beneath the towering sandstone rendering, erected in 1939. (Over time, this statue—eroded by the marine air and from “visitor abuse”—would be replaced with a hardier limestone model in 1988.)² Depicted in chainmail and armor, Cabrillo stands beneath a cross,

¹ See Ulmer, “Inside a doomed migrant boat journey from Mexico to California,” 2021.

² See Crawford, “Cabrillo statue's journey to San Diego marked by legal twists,” 2008.

looking over his right shoulder with a map and compass in hand—symbolic of his 1542 expedition along the western coast of Mexico, from Navidad to Kumeyaay land, what is now San Diego.

My grandparents could have taken a photograph standing beneath this iconic statue—or at the various lookout points that might have captured the vast Pacific to the west—or the inland views of the city and the white boats dotting the bay. But the photograph they have from that day is the one of them posed in front of a fountain and a white trellis, which at the time was located just outside of the park. The friends taking their picture had admired the lattice work and the water feature and thought it a nice spot to take the couple's first photo in the United States.

If you look closely behind the couple, you can see water captured in movement, falling off the rounded edge of the upper tier of the fountain. The water descends in long or dispersed droplets, in some places, forming thin, stretching sheets before breaking apart in the fall. If you look at the space between my grandparents, you can even register the bounce of the droplets as they hit the lower bowl, water caught in suspension before falling again. My grandparents are too high up and too far from the base of the cliffs to hear the waves below, crashing against the sandstone bluffs. But as my eyes detect the white blurs of falling water, I can imagine the tapping and rushing sounds of the fountain, can register the tactile sense of wet and cold, the heat of the sun and wind on their faces. As I read the photograph, I'm swept over by waves of light and sound and water.

Listening to this photograph also means listening to the echoes of war and conquest—to geologic pasts and presents that shape the Point Loma Peninsula, histories of Spanish settler colonialism in the Pacific and around its edges, the genocide and exploitation of Indigenous peoples and lands in the Americas and islands like the Philippines, environmental devastation

caused by US militarism, and the racialization, deployment, and/or capture of bodies in service of the US nation-state. A National Park Service publication, *Shadows of the Past at Cabrillo Monument* (2001), offers a substantial history of the Peninsula. It describes the Peninsula's geological formations: a basal formation from "70 to 80 million years ago from Cretaceous Period deep ocean deposits" with rich marine fossil records; a "Cabrillo Formation" made of thick "cobbles" and "sandstone," also of "deep marine origin" but "less resistant to the sea" and "eroded into undercut seacliff caves and ledges;" and the youngest layer of coastal terraces and vegetation (Kelly and May "Chapter One"). It touches on the presence of modern Kumeyaay communities and governments and also details coastal archaeological studies that indicate the activities of ancient Kumeyaay peoples, including a study of shell middens that illuminate particular food and milling practices ("Chapter 2"). It highlights Cabrillo's landing in 1542, prompted by a series of Spanish military expeditions seven years after the conquest and founding of New Spain; commanding the galleon *San Salvador*, Cabrillo "penetrated the Pacific Coast in search of exploitable resources and routes of commercial transit to the East Indies." After Cabrillo "opened" a navigable Pacific route, his officers were able to plot Manila galleon courses to Asia. Later, in 1769, conquistadors established the first colony, including a presidio (military fortress) and mission compound, at San Diego Bay. Kumeyaay displacement, insurrection in resistance to the encomienda system, and "annihilation" followed. Over the next twenty years, Spanish authorities began to fortify the Peninsula—establishing Fort Guijarros in 1796, a cannon battery on the eastern interior for defense against "pirates, privateers, and smugglers." After the end of the galleon trade in 1815, Mexico opened international trade in 1822, and the Peninsula soon saw an influx of mariners from across the Pacific and Europe who traded in markets at the

presidio.³ With a new influx of transglobal mariners, and following the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), the newly conquered US territory—soon to be the State of California in 1850—would become a commercial hub predominately run by European whalers and Chinese fishermen (“Chapter 5”).⁴

With the Peninsula now a US possession, the area was transformed by a series of US military installations, used by both the Army and Navy, evolving over the next two-and-half centuries. From 1870 to 1873, the “coast artillery corpsmen evicted whalers” to begin building Fort Rosecrans (“Fort Rosecrans: Historical Landmark”). In 1898, the year of the Spanish-American War, the Army erected several artillery batteries near the entrance to the Bay, where the Navy prepared a fleet of ships that would protect and patrol the Pacific Coast. Thereafter, through the World Wars, the majority of Point Loma was a dedicated military reservation—outfitted with mortar batteries, sighting stations, and expanded Naval facilities—eventually evolving into the Naval Electronic Laboratory, merged into Naval Ocean Systems Center in 1977, and SPAWAR (Space and Naval Warfare Systems Command) in 1997 (“Chapter 5”).

Condensed upon these pages, this history of the Peninsula as geologic formation, port, and fortress underlies the photograph and forms the ground upon which my grandparents stand. As my grandfather poses with one leg raised on the planter wall, his forearm resting on his knee, the pose resonates as a gesture of conquest, a claim of ownership over or some right to the land

³ These crews included “Polynesians from Hawaii, Aleut seal and otter hunters from Alaska and the Bering Sea, Black African whale hunters from Portuguese islands of the Azores, New England Native American whale hunters, freed slaves from all over the world, Asian sailors from the Philippines, Maori seal hunters from the South Pacific, and a varied mix of European American immigrants” (Kelly and May “Chapter 3”).

⁴ In *Shadows of the Past*, Roger E. Kelly and Ronald V. May describe finds that represent the stratification of prehistoric through industrial archaeology. For example, site CA-SDi-12,000 on Ballast point is comprised of ruins of a “1796-1835 Spanish and Mexican artillery battery,” which form a platform for shops, boat yards, and residences made in c.1858-1886 by “European American whalers and Chinese fishermen.” On top this area, the US “Army Corps of Engineers covered the entire area with soil in 1873 to level the area for emplacement of a large artillery battery;” and in 1898, the Corps returned to construct another, improved battery (“Chapter 5”). In other sites in the area, archaeologists have found 19th century structures built over prehistoric shell middens.

he stands upon, having arrived in a new place after a long journey, as if completing an expedition. His gesture and affectual desires collide with previous conquests, previous desires.

My reading of this family photo thus draws attention to the overlapping histories of conquest, militarization, and geographic displacement that underlie the photograph as well as the affective and sensorial valences that emanate from it.⁵ More specifically, these evocations comprise a stringing-together of what Ariella Azoulay has called “the photographic event,” describing the composition of an “infinite series of encounters” between photographers, subjects, the camera—a potential happening over which no participant is sovereign (*Civil Imagination* 26). The photograph itself thereby becomes a way to “[continue] the event of photography that happened elsewhere,” “a rich document that might prove helpful in attempts to reconstruct something of the encounter for all of those who took part in it” (*Civil Imagination* 23, “What is a photograph?” 13). The photographic event, in its infinite composition, ultimately evades any prescribed certainty or attainment of a decisive recollection of the circumstances of its making. Yet we can still engage the photo as a materially produced object, evocative of a longer chain of events that brought about its taking, its posed subjects, and the stratified ground upon which they stand. I consider the “Cabrillo Monument Visit” photograph an object that thus opens up to the spatiotemporality that Wai Chee Dimock has called “deep time.” As Dimock reframes “American” literature beyond the discrete bounds and short chronology of the US nation, she considers texts as instead entangled in an “open-ended and ever multiplying” series of pathways—“input channels, kinship networks, routes of transit, and forms of attachment” that bind America to other “geographies, other languages and cultures” (*Through Other Continents* 3). These crisscrossing, “connective tissues” are indicative of deep time: “a set of longitudinal

⁵ See section entitled “Vibrancy” in this chapter for more on the sensorial/affective.

frames, at once projective and recessional, with input going both ways, and binding continents and millennia into many loops of relations, a densely interactive fabric” (*Through Other Continents* 3-4).

My reading of the “Cabrillo Monument Visit” photo—as a photographic and literary text produced in deep, planetary time—thus attends to the lengthened spatiotemporal threads that multitudinously attach to and extend from it. When I engage the photo, I approach it as a dense and shimmering object, evocative of a photographic event thickly composed of stratified colonial, transpacific histories and the desirous affects and sensorial lives of its subjects—those who move within racial and ecological networks and whose lives are still affected by ever-forming geological events. The photograph’s reverberances exceed the moment of its taking.⁶ More than simply documenting my grandparents’ arrival, the photo is a site of convergence—an object that, through my reading, illuminates what I call *transpacific vibrancy*, and thereby, also orients readers toward this project’s methodological and theoretical concerns.

Transpacific Vibrancy

Transpacific Vibrancy brings together studies of the transpacific—especially as a site of colonization, military empire, and racialized subject formation—with studies of sensorial racial ecologies—especially as inflected by new materialisms and ecocriticisms. I read contemporary literature and photographic archives to examine the ways US and Spanish empires materially and

⁶ My orientation beyond the edges of the photograph, driven by a desire to read beyond the initially perceived boundaries of an image, is resonant with Shawn Michelle Smith’s investigations in *At the Edge of Sight: Photography and the Unseen* (2013). As she attends to the racialized dynamics and conditions of cultural and technological production in early American photography, Smith underscores that “at the very heart of photography” is “both an intense desire, and a failure, to see” (2). She notes that the invention of photography “expanded the realm of the visible,” demonstrating what is ordinarily overlooked, “but also exposed its [physiological and technological] limits,” drawing viewers to “the edge of sight” (6). Thus, as I consider what is pictured and unpictured in 20th century vernacular photographs—what is distinctly proclaimed and whispered, almost imperceptibly, in all the texts I examine in this project—I, like Smith, perform readings that “[reanimate] stilled time,” looking/feeling/thinking beyond a seemingly static or contained text (19).

discursively attempt to produce docile colonial subjects and also how they fail to do so. The Vietnamese refugee, Filipinx American, and Chicana subjects I attend to are prescribed differing, racialized conditions of bodily entrapment and extractability; rendered as malleable and ultimately expendable other-than-human objects, they are deployed to support imperial projects in the Pacific and its landed edges. However, as my readings disclose, these subjects respond to attempted subjugation by imagining *vibrant* ways of feeling and thinking the world. I theorize what I term *vibrant being*, which becomes sensible to us if we attune ourselves to the physical properties of light, sound, and oceanic waves that are evoked by the works I examine. Forged in the vertigoes of geographic displacements and through contact with the unwieldy, dissolving material of the ocean, vibrant being signals a reorientation of the senses and kinesthetic body. I explore vibrant being as a mode of racialized ontology that becomes accessible to readers and viewers who attune themselves to the sensorial and affective valences of transpacific living. I show how attending to vibrant being opens up ways of sensing anew and experiencing expansive, ecological forms of relation. I theorize vibrancy not only as a way of thinking/feeling the world but also develop vibrancy as a reading methodology (parsed most directly in Chapter 2) via my own close and creative attentions to texts.

As I theorize Vietnamese refugee, Filipinx American, and Chicana vibrant being, I examine texts produced from the mid-20th to the 21st century that expose the different tendrils of empire that have breached the lives of seemingly disparate subjects across Southeast Asia and the Americas. Thus, while making an ontological and methodological argument about vibrant being, this project also offers a novel juxtaposition of texts and traditions, investigating the longue durée of US empire and its intersections with Spanish settler colonialisms—with the aim, following Dimock, of affording “a scale enlargement along the temporal axis that also enlarges

[the] spatial compass” of texts not simply confined within US national borders but that reach across transpacific space and time (*Through Other Continents* 4). This project converses with scholarship across comparative studies of race and the intimacies of empire, Asian American studies of a militarized and ecological transpacific, Latinx and Chicanx studies of embodiment and environmentalisms, and new materialism and affect studies.

In what follows, I offer a brief outline of the project’s theoretical and methodological infrastructure, noting the material and affective valences of vibrancy—although its inflections are nuanced within each chapter and parsed in more detail in Chapters 1 and 2. The rest of this chapter sketches out the project’s historiographical investments. I foreground the interwoven colonial histories and transpacific epistemes that shape my approach. This discussion highlights pivotal historical trajectories that link the development of the militarized US settler/ “national security” state (c.1848 through the Cold War) to Spanish settler colonialism (c.1542-1898) in the Pacific and the Americas, especially as related to California’s formation and transpacific porosity.

Vibrancy

Here, I offer an initial overview of my conceptualization of vibrancy—a way of being/thinking/feeling charged by colliding sensory and affectual trajectories. This project uses terms like *affect*, *feeling*, *emotion*, and *desire* largely interchangeably, following Sianne Ngai (*Ugly Feelings*, 2005).⁷ Like Ngai, I take any difference, if at all, between affect and emotion as “a modal difference of intensity or degree, rather than a formal difference of quality or kind,”

⁷ Although some schools of thought in affect studies, for example, following Brian Massumi (*Parables for the Virtual*, 2002), differentiate between affect as a kind of unnamed “intensity” and emotion as a “qualified intensity,” this project does not find these distinctions particularly helpful in describing the embodied responses represented in the texts I examine (30). I instead follow Ngai’s lead in noticing only slight degrees of intensity that might characterize any difference between affect and emotion.

and assume that “affects are *less* formed and structured than emotions, but not lacking form or structure altogether” (27). Indeed, the feelings I track are embodied responses, shaping objects and others and being shaped through contact, and thus having some sort of directionality. My sense of the affectual is thus aligned with Sara Ahmed’s phenomenological model of emotions as “directed” toward things, as “intentional,” as moving us, through contact, “toward” or “away” from objects (2). For Ahmed, affects are layered and remembered in the body: “past histories,” she writes, “surface as impressions on the skin,” and “emotions shape what bodies do in the present” (2). Vibrancy is particularly inflected by feeling as events of memory—recorded by, held within, and expressed through the body in relationship to space.⁸ Vibrant ways of being thus draw attention to the sensorial world and respond to the world through multisensory language.⁹

Centrally, vibrancy takes its name from the physical forms of waves—especially sound, light, and ocean waves. Each form denotes the multisensorial surges of vibrant being. Constituted by vibrations, sound is energy that travels through and moves the particles of media it comes into contact with.¹⁰ Light, composed of photons, is energy emitted by hot objects that also travels as a wave, radiating even through vacuous space.¹¹ The ocean itself is never still; its waves are the transmission of energy, created by the friction between wind and surface water,

⁸ While Ngai’s and Ahmed’s affectual and phenomenological studies center the “human” body (although, as I discuss later in this Introduction, the racialized subjects I examine are consistently differentiated from a predominant White, liberal Humanity), this project also turns to scholarship on multispecies ecologies that foreground interactions between a human and nonhuman world, including work by Donna Haraway (“Staying with the Trouble,” 2016), Eva Hayward (“Fingeryeyes,” 2010), and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing (*The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 2015).

⁹ At times, the modes of vibrant being I theorize tend toward synesthetic ways of understanding and responding to the world. As Ren Ellis Neyra expresses in *The Cry of the Senses* (2020), synesthesia “occurs when a sense impression manifests itself out of place,” marking an “opening of alternate pathways of sentient cognition” (1). These intersensory detours help readers explore the unspoken relations that structure subjects and environments and open opportunities for exploring the vibrant itinerance of feeling. See Chapter 2’s discussion of “transpacific disorientations” and vibrant reading for more on synesthetic reorientation and potential.

¹⁰ This understanding is aligned with Tina Campt’s body of work, especially *Listening to Images* (2017), that understands sound as frequencies felt in the body. I expand upon Campt’s work on the sonic and photographic in Chapter 2.

¹¹ Thinking with light waves is helpful as I assess the remnant light of photographs in Chapter 1 and Chapter 2.

shifting pressure, underwater disturbances like volcanic eruptions and earthquakes, the radioactive heating of the Earth's interior that causes slow, tectonic shift, the gravitational pull of the sun and the moon upon the planet. Made of grand and miniscule movements, vibrancy thus denotes wave energy in its various proprioceptive and otherwise sensory forms—as what registers as motion, heat, illumination, a hum, a touch, a shining.¹² Thus, more than simply position “the sea as a stage for human history,” I follow Elizabeth DeLoughrey's impulse to think the transoceanic not just as “a narrative of flat surfaces” but rather, as “a cultural or multispecies ecology,” considering both “the materiality of history” and the ocean “as a material in itself” (“Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene” 33).¹³ A vibrancy that courses with and emerges from the oceanic (and specifically, from the transpacific, as I detail later) thus courses with other-than-human things—with animals, objects, and other nonhuman forms.

As I discuss later in this Introduction, following Lisa Lowe, I understand the “Human” as synonymous with the exclusive and privileged site of Whiteness, belonging to the Western, liberal subject—civilized, rational, and free—who requires the subjugation and subordination of colonized peoples, the use of their labor and resources, and the death of the Other (especially Black, Native, and Asian subjects) for its self-actualization and conditions for liberty (*Intimacies of Four Continents*, 2015).¹⁴ Vibrancy thus seeks to diverge from the totalizing, rationalizing,

¹² See Denise Ferreira da Silva, “On Heat” (1984), for more on the potential of the elemental epistemologies in the face of climate change and in the current age of the Anthropocene.

¹³ Future revisions of this chapter will attend to the specificity of Black Atlantic ecologies in relation to vibrancy. More broadly, this project engages scholarship like DeLoughrey's that foregrounds colonial histories of race-making in relation to environmental and ecocritical inquiries. For example, this project converses with Macarena Gómez-Barris' scholarship on colonial extractivism, Anthropogenic violence, and “submerged perspectives” across Latin America and at Pacific edges (see especially *The Extractive Zone*, 2017, “Submerged Perspectives,” 2021, “Out of the Ruins,” 2022, and “Life Otherwise at the Sea's Edge,” 2019). Additionally, two recent essay collections explicitly focus on the intersections of empire-making as entangled with race and ethnic difference and point to an array of this project's interlocutors: *Empire and Environment: Ecological Ruin in the Transpacific* (2022), edited by Jeffrey Santa Ana, et al., and *Latinx Environmentalisms: Place, Justice, and the Decolonial* (2019), edited by Sarah D. Wald, et al..

¹⁴ Lowe's critiques of the coloniality of Western humanism (i.e., where the “Human” becomes synonymous with white liberal Man) dialogue with work that radically questions the current, dominant definitions of the Human that

and taxonomizing practices of the mythic, overdetermined Human subject, or his specifically transoceanic variation, the “unmarked masculinity” DeLoughrey calls “*aqua homo*,” who envisioned the Pacific as an “*aqua extractio*” (“Submarine Futures of the Anthropocene” 33). Further, in attending to the other-than-human via the sensorial realm, my analyses lean away from discourses of Western epistemic Reason. As I discuss in the historiography that follows this section and further demonstrate in each chapter, differently racialized people—including the Vietnamese refugee, Filipinx, and Chicanx subjects I examine—have been perceived as cognitively subordinate peoples/objects, to the point of “childlikeness” or a debased sense of “animality.” Departing from or rescripting such discourses of violent differentiation, vibrancy senses out ways being/thinking/feeling that inhabit multisensorial, ecologically attuned worlds.

In my chapters, I theorize vibrant being in ways specific to the racializing conditions different subjects face as well as the particular, historically informed oceanic imaginaries they produce. Thus, one shared impulse across the variations of vibrant attentiveness I examine is an orientation towards histories, both personal (vernacular, familial) and transglobal. As my reading of the “Cabrillo Monument Visit” photo suggests, vibrancy attends to what is not always immediately evident, and instead, senses more deeply, listens more closely, to narratives that underlie a text, to knowledge stored deep within a body, to what seeps beyond the edges of a photograph.

Overlapping Empires

As I analyze both Asian diasporic and Chicanx texts, this project works adjacently to comparative studies of Asian American and Latinx subject formation and cultural forms. Such

create classes of abject humanity, such as Sylvia Wynter’s body of work (e.g., “1492: A New World View,” 1994, which describes the overrepresentation of Man and its violent assertions against Black and Indigenous peoples in the Americas post-1492).

scholarship has assessed the ways these minority subjects are marked as “other” in US racial and national discourses, illuminating how US imperialism and racism obscure variations of “nonwhiteness that has come to be variously figured as ‘foreign’ and identified with the alien wilderness beyond the borders of ‘American’ nationhood” (De Genova 3). Work emphasizing literary aesthetics, transnational orientations, and tropes surrounding foreignness (e.g., Long Le-Khac 2020, Jayson Gonzales Sae-Saue 2016, Crystal Parikh 2009); ethnographic analyses of cross-cultural and interethnic affinities and social-historical landscapes of exchange (e.g., Anthony Ocampo 2016, Rudy Guevarra Jr. 2012 and 2023); and evaluations of the linguistic capital and economized racial assimilation of bilingual speakers (e.g., Jeehyun Lim 2017) have produced analyses of the legal, social, and cultural relations that historically conjoin Asian American and Latinx subjects. Such analyses tend to emphasize the shared political and economic struggles of immigrant populations as well as the legacies of exclusion and imperialism that continue to structure minoritized living.

This dissertation finds critiques of “otherness” as a binding force between Asian American and Chicanx subjects useful to the extent that such investigations unearth the operative US settler and military-imperialist logics derived from European liberal humanism—and played out in the Americas and Pacific by a Spanish colonial predecessor—that racially differentiate and subjugate non-white peoples as other-than-human things. As previously mentioned, my project finds affinities with Lisa Lowe’s *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (2015), in which she observes that little attention has been paid to relation across difference, to interconnected but differently situated histories, and to US racial formations in connection with the larger history of the Americas.¹⁵ Such connections and circuits between “differentially laboring peoples”—i.e.,

¹⁵ Lowe’s work calls attention to the fact that “U.S. history is more often separated from studies of the larger Americas. Work on comparative U.S. racial formation is still at odds with American history, which disconnects the

Black, Native, and Alien subjects, as un-human Others—have been “eclipsed by the operations that universalize the Anglo-American liberal individual” (*Intimacies* 21). Crucially, Lowe illustrates the distinct ways that liberalism “rationalizes settler appropriation and removal differently than it justifies either the subjection of human beings as enslaved property, or the extraction of labor from indentured emigrants, however much these processes share a colonial past and an ongoing present” (10-11). Lowe examines the linked but distinctive genealogies of liberalism that inform justifications of “ongoing settler projects of seizure, removal, and elimination” beside the perceived “liberal political and economic rights to property and commerce” that inform slave ownership and the “liberal utilitarian and humanitarian arguments” for imperial intercession in Asia and the Pacific (10, 11, 15).¹⁶ I thus situate my examinations within complex histories of the multifaceted and developing liberalisms that inform transoceanic and intercontinental colonial and imperial rule.

Further, as I track the residues of multiple colonizations across Asian American and Chicana texts, spotlighting different subjects caught in the circuits of empires that sweep the Pacific and traverse its edges, my approach aligns with Lowe’s own reading practices. Also resonant with Dimock’s work on “deep time,” Lowe’s approach and mine disrupt comprehensive, teleological historical and geographical chronologies, emphasizing “the relationality and differentiation of peoples, cultures, and societies, as well as the convergence and divergence of ideas, concepts, and themes” across seemingly distinct archives (6). While Lowe attends to “the convergence of asymmetries” between colonial repositories in order to

study of slavery from immigration studies of Asians and Latinos; the histories of gender, sexuality, and women [are] often separated from the study of race” (*Intimacies* 37).

¹⁶ Lisa Lowe’s study in *Intimacies* is in discussion with Indigenous studies scholars including “Glen Coulthard, Jodi A. Byrd, J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, [and] Shona N. Jackson,” whose work affirms that the “ongoing settler projects of seizure, removal, and elimination are neither analogous to the history and afterlife of racial slavery, nor akin to the racialized exploitation of immigrant laborers, the discussion of settler colonialism cannot be simply folded into discussions of race without reckoning with its difference” (*Intimacies* 10).

track the making of race, empire, and modern European liberalism, I employ a similar approach in a transpacific context, reading contemporary novels, poems, and vernacular photographs through which US and Spanish colonial violences undulate (11). Like Lowe, I aim for my readings to unsettle texts as “discretely bounded objects,” as dictated by national histories “invested in isolated origins and independent progressive development” (6).

In what follows, I highlight three historical arcs of Spanish and US empire in the Pacific and hemispheric Americas as well as the racializing, liberal ideologies that inform different acts of conquest and military takeover. While not attempting to convey a comprehensive history, I constellate these events as crucial touchpoints for understanding the particular Asian American and Chicanx texts this project examines. First, I orient an examination of the Spanish colonial era around the galleon trade (1565-1815). In dialogue with work in Hispanophone and Anglophone literary studies as well as ethnographic studies of this period, I frame the transpacific trade as a site of intercolonial connection and the racializing transit of Spanish humanist thought. The trade is especially relevant to the text I examine in Chapters 2 and 3 of this project, Rick Barot’s poetry collection *The Galleons* (2020). Second, I attend to the genealogies of US nationalism and settler colonialisms that rationalized the conquest of the Pacific, as well as the Caribbean, during the Spanish-American War of 1898. This period of transition of colonial holdings from Spanish to US rule not only informs the Chicanx literatures I examine in Chapter 4, but also identifies the Philippines and Filipinx American texts as key sites of inquiry in this project—constituting its historical and rhetorical connective tissue. Lastly, I highlight the subsequent era of the militarized transpacific under US empire from the start of the 20th century through the humanitarian “refugee crisis” of the 1970s. Transpacific studies scholarship uncovers the liberal tactics deployed to mask US colonial and military takeovers with narratives of democratic

liberation and rescue in the Pacific. Thus, I identify these three events as illuminating the maneuvers of Spanish and US liberal humanist thought that produce what Lowe has called “the colonial division of humanity” (Azoulay et al. 164).

Transpacific Vibrancy points to the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade of the mid-16th through the early 19th century as a pivotal event connecting Asia and the Pacific and the American hemisphere through Spanish colonial exchange. Scholar of Hispanophone and Anglophone Philippine literature and cultural productions, Paula Park has argued in *Intercolonial Intimacies: Relinking Latin/o America to the Philippines, 1898-1964* (2022) that the “linguistic legacy of Spanish colonialism” primarily links Filipinxs not to ““mother Spain”” but to Latin America (6). In her readings of 20th century writers from the Philippines and Latin/o America, including Mexico, Park traces a “sense of affection born out of the residue of a common past”—linked to remnant affects surrounding the transpacific trade (7). For example, Park reads diplomatic exchanges written in 1921 from Mexican to Filipinx representatives that express a certain nostalgia for the “halcyon days” of galleon-era economic prosperity through the “rhetoric of familial reciprocity” of sibling nations (17, 18). While Park scrutinizes Mexico’s “expansionist and colonial objectives” as “concurrent with the United States’ imperial ventures throughout the nineteenth century,” she also reads this desire for relinking the former colonies as speaking to the Philippines’ and Mexico’s shared “intercolonial past” (18, 19). *Transpacific Vibrancies* likewise contends with instances of former colonial subjects reinscribing and perpetuating extractive colonial logics—such as those that fueled the galleon trade. At the same time, the project gives ear to affects that diverge from or deflect Eurocentric models of transpacific and interpersonal relationships—such as the more complicated sensibilities surrounding Philippines-Mexico intercoloniality, augmented by notes of warmth, camaraderie,

and siblinghood forged in the wake of colonial subjugation. Park's positioning of "the origin of the intimacies between Latin America and the Philippines...specifically at the beginning of the aforementioned Manila galleon trade" helpfully modulates historiographies of the lingering affects of affiliation and vestiges of contact between Mexican/Californian and Asian American/Pacific racial formations (Park 10).

In Chapter 3, I explore the sustained affects and racialized ontologies of Filipinx American subject/objecthood that stem from the galleon trade's ongoing legacy—investigating the Spanish humanist manipulation of Filipinx bodies into commercial, other-than-human objects. Scholars like Rudy P. Guevarra have described how the galleons enterprise "brought about an exchange of luxury goods, agricultural produce, precious metals, and, most of all, people" (*Becoming Mexipino* 9). Not only were Filipinx "*indios*" or "*chinos*" (racialized as Native or Asian subjects of the Spanish crown) "seen as a dispensable commodity" for the construction of the galleon ships from teak and other hardwood trees harvested from the Philippine islands, but they were also brought on board the galleons "as seamen, servants, and slaves," who were considered part of the galleon cargo ("Filipinos in Nueva España" 391). Extractive Spanish colonial logics thus informed the reaping of resources from Philippine lands as well as a range of abuses of Filipinxs who were "'treated like dogs'" ("Filipinos in Nueva España" 392). I further discuss this racialized differentiation between white, property-owning Humanity and Filipinx commercial objecthood in Chapter 3.

This project also turns to ethnic studies examinations of the ways US nationalism's evolving settler-colonial, frontier-expanding aspirations have informed overlapping transits of empire in the Pacific—culminating in the Spanish-American War in 1898. This war marks the transition of sites across the Caribbean and Pacific, including the Philippines, from Spanish to

US colonial control. In the Introduction to *Racial Transformations: Latinos and Asians Remaking the United States* (2006), Nicholas De Genova lays out the long processes of racialization of subjects that don't fit within the "tyrannically drawn binary" of Black and white hegemonic US racial categories (1). De Genova points to a history of the US nation-state's settler project, beginning with the 17th and 18th century "genocidal dispossession" of Native Americans and the "real annihilation of indigenous humanity"—a project driven by Manifest Destiny rhetoric, purporting the "rightful and preordained inheritance of the U.S. 'nation'"—as well as the subjection of Blackness as the "absolute antithesis" of whiteness within the "ongoing constitution of an 'American' national society," congealing in the institution of chattel slavery (1-2).¹⁷ As an iteration of "a European settler-state's imperial gesture of usurpation," the exclusive US national identity required a foreign other—first represented by Native Americans, who were "intrinsically relegated to a space beyond the frontier and essentially inimical to white 'civilization' and capitalist 'modernity'" (5, 3). In the 19th century, the US military reoriented its expansionist aspirations to Mexico, instigating a war of conquest in 1846. In a pivotal moment in 1848—crucial to the Chicana studies scholarship that informs Chapter 4—the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo resulted in US colonization of more than half of Mexican territory. De Genova describes how during and after the war, Mexicans and the newly conquered population in the new Western United states were racialized as "'savage,' 'barbarous,' or, at best, little more than 'half-civilized' Indians and degraded racial 'mongrels'" (5).

¹⁷ De Genova helpfully constellates formations of Blackness and Nativeness in relation to the perceived "alienness" of Asian and Latinx subjects. He notes, "Throughout the nineteenth century...that presumed [US national] inside, which was systematically elaborated along this defining white-Black axis of racialized dominance and subjugation, was always already coupled with an equally defining and highly articulated awareness of its own inexorable expansiveness and the ever-advancing frontier beyond which it always confronted an outside. That outside, of course, was preeminently identified with Indian 'savages' and, thus, taken to be racially 'alien,' culturally inferior, intrinsically hostile, menacing, and ripe for conquest. Rather than the despicable bottom of white 'American' society, however, Native Americans were despised as its inimical and incorrigible outsiders who could never be incorporated into white 'civilization' and so were condemned to extinction" (De Genova 3).

Later, after 1891, following a proclamation of the closing of the “‘frontier line’ between areas of white settlement and Native American wilderness,” the US expanded into Asia, the Pacific, and Latin America (6). US military interventions in South and Central America and the Pacific, including Hawaii and Samoa, swiftly followed. The Spanish-American War of 1898, which culminated “in the invasion and occupation of Cuba, the colonization of Puerto Rico and Guam, and the brutal subjugation of the national liberation movement in the Philippines and these islands’ subsequent colonization—all bolstered the triumphalism of the United States as an ascendant global power” (6). The newly subjugated peoples of the Pacific and Caribbean islands were regarded as “savage and senile peoples” to “master” and governmentally administrate (6). While, as scholars like Lisa Lowe point out, specific philosophies of liberalism differently inflect the US ideologies that resulted in the genocidal dispossession of Native American peoples and the conquest that fueled US wars in Asia and the Pacific, De Genova’s attentions to Western expansionist aspirations point to an evolving white, settler-colonial nationalism that drives the racializing logics that rationalize US conquest and military intervention.¹⁸

More specifically, Rick Baldoz’ *The Third Asiatic Invasion: Empire and Migration in Filipino America, 1898-1946* (2011) points to the liberal progressivist ideals that propelled US expansion in the Pacific and Caribbean and also racially differentiated the peoples in the nation’s new colonial holdings. Following the acquisition of former Spanish colonies post-1898, debates arose around extending citizenship to the subjects in the new colonial holdings. Anxieties cropped up around the democratic inclusion of the Filipinx “newcomers of suspect racial stock;”

¹⁸ In future revisions of this project, I will attend more closely to my work’s intersections with settler-colonial theory, including work by Iyko Day (*Alien Capital*, 2016) and Juliana Hu Pegues (*Space-Time Colonialism*, 2021).

at the same time, racialized, Progressive Era ideologies driving extraterritorial expansion argued otherwise:

Anglo-Saxons had demonstrated a singular capacity for civilizational development, a talent that might be imparted to pre-modern peoples inhabiting the dark corners of the globe. According to the imperialists, the United States was duty bound to *rescue the Filipinos from their debased condition*, a project that would require holding the islands in subjection for an indefinite period of colonial apprenticeship. (Baldoz 11, emphasis added)

The US victories over Spain seemed evidence of a superior, Anglo-Saxon capacity to democratize and civilize foreign cultures, “rescuing” Filipinxs from their natural “debasement.” By these logics, Filipinxs were determined as “unfit for citizenship,” requiring the drawing up of a “new national policy that allowed the United States to attach its sovereignty to overseas territories without necessarily incorporating the undesirable inhabitants of those possessions into the American polity (at least not as full members)” (11). Filipinxs instead became “fractional members of the American polity, with certain narrowly defined rights and protections” (13).

US liberal progressivism also fashioned the US policy of “benevolent assimilation” in the Philippines. In his discussion of Filipinx mestizaje discourse as a “*racial ideology of ability*” marking a preference for able-bodied and able-mindedness aligned with the colonial project,” Sony Coráñez-Bolton discusses how benevolent assimilation taught new US subjects “the modern franchise of democratic self-government” (7, 25). This paternalistic policy presumed that Filipinxs—though docile, childlike, and teachable—were unable to self-govern. Such “annulment[s] of sovereignty” were not just “metaphorically staged” but also “deeply entwined with evaluations of the literal cognitive capacity of the colonized” (Coráñez-Bolton 25). I discuss this racializing perception of Filipinxs as having a limited capacity for rational thought further in Chapter 2—especially as it shapes the lives of seemingly deployable, militarized, transpacific Filipinxs. An examination of the post-1898 period of imperial transition in the Philippines thus

brings to light the sinister ways US liberal progressivism masked US colonial order—couching the racializing terms of a civilizing mission of democratic uplift in terms of “benevolence” and “aid.” In reality, this US policy largely reiterated the Spanish colonial humanist logics of racial differentiation that informed the galleons period—bolstering the white liberal elite while subjugating “debased” *indios* and rehabilitating *mestizos*.¹⁹

The Philippines thus becomes a site through which the significance of the 1898 transition between colonial regimes becomes legible—marking the dislodging of the Spanish empire and the US entrée into the Pacific and rise to global power. *Transpacific Vibrancy* thinks critically about the ways the Philippines has been employed as land for traversal and conquest and ports for commerce—as the site of the extraction of bodies and natural resources, shipped thereafter across the Pacific in the perpetuation of colonial commercial or military-imperial ventures. This project thus does not seek to reproduce the harm of figuring the Philippines, Filipinx texts, or Filipinx being as simply sites of transit or implementable, wieldy materiality. While the Filipinx American texts that I examine do constitute the project’s connective tissue—literally comprising the focus of the intermediary chapters and also bridging Asian-Pacific and American hemispheric narratives of conquest—I attend to these texts as such in order to expose the compounding effects of multiple colonialisms that stretch across the ocean, extend into its hidden depths, and infiltrate the lives of not just Filipinxs but differently racialized subjects—namely, the Chicana and Vietnamese refugee subjects this project attends to—in disparate corners of empire.

¹⁹ Coráñez-Bolton discusses the marker of distinction between “colonized *indio*” and Filipino *mestizaje*. Coráñez-Bolton describes: “Filipino *mestizaje* is a racial, political, and aesthetic discourse that blends Spanish humanist and US progressivist thought in order to identify adequate beneficiaries of colonial rehabilitation and capacitation. The Filipino ‘mestizo mind’ also becomes the actualizer of colonial rehabilitative mandates for an Indian from which it has evolved. I suggest that Philippine *mestizaje* colludes with US benevolent reform by interiorizing settler colonial logics surrounding and producing the Indian” (7).

Transpacific Vibrancies thus works in synchrony with transpacific studies. As Christine Mok and Aimee Bahng detail in their essay “Transpacific Overtures” (2017), scholarship in the field of transpacific studies, prompted in part by the post-national turn in Asian American Studies, has imagined the transpacific as an “antiphonal space” of competing imperial transits (4). Citing work by Viet Thanh Nguyen and Janet Hoskins (*Transpacific Studies*, 2014), Mok and Bahng underscore a transpacific studies that illuminates the material, cultural, and ideological exchanges ““across the troubled ocean”” (2017). More specifically, describing transpacific studies’ work that intersects with postcolonial, Asian American, and area studies, Jini Kim Watson articulates how a transpacific lens

might allow the histories of struggle and migration that characterized life under Spanish, Japanese, Dutch, British, and French colonial rule to inflect understandings of Cold War decolonization and the rise of the American Pacific Empire. At the same time, it may consider the ongoing formation of racial hierarchies within the United States *and* postcolonial Pacific nations, alongside the interlinked cultural and material politics of flexible citizenries, gleaming urban hubs of Asian capital, subaltern labor migration, and the taxonomy of refugees. All the while, the interrogation of disciplinary spaces and formations maintains attention on the relationship between power and knowledge production, reminding us that that the transpacific is always a space of both complicity and critique. (122)

Thus, following the 1898 rupture of US predominance in the Pacific, I turn now to a third thread that shapes this project’s historiographical concerns: the rise of the US as a military-settler-imperial power in the Pacific throughout the 20th century—specifically focusing on the War in Vietnam and subsequent refugee crisis.

The essay “Transpacific Entanglements” (2018) by Yên Lê Espiritu, Lisa Lowe, and Lisa Yoneyama is foundational to *Transpacific Vibrancy*’s understanding of the ways US empire and militarism have—through an arsenal of racializing, sexualized, settler-colonial, capitalist, and neoliberal logics—asserted itself across Asia and the Pacific in the name of fortifying the US national security state. As the authors assert:

Empire works simultaneously, yet differentially, to naturalize U.S. presence and possession in Asia and the Pacific Islands *through the imperatives of national security and wartime necessity*, to racialize the peoples it captures, occupies, kills, and governs, and to disavow the historical and ongoing dispossessions of Indigenous peoples. (Espiritu et al. 176, emphasis added)

These authors thus describe a variation of the ideological weapons devised against Native Americans—revising and revitalizing American nationalist settler logics. Having replaced older colonial orders, such as the Spanish regime, US empire operated through disavowals of its own colonial and military takeovers “through the liberal tenets of freedom, consensus, private property, and self-determination” (Espiritu et al. 181). Under the guise of democratic, modernizing, and progressive liberation, the United States stepped into a white liberatory role, figuring Asiatic and Pacific lands, waters, and air space as in need of defense against varying “evils” and marking its peoples as racial others in need of US aid, especially humanitarian acts of “rescue.” A “global portrait” of the US thus emerged “as [the] triumphant and humanitarian liberator” of Asia and the Pacific, as the nation fortified its military defenses against US “‘enemies,’ variously named in twentieth-century history as ‘fascists’ during the Second World War, ‘underdevelopment’ in the U.S.-modeled modernization projects of postcolonial third world countries, [and] ‘communists’ in the Cold War” (Espiritu et al. 176).

In Chapter 1, I discuss how the Vietnam War and refugee crisis deployed “the discursive force of liberal humanism and humanitarianism” in shaping the narrative of the war, arguing that military intervention was necessary for democratic liberation (Espiritu et al. 181). In this process, Vietnamese refugees, as Espiritu has elsewhere argued, have been figured as helpless, incapacitated objects in need of rescue.²⁰ This chapter also touches on the use of bases in the Philippines (along with Guam, Wake Island, and Hawaii) as well as US bases like Camp

²⁰ See *Body Counts: the Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees*, 2014.

Pendleton as receiving and processing centers for Vietnamese refugees after the Fall of Saigon in 1975—constellating transpacific sites that became part of the US “rescue mission.” Today, this same transpacific regime continues to dictate and justify military presence in “Philippines, Guam, Hawaii, Okinawa, Korea, and Vietnam” (Espiritu et al. 176).

Transpacific Vibrancies attends to texts that illuminate racialized subjecthoods formed in relation to these trajectories—whose stories are charged by these varying undercurrents of empire, whose lives are still rocked by its tremors. In the chapters that follow, I articulate the specific modalities of vibrant being particular to the racialized conditions of subjects’ transpacific and oceanic formation. In sequence, the chapters bear the reader backward through the historiography outlined above, although I highlight moments when the trajectories inevitably intersect. I begin by addressing texts that contend with the War in Vietnam and subsequent refugee crisis, followed by texts that confront the militarization of Filipinx under US rule, the transmogrification of Filipinx during the galleons trade, and finally, the extraction of Chicanxs in relation not just to shifting border geographies but to “prehistoric” geological and pelagic depths.

In **Chapter 1, “Vibrant Being and Vietnamese Refugee Ecologies,”** I read lê thi diem thúy’s canonical text *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003); I attend to how the novel enunciates vibrant being as a mode of Vietnamese refugee being that pursues animateness and seeks proximity to seemingly inert objects. I argue that lê’s narrator expresses a desire for liveliness that pushes against popularized images of “boat people” taken during the Indochina refugee crisis of the late 1970s. Such militarized photographs entrap subjects in inanimate and animal-like captivity—as incapacitated, serially circulated victims. Rejecting photographic forms that miniaturize and freeze her, lê’s narrator evokes a vibrant refugee being enmeshed in vibrant

ecologies—one that communes with the parahuman and with memory objects in refusal of the security promised by the Western welfare state. Crucially, this chapter helps theorize the material, affective, and sensorial valences of *vibrancy*. Following the example of lê’s narrator, who exhibits multisensorial ways of listening to, feeling for, and drawing close to things that appear deceased, distant, or gone, I theorize a vibrant mode of sensing the world in the aftermath of loss and destruction.

Chapter 2, “Vibrant Reading: a Transpacific Poetics of Filipinx American Vernacular Archives,” analyzes the infiltration of US empire into Filipinx family photographs. I read images from *The Pakinggan Archive*, an online archive of photos that my sister and I gathered from family members and other Filipinx American families in California.²¹ Tracing the overt or spectral presence of the US Navy in the photographs, I theorize what I term *transpacific tractability*—a condition that renders Filipinxs as wieldy, deployable agents of empire for furthering US military projects in the Pacific. At the same time, I attend to the photographs as sites where empire and affective desires collide, developing *vibrant reading* as a synesthetic listening method for approaching the photos as sensorial reliefs. I focus particularly on a photo series from 1965 that implicates Filipinx and Vietnamese lives during the War in Vietnam. Thinking through these subjects’ collisions in the militarized transpacific and their reverberant desires for vibrancy, I draw out the connections between Indigenous dispossession, the United States’ strategic use and valorization of US military bases during the war, and refugee rescue operations across the Pacific.

In this chapter, I catalyze my analyses of the photographs with readings of two poems in Rick Barot’s collection, *The Galleons* (2020), which postulates Filipinx contemporary living as

²¹ An article version of this chapter appears in *MELUS* (see Lafferty, “Vibrant Reading,” 2024).

ever undulated by the tides of US and Spanish empire. While this chapter attends to poems that offer language for the sonic and proprioceptive impulses of *vibrant reading*—prompting readers to listen and creatively respond to the sensorial and affective evocations of texts—I attend more fully to Barot’s “Galleons” poems in Chapter 3.

In **Chapter 3, “Vibrant Filipinx Being in Spacetime and Relation,”** I trace the residues of Spanish colonialism during the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade (1565-1815) in Filipinx American life. Barot’s *The Galleons* speaks to the entanglement of Filipinx living with long histories of transoceanic commercial exchange, wherein Filipinx—brought on board the galleons as slaves, indentured servants, or sailors—are wrought into transportable, other-than-human objects. I show how Barot’s poems thus elucidate an earlier iteration of transpacific tractability, formed under the racializing logics of Spanish humanism and through the extractive practices of the galleon trade. Specifically, I argue that the poem “The Galleons 2” produces in the reader a sense of archival longing—directing readers toward a deeper investigation of galleons histories in response to archival omissions and muted colonial violences. Following this sensibility, readers, I contend, can engage the other nine “Galleons”-titled poems in the collection, stirred by an archival hunger and a desire to search for Filipinx life amidst a history of Pacific wreckage and loss. The Galleons poems express *vibrant Filipinx being* as a form of ongoingness—a being that cannot simply be eradicated or contained, but rather, crosses oceans, traverses continents, and bridges and compresses time—making space and finding language for mourning.

Chapter 4, **“Emergent Oceanic Ecologies and Vibrant Chicanx Becoming,”** turns to vibrancy at the edges of the Pacific, examining Chicanx ways of being at California shorelines and in relation to oceanic depths. Since, for good reason, Chicanx studies has focused on the

US/Mexico borderlands as a primary lens for thinking about cultural expressions and politics, the oceanic valences of Chicanx subject formation may not be readily apparent. However, through analyses of two canonical texts, Helena María Viramontes' novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995) and Lorna Dee Cervantes' poetry collection *Emplumada* (1981), I reveal the submerged oceanic discourses that have given shape to Chicanx lives. Although these works center on ecological ontologies tied to land, they also offer oceanic imaginaries. My reading of the tar pits imagery in Viramontes' novel shows how extractive systems of colonial capitalist production figure migrant Chicanx bodies as inseparable from geologic and deep oceanic processes—reducing bodies to remnant organic matter, shell and bone, to be recycled for use as natural resources. Facing this condition, the characters Alejo and Estrella glimpse other, vibrant ways of being, temporarily inhabiting a quiet space of reprieve, characterized by multisensorial, ecological encounters. While the oceanic has more metaphorical resonances in Viramontes' novel, the oceanic holds ontological significance in Cervantes' poems. Cervantes' speaker seeks language for processing the racialized and gendered violences she undergoes and for expressing a bifurcated sense of identity—namely, living between English and Spanish and between a Chumash and a Mexican heritage. In this process and through encounters with marine life along the California shoreline, the speaker experiments with an ecotonal poetics, finding language that reflects the unwieldy materiality of the sea—refracting the political on multiple levels and finding expression through interactive, multisensory contact with the shifting meeting site of ocean and sand. Together, the texts theorize *vibrant Chicanx becoming*, a being ever in process that courses in relation to oceanic materiality and lifeworlds.

In the **Coda** to this work, I draw together some of the resounding oceanic images that accumulate throughout the dissertation. Lastly, I close by making a return. I reflect upon my visit

to the Cabrillo National Monument, considering the affects that coat my experience there and the sonic-haptic tapestry of the tide pools—a weaving together of violent waves, bird cries, the tapping of steps on water-sculpted stone, and a hushed ongoingness that lies deep.

CHAPTER 1

Vibrant Being and Vietnamese Refugee Ecologies

In the epigraph to *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003), lê thi diem thúy has inscribed: “In Vietnamese, the word for *water* and the word for *a nation, a country*, and *a homeland* are one and the same: *nu’ó’c*.” In the English reading, *nu’ó’c* is suddenly exploded, polymorphic in translation, communicating the links and traversability between the four associated terms: water, nation, country, homeland. English fragments the once unified term, rendering *nu’ó’c* mutable, unstable, or in process of being remade as a result of linguistic crossing.²² In a postwar context, following the War in Vietnam (or the American War), *nu’ó’c* takes on more complicated significations for Vietnamese refugee subjects. As Vinh Nguyen describes, “For the Vietnamese diaspora, water at once signals a cultural identity and separation from that identity, a home(land) as well as the violent rift from, and loss of, that home” (“Nuóc/Water” 66). Thus, to consider the modes of Vietnamese refugee being expressed in lê’s novel, we must be attuned to a transoceanic sense of communion and loss that shapes the lives of people displaced by way of water and war.

Attuned to *nu’ó’c* as a transpacific figuration, I want to home in on the violent processes and representations—formulated and preserved by US imperialism—that position Vietnamese refugees as ever in flight, ever in anticipation of or in compliance with the terms of Western salvation and resettlement.²³ In this chapter, I gesture towards *nu’ó’c* as both a formative site for

²² Translation enacts one of the central effects of diasporic movement. Diaspora involves migration or dispersal, orientations away from old homelands and towards new ones, settling, to various extents, into the new land, and the threat of loss and fragmentation; especially precarious are notions of home and nation, which once might have been whole and stable concepts (Faist 12-13).

²³ I use “resettlement” to name part of the process of aggregating and then attempting to incorporate Vietnamese refugees into the fabric of the US settler colonial state. The term also acknowledges the triangulation of Native, alien, and settler positions that scholars—including Jodi Byrd, (2011), Patrick Wolfe, (2013), Candace Fujikane, (2008), and Iyko Day, (2016)—have employed in order to move beyond the binary settler colonial framework of “settler” vs. “Indigenous” persons. In considering “resettlement” in this chapter, I grapple with the difficulty of

Vietnamese refugee being—an aqueous terrain for the militarized and racialized apprehension of these subjects—and the fluctuant substance that informs the felt course of what I call *vibrant being*. I argue that *The Gangster* theorizes vibrant being as a mode of Vietnamese refugee being characterized by two critical desires. First, vibrant being is characterized by a critical desire to pursue life or animateness (i.e., *anima*, as breath, soul, or vital force); as I explain later, I consider animateness as linked to movement and vital force, as opposed to a perceived incapacity.²⁴ More specifically, I attend to this desire as a response to popularized images and renderings that seek to snuff out the vibrancy of Vietnamese refugee being, photographically entrapping subjects in inanimate and animal-like captivity. Bursting forth from rigid, imperial apprehensions of refugee subjecthood, vibrant being rejects photographic forms that seek to miniaturize and freeze it. Second, vibrant being desires proximity to what has been lost, resulting in efforts toward recovery and recollection, made in “wild,” unbridled motion. Rescripting the animal for creative and memorial purposes, refugee being pronounces and leans into vibrant ecologies—communing with the parahuman, with memory objects, and other transfigured beings—in divergence from the security promised by the Western welfare state and from the progressive spacetime of US imperial projects. Ultimately, lê’s novel presents a vibrant being that speaks in its own sensory language, relying on felt understanding that affords the recognition of those lost and the ongoingness of their living. This sensory language runs through vibrant being like a pulse, its critical animateness—a signal that sounds out in wavelike patterns, like the

clarifying the role that “nonwhite migration” plays within a triangular framework and “how it intersects with other aspects of white supremacy” (Day 19). Informing these questions in reference to the position of Vietnamese refugees entering the US, we may consider “the stark absence of choice for many of those who had ‘evacuated’” Vietnam (Lipman 5).

²⁴ While Mel Chen’s sense of *animacies* (2012) has some intersections with my use of “inanimateness” and “animateness,” including a focus on physical and affective motions and their coursings through nonhuman beings and matter, my examinations do not draw upon linguistics nor engage a biopolitical argument as Chen does; so our understandings of the “animate” largely diverge.

rise and fall of breath, the rushing and receding of the tides. It is the language of butterfly wings and shining of writhing bodies, coursing through and calling to vibrant beings, who run toward and away from ruinous landscapes and sites of memory, who know others by their soundings, ceasing and unceasing.

Nu'ó'c and Vibrancy

I align my readings with discourses across ecocritical and racialized studies of the transpacific, noting especially how they intersect with critical refugee studies. As Macarena Gómez-Barris underscores, the transpacific denotes “a geography that is both land and sea, in perpetual ruin and repair,” connecting “the Pacific, the world’s largest ocean, to Indigenous territories...the Americas to Asia, Australia, and the Pacific Islands” (“Out of the Ruins” xiii). Focalizing geographic connection as well as residual and perpetuated environmental devastation, the transpacific opens up ways of assessing transoceanic displacements entangled with imperial destruction. Jeffrey Santa Ana, Heidi Amin-Hong, Rina Garcia Chua, and Zhou Xiaojing highlight that the “imbrication of imperialism and global environmental crisis” is “frequently absent in discussions of anthropogenic climate change, extinction, and other evident manifestations of human-caused environmental crises” (1). For example, the War in Vietnam evidences just one of many “overlapping histories of ecocide—spaces where imperial violence ripples or echoes across the natural environment,” conveying “material and psychic effects” into the present (Amin-Hong 130). Most notably, from 1955 to 1973, US forces spilled 72 million liters of Agent Orange across Vietnamese land—deploying large-scale environmental destruction as a primary offensive strategy (Amin-Hong 144). Such acts of US militarism entrapped human and nonhuman life forms into consequential histories of relation—damaging bodies in

immediacy and over unspectacular time, poisoning land, water, and air.²⁵ Thinking with the transpacific affords the examination of the interconnectedness of these things—wide geographies, decaying and ruinous environments, fraught spaces of imperial violence and flight.

Within this framework, I understand *nu'ó'c* as a transpacific geographical space and analytic focalized through Vietnamese refugee subjectivity—a space of imperial calamity and dispersal, as ruinous, torn, and fluid, and as a site of creative potential. Gómez-Barris emphasizes that one can think with a transpacific episteme “not just as geographical space, bounded by the outlines of a colonial map, but also as a powerful way to counter-narrate a history of decimation. A route to potential futures. Against histories of the normative nation-state. A way to...remake” (“Out of the Ruins” xvi). Rather than ascribe to *nu'ó'c* the power to render imperial violence obsolete—to fully recover from or erase the effects of such violence—I conceptualize *nu'ó'c* as a multiphonic, and perhaps discordant, transpacific form. Simultaneously demarcating violence and feeding creative, ecological, and affective aspirations, *nu'ó'c* proposes what could be.

This conceptualization of *nu'ó'c* is aligned with discourses across critical refugee studies—wherein “the refugee” is not simply formulated as “an object of rescue” by a benevolent Western nation-state but as a “site of social and political critiques of militarized empires” (*Body Counts* 174).²⁶ As they theorize a *feminist refugee epistemology* (FRE), Yên Lê Espiritu and Lan Duong underline “refugees’ rich and complicated lives, the ways in which they enact their hopes, beliefs, and politics, even when their lives are militarized” (588).²⁷ Thinking with FRE, *nu'ó'c*

²⁵ I discuss what Rob Nixon (*Slow Violence*, 2011) calls unspectacular time in more depth in Chapter 2.

²⁶ I expand upon the implications of the “object” status of refugee subjects apprehended by a Western gaze in Part 1 of this chapter.

²⁷ I should note that “refugee” identity has often overdetermined Vietnamese subjecthoods in the US, overlooking those who immigrated for reasons separate from the War in Vietnam or the Indochinese refugee crisis; dominant narratives often do not fully account for the breadth and differences in experience of folks of Vietnamese descent. In developing her term, “militarized refuge(es),” Espiritu acknowledges that, largely, Western spectatorship does not consider Vietnam outside of “that war;” but she also argues for a critical engagement of the war as an “important

becomes a site of remaking—where refugee subjecthood, as materially and discursively produced, can be unsettled and considered anew. Nu’ó’c is also aligned with what Vinh Nguyen calls the *refugee space* of the sea: “a space that both facilitates and bears traces of various human movements—one of them being that of asylum seekers” (70). Thinking through the “oceanographic” as an alternative frame for assessing terrestrial nationalism and reconsidering human history, Nguyen cites Hester Blum’s study of the sea as a “proprioceptive point of inquiry” that can “make possible other ways of understanding affiliation, citizenship, mobility, rights, and sovereignty” (71, 70). As nu’ó’c reorients, repositions, and moves bodies, and as it accrues multiple, fractal meanings, Vietnamese refugee subjects can sense out other ways of reimagining life among the terms and ruins of forcible displacement.

It is from the fluctuant, polyphonous ground of nu’ó’c that I theorize *vibrant being* as emergent. As described in the Introduction, I conceptualize vibrancy via the form and matter of light, sound, and oceanic waves. Particularly relevant to this chapter is the expression of vibrant being as pursuing the quality of vital force, which may manifest as the engagement and crossing of sensory motion—as the emission or reception of waves, as registering the presence of other beings in an environment through felt vibrations in the earth. Vibrancy is thus resonant with what Jane Bennet calls the “Force of Things,” pointing to a nonhuman vitality, where materiality enlivens through its active shaping of human and nonhuman events (1). Such parahuman attentions are critical to attending to Vietnamese refugee stories and the transpacific space of nu’ó’c. As Emily Cheng has argued, a “focus on the narratives illuminated through the material world adds to the telling of marginalized stories of the Vietnam War and its aftermath” (116). Vibrant being attends to agentic objects, seeking vibrancy—considering what moves, even at a

historical and discursive site of Vietnamese subject formation and of the shaping and articulation of US nationhood” (*Body Counts* 26-27).

particulate level, what constitutes a dynamic, interconnected environment of things. Aligned with FRE's creative, everyday strategies of refuge-making and living otherwise, vibrant being is driven by hydrophonic impulses—an orientation toward the undulant courses of life in transpacific ruin and “benevolent” Western apprehension, an attunement to the reverberant sounds of imperial destruction and the potential pulses of livingness that emanate from the refugee space of nu'ó'c. From here, through the eyes of lê's narrator, I sound out vibrant, Vietnamese refugee being.

I. Flight from Photographic Captivity – the Inanimate and Animal

Vinh Nguyen writes that “many Vietnamese in diaspora refer to April 30, 1975 as the day of *mât nu'ó'c*: to lose one's country, to be without the life source of water” (67). That day marked the end of three decades of warfare, as Northern Vietnamese troops took over Saigon, deposing the South Vietnamese regime supported by the United States for the past decade. As Saigon fell, the United States airlifted a first wave of around 130,000 Vietnamese people from the city to military bases across the Pacific—including the Philippines, Guam, Wake Island, and Hawaii—and then to bases across the United States, including Camp Pendleton in Southern California. Following this first wave of refugees, the second wave of “boat people” fled Vietnam from 1978 to 1979. These refugees, facing continued war, fled targeted persecution, political and economic oppression, incarceration in “reeducation camps,” and poverty. In often overcrowded, unseaworthy vessels, these refugees were smuggled across the South China Sea, arriving in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, and other Southeast Asian countries and awaited resettlement and processing by countries in Europe and North America. Western media widely sensationalized these events, dubbed “rescue missions,” and reinforced the United States' status as a welcoming, recipient nation—or as a place of “good refuge” (Espiritu et. al. 178).

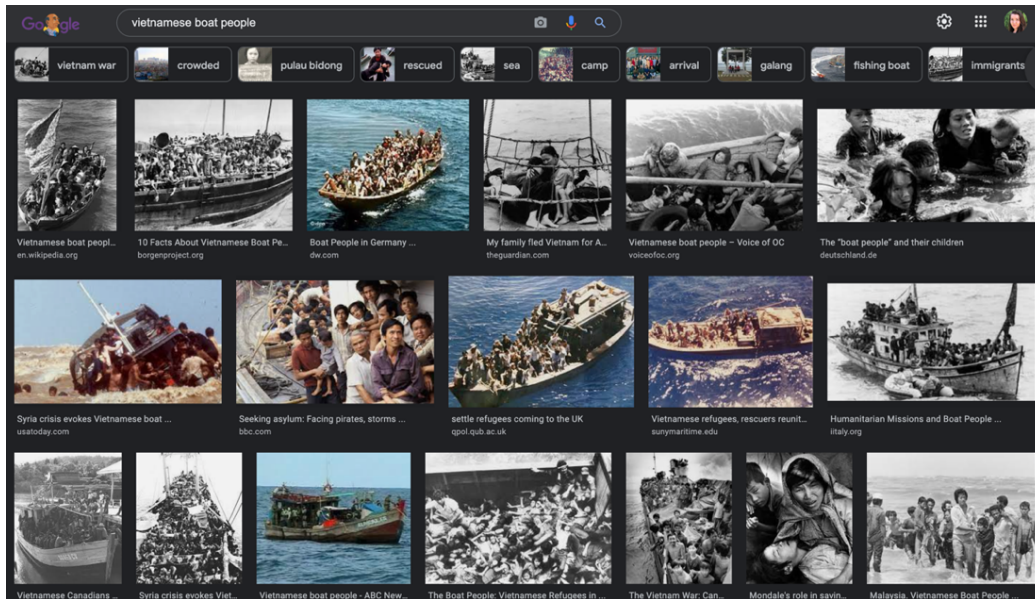


Figure 2: Google Search, Olivia Lafferty, 2021.



Figure 3: "35 Vietnamese Refugees Wait to Be Taken Aboard the Amphibious Command Ship USS BLUE RIDGE (LCC-19). They Are Being Rescued from a 35 Foot Fishing Boat 350 Miles Northeast of Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam, after Spending Eight Days at Sea," PH1 Phil Eggman, 15 May 1984, US National Archives.

An archive of commonly circulated representations of Vietnamese boat people hovers before lê's novel; these over-documentations take shape beside many sensationalized images

surrounding the war.²⁸ These public texts—primarily sourced from and accessible via the US National Archives—pin down refugee bodies as legibly in need of rescue. A quick internet search (Figure 2) yields popular depictions of the Indochina refugee crisis of the late 1970s to early 2000s; they are captured, largely, from an angle above the photographed subjects. For example, the first image (Figure 3) from the Department of Defense archives was taken from the vantage point of the amphibious command ship the USS *Blue Ridge* (LCC-19), 350 miles northeast of Cam Ranh Bay, in the midst of the South China Sea.²⁹ We register the makeshift sail, fashioned out of what looks like a patterned bedsheet or curtain; we see the woman in the stern, her arm raised as if to hail the sailors on deck, the man beside her, pointing to those approaching. There are faces agape, shielding the sun with nón lá hats or miscellaneous clothing articles. Infants and children cling to adults, some meeting the camera's gaze. This photograph is one of many iterations. Looking at the tapestry created by the image search, we are overwhelmed with pictures of people packed in groups, nearly spilling over the sides of the boats. Displaying the cramped conditions of their voyage, the images invite animal metaphors to convey the circumstances they record: people cooped up like birds or crammed together like fish. The camera distances us from the people below, amassed and made miniature, pictured as one and undifferentiable, recognizably human and yet postured as other than so. Even in closer portraits—where grief, panic, exhaustion, and desperation are legible in the faces of women and

²⁸ Combat photography and spectacularized scenes of violence saturate Western media's memory of the war, e.g., Malcolm Browne's photograph of Thich Quang Duc's self-immolation in protest of Buddhist persecution by the South Vietnamese government, "*Burning Monk*," 1963; Eddie Adam's image of the public execution of Nguyen Van Lem in Saigon, 1968; and Nick Ut's photograph of Phan Thi Kim Phúc, the "napalm girl," 1972. The majority of the works I consulted in this chapter (namely by Viet Thanh Nguyen, YẾN Lê Espiritu, and Thy Phu) acknowledge these iconic, disturbing images of suffering that focus on war atrocities and injured victims. Viet Thanh Nguyen reads over-circulated images of Vietnamese suffering as affirming the "power of an industry of memory," drawing on the terminology of *screen memories* or "glowing afterimages" (*Nothing Ever Dies* 104-105).

²⁹ These images were accessed via the Department of Defense, National Archives: <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/6382583>.

children—the images anonymize the refugees, collected under the banner, “the boat people.” These photographs dictate Vietnamese refugee personhood as always in mass and in peril, inseparable from narratives of victimhood and rescue by a Western welfare state.

In this section, I attend to scenes in *The Gangster* where the narrator encounters Vietnamese refugee subjectivities rendered captive and animal-like within militarized, photographic apprehensions of boat people in transpacific space. Reacting to a sense of her own captivity, the narrator ultimately performs vibrant acts of refusal, feeling out multisensory affiliation with and rejecting the inanimateness presented by animal-objects contained within the household of her sponsor family, the Russells, in San Diego, California. While living in the Russell household, the narrator gives an account of a photograph matching those proliferated throughout the public domain—but it’s one in which she, Ba (her father), and the four “uncles” she’s living with are the subjects of the image, pictured in the boat they escaped on.³⁰ The narrator describes the strange experience of looking at herself from above, from the perspective of those on the rescue ship. She observes:

The picture was taken by someone standing on the deck of the ship that had picked us up. I don’t know who took the picture or how one of the uncles came to have it. In the picture, our boat looks like a toy boat floating in a big bowl of water. There are little people standing in the boat. We are among the people in the picture but I can’t tell who is who because we are all so small. Small faces, small heads, small arms reaching out to touch small hands. (29)

Uncertainties shroud the photograph: the identity of the photographer, how it came into the family’s possession, and where the narrator herself or her family members are located in the photo. Due to the distance between the camera and its subjects, the narrator cannot distinguish herself from others. Everyone in the boat has been made small—their bodies reduced, the boat

³⁰ Critics have discussed this novel as an ekphrastic text, full of verbalized representations of visual representations. See, for example, Jutta Gsoels-Lorensen “lê thi diem thúy’s ‘The Gangster We Are All Looking For:’ The Ekphrastic Emigration of a Photograph” (2006).

seeming like a toy, the water contained in a basin—the people scaled down, infantilized, transformed into something other-than-human. In this moment of photographic encounter, lê's narrator inhabits a zone of suspension, dwelling in the peculiar position of behaving as both viewer of images and as the photographed subject herself—hovering in infinity, in the ongoing and potential motion of “the photographic event” (Azoulay 11).³¹ Thus, exemplified by the narrator's estranging encounter with her imaged self, lê's narrative presents Vietnamese refugee consciousness as involving an awareness of one's own body's *photographic captivity*—rendering subjects inanimate and other-than-human.

By *photographic captivity*, I refer to the discursive and representative containment and regulation of Vietnamese subjects under the humanitarian terms of the “refugee,” wherein subjects are imaged as still, detained, parahuman objects.³² Photographs like the one the narrator encounters, constructed and dispersed primarily for Western consumption, hyper-focus on suffering; they “freeze-frame the ‘victims’ in time and space, prolonging their pain and agony in perpetuity;” they “render invisible and inaudible displaced [peoples]...as they manage war's impact on their lives” (Espiritu and Duong 587). The “highly charged images of Third World poverty, foreignness, and statelessness” suspend these subjects in permanent peril, muted and

³¹ More broadly, within Asian American/Pacific Islander critical discourses and US immigration studies, scholars including Lisa Lowe (*Immigrant Acts*, 1996) and Kandice Chuh (*Imagine Otherwise*, 2003) have addressed the sense of “stuckness” in repeated flights and migrant motions that characterizes the “in-betweenness” of these subjects—especially in regard to discourses around citizenship. The requirement of motion/flight as well as the sense of “stuckness” are partially formulated in coherence with liberal positivist expectations of immigrants' societal and economic advancement, narratives that especially adhere to “model minorities” and those “in-between” nations, cultures, languages, and citizenships. Speaking to the “in-betweenness” of Vietnamese refugees, Viet Thanh Nguyen writes: “The Vietnamese refugee is caught between Viet Nam and the host country, but also in between capitalism and communism, war and peace, tradition and modernity, memory and history, representation and reality” (“Speak of the Dead” 28).

³² Photographic captivity is not to be conflated with Early American “captivity narratives,” which refer to the capture of an Anglo American by Native peoples in North America and the colonial US, or to the capture and enslavement of African peoples (e.g., as in the 1789 memoir of Olaudah Equiano). Different dynamics and connotations of “animality,” “civilization,” “barbarism,” are at play in these narratives (e.g., where the white captive acts as a cultural mediator between “savagery” and “civilization”).

ensnared by a hostile camera. “These associations reflect the transnationally circulated representations of refugees as” what Espiritu refers to as, “*incapacitated objects of rescue*, fleeing impoverished, war-torn, or corrupt states—an unwanted problem for asylum and resettlement countries” (*Body Counts* 15; emphasis added). Hence, the quality of inanimateness, made legible via the photographic medium, is tied to a perceived “incapacity” of the refugees, continually and serially positioned as “pathetic and passive victims” ever anticipating asylum and nearing rescue (*Body Counts* 26).

In *The Gangster*, this US militarist, humanitarian perception of refugees is conveyed through the character of Mr. Russell. At the start of the novel, it is 1978 when Mr. Russell, “a retired Navy man” in San Diego, decides to sponsor the narrator, her father, and four other refugees. From his time serving in the Pacific, Mr. Russell remembers the “people there as being small and kind.” Upon hearing about the Vietnamese boat people, he spends “many sleepless nights staring at the ceiling and thinking about the nameless, faceless bodies lying in small boats, floating on the open water”—people who, in his mind, “merged with his memories of the Okinawans and the Samoans and even the Hawaiians” (4). Mr. Russell is preoccupied with images of the refugees as anonymous, featureless “bodies,” in need of aid, adrift in a vast sea. This regard of the Vietnamese bodies, imagined without names or faces, is consonant with the perspective conveyed not just through images of the boat people but via other popular media produced in the war’s legacy. For example, as Viet Thanh Nguyen notes in his discussion of *Apocalypse Now* (1979), the white, US soldiers in the film gain insight into their own “humanity” and “inhumanity” at the expense of keeping the Vietnamese others “simply inhuman, as either savage threat or faceless victim” (*Nothing Ever Dies* 121). Mr. Russell’s status as a veteran further underscores the parallels between his perspective and that of the US soldiers in

the film; the Vietnamese people become objects of measurement by which Western imperial agents can assess their own sense of Liberal individuality, freedom, and white integrity. Further, Mr. Russell lumps visages of the Vietnamese boat people together with his other encounters of Native peoples in the Pacific—places infiltrated by US colonial and military presence—envisioning them all as “small” and benign, as “incapacitated by grief and therefore in need of care” (*Body Counts* 16). Thus, Mr. Russell’s perspective links US imperialism in the Pacific to the logics that rend refugee subjects captive.

As Espiritu, Lisa Lowe, and Lisa Yoneyama outline in “Transpacific Entanglements,” the process of slipping the Vietnam War into the United States’ list of “good wars” has required the production of both the “good refugee” and “good refuge” narratives. These strategic cover-ups for rebranding militarized, colonial ventures in the Pacific demonstrate the reach and legacy of US empire. Resonant with the broader “model minority” myth attributed to Asian diasporic peoples in the US, Vietnamese refugees become legible as “successful, assimilated, and anticommunist newcomers to the American ‘melting pot.’ Represented as the grateful beneficiary of US-style freedom, Vietnamese in the United States become the featured evidence of the appropriateness of the US war in Vietnam: that the war, no matter the cost, was ultimately necessary, just, and successful” (Espiritu et. al., 177). Thus, in negotiating what Lowe has called “the unfixed liminality of the Asian immigrant,” Vietnamese refugee identities can become fixed and strategically overdetermined as part of the US “rescue and liberation” mission; this operation simultaneously manages to retain the “alien” distance between Asian (“communist”) and US (“democratic”) cultural spheres while discursively incorporating Vietnamese refugees into the farcical homogeneity of Western, liberal “citizenship” (*Immigrant Acts* 6). The presentation of Vietnamese refugees as well-adjusted, working members of society continues to bolster

ideologies of the United States as a benevolent recipient of the tired, poor, and huddled masses—making the nation a “good refuge”. As exemplified through Mr. Russell’s perspective of the “small” and “kind” peoples of the Pacific, a mission to recuperate US national identity and militarism hinges upon the apprehension of the Vietnamese refugee during the “flight-to-salvation-to-resettlement process” (*Body Counts* 13). More broadly, the circulated images of “boat people” in this process, such as the one lê’s narrator encounters, are products of what Viet Thanh Nguyen calls the “American industry of memory” (*Nothing Ever Dies* 108). Within this system of weaponized memory, the US war machine not only deploys images on a global scale but also militarizes photographed subjects, propagating the associative terminologies that haunt Vietnamese refugees. Thus, behind lê’s narrator’s recognition of her own photographic captivity is a formulation of Vietnamese refugee subjecthood configured within US imperial transpacific space. This refugee subjecthood is confined by and accountable to the US military state, whose photographic gaze, seizing them at the moment preceding rescue, renders them parahuman, faceless victims—objects to amass for eventual regulation as governable US subjects.

In lê’s novel, refugee parahuman objecthood is linked not only to the photographic inanimateness of the objects but also to animal affiliation—evidenced by the narrator’s interactions with a collection of glass animal miniatures in the Russell household. Within the “good refuge” of the home where the narrator, Ba, and the uncles are also held, the dynamics of photographic captivity play out as the narrator interacts with the Russell’s possessions. In these scenes, inanimateness and animality are tied the refugees’ domestication within a US military family’s household, treated as if they themselves are things transferred in ownership. After Mr. Russell’s unexpected death, the refugees move in with his son, Mel Russell. When Mel picks up the refugees from the airport, he approaches them with a “faint rattling” accompanying his

stride—the sound of a large “ring full of gold and silver keys hanging from his belt” (5). From the moment the narrator and her family meet him, Mel presents as a jailer, keeping the refugees under metaphorical lock and key. Later, Mel reports to his mother, ““I feel like I’ve inherited a boatload of people,”” a comment overheard by the refugees in the next room, confirming that they aren’t wanted there (6). Regarded as part of his inheritance from his father, the refugees seem a burden to Mel, as if equivalent to the other items he receives upon his father’s death. Among the things Mel receives that once belonged to his father are a glass display cabinet and collection of about twenty glass animals—“small glass figurines of animals, mainly horses” (21).³³ The narrator tells us “they were lined up in pairs like animals in a parade,” or, positioned to board a boat to safety. Moving the items into his crowded office, Mel stores the animals inside the glass cabinet beside “blue-and-white china” and “red leather-bound books.” Safe in the display case, the possessions are for looking, “not for touching,” as Mel tells the refugees (23). Displayed beside the china and cooped up in the cabinet, the glass animals take on ornamental, Oriental objecthood, as the delicate belongings that make up the Russell family archive.³⁴ Thus, the “five small-boned Vietnamese men” are likened to the glass animals in the menagerie, the men contained within the house as if possessions—small, animal objects meant to be recipients of a paralyzing gaze (9).

Rendered miniature, multiple, and indistinguishable in amassed captivity, the refugees evoke a domesticated animality in their seizure. My sense of animality here—as reined-in and regulated, as if in zoological captivity—evokes the specter of refugee camps, holding and processing centers, and reeducation camps. The images of overpacked refugee boats are among

³³ In future revisions of this chapter, I will examine the intertextual connections between this scene and scenes with the glass animals in Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* (1945).

³⁴ See Anne Cheng, *Ornamentality* (2018).

the types of “dehumanizing” enclosures that haunt memories of the war. For example, we may consider the “industrial shelving” or “human warehousing” of asylum seekers awaiting resettlement in “prison-like” camps and detention centers in East Asia, most numerous in Hong Kong (*Body Counts* 75-76). Here, Southeast Asian refugees were subject to the “tight packing” system that included the “sardine-like tiering of human cargo”—transmuting personhood into animal-objecthood (*Body Counts* 77). Thus, the animalization of Vietnamese boat people, as produced by and made legible in popularized US archives, is resonant with a broader history of caging, serializing, and restraining refugee bodies.

More broadly, such animal affiliations are in keeping with how Asian subjects have been racialized within the Anglo-American imaginary. For example, the emphasis on micro-animalities—like the insects, fish, birds the narrator encounters—are consistent with white anxieties about Asian American subjects being proximate to pests, infestation, and disease. As Mel Chen highlights in their reading of the c.1870-90 “Rough on Rats” advertisement for rat poison, which likens rats to a pictured Chinese man with a queue hairstyle, Asiatic subjects are often metamorphized into small, pestilent, and disease-ridden creatures—in keeping with anti-Asian immigration movements and racism (Chen 110-111). Adjacent to, emphasis on the smallness and artificiality of these subjects has Orientalist valences that underscore their commodification and collectability. Anne Cheng, for example, has articulated the ways the ornamental encrusts upon Asian female object-personhood, a mode of existence where “artificial matter animates the human” (22). Such a rendering of Oriental womanhood is attached to the female as a “decorative, disposable toy for leisure” (135). This enchanted objecthood is, in part, rooted in expansive histories of “colonial commodification” that presents colonial goods and disappears colonial labor and imperial trade (*Intimacies of Four Continents* 97). Lê’s novel’s

portrayal of the glass animals, in pairing the animal and artificial, thus opens up resonances across racialized histories of violent, discursive and material constructs of Asiatic object-personhood—mattered as small, synthetic, toylike creature-commodities.

The glass animals' stillness is unsettling to the narrator, indicative of their apparent lifelessness—a quality of being apprehended in photographic captivity. Despite Mel Russell's instructions, the narrator sneaks into the office after school and opens the glass cabinet doors “so the animals [can] get some air.” “I always touched the animals,” the narrator reports. “I carried them to the windowsill and let them sit on the sunny ledge, beside my golden butterfly” (28). Placing the animals beside another object in the office—a golden-brown butterfly inside a thick glass disk—the narrator tells the animals stories. As if they need to breathe, as if they have the potential to look out the window or bask in the sunshine, as if they can hear her, she lets the animals out of their glass cage. In this motion, the narrator expresses a desire for vibrancy, creating opportunities for breath, for feeling heat or the brush of a breeze, testing out a place for living beyond the confines of the cabinet. To her frustration, the glass animals do not “blink,” “laugh,” or “tilt their heads” during her storytelling; nor do they “remember” her when she returns to the display cabinet to let them out again (30, 31). It seems they have “no soul” (i.e., *anima*) (31). Notably, the narrator reads the animals' inanimateness not just as tied to their stillness but to their silence—their lack of laughter or response. Across Asian American discourses, silence and the accompanying signifier “quiet” recall stereotypes produced by white anxiety about the inscrutable “foreignness” of the “Oriental,” especially as indicated by exclusion or distance from monologic society in the US, a logic partially informed by indiscriminate Anglo-American valorizations of speech (Cheung 7). As King-Kok Cheung describes in *Articulate Silences*, Asian American silence is often susceptible to judgment and

patronization, despite varying positions on the virtues of either logocentrism or reticence in Western philosophical discourse. “The quiet Asians,” she writes, “are seen either as devious, timid, shrewd, and above all, ‘inscrutable’—in much the same way that women are thought to be mysterious and unknowable—or as docile, submissive, and obedient, worthy of the label ‘model minority,’ just as silent women have traditionally been extolled” (Cheung 2).³⁵ Thus, the silence of the captured glass creatures emphasizes a racialized and feminized sense of docility—portraying domesticated, inanimate animality that is readily captive within the US refuge space. Glassy and transparent, without blood or breath, the glass animals are delicate items to behold, to keep safe, to wonder at from a distance, in containment. The narrator sees the animals—miniature and toylike, fragile and amassable—and sees herself (without actually seeing herself) displayed in the photograph in a parallel static, effaced way.

Although the glass animals stay silent, the narrator is assured that the butterfly is still alive, even speaking to her. In the following scene, the narrator enacts vibrant being; she pursues a vital force that might escape the confines of the butterfly’s inanimate rendering, holding the object close, seeking some kind of movement. Fascinated by the insect “trapped in a pool of yellow jelly,” she recounts:

Though I turned the glass disk around and around, I could not find where the butterfly had flown in or where it could push its way out again. I held the disk up to my ear and listened. At first, all I heard was the sound of my own breathing, but then I heard a soft rustling, like wings brushing against a windowpane. The rustling was a whispered song. It was the butterfly’s way of speaking, and I thought I understood it. I cupped the disk in my palms, and gazing down at the butterfly, carried it over to the window overlooking the

³⁵ Throughout her work, Cheung reads silences that carry various meanings and have specific implications within works by Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Joy Kogawa. “Modalities of silence,” Cheung urges, “need to be differentiated;” for, the works not only reveal the “problems of speechlessness” and the “importance of breaking silence,” but also “challenge blanket endorsements of speech and reductive perspectives on silence” (3). Thus, rather than simply valorize speech or detract from the strategic use of silence as a form of illegibility, I underscore the conditions of photographic captivity under which *lê*’s narrator deems it necessary to listen to the glass animals, especially the butterfly, and ultimately, to imagine ways of breaking them out of captivity.

back garden. When I held it up to the sunlight, the disk glowed a dazzling yellow and at the center of the yellow was the rich earthen brown shape of the butterfly. (25)

At first, looking at the disk in her hand, the object appears sealed, without cracks, fissures, or any means for the butterfly's escape. It is as if the insect has been frozen in time, preserved in amber, like the photographic subject, contained by its medium. Yet, moving the disk to her ear, the narrator pursues what is not immediately detectable: a sign of its vibrancy. Upon listening to the object, with the butterfly pressed to her ear, the narrator soon hears a quiet noise beyond the sound of her own breath. She registers its "soft rustling," the gerund emphasizing its continuous action, offering a sense of the kinetic and textural. Defined as "a soft, muffled crackling sound like that caused by the movement of dry leaves or paper," rustling is the quiet result of an abrasive, brushing action like a wingbeat (OED). Orienting herself towards this animal-object, the narrator senses its vibrant being and interprets its "whispered song." Here, I want to distinguish between the racialized silence prescribed under the photographic captivity of refugees and the kind of vibrancy that *lê's* narrator senses in this scene. I read this quiet as a sign of vibrancy. The low-intensity, treble sound of the "soft rustling," simulated by the repeated, hushed "s" sounds in the text, signals audible movement—high frequencies that register in the narrator's ear. The narrator's vibrant being seeks out and receives these transmissions via her tactile listening practice, drawing close to an object previously thought captive and inert. For further assurance of the animal's liveliness, the narrator carries the butterfly to the window to hold it up to the light. Catching the rays of the sun, the animal glows, bending and emitting light, the sunlight moving through the object to illuminate the "rich" and "dazzling" colors of its body. After experiencing sonic, haptic, and visual confirmation of the butterfly's animateness, the narrator explains to her father and the uncles, "The butterfly is alive...but it's trapped" (25-26). Despite the uncles' statements that the butterfly must be dead, the narrator protests: "'No, I heard

it rustle its wings. It wants to get out!” (27). The narrator confirms that the butterfly has spoken to her, whispering, ““Shuh-shuh/ shuh-shuh”” (26). Conveying the urgency of the butterfly’s desire to escape, the narrator refuses to commit the butterfly to the glass animals’ fate—sensing potential life and freedom from glass confines. In the narrator’s determinedness, we hear her desire to break away from the paralyzing, photographic gaze of a dominant US imaginary and from captivity within the glass cage, the false “refuge,” of Mel’s household.

At the end of the chapter, the narrator decides to free the butterfly. She hurls the object, “letting the disc fly,” aiming for a spot on the office wall but missing. The butterfly crashes through the glass display cabinet, and the “animals’ knees [buckle],” some “shattering completely,” filling the office “with the sounds that animals make” (34-35). At last, in their breaking the animals cry out, enlivened only in destruction. Ultimately, readers do not know what the narrator sees—if she glimpses the butterfly or what remains of it.³⁶ Lê refuses to give us a visual. Instead, as the narrator scans the ceiling for the butterfly and as Ba throws open the office door, we’re offered sounds—the butterfly’s voice and Ba’s demand for his daughter to stop:

“Shuh-shuh/ shuh-shuh.”
“Suh-top! Suh-top!”
“Shuh-shuh/ shuh-shuh.”
“Suh-top!” (35)

Ba’s and the butterfly’s voices create a back-and-forth motion, a short, song-like series of hushed tones and brushing consonants, like heartbeats, butterfly wings, or the mechanical shutter of a camera. We hear both the butterfly’s rustling cry, a sure sign of its vibrant livingness, and Ba’s pleading for the narrator to “suh-top.” In their voices, we hear the oscillation between flight and

³⁶ Throughout this chapter, the object of loss is Ma, left behind in Vietnam—whom the narrator pictures on the distant shore. In a dream, the narrator looks through the butterfly disc and sees Ma (31-32). Thus, we may interpret that in the breaking of the disc, the narrator sees an opportunity to “free” Ma, to bring her near.

captivity, a sense of Vietnamese refugee vibrant being that reverberates, ceasing and unceasing, resonant with a photographic consciousness and animal embodiments. As a result of the destruction, Mel tells the refugees to “pack [their] things and get out” (31). The group is expelled from their “refuge,” released from the glass zoo, emerging from wreckage, moving on. Contrary to expectation, the refugees do not follow the easy flight-to-resettlement path dictated by the militarist, humanitarian nation-state. Instead, the process is full of detours and reroutings, where home(land)—nu’ó’c in its fragmentation and fluid integrity—is uncertain and where promised refuge often false. This is where vibrant refugee being whispers, bursts, and shatters for elsewhere. The chapter ends with the exchange between the butterfly and Ba—a negotiation between the buzz of life that goes on and the urgency to halt the vertigoes of transoceanic migration, the ripples of nu’ó’c in all its meanings.

II. Vibrant Animal Ecologies in Ruinous Memoryscapes

Thus far, I have articulated the condition of photographic captivity that holds fast to Vietnamese refugee subjecthood—a condition to which affiliations with domestic, inanimate animality adhere. Taking the narrator’s vibrant attentions to the butterfly disc as an example, I develop vibrant being as a modality of Vietnamese refugee being that pursues other ways of living in imperial ruination and eschews fixed understandings of incapacitated subjecthood. Vibrancy expresses itself as a being that resounds and receives sound in wavelike vibrations, through felt contact with the body—an animateness that is rocked in the wakes and aftershocks of war, that reaches out towards objects of loss and pulses towards recovery. In this second section, I inquire after the animal-affiliate movements, sensorial drives, and transfigurations of refugee bodies that take place in environments marked by loss and destruction. I listen to subjects and objects move in ecological relation within refugee memoryscapes—sites of

auditory, textural, and embodied memory-making that witness the dissolution of binaristic distinctions—between human and animal, living and dead, past and future, lost and ongoing.³⁷ In the novel, the narrator performs acts of vibrancy staged in “wild animal” bodies of scavenging, rampant creatures, rescripting animal legibility for her own memorial purposes. Such transfigurations afford proximity to lost objects, moving within vibrant ecologies of ruinous landscapes as vibrant being enunciates its ways of resounding, reaching, and remembering.

As I attend to raced, refugee subjects who lean into “the animal” as a creative mode for remembering, I express interest in what Zakiyyah Iman Jackson has called “latent animal potential”—where subjects are “no longer simply human,” but rather, “transformed by the taking on of the physical and psychical potential of animals” (33, 32). For Jackson, “animal potential” diverts from the ways that white, scientific, colonial thought has posited Blackness as “bestial”—finding instead opaque modes of creative, animal expression, where Blackness is not readily legible or exploitable for bolstering Human projects. In my own work, I am attuned to the ways *lê’s* novel rescripts captive, docile, inanimate animality, leaning into an animal and animate potential for the sake of sounding out alternate lifeways and memory-making amidst wreckage.

Early in the novel, the narrator characterizes birds as “dumb” and at first seeks to distance herself from them. While the refugees are still in the Russell house, Mel complains that he can hear the narrator ““chattering in his sleep;”” later, she tells her Ba, ““Dumb birds chatter. I don’t chatter”” (18). As Stephen Hong Sohn discusses, domesticated birds—specifically “brainless creatures” like chickens—have been invoked to racialize and animalize Vietnamese Americans to “exemplify unrefined, undeveloped, and undesired living beings” (“Brainless Creatures” 71).

³⁷ My reference to “memoryscapes” borrows from oral history studies, including Toby Butler’s experiments with memoryscape audio trails—homing in on embodied listening and learning practices that animate experiences of historical landscapes (see Butler 2007).

This racialization resonates with the characterization of refugees as incapacitated, foreign, helpless objects of rescue—incapable and acephalous recipients of US aid. Yet, Lê's text does not seek to taxonomize different animal forms nor figure them below Humanity in alignment with hierarchized understandings of rational, Liberal, Anglo-American superiority. Instead, after the breaking of the butterfly disc and the release of the refugees from the Russell household the narrator is reattuned to the parahuman in her suburban space, reimagining ruinous living in animal affiliation and likeness.

In the novel, the depiction of Vietnamese children as “wild animals” is informed by a transpacific consciousness, a reaction to living through and after war. Soon after the departure from Mel's house, Ma is reunited with the narrator and Ba in San Diego. The family moves to an apartment complex with other Vietnamese families. In contrast to the representation of the glass animals, the children in the apartments are deemed “wild animals,” embodying youthful risk. The landlord of the building regards his tenants as “people who broke things,” and who “let their children run wild” (41). Almost always in motion, the children run and play around the apartments and surrounding blocks. For example, the young boys at the complex dive off of the second-floor railing into the pool in the courtyard below, encouraging each other to jump and then “[hooting] their approval.” At one point, Ma voices her concern, warning, “Someone is going to die trying to fly like that,” but the boys continue to jump (44). Portrayed as birdlike—in their “hooting” and efforts to “fly”—the boys push boundaries, not sensing any danger, careless, willing to fling their bodies off of buildings for the “laughter” that follows (52). Finally, the landlord catches the boys in the act. One morning, he drains the pool, fills it with cement, and places a single planter with a squat palm tree in the middle, taking away what the narrator and her parents considered their “ocean.” Now, in this desert of concrete, the kids have nothing to

catch them, no water to break their fall, or absorb their plummeting motions—the opportunity of flight taken away, a “suh-top” response to their flight, another ocean/home revoked.

Looking out at the concrete courtyard, Ba shakes his head and tells the narrator and Ma “that when they drained the pool, they should have filled it with soil.” Then, “he could have grown [them] a jungle in the courtyard;” then, the narrator and her friends “could have been the wild animals, charging through the jungle two by two” (69). Ba glimpses what could have been—an environment befitting the children, filled with growing plant life instead of stark concrete. In contrast to the depiction of the paired animals in the glass cabinet in Mel’s office, Ba imagines the children on parade—creatures rushing forward, together—suitably, finally, at home. The jungle imagery reverberates from across an ocean.

At one point, the narrator describes Ma as she was in Vietnam, lying in her bed at night and thinking of the landscape around her: “She began to wonder what the forests were like before the American planes had come, flying low, raining something onto the trees that left them bare and dying. She remembered her father had once described to her the smiling broadness of leaves, jungles thick in the tangle of rich soil” (81). Memory of a jungle before war, before conflict, is buried in preceding generations. Reliant on her father’s stories, Ma imagines a landscape teeming with life: rich soil, broad leaves—animated and anthropomorphized, smiling—and thick forests of trees. She pursues a memory of land that is not her own, a motion of her mind that seeks to recover something lost, a past she cannot really know. Now, knowing only an environment of conflict, she lives amidst forests infested with chemical agents that leave the jungle “bare” and “dying.”³⁸ In her descriptions, we hear echoes of the photographic gaze from the Navy ships that stills refugee life in the boats below—that renders them small and

³⁸ This context could inform readings of lê’s novel that track the language of breath and speaking—especially her emphases on the respiratory and vocal passages as sites of trauma and apparatuses for telling.

motionless—as the herbicidal rain from US planes slowly eats away at the land, killing off chances for life on the ground. Like Ma in Vietnam, the children in the apartment complex in San Diego are confronted with attempts to limit vibrant being—the filling of an “ocean,” the poisoning of land, the flash of a camera. The subjects are left in subjunctive suspension, imagining what might or could have been, and in the remembering of what was. The “wild animal” potential within the children, then, is reminiscent of life lost, truncated in conflict, something indicative of growing in the midst and aftermath of war.

These children are suited to growing up in ruin. In such spaces, attending to what is left, vibrant being draws close to things perceived as lost and gone. Anna Tsing’s attention to “disturbance-based ecologies” and emergences in “blasted landscapes” helps me understand the implications of living in ruin that becomes a “collective home” (3, 5). Her work, grounded beside Laotian and Cambodian refugee communities of mushroom foragers in the US Pacific Northwest, sees the promise of ruin. “When Hiroshima was destroyed by an atomic bomb in 1945,” she writes, “it is said the first living thing to emerge from the blasted landscape was a matsutake mushroom” (3). Amidst the “environmental messes that humans have made” and against all odds, things like mushrooms keep on living, often in “patchy unpredictability” (4, 5). Tsing’s work suggests an openness to thinking beside what can sprout in unlikely, disastrous, seemingly lifeless places—or how critters like “rats, racoons, and cockroaches” can make do with detritus (3). We can thus consider Tsing’s attentions in tandem with a multivalent understanding of the transpacific, a site of imperial ecocide as well as ecological, imaginative making; and we can read the children’s wild animal tendencies and affinities for places reminiscent of nu’ó’c—the pool, their “ocean,” what might have been a homeland, their very own “jungle”—as an attempt at living in and after war and ruin. With vibrancy, the children in

lê's novel scavenge for new home spaces—affording alternative patterns of flight, refusal of captive, domesticated terms of refugee subjecthood, and an insistence on “wildness” or disobedience to national, colonial scripts of settling in the “good refuge” of the United States.

The children make attempts to dwell within various ruinous homescapes, acts that evoke desires for proximity to the past through the language of pest-like foraging and inhabitation as well as language of the vernacular photographic. The landlord notices that “the neighborhood children had taken over the house” next door, one that had been gutted by a fire. The house that “had begun as something pretty” is now a “shell,” littered with eucalyptus cones and branches (41-42). Ma and Ba refer to the space as “the kids’ house,” where she and her friends play. In the abandoned house with black walls, “the rooms were small and crowded with burnt and broken things” (55). The narrator recalls, “We’d pick through the empty kitchen cabinets and pretend to find french fries, hamburgers, and fried chicken, which we devoured loudly with our mouths open” (57). Rifling through the ruins, the children pretend to search for food and feast with abandon—scarfing down what they’ve scavenged. They imagine and enact ways of inhabiting wreckage, feeding off of emptiness.

Examining the burnt remnants of things behind by the previous tenants, the narrator recalls:

Among the things we found when we first came into the house was an empty chest of drawers, a dusty mattress with broken springs, eight bent spoons, a dead lamp with a melted cord, ashy paper...Also scattered across the floor were pictures of a couple...In the pictures, [the woman] has freckles and her skin is pale, almost shining. She doesn’t look healthy although I imagine her skin was probably soft to the touch. (56)

In this scene of wreckage, we may hear echoes of the blasted jungle, now domesticated within a suburban neighborhood in San Diego. The children navigate dust and ashes, melted plastic, metal warped in heat. Inhabiting this space, moving among objects not their own, they play in

something akin to archival ruins, examining the quotidian remainders of the couple's life, including the strewn photographs, lying in disarray. Unlike the photograph the narrator encounters earlier in the novel—the image taken from a top-down perspective from the Navy boat, peering down at the small figures below—the photographs here are vernacular ones. The picture remnants are evidence of past inhabitation, life once lived here, making up a scattered, paper world. In the destruction, the personal and specific have largely been lost. Elemental violence has largely effaced the names and details of these residents. Even in the remains of a domestic fire, the narrator hears echoes of war and transpacific displacement. The photo still speaks small, felt things about the people in it. Just as the narrator draws close to the amber butterfly in Mel's office, an object which does not belong to her, she attends to other objects that are not her own—especially beings still frozen in photographic confines—hearing the buzz of livingness, traces of a past, and a potential for life ongoing. The narrator focuses on one image in particular: the picture of a woman whose skin looks “soft to the touch,” so pale she is nearly “shining.” The narrator notices the details of the woman's face, how it catches the light, drawing closer to a point of recognition, closer to a familiar flash of life.

Driven towards remnant, photo objects in efforts of recovery, the narrator moves within a vibrant ecology of refugee memory. This act of surging is indicative of a particular understanding of loss, especially as a condition of living after war and knowing grief. In Vietnamese, “loss” has less definite semantic implications than in English:

The Vietnamese word for loss, *mất*, carries semantic connotations of possibly retrieving the missing person or place. Lê thi diem thúy, discussing this nuance in relation to *Gangster*, argues that the word shapes the Vietnamese-American psyche; linguistically, loss within the diaspora “doesn't feel so definite” as it does elsewhere, as the word used to describe it suggests that the lost person, place or thing might one day re-materialize. (Markbreiter 80)

The ongoing sense of loss, enacted in the word *mất* itself, contributes to the ghostly, parahuman effect of animating subjects and rematerializing the lost. In articulating photographic, vibrant being in relation to Vietnamese refugee consciousness, I am implying a proleptic sense of loss—knowing that in a state of postwar precarity, one can, at any moment, become like the person in the photograph—the body represented, an emanation of livingness—known by others as one’s paper self, remembered via radiation, the reach of quiet soundings. When the narrator encounters the photograph amidst the wreckage, her vibrant being passes over the seeming stillness and silence of the image, reaching out with an alternative, sensorial knowledge, seeking out those who inhabited that place. As photographs may affectively and sensorially enact what Barthes refers to as “the return of the dead,” so vibrant modalities of refugee remembering find felt communion with what was presumed to be gone or out of reach (Barthes 9).³⁹ Indeed, the sense of “suspension” created in framing a subject within the borders of the photograph or in the observer’s viewing of the preserved event lies in the photograph’s ability to reproduce “to infinity” what “has occurred only once: the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially” (Barthes 4). Thus, the represented body (and the referent adhered to it) invokes “that rather terrible thing which is there in every photograph: the return of the dead” (Barthes 9). With a photographic consciousness, vibrant being sees the potential for animation and the trespassing of boundaries—turning silence into a quiet that buzzes with meaning, with the potential to be heard. The narrator demonstrates a vibrant being that trespasses normative boundaries between past/present/future, nonhuman/human, and dead/alive, mobilizing ecological relation and an alternative lifeway of memory-making. Once a private space for the pictured couple, the ruins are now a site for other kinds of life—an alternative home or refuge.

³⁹ I discuss the vibrant potential of the photographic medium in more detail in Chapter 2.

Amidst this ruinous, memorial space, the narrator finds ways to seek out the vibrancy of the place—drawing close to memory objects and their seemingly still subjects, scavenging through remains in wild, pestilent animality. This temporary, makeshift home becomes a space that affords aberrant motions—trajectories that recount the impulse behind the shattering flight of the butterfly disc.⁴⁰ Describing how they play in the borrowed house, the narrator describes, “We dragged the dusty mattress out to the middle of the living room and took turns jumping on it. We pretended that the mattress was a trampoline with the potential to project us across oceans and into outer space if we jumped hard enough” (57). The children transform the site of wreckage into a place to imagine impossible trajectories—moments where the logics of the current orders of spacetime and laws of physics may dissolve—where reckless flight is a possibility. The narrator imagines that she might be sent far away—perhaps across oceans, back home, perhaps further, into places stranger, more uncertain. Emerging from ruin, from a burnt landscape—ringing with echoes of war—the children imagine deviant orientations, skewed towards diasporic geographies of past homes and promising elsewhere.

One character in the novel who inhabits another uncertain space, somewhere between home and elsewhere, is the narrator’s brother, who drowned in the South China Sea before the family left Vietnam. Throughout the novel, the narrator has difficulty confronting his death and memory. The brother, elusive and a topic unvoiced in the family, seems to have been lost to nu’ó’c—swallowed into the water/home, his body left behind on the farther shore, the other, now distant nation—the initial site of rupture. Once, while returning to the San Diego apartment from an errand to the store, the narrator encounters her brother’s ghostly presence, emanations of his vibrant being meeting hers. The narrator experiences “the familiar feeling of warmth, of his body

⁴⁰ See Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) on “deviations.”

beside [her] body” and her “brother’s breath” upon her (74-75). Finally, she bolts for home. Once there, the narrator feels displaced from her own body and voice: “‘I flew here.’ That was my voice. ‘I flew here.’ That was my voice again” (76). In this passage, the narrator’s impulse towards flight is an evasive one, not yet prepared to face the loss of her brother, frightened by his felt presence, the uncanny assurance of his “living on.” Here, vibrant being is one chased by the past—an ongoing, animate loss that pursues her, a shadow from which she flees. The narrator embodies an animal being that is ever on the move, chasing life and being chased by what won’t stop living, by what exceeds the photo frame.

In the final chapter, “nu’ó’c,” the narrator draws closer to that site of loss, to her brother. This chapter is staged at shorelines and in bodies of water, where the narrator, ultimately returning to Vietnam and the South China Sea, revisits the scene of her brother’s death. In this last section of the novel, animal bodies morph into representing what has drowned, what submerges and resurfaces, shining and churned by the waves. These aqueous animal transformations rush and recede in relation to nu’ó’c—caught in the fragmented space, inseparable from what is inevitably lost and what is still, ceaselessly beside oneself. In turn, the photographic signals the lost object, both relegated to and returning from the past, whose referent cannot ever be fully recovered. Yet the animal and photographic still transmit livingness, a signal that draws vibrant beings into proximity, nearing communion, with what is adrift, missing, and reappearing. By this language of the sensorial, vibrant beings recognize another.

The narrator offers some details of the circumstances of her brother’s death; readers know that he drowned, “swallowed by the sea,” when jumping between two boats. Picturing the scene, the narrator says, “I saw my brother flying through the air” before he slipped and fell between the boats (145). She sees him sailing for a moment, disrupted in flight. She captures the sudden

loss of a body stopped midstride, on his way somewhere. Then, she sees him sinking low into the sea, the currents dragging him down “into a hole in the water” (146). While lying in her bed the night the family brings her brother’s body into their house in Vietnam, the narrator describes what she pictures:

In my imagination, the hole became a room and the room was in a house, a house exactly like the one I was lying in, playing with the shells my grandfather had given me, except that it was underwater. It was darker in my brother’s house than it was in mine—and colder—and fish instead of chickens crowded the courtyard. As the women continued talking about “the boy” and “the bad water,” I saw my brother rolling and turning with the tides. I knew him. He was stubborn. I knew that he would continue to do this: he would roll and turn, until, like the shells my grandfather had given me, shells my brother had wanted for himself, shells that had been stripped by the sea of all their markings, his body became as smooth and brilliant as polished stone. My brother floated across his underwater courtyard, glowing, knowing that in time he would not fade at all; he would only shine brighter. (146)

The narrator paints an underwater home for her brother, parallel to her one above ground. She places him beside aquatic animals, knowing he belongs to nu’ó’c. Finding language for his movements, for his ongoingness, the narrator likens the brother’s body to the shells. Like the treasured gift from her grandfather, the precious items she holds close, the brother’s body will be polished in the tides and sand, gleaming. The brother will be transformed, unmarked—apparently anonymous, or unrecognizable by his usual, distinctive features. In processes normally thought of as ones of forgetting, fading, or erasure (such as the anonymizing power of photographic captivity), the transformation only ensures the brother’s livingness: his shining that brightens over time. In this passage, we detect the glimmer that surpasses photographic captivity—like the woman’s pale skin that nearly shines—like the gleam of the butterfly held in the sunlight. Here again, vibrant being detects shining as a signal of life going on.

After the brother’s death, the narrator describes, how, life inexplicably, incredibly continues: “Outside the thatched gate of our house in Vietnam, life went on. Up and down the

street, the women laid out trays of small silver fish to dry. The bodies of the fish glinted like small broken mirrors. At night, the squid boats dotted the horizon” (149). The fish, despite being dead, still catch and reflect light, scattering it off their cracked, mirrorlike bodies. In the distance, the squid boats, viewable from the narrator’s window, flash their lights. Such lights, the narrator describes, are “troubled beacons”—lit by fisherman to “lure the squids into the nets,” bobbing “in and out of sight” (127). Thus, the shining of bodies, of images, of the animals, is a troubled signal. It is a violent flash of remembrance—reminiscent of a camera at the moment of capture, the lure of the fisherman’s trap, the phosphorous luminosity of an explosion, the radiance of consuming flames. It is reminiscent of the afterglow of a napalm bombing—such as the one contained within Ma’s memory. Ma can recall the floating body of a girl killed during the war; the girl had been wading in the water, and “they found her floating on the sea. The phosphorous from the napalm made her body glow, like a lantern” (86). Just as a transpacific sense of *nu’ó’c* can denote both imperial ecocide and the potential making of other ways of living, shining bears the violence of capture, war, and loss. Yet, it is also the way that film still catches and reflects light; the illumination of photographed subjects, bearing traces of movement and breath and skin, soft to the touch; the glow of life in glass captivity and whispered song; the brilliance of a body, a shell, polished by the waves, ever turning.

This is the language of vibrant being that courses through lê’s novel—a gathering of images and feelings—sounding out what it is to keep living, to keep making errant motions. These “errant” or “deviant” motions stray from scripts that characterize subjects’ displacement as due to an immigrant “failure” to assimilate or achieve inclusion into the nation-state. Instead, these unexpected, skewed trajectories become uneasily legible within imperial orderings of progressive spacetime. Subjects like lê’s narrator dart away from the flight-salvation-resettlement

narrative imposed by an imperial, humanitarian nation, away from the choice to settle in the “good refuge.”

In the novel, a flickering haunts vibrant being, the on-off, “shuh-shuh,” of what calls out, what ceases and cannot cease. Years later, upon the narrator’s return to Vietnam, she swims toward the same squid boats she glimpsed after her brother’s death. She walks out to the water, unable to sleep. The narrator says, “With the squid boats bobbing in the distance...I swam straight out, as fast and far as I could go, my body rocking from side to side, my arms arcing through the air” (155). Whereas in her childhood, she flees from her brother’s presence, she soars towards it now, moving through the water in an attempt at closeness, in reaching out to him. Her body carries remnant motions—the rocking of a boat, the birdlike gliding through the air. These characterizations follow her as she aims not for the refuge in San Diego, but for the distant, troubled beacons. Diving into the waves that house her brother’s body, swimming across the sea in which she fled years before, she cuts through the water, as if, in this pursuit, she may yet meet him again—may recover him on her way towards the lights.

In the final scene, the narrator returns to a time when she was still a young child, living with her parents. Ba drives Ma and the narrator to the beach during their first spring together in San Diego. Walking along the shoreline, the narrator nears the water, and in dark obscurity, she senses an uncanny lifeworld:

At first, there seemed to be nothing but that long familiar expanse of darkness. We’d seen it before; it was the open sea, late at night, with no one around. As we walked toward the water, I noticed in the silence following each wave’s crash scattered sparks of light appeared across the sand. The beach was covered with small silver fish whose bodies gave off a strange light...They writhed in the wet sand and it seemed that the more they writhed, the brighter they became. Out from the darkness of the sea, wave after wave of small, luminous bodies washed to shore. My father turned to my mother and me and, smiling broadly, pointed at the fish, as if we knew them. (158)

Drawn by the scattered lights on the sand, the narrator recognizes them as living, embodied, and reflective. The fishes' luminosity is "strange" because of their seeming pain, their apparent dying or undeadness as they "writhe" upon the shore, washing together, their bodies forming waves.⁴¹ These troubled beacons flash with familiarity—a sure sign of life that goes on. Pointing to the fish, Ba gestures to them as if they're someone they know, perhaps recognizing the shining of the brother, who, in loss, grows ever brighter. Perhaps, like the brother, the fish shine all together as the many who were lost, who exist only at a distance, though at times, in stubborn, unrelenting pursuit of the living—the ghosts that follow, the picture people who shine. These radiating, oceanic bodies signal a loss inextricable from violence, a haunting that continues to burn. As the narrator tells us, "War has no beginning and no end" (87). Thereby, one senses its terror and feels its traumas, creating ecologies with the parahuman, taking on photographic and micro-animal expressions, someone you could know or might have known. The fish are not anonymized in the way the popular photo archive of governmentalized, captive subjects minimizes and domesticates the boat people. Here, lê's text presents an alternate way of understanding refugee being—one that overturns the violent gaze and characterization that seeks to pin it as inanimate, toylike, contained. Vibrant being prioritizes a recognition that is felt, a recall sensed by the body, a past brought to the surface. Although there are subjects that seem erased, their features not normatively legible, vibrant being recognizes subjects in their transformations, in the way the sea has churned a body, or the way a fire warps photographs. As the narrator states, "I half expect to turn and find [my brother], a young man moving along beside me, someone whose face I may no longer recognize but whose body my body will recall...if he was here, I'd press my head against

⁴¹ I suspect these fish are grunions, which mate and lay eggs in the sand on beaches in San Diego certain times of the year. These fish, then, may not actually be dying; they only appear that way. Strangely, they need to come to shore to propagate life. Across San Diego County, people make "grunion runs" an activity, catching the fish on the sand. Snatched up, kept in buckets, and maybe consumed, these are bodies stalled in their effort to keep living.

his belly, the two of us like dogs sleeping through the heat of midday” (154). The narrator may not register her brother’s features, his body ever changing, but she will know his presence and remember the familiar feeling of having him by her side. We can nearly hear them resting there—breathing together, matching the rise and fall of the other’s lungs, lulled into a safe slumber. Offering animal imagery again, the narrator paints them as dogs, resting, pressing into the other, a pair, inseparable. I picture lê’s animal metaphor here also as a photographic one. In related terms, lê expresses something that Barthes also discusses: that in photography, the referent always adheres to the photograph. There is a certain difficulty in distinguishing the represented photographic subject and the referent; and thus, photography engages the “tireless repetition of contingency” (Barthes 5). The referent is stubborn; the photo is like a laminated object, “whose two leaves cannot be separated without destroying them both: the windowpane and the landscape” (Barthes 6). In lê’s passage, I hear the fusing of these two leaves, the steady breath of the two dogs, and dread their peeling apart, their waking.

In the first paragraph of lê’s novel, the narrator says, “We weren’t a family like we are a family now. We were in separate places, waiting for each other. Ma was standing on a beach in Vietnam while Ba and I were in California” (3). Now, at the end of the text, we have come full circle—returning to the shoreline, staring at nu’ó’c. The last line of the novel reads: “As my parents stood on the beach leaning into each other, I ran, like a dog unleashed, toward the lights” (158). The picture of the family is nearly complete, everyone meeting, in some form, on the shore. This is a moment of reunion, of trying to piece together again home and water, ocean and family. The parents lean “into” each other, supporting the other in the pressing, the shifting of weight. As if released, the narrator—in canine, bodily form that remembers the companionship of her brother—runs towards the waves, where the fish crash upon the shore. The narrative

leaves us in motion towards reunion, the convergence of different lifeways. Throughout the novel, the narrator exhibits many trajectories of flight—either evasive or in pursuit, at times the object, and at others, leading the chase. In this final scene, a final rushing, vibrant beings draw together, suggesting a meeting that never graces the page, revoked from lê's narrative. We end in suspension, beside bioluminescent lifeforms, and in motion toward recovery of what has been lost in war, swallowed by nu'ó'c. We see scales shining in the moonlight, film paper flashing in the near dark. In her surging, we hear the throwing of the butterfly disc, anticipating the shattering of glass, the hooting of wild animals, the splash of water. In lê's text, Vietnamese refugee being runs through captivity and animation, driven by a desire to burst forth from the rigid material burdens of representation, to take shape as animal, to speak in a blinking language of light, to thrive in ruin, in spaces teeming with life otherwise—in vibrant, unbridled being.

In the next chapter, I continue to investigate US militarism in the Pacific and California and the rippling effects of the War in Vietnam in familial life. Reading a 20th century vernacular photographic archive, I highlight the modes of living and feeling of another Southeast Asian diaspora—focusing on Filipinx American subjects, their transpacific disorientations, and militarized movements. I engage another ekphrastic text—poems in *The Galleons* (2020) by Rick Barot, which inform my readings of the family photographs and the threads of loss and longing that weave them together. I argue that Barot's poems theorize a vibrant reading mode akin to the attentive listening demonstrated by lê's narrator in the butterfly scene; by drawing near to seemingly silent or static objects, readers can be attuned to the potential liveliness of texts and offer imaginative responses.

CHAPTER 2

Vibrant Reading: a Transpacific Poetics of Filipinx American Vernacular Archives

In 2020, my sister, a student of Art History, and I gathered vernacular photographs from family members and other Filipinx American families living in San Diego, California.⁴² We curated the images online as *The Pakinggan Archive*—or the “listen” archive—creating a space that would urge viewers to pay close attention to photographs that told previously unheard, unseen stories of Filipinx living.⁴³ To date, we have curated about one hundred photographs from the mid- to late-20th century, from the personal albums of seven different families who contributed. We formed the archive, in part, as a response to popularized images in university archives, such as the Dean Conant Worcester collection at the University of Michigan (“Dean”).⁴⁴ Worcester, a zoologist and ethnographic photographer, served as the secretary of the interior for the US Insular Government in the Philippines from 1901 to 1913 (Rice 1). His photographs of Filipinx Natives have informed work by scholars such as Sarita Echavez See and Nerissa S. Balce. These scholars argue that such archives of US empire, such as Worcester’s, accumulate knowledge capital and devise imperial fictions based on the collection and display of

⁴² San Diego has a long history of ties to the US military and US naval recruitment. As the former site of the Naval Training Center and current site of one of the largest naval bases in the United States, San Diego has been a primary place of settlement for Filipinx personnel and families since the early twentieth century (Suarez, “Militarized” 183). Filipinx naval recruitment in addition to the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act contributed to the rapid growth of the Filipinx population in San Diego throughout the latter half of the century (Espiritu, *Home* 20). While not representative of all Filipinx experiences in diaspora or in relation to US naval recruitment, the experiences represented in *The Pakinggan Archive* focalize the crossings of Filipinx lives and US naval empire in a specific, militarized place.

⁴³ In Tagalog, *pakinggan* is a command, meaning “listen to.” After thinking through the work of our archive and the urgency of “listening” to otherwise unheard narratives, my sister and I encountered Tina Marie Camppt’s work. Camppt’s theorizations of sonic-multisensory experiences and racialized terms of photographic encounter, especially in *Listening to Images* (2017), serve as an adjacent discourse, which I discuss later in this chapter. The Pakinggan Archive can be found at: <https://pakingganarchive.omeka.net/>.

⁴⁴ The Dean C. Worcester Collection can be viewed at: <https://lsa.umich.edu/umxmaa/collections/online-collections/worcester-photograph-collection.html>

racially “primitive” and abject Filipinx bodies.⁴⁵ In turn, *Pakinggan* offers a platform for narrativizing diasporic Filipinx living via visual, vernacular modes that suggest complicated and at times illegible subjecthoods in everyday and domestic settings. While the archive offers opportunities for diverting or confusing the imperial gaze, many images still centralize or track the residues of US military empire—predominately via the overt or spectral presence of the US Navy.

How do we attend to these images that present the infiltration of US empire into Filipinx vernacular memorial practices? How do we parse these representations of Filipinx subjecthood as sites of collision between US militarism and the affective trajectories of self-making?⁴⁶ In this chapter, I develop *vibrant reading* as a synesthetic listening method for approaching the photographs as sensorial reliefs—sites where transpacific narratives of empire and trajectories of desire both emerge and collide. In addition to reading photographs from *The Pakinggan Archive*, I take up poems by Rick Barot from his collection, *The Galleons* (2020). On reading Barot’s poems, I found that his depictions of the entanglements between empire, memorial objects, and familial lives resonated with the work and aim of the Archive. Together, Barot’s poetry and the *Pakinggan* photographs enable me to theorize *vibrant reading*. First, I theorize vibrant reading from the ground of Barot’s poem, “The Galleons 5,” which enacts modes of approaching vernacular archives and employs what I refer to as a poetics of *polyvocal interference*. Second, I attend to the ways Barot’s poem and the *Pakinggan* photographs evidence what I’m terming the *tractability* of these subjects—rendering Filipinx bodies deployable and readily managed as US

⁴⁵ See Sarita Echavez See’s *The Filipino Primitive: Accumulation and Resistance in the American Museum* (2017) and Nerissa S. Balce’s *Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive* (2016).

⁴⁶ I align my understanding of *affect* and *feeling* with work by Sara Ahmed and Sianne Ngai—especially following Ahmed’s sense of being “orientated” (1) and Ngai’s understanding of racialized subjects as figured as having “intensified attunement or hyperreceptiveness to the language of others” (8).

imperial subjects. The poetic and photographic objects I examine, while moved and marked by empire, are also, crucially, sites where everyday, imaginative acts take place. Dwelling in the realm of the vernacular, I ultimately I offer a vibrant reading of the *Pakinggan* photographs, listening to their everyday acts of living, feeling, and telling that are not strictly captive to militarized modes of subjection. I sound out the photographs' affective landscapes that enunciate desires for retaining relation in proximate and present spaces and for finding familial connection against the backdrop of war. At the close of this chapter, I expand my discussion to listen out for the resonances between tractable Filipinx and Vietnamese refugee subjecthoods—thinking through their collisions in the militarized transpacific and their reverberant modes of searching for vibrancy, for what shines and reaches through the photograph.

I situate my inquiries beside Asian American and Filipinx American studies approaches that engage a transpacific critique—grappling with the transpacific as a site of racialized and gendered subject formation and of exchange of labor, capital, and ideas.⁴⁷ While my first chapter emphasizes the transpacific space of Vietnamese refugee being and becoming (more specifically, *nu'ô'c*), here, I focalize Filipinx American subjecthood as emerging alongside US empire in the Pacific. As Rick Bonus and Antonio T. Tiongson Jr. underscore, Filipinx American studies connects “Filipinx presence in the US and beyond with the larger histories and current manifestations of imperialism, colonization, global capitalism, racialization, and

⁴⁷ Transpacific critiques that address these vertices include Denise Cruz' *Transpacific Femininities: The Making of the Modern Filipina* (2012), Kale Batingue Fajardo's *Filipino Crosscurrents: Oceanographies of Seafaring, Masculinities, and Globalization* (2011), Rick Baldoz' *The Third Asiatic Invasion: Empire and Migration in Filipino America, 1898-1946* (2011), and Jodi Kim's *Settler Garrison: Debt Imperialism, Militarism, and Transpacific Imaginaries* (2022). This scholarship works differently from but adjacent to transpacific scholarship that foregrounds Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies, and resistance in Pacific Islands and Oceania. Future revisions of this chapter will also engage Allan Punzalan Isaac's scholarship on Filipino American formations—especially thinking through his work in *Filipino Time* (2022) in relation to vibrancy.

gendered/sexualized labor” (10). More specifically, as a spatial and temporal undertaking, mapping out the contours of Filipinx American formations requires

geographic, ideological, and sociopolitical frames...neither solely situated nor firmly placed within the borders of what is understood as the United States, so much so that the US is not the only exceptional and terminal point of being and becoming Filipinx American, and that Filipinx American lives are intricately connected with the interlocking histories and contemporary trajectories of global capitalism, racism, sexism, and heteronormativity. (Bonus and Tiongson 10)

Bonus and Tiongson accentuate a Filipinx Americanness that cannot be limited to development strictly within US borders, acknowledging instead, Filipinx being and becoming as more porous—necessarily interconnected with broader social, political, and historical trajectories across the globe. Thus, in this chapter, I engage the narratives and representations of Filipinx American subjects whose lives are shaped by and within wide, conjunctive geographies of the transpacific.

More specifically, I am invested in tracing currents of empire across the Pacific, bringing to the fore the workings of US militarism in vernacular life. Centering militarization as a structuring force in empire-building in the transpacific, Setsu Shigematsu and Keith L. Camacho consider the ways “political geographies across Asia and the Pacific have been militarized” and “linked with the residual and ongoing effects of colonial subordination” (xv).⁴⁸ The authors frame “militarization as an *extension of colonialism*” and indeed, “a constitutive institution and ideology of empire” (xv, xxvii). Following its “wars of colonial expansion in Native America,”

⁴⁸ Shigematsu and Camacho underscore the linked histories of colonial rule by Japanese and United States throughout Asia and the Pacific Islands, emphasizing the sustained existence of the other through what Naoki Sakai terms a “trans-Pacific arrangement” (see “On Romantic Love and Military Violence: Transpacific Imperialism and US-Japanese Complicity,” 2010, and “‘You Asians’: On the Historical Role of the West and Asia Binary,” 2000). Tracing these imperial intersections opens up opportunities for assessing the resonant experiences of colonized and militarized transpacific peoples, including Chamorros, Filipinos, Hawaiians, Japanese, Koreans, Marshallese, and Okinawans. While both Japanese and US colonial atrocities in the Philippines have certainly shaped the Filipinx narratives and subjectivities I analyze in this chapter, I focus primarily on US empire in order to examine the relationship between Filipinx subjects and the US Navy.

the United States “similarly advanced its own rhetoric of civilization, nationhood, and race” overseas (xx). After the Spanish-American War in 1898, the United States colonized the Philippines along with other Pacific and Caribbean islands, considering them strategic holdings for economic expansion, military conquest, and Western civilizing missions. The overseas empire in the Philippine archipelago grew as the United States established naval harbors in port cities, installed colonial forms of education and public policy, and racialized “nonwhite settler populations as inferior, creating native elite and police collaborator classes, and excluding most native populations from white circles of influence, residency, and power” (xx).⁴⁹ Thus, as I also highlight in this project’s Introduction, the militarization of the Philippines is inextricable from US colonial infliction of Native dispossession, racial and social restructuring of the populace, and the strategic extraction of the islands’ labor and resources.

Focusing on a militarized transpacific, this chapter strives to expose the extent to which colonial extractive practices have infiltrated Filipinx American lives—feeling out the residual and ongoing violences that pulsate beneath Filipinx aesthetic and vernacular productions. Such productions, then, are transpacific objects caught up in the interconnected vectors of empire—namely, the killing and displacement of Native peoples and ravaging of Indigenous lands and waters across the Americas and Pacific, and the subjugation of Asian and Black subjects in processes of labor and enslavement for the sake of imperial expansion and resource extraction.⁵⁰ Thus, this chapter examines transpacific texts that illuminate the imbrications of these cultural

⁴⁹ See Catherine Ceniza Choy’s *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History* (2003).

⁵⁰ My investigations are thus resonant with Lisa Lowe’s examinations of US racial formations in connection with the larger history of the Americas (*The Intimacies of Four Continents*, 2015); with settler colonial critique, such as that put forth by Iyko Day (*Alien Capital*, 2016) and Juliana Hu Pegues (*Space-Time Colonialism*, 2021); and with work that investigates Asian, Asian American, and Pacific Islander relations, including Vicente M. Diaz’ “To ‘P’ or not to ‘P’: Marking the Territory Between Pacific Islander and Asian American Studies” (2004) and Yén Lê Espiritu’s “Critical Refugee Studies and Native Pacific Studies: A Transpacific Critique” (2017).

objects within branching histories of violence, even as I discuss violences particular to the Filipinx American subjects poeticized and pictured in the texts at hand.

I consider *The Pakinggan Archive* a transpacific archive in that its contents map out transoceanic trajectories of exchange, militarism, and familial ties across wide, connective geographies of land and sea. In his readings of portrait photographs taken in the Philippines and California from the late 19th to the early 20th century, Adrian De Leon employs a transpacific critique to articulate the formation of Filipino subjectivities “*in the visual and political-economic terrain* of labor diasporas, United States imperialism, and crises of global capitalism.” De Leon assesses a transpacific visual landscape not within a concrete geography but rather by thinking with Lisa Yoneyama’s transpacific approach—reading “the constellation of subject formations in a *coeval* manner across disparate geopolitical contexts, and...*conjunctively* through mutual (if uneven) resonances of colonial statecraft and subjectivity across the Pacific” (De Leon).⁵¹ Thus, I postulate *Pakinggan* as inhabiting a similar transpacific, visual terrain wherein we may interrogate Filipinx displacements and migrations punctuated by US war-waging and other violences of colonial militarization.

As transpacific texts, *The Pakinggan Archive* and Barot’s poetry collection, *The Galleons*, both underscore the vernacular or “non-monumental” as crucial for understanding the ways empire infiltrates the everyday living of Filipinx subjects (Smailbegovic). Some of the violences of US colonialism in the Pacific—including the infiltration of US militarism into the everyday lives of Filipinx subjects—are slow, attritional, dispersed ones, whose “calamitous repercussions [play] out across a range of temporal scales” (Nixon 2). Militarization requires “gradual” cultural, institutional, and ideological transformations, working via accumulative changes that

⁵¹ See Lisa Yoneyama, *Cold War Ruins: Transpacific Critique of American Justice and Japanese War Crimes* (2016).

normalize everyday violences of empire.⁵² As I later address in more detail, militarization breaches the homosocial family unit, dictating especially its transpacific deployments and displacements; the “transnational domestic sphere” is “inescapably militarized and domesticated within the contexts of US military culture and US imperialism” (Suarez 182).⁵³

Barot’s poems address the unspectacular, residual violences of colonialism that pour out into everyday life. Rick Barot was born in the Philippines and grew up in the San Francisco Bay area. He has been referred to as an “ekphrastic poet” (Randall). *The Galleons* is his fourth collection of poems and his first book that overtly engages Filipinx histories, as demonstrated by the work’s title. As a collection, *The Galleons* consists of twenty-eight poems, including ten “Galleons” poems, titled “The Galleons 1” through “The Galleons 10.”⁵⁴ The collection’s contents flicker between musings on history and the personal, familial lives of contemporary Filipinx Americans, presenting seemingly separate strands of long-ago histories, disparate places, and distant people as entangled, as somehow in relation, ferried into a present time and place. As indicated by the collection’s title, the work centralizes the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade of the Spanish colonial era (1565-1815) as a formative space of Filipinx becoming via transpacific

⁵² “Militarization is a step-by-step process by which a person or thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military *or* comes to depend for its well-being on militaristic ideas. The more militarization transforms an individual or society, the more that individual or society comes to imagine military needs and militaristic presumptions to be not only valuable but also normal” (Enloe 3).

⁵³ I engage the “domestic” elements of Barot’s poems and the *Pakinggan* photographs primarily to focalize sites of vernacular and familial life. My attention to these sites also underscores the tension between what Theresa C. Suarez refers to as “militarized” and “demilitarized domesticity.” The former “refers to the process by which the military regulates notions of intimacy, marriage, parenthood, and family life,” while “demilitarized domesticity is expressed as the everyday decisions enacted to lessen a reliance on the values, resources, and structures of the military for the material and social well-being of the family” (“[De]Militarized” 201). We can thus consider the poems and photographs I examine in this article as fraught sites of domestic life—objects that demonstrate both how the colonial institution of the US military reconfigures and regulates “structures and ideas about race, gender, and family . . . intimacy, marriage, motherhood/fatherhood, and family life, which are based on an ideal of white bourgeois domesticity”—and objects that suggest how everyday acts might exceed colonial regulation, imagining other forms of feeling and moving in the world (191).

⁵⁴ In Chapter 3, I provide a fuller analysis of the ten Galleons poems in Barot’s collection and discuss the text’s significance to the overall project. I underscore how Barot’s work offers ways of understanding a Filipinx being shaped by both the wake of Spanish colonialism (especially the galleon trade) as well as US empire (the implications of which I explore more fully in this current chapter).

movement. At the same time, the collection follows the life of a grandmother and her experiences as part of a US Navy family. In the poem, “The Galleons 1,” the speaker asserts:

History is the galleon in the middle
of the Pacific Ocean...

She is on another ship, centuries later, on a journey
eastward that will take weeks across the same ocean.
The war is over, though her husband
is still in his office’s uniform, small but confident
among the tall white officers...

...Her daughter is two,
the blur of need at the center of each day’s

incessant rocking. Here is a ship, an ocean.
Here is a figure, her story a few words in the blue void. (Barot 3-4)

This section of the poem centers the grandmother’s transpacific journey—crossing the same waters as the Spanish galleons did, “centuries” before. As we learn from later poems in the collection, she is aboard a US Navy ship, with her husband, the officer, and her young daughter. The speaker’s language surrounding the daughter suggests the kinetics of transit onboard—the central “blur” of the daughter in motion, the “incessant rocking” of the vessel by the waves—conveying the vertiginous feeling of being in transoceanic space. Described within a series of non-distinct emblems—“a ship,” “an ocean,” “a figure”—the grandmother’s narrative is seemingly ordinary, simply “a few words in the blue void.” She is but momentary. Against the great, abstract backdrop of the Pacific and its history, the exchanges of other ships long ago, and its other colonial crossings, her story is just a few, spoken sounds.

From these sounds, calling out from somewhere in the middle of the Pacific, Barot’s poems emerge. His poetics embrace the everyday, the momentary, the familial, and the sensory;

as such, they slow down the abstracting, eviscerating work of colonial movements, preparing us to listen to the grandmother's story. By placing Barot's work beside the *Pakinggan* photographs, I draw together reverberant narratives of Filipinx living and familial longing—each text already a site of collision, rife with imperial crossings, residues of manipulation, and transpacific disorientation. Like Barot's poems, the *Pakinggan* photographs evoke the momentary and interpersonal amidst transpacific space. The photographs constellate different sites: California, the Pacific Ocean, the Philippines, Vietnam, and the South China Sea between them. They evoke war, anxieties about loss and distance, and desires to hold on to memory and to one another. As I engage with these poems and the photographs in what follows, I invite my readers to sense a kind of vibrancy that exceeds the photograph and the poem—to listen to what sounds out with desire for more proximate relation and remembrance.

λ₁ – Vibrant Reading and “The Galleons 5”

“Vibrant,” of the critical mode of vibrant reading, takes its name from the multisensorial quality of transpacific texts. I understand these texts as multisensorial reliefs—constituted by the various wave-like forms that collide and course through them. As I have outlined in previous chapters, vibrancy takes its name primarily from the physical forms of sound, light, and oceanic waves. In this chapter, I dwell especially upon the sonic as informing the attentive listening practice that vibrant reading entails. Tina Campt describes what I would call a vibrant experience of listening to photographs:

[S]ound consists of more than what we hear. It is constituted primarily by vibration and contact and is defined as a wave resulting from the back-and-forth vibration of particles in the medium through which it travels. The lower frequencies of these images register as what I describe as “felt sound”—sound that, like a hum, resonates in and as vibration...It is an inherently embodied modality constituted by vibration and contact. (*Listening to Images* 7)

As Campt conveys, listening is both a sonic and haptic experience—something felt and registered in the body. In a multisensory listening mode, vibrant reading registers the emanations of feeling and narratives of empire that propagate from images. Like Campt, I rely on an analytical attunement to a photograph's low-frequency vibrations of "felt sound"—registering its various dimensionalities, hearing what might otherwise remain unspoken or overlooked. While Campt works at the junctures of Black feminist theories and visual cultures, engaging an archive of African diasporic subjects to write against regimes of representation that impose apparent limits on raced being via photographic methods of capture, my basis for synesthetic attention is located with different, although adjacent, racialized subjects and histories in transpacific settings.⁵⁵

Barot's work—which conveys photographic interaction through not only visual but also audio-synesthetic terms—theorizes and performs the listening method of vibrant reading.⁵⁶ His poem, "The Galleons 5," centers familial archival objects. The speaker of this poem draws near to these memory objects and listens to voicings of the past. As enacted by the poem, vibrant reading tracks multiple, interfering waves—overlapping past and present spacetimes, threads of

⁵⁵ Acknowledging the difference of racialized conditions between Campt's subjects and my own, I take seriously the place of my own theorizations as adjacent to Campt's. In her other work on Black visibility, Campt has focused on "relationality and adjacency" as defining Black contemporary artists' practices of refusal and witnessing. Notably, she addresses "the adjacency of indigeneity and diasporic formation linked by a vicious history of imperialism and colonization that tethers Black subjects to Pacific Islanders" ("Black Visibility and the Practice of Refusal" 85). As such, Campt opens up space for considering the witnessing position of adjacency across raced and global forms of interaction. While a detailed account of these relationships lies beyond the scope of this article, I read Campt's sense of adjacency as an avenue for discussing the interrelated matrices of power and photographic representation that figure the lives of Filipinx and Black diasporic subjects.

⁵⁶ Christine Bacareza Balance's work on the sonic, visual, and bodily in Filipinx American musical performances informs my understanding of vibrant reading as a synesthetic practice—one that leans into the ready entwinement or frequent crossing of the senses. While Campt articulates how we might experience the photographic in sonic terms, Balance underscores the sonic as a photographic or visual experience. She "moves alongside the important work of Fred Moten," using a *phonographic approach* (Balance 20). This approach is inspired by Moten's poetic line in *B Jenkins* (2009) that "the phonograph is also a photograph of movement and what it bears" (qtd. in Balance 20). As I attend to the poetic and photographic forms in this article, I, like Balance, inquire: "[W]hen brought into the present, what critical work do these photographs, as forms of musical recording . . . help us to hear?" (20).

different, converging colonial histories, and colliding affects and sensory outputs from transpacific Filipinx subjects. The poem turns photographic viewing into a shared, vocalized experience, resulting in a poetics of *polyvocal interference*. To sound out this term, we can examine the dual-voiced form of the poem. The following excerpt is of the first four of twenty-one couplets that make up the poem:

We didn't want to be noticed, so we put charcoal on our faces.
I listen to the hours of tape, of the two of us at the dining table.

All the girls, looking like dirt. / My father was always drinking
Questions about the town, her parents, the names of people

or with women, my mother had to take care of the business. /
that only she could now remember. The images, I imagined,

My sister broke her back when she was a child, she grew up
scrolling in her mind, and translated into the answers she gave. (Barot 32)

Readers of the poem track two overlapping voices. We can attribute the first, italicized voice to the speaker's grandmother, her recording captured on audiotape and transposed in pieces (indicated by the slashes) to the page. The other voice, forming the secondary line of each couplet, offers a window into the speaker's interiority, his musings as he processes his grandmother's words. Within the poem, at least, it is as if these voicings—the recording of the grandmother's stories and the speaker's consciousness—occur simultaneously. In abrupt, back-and-forth motions between italicized and regular text, each line interrupts the other, ever delaying meaning. Reading straight through the poem presents a significant challenge to our mental processing, forcing the reader to frequently pause and recall where the previous sentence ended. For comprehension, the reader must slow down or return to the previous couplet to make sense of the overlapping strands of voicing and thought, ultimately processing the interlocking

lines separately, as distinct narratives. Yet, the back-and-forth form of the poem is crucial to theorizing vibrant reading, characterized by polyvocal interference.

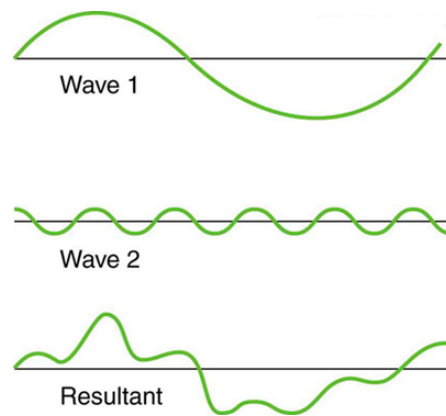


Figure 4: Superposition of Non-Identical Waves: Superposition of non-identical waves exhibits both constructive and destructive interference. (“Module”)

As defined in physics, sound wave interference occurs when two or more distinct soundwaves are present in a field at the same time, interacting with each other to produce a new wave (see Figure 4). Thus, Barot’s poem asks us to imagine the grandmother’s italicized lines and the speaker’s lines as occurring at the same time—as if the speaker’s thoughts were being transmitted to the reader while the audiotope plays. The interference represented in the poem is a product of the speaker’s enactment of vibrant reading, as he listens to storied photographs and offers a narrativized response. The result of their interaction is an altered sonic-sensory experience—the poem becoming a vibrant object itself in our reading of it—yielding uneven frequencies, amplitudes, and wavelengths.

Especially significant for my purposes is the fact that the speaker identifies the interaction as one of synesthetic listening: “I listen to her with my skin and my eyes...my ears.” In congruence with the sensitivities of vibrant reading, the speaker’s whole body is attuned to the grandmother’s voice, exemplifying a multisensory listening experience synesthetically heard through touch and sight as well as hearing. Describing this vibrant interaction, the speaker notes “the things that suddenly...return when you are speaking, like pockets of color coming to...life

in your mind” (32). As the grandmother passes these scenes to him, the speaker experiences the illumination of images, their brightness and distinction ferried into his present. Even against the glare of the “blue void” of the transpacific, the grandmother’s memories are vivified, awash with color, filling the speaker’s present. Further, the invocation of the “you” expands the experience of this process and draws us nearer as readers, who are asked to imagine ourselves as listeners. With the speaker, we register the grandmother’s words in vibrant terms of light and sound and feeling.

Notably, this vibrant reading creates a vocalized mode of intimacy—an opportunity to draw nearer to the grandmother (whose presence is only tangible via the audio recording) and to the people, places, and events memorialized in her words. Thus, vibrant reading is oriented toward the radiating, proximate presence of what is supposedly past and gone, inert and without liveliness, lost to the void of Pacific crossing. I think of *liveliness*, as a pursuit of vibrant reading, as the quality of “vital force” that may manifest as the engagement and crossings of sensory motions (for example, emitting or receiving sound waves, registering the presence of other beings in one’s environment through felt vibrations in the earth)—or as the nonhuman vitality of what Jane Bennet calls the “Force of Things” (1). Furthermore, such attentions of vibrant reading are aligned with Sara Ahmed’s sense of being “orientated”—attending to desirous subjects and bodies, who are affected by what we come into contact with, in touch with emotions that move us toward or away from things (5). The vibrant reader is thus aware of how objects impress on us, and how the sonic emanations of an object move us toward response.

In listening and responding, the speaker confronts the asymptotic nature of his archive—realizing that this intimacy has its limits, illegibilities, and losses. The opening lines describe him listening to “hours of tape,” playing back the conversation between himself and his grandmother

in a domestic, shared setting. At the time of the recording, they are seated “at the dining table”—the table where, perhaps, they have shared meals, with each other or family or friends, in the comfort of a home. I imagine it is the grandmother’s table—a space where she feels comfortable sharing her story, recalling past moments, relaying them to her grandson, and choosing what not to say. She recites things like the names of certain people “that only she could now remember” (32). The grandmother’s stories, then, are one of the only ways that knowledge of these people, what they meant to her, can be recalled and recorded; and yet, these names are not listed in the poem. Already, there is an inevitable, implied loss in the act of remembering and reporting. The poem at once underscores the anxieties surrounding forgetting—evidenced by the speaker’s desire to record the grandmother’s life story—and acknowledges the expected, pedestrian event of forgetting. Despite efforts to cling to details afforded by memory—to capture by whatever technological means possible, in reliance on the retelling, all the people, events, places, and things that have shaped the person—the speaker confronts loss: the sounds unheard, the nodes on a resultant wave. The speaker acknowledges this reality and mourns it but briefly in that phrase that places the grandmother in solitude, as sole keeper of these names, “only she,” before moving on. Thus, vibrant reading, while motivated by an affective impulse toward closeness with the distant object, ultimately retains the object’s illegibility, an acknowledgment of the impossible task of recovery, an encounter with the asymptotic nature of remembering.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Lisa Lowe reminds us: “Writers, artists, and scholars—from Alfredo Salanga, Angel Shaw, and Carlos Bulosan to Oscar Campomanes and Reynaldo Ileto—have commented that *forgetting* characterizes the Filipino encounter with the United States, both in the Philippines and in the United States. . . . [W]hile a past defined and constituted by such forgetting can never be made available whole and transparent, it may often reappear in fragments. It may perhaps be read in the cultural practices, social spaces, scholarly and political work of immigrant formations” (Foreword vii). I read the creative acts of Barot’s speaker as working with fragments of sound and story, toward the expression of remembrance and vibrant ways of inhabiting the world.

Later in the poem, the speaker more explicitly describes the ethical bent of vibrant reading, outlining its impulses—what it strives to do and not do. The speaker has a passing “notion” that inquiring after his grandmother’s stories could add to his “art, as though...her past and her love could be vectors of use” (33). He paints extractivism, figuratively, as a temptation, hesitating at the opportunity to employ the grandmother’s narrative and their relationship for his poetry. Yet, as I discuss in detail later, such a desire would only reproduce the logic that informs the deployment of Filipinx bodies in militarized service and the colonial removal and redistribution of environmental and labor resources from the Philippines. Instead, avoiding the reinscription of a colonial-extractivist mentality, the speaker realizes:

... what I actually needed to know, I would have

*Then Norfolk. Richmond. / I was so sick on the ship, I can't
to conjure for myself, because what we know most deeply*

*remember much. Your mama just kept running all around.
we guard best, even as she spoke, laughed, passed the glow*

*It was a navy ship. / My mother's name is Canuta Sacay and
of each story to me, like a document I could have in hand*

*my father's name is Enrique Omega. My grandparents were
but could not understand. (Barot 33)*

Like the speaker, the vibrant reader performs the work of conjuring what cannot be normatively heard—what is unstated, most precious, “most deeply” known—listening out for stirrings at lower frequencies, for the sounding of deeper tones. In visual terms, the speaker describes the “glow” that her voice hands to him, invoking the tactile, too, in this exchange. Even when holding on to the story, the speaker cannot comprehend it fully, admitting the limits of his grandmother’s words. He cannot fully access her experiences as she lived them. There is much she does not disclose, and yet she passes “the glow...of each story” to him—something still felt,

trespassing through time to reach him. I would argue that he is engaged in a vibrant reading that acknowledges and retains the ultimate unknowability of the subject, performing instead—with an informed, affective, multisensory imagination—the creative work of hearing and responding to the vibrancy of the object. In this process, the reader creates a landscape of overlapping tones, colliding particles of sound, illuminative moments of a passing glow. These are vibrant impulses reaching out to, searching for vibrancy—for ways of knowing/feeling livingness and nearness—in the sound bites of a moment.

λ₂ – Vibrant Reading and Tractability

Thus far, I have articulated vibrant reading's orientations toward lost or distant objects and its multisensorial attentions as it seeks vibrancy itself—attending to forms of colliding sound and light waves and to felt vibrations of movement. In this section, as I listen to Barot's poems and to photographs from *The Pakinggan Archive*, I theorize a second conceptual foundation, a condition of *tractability*: the transfiguration of Filipinx subjects into readily deployable, movable agents of US empire. Tractable Filipinxes are perceived by imperial authorities as able to be handled, managed, or dragged around—employed to perpetuate the violent extractivist work to which they themselves are subjected.⁵⁸ Beyond simply militarizing these subjects, or being

⁵⁸ In developing the concept of *tractability*, I build on Asian American studies scholarship that interrogates the use of Asian bodies in service of empire and US war-making. Tractability resonates with what Daniel Y. Kim has called *military Orientalism*, a mode of representation that “seeks to elicit the affective attachment of Asians and Asian Americans to the American cause” and “manifests as a military labor force that is segmented and stratified both domestically and transnationally” (275). Conscribed into this formation are Asian populations from South Korea, South Vietnam, and the Philippines, among other Cold War allies who served as outsourced military labor for the United States. Tractability is also informed by Jinkyung Lee's understanding of the contradictory position of soldiers, who serve simultaneously as “the agent of the state's necropolitical power and its very potential victim”—carrying out “the will of the state in conquering and subjugating the enemy, that is those ‘deemed worthy of being exterminated’” while also carrying “the risk of themselves being exterminated by their enemy” (38). Lee's work underscores the use of Asian labor (primarily South Korean, Hmong, Filipinx, Laotian, and Cambodian) as a “subimperial force” (40) or “surrogate army” in the War in Vietnam (45). Thus, I theorize tractability as tied to a transnational military-industrial complex for the United States that mobilizes Filipinxes and other Asian subjects as a potentially expendable labor force.

controlled by or dependent upon the military to the extent of its normalization in the life of the individual or society, tractable Filipinxs become activated, objectified imperial agents.

Tractability hinges on a perceived quality of Filipinx subjectivity as wieldy and malleable—a sense that emerges in the wake of the United States’ colonization of the Philippines, following the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898.⁵⁹ Critically, President McKinley’s policy of “benevolent assimilation” evidences the American imperialist regard of Filipinxs as docile, childlike, and in need of Western-civilizing government—presenting colonization as a sentimentalized narrative of Filipinx inclusion and autonomy under the civil governance of the United States (Rafael 641-43). Ultimately, this “benevolent” colonization led to the identification of the colonized with a narrative of US exceptionalism—inducting subjects into imperial ventures as seemingly willing participants.

The project of benevolent assimilation portrays “colonization as a humane and progressive act of moral reform and social uplift” (Rafael 641). Describing how the US colonial administration presented its process of democratic institutionalization as a “gift” to the “childlike” natives of the Philippines, Vincente Rafael writes:

Instead of annihilation, [benevolent assimilation] called for the domestication of native populations and their reconstruction into recognizably modern political subjects. Rather than being conquered and enslaved, Filipinos were infantilized as racial others in need of nurturance and tutelage in the fundamentals of “Anglo-Saxon democracy”—not in order

⁵⁹ My understanding of Filipinx bodies as wieldy and readily deployable in military service is informed by Neferti Tadiar’s work that underscores the “liquidity” of gendered and racialized bodies, especially the urban poor of the Philippines and places across the Global South. Liquidity, Tadiar explains, “designates the measure of convertibility of assets into other assets” and “any number of things and actions in order to serve as so many kinds of relays, intersections, components, and channels for the value-producing movements of others” (162). In the Philippine context, liquidity primarily accounts for the ways that disenfranchised, “expendable” peoples, especially service laborers, make possible the lifestyle of those with “proper (i.e., valued) urban life” (161). I thus consider tractability, like liquidity, a condition produced by an imperial, racial capitalist order, which deploys Filipinx bodies, or “disposable captive life” made “material, instrument, collateral, and currency for the securitized production of valued life” (x). Specifically, tractable subjects—readily instrumentalized and converted into mechanized agents of US war-making and transpacific empire—bolster the “valued life” of those who fall under the protection of the Western democratic, civilizing nation-state.

to turn them into Anglo-Saxons but rather into a “self-governing people” separate from but equal to white civilization. (641)

The United States thus managed to distinguish itself from its exploitative European predecessors. Construing itself as the munificent liberator of the Philippines’ previous Spanish colonizers and construing the residents of the island territory as incapable of self-government, the paternal Western nation imbued their new subjects with a sense of inclusion and indebtedness. Cloaked in the language of US exceptionalism, the United States simultaneously fought to suppress native insurgents and rebellions throughout the Philippine-American War and long after its official end in 1902. As Vernadette Gonzalez has noted, “bringing ‘civilization’ to America’s ‘little brown brother’ was a violent and protracted affair” (“Military Bases, ‘Royalty Trips,’ and Imperial Modernities” 34).⁶⁰ Despite the reality of the violent US takeover, the perpetuation and predominance of the success narrative of the Philippines under benevolent assimilation afforded the identification of the colonized with US exceptionalism. Filipinxs were marked as moldable subjects poised to contribute to other colonial projects—including militarized, imperial expansion.

Since the 1901 McKinley decision to allow a quota of Filipinxs to enlist in the US Navy as stewards, Filipinxs have been recruited and deployed in colonial extractivist undertakings across the Pacific and Americas.⁶¹ Driving the justification of such undertakings is the perpetuated narrative of benevolent empire and American exceptionalism, which “has

⁶⁰ For more on the violence and aftermath of the Philippine-American War, see Shaw and Francia’s *Vestiges of War: The Philippine-American War and the Aftermath of an Imperial Dream, 1899-1999* (2002) and Michael Salman’s *The Embarrassment of Slavery: Controversies over Bondage and Nationalism in the American Colonial Philippines* (2001).

⁶¹ For more on Filipinx history in the Navy and the experiences of Filipinxs in San Diego, see Yêñ Lê Espiritu’s *Home Bound: Filipino American Lives Across Cultures, Communities, and Countries* (2003) and Theresa Cenidoza Suarez’ “Militarized Filipino Masculinity and the Language of Citizenship in San Diego” (2010). For more on the infrastructure of US military bases in the Philippines as legacies of sustained US occupation, see Vernadette Gonzalez’ “Military Bases, ‘Royalty Trips,’ and Imperial Modernities: Gendered and Racialized Labor in the Postcolonial Philippines” (2007).

rationalized US military and capitalist interventions in Asia and the Pacific Islands as necessary for the ‘national security’ of the United States” (Espiritu et al. 176). The narrative of American benevolence continued after World War II when the United States presented itself as a “‘liberator’ of Japanese wartime colonialism;” configured as a “rescuer” instead of a “nation of war crimes associated with colonial takeovers and occupations,” the United States thus instilled in their “liberated” subjects a sense of an “already accrued debt” (Shigematsu and Camacho xxi). As Shigematsu and Camacho underscore, “many postcolonial subjects, such as the Filipinos and Chamorros who currently serve in the US military,” are driven by this sense of indebtedness to the benevolent nation (xxi).⁶² Further, as Faye Caronan has described the “ideological power” of US imperialism in the Philippines manufactures “Philippine consent and cooperation in US imperialist projects” (114). Thus, especially in the context of militarized mobilization, Filipinx tractability suggests readily deployable, extractable, assimilable, and transportable subjects as vectors of use for imperial bidding.

One result of this condition is a transpacific sense of disorientation. Reading “The Galleons 5” and the *Pakinggan* photographs, I articulate the evolution and vertiginous symptoms of this condition under US military empire—more specifically, as mobilized through the US military’s deployment of Filipinx subjects as weaponized imperial agents. Transoceanic deployment disorganizes the senses—thus forming the unstable ground upon which *vibrant reading* is founded and from where it attends to other landscapes of collision.

Transpacific Disorientations

⁶² Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez notes the continuation of these imperial narratives in the Philippines in the contemporary era; writing on two memorial sites, Bataan and Corregidor Island, she describes: “In these two sites, the act of touring historical battle-fields and military routes is simultaneously an emotional and ideological remembering of a benevolent American protector, an erasure of imperial violence and occupation, and a reiteration of the Philippines’ continuing ‘special relationship’ with its former colonizer” (73).

We can sense the tractable nature of the subjects in “The Galleons 5.” While the underlying, unitalicized lines of response in the poem demonstrate the orientations and impulses of the vibrant reader, the grandmother’s narration gives voice to the conditions of Filipinx subjecthood under US military-imperial rule. The sound bites of the grandmother’s stories describe a turbulent postwar childhood in the Philippines, a vertiginous experience as part of a US Navy family, and other autobiographical details. After meeting her husband at the end of World War II, the US Navy becomes a major force in her life, moving her to different bases, from Japan to Virginia and Maryland. She recalls:

I liked Japan when he was stationed there. It was so clean.
realize that what I actually needed to know, I would have

Then Norfolk. Richmond. / I was so sick on the ship, I can’t
to conjure for myself, because what we know most deeply

remember much. Your mama just kept running all around.
we guard best, even as she spoke, laughed, passed the glow

It was a navy ship. / My mother’s name is Canuta Sacay and
of each story to me, like a document I could have in hand...(Barot 33)

The breaks and alternating lines of interference from the speaker disrupt a continuous reading of the grandmother’s account. The form reflects the grandmother’s difficulty in remembering her time aboard the ship, exemplified by the disjuncture between “I can’t” and “remember much” in the following couplet. What stands out in the grandmother’s mind is the behavior of the speaker’s mother, who was just a child at the time, running around the ship. This salient memory is framed by details of the experience—first, the prevalent sickness that clouds her memory of her time on board and, later, the identification of the vessel as a US Navy ship. I want to highlight both the effect of the movement of the ship on the body and the actions of the mother, running through the memory at sea.

The subjects in the poem—namely, the grandmother and mother—live under conditions where the “ground” is always moving, where the body is destabilized, the senses disoriented. More specifically, the condition of seasickness results from a conflict in the inner ear, signaling to the brain how the body is experiencing up-and-down, side-to-side, and tilting motions. As a body moves along with a ship, the eyes can register a relatively stable scene; yet, agitated by the perceptual incongruity between somewhat stationary visual input and a distressed vestibular system, the brain releases stress-related hormones that can induce nausea and vertigo. Vertigo indicates a disruption of visual, auditory, and proprioceptive faculties—determining a shift in how the kinesthetic body feels in space. Sarah Ahmed, elaborating on the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, notes how “moments of disorientation...involve not only ‘the intellectual experience of disorder, but the vital experience of giddiness and nausea’” (4). The disturbance of mental faculties and embodied experience of nausea resonate with the grandmother’s inability to “remember much” amidst her sickness. Thus, the seasickness marks a disruption of the body’s orientation in space, to the point of inducing forgetting—impairing mental and physical senses.

We can attribute the limitations of her memory and the illness she experiences to the condition of transpacific tractability, associated with living under US Naval power. For the tractable, disoriented subject, the ground is ever rocking, the body ill, the mind subject to forgetting. The poem thus suggests a tractability that extends not only to service members but also to their families. Through the poem, we begin to witness the infiltration of the US Navy into the family unit. Conscripted by empire, the grandmother and her daughter have been uprooted and transplanted across the globe. Even years after the transoceanic journey, the grandmother can

still recall the reeling effects of life in service to the Navy—a transpacific residue that ripples into the lives of the generations that succeed her.

Before turning to the *Pakinggan* photographs, I want to linger on the salient memory that the grandmother holds on to: the blur of her daughter, rushing “all around” the ship. We can picture the darting movements of a child, all energy and exuberance, on the already rocking vessel. We can imagine the ship’s tight corridors, its spaces sunk below sea-level, everything steel and guardrails, crowded wireways and piping, and the grandmother ill, exhausted, trying to keep her daughter in check. In the different narrative strands and the resultant wave of the poem, we hear generations looped into life aboard this vessel—lives that seem to cross and keep crossing, even if only in feeling or memory, transpacific space—lives tethered to an imperial government, movements dictated by a military. Mother and daughter following a father at sea—a son, a grandson, listening to stories on tape.

When I listen to the poem, I can hear the lola pointing to the photographs she shows the speaker.⁶³ I think, too, of how the speaker is listening to the audiotape, and how he might also conjure the bent finger she raises, pointing out details in the images, the people pictured there. “*You know that wedding/...dress in the picture, we had to borrow it from our neighbor,*” she tells him. “*This was the apartment we lived in in Maryland/...That’s Junior there in the picture. And there’s your mama*” (Barot 33). With each “this” and “there,” we can picture the grandmother pointing to the images, recognizing her children, their likenesses. I can picture her brushing the image with a fingertip, or maybe, thinking it too delicate, just hovering above the page. Across time and space, the photographs, as relics of the past, are transmuted somehow in the recording. By the grandmother’s voice, and in our listening, they are carried across forms, emerging from

⁶³ *Lola* is “grandmother” in Tagalog.

their nested spots—photos brought out from shoeboxes, albums lifted from bookshelves—for the speaker to listen, for the reader to witness all this in the poetic form. The speaker’s attunement, his vibrant attentions to colliding waves—their sonic interference—resurrects voices of the past, ferrying them closer via archival objects, activating and enlivening them on listening. The grandmother’s last words in the poem return to the mother—that “blur of need” at the center of the memory amidst the sickness.



Figure 5: "Iris, 1966," front and back sides of the image series, Marietta Reyes Obille, 1966, The Pakinggan Archive.

“Iris, 1966”

Transpacific disorientation, resulting from the US imperial perception of Filipinx people as tractable—docile, deployable, transportable—forms the unstable ground of Barot’s poem and the *Pakinggan* photographs. Vibrant readers listen to the emissions of these objects, registering their sensory detours produced from vertiginous transpacific space. In this final section, engaging a vibrant listening practice, I offer my own narrativized response (in italics below) to family photographs and enact polyvocal interference. Like Barot’s speaker in “The Galleons 5,” who encounters the centrality of his mother in the stories behind the images, I encounter the centrality

of my mother, Iris, in a series of photographs from 1966. These photos (see Figure 5) were taken by my grandmother, Marietta Reyes Obille, in San Diego, California, and Cavite City in the Philippines and accompanied my grandfather, Teofilo Barron Obille, while he was stationed in Danang, Vietnam, from August 1966-1967. In this handful of images, my mother is pictured at just over a year old. Two of the photos are taken at the family's first house in San Diego; the rest are taken at relatives' houses in Cavite, where my grandmother and mother returned in order to be closer to my grandfather while he served in Vietnam. The images are printed on square photo paper, developed in Cavite, and were given as tokens of remembrance to my grandfather—slipped into his suitcase after a visit with the family in the fall of 1966. On the back of each photo is a handwritten note—short inscriptions in my grandmother's hand.

I am compelled by the way that these images constellate sites across the Pacific, by the way different vectors of imperial power and desire for proximity bring about movements across bodies of water, the infiltration of Vietnamese land, the tearing away from the family's first home in the States, and the return to a Philippine home for a brief window of time. At first glance, the photos seem to mark the pedestrian and merely domestic—a child in a home, a child with a doll, a child on a patio.⁶⁴ With a vibrant attunement, I listen now to the colliding waves of affect and empire that propagate from these images, enacting polyvocal interference. The photos (see Figure 6) speak these things:

⁶⁴ There is space for more critical consideration of the representations of different "homes" in these photographs—especially in the context of vernacular, familial production. For example, I might think beside Crystal Mun-hye Baik's analysis of a Korean American home film archive as a space that "registers the polyphony or double logic that functions at the heart of American citizenship: the ways in which narratives of the comfortable American home and possessive individualism depend on obscured histories of exclusion, loss, and dispossession" (14).



Figure 6: "Iris, 1966," the Gilmore Street House, San Diego, front and back sides, Marietta Reyes Obille, 1966, The Pakinggan Archive.

September 1966. Iris is young, perhaps too young to recall this place someday—her first home, the family's first place in the United States. It's a small house on Gilmore Street, near the 32nd Street Naval Station, and her mother has been packing to leave for Cavite. Teofilo has been in Vietnam a month already, so Marietta handles the move by herself. She has stacked suitcases in the corner of the room (the haze of orange plaid in the background of the photo). Slowly, she has removed her things from the living spaces, sold off furniture, given items to friends for safe keeping. Just a few things of hers are left—gauzy, white curtains, a chair with narrow legs, a maroon-cushioned couch. Soon, it will be as if they'd never been there at all.

Night has already fallen, the cool of evening invading the home. As she packs, she makes time to document their life there, putting Iris in a white dress with lace details at the neckline. She combs down the wispy strands of her daughter's hair; wrestles on red socks that the child will take off just moments later. When it's time for pictures, Marietta kneels down to get close to her daughter's level, lowering the camera to view what Iris sees—capturing the beige carpet and low angles of the room. Iris' gaze meets the flash when it goes off, leaving her wide-eyed, her dress brightened by the exposure. It's enough to remember the house by.

Later, inscribing the back of the printed photograph, Marietta offers it as a “souvenir” to remind Teofilo of his daughter.

Amid my listening practice, I want to follow the detour suggested in that single word. The photographed child and the memory of that place become a “souvenir”—a term caught in a commercial, transoceanic, memorial economy. A souvenir is something that travels—that originates from and embodies a particular place. My grandmother's word highlights the brief nature of their stay in San Diego, as if they regarded themselves as tourists instead of US citizens. In this transmutation of a body into a transportable object—of Iris, her image, into a souvenir—we sense out the undercurrents of tractability that render her so. Her transfiguration is necessitated by the family's sense of ephemeral dwelling, moved by my grandmother's impulse to hold onto people, places, and things, to be able to draw near to them again. In the images, Iris acts as a placeholder for place itself—an impression, a resonance of the San Diego house, and then, the family house in the Philippines. This slippage that occurs between Filipina being and domestic space accompanies and is symptomatic of the transpacific tractability that radiates into the family's lives through my grandfather's status as a militarized subject.

During his time in Danang, my grandfather's role in the military was in transport. The things and people he transported varied. At times, it was Vietnamese prisoners—serving as a guard, gathering and moving these people across the Vietnamese land. Faye Caronan might suggest that an identification with US exceptionalism is at work here, “prevent[ing] identification with the subsequent targets of US colonial projects” (114). Under the logics of tractability, my grandfather in this circumstance, has not only been himself transplanted and mobilized, but has also been assigned to propagate the violence of tractability—transmuting other racialized subjects, the Vietnamese prisoners, into objects for transport and containment—ultimately, in the name of the US democratizing intervention and benevolent rescue of the Vietnamese people.

More often, my grandfather's duties required him to transport body bags containing the remains of US soldiers. His role involved first collecting the bodies, usually retrieving them in parts and placing the parts into the bags. Afterward, he was responsible for moving them into storehouses. From these anecdotes, I can imagine how holding fast to the photographs of Iris and letters from my grandmother would have anchored him—viewing his daughter as a vibrant center amidst the “incessant rocking” of his days.

Thus, underlying the photographed stills are the vertiginous movements that accompany the tractable condition—coursing through not just the life of my grandfather but also the lives of the rest of the family. Through my grandfather's service in the Navy, my grandmother and mother also become transplanted, mobilized subjects, demonstrating the rhizomorphic aggression of the tractable logics of empire. These logics resound into the posturing of the photographed Iris as a “souvenir”—the photo resonating with Marietta's desire to hold on to the places in which empire places them, to document her daughter's growing up in domestic spaces

of care amidst the waves of war. There is more to be said, too, about how Iris is figured here—memorialized in idealized Tagalog and Spanish mestiza femininity, even in infancy, dressed in white, pictured with a doll with sandy blonde hair. We might link Iris’ presentation to the strand of feminine religious purity associated with the Maria Clara figure, or to the preference for lighter-skinned mestiza beauty.⁶⁵ At the same time, the photos carry the resonances of affection, picturing what is held dear. Iris is not only fixed up by her mother and formulated by the camera but also made material by inscription. In familiar expressions of devotion, my grandmother’s letters convey to my grandfather the urgency of remembering—repeating, “Something to remember by,” “A promise to remind you of your loving daughter,” “May this remind you of us always.” The anxiety of forgetting underlies her words—an aversion to loss, the desire to find ways through or around distance. My mother promises a means of altering that distance. She is memory. She is a promise of family, a tether between father and daughter, a focal point amidst the disruption of war, the sway of a ship, the beating of waves. The images reach out in attempts to hold together a family.

Transpacific Resonance, Shining in Spectacular and Unspectacular Time

My grandfather (“Nono”) passed in December 2022. He had Parkinson’s disease, which has been linked to exposure to Agent Orange. The air he inhaled his year in Danang was air that infiltrated deep, that rooted in the body, spoiled it gradually and quietly over time. This poisoning occurred in what Rob Nixon refers to as *unspectacular time*—where slow violence performs its insidious work. “Chemical and radiological violence,” he writes, “is driven inward,

⁶⁵ Denise Cruz analyzes the icons that reappear or haunt Filipina femininity, including the Maria Clara figure. Ghostliness, she notes, “implies overlap, the impossibility of separating one realm from the other, or in the case of the Philippines, the continually imbricated histories of this nation with those of Spain, the United States, and Japan” (71). Cruz’s work thus underscores constructions of transpacific feminine bodies that are indicative of the Philippines’ changing interactions with other nations. We might consider the representation of Iris in the archive as one fabricated by spectral, imperial legacies and transpacific circuits.

somatized into cellular dramas of mutation that—particularly in bodies of the poor—remain largely unobserved, undiagnosed, and untreated” (6). This is the quiet work of US empire in the transpacific—work that also involves the deliberate forgetting of the war in Vietnam’s destruction of life and land. Public discourses surrounding the war often ignore that the Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians lost “approximately four million people during the war’s official years” while the US lost “fifty-eight thousand or so men” (Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies* 156). Explosives devastated the Vietnamese countryside and most of its infrastructure. US aircrafts spraying Agent Orange and other herbicides poisoned the water, land, and air, the contaminants toxifying the soil for decades and creating chemical “hot spots” that infiltrate the food chain in forests, farmland, and former military bases. The dioxin in Agent Orange has caused serious birth defects among at least 150,000 Vietnamese children and cancer, diabetes, Parkinson’s, and other documented disabilities documented among US veterans (Aspen Institute). Listening to the imperial transpacific means listening to colliding stories of conquest and destruction, couched in US benevolence, liberation, or the promise of “good refuge.” Nono’s story is one of many soundings in the blue void of the transpacific.

In Chapter 1, I read an image of Vietnamese boat people taken from the deck of the USS Blue Ridge (LCC-19) in May 1984. After selecting the image for analysis, I found out that my grandfather served on this same vessel after its first commissioning in November 1970, where it was built at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard. Assigned to the new ship as a Navy Chief Machinist Mate, my grandfather was aboard the USS Blue Ridge from November 1970 to September 1972, over a decade before the photograph was taken. I’m interested in these distant soundings, the residues of watery crossings, the ghosts of militarized and racialized regimes and the subjects implicated in them, the intricate workings of empire that loop people together across

oceans and timespaces. As YẾN Lê Espirtu has described, the Vietnam War “involved a constellation of US former and current colonial territories in the Asia-Pacific region,” leading her “to reconceptualize the Vietnam War not as a dyadic but as a *transpacific* war that inflicted collateral damage on the Vietnamese *and* also on indigenous and (formerly) colonized subjects in the circuits of US Empire (“Critical Refugee Studies and Native Pacific Studies” 483). In this moment, I listen out for the crossings between the pictured *Pakinggan* subjects I examine in this chapter and vibrant refugee beings in the previous chapter—subjects entangled in transpacific imperial violence and ecological destruction that occur in spectacular time (a napalm bombing, a transoceanic displacement, a burning) and unspectacular time (the debilitation of a body, the construction of narratives of benevolence and rescue, the quiet losses that resound). Hearing these stories together creates an instance of polyvocal interference, as I bear witness to collisions across the Pacific, at the edges of California, and in the realm of photographic memoryscapes.

During the Fall of Saigon in April 1975, Vietnamese refugees were evacuated on US military aircrafts, transferred to US military bases in spaces including the Philippines, Guam, Wake Island, and Hawaii, and delivered again to bases in the United States, including Camp Pendleton in California (where my grandfather was on detail between 1985 and 1989). The use of former and current US colonial territories in the Pacific as receiving centers reveals the United States’ dependence upon these holdings and its ongoing militarization practices. As Espirtu, Lowe, and Yoneyama underscore,

it was the enormity of the US military buildup in the Pacific that uniquely equipped US bases there to handle the large-scale refugee rescue operation. As such, US evacuation efforts were not a slapdash response to an emergency situation that arose in Vietnam in 1975 but rather part and parcel of the long-standing militarized histories and circuits that connected Vietnam, the Philippines, and Guam, dating back to 1898. (178)

The militarization of the Pacific thus anchored the Philippines and other US colonial holdings as militarized sites for bolstering the US war efforts and venerating American liberatory interventions.

Further, bases in the Philippines, such as Clark Air Force Base, emerge from a history of Native dispossession and colonial conquest. Clark, for example, into which my grandparents and Iris flew while my grandfather was stationed in Danang, is on land formerly owned by individual Filipinx families. In 1902, the US Army wanted to relocate their post to the fertile plain owned by Philippine Natives, converting the space into a large airfield over the next couple decades. My grandfather's family owned and lived off of a portion of that plain. After the United States bought the land from the Philippine government, the local officials failed to compensate his family for the land they sold, leaving them destitute. Later, when my grandfather was four years old, his father died of starvation, leaving him in need of finding work to support his mother and sister. Eventually, he found a way out of poverty: passing an intelligence exam and joining the US Navy as a steward.⁶⁶

Like Clark Air Force Base, Camp Pendleton in California is also marked by Indigenous dispossession. Located on the land of Juaneño, Luiseño, and Kumeyaay tribes, Camp Pendleton has a layered history of Spanish "discovery," "unscrupulous Anglo-American settler" ownership, and finally, acquisition by the US Marine Corps in 1942 for Marine combat training (Espiritu et al. 179). The construction of these bases as sites of "good refuge" obscures the violences of the ongoing settler-colonial occupation of stolen land as well as their crucial roles in the Vietnam War. For example, Camp Pendleton is the "home base of the illustrious 1st Marine Regiment, whose battalions participated in some of the most ferocious battles" of the War in Vietnam; and

⁶⁶ Due to the demeaning nature of stewards' labor on board US Navy ships, the vessels have been referred to as "floating plantations" (Rowe).

from 1965 to 1975, Clark Air Force Base, the “largest overseas US military base in the world, became the major staging base for US involvement in Southeast Asia, providing crucial logistical support for the Vietnam War” (Espiritu et al. 180). Thus, while actually contributory to the displacement of refugees and destruction in Vietnamese lands, the bases of the Pacific were publicly celebrated—transvalued into sites of liberation for aiding Vietnamese refugees in their flight-to-resettlement process.

Thus, Vietnamese refugees and tractable Filipinx are caught up in webs of imperial transpacific interrelation. Within the transpacific space of ecocide and militarization, these subjects seek out vibrancy in its particular and nuanced forms—chasing after animateness and expressions of animal alterity that bursts forth from docile refugee captivity, attending to what shines as a troubled reminder of the violent becoming space of *nu’ó’c*—or listening out for what glows, for livingness that might be brought near, responding in polyvocal interference to objects saturated with militarized dictations of tractable subjecthood. These are subjects seeking always the things thought displaced, distant, or disappeared.

In *lê*’s novel, the narrator encounters a photograph of her own grandparents while she and her family are living in an apartment in San Diego. She states, “Vietnam is a black-and-white photograph of my grandparents sitting in bamboo chairs in their front courtyard” (*lê* 78). The image becomes a metonym for an entire nation, standing in for Vietnam itself—the place, all its memories and associations—holding so much more than what “is not visible to the eye” (*lê* 79). Later in the novel, the narrator and her parents watch as their San Diego apartment gets torn down. The photograph of the grandparents, left behind, lies somewhere in the wreckage. Staring at the remains, the narrator says: “Listen...they are sitting in the attic, sitting like royalty. Shining in the dark, buried by a wrecking ball. Paper fragments floating across the surface of the

sea” (lê 99). The narrator beckons us to listen, showing us how to attend, as she does, to the vibrancy of the photographed subjects—the grandparents sitting upright, shining in the darkness. Just as she listened to the glass butterfly, holding the object to her ear before detecting the “soft rustling” of its song, the narrator urges us to listen now (lê 25). Via the narrator’s listening, the photographed subjects exceed their perceived boundaries, rendering the photograph itself a porous medium from which the grandparents surge into motion, emitting a light that touches the narrator and is passed on to the reader. Lê’s narrator thus performs a vibrant reading of the photograph of her grandparents—hearing something in its ruinous state, in its fragmented, floating form. From the site of nu’ó’c, from spaces of imperial destruction, the narrator senses out the vibrancy of what is supposedly lost to the ongoing violences of war.

The narrator’s reading enacts a vibrancy that registers especially in terms of light waves—feeling out the vibrant potential of the photographic medium in ways that highlight the affective and sensorial properties of photographs.⁶⁷ As Barthes describes in haptic terms, the chemical photographic process involves the recovery and direct printing of “the luminous rays emitted by a variously lighted object. The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here” (80). Citing Sontag, he observes, “the photograph of the missing being...will touch me like the delayed rays of a star” (80-81). Barthes highlights the nature of (predigital) photography—especially in having a “necessarily real” referent—where the body of the photographed person can, through the film medium and conversion of silver halide crystals into metal via interaction with light, reach out to the viewer (76). Although delayed in passage, like the old light reflected

⁶⁷ For more affective readings of *Camera Lucida*, see Thy Phu and Elspeth H. Brown, *Feeling Photography* (2014).

from a cosmic object to the viewer on Earth, the transmission is felt in our own timeplace.⁶⁸ As vibrant readers interact with the photographic medium, they sense what radiates from the image, what registers in their present place. The light that reaches lê's narrator is, like other shining imagery in the novel—the underwater turning of the brother, the lights from squid boats, the bodies of writhing fish—a troubled signal; the grandparents' shining communicates at once the ongoingness of their vibrant being and the loss of them in the wreckage of the supposed refuge.

When attending to the *Pakinggan* photographs, different vibrant readers will respond to the images' transmissions in different ways, moved by their own senses and affects, creating different resultant waves from their experiences of polyvocal interference.⁶⁹ When I view the *Pakinggan* images, when I reach out to them in vibrancy and listen for the ways they reach back to me, I hear layers of talk from living rooms I've never set foot in—rooms from the family house in Cavite that is now gone, the land sold, the structure leveled just a few years ago to make room for new developments. I can feel what it's like to sit on the springy maroon couch in the photo at the San Diego house, though I've never sat on it before, and I can smell the jasmine wafting in through the open windows—the scent that always hangs in the damp, evening air—the smell of being close to the ocean, even if you can't see it. What shines to me through these photos is not just the shining of the light that travels to me, the effect of flash that illuminates these moments and brightens Iris' dresses. What shines is the stunning, sustained moment of the photograph reaching out to me, speaking things in the language of light and sound and ocean.

⁶⁸ In one of Barot's poems in *The Galleons* entitled "UDFj-39546284," the speaker describes the feeling of viewing a photograph of his grandmother, who sits outside, "her hands folded in her lap," "taking in the gold sunshine" (Barot 6). The speaker compares the feeling of looking at this image to viewing a photograph of the farthest known galaxy—conveying the strangeness of the experience of distance and time.

⁶⁹ This understanding is aligned with Stanley Fish's declaration of the sentence as not just an object, "a thing-in-itself, but an *event*, something that happens to, and with the participation of the reader" ("Literature in the Reader" 125). In future revisions of this chapter, I will think, too, about how Wai Chee Dimock's work on "resonance" ("A Theory of Resonance," 1997) may inflect my theorization of vibrant reading.



Figure 7: “Father, Daughter,” Teofilo Barron Obille and iris, in the Reyes house, Cavite City, Marietta Reyes Obille, 1966, The Pakinggan Archive.

I’ll close by listening to a final photograph, “Father, Daughter” (see Figure 7), in the “Iris, 1966” series—one that enacts this shining, the reaching out, more clearly.⁷⁰

Now, the family is in the Philippines, in the Reyes family house in Cavite City. Iris and Marietta are staying with her side of the family, the place where she grew up, where her own mother and father, Nanay Salud and Tay, her maternal grandmother, Lola Pina, and some of her twelve siblings are still living. The house is full, the radio always playing, something always cooking. Teofilo has met them here, on break for just a couple days before returning to Danang.

In the living room, Teofilo lifts Iris for the picture—wearing another white dress, anchored on his shoulder. On the shelf behind them are assorted knick-knacks—a Buddha statue; a floral, ceramic figurine; a pink toy basket—and the family’s book collection. Teofilo points at the camera, drawing Iris’ attention there. The parents’ coaxing is in the air, as if Marietta is calling Iris by name, as if Teofilo issues, in his deep voice, a “Look there, at your Mama.” In

⁷⁰ In future revisions of this chapter, I will add analyses of more photo sets from *The Pakinggan Archive*, offering a fuller sense of the narratives it holds.

mimic motion, Iris looks at the camera and points her finger at the camera, too. The camera flashes, the shutter snaps, and the moment stands.

Teofilo returns to Cavite at his next break. When he's called back to Danang, before he leaves again, Marietta slips five envelopes into his suitcase, each with a photograph, each inscribed with a note of love and remembrance. She signs most of them as "Iris" or "Iris Joyce," but on one photograph, the one with father and daughter, she signs, "Love, We."

Even as I listen and respond, I hear the evident gaps in the story: the family's journey on the plane to Clark Air Force Base; the silence surrounding my grandfather's experience in the war while his family was just east across the South China Sea; and the implication of the return the following year to California, starting over again. In these silences, the hum of the blue void slips out, overlaid with the few soundings from the photographs.

There is something captivating to me about this last picture—the way my lolo is pointing at the camera and directing my mother's attention, and the way their eyes meet the viewer. The deictic gesture, the pointing, places the photographed subject and the viewer into relative space and time—indexing an unfixed here and now, invoking the pronoun "you," as if heralding the viewer, inviting them into the possibility of the photographic event.⁷¹ I can hear a vibrant exchange here—as you look at him, as he redirects the gaze in return. The interference—between viewer and photographed referent—is more tangible here. Sounds are amplified, the crests tall, everything proximate and rapid. Shining, they pass their glow to me, everything warmth and remembrance. When I view this image and my grandfather's pointing gesture, it is like being

⁷¹ As discussed briefly in the Introduction, Ariella Azoulay describes photography as a potential event ("What is a Photograph?" 12). She writes: "I think of the photographic event as an effect of the potential penetration of a camera, accompanied by the possibility that a photograph will be produced within its field of vision. The event of photography...might take place as the encounter with a camera, with a photograph or with the mere knowledge that a photograph has been (or might have been) produced" ("What is a Photograph?" 11-12). For Azoulay, the event of photography, the photographic encounter, is not constrained by either past or present tense. Photography is a happening that could be, that might be, and so orients us to ongoing and potential motions and sense-making.

recognized, a familiar act; for another viewer, it is an address and invitation, an assertion of agency and a turning of the gaze. Linger with this gesture, I sense the way the photographs can hold onto you, and how, at the time of their taking, they were the means of holding onto each other.

My broader claim in this chapter is that vibrant readers take on a posture of adjacency—knowing they cannot reach the photographed referent, but recreating, in dizzying, sensory divergence, the imagined scene—the *as if it is, here and now*. As a vibrant reader, I listen with my skin, eyes, and ears to the past sounds that are sounded now, ferried to me in waves of various lengths and amplitudes—waves colliding with other waves, traveling in the space of the transpacific, placing me amidst ocean vectors and channels of desire. Following Barot’s speaker’s enactment of a multisensorially-attuned listening practice in “The Galleons 5,” I create interference with the photographs in a vibrant exchange of listening and telling. I dwell beside the poetic and photographic objects, inhabiting the non-monumental scale of vernacular life, bearing witness to the slow-moving, attritional violences of empire and to the everyday acts that speak and imagine other ways of feeling and living. To listen to these representations of Filipinx living, their sensorial and oceanic movements and reverberant longing, is to get caught, too, in the stickiness of empire that clings to tractable subjects—to each mobilized member of a militarized family. I hear, too, subjects caught in the crosscurrents of the transpacific, in webs of Indigenous dispossession and displacements dictated by empire. Still, as the photographs offer me the feeling of their times and places in a few words across the stretch of blue, I draw near and offer something in return. Receiving, washed over, I listen and sound out their presence again.

CHAPTER 3

Archival Longing and the Vibrant Ongoingness of Filipinx Being

In this chapter, I discuss the spatiotemporal effects of Spanish colonial violences that shape Filipinx being and articulate its creative, relational, multisensory, and memorial impulses. In the previous chapter, I examined the ways that two of Rick Barot's poems in *The Galleons* (2020) demonstrate the creative mode of *vibrant reading*, producing *sonic interference* in listening multisensorially and responding to texts, led by the desire for familial connection and an attunement to the repercussions of empire. Specifically, my reading of the poem "The Galleons 5" catalyzed an analysis of the vernacular photographs in *The Pakinggan Archive*; the poem contextualized the photographs within the vertigoes of transpacific transit under US imperial rule post-1898, when, I argued, that US policies and racialized logics of benevolent assimilation fashioned "docile," "teachable" Filipinx into *tractable* subjects—into readily deployable weapons of empire. Pivoting from Chapter 2's focus on the militarization of Filipinx subjecthood under US empire, this chapter offers more sustained attentions to Barot's poetry collection and traces a Filipinx racial ontology to an earlier period of Spanish colonial rule.

Filipinx American scholarship has largely focused on the post-1898 period, when the Philippines became a US imperial territory, in order to assess the terms of American subjugation and to "reckon with [Filipinx] incorporation into the American body politic not only in terms of the history of immigration, acculturation, and community formation, but also in terms of the 'trauma' by which the Philippines was both annexed and disowned by the United States as an experiment in imperialism" (Campomanes qtd. in Bonus and Tiongson 1). Understanding this period of US imperialism as forged in the wake of Spanish colonial period of racializing and extracting Filipinx bodies and lands, I investigate the Manila galleon trade era as crucial to

discerning the residual and ongoing effects of Spanish humanism that inform a transpacific Filipinx American subjecthood.⁷²

From 1565 to 1815, the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade conveyed goods and Filipinx subjects themselves—as maritime workers, indentured laborers, and enslaved people—across the Pacific Ocean to the western coast of Mexico and what is now the state of California. Reading Barot’s poems, I inquire after a mode of being that recognizes and responds to the felt and experienced ongoingness of this trade—its vertigoes and violences. I argue that Barot’s poems theorize *vibrant, Filipinx being* as a response to a condition of transpacific *tractability* under Spanish colonialism. I trace the US imperial-era (post-1898) perception of Filipinxs as deployable objects of empire to an earlier iteration of tractability under Spanish rule (1521-1898). Under Spanish humanist logics that racialize Filipinxs as “*indios*” or “*chinos*”—as subordinate, rehabilitated colonial subjects or Asiatic foreigners—Filipinx bodies become easily wrought into commercial objects. Barot’s poem “The Galleons 2” makes these transfigurations apparent through the speaker’s archival encounter of galleons ship logs, an archive enmeshed in a transpacific ecology of wreckage. My reading of the poem exposes a sense of archival loss and longing that accompanies the transmogrification of Filipinx bodies into transportable goods. These asymptotic affects lay the groundwork for the orientations of *vibrant, Filipinx being*: a felt, spatiotemporal proximity with objects of loss—seemingly unreachable or sunken things—and the desire to sense the expansive, branching forms of liveliness in them; vibrant being expresses far-reaching ways of sensing/feeling/thinking the world. In the second half of this

⁷² By foregrounding the Spanish colonial era in the formation of Filipinx American subjecthood, my readings share alignments with works such as John D. Blanco’s *Frontier Constitutions* (2009), Denise Cruz’ *Transpacific Femininities* (2012), Paula C. Park’s *Intercolonial Intimacies* (2022), Sony Coráñez Bolton’s *Crip Colony* (2023), and Genevieve Alva Clutario’s *Beauty Regimes* (2023), which trace racialized, gendered, and political epistemologies developed under Spanish colonialism in the Philippines and their evolutions during and after the period of transition to US imperial rule.

chapter, I show how my reading of “The Galleons 2” orients a reading of the other Galleons poems, “The Galleons 1” through “The Galleons 10,” in Barot’s collection. These poems not only show how the transpacific trade echoes across contemporary, vernacular, and transglobal settings, but also demonstrate the ongoingness of Filipinx being—the felt sensorial and affective surges of what cannot be contained or extinguished.

Race and Relation

Attuned to the reverberations of history and the resonant experiences between different people swept into global circuits of exchange, vibrant being draws attention to seemingly distant things and offers flashes of uncertain, indefinite relation between them. As discussed in preceding chapters, Lisa Lowe observes that little attention has been paid to relation across difference, to interconnected but differently situated histories, and to US racial formations in connection with the larger history of the Americas; such connections between “differentially laboring peoples” have been “eclipsed by the operations that universalize the Anglo-American liberal individual” (*Intimacies* 21). This individual, the post-Enlightenment, “rational Man,” in his pursuit of the universal and transparent, has created classes of abject humanity. As Lowe discusses, global, colonial processes developed a divide between modern liberal subjects and those overlooked—especially colonized peoples, the “unfree,” “uncivilized,” and the “non-human” (*Intimacies* 39). The relegation of Filipinx subjects to non-human, commercial-objectified status under the logics of tractability, then, follow Spanish humanist reason that forms the category of “Man”—synonymous with the exclusive and privileged site of Whiteness, belonging to the Western, liberal subject—civilized, rational, and free.⁷³ In other words, I

⁷³ Also informative of my understanding of the mythic subject, Man, is Kandice Chuh’s discussion (extrapolating on Sylvia Wynter’s body of work) that advocates for the acceleration of the “conceptual ‘erasing’ of the figure of Man” and bringing an end to the present order of discourse (Chuh 1). Such discourse creates “sub- or unhuman bodies by

understand the Human as an evolving form of Whiteness that requires the subjugation and subordination of colonized peoples, the use of their labor and resources, and the death of the Other (especially Black, Native, and Alien subjects) for its self-actualization and conditions for liberty. This chapter thus unpacks racialized Filipinxness as embedded in the differentiation of subjects deemed other-than-human, specifically as attached to both Indigenous (i.e., Natives eventually incorporated as political subjects under Spanish rule) and Asian racializations and forms of “non-humanity.”⁷⁴

As I address questions of race and relation, I am also informed by Alexander Weheliye’s notion of *racializing assemblages* and Édouard Glissant’s *poetics of relation*. I reference these ideas as theories grounded in studies of Blackness and Afrodiaspora that explicitly gesture towards or open dialogue with other studies of raced being, including Asian American and Pacific Islander discourse. In *Habeus Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (2014), Weheliye brings “to the fore blackness” but also situates his project as “relevant to and [drawing] on other forms of racialized minority discourse (Asian American studies, Latino/a studies, ethnic studies, Native American studies, postcolonial studies, etc.);” like Weheliye, I consider “the barring of nonwhite subjects from the category of the human as it is performed in the modern west” as informing the “ongoing sets of political relations” that make up “race” and “racialization” (Weheliye 3). Further, racializing assemblages

the materializing processes of capital, empire and the imposition of the nation-state as the naturalized and dominant geopolitical formation” and marks such bodies with “the incapacity for proper aesthetic judgment” (Chuh 19).

⁷⁴ In *Crip Colony* (2023), Sony Coráñez Bolton notes an important distinction between the ways nations of Latin America and the United States have treated or incorporated Indigenous peoples. He writes: “In a basic sense, the Spanish Empire incorporated the *indio*, while Anglo imperialism treated the Indian as separate and distinct... Spanish imperialism considered indios political subjects of the Spanish crown, while this was not the case for Anglo imperialism, which considered Indians distinct political subjects though still beholden to the British crown” (13). Thus, following Bolton, I underscore a sense of Filipinx Indigeneity that developed under Spanish colonial logics of Indigenous incorporation—a form of Nateness that brushes up against but is different from Native American and First Nations subjectivities in most parts of the US and Canada.

are assemblages of Glissantian relation. Writing from Afrodiasporic Caribbean grounds, Glissant articulates the relation of each matter to all others, drawing errant networks of difference between the local and global, a body and other bodies, a body and its immediate environment. Glissant postulates intercultural, interpersonal, and ecological being, based on the necessity of movement, where one is always in relationship with the Other. Relation, never knowing an absolute totality, aids in the renunciation of pursuits of a universal and transparent raced subject. Embodying the processes of bringing-into-relation that describe “spheres of interconnected existences that are in constant motion,” racializing assemblages reveal “the global and systemic dimensions of racialized, sexualized, and gendered subjugation, while not losing sight of the many ways political violence has given rise to ongoing practices of freedom within various traditions of the oppressed” (Weheliye 13). Thus, this chapter strives to think through Filipinxness as a racialized assemblage that is always already in relation, as formed by global processes of exchange and co-informative making.

As Glissant suggests in his work, “the reality of archipelagos in the Caribbean or the Pacific provides a natural illustration of the thought of Relation,” both as “explosive regions,” as places of “encounter and connivance and, at the same time, [passageways] toward the American continent” (33). Glissant draws attention to the Pacific, like the Caribbean, as a body of water that explodes the land into islands—the formations themselves demonstrating the diffracted, open network that comprises relation. Further, I would argue that the Philippine archipelago could be thought of as a materialization of Glissantian relation in its endurance of multiple eras of colonization and occupation, namely, by Spain, Japan, and the United States, causing collisions of languages and cultures. To be clear, in the spirit of Glissantian relation that pronounces an openness of being that collides with other beings, I read *The Galleons* not as

striving to answer the question of where Filipinxs should fit into Spanish colonial or contemporary American racial categories, but rather as inquiring after the legacies of Spanish colonialism and the formation of the Human (i.e., white, Western Man) as they play out both on a global stage and across quotidian scenes of life. Such histories have prescribed and continue to affect conditions of Filipinx tractability—rendering racialized subjects moveable across oceans as dictated by Western aesthetics and the colonial demand for sub- or non-Human labor.

These colonial trajectories of power inform the transpacific space in which Filipinx tractability is enacted and from which vibrant being sprouts. As first discussed in Chapter 1, a transpacific episteme demarcates not only a geography but also “a powerful way to counter-narrate a history of decimation” (Gómez-Barris xvi). As such, I theorize vibrant being as leaving open the possibilities for creative making amidst oceanic dissolution, the sinking of ships and cargo, and the forgetting that accompanies colonial transits. I imagine vibrant being as unruly and stretching in alignment with what Donna Haraway has articulated as a stringy “tentacularity,” delineating the “reaching and climbing tendrilled ones,” thriving in “nets and networks,” embodying “life lived along lines—and such a wealth of lines” (32). Vibrant being, emerging from dictations of transpacific, racialized objecthood, feels out the possibilities of netting together what is thought to be gone, too past and far away, knowing instead the intimate besideness of things brought together across watery terrains.

I. Filipinx Tractability and Transpacific Archival Loss

“Indios or Chinos”

During the first 150 years of the galleon trade, from the late 1560s to the early 1700s, traders brought slaves from Manila to Acapulco as part of regular maritime commerce across the Pacific. Prior to the trade and throughout the 16th century, newly introduced European diseases

caused epidemics that wiped out an estimated 27 million Indigenous peoples in colonial Mexico, or Nueva España, creating a high demand for imported labor (Acuna-Soto, Rodolfo, et al. 1). Additionally, after 1542, the Natives (*indios*) of New Spain were deemed “free, indigenous vassals” as those who accepted Spanish sovereignty and could no longer be considered enslavable (*Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico* 5). As part of Spain’s effort to supply the American colonies with labor, the transpacific trade brought slaves from “disparate places, including East Africa, Portuguese India, the Muslim sultanates of Southeast Asia, and the Spanish Philippines”—including different *indios filipinos*, for example, “*de nacion Pampango [Pampanga]*” or “*natural de Cibu [Cebu]*” (“The Rise and Fall of the Transpacific Slave Trade” 1506, Slack 59).⁷⁵ Thus, I underscore the role of Filipinx slave labor during the galleon trade as an imported force that supplemented the needs of a growing Spanish empire in the Americas—tying Filipinx bodies to both commercial transit and racialized subjugation in relation to the crown’s other “*indios*.”

⁷⁵ When considering the transoceanic transport of enslaved people to the Americas, the racial differentiation between peoples in the hemisphere, and the condition of person-commercial object mutability pronounced in this process, readers will most likely think of the transatlantic slave trade and constructions of transatlantic Blackness. Such archives and Black ontological frameworks are often considered detached from the transpacific slave trade—the latter, a lesser-known and -studied history, particularly in US and hemispheric American contexts. Indeed, Black slaves were part of the transpacific slave trade aboard the galleons. Although a minority in Manila, Black subjects, primarily slaves accompanying Portuguese and Spanish merchants as well as freemen of African descent, labored or provided services on the galleons (Reyes 695). Upon arrival in the Americas, slaves—including both Filipinx and Afrodescendant peoples brought from Manila—were generally categorized as *negros* (or *cafres*, i.e., black slaves from all parts of Africa), *chinos*, or *indios*. As Tatiana Seijas has stated, “any estimate of the overall trade must be understood as including both blacks and chinos” (1506). Colonial narratives, including those maintained in colonial archival records—as processes of forgetting—erode the connectedness of Black and Filipinx discourses, historical narratives, and racial formations.

Barot’s poem, “The Galleons 2,” does not explicitly list “*negros*” among the enslaved peoples on the galleons; but other poems in his collection suggest the more proximate, although fraught, relation between transatlantic Blackness and transpacific Filipinx being. In another poem in *The Galleons* entitled “UDFj-39546284,” Barot’s speaker uses language of artistic production within a global labor economy to grapple with the difficulty of thinking through Black and Filipinx histories together. The poem offers helpful language of visibility for expressing the complications surrounding the compulsion to “background” one narrative in order to “foreground” the other (Barot 6). Although a sustained discussion of this relation falls outside of the scope of this chapter, I read the omission of *negros* as evidencing the difficulty of holding both narratives, of the Black transatlantic and Filipinx transpacific slave trades, in relation, as people caught in transglobal histories of labor, exchange, and racialization that serve to centralize and safeguard white, liberal Humanity.

Thinking of Barot's poem "The Galleons 2" as a soundscape, I want to listen to the wavelengths of histories underlying the racial designation of Filipinxs as "*indios* or *chinos*" as the conditions of possibility for their transfiguration into tractable objecthood (Barot 11). Via vibrant reading, we can be attuned to the narrative murmurs that underlie the poem, revealing the sinister slippage of Filipinxs beside objects for sale and racializing networks otherwise muffled within the archive. "The Galleons 2" exemplifies an archival encounter that questions the position of contemporary Filipinx subjecthood in relation to the galleons histories. The poem consists of fifteen couplets, the majority of which catalogue the various goods, animals, and people encountered in the transpacific record. Framing the poem in the first and final couplets is a question, responding to a statement in the opening line:

Research is mourning, my friend says. Which means what,
exactly, for the things listed in the archives

as filling the galleons when they left Cebu and Manila—
ivory objects, jade objects, copper objects...

...slaves that were called *indios*
or *chinos*, nails, tools, iron cask hoops, fireworks, opals—elegy? (10-11)

If, as the speaker's friend suggests, that research is mourning, what does that mean for the archived objects? How can these items—ornamental goods and "slaves" among others—be elegized or properly lamented? The speaker suggests the problem of archival encounter, as he desires proximity to the objects at once specified and anonymized in the ship log, coming up against the ultimate impossibility of the objects' historiographical recovery or revivification; and thus, any attempt to mourn these objects/people will seem imperfect, inadequate.⁷⁶ As he

⁷⁶ By centering questions of archival limits, loss, and an affective though ultimately unfulfilled impulse toward recovery, the poem draws a field of inquiry that overlaps with questions posed across a substantial body of work in Black transatlantic studies. Saidiya Hartman's "Venus in Two Acts," for example, faces an archive of Atlantic slavery that repeatedly presents the raced and sexualized figure of "Venus"—a title given to many, always marking

considers the silences within transpacific records, the speaker experiences archival longing, a desirous affect determined by the poem's representations of an excess of material commercial goods as well as the uncanny listing of racialized, enslaved subjects beside "nails, tools, iron hoops, fireworks, opals."

I argue that "The Galleons 2" also engenders an archival desire in the reader. Following the speaker's impulse of archival longing and contending with the compressed, lyric form, readers may be incited to delve into galleons histories that are not fully encapsulated on the page. Functioning as an exemplary reader of the poem, I turn now to scholarship on the history of Filipinx enslavement and colonial extraction during the galleons trade in order to flesh out the nature of the violences that the archives damper and which the poem can only give voice to in soundbites and sketches.

In Barot's poem, the "slaves" referred to are identifiable by their legal status and objecthood, leaving no room for speculation about these figures' interior lives, instead highlighting their equivalency with other items intended for trade and consumption—utilitarian or decorative in nature. The tractability of Filipinx colonial subjecthood is made tangible here, where Filipinxs exist as objects among objects, bodies transfigured into exports, as labor capital. As Antonio de Morga, member of the Spanish court, reports in a famous account, *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas* (1609), Native slaves could be "sold, exchanged and traded, just like any other article of merchandise" (Giráldez 21). According to colonial logics, Filipinxs could be readily handled, managed, and dragged across the Pacific by Spanish authorities, converted into commercial, other-than-human status for the sake of securing colonial rule and fueling colonial extractivist projects in the crown's territories.

suffering but ever detached from any specific subject. "Loss," Hartman describes in encountering what remains unknown about the Venuses of the archive, "gives rise to longing" (4).

This transfiguration of Filipinx bodies is made possible by the differentiating logics of race under Spanish humanism—which perceived *indios* or *indios chinos* as “savage” people in need of taming and instruction. *Chinos* is a complex term that chronically and geographically evolved during Spanish governance. After the start of the galleon trade in 1565, *chinos* distinctly designated an enslaved class of Asiatic laborers—the majority of whom were Filipinx natives, although others were from other places including India, Malaysia, and Indonesia by way of Manila.⁷⁷ The galleons or *naos de China* (China ships) were understood to transport “Asian products and individuals...from Cathay, Cipango (Japan), the Philippines, various kingdoms in Southeast Asia, and India” (Slack 35). Throughout the next century, *la China* became more synonymous with the Philippines itself; and the designation *chino/a* could indicate both a slave’s broadly Asian origins and that fact that they traveled across the Pacific from Manila (Slack 57). Such individuals were known collectively in New Spain as *chinos* or *indios chinos* (“The Rise and Fall of the Transpacific Slave Trade” 1506). Thus, Filipinx subjecthood, technically mislabeled under the *chino/a* signifier, took on a sense of a pan-Asian amalgamation—a combination and reduction of many different cultures, ethnicities, and languages. During this time, many Filipinxs, who had quickly become part of New Spain’s urban work force, were able to pass as *indios* of New Spain, adopting the customs of the host country and using this position to their advantage, hoping to join the *república de indios*, the free republic; part of what afforded passing was the Spanish government’s difficulty in telling *chino* slaves apart from the Natives of New Spain; in fact, many Spanish slave owners resorted to branding *chino* slaves on their faces

⁷⁷ Filipinx *chinos* were distinct from *Sangleys* (native-Chinese) and *mestizos de Sangleys* (Chinese-native mestizos) in the Philippines. See Sony Coráñez Bolton’s chapter, “Orientalizing Impairments: Chinese Foot-Binding and the Crip Coloniality of Travel Literature” in *Crip Colony*, 2023, for more on how *sangleys* tracked notions of the unassimilable and Oriental in the later 19th century.

to dissuade Filipinos from fleeing and passing as free *indios* (*Asian Slaves in Colonial Mexico*).⁷⁸ Eventually, by the 1660s and officially in 1672, all Indigenous peoples in Spanish-held territories were deemed “indigenous vassals”—thus liberating *chino* slaves from the Spanish Philippines. *Indios* thenceforth signaled “a universal term for those considered to be natives of the king’s dominions in the Americas and Asia” (Slack 64).

The Spanish government of colonial Mexico considered *los Indios de Philipinas* peoples of questionable character—“grouped together with *negros* and *mulattos*,” these *indios* were a race “predisposed to criminal activity” (Slack 65). Not only were Filipinxs considered to be of corrupted character, but they were also attributed a base degree of mental capability. In a 1763 manuscript, Don Joachin Antonio de Basarás, a Spanish merchant and member of the New Spanish elite, records that the “*indios de Yslas Philipinas*” were of “the lowliest rank of rational state of mind”— due to the orientation of the night sky over the Asian region, the humidity of the island climate, and the *indios*’ “propensity for eating seafood” (Slack 58). Thus, Spanish colonial humanism dictated Filipinxs as enslavable (prior to 1672), in need of taming and reform (after 1672), and indeed, tractable (always), due to a perception of their lesser, underdeveloped minds that opened them to vices and senselessness. Filipinx *indios* were thus debased, acephalous subjects on the “lowliest” scale of humanity.

As such, colonial governance saw Filipinxs as fit primarily for hard labor in the Americas and at sea. As Rudy P. Guevarra Jr. discusses in his examination of the shared histories of sociocultural exchange between Filipinos and the peoples of Nueva España and contemporary Mexico, Filipinx *indios* were relied upon for their labor in the navigation and construction of the galleons. *Indios* were employed to navigate the galleons themselves—their nautical tact and

⁷⁸ For more on the agricultural, linguistic, cultural, and interrelational exchange between Filipinxs and peoples of New Spain/Mexico during the galleons era, see Rudy P. Guevarra Jr., “Filipinos in Nueva España” (2011).

navigational skills crucial to a galleon's successful passage to the New World. Guevarra writes, "The navigating prowess of the Filipino seamen and their knowledge of the Pacific Ocean assured that many of the galleons touched port in Acapulco. Their history of inter-island and long-voyage trading with other Asian countries made them invaluable navigators" ("Filipinos in Nueva España" 392). Thus, transpacific transport was made possible by the very subjects deemed "irrational," "criminal," and "lowly." Further, the galleons themselves were sourced from Philippine natural resources, built by Filipinx *indios*, and exported from entrepôts like Manila. *Indios* were used to cut timber—teak and other hardwood trees abundant in the Pampanga province—and haul them to shipyards where they would construct the ships. These usually unpaid workers, *polistas*, were part of the forced labor system called *polo* (Giráldez 72). Guevarra notes that this system was "the most oppressive phase of the Spanish domination on the islands;" in the construction of the galleons, *indios* were "seen as a *dispensable commodity*...underfed, mistreated, and worked to the point of exhaustion and death" ("Filipinos in Nueva España" 391, emphasis added). Perceived as readily replaceable objects of use, tractable Filipinx were deeply embedded in the production and navigation of the galleons and were "treated like dogs" in the process (Schurz 212).⁷⁹ Tractability thus dictates forced Filipinx participation in the extraction of timber and other goods from their own land and in the construction of their own vehicles of transport—vehicles which staged the transfiguration of Filipinx "personhood" into colonial objecthood, cramming slaves in holding spaces, as "part of the galleon cargo" (Guevara 391).

⁷⁹ Gendered dynamics of abuse also disproportionately affected Filipinx women aboard the galleons: "Filipino indio women suffered other indignities. They were used as concubines for Spanish nobles and other officials, who often times impregnated and abandoned them once they reached port. This practice became such a problem that the Spanish Crown wanted to avoid it altogether; thus a decree was issued in 1608 to put an end to this custom: 'One prominent official had carried fifteen of these women with him on the voyage. Several were delivered of children by him, while others left the ship at Acapulco in a pregnant condition, 'which made a great scandal'" (Guevarra 392).

We can observe that this form of Filipinx tractability developed under Spanish colonial humanism lays the groundwork for its evolution post-1898. As I discuss in Chapter 2, under the US derivative of tractability, Filipinxs are perceived as in need of “benevolent” instruction—once again cast into a lowly rank of humanity, this time as America’s “little brown brother.” Fixing the Filipinx as a “childlike” Native, the United States managed to cloak their militarized extraction of the Pacific archipelago by with the rhetoric of a “civilizing mission.” As tractable, US imperial subjects (even after Philippine independence in 1946), Filipinxs were deployed in US militarized, democratic expansionist ventures that devastated lands and life, such as during the War in Vietnam; at the same time, the Philippine islands were equipped with US bases (built on stolen Native land) and provided crucial logistical support to US troops in wartime.⁸⁰ Thus, Filipinxs and Philippine land were utilized to perpetuate the work of empire—abuse that echoes with the ongoing violences inflicted by its previous colonial occupant. Listening to the frequencies that underlie *indio* and *chino* reveal that tractability, in its multiple imperial and colonial forms, is ever enmeshed with ecocide, Native dispossession and exploitation, and the transfiguration of Filipinx sub-rational, expendable, reformable bodies into vectors of use.

Transpacific Archival Ecologies

I have discussed the ways that the racialization of Filipinxs as *indios* or *indios chinos*—as both dispensable and crucial laborers, senseless yet tamable—have formed the basis of their perception as tractable colonial objects of use. Returning to “The Galleons 2,” I argue that Barot’s poem makes the tractability of Filipinxs apparent via its placement within a colonial archival ecology of excess and loss; it is both the site where Filipinx transpacific objecthood emerges beside other racialized objects, amassed and cramped together in transport, and the site

⁸⁰ See Chapter 2 for more on the utilization of Philippines and tractable Filipinxs during the War in Vietnam.

of vibrant potential, an asymptotic, sunken space of subjunctive uncertainty. Spilling out onto the page, the list of goods in the poem seems endless:

...copper objects,

brass objects, lacquer objects, mother-of pearl inlaid furniture,
pearls, rubies, sapphires bolts of cotton cloth,

silks and gauzes, crepes and velvets, taffetas
and damasks and brocades, stocking, cloaks, robes,

kimonos, bed coverings, tapestries, linens, church
vestments, rugs, blue-and-white porcelain that numbered 1500

in one ship, wax, tallow candles, cordage,
sailcloth, musk, borax, camphor, cigars, varieties of tea,

cinnamon that was dried and powdered, 40,000 pounds of it
listed in one ship's manifest, cloves, pepper,

nutmeg, tamarind, ginger, martaban jars from Burma,
dragon jars from China, Vietnamese jars,

Siamese jars, Spanish jars, 800 jars found with the wreck
of one salvaged ship...(10)

Items pile on, one after the other—ornamental items, precious gems, cloth, spices—drowning the reader in materials, fabrics, tastes, and smells—sonically conveyed with the repetition of the sibilant “s” at the ends of the plural nouns.⁸¹ The list overwhelms the senses, conveying the decadence of the items and the crowdedness of their storage onboard the ship. Reinforcing the mass of the exports, some items are numbered: 1500 blue-and-whites, 40,000 pounds of cinnamon, 800 jars found in one wreck. While the numeration promises exactitude, in effect, it only serves to further estrange the speaker and the reader from the archived things. The speaker attempts to anchor his understanding in arithmetic specificity, grasping for a sense of totality that

⁸¹ As Anne Cheng describes in *Ornamentalism*, 2018, the Western imaginary has long associated the “Oriental” with the “ornamental”—especially in terms of folding Asian feminine personhood into artificial, sartorial, shining, and supplemental objecthood.

the numbers seem to guarantee; yet as he—and the readers following the listing in the poem—brush up against the hundreds and thousands of tallied things, the numbers only convey the tremendous excess of replaceable items. Some of the items, such as the jars, are attributed places of origin—“Vietnamese jars, /Siamese jars, Spanish jars”—as if the vessels themselves are racialized. This racialized attribution contributes to the sense of the transpacific archival space as a vortex of cultural exchange and “colonial commodification” (*Intimacies of Four Continents*). This is also the space from which the Philippines manifests as a site of commercialized cultural aggregation, resource extraction, and transoceanic distribution. Depicted as departure points, Cebu and Manila serve as strategically located nexuses with Pacific routes, tracking items from Asian, American, and European continents. Among the assortment of East and Southeast Asian exports from the Philippine cities are the iconic jars from Burma, China, Vietnam, Siam, teas, porcelains, spices, and silks beside objects of Spanish influence—church vestments, Spanish jars, bizcocho bread, and even Catholic “priests/ and missionaries” (Barot 11). The archival objects are caught up in webs of repeated traversal, figuring the Philippines simply as port for the output and receipt of objects and the archival space as a shipping container for crowded, excessive objecthood. How can the speaker elegize these things—resources reaped, gathered, and distributed together in the ships, listed in the archive, and assembled again in the poem itself?

Throughout the poem, the speaker offers speculation and affectively charged remarks about some of the things lost in the Pacific “somewhere along the way”—in tempestuous spots, over reefs, across open ocean (Barot 11). Induced by archival longing, for proximity to potentially sunken objects, he faces the limitations of the archive and still, in brief moments, senses out the small, beating vibrancy of things:

Siamese jars, Spanish jars, 800 jars found with the wreck
of one salvaged ship, jars that would have

contained tar for caulking, oil, wine, bizcocho bread,
salted meats, dried fruits, lard, bacon, beans, chickpeas, lentils,

flour, garlic, cheese, honey, rice, salt,
sugar, food for months, not enough food, not enough water,

chickens, cows, pigs, up to 1000 souls
depending on whether the ship had a tonnage of 300 or 500

or 1000 or 2000, ships that in the 250 years
of the trade route wrecked somewhere along the way

more often than they arrived in Acapulco...(Barot 10-11)

The speaker's affective language, interspersed amidst the list of food and livestock, captures brief moments of a form of vibrant *interference*, offering moments of interjection, of creative reimagining upon an attempt at listening to an archive, searching for livingness amidst wreckage. Describing what was "salvaged" from the wrecked ship, the speaker employs the conditional perfect to describe the variety of food staples that "would have" filled the jars. The conditional perfect underscores an unreal occurrence in the past; theoretically, had the ship not been wrecked and its contents lost to the sea, the jars would have been full. By using this tense, the speaker creates a sense of longing for the items lost—for what, or for whom, never reached the shores of New Spain. In this gap of uncertainty, the speaker interjects in the subsequent lines, noting that they would have carried "sugar, food for months, not enough food, not enough water." The repetition of "not enough" conveys desperation, the speaker interjecting a moment of empathetic imagining amidst the rush of the listed things. Following this line, he lists the animals on board, "1000 souls." Referring to the livestock as "souls" asserts something precious about the animals' state, something about their living that should be honored or protected aside from commercial

worth. Impressing upon the speaker and upon readers examining the poem, the items produce a certain affect—horror, grief, the experience of loss and longing.

The Filipinx slaves are crammed together with these things in the archive, in the holding space of the galleons, in the wreckage at the bottom of the Pacific—drawn together as items of commercial worth. Filipinxs are tractable objects among other objects—food, decoration, clothing, animals, spices, slaves—things caught in a transpacific archival ecology of violent transfiguration and resource reaping, shrouded in unknowns. Vibrant being, as exemplified by the speaker and possibly readers as well, attempts to reach out to these sunken, submarine things, searching for what it knows to be true—that while transpacific space reverberates with loss, it transmits the possibility of a lifeworld, too.

II. Acts of Mourning (i.e., Remembering, Responding) and Vibrant Ongoingness

Thus far, I have argued that Barot’s work figures Filipinx tractability as a condition derived from the exploitative commercial practices of the galleon trade and Spanish humanist thought that materially and discursively transfigure Filipinxs into racialized capital. “The Galleons 2” makes this condition apparent via a transpacific archive of collected commercial things subject to wreckage and loss in the depths of the ocean. Tracing Filipinx tractability within the context of the galleon trade and the experience of encountering archival limitations, I have described the historical and affectual ground from which vibrant being sprouts. In this section, I show how my reading of “The Galleons 2” can inform readings of the other Galleons poems in the collection, “The Galleons 1” through “The Galleons 10.” Following the sense of archival longing conveyed in “The Galleons 2,” I show how the other Galleons poems reveal the speaker’s efforts to find language for recounting personal histories and vernacular life in relation to the galleons’ history and its omissions. The poems thus present vibrant attempts at mourning,

remembering, and responding to silences that breach multiple scales of interpersonal and spatiotemporal relationality—investigating the familial and intercolonial, the local and transglobal and planetary—histories of the minor and the “grand.” Sensing and making sense of the world through the language of possibility, the speaker ultimately points to a vibrant Filipinx being that is ongoing and lively—not just killed off in transpacific transit or transmogrified into commercial things—but rather a vibrancy that stretches across oceans, touches continents, and reverberates across timespaces. When you cannot fully mourn the nameless and numbered, the starving and thirsty, the speakers shows, there are ways of feeling for what is there and not there, what is sensed and still unknown.

I will first revisit the two poems I analyzed in Chapter 2, “The Galleons 1” and “5,” in light of archival being. Then, I will look at a pair of poems, “The Galleons 6” and “7,” which are the only contiguous Galleons poems in the collection. This pairing juxtaposes the grandeur and ultimate inaccessibility of galleons archives with another type of unknowability—one that shrouds and dampers mourning in an intimate, vernacular register. Then, I will examine “The Galleons 3,” “4,” and “9,” which illuminate everyday moments. In these poems, the speaker is oriented outward, to the interpersonal; the speaker utilizes interpersonal relation as a passageway through which to meditate on transglobal landscapes and timeplaces.⁸² Finally, I will close with readings of “The Galleons 8” and “10,” which, in different ways, take on a posture of a return. These poems look back to the Philippine Islands, one, from the perspective of the galleons themselves, and the other, from the perspective of the speaker, reflecting on his ancestry.

In Chapter 2, I discussed how “The Galleons 1” draws together two ships in transpacific transit, separated by hundreds of years’ time. The first is “the galleon...in the middle of the

⁸² Future revisions of this chapter may employ Bakhtin’s chronotopic language to describe how vibrancy senses out space/time (see *The Dialogic Imagination*, 1981).

sixteenth/ century,” and the second, a ship that the speaker’s grandmother travels on “across the same ocean” from the Philippines to the United States (Barot 3-4). The imagery of the two ships appears halfway through the poem; in the first seven-and-half couplets, the speaker attempts to articulate the relationship between the grandmother’s story and “history.” The poem begins:

Her story is a part of something larger, it is a part
of history. No, her story is an illumination

of history, a matchstick lit in the black seam of time.
Or, no, her story is separate

from the whole, as distinct as each person is distinct
from the stream of people that led

to the one and leads past the one. Or, her story
is surrounded by history, the ambient spaciousness

of which she is the momentary foreground...(3)

Through a series of shifting images, framed by frequent negation (“no”) and the repetition of “or,” the speaker demonstrates his process of finding language that might describe what precisely the grandmother’s story does—what significance it might hold in relation to the grander narrative expanse of “history.” The first statement appears to be a simple, confident claim—“Her story *is* a part of something larger”—but the speaker continues to undercut his own declarations. No description is quite right; her story is not simply a “part” of something, nor a means of “illumination”—a small flame of a “matchstick” that might ignite the “black seam of time,” as if she could burn away the dark threads that stitch time together, or ignite a trail of gunpowder, that might culminate in an exposition, undoing, or explosion of meaning. The enjambment that occurs in the second and third couplets, between “separate” and “from the whole,” conveys through form the possibility of the distinctiveness of the grandmother’s story—it cannot simply be a piece of the “whole” or the “one” of history—it cannot be subsumed within a generic

“stream” of the lives grouped together to form some rough entity. Perhaps her story flickers as a “momentary foreground” against the backdrop of history—an ominous, enduring “ambient spaciousness.” This first *Galleons* poem thus sets up a central inquiry of the collection—how does one reckon with both the “minute” personal and “grander” historical narratives? What language might correctly conceptualize these at times contradictory but connected things?

In the middle of the poem, the claim settles: “History is the galleon...” and “she is on another ship, centuries later...” (3). These are the images that linger, the relationship between history and the grandmother’s narrative that—for now, for *The Galleons* collection—works. The poem ends with this offering: “Here is a ship, an ocean./ Here is a figure, her story a few words in the blue void” (4). “A ship” is both the galleon and the ship that transports the grandmother, along with her husband, “still in his officer’s uniform,” and young daughter (4). “An ocean” is the Pacific in sixteenth century and in the 1940s.⁸³ The first *Galleons* poem thus establishes the aim of the subsequent poems to theorize a sense of Filipinx being that grapples with both History and the vernacular, making space for both things beside each other.

Having read “The Galleons 2”—which establishes the collection’s sense of archival mourning and paints a transpacific ecology of wreckage—readers can return to this opening poem and read its gaps differently. The “blue void” is a void in the sense that it seems to consume evidence of life, to bury bodies of “*indios*” and “*chinos*” beside jars of tar and honey and salt, to sink specificity and precious stories into a submarine abyss. It is the black seam that makes one story a matchstick, the overwhelming spaciousness against which one, small narrative can only appear for a moment. The blue void is what the speaker’s family crossed, where his

⁸³ Barot delineates the 1940s as the time of the grandmother’s transpacific journey in a 2019 interview (Randall).

grandmother got sick “with the water’s motion” (4). It is the transpacific site of colonial forgetting and lived, sensorial experiences—the site of vibrant being.

Filtered through the premise and conceit of “The Galleons 2,” “The Galleons 1” thus directs readers to everyday moments and personal narratives that too often get eclipsed by the encroaching expanse of History.⁸⁴ Of the Galleons poems in the collection, the poem “The Galleons 5” most directly addresses and draws from the grandmother’s personal narrative. As I discuss at length in Chapter 2, in “The Galleons 5,” the speaker listens to and offers a vibrant, creative response to his own family archive—specifically to tape recordings of his grandmother, as she discusses her life story and family photographs. Revisiting that poem in light of the archival longing evoked in “The Galleons 2” adds another layer of import not only to the speaker’s archive but also to his act of vibrant reading. The vernacular archival material in “The Galleons 5” takes unique shape in the form of the italicized first lines of each couplet, designating what the speaker is hearing on tape, paired with the speaker’s response in the second unitalicized line. The relayed snippets of the grandmother’s voice offer a seemingly direct link to her personal history. Yet the compressed form of the poem, which takes up two pages, still houses some uncertainties.

For example, numbers only appear twice in this poem and both instances point to a haziness or imprecision of memory. The first number reports the grandmother’s age, “*around...fifty-five*,” when she held her first “*real*” job, and the second reports her birthdate: “*I was born in Ormoc, December 8,...1924 or ’25*” (32, 33). The first number is an estimate, perhaps related to the uncertainty surrounding her actual year of birth. While the reason for uncertainty is unclear (perhaps related to an issue of record-keeping), the numbers again only

⁸⁴ See Chapter 2 for a discussion of the value of the vernacular, especially in relation to Nixon’s *Slow Violence* (2011).

point to what is not fully known. Thus, as the speaker listens to his grandmother's voice with his "skin" and "eyes" and "ears," led by the desire to let the snippets of her story speak on the page, the speaker realizes: "what I actually needed to know, I would have...to conjure for myself" (32-33). Thus, while "The Galleons 2" routes readers to investigate galleons' history—to dive deeper into sites of wreckage, to speak feeling into sunken spaces—"The Galleons 5" points to another inflection of archival longing. This vernacular, family archive prompts the speaker to similarly respond—to "conjure" knowledge from the snippets of the grandmother's stories, holding onto "the glow" of them (33).

The poems "The Galleons 6" and "7" also materialize the collection's focus that shifts between galleons archival history and personal archival histories. Using the figurative language of "The Galleons 1," "The Galleons 6" embodies "History"—the Spanish ship "in the middle// of the Pacific in the middle of the sixteenth century;" and the poem immediately following, "The Galleons 7," embodies the other ship that crosses the Pacific "centuries later" (3). Most Galleons poems are separated by two or three other poems in between; but "The Galleons 6," the longest in the collection, filling nine pages, is immediately followed by "The Galleons 7," the shortest, comprised of only two couplets. In a 2019 interview where he discusses these two poems, Barot states: "That juxtaposition of two incongruous scales—the grandeur of the ship catalogue and the intimacy of my grandmother's death—feels like the heart of *The Galleons* to me" (Randall).

Like "The Galleons 2," "The Galleons 6" focuses on the Manila-Acapulco trade and its archives, inviting questions around what they do and do not disclose. While the speaker responds to and recounts information from archives in "The Galleons 2," the speaker's voice is not legible in "The Galleons 6." Instead, this poem reads simply as a list, filling nine pages with narrow columns of couplets that log the names and dates of 180 ships that naval historians identified as

part of the Spanish galleon trade (Randall). On the page, the length of the poem and brevity of each line make the poem stand out from others in the collection—imaging a near ceaselessness, approaching infinity (See Figure 8).

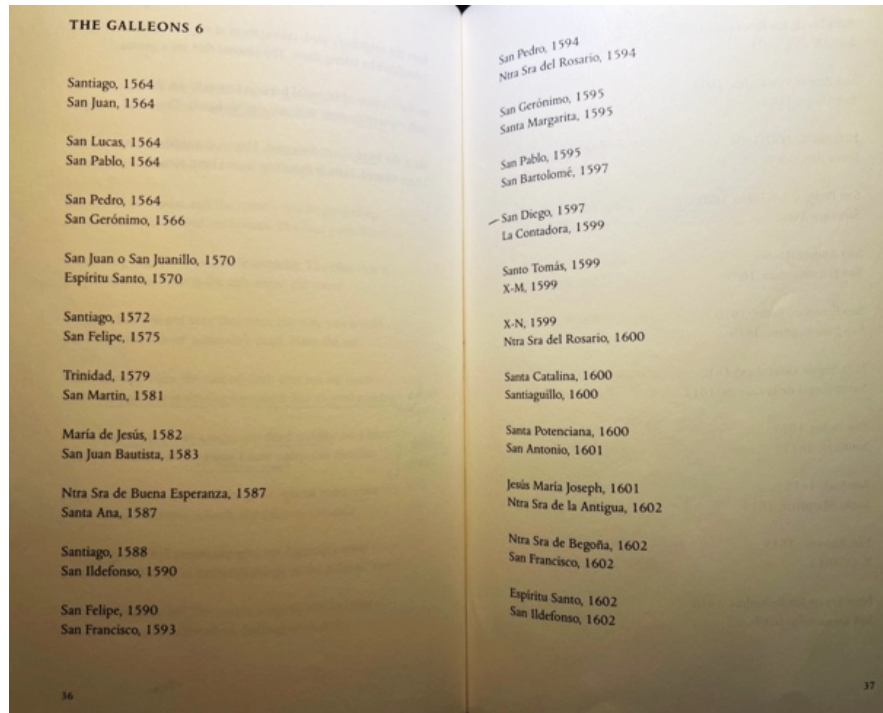


Figure 8: The first two pages of Barot's "The Galleons 6," Olivia Lafferty, 2022.

The poem lists ships documented between 1564-1815, beginning, “Santiago, 1564/ San Juan, 1564 // San Lucas, 1564 / San Pablo, 1564,” and ending, “Fidelidad, 1814/ Victoria 1815” (36-44). Largely, the list reflects Spanish names, often named after saints, and a few stray English names appear at the post-1800 end of the list—“Nancy,” “Franklin,” “Hardinger,” and “Victoria”—suggesting a broader European presence in the trade toward the end of the galleon era. The list pours out on the page, reading like a linear timeline. From it, the reader gleans only the ongoingness of time, the persistence of the trade, the words offering little imagery or sensorial information. In conjunction with the recurrence of Spanish names and repeated “San” of the ship’s titles, the couplets simulate waves, sounding out the nearing of perpetuity, the rising and falling, again and again. All the poem contains is a carrying on, a seemingly endless

transport, reinforcing the feeling that the galleon trade and its violences may still be felt into the present—still informing contemporary Filipinx living, posited as in relation to this era of unreachable, unrestorable loss. The poem thus underscores what remains—the names of the galleons—and what has receded into time. Like “The Galleons 2,” which enumerates things and persons transported on the ships, “The Galleons 6” sounds out the noise of a regime that pronounces transpacific objecthood, an insatiable transglobal appetite, the repetition and renaming of colonial vessels that issue and reissue violence.

Pivoting to a vernacular moment and employing a contrasting form, “The Galleons 7,” in its entirety, reads:

We had left the room to make a quiet
for the nurse to wash her in.

To go from us then, to decide,
as in a courtesy. Her soft nod away. (45)

The poem recounts the grandmother’s passing—another kind of transit, another kind of happening that creates a sense of longing and unknowing. In the poem, the speaker and those he is with (“We”) choose to leave the grandmother’s room “to make a quiet.” In creating this space—sonically, haptically, one of softness, traversed only by low, humming tones—they give the grandmother privacy. Unwittingly, they also create a gap. At this time, the grandmother chooses—“decide[s],/ as in a courtesy”—to “go.” The speaker is thus both close to and removed from the event of his grandmother’s death, positioning him again as one who can only bear witness to events, even familial ones, at a certain distance. The speaker is left with the image of a gesture: “her soft nod away.” I read this gesture as denoting perhaps the grandmother’s actual death, but possibly conveying the reverberant moment of when they left the room—the last

glimpse they had of her, sending them away, bidding them farewell with a nod—replaying in the speaker’s mind at the close of the poem.⁸⁵

In either case, the speaker and those left with the quiet they created must sense that distance, echoing in the blankness on the rest of the page. “The Galleons 6” and “The Galleons 7” are perhaps the most reticent poems in the collection—speaking to forms of unknowing presented alternately as breadth and reserve. Both poems direct the reader away, to elsewhere, where they may investigate histories—delving further into the silences of the galleons’ archives—or where, having looked away, respectfully, readers may let the contemplative blankness and quiet stir, leaving a space for what may not, at this time, need any further scrutiny. “The Galleons 7” thus leaves the reader with a sense of what cannot or need not be conveyed or captured on the page.

The speaker also contends with what can and cannot be told in a group of Galleons poems that take up minor histories, “The Galleons 3,” “4,” and “9.” These poems reach outward to the interpersonal—as the speaker interacts with strangers, listening to their stories or sensing his restriction from them—and to the landscapes around him—taking in, through sensoria and motion, the phenomenological world before him. As he reaches toward the world around him, the speaker imagines an interconnected globality, sensing time and space differently, in a network of things seemingly distant from him that can be brought into vibrant proximity.

⁸⁵ *I will provide here, briefly, an undercurrent. As a reader, I know this “soft nod away,” as I suspect other readers do. If it is indeed the moment of death, I have been its witness. I have been the one left in the room—present, holding a hand—upon the nod and the breath and the dipping away. This moment—being there, in the loosening, and in the afterward—in the shift to cold and dilation—is close and conjurable. I have also been excused from this moment, and know what that “quiet” sounds like, feels like. What the speaker doesn’t quite share is that the quiet it creates does not just coat the room. The quiet situates itself in the body of those who leave the room, who make that space. This gap, internalized, weighty and hollow, houses a stirring whose wavelets overlap with those of archival longing—though this stirring strikes more acutely, having known the lost.*

In “The Galleons 3,” the speaker describes an exchange on an airplane. The speaker strikes up conversation with the man seated beside him—a young, Marine Corps veteran who “now works as a long-haul truck driver” (17). After the speaker shares that he is “trying/ to write a poem about the Spanish galleon/ trade,” the man tells him “about the things/ he carries” (17). The ensuing list of items, while not as cramped and crowded as the many objects contained in “The Galleons 2,” is reminiscent of the galleons logs: “hay from Nebraska to Florida,// TVs from Delaware to Mississippi, / bark from California to Texas, refrigerated// foods from Missouri to North Dakota...” (17-18). The poem goes on to include “rolls of carpet,” “Victoria’s Secret stock,” “iPhones,” and “unspecified hazmat materials that went with a security escort”—listed along with their states of origin and destinations (18). The poem thus highlights another kind of shipping system—modernized and domesticated within the United States. With the galleons research at the forefront of the speaker’s mind and through listening to a fellow passenger’s stories, the speaker draws close to another shipping archive, redolent with the rhythms of transport. The conversation reveals the multitude of narratives that lie in stories of transport more broadly, as well as stories of other militarized lives, ever set in transit or in service of transit. The seemingly mundane or monotonous event of long-haul trucking, for example, hides mysteries of its own—even carrying “unspecified” and dangerous materials that require security details. In this ordinary exchange, the speaker finds resonance between the passenger’s life and his own as a “teacher” and “poet,” oriented by the gape of the blue void, by the desire to reach towards things otherwise lost or forgotten (17).

“The Galleons 3” thus offers a picture of connection between strangers, between two regular people in transit, both heading home. At the end of the poem, the passenger shows the speaker a picture of his dog, “Felix, a brown dog/ with an old dog’s gray muzzle, one eye// softly

brown, the other marbled gold/ and green, like the weather on another planet” (18). In this moment of intimacy—as the passenger shares with a near-stranger a beloved piece of his life—the speaker sees something wondrous in the mundane. Even in the eye of an aging dog, he sees a bit of marvelous specificity—likening the stirring colors to an extraterrestrial occurrence: “weather” not on Earth but elsewhere, on a distant planet. This act exemplifies vibrant Filipino being, as the speaker detects in the ordinary something connected to an entirely different space and time, sensing the evocations of the miniscule.⁸⁶ “The Galleons 2” demonstrates that the speaker cannot fully mourn the lives of the Filipinx lost in the galleon trade, coming up against the asymptotes of the colonial archive; but “The Galleons 3” shows that he can share a bit about this passenger’s story. As the speaker places the ships beside another in “The Galleons 1”—letting a ship and an ocean represent both a galleon and the ship carrying his family members—the speaker places these stories beside one another, the poems beside one another, honoring the everyday.

In “The Galleons 4,” the speaker continues to point to stories that do not always get told, this time more overtly engaging a vibrant spatiotemporality, perceiving a vast, interconnected global present. In the poem, the speaker is people-watching “on a bench at the Brooklyn Promenade” in New York and reading poems by Frank O’Hara (26). The speaker observes:

the fleets of strollers are out in the sunshine

 expanse of the morning
 the strollers that are like galleons

 carrying their beautiful gold cargo
 being pushed by women whose names once graced

 the actual galleons *Rosario*
Margarita Magdalena along with other names

⁸⁶ This imagery echoes the extraterrestrial focus of a preceding poem, “UDFJ-39546284” (Barot 5-7).

Essie Maja from places that history has patronized...(26-27)

Against the “sunshine expanse” of the day—like the expanse of the Pacific—the strollers appear as galleons to the speaker. Like the ships, the prams carry precious “cargo”—here, the lives of infants that are likened to “gold.” Steering these vessels are women, whom the speaker guesses may be from other colonized places, zones “patronized” by “history.” These lines not only highlight the reduction of lives to capital (i.e., transmuting infants into gold), but also underscore that the labor of the colonized—mapped onto the women pushing the strollers—fueled the colonial transits of the galleons. In the poem, the speaker draws attention to these women, wanting to not simply see them as abstract figures but people with names; yet he can only guess at them—perhaps they have Hispanic names that also “graced” the galleons. Still, the women’s interior lives are not accessible to the speaker or the reader. There are evident gaps here.⁸⁷

As he watches these “galleons,” the speaker senses the world an interconnected thing, and space and time all relative. Near the start of the poem, the speaker notes that he is “aware it is 10:30 in New York/ on a Tuesday morning” as he reads a line in an O’Hara poem: “*It is 12:20 in New York a Friday*” (26). O’Hara wrote the poem “almost sixty years ago on a July moment, // that must have been like the one” the speaker is “having now” (26). At the end of the poem, the final couplets note the time of day in other zones: “when it is 10:30 in the morning/ in New York it is 11:30 in the night// in Manila and it is 4:30 in the afternoon in Lagos/ and in Warsaw and it

⁸⁷ *In this space of unknowing, the poem leaves room for a response; so I respond here in the low, murmuring space near the margins of the page. When I read this part of the poem, about the women—likely women of color from, as the speaker presumes, some colonized place or other—and how they’re pushing strollers around the park, I cannot help but think of my aunt, Mama H—. When she was living in a suburb of New Jersey with her two, young children, people often presumed she was their nanny. In parks, at grocery stores, when she picked them up from school—people thought she couldn’t be their mother. She was just the woman pushing the stroller or the grocery cart or driving the car. She was just “on duty.” These children were not her own. So when I read the lines about the women (Rosario Margarita Magdalena Essie Maja) pushing the strollers, I am taken to another time and place when Mama H— told me of this offense—lightly, humorously, with compassion for the people who misjudged her. I think about how she is, indeed, from a colonized place, and how there are transits and words that still somehow push her.*

is 9:30// in the morning in Guatemala City/ where it is also Tuesday and where it is also summer” (27). The poem thus notes a series of many relative “nows” occurring across the globe. Aside from one slash in a citation of lines from O’Hara, there is no punctuation in the poem to indicate the separation of phrases or ideas, no structures to form distinct sentences. Words flow freely, and yet, the consistent couplets and line breaks still regulate the poem’s structure, grouping words and phrases. The form of the poem underscores the tension between the speaker’s sense of simultaneous interconnectedness and distance from other timespaces—from Frank O’Hara writing his poem in the same space, separated by sixty years’ time, from cities around the world where life is going on at the “same time,” separated by distance. Like in “The Galleons 2,” where the speaker uses numbers for reporting tallied items, attempting to convey specificity that only dissolves into more and more uncertainty, in “The Galleons 4,” something slips away in the listing of relative times around the world. Distinct time zones should denote a clear, universalized organization of time as related to distance. Yet, in the poem, the temporal precision leaves room for a kind of awe—that in Guatemala City, seemingly so far from the Brooklyn Promenade, it is “also Tuesday” and “also summer.” Suddenly, this “where” is not so far away. Thus, as the speaker checks the world clock in the palm of his hand, looking at his phone, he enacts a vibrant being that compresses time and space.

In “The Galleons 9,” the speaker has journeyed to the Spanish metropole; he is in Madrid, exploring the boulevards of the “empire” (58). The city itself becomes a text—a place imprinted and treaded upon, constructed and worn away and reconstructed, holding its own layers of history. The speaker encounters statues and gardens, palaces, an “exhibition of plants indigenous to [his] islands,” and wonders if José Rizal had walked the same streets (58). The speaker reports: “in the great white/ square at dawn I walk inscribe myself like letters on a

page// at the naval museum I look into the face of Magellan show the/ painting my face” (58).

Through movement, touching, and looking, the speaker asserts his presence in the city that would obtain and display plants from the Philippines and flaunt the wealth and breadth of empire, years after its fall from power in the Pacific. The speaker writes himself into its streets and faces the portrait of the famed circumnavigator of the globe—making the explorer look upon him. At the close of the poem, the speaker happens upon an odd sight in the city: “around a corner/ I stop because a kind of meadow has been grown on the side// of a building like a tallness of heart a dream carried/ into waking my life breathing before it

incredible and true” (59). The sight of the meadow-like greenery thriving on the side of a building halts the speaker. The passive voice, “has been grown,” hides the actor(s) responsible for this unusual meadow, creating a bit of mystery behind its appearance. The passive voice suggests, perhaps, that the greenery cropped up, through time, on its own; or perhaps another kind of erasure, of the labor behind tending this wall, has occurred; or perhaps the gardeners do not need themselves to be made known. Whatever the case, the meadow’s inexplicable presence on a city building and odd verticality inspire the speaker—who feels the pulse of life here, who meets the space with his own pulse, his own breath. The greenery—a meadow, normally a horizontal form, reoriented on another plane, stretching outward and upward towards the sky—suggests a possibility of alterity and livingness, resonant with the speaker’s desires to reinscribe the city. In terms of form, readers can note that the internal gaps in the poem’s lines evolve throughout the poem. At first, the gaps suggest the speaker’s disorientation in a new place, starting and stopping along his route through the city, sensing his “diasporic self” (Randall).⁸⁸

⁸⁸ In the 2019 interview, Rick Barot states: “For many of us, *home* and *birthplace* and *country* can mean several different places. Maybe that broken-hearted self in “The Galleons 9” is the constituency I was speaking for in *The Galleons*. That diasporic self. That self who thinks about his grandmother on a boat crossing the Pacific in the

Yet by the end of the poem, the gaps communicate a kind of breathlessness, an awe inspired by possibility—an ecological reorientation and mark of resilience. The encounter with this lifeworld, sprouting in an unexpected place, feels akin to an encounter with the ongoingness of vibrant being—with what crops up in “patchy unpredictability” on the face of colonial architectures, and bears itself toward the sun (Tsing 5).⁸⁹ “The Galleons 9” thus offers some hope for modes of re-making, away from or contrary to colonial production, in the present and future.

To close, I examine the “The Galleons 8” and the final Galleons poem, “The Galleons 10.” In different ways, these poems stage a return to the Philippines, pointing to a kind of longing produced in the vortex of the colonial transpacific and in the bodies of those who carry multiple transits within them. “The Galleons 8” is written from the perspective of the galleons themselves—and the ships “want” a series of things. The poem opens with a couplet that describes, “The galleons want to go to the opera/ because they want to hear emotions as big as their emotions” (53). Personifying the ships as sentient and sensitive beings opens possibilities for expressing the drama of the galleons history—conveyed via a “booming aria” that brings to the galleons’ mind the “oceans that cover// the world almost completely” (53). The splendor of the opera expresses the breadth of the world’s waters they’ve crossed. The opera is also emotionally poignant for the ships—making them “think of the months-long journeys that will pick off// their crews one by one, in terrifying/ weather followed by boredom” (53). The poem thus highlights the “terror” of the journeys—only hinted at in “The Galleons 2”—that “picks off” their crew members, who are at the mercy of the mercurial weather.

1940s; who talks to the long-haul truck driver who was a Marine in Afghanistan; and who observes the nannies of New York, many of them from formerly colonized countries” (Randall).

⁸⁹ There is room to think more about the kind of “heterogeneity of space and time” that is expressed in this encounter in Barot’s poem (Tsing 4). What kind of “temporal rhythms and spatial arcs” are encountered here (Tsing 4)? How do they intersect with the transit of colonial time—or its seemingly secure, established architecture?

From here the poem quickly shifts away from heightened emotion to other interests of the ships—namely, within a capitalist realm and the realm of the personal. The galleons want to “shop in the mall in the suburbs”—seeing “blouses” and “blenders” that remind them of their own stores of gold and silver, and “food courts” that remind them of their own “full bellies,” their holds stuffed with merchandise (53). This reference to the suburban mall reinforces the fact that in the poem, the galleons are traversing the present or recent moment. The ships are not contained to 1565-1815. As the primary speaker of *The Galleons* has suspected, these histories permeate the present, continuing to reverberate across the Pacific. The ships even “visit the boy who loves making model boats,” approving of his meticulous recreation of a galleon in “exquisite minute scale” (53-54). The galleons pervade all these spaces—a home, a mall, the opera—visiting, like ghostly passers-by, many corners of contemporary life.

Finally, the poem pivots to the galleons’ nostalgia, a romanticized but cutting, melancholic longing for a precolonial time:

...And then the galleons, on certain
other days, want to go back to the forests

they came from, to reel the blood-soaked narrative
back to the stands of pines and oaks

that will become their keels and decking,
hulls and masts. Back to the mountains being mountains,

their iron in the ground like gray thoughts.
Back to the birds being birds.

Back to the lakes being lakes, deeply shining,
like the black velvet gloves of a prince in an old painting. (54)

The poem offers images of reversal. If the galleons could just go back in time, before “blood” “soaked” their story, then, the keels and decks would be forests again. “Mountains” would just be “mountains”—formations of the earth, plants, animals, and waters would not be resources for an

extractivist, colonial mercantile society—they would just be as they were. The galleons long for a return, before the reaping of the islands. But the final line, referencing “black velvet gloves of a prince,” hints at the impossibility of full recovery and restoration. The reference recurses to materialist and classed thinking, suggesting something inescapable about the circuits of commerce and colonialism and the ideological and artistic exchanges that have traversed the world.

“The Galleons 8” thus expresses a desire for an impossible recovery of or return to a precolonial past. However, in “The Galleons 10,” the speaker finds language for his sense of his own origins, conveying to the reader the vibrant, trans-spatiotemporal, intergenerational history he carries within him. As he sounds out his stories—the birthplaces of his parents, their landscapes, the practices of his ancestors—he paints a transpacific, ecological way of being, returning, and remembering that also makes space, finally, for mourning. In the middle of the poem, the speaker describes how “fate” took him “across an ocean,” and how “it has taken half a life/ to turn back and see// what it was [he] left behind” (65). Through the space of the poem, the speaker steps out toward the reader and inhabits that polymorphous, melancholic gap—the oceanic interval between the Philippines and the US, the quiet made during the grandmother’s death, the weight and silence and distance of a history that still moves him. Only now, on the page, in brief couplets, can the speaker finally make a return, reaching back out and across the Pacific to come to terms with his own past—a past that is his own present ongoingness.

The opening line of “The Galleons 10”—“I come from the lowlands.”—establishes a phrase that will repeat throughout the poem (65). “I come from” acts as a kind of grounding force on the page—an almost liturgical repetition—anchoring the speaker’s claims, evoking ceremony. Repeating this phrase, the speaker highlights what he inherits from his mother and

father and from their respective origins, though those places are not specifically named. His mother, the speaker states, is from a city “built on the river/ where the mountains fanned out to the sea;” he comes “from farmers,” “from childhood’s transistor radio,” and “from the kalachuchi tree” (65). The speaker is from a space where land and water meet, where people cultivate the land, and from sound, as if fed by the music of the radio. He is from the kalachuchi tree—a type of plumeria that was brought from Mexico to the Philippines during the galleon trade. The Philippine name “kalachuchi” is derived from the Nahuatl term for the flower *cacaloxochitl* or “raven flower” (Zumbroich 348). Thus, the speaker’s claim of roots from the kalachuchi tree emphasizes the routes of transpacific exchange that underlie the islands’ makeup and Filipinx subjecthood—an ancestral ecology that is both of the Philippines and inevitably of transglobal itineraries.

In later couplets, the speaker alludes to his connection with an Indigenous history. On his father’s island, he notes, “the people covered their bodies// with tattoos. I come from soot,/ from ink” (65). The speaker points to these substances as a kind of alternative to blood, as if soot and ink flow through his veins and inscribe his skin. These same people are the ones “who buried their dead in coffins// shaped like boats for a journey” (66). Here, the poem likely refers to boat-coffin burial practices, prevalent in the Philippines and across Southeast Asia, performed since prehistoric times and still upheld in some regions in the present; the practice consists of placing the dead in hollowed-out logs in the shape of boats and then laying the coffins inside caves or rock shelters (Tenazas 19).⁹⁰ In Tagalog, a word for coffin is “kabaong”—indicating a boathouse for the dead. In a way, then, the galleons at the bottom of the ocean, referenced in “The Galleons

⁹⁰ To close the article, Tenazas summarizes: “Boat-coffin burial in the Philippines is too complex to assign to it a single source of origin. The types encountered here are the result of the convergence of different traditions in the process of diffusion” (23). As Barot’s speaker lacks a single origin point, so the boat-coffin burials exemplify the cross-cultural networks and tangles that inform Filipinx cultural heritage and being.

2,” wrecked in Pacific tempests, become coffins, mass sites of burial for the sunken objects and the dead. The boat-coffin reference in “The Galleons 10” accentuates how the vessels’ shape implies a “journey”—a potential trajectory, some transit to be made, even in death.

The speaker thus articulates a vibrant sense of oceanic, transitory Filipinx being that courses with what ends, in one sense, and what is ceaseless, in another. The final line of “The Galleons 10” reads: “I come from horizon. I come from water” (66). The “horizon” indicates what is desirous and asymptotic, both defined and indefinite. It is a dissolving, imagined border, an ever-receding plane. “Water” is the transpacific and more—the “river” of his mother’s city and the mountains that meet the “sea”—the perceived, airy space of transit after death, another kind of ocean (65). In claiming his origins, in looking back, and in articulating his own ecological being, the speaker performs a vibrancy that is itself a mode of mourning, embodying and illuminating what is lost and not lost, stepping into the quiet, responding to the gap.

Together, the Galleons poems demonstrate the ongoingness of Filipinx being—despite the terrors of the galleon trade, despite overlapping eras of colonial rule and extraction, despite the blood that soaks Pacific lands and waters. They draw out loops of desire that extend across oceans, attached to an archival longing made apparent through listening to the galleons’ transpacific history. The poems respond to violences that reverberate into the many corners of contemporary and vernacular life, illuminating a being that is unwieldy and unceasing.

Intercolonial Confluence

I have demonstrated how the galleons era is a critical point of confluence for a vibrant mode of Filipinx American ontology that continues to be moved by the era that renders Filipinx tractable objects and creates, as demonstrated by Barot’s poem “The Galleons 2,” a transpacific ecology of loss. Residues of this era ignite a vibrant desire that sweeps across spheres of

relation—an impulse for proximity attaching to sunken archival objects, family members lost, one’s origins, and other, little, vernacular things.

While Barot’s poems explore relation in these capacities, the collection doesn’t go so far as to explicitly underscore senses of intimacy forged in the galleons era between Filipinx and Latin American subjects under Spanish colonial rule. Looking beyond what “The Galleons 2” spotlights—namely, the desire to mourn the objects in the archive in the face of an ongoing sense of tractable subjecthood—readers can attend to the surrounding historical resonances of poem and examine the galleon trade era as a period critical to the formation of both affective and material links between the Philippines and Mexico. As outlined in the Introduction chapter, scholarship has examined the overlapping histories of conquest, militarization, and labor that have connected Filipinx and Latinx subjects, especially during the period surrounding the Spanish-American War—notably, the US acquisition of Mexican territory in 1848, and the annexation, occupation, and colonization of territories across the Pacific and Latin America, including Hawaii, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Guam, the Philippines, and Samoa later in the 19th century (De Genova 5-6). Crucially, scholars like Paula Park have rerouted studies of Asian-Pacific and Latin American exchange towards the earlier period of the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade in order to assess the terms of kinship expressed by “twentieth-century writers, diplomats, and intellectuals from Latin/o America and the Philippines” (8). In her work *Intercolonial Intimacies* (2022), Park argues that the galleon trade functions “as a starting point to deconstruct Eurocentric notions of globality”—as the 20th century writings she examines ultimately convey a desire not for the “revival of a fallen [Spanish] empire but a distinct intercolonial bond” potentially “[independent] from their common former colonizer” (9, 19). Park thus anchors the

galleon trade as a critical point of transpacific exchange tied to affects expressed centuries later—senses of kinship evoking “a unique and strangely familiar intercolonial past” (19).

Park’s examinations of Filipinx and Mexican subjects’ nostalgia for a time of clear, shared intercolonial relation speaks to the nebula of affects surrounding the galleons era and its artifacts. Returning to Barot’s speaker in “The Galleons 2,” we can begin to contextualize his archival longing within a grander highway of affects that course alongside his own. The speaker’s desire to mourn the galleons items courses beside other desires expressed by Filipinx and Mexican thinkers of the post-Spanish-colonial era who continue to grapple with the residues of the trade: desires for relation on multiple scales—including the felt intimacy between subjects looped into transoceanic circuits of conquest and commerce.

In the following chapter, I explore the oceanic language and ontologies submerged within two canonical Chicane texts, analyzing ways of being/thinking/feeling that take place in sunken spaces of earth and sea and along the ecotonal sites of the shoreline. In the Coda to this dissertation, I begin to draw out the resonances between the spatiotemporalities imagined within *The Galleons* and the two Chicane literary works, dwelling in wreckage and becoming at the bottom of the ocean and at meeting sites between land and sea.

CHAPTER 4

Emergent Oceanic Ecologies and Vibrant Chicanx Becoming

This chapter turns to vibrancy at the edges of the Pacific, examining Chicanx ways of being and becoming at California shorelines and in relation to oceanic depths. My previous chapters have examined the transpacific as a site of colonial extraction and environmental devastation, geographic connection, and racialized subject formation.⁹¹ Following the trajectories of Vietnamese refugee subjects (Chapter 1) and Filipinx American subjects (Chapters 2 and 3), these chapters have emphasized the transpacific as a site for thinking through transoceanic Asian American displacements induced by the crossings of war, US military empire, and Spanish colonialism. Specifically, an oceanic sensibility in Chapter 1 is inflected by *nu'ó'c*—a space of the forming and reimagining of Vietnamese refugee subjecthood—which I mobilize in relation to critical refugee studies and lê thi diem thúy's *The Gangster*.⁹² In Chapter 2, I emphasize the transpacific as a vertiginous site of Filipinx deployment under US Naval empire, made apparent via readings of vernacular photographs from *The Pakinggan Archive*. In Chapter 3, I read Rick Barot's poems in *The Galleons* as illuminating an earlier history of transpacific exchange—the Manila-Acapulco galleon trade—examining the racialized, other-than-human subordination of Filipinx under the logics of Spanish humanism. Together, these chapters emphasize the oceanic as tied to racialized Asian diasporic ontologies via militarized and colonial transoceanic exchange.

⁹¹ As articulated in the Introduction and Chapter 1, I follow Macarena Gómez-Barris' understanding of the transpacific that emphasizes overlapping histories of ecocide and empire, as well as the creative potential of the space (see "Out of the Ruins" 2022).

⁹² See Chapter 1 for a discussion of *nu'ó'c* in relation to "refugee space" (Vinh Nguyen 2016) and a *feminist refugee epistemology* or FRE (Espiritu and Duong 2018).

In contrast to the Asian American context, the oceanic valences of Chicanx being and subject formation may not be as readily apparent; and my drawing attention to them in this chapter may strike some readers as a counterintuitive critical move. For good and obvious reasons, Chicanx/a/o studies has focused on the US/Mexico borderlands as a primary lens for thinking about migrant expression, cultural politics, and transnational labor.⁹³ Broadly, Chicanx identities, modulated by cultural and tribal claims, have been articulated through *mestizaje* discourse (asserting a cultural “Mexican, Anglo, and Indigenous hybridity”) and through the recognition of the “U.S. occupation of Mexican and/or Indigenous lands” (Juana María Rodríguez 11).⁹⁴ Environmental inquiries about Chicanx cultural productions also tend to center land and borderlands as analytics that aid in understanding how the production of space affects Chicanx subject formation and ecological epistemologies.⁹⁵ Predominantly, Chicanx studies’ social, cultural, and political investments tend toward assessments of borders that shift around subjects and the renaming and reclaiming of lands—not transoceanic movement, nor necessarily oceanic ontological demarcations and resonances.⁹⁶

Yet I assert that an analysis of two canonical Chicanx texts, Helena María Viramontes’ novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995) and Lorna Dee Cervantes’ poetry collection *Emplumada*

⁹³ Some notable examples include Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987); Alicia R. Schmidt Camacho, *Migrant Imaginaries* (2008); Mary Pat Brady, “Fungibility of Borders” (2000) and *Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies* (2002).

⁹⁴ *Chicanismo*, a cultural consciousness and political ethos of the Chicano Movement (*El Movimiento*) of the 1960s and 1970s, asserts a cultural nationalism and connection to Native American land. Following the Mexican-American war in 1848, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ceded half of Mexican territory to the US, including what is now California, Texas, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, and more than half of Colorado and the Oklahoma Panhandle (Grewe-Volpp 73). *Chicanismo* thus expresses a cultural nationalism via the invocation of an Indigenous past and reclamation of the Native lands divided and reorganized by the imposition of territorial borders post-1848.

⁹⁵ For example, see the ten essays on Chicanx environmentalisms in *Latinx Environmentalisms: Place, Justice, and the Decolonial* (2019), edited by Sarah D. Wald, et al., which center around decolonial justice and land-based imaginaries.

⁹⁶ As I reference in the Introduction, some migrants, boarding trawler boats from Baja California and other parts of Mexico to San Diego, do use a Pacific route around the border. This route is treacherous and has resulted in casualties over recent years.

(1981) reveals submerged discourses of the oceanic. In one sense, the oceanic in these texts are “submerged” in that they are not the works’ primary modalities of understanding Chicana subjects and their environments, as discourse surrounding the contended space of land takes precedence. In another sense, these discourses gesture toward what Macarena Gómez-Barris has called “submerged perspectives” (*Extractive Zone* 1, “Submerged Perspectives” 856). In response to “overburdened and normative vocabularies of political experience,” Gómez-Barris uses “submerged perspectives” to describe an attendance to “those sensibilities, forms of perception, and material practices that are organized below the modern colonial order, and that go undetected by the regime of state power” (“Submerged Perspectives” 856). In my readings, I examine oceanic ecologies that invite reorientations of ways of being/feeling/thinking the world.

I argue that attending to the emergent oceanic ecologies within Viramontes’ and Cervantes’ texts reveals a Chicana vibrancy—a multisensorial, affective mode of being/becoming that courses in relation to oceanic materiality and lifeworlds. In Viramontes’ novel, the main character Estrella comes to terms with her own extractability as a migrant worker, whose body serves as a resource that fuels white agribusiness. Reading representations of tar and oil production in the novel, I examine a condition where migrant workers are inseparable from a system of earthy and oceanic production—where Chicana bodies become readily convertible, erodible organic material, an expendable labor force made to disappear under colonial capitalist logics. Facing this condition, in one key moment, the characters Alejo and Estrella experience an oceanic ecology of intimacy, creating a temporary space of respite marked by interrelationality and multisensorial feeling. Ultimately, the oceanic in Viramontes’ novel retains a primarily symbolic significance, as the text returns to a terrestrial extractive economy that prescribes and restricts Chicana subjecthood. While an oceanic mode of being is merely

glimpsed in *Under the Feet of Jesus*, it plays a more central role in *Emplumada*, where the oceanic holds not simply metaphorical significance but ontological implication. The speaker in Cervantes' poems turns to the Pacific coastline as she seeks language for articulating her navigation of bilingualism, a Native American (Chumash) and Mexican American identity, and racialized and gendered abuses. In this process, the oceanic emerges as a site of colonial loss and displacement as well as vibrancy. Via encounters with marine creatures and relics at the shoreline, Cervantes experiments with an ecotonal poetics that interprets and arranges the world through multisensory contact and refracts the political on multiple scales. Together, the texts demonstrate *vibrant Chicanx becoming*—a being ever in process, desiring refuge, and finding expression in sensory language and oceanic contact.

My focus on vibrant Chicanx becoming, while complementing the coming-of-age themes in *Under the Feet of Jesus* and *Emplumada*, is aligned more broadly with scholarship that underscores “Latinx” and “Chicanx” as categories that speak to subjectivities always and ever in process of formation.⁹⁷ Following Norma Alarcón's analysis of how subjects create new knowledge forms by responding to and being shaped by encountered differences, Juana María Rodríguez imagines *Latinidad* as constituting and being constituted by “subjects-in-progress” (6). Alarcón's term, Rodríguez explains, “does not insinuate a progressional, unidirectional development; instead the process is often spastic and unpredictable, continually unfolding without origin or end, an act of becoming that never ceases” (7). “Subjects-in-progress” thus

⁹⁷ One could argue that Cervantes' poems fit the *künstlerroman* sub-category of the *bildungsroman*, since the poems track her growth as an artist. Regarding Viramontes' novel, Lene M. Johannessen has noted that it can “be read as a conventional *Bildungsroman*, following the typical trajectory toward the protagonist's realization of self and her place in the world. However, there are other aspects and readings of *Under the Feet of Jesus* that may be more rewarding” (i.e., analyzing the “meaning of place” in the novel) (148). I don't address the readership of Cervantes' and Viramontes' texts in ways that would be necessary for a robust analysis of the role of genre; but it would be interesting to consider these texts as working in ways complementary to Cisneros' *House on Mango Street* (1984), which has been widely pitched as a coming-of-age novella and taught to middle and young adult readers, among other “Chicana feminist *bildungsroman*[e]” (Cummins and Infante-Sheridan, 2018).

reflects the ongoing, rhizomatic transformations of Latinx subjects via various historical, cultural, geographic, linguistic, and “self-named” discourses (Rodríguez 22). As I attend to the ever-reinscribed and -inscribing subjects represented in Viramontes’ and Cervantes’ texts, I am oriented by Marissa K. López’ analyses of the gestures of bodies in Chicanx cultural productions; her work directs me not only to the vibrant realm of embodied feeling—through her consideration of bodies as conductive, portal-like sites of physical and affective experiences—but also to the temporality of such bodies. López reads bodies that “do not look, behave, or signify as anticipated” and thus “disrupt the temporality of expectation” (5). Following Sandra Ruiz’s formulation of “awaiting” political subjects, López describes that such bodies “render the future perennially surprising, impeding linearity and suspending time” (5, 11). Thus, I analyze bodies in this chapter that invite moving with a slowness, away from linear, Liberal-progressive time, orienting us to an ongoing present and an uncertain, suspended future.

Further, in tracing vibrant becoming, I consider bodies that create and are in flux with what López calls “choratic networks,” emphasizing bodies that produce, interact with, and are energized by the material world—especially text and language as mattered things (*Racial Immanence* 20). Attending to such webs of sensory materiality and affective surges—or what I would call vibrant, interactive ecologies—I turn to the oceanic not simply as a backdrop to subjects’ movements but a charged space and fluid substance that contours Chicanx life via contact and encounter. My oceanic orientation follows Macarena Gómez-Barris’ impulse “toward fluid ways of relating and being in tune with our liquid planet” and her charge to “acknowledge our intimate knowledge of the Earth as that which moves and shapes our affective, psychological, and collective attachments to the delicate web of social and biological life” (“Life Otherwise at the Sea’s Edge” 30). I thus inquire after the colliding trajectories and points of

contact between Chicane subjects, marine life, and oceanic movements. Viramontes' and Cervantes' texts represent ecologies that point ahead to scholarship like Gómez-Barris' that highlight alternative worldmaking in the face of colonial Anthropocenic violence.⁹⁸

Crucially, this chapter dialogues with work across US Southwest, Latinx, and Caribbean studies that employ watery and oceanic environmentalisms, ecocriticisms, and cultural critiques that attend to racial and ethnic difference. In US Southwest and Latinx studies, primarily focusing on the region surrounding the Rio Grande as well as on the Gulf of Mexico, scholarship has examined the aqueous biogeographies, contact zones, literary circulations, and environmental injustices of the border regions.⁹⁹ Adjacent, recent work in Latinx studies, tracing marine migration routes and knowledge forms of Caribbean and Afrodiasporic subjects, has drawn attention to the watery, transoceanic, and ecological valences of Latinx cultural forms.¹⁰⁰ Thinking beside the oceanic trajectories of these works, this chapter asks: what does it mean to think/feel Chicane being oceanically? How does the oceanic inform Chicane ways of thinking and feeling the world? What vibrant ways of being and becoming emerge when we attend to the calcified, watery, and multisensorial sites of Chicane life alongside the Pacific?

I. Helena María Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995)

Viramontes' novel opens opportunities for thinking the oceanic in conjunction with Chicane life and labor. Set in an unspecified time in the latter half of the twentieth century, the novel tells the story of migrant farmworkers in California's Central Valley, who face exploitation,

⁹⁸ Gómez-Barris writes that the "colonial anthropocene" refers to "human led planetary climate change and environmental destruction as a spatial and temporal structure with accelerating consequences, one that spans more than five centuries of colonial domination. Put more simply, it is the war against the Earth, Indigenous and racialized peoples, and the nonhuman" ("Life" 30n5).

⁹⁹ See C.J. Alvarez, *Border Land, Border Water* (2019), Kirsten Silva Gruesz, "Transamerican New Orleans" (2018), and Jennifer Garcia Peacock, "Zeke Peña: Illustrating Chicane Environmental Justice Histories in the Rio Grande Watershed" (2022).

¹⁰⁰ See Rebeca L. Hey-Colón, *Channeling Knowledges* (2023) and Marisel C. Moreno, *Crossing Waters* (2022).

poverty, and pesticide poisoning, among other trials.¹⁰¹ The text narrates the perspectives of different farmworkers, returning most often to the perspective of a thirteen-year-old girl, Estrella. As she comes of age among her family and other piscadores, Estrella forms a friendship and eventual romance with a teenage boy, Alejo. In the novel, Alejo becomes sick from pesticide poisoning, is looked after by Estrella's family, and eventually is taken to a hospital for care; in the end, it is uncertain whether he will live or die.

Scholars have paid ecocritical attention to Viramontes' work, underscoring the junctures of race, gender, and labor in relation to environmental justice and multispecies worlds, attending to subjects' relationships to land and the California landscape.¹⁰² Understandably, given that the novel itself emphasizes the relationship between its Chicana protagonist and the land, scant attention has been paid to the oceanic evocations in the text, which lie beneath the pervasive imagery of the tar pits in the novel. I argue that tracing the representations of the production of oil and tar—substances made from the remains of marine organisms and geologically cycled to the surface—reveals a submerged condition of migrant extractability that is linked to the oceanic. Under extractive capitalist logics, Chicana bodies are reduced to organic, recyclable matter for use in ways that make them proximate to a longer, submarine history. In the novel, Estrella enters into a momentary though significant awareness of how deep oceanic formation is linked to the piscadores' present. As I illuminate in what follows, the oceanic and Estrella's confrontation with

¹⁰¹ Scholars, including Joseph B. Entin, have identified Viramontes' novel as one that "evokes and rewrites earlier novels about migratory laborers," including Carlos Bulosan's *America is in the Heart* (1946) and Tomás Rivera's *...y no se lo tragó la tierra/...And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* (1971) (Entin 56). Further, Sarah D. Wald has analyzed Viramontes' novel in relation to food systems injustices. Wald underscores that Viramontes' novel "unveils the processes that mask farmworkers' visibility in both US food systems and society," placing food systems workers at the political center of the text (201). Wald's and Entin's works thus underscore the novel's more explicit environmental discourse surrounding land, agriculture, and migrant labor. Future revisions of this chapter may engage other migrant labor narratives and creative works—e.g., examining the lives and artistic productions of Ester Hernández (see Jennifer Garcia Peacock, "Sun Ma(i)d," 2019) and María Elena Lucas (see *Forged Under the Sun/Forjada Baja El Sol*, edited by Fran Leeper Buss).

¹⁰² See Arianne Burford (2008), Christa Grewe-Volpp (2005), Dennis López (2019), David James Vázquez (2017).

it coalesces into a vibrant becoming, as she gains access to sites of refuge for haptic, ecological relation. I turn now to scenes in Viramontes' text that move in slowness with the passage of geologic time, offering an expanded view of earthy and deep oceanic events.

Extractible Migrant Bodies

In the text, images of tar and oil crop up around Alejo's poisoning, which is arguably the pivotal event of the novel. One day, Alejo is perched up high in a peach tree, sneaking fruit from the orchard with his cousin Gumeecindo, when they hear the biplane approaching. The plane sprays a "shower of white pesticide" over the orchards a week earlier than planned (Viramontes 76). While his cousin is able to run to safety, Alejo can't climb down the tree fast enough to escape the mist.

He shut his eyes to the mist of black afternoon. At first it was just a slight moisture until the poison rolled down his face in deep sticky streaks. The lingering smell was a scent of ocean salt and beached kelp until he inhaled again and could detect under the innocence the heavy chemical choke of poison. (77)

The "ocean salt" and "beached kelp" smells register as "innocent"—familiar, harmless scents that do not pose a potential threat in and of themselves. Yet, the oceanic masks the scent of poison—toxins that restrict Alejo's airways, stifling him as they coat his face and infiltrate his lungs. In this scene, the oceanic is ultimately evocative of death, concealing a toxicity that is a reminder of the piscadores' precarity. Alejo's health is compromised for the sake of spraying the fields, to eliminate unwanted pests—"like the insects" that "fall long and hard" from the peach trees—pests that might otherwise compromise agribusiness' profit from the produce (77).¹⁰³ The chemicals consume Alejo's body: "a hole ripped in his stomach like a match to paper, spreading into a deeper and bigger black hole that wanted to swallow him completely" (77). The text

¹⁰³ For more on the implications of "pests" in the novel, see Lisa Fink, "Refusing the Colonial Discourse of Animality: Insects, Farmworkers, and Ecological Solidarity in Helena María Viramontes' *Under the Feet of Jesus*" (2022).

highlights Alejo's fear of being erased from "earth's history," emphasizing the rapid disintegration of his body, as if torn apart by the poison, as if ignited and devoured by flame (52). Demonstrated by the physical wearing-away of Alejo's body and its consumption by toxins, the laboring Chicana body is thereby rendered expendable, readily exterminated by the racialized economy of agribusiness.

The passage demonstrates that Alejo, as a migrant agricultural laborer, is part of an extractive capitalist system that threatens to literally and metaphorically kill him. In an analysis of *Under the Feet of Jesus* in relation to migrant labor, working-class struggle, and border cartographies, Joseph B. Entin describes the novel's message as such: "In the California fields, living labor is converted to dead labor, both metaphorically, as it is extracted and congealed in capitalist value, and literally, as workers' health is sacrificed for profit" (58). The poisoning of Alejo evidences the effacement of his laboring body. He suffers physical pain, as if he is burning alive; more broadly, as a migrant laborer, he is systemically erased and exploited in the transfer and congealment of his expended work into commodity. As Dennis López explains, commodities are metaphorically "lifeless" things, and "sensuous, living labor is transformed, under the auspices of capital, into abstract and alienated 'dead labor,' momentarily crystalized in commodity values but actively concealed in the objective immateriality of the value form" (310). López highlights the inherent forgetting behind the creation of the fetish (the dead thing), alienated from the worker's hands, removing the "sensuous, living" qualities from the laboring body. The orchard scene thus reveals the concealment of the precarity of the migrant worker, inevitably churned into dead labor.

To return to the issue of the oceanic, I underscore that it is in this poisoning scene that we encounter the first direct reference to the tar pits in Viramontes' text. Such imagery draws

attention to a relationship between Chicana subjects, land and citizenship, and deep oceanic processes. Already evoked in the “deep sticky streaks” of poison that roll down Alejo’s face, tar becomes a substance that adheres Chicana laboring subjecthood to a geologic ecosystem and to capitalist exploitation as a form of colonialism (77). As the crop duster circles a second time, Alejo “[closes] his eyes and [imagines] sinking into the tar pits” (78). Echoing his feeling of being consumed into a burning “black hole,” the tar pits threaten an erasure of Alejo from the face of the earth, imagining himself devoured by it.¹⁰⁴ Alejo feels himself sinking deeper, the sticky, black substance reaching his “feet” and “knee joints” before “swallowing his waist and torso, the pressure of tar squeezing his chest and crushing his ribs. Engulfing his skin up to his chin, his mouth, his nose, bubbled air” (78). The poison, like tar, constricts and crushes Alejo’s body as he’s ingested, bit by bit. He senses his own death:

Black bubbles erasing him. Finally the eyes. Blankness. Thousands of bones, the bleached white marrow of bones. Splintered bone pieced together by wire to make a whole, surfaced bone. No fingerprint or history, bone. No lava stone. No story or family, bone. (78)

In this passage, the series of short sentence fragments, separated by periods, simulates the “splintering” of Alejo’s bones. He feels himself reduced to a calcified remnant—an ossified, broken thing, his flesh eaten away—and is left without narrative or familial connection. The erosion of Alejo’s family history is evocative of the novel’s anxiety surrounding documentation and citizenship.¹⁰⁵ Later, Estrella reminds her mother that Alejo and his immediate family were all born in Texas, stating, “They belong there, Mama” (142). Yet, despite his legitimate claim to

¹⁰⁴ Critics have read this moment as reversing a scene in Tomás Rivera’s *...y no se lo tragó la tierra*, in which a character makes a triumphant assertion that earth did *not* devour him. “Where the geography and landscape in Rivera’s story ultimately support the protagonist in his quest for knowledge and self-assertion, the land in *Under the Feet of Jesus* is far more uncertain” (Johannessen 147).

¹⁰⁵ The title *Under the Feet of Jesus* refers to the fact that Estrella’s mother, Petra, takes a Jesus figurine with her and hides her children’s birth certificates beneath the statue (Viramontes 63).

citizenship by birthplace (*jus soli*), he is still subject to erasure in a land that considers him ever foreign (Lim 232). As evidenced by the novel's setting in an "unspecified moment" in the later twentieth century, the text "shows that although the government policies change, the result is often the same for the workers, who are treated almost exclusively as criminals who need to be eradicated from the land even as their bodies are sought for labor" (Manzella 157-158). Thus, Alejo's consumption and disintegration into the earth reinforces the "precarious status" of the migrant laborer, who is "without citizenship rights or protection" (Manzella 157).

While a focus on land and citizenship illuminates one facet of migrant precarity, the passage also points more broadly to a "humanity" linked to the body as a narrative means of being—a creative mode of story-ing and being storied. Alejo has no "fingerprint or history," two kinds of texts that could have illustrated his selfhood. The fingerprint, with its ridges and whorls unique to an individual, highlights the body as something that is inscribed and that can, through touch, impress upon the world. Alejo's history, revoked, marks an erasure of his past, a forgetting of where he has tread, what he has touched and thought. The repetition of the "o" sounds throughout the passage (in "bone," "marrow," "whole," "no," "stone," "story") simulates a hollowness, an echo, a mourning sound. Without a recognizable human feature or a piece of his story, Alejo is simply bone—anonymous material, dead evidence of something once living, ultimately converted into oil and tar. The language surrounding Alejo's poisoning thus demonstrates the erasure of the migrant body (as eroded, dead labor) via a terrifying return of the Chicane body to the earth. As Chicane bodies are things ever-reduced, "humanity," then, becomes an ever-eroded concept, never fully available to these subjects.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ See Introduction for discussion of "humanity" as an exclusive category, synonymous with white Liberal manhood, as differentiated from subordinated racial others in the Americas.

While Viramontes' text does not go as far as to anticipate a settler-colonial critique, Gómez-Barris scholarship helps contextualize Alejo's poisoning within histories of environmental destruction and colonial domination. She writes:

Before the colonial project could prosper, it had to render territories and peoples extractible, and it did so through a matrix of symbolic, physical, and representational violence. Therefore, the extractive view sees territories as commodities, rendering land as for the taking, while also devalorizing the hidden worlds that form the nexus of human and nonhuman multiplicity. This viewpoint, similar to the colonial gaze, facilitates the re-organization of territories, populations, and plant and animal life into extractible data and natural resources for material and immaterial accumulation. (5)

An extractive view of migrant Chicana bodies and land alike reduces subjects to "insects" for extermination, to "bone" to be churned into oil in the earth and sea, erasing histories of livingness and omitting the narratives of multiplicity that might have been legible, for example, in a "fingerprint." In the scene of Alejo's poisoning, the text offers a sense of terror instead of restoration upon Alejo's return into the earth. Thus, Viramontes' novel exposes, through the imagery of the tar pits, the ways settler-colonialism and capitalism render *piscadores* extractible, organic resources tied to territory.

The tar pit imagery not only draws attention to an extractive view of migrant bodies and land but also reveals that extractivism reaches the submarine, pelagic zones of Chicana formation. The abyssal plain of the ocean floor exposes a condition where humanity, for Chicana subjects, is always subject to erosion, tying Chicana living to reduction to bone, to organic matter. At first, in the days following the poisoning, Alejo returns to work. The text describes his condition as he wakes the following morning:

In the morning light, Alejo saw mud and tar under his nails and this frightened him. He felt like splintered and chipped sea shells embedded in layers of the desert rock, so far away from the ocean. Something had gone wrong. The sea had receded without him. The sideboards of the truck clacked like broken dishes and the noise made him start... The thick smell of chemical and saltwater had not abandoned his nostrils and Alejo felt as if he reeked. (81-82)

Caked under Alejo's nails are mud—a mixture of earth and water—and tar. These substances induce “fright,” as they remind him of the previous day's events and the poison that hasn't left his body. The passage moves us from his affective response of fear to his assessment of how his body feels: “like splintered and chipped sea shells.” The comparison of his body to broken sea shells, marine invertebrate exoskeletons largely made up of calcium carbonate, echoes Alejo's feeling of becoming “splintered bone,” another calcified remnant of a living organism (78). In this passage, his poisoning is linked more explicitly to the oceanic and here, evokes a site of origin or belonging. Alejo feels like the shells trapped in “layers of the desert rock, so far away from the ocean.” As if displaced from his ocean home, Alejo senses himself sedimented and stratified in his current desert place. He reclines, ill, in the truck moving across the California ranch, the rattling of the vehicle “like broken dishes”—adding a sonic element to his experience of embodied fragmentation and desiccation. Alejo has an instinctive feeling that “something had gone wrong,” that he had been left behind, as if by mistake, as if the “sea...receded without him.” Estranged from the sea and left in a state of brokenness, Alejo still “reeks” of the “chemical and saltwater” smell of the poison. This oceanic discourse not only underscores the extent of extractive violence, which draws out resources even from the watery depths below the earth's surface; it also alerts readers to a migrant Chicanx affect of estrangement from an oceanic site of origin—tying migrant Chicanx experience not simply to lateral understandings of territorial and national belonging but to geologic formation in pelagic depths.

The novel thus expands the spatial and temporal scope of Chicanx subject formation, opening a concourse to the planetary, a trajectory that complements what Wai Chee Dimock has called “deep time” (2001). Reaching toward this “denationalized space” that extends “backward...into far-flung temporal and spatial coordinates,” the tar pit scenes in the novel point

to dwelling beyond the frameworks of the national, borders, and citizenship; instead, they evoke a spacetime that predates the US entirely, pointing to another world “already fully in existence” (Dimock 759-760).

Intimate, Oceanic Ecologies

As I have argued thus far, the vestigial presence of the oceanic in Viramontes’ text at once conceals violence and points to geologic production as evidence of the deep entanglement between capitalist extraction and colonialism. In another pivotal scene in the novel, which I examine next, the oceanic also figures as an imaginative, liminal site of relief, a hidden world. The deep ocean—a space the characters momentarily inhabit on an imaginative level—becomes a space tinged with desire, affording an interpersonal, haptic exchange between Alejo and Estrella. The characters’ recollection of and engagement with oceanic depths holds vibrant potential—affording long-term, geologic thought, residing in a stalled sense of time that disrupts the progressive temporality of capitalist production.¹⁰⁷ This glimpsed oceanic sensibility—a being at the bottom of the sea, on the cool, ocean floor—offers respite in a different timeplace and draws awareness to an intimate, oceanic ecology, a network of interconnected things, accessed and made legible via sensoria.

On a particularly sweltering day in the week following the pesticide poisoning, Estrella rests in the shade beneath one of the trucks parked in the grape fields. It’s a day that makes her dream of “swimming and water and ice” (85). As Alejo slides beneath the truck to lay beside her, he brushes against “the oil greased thick on the shock absorbers,” leaving a residue on his clothes (86). Alejo then explains to Estrella the origins of petroleum, and the two enjoy a calm moment of intimacy:

¹⁰⁷ See Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015) for more on the unified coordination and unidirectional gaze of progressive time (20-25).

—Millions of years ago, the dead animals and plants fell to the bottom of the sea.
 —You like to talk, don't you?
 —Imagine bones at the bottom of the sea...
 —If you say so. Estrella yawned. She found it hard to imagine the cool silence of the ocean floor when her feet were itching with swelling sweat and she could feel the constraint of her shoes as if her feet were bound. But smell it yes, she smelled the kelp.
 —Bones and rocks and leaves. Falling. Slowly.
 Estrella studied the way the tire tread actually had a lacy diamond pattern like the scarf doily the mother spread under Jesucristo. *Falling*. She noticed the color white had faded out of the imprinted word GOODYEAR. *Slowly*. His words were hypnotic over the hum of radio waves.
 —The bones lay in the seabed for millions of years. That's how it was. Makes sense don't it, bones becoming tar oil? Estrella felt Alejo's hand take hers and she could feel the wet of sweat rolling down the side of her breast. (87)

Alejo's words settle Estrella and the reader within a different space and time, "millions of years ago"—a nonspecific way of referring to an ancient or prehistoric past. The imperative "imagine" invites Estrella closer to that past, as her initial indifference gives way to vibrant imagining. In multisensory modes of feeling, she starts to inhabit that long-ago space—trying to imagine the "cool silence of the ocean floor." The synesthetic description, "cool silence," mixes the touch sensation of cold with the sonic quiet of the bottom of the sea. It is an olfactory sensation, though, that simulates the feeling of being on the seafloor, altering the way Estrella inhabits her present moment. Despite the hot day that swells and constricts her feet, she can still "smell" the ocean. Perhaps what she smells in reality is sweat from the day or the saltwater smell of the pesticides still clinging to Alejo, but she interprets it as the smell of kelp. Alejo's words lull Estrella into the slow, humming environment of a sunken ocean space. The polysyndeton in "bones and rocks and leaves" elongates the phrase, enacting the objects' fall. Further, the periods after "Falling" and "Slowly" demarcate breath, the pauses Alejo takes between words. With Estrella, with the bones and rocks and leaves, readers fall into deeper waters. Alejo's words become "hypnotic over the hum of radio waves," his voice overlapping with the distant sound of the radio. Listening to and slowing with his voice, Estrella senses her environment differently.

Sensing oceanically, viewing the world from below, she notes specific patterns and textures of her immediate environment and draws connections between her own position beneath the truck and a parallel site. She pays close attention to the “lacy diamond pattern” of the tire tread, which is “actually” much alike her mother’s doily, placed under the feet of the family’s Jesucristo statue. As emphasized by the novel’s title, *Under the Feet of Jesus* confronts the idea of being “under” an authority or regime of power or protection. Thus, an oceanic sensibility—a vibrant mode of thinking/feeling/being in the cool, deep space of slow geologic time—makes it possible for Estrella to perceive the slow violences at work in the world.¹⁰⁸ She inhabits a vibrant, oceanic ecology of intimacy—a low, humming space wherein it’s possible to notice the interconnectedness of things, to be attuned to difference. From below, she can recognize the geologic mechanisms that churn the dead remains of living things (“dead animals and plants,” alongside “bones and rocks and leaves”) into tar oil; she can notice how “imprinted” things, like the “Goodyear” name on the tires, or a “fingerprint” or “history,” as Alejo feared, are subject to erosion. She sees the wearing-away, attendant to the scale of what happens in “millions of years.”

As Alejo and Estrella lie beneath the truck, seeking refuge from the heat of the day and imagining a long-ago, pelagic timespace, Estrella becomes attuned to the details of a watery and landed world in ways that recognize and unsettle colonial boundaries. She reacts to and revises a settler-colonial, extractivist reduction of her body to bone, to dead labor. Perceiving things from a submerged perspective, immersed in a hidden world, she inhabits an intimate, oceanic ecology. Viramontes’ novel thus reorients notions of embodiment, demonstrating how characters turn away from Western models of a unified, supreme power that exercises control over territories

¹⁰⁸ See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence* (2011).

and peoples alike; instead, characters orient themselves within submerged lifeworlds, pursuing affective trajectories in spaces hidden from a colonial view.

As Alejo and Estrella find refuge beneath the truck, they encounter a mode of relation through contact, a sensory way of being connected to an autochthonous sense of belonging in, emerging from, and returning to the underworld of the earth and sea.¹⁰⁹ Following Alejo's explanation about "bones becoming tar oil," Estrella "[feels] Alejo's hand take hers." She registers the proximity of his body in a multisensory way, noting the new feeling of "this skin," "this heat," "this scent" beside her (88). In proprioceptive language, the text describes how Estrella "became aware of his body shifting in the gravel, imagined where his face was, where the words came from. She could feel the hairs of her arm stand erect" (88). Alerted to Alejo's movements, Estrella senses him without looking, the fine points of sensory reception on her body attuned to his. For a moment, she "[pulls] her hand away gently to touch the bolts and rolled the blackened tar between her fingers"—touching the sticky, black substance that has accumulated under the vehicle (88). With tar on Estrella's hands and with Alejo, still suffering from the effects of poison, beside her, the two become "quiet" (89).

Estrella felt him take her hand again, her fingers soiled with the tar grease, and she closed her eyes. She did not resist, unaware of where he was taking her or how. Alejo carefully smoothed her fingers flat as if unfolding a map. His mouth pressed against the center of her palm and his lips, which felt dry as baking soda, lingered until the heat of his air welded into the cup of her hand. (89)

In this passage, Alejo's and Estrella's expressions of youthful tenderness perform a bodily autonomy that an extractivist view denies them. Such autonomy is enacted via contact as a form of relation. As Alejo takes Estrella's hand, a calm sets over her; comfortable, she closes her eyes, and does not "resist." Touch becomes a mode of expressing affective desire, the haptic encounter

¹⁰⁹ In future revisions, I may think more here about this passage in relation to Donna Haraway's conception of the *chthonic* (as in Greek for "underworld"). See *Staying with the Trouble*, 2016.

bringing directionality and shape to want. For example, Estrella is “unaware of where” Alejo is “taking her or how.” She senses that by allowing Alejo to take her hand, she is letting him lead her to an uncertain “where”—suggesting a trajectory of the gesture and spatial dimension of a shared destination. In this scene, touch draws attention to creating a shared space, where one entity is not subsumed or eroded by the other. With “[care],” Alejo “smooths” out Estrella’s fingers, “as if unfolding a map,” before pressing a kiss to her palm. In one sense, “mapping” Estrella’s body evidences Alejo’s reinscription of colonial desire—an impulse to chart and name territory and peoples as a form of power. At the same time, the comparison of Estrella’s hand to a map suggests an understanding of the body as a legible expression of selfhood, with distinct contours and topographies, a palm to be read. Like the earlier reference to a fingerprint that would narrate or evidence Alejo’s livingness, the map comparison suggests that Estrella’s hand is another text, a diagrammatic representation of who she is—something he can “read” with his lips or the press of his cheek. The moment thus draws attention how Alejo’s pursuit of Estrella provokes the inhabitation of a vibrant modality.

The oceanic in this scene becomes a relational way of sensing differently. Estrella receives Alejo’s kiss to her palm:

Her fingers closed on his chin gently like the tentacles of a sea anemone. He then pressed his cheek against the nakedness of her palm and his bristles tickled and she smiled in her darkness, until Alejo kissed her again, but this time longer, damp and pleadingly and still. Her oiled handprint, the shape of her fingers, imprinted onto his face. And that was all he had to do. (89)

This moment, in which Estrella compares her hand to a sea anemone, foregrounds the oceanic sensuality of contact between two beings. While metaphorical, the oceanic evocation here has critical connections. Extending the conceit of the anemone, I read the moment as anticipatory of Eva Hayward’s encounter with cup corals, discussed in her essay “Fingeryeyes” (2010).

Hayward develops “fingeryeyes” as a “haptic-optic” that registers the range of sensorial interactions between species (580). She describes:

Perceptions are moved (affected) by the movements and actions that they provoke in other organisms. Stirred by the ripples of investigation that emerge in the arrangement that we may touch, senses are amalgamated, superimposed, forging cross-species reticulations and sites of solid-arity. This kind of transversing is navigated by constantly accessing the medium of the meeting and the accompanying beings and things. From this point of view/touch of fingeryeyes, species are impressions, thresholds of emergence. (580)

Hayward’s description of sensory beings, their transmissions, and the way they texture other beings and things, is resonant with the vibrant, oceanic exchange between Alejo and Estrella. The simile that likens Estrella’s fingers to the tentacles of an anemone invites attention to what Hayward would regard as a cross-species interaction—where a “species” is comprised of “shared milieus” of “energetic forces, coextensive overlappings” of “sensuous responses” (593). The interface of fingeryeyes is much like the vibrant contact of Estrella’s hand upon Alejo, an exchange composed of “resonances and dissonances of intensification” and shaped by the “energetic cadences of one another” (Hayward 593). The two characters find proximity with sensuous, aquatic forms—experiencing embodied encounters that rub against the extractivist reduction of migrant Chicanxs to extractible, natural resources. Under the truck, Estrella and Alejo engage in multidirectional acts of impressing—the bristles of his cheek tickling her palm, she leaving an “oiled handprint” on his face, the “shape of her fingers” still there, “imprinted.” The tar print on Alejo’s face gestures to an ongoing confrontation with the reality of migrant Chicanx extractability. Experienced through a slowing with geologic time and through Alejo’s poisoning that leaves his lips as “dry as baking soda,” the two sense the threats of their erosion into bone, to the carbonate substances that are chemical building blocks of life, and their

subjection into the depths of the earth and sea. Yet here, on the ocean floor, is also where they find other ways of sensing and thinking the world.

Like the corals Hayward encounters, sea anemones are cnidarians formed of polyps, cylindrical forms with upper ends surrounded by a whorl of tentacles. These tentacles serve as the organism's tactile sense and assist in the capture of food, making a cnidarian's very being a kind of haptic-sensory apparatus. Hayward describes, "When a coral's tentacles reached out to eat, and it 'tasted' my fingers and reacted, a moment of sensitization...we did not engulf or overcome each other in this act, but we pressed against each other" (585).¹¹⁰ As Hayward understands this moment of fingeryeyes, "a provisional togetherness," there is space allotted for the differences between both beings (585). There is friction, the pulse of sensoria coming into contact, the interference of vibrant beings (beings as and through sensoria) shaping one another. Within the context of Viramontes' novel, this kind of "tentacular" feeling is a specific, racialized response. This vibrant, oceanic sensibility rescripts the abyssal subjection of migrant Chicana bodies within a deep, aquatic ecology that imagines refuge and intimacy.

Thus, invoked via the imagery of the tar pits, the oceanic in the novel alerts readers to both the long-term, hidden processes of exploiting laboring bodies and to a dimension of escape from that reality—a moment's pause in an imaginative, deep ocean space of slowness and proximity. Vibrant Chicana being finds relation through sensoria—through various modes of contact—through touch, through soundwaves that travel through a medium, passing vibrations.¹¹¹ Although not fully realized, the emergent oceanic ecologies in the novel give way

¹¹⁰ There is room here to consider the "contact zone" of this moment, i.e., as "backgrounded dimension of affects...where intensities move between materialities (Haraway 2008)" (Hayward 585).

¹¹¹ The imagery of the anemone also draws to mind the delicate hair cells (cilia) in the inner ear (cochlea) that convert movements (i.e., soundwaves) into nerve impulses, which are then carried to the brain (by the auditory nerve) where the brain decodes information. I'm interested in the synesthetic sense of vibrancy conjured in this process and through the tentacular image of the cilia, foregrounding sound as a necessarily haptic experience.

to altered haptic and affective worlds, resulting in Estrella's understanding of an extractive condition, linked to the "prehistoric" resource found in the tar pits, and a vibrant becoming that expresses itself in sonic and multisensory forms.

At a critical point near the end of the novel, the imagery of bones and tar resurfaces in Estrella's mind. Alejo's condition grows in severity, and Estrella's family resorts to taking him to a clinic. After assessing Alejo, the nurse refers him to the larger hospital in Corazón, twenty miles away and charges the family a fee of ten dollars for the visit. The character Perfecto, a father-figure to Estrella, reluctantly hands over the only money they have left: nine dollars and seven cents. In this moment,

[Estrella] remembered the tar pits. Energy money, the fossilized bones of energy matter. How bones made oil and oil made gasoline. The oil was made from their bones, and it was their bones that kept the nurse's car from not halting on some highway...It was their bones...that kept them moving on the long dotted line on the map. Their bones. (148)

Estrella arrives at a moment of understanding of circuits of extraction, activated by the memory of lying under the truck with Alejo. She sees the exploitation of her family, abstracted into "energy," their calcified remains ("bones") convertible matter, used "for kindling" (155). In this pivotal moment, fueled by the recognition of a prescribed being-as-resource, Estrella taps into newfound power. Estrella returns to the car to fetch a crowbar, and threatens the nurse, insisting she return their money, and the nurse complies. With her money restored, the family is able to drop Alejo off at the hospital. Estrella walks out of the hospital unsure whether or not Alejo will survive. Upon exiting without him, not knowing "quite what to do with the emptiness in her hands," Estrella approaches the glass doors; "she lifted her arms, her palms up and then spread them wide...[parting] the doors like a sea of glass" (156). With a prophetic gesture, evoking the Biblical parting of the Red Sea, Estrella parts the glass doors, suggesting a kind of power over

the origin site of her extractivity. She demonstrates a vibrant, creative potential—the ability to make something out of nothing at all, such as the emptiness in her hands.

Ultimately, the novel continues to explore Estrella’s vibrant strength in the realm of the multisensorial and proprioceptive, presenting her as a transmitter of voice and feeling. The final scene paints Estrella in a scene of near-transcendence, “standing on the verge of faith” (176). She is presented as a sonic, summoning force: “Her heart tolled in her chest” (174); “She had to trust the soles of her feet, her hands, the shovel of her back, and the pounding bells of her heart” (175); “Like the chiming bells of the great cathedrals, she believed her heart powerful enough to summon home all those who strayed” (176). This is vibrant becoming at the edge of a new kind of fullness, a new kind of sanctuary, shining and sounding out. While the ocean imagery does not appear in this final scene, crucially, Estrella’s agency is propelled by insight into an oceanic perspective on spatiotemporality and the potency of the sensorial and affective contact. Ultimately, Estrella’s recognition of her use in an extractive economy and altered sensory perception open embodied, sonic avenues for expression and interpersonal connection, affording the creation of a new space of refuge.

In Viramontes’ novel, the oceanic imagery recedes, returning to a position of thematic submergence. In Cervantes’ poems, however, the oceanic moves beyond metaphor and explores a Chicanx ontology linked to ecological relationships with oceanic space and creatures and objects along the California shoreline.

II. Lorna Dee Cervantes’ *Emplumada* (1981)

Emplumada is Lorna Dee Cervantes’ first published collection of poetry, her “coming-of-age debut collection,” which received an American Book Award and is considered “a

fundamental text in Chicana/Latino studies” (González 163-164).¹¹² A largely autobiographical text, the collection is inspired by Cervantes’ own upbringing in San Jose. Cervantes was raised by her grandmother, a member of the Chumash nation, who mirrors the grandmother depicted in the collection, a woman “from the hills of Santa Barbara” (“Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway” 12). Scholars of ecocriticism and environmental justice have read *Emplumada* as a text that “anticipates a Chicano ecopoetics,” as it spotlights “relationships between humans and nature, biology and language, and ecosystems and culture” (Dowdy 30); and have lauded its bioregionalist imaginary, its depiction of sites of “sustenance, cultural and ecological memory, human and nonhuman resistance to destructive development, and place-based identity” (Gatlin 247). These ecocritical works help readers reevaluate *Emplumada*’s conceptions of Chicana relationships to land, especially in the wake of *movimiento* political thought.¹¹³

While connected to *Emplumada*’s landed and urban ecologies that tie Chicana living to terrestrial plant and animal life, my readings shift specifically to the collection’s thread of oceanic nearness. A significant number of the poems take place at or meditate upon shorelines and uncertain, watery terrains. I focus on poems that elucidate the oceanic as a site reverberant with colonial violences that materializes the speaker’s linguistic and cultural displacement. Seeking modes of expression and refuge from the in-between, the speaker encounters marine creatures and objects along the shoreline that open haptic modes of intimacy and remembering. I argue that the speaker experiments with a vibrant, ecotonal poetics—emerging in the poems’ form and in the content’s multiscalar political resonances.

Interstitial Oceanic Space

¹¹² For more on *Emplumada* as a coming-of-age text, see Seator, “*Emplumada: Chicana Rites of Passage*” (1984).

¹¹³ As Dowdy outlines, *movimiento* politics of the mid-to-late twentieth century aligned with Chicano nationalisms that invoke an Indigenous past and seek to reclaim the mythical homeland of Aztlán—US-occupied land, ceded by Mexico in 1848 (24).

“Barco de Refugiados” and “Refugee Ship” are among Cervantes’ most well-known poems from *Emplumada*.¹¹⁴ In the collection, the Spanish version of the poem is on a lefthand page preceding the English translation on the right. As John Alba Cutler notes in the opening of *Ends of Assimilation* (2015), the poem traces the speaker’s “linguistic homelessness” to “failed mother-daughter identifications,” thus characterizing “language as a space to inhabit” (2).

Attending to the spatialization and sensorial valences of the speaker’s displacement illuminates the oceanic as a site of perpetuated loss and dislocation as well as vibrant desire.

Like wet cornstarch, I slide
past my grandmother’s eyes. Bible
at her side, she removes her glasses.
The pudding thickens

Mama raised me without language.
I’m orphaned from my Spanish name.
The words are foreign, stumbling
on my tongue. I see in the mirror
my reflection: bronzed skin, black hair.

I feel I am a captive
aboard the refugee ship.
The ship that will never dock.
El barco que nunca atraca.

While the presentation of the poem in both Spanish and English seems to accentuate the speaker’s bilingual and bicultural fluency, the content of the poems undercuts a sense of ease accompanying her navigation of a bifurcated identity. The poems’ sensory and material construction points towards the speaker’s vacillation between ruptured worlds. The first line of the second stanza suggests that the mother raised the speaker “without language”—“sin lenguaje” in the “Barco” poem. Due to this gap in intergenerational knowledge, the speaker cannot communicate with her grandmother in Spanish. The first stanza describes how, “like wet

¹¹⁴ Her spontaneous reading of these poems at a festival in Mexico City in 1974 first garnered her critical attention (“Lorna Dee Cervantes”).

cornstarch,” the speaker “slide[s]/ past [her] grandmother’s eyes”—a distance growing between them as time goes on. The passage of time is indicated by the last line of the first stanza: “The pudding thickens.” The dessert solidifies, stagnant and undisturbed. In contrast, the speaker is slippery, the “wet cornstarch” description texturing her in-betweenness, such that she slides past (“deslizarse”) the grandmother’s notice. Further, the speaker conveys the “foreign” or “extrañas” (strange) feel of Spanish words “on” her tongue. The English “foreign” evokes the spatial language of distance—words from another place that feel awkward or unbelonging as they “stumble” from her mouth. The “Barco” poem uses “tartamudeando”—stuttering or stammering—to convey how the words trip over the surface of the speaker’s tongue. By lingering on the poems’ haptic elements—the slippery substance associated with the speaker’s body, the contact established in the faltering traversal of Spanish words across her tongue—I point out its emphasis on how a condition of betweenness affects the speaker’s sensoria and sense of herself in space. Cast in flight between languages, the speaker is not at ease in her own body. She senses an incongruency between her language ability and her physical appearance—“bronzed skin” and “black hair”—that might racialize her as a Spanish-speaker. The speaker realizes this incongruency by viewing her mirrored self. In alignment with the coming-of-age current of the collection, the speaker embodies strangeness or foreignness, sensing that she is not at home in her own body.

Her expression of “ni de aquí, ni de allá” feeling and spatiality anticipates Gloria Anzaldúa’s theorization of *Nepantlismo*, mentioned in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) and further theorized in later works, including “(Un)natural bridges, (Un)safe spaces” (2002).¹¹⁵ Taken from the Nahuatl, *Nepantla* means “the space between two bodies of water, the space

¹¹⁵ Also see Pat Mora, *Nepantla: Essays from the Land in the Middle* (1993).

between two worlds,” or “tierra entre medio” (*Borderlands* 276, “(Un)natural” 1). Although Cervantes’ poems reverse the *Nepantla* image—the speaker sensing herself caught at sea, between two bodies of land—we could think about Cervantes’ poems as speaking to Anzaldúa’s understanding of a mestiza consciousness, developed by being “caught between *los intersticios*” (*Borderlands* 42).¹¹⁶ This comparison between Cervantes’ speaker’s interstitial being and Anzaldúa’s mestiza consciousness is indicative of the texts’ residues of *chicanismo*, which asserts a Chicanx claim to Native American land. Scholars, including Josefina Saldaña-Portillo (2001), Nicole Marie Guidotti-Hernández (2011), and Maylei Blackwell et al. (2017), have interrogated constructions of Indigeneity and *mestizaje* in Chicanx contexts, especially as theorized by Anzaldúa. These scholars grapple with Anzaldúa’s appropriation of Native American “spiritual paraphernalia” and reproduction of settler colonialism, *mestizaje*’s valorization of racial whitening, and more broadly, “tensions that arise when Indigenous [Latinx] migrants are positioned as part of a settler colonial force that continues the dispossession and erasure of Northern Native people who struggle for their sovereignty” (Saldaña-Portillo 419, Blackwell et al. 132).¹¹⁷

While Cervantes’ poems may forecast Anzaldúa’s theorizations of mestiza consciousness and *Nepantla* and at times, romanticize a recuperation of her Chumash grandmother’s spirituality, her oceanic poems—including “Barco” and “Refugee Ship”—point to irresolution

¹¹⁶ Hey-Colon draws attention the watery textures of *Borderlands/La Frontera*. She notes that the text begins and ends with water, and is in a sense, surrounded by it; specifically, she asserts that it is “a text suffused with the energies of Afro-diasporic waters” (114).

¹¹⁷ This scholarship offers important reevaluations of Chicanx cultural forms and identities in relation to Indigeneity. At the same time, scholars like Enrique Sepúlveda (“Chicanx Studies, Indigeneity and the Politics of Settler Colonialism,” 2023) have expressed the need to rethink the binaristic Indigenous vs. migrant/settler paradigm in ways that offer room for expressing nuances of different subjectivities. His work speaks to a critical desire for more capacious understandings of different experiences of those who fall adjacent to or diverge from a strict immigrant/settler position (e.g., undocumented immigrants, refugees, etc., whom the settler colonial frameworks may not carefully place).

rather than a triumphant reclamation of Indigenous knowledge.¹¹⁸ The wavelike repetition of the final lines of “Barco” and “Refugee Ship” underscores the perpetuity of the speaker’s flight between linguistic homes. In “Barco,” both the penultimate and last line of the poem are in Spanish—“El barco que nunca atraca./El barco que nunca atraca.”—creating an air of solemnity around the repeated statement, solidified with periods, marking a certainty that the ship will never dock, ever attempting to reach shore. In “Refugee Ship,” the penultimate line is in English and the last in Spanish, thus simulating the inevitable movement between linguistic homelands. “Refuge” is ever desired and revoked.¹¹⁹

The speaker’s felt and embodied dissonance is conveyed via the poems’ layout on facing pages. The physical text produces another uneven reflection across the vertical line of the book’s spine between the lefthand Spanish poem and righthand English one. The structure of the two poems is nearly the same, with four lines in the first and last stanzas; but the English poem contains five lines in the second stanza compared to the six in “Barco,” creating an unparallel visual. As I hold my paperback copy of *Emplumada*, I am struck by the watery landscape created by the physical text—spatializing the betweenness that is characterized by the unspoken oceanic space across which the “refugee ship” transits, ever between languages, ever between the worded islands on either page. The curvature between the pages, separated and seamed at the spine, mimics a wave—a shape that conveys at once the togetherness and inevitable parting of a body of water and the repetition of oceanic pulses. Framing my reading of this spread is the sonic experience of flipping the pages, which I rustled to get here, and which, upon closing the book

¹¹⁸ “With the exception of ‘Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway,’ Cervantes writes no celebratory poems—only poems that desire celebration” (Sánchez 104).

¹¹⁹ See the Coda for further meditation on the valence of “refuge” in conjunction with other “refuge” discourses in this dissertation (e.g., the Vietnamese refugee experiences depicted in Chapter 1).

will conjure the rushing-and-receding sound again. Although unspoken in the poems, there is ocean here.

Inflected by the haptic language in the poem and the form of the text, the speaker's sense of embodied dislocation is metaphorized and materialized via the oceanic—a medium that illuminates the tension between liminality, loss, and vibrancy (i.e., feeling and desire attached to the mixed sonic, optic, haptic, and other sensorial forms). The underlying oceanic in “Barco” and “Refugee Ship” is thus the site of linguistic and embodied estrangement as well as potential poiesis. Caught in oceanic space aboard “*el barco que nunca atraca*” / “the ship that will never dock,” the speaker expresses a desire for “language” itself—the thing the second stanza reminds us she is “without.” The speaker's embodied and oceanic sense of disorientation, expressed in “Barco” and “Refugee Ship,” thus makes way for the vibrant becoming of the artist, a subject-in-progress, fueled by a desire for language.¹²⁰

The two poems speak to the collection's metapoetic consciousness, the speaker's desire to find language, as mode and material of expression, and her artistic attempts to arrange it. Throughout the collection, imagery of the oceanic as migratory space accompanies scenes of making. In the paratext preceding the poems in *Emplumada*, Cervantes offers definitions of Spanish terms that inform the collection's title. The frontmatter offers these dictionary entries:

em.plu.ma.do *v.m.*, feathered;
in plumage, as in after molting
plu.ma.da *n.f.*, pen flourish

¹²⁰ In my previous chapters (see Chapter 2), I have discussed how transpacific disorientation catalyzes vibrant thought and feeling. The vertiginous experience of being at sea involves a disruption of the body's faculties, scrambling the senses in ways that make room for irregular modes of experiencing the world. While my work in Chapter 2 discusses disorientation in the context of tractable Filipinx subjects deployed by and for US empire, disorientation in the context of “Barco de Refugiados” and “Refugee Ship” is linked to a different experience and history of displacement.

The title *Emplumada* thus draws attention to birdlike flight—noted as a verbal form, “feathered”—and as a nominal form, the act of penning. Bird imagery frequently appears across the collection, and many of the birds referenced are “seagulls” or “seabirds.” Often, the speaker invokes aquatic birds to draw attention to a migrant subjecthood tied to displacement—specifically one performed across oceanic spaces or along a coastline.

For example, the speaker draws parallels between her own migratory being and that of seagulls in the poem “Visions of Mexico While at a Writing Symposium in Port Townsend, Washington.” The poem is divided into two sections, the first titled “México” and the second, “Washington,” describing two disparate locations. In the “México” section, the speaker describes, “We work/ and watch seabirds elbow their wings/ in migratory ways, those mispronouncing gulls/ coming south/ to refuge or gameland” (45). Then, at the end of the poem, in the “Washington” section, the speaker assesses: “as pain sends seabirds south from the cold/ I come north/ to gather my feathers/ for quills” (47). Like the speaker in “Barco de Refugiados” and “Refugee Ship,” the seabirds seem to have stumbling speech, garbling their words in a new place. As they fly south to Mexico, they, too, seek “refuge,” or perhaps, “gameland.” The latter term denotes land specifically redesigned for recreation, especially hunting or trapping. The speaker thus paints the gulls as ambiguous figures; the birds are either motivated, like the speaker, to find a safe place to land, to find belonging in a removed homeland; or, like gawking tourists, they are enticed by the prospect of sport, reaping what they can find from a plentiful land. The speaker sees herself as moving in parallel to these birds, though flying in the opposite direction. While the birds reap resources from the south, the speaker reaps words from her time in Washington state, gathering “quills.” In the penultimate stanza, she states: “there are songs in my head I could sing you/ songs that could drone away/ all the Mariachi bands you thought you

ever heard/...but for that I need words...obedient words obligatory words words I steal/ in the dark when no one can hear me” (47). The speaker expresses the difficulty of transmuting her interior world to paper, struggling to make herself legible. In sonic terms, she describes the vibrancy within her—a songful world, buzzing with potential, emphasized via the conditional “could.” The songs “in [her] head” could undercut cultural performative expectation, exemplified by the reference to the popular ensemble of “Mariachi bands.” Her songs could “drone away” these performances—drowning out the band with the low, persistent hum of her own experience. Through these sonic vibrations, she could convey what she knows. Like the gulls that might pilfer the land, the speaker “needs” to “steal” words. She communicates an anxiety about being extractive for the sake of her art—wary of subduing and thieving words under the covert cover of a silent “darkness.” The “Visions of Mexico” poem thus displays orientations toward oceanic ecologies—born out of displacement and desire for refuge and words—where the speaker moves in parallel and proximity to aquatic birds—animals that congregate at coastlines, migrating overseas and between different shores.

Shorelines and Ecotonal Poetics

“Starfish”

In this section, I continue to trace the speaker’s vibrant desire for poetic language, expressed via encounters with marine life and relics along the coastline. I argue that Cervantes’ lyric poems “Starfish” and “Shells” theorize an ecotonal poetics—a vibrant mode of making, emergent from and contoured by the interstitial space of the shore, where ocean and land meet. An ecotone is a region of transition between two biological communities or habitats, such as the shore (OED). In this amphibious meeting site, oceanic ecologies materialize as the speaker comes into contact with starfish, shells, and remnant sea life. Here, she can confront oceanic

senses of loss, division, and violence—their apparitions aggregate, fleeting, and uneasily attributed to a singular event. In the vibrant, interactive site of the ecotone, colonial pasts and family traumas wash ashore. Sensations accumulate. Images, like waves, make momentary suggestions of shape, gesturing towards specificity, and then disintegrate, refracting but not fixing multiple political meanings.

At first glance, “Starfish” and “Shells” may seem to present the California shoreline as a space for retreat from social and political engagement. As Marta Ester Sánchez has described,

Cervantes’ lyric poems express a desire to be free from the pressures of social commitment and responsibility. Spoken by disembodied lyric speakers, they reveal her need to speak in a voice that deliberately tries to avoid claiming a social consciousness. As such they are less dependent than the discursive poems upon a familiarity with the subtleties and innuendos of the interrelationships among Mexican, Chicano, and Anglo cultures. (103)

While the speaker’s ethnic, gendered, and classed experiences may be addressed less explicitly in these poems than others in the collection, Sánchez clarifies that “Cervantes’ images remain anchored in the concrete world, directed outward toward the historical landscape” (104). They do not vacate the personal or local for the sake of universalizing the “human experience.” Read intertextually, “Starfish” and “Shells,” like other *Emplumada* poems, are specific to the speaker’s experiences as a Chicana/Chumash subject growing up in relation to the California coastline. Further, I contend that in alignment with the speaker’s attempt to sing songs that could “drone away” the popularized “Mariachi” music, the two poems defamiliarize Chicanx experience, undoing expectation. Here, I reference Ralph Rodriguez’ line of thinking in *Latinx Literature Unbound: Undoing Ethnic Expectation* (2018), which considers how texts push back on preconceived notions of the coherency or shared aesthetic of “Latinx literature.” Likewise, I see Cervantes’ ecotonal poems as turning away from conventional “ethnic” themes in order to animate a politics that courses with vernacular and historical experiences of oceanic ecologies.

I argue that the oceanic imaginary operate in the poems destabilizes what the political is. While seemingly vague, Cervantes' poems actually adopt a multiscale perspective—evoking the political across multiple domains. The poems' context within the collection invites readers to consider them as operating within matrices of colonial histories of oppression and Indigenous genocide and displacement; and at the same time, one cannot easily map a singular, legible Chicana/x identity onto the “disembodied” speaker in the poems nor onto the encountered marine animals and objects. The poems offer diffuse political meanings that proliferate in unwieldy ways, in keeping with the oceanic materiality at the shoreline. As Hayward notes, “here,” at the meeting place of land and ocean, “human perception is refracted, textured by the encounter of shoreline and ocean;” at this “mixing point of water-air-earth,” sensoria activate differently than in terrestrial settings (579). Light and soundwaves travel slower in water than in air, entering a denser medium, propagating more slowly, diffracting multiply.¹²¹ I thus read Cervantes' ecotonal poems as registering the political on multiple scales, sounded and seen differently, awash in zones of transmission and contact. I also clarify that while Sánchez imagines “disembodied” speakers, I read the poems as charged with the language of sensorial and affective feeling, expressing vibrant becoming alongside oceanic ecologies. The poems' occupation with the oceanic also emerges in form—arranging the words on the page and coursing through the sonic elements of them poem. This is a poetics in process about subjects-in-progress—a becoming glimpsed in flashes of relation, through the pressure and parting of touch, and in modes of mourning, making, and memorializing.

“Starfish” grapples with the ocean as a site that reverberates with loss and the pain of dislocation—opening up to histories of displacement associated with colonial traumas.

¹²¹ In future revisions, I will think further about the physics of the sustained sense of time refracted here.

Interacting with marine animals at the shoreline presents an opportunity for the speaker to address loss via dissonant imagery, blurring the lines between livingness and deadness across a landscape of organic things.

They were lovely in the quartz and jasper sand
As if they had created terrariums with their bodies
On purpose; adding sprigs of seaweed, seashells,
White feathers, eel bones, miniature
Mussels, a fish jaw. Hundreds; no—
Thousands of baby stars. We touched them,
Surprised to find them soft, pliant, almost
Living in their attitudes. We would dry them, arrange them,
Form seascapes, geodesics...(30)

In this poem, the speaker is not alone; she speaks as one among others, forming a “we.” The gestalt of “we”—the speaker as part of a greater whole—reflects the gestalt of a wave—water particles pressed together, moved by the wind, energized, cresting into a recognizable form of a whole, before its disruption into drops and spray. Perhaps the poem takes place when she is young, scavenging a California beach with friends.¹²² Perhaps the poem takes place during her time at the writing symposium in a coastal town in Washington state, and she walks with a cohort of creatives. For the group, the shore is a space for play, imagination, encounter, artistry, and ultimately, somber reflection—bringing awareness to the proximity of adornment and beauty to violence and death. There is a prettiness to the poem’s form, each line beginning with a capital letter, suggesting order. The first line describes the titular starfish as “lovely,” lying in sand that shines like quartz and catches the eye with aggregate jasper tones—perhaps a variety of reds, yellows, or greens. As the speaker admires their beauty, she imagines “purpose” behind their adornment, in situ. It is “as if” the stars “had created terrariums,” using their own “bodies” as media. The past perfect subjunctive emphasizes the speaker’s desire to attribute artistic agency to

¹²² As later discussed in my analysis of “Shells,” the speaker has fond memories of gathering pebbles along the beach—but she is distinctively “alone” in the memory (60).

the starfish, envisioning intention behind their own display in the sand—evidence of a vibrant desire to see livingness in dead or dying things. The creation of “terrariums” suggests that the starfish have made their marine bodies into terrestrial home structures—habitats for living outside of their natural ones. Washed ashore, they are away from tidal pools, reefs, or the sandy seabed. Thus, the speaker imagines their survival in landed vivaria of their own making, collated with organic materials (“seaweed”), relics of other marine creatures (“seashells”), plumage, perhaps of sea gulls (“white feathers”), small creatures, perhaps still living (“miniature mussels”), and the body parts of fish (“eel bones” and “a fish jaw”). Listing the remnants of creatures disrupts the “lovely” image of ornamented stars. Sonically, the list is comprised of hushed alliterative phrases—“sprigs of seaweed, seashells”—disrupted by the eerie, open-vowel sounds of “eel bones,” an ominous interruption, quickly followed by the cute, “miniature/ mussels”—and ending abruptly, mid-line with “a fish jaw.” In reality, these are dying things decorated with dead items.

Through visual encounter and haptic contact, the speaker positions herself and the others who comprise the “we” beside the starfish, like small, marine counterpoints, these “almost/living,” creative beings. The “we” is not unlike the creatures who adorn themselves with the dead and make lifelike dioramas out of their own bodies. The group “would” use them—as if in common, repeated practice—to form their own aquatic worlds (“seascapes”) and curved lines, world-shaped geometries, as if stretching across a globe (“geodesics”). Their “soft, pliant” bodies are malleable media for the group’s designs. At the shoreline, in acts of taking, touching, and arranging, the speaker finds herself within a network of marine life of creatures that texture her thinking and art. The speaker, who has seen her counterpart in the pilfering, migratory gulls, now

sees herself as the stranded stars—out of place, washed ashore, ironically becoming, vibrantly, in this place of dying.

The second half of the poem takes on a more mournful, perhaps regretful tone and anthropomorphizes the starfish in ways that invite questions about what or whom the starfish may represent. The poem diffuses different political meanings—evoking histories of Native genocide, environmental change, and feminist concerns.

...We would dry them, arrange them,
Form seascapes, geodesics... We gathered what we could
In the approaching darkness. Then we left hundreds of
Thousands of flawless five-fingered specimens sprawled
Along the beach as far as we could see, all massed
Together: little martyrs, soldiers, artless suicides
In lifelong liberation from the sea. So many
Splayed hands, the tide shoveled in. (30)

Readers of *Emplumada* who reach this poem may make connections between the starfish imagery and previous poems, inferring to which raced or ethnic groups the imagery might adhere. For example, a consideration of the poem's order in the collection invites an association of the mass of bodies on shore with the colonial genocide of Indigenous peoples. In the poem that precedes "Starfish," entitled "Four Portraits of Fire," the speaker laments Indigenous genocide while acknowledging her felt distance from her Native community.¹²³ The speaker confesses: "I am away from the knowledge/ of animal mystics,/ brujas and sorcerers/ or the nudging chants/ of a Tlingit Kachina" (29). She acknowledges her separation from Native American spirituality and knowledge forms—feeling herself "away" from mysticisms that might inform her about the creatures she encounters.¹²⁴ Such knowledge, as she acknowledges in other

¹²³ The poems "Four Portraits" and "Starfish" may be precursory addresses of what Cervantes' next collection, *From the Cables of Genocide: Poems on Love and Hunger*, which includes a dedication to Cervantes' Chumash ancestors (Vasquez 293).

¹²⁴ Cervantes does make a broad sweep here, relating to a global sense of Indigeneity that seems to blur tribal and place-specific difference.

poems, belongs to her grandmother.¹²⁵ Indeed, the speaker admits: “I am frightened by regions/ with wills of their own,/ but when my people/ die in the snow/ I wonder/ did the depths billow up/ to reach them?” (29). She mourns her “people,” broadly grouping North American Indigenous peoples. The speaker implies that part of the Native spiritual knowledge she lacks points to the agency of “regions”—perhaps the snowy, mountainous regions of the Tlingit people in the Pacific Northwest Coast, whose bodies the “depths” might “billow up” to reclaim. Perhaps the ocean is another willful region, whose undulating “depths” might swell to reclaim the bodies of the autochthonous dead.

Readers of “Starfish” may thus arrive at the poem with the end of “Four Portraits” in mind, reading the mass death of the starfish and their displacement from their ocean home as an allegory for Indigenous death. The starfish’s dying bodies abound not in “hundreds” but “thousands” upon the shore. Their number is twice-emphasized in the poem, during the speaker’s first encounter with them and then upon the abandonment of the many bodies unused in the group’s artful arrangements. The repetition also emphasizes the group’s lament; they cannot “gather” the countless stars for their art; some must remain behind, dying for nothing on the beach, “massed/ together.” The enjambment after “massed” disrupts any kind of perfect unity imagined in this group of the dead, “artless” in their “lifelong liberation” from their sea. Not all the dead can be accounted for, not all lives retold in poetic words.¹²⁶ Their humanoid “hands,” like severed parts that make up the stars’ whole bodies, remain “splayed” in this death, roughly “shoveled in” by the “tide.”

¹²⁵ See “Beneath the Shadow of the Freeway” (12).

¹²⁶ The encounter on the beach in “Starfish” echoes the final scene in lê’s *Gangster* (see Chapter 1) and also evokes the conceit of Barot’s *The Galleons* poems (see Chapter 2 and 3), regarding the challenge of telling and mourning. I will more explicitly link these reverberant moments in the Coda.

In reality, the group of beach-goers is likely witnessing a “mass stranding” event—not uncommon for seabed-dwelling animals like starfish. Such occurrences can be caused by storms, changes in ocean temperature that makes starfish more vulnerable to tides, or habitat changes that might cause the animals to migrate to shallower waters. Essentially, the event is a response to environmental change. These creatures respond to shifts in heat, pressure, tidal motion—some cycles natural, some anthropogenically induced. In a more severe case, Cervantes’ poem may be recording an experience of a “massive die-off” event. Recorded in the 1970s, 80s, 90s, and again in greater magnitude and over a wider geographic area of the North American Pacific coast in 2013 and 2014, mass die-offs are caused by a disease known as “sea star wasting syndrome” or SSWS. The disease has affected over 20 species of sea stars and has devastated sea star populations along the coast (Multi-Agency Rocky Intertidal Network). Cervantes’ poem thus resonates with both environmental concerns and histories of genocide. The image of sea stars, dying of disease on the shore, evokes the eradication of Native American populations following influx of infectious, Old World diseases to which New World peoples had acquired no immunity. Further, the die-off or mass stranding represented in the poem draws attention to the ways events like colonial genocide slip too gently into Western thought, naturalized as the way of conquest.

Following this thread connecting the imagery of the mass stranding of starfish to the genocide of Native American peoples, the Pacific shoreline reverberates as a site of colonial landing. Cervantes’ poetics, forged in this space between land and ocean, points to this ecotone as a portal that led to conquest. The porous boundary of the California coast is the site of the Spanish landing in Baja California in 1535 and Alta California in 1542, the ports visited by Manila galleon ships en route to Navidad and Acapulco after the initiation of the trade in 1565, and the establishment of missions and presidios (military forts) along the coast from 1769 to

1823. I thus theorize Cervantes' ecotonal poetics beside discourses that connect ecological zones to racial formation and the conjunction of violences that follow European conquest in the Americas. The poems' engagements of the shoreline anticipate Tiffany Lethabo King's work on the ecotonal site of the shoal (2019). Invoking the geological formation of a sandbank or area of shallow water, King theorizes the shoal as "a metaphor and an analytic" for disrupting the coherence of Blackness as tied to the oceanic and Indigeneity as solely tied to the land (8). The shoal works to "slow the momentum of long-standing and contemporary modes and itineraries for theorizing New World violence, social relations, Indigeneity, and Blackness in the Western Hemisphere," revealing moments of encounter, co-witnessing, and implications of relation made through "conquistador-settler" conquest (2, xi). I consider Cervantes' ecotonal poetics as contributing to a proximate effort, slowing the passage of the normative flow of disciplinary thought that may plant Chicana being exclusively within landed discourse. Further, Cervantes' poetics reorients normative perceptions of the poems of seaside encounter as escapist aesthetic ventures removed from cultural politics, instead evoking diffuse political meanings—including the mass depletion of sea stars and the killing of Native peoples.

The oceanic continues to accumulate meaning in Cervantes' poem, demarcating not only colonial rupture but also familial traumas. Upon constellating "Starfish" with others in the collection, the oceanic becomes apparent as a conductive site that transmits gendered violences. The speaker's use of "baby stars" suggests not only an empathy for these creatures but a sense of loss of young life and innocence. The reference conjures images from the opening poem of *Emphumada*, "Uncle's First Rabbit," which describes domestic violence that causes the loss of a child. The speaker's uncle remembers "his dead baby sister" and his "father's drunken/ kicking that had pushed her/ into birth" (3). The uncle is haunted by this memory, which infiltrates his

mind when he goes to war in the Pacific, “off the coast of Okinawa.”¹²⁷ Here, “[a]t war’s end, he could / still hear her, her soft/ body stiffening under water / like a shark’s. The color/ of the water, darkening, soaking,/ as he clung to what was left /of a ship’s gun. (4) In the midst of battle, against a scene of defeat as he clings to the remains of a ship, the uncle is bombarded with a memory of loss, recalling his sister’s death in sonic and visual terms. He hears the “stiffening” of her “soft body,” auditorily registering her lack of movement, the quieting of her form “under water.” The uncle compares this dying body to a “shark’s”—likening the sister to a marine creature, something fearsome—indicative of the panic the memory provokes in him. Cervantes’ poem draws attention to intergenerational cycles of masculine violence and female victimhood that seem to be inherited, learned and passed down through patriarchal instruction and matriarchal silence. The uncle only seems to perpetuate this cycle when he returns home from the war, waking to “find himself slugging the bloodied/ face of his wife” (4). The oceanic in this poem is thus presented as not just the site of war and death but a conduit of violence. A conductive space, the ocean in Cervantes’ work is charged with memories of loss and traumas of abuse. As Cervantes’ speaker confronts the oceanic at the porous site of the shoreline, she inhabits a space for confronting the deep, relentless pain of past abuses, finding in what washes ashore a chance for contact and reflection upon the interconnectedness of things.

“Starfish” does not offer a conclusion but rather an “encounter with nature” that is “insufficient as a transcending force” (Sánchez 108). Across the poem, the images gather, pressing together and parting without certainty of meaning. A mass of stars, the mass of Indigenous lives lost, agential regions that may swallow up or strand the dead. “Baby stars” and

¹²⁷ Future revisions will explore the poem’s transpacific orientation and the Uncle’s military affiliation in relation to the other chapters in this work.

drowned sisters. Reverberant images at the shore, memories beached. An ecotonal poetics refracts and diffuses all these things.

“Shells”

“Shells,” which appears late in the collection, demonstrates the speaker’s ecotonal poetic practice, enacting a vibrant, poetic mode of telling. The poem is comprised of five sections, separated by vertical fleurons. In the poem, the speaker uses shells as a haptic mode of expression, creating portals of insight into memory and interpersonal relationships.

I string shells
put an order
to my life

I find in shells
the way I live
everything I touch

is fragile
but full of color
or brine

I can’t
hold back
from touching...(59)

Visually, the poem stands out in the collection due to its form; the short lines are striking, with as few as two syllables and as many as seven in a line, and each stanza is comprised of three lines. The poem looks narrow on the four pages it takes up, visualizing the stringing action described in the opening stanza. Through this act of stringing shells, the speaker orders her life and theorizes a poetics that orients her in the world. In this act of making, incited by touch, shells become small, stabilizing points. The speaker’s newfound mode of understanding is reflected in the poem’s lack of punctuation and capital letters (except for the pronoun “I”), which would normally demarcate grammatical order. Instead, the speaker has found objects that emulate the

“way” she “live[s],” a present, ongoing action. This way of life, emulated by the shells, holds together contrary images, textures, and tastes—conveyed via the descriptive language in the third stanza that sways between the precarious, vivacious, and aversive. For the speaker, living is “fragile”—brittle, easily broken, requiring care—“but” also “full of color”—vibrant, as in radiating vivacity—and at other times, full of “brine”—brackish, distasteful. These dissonant descriptors are characteristic of Cervantes’ ecotonal poetics—evoking the clashing site of the shore. The oscillation between them is reminiscent of the conflicting descriptive language in “Starfish,” creatures “lovely” in their dying. Shells themselves are the exoskeletons of dead mollusks or other marine invertebrates. The speaker again communes with remnant objects, husks of sea life, finding what is left behind, echoes of living.

The first section of “Shells” also enacts an ecotonal poetics by foregrounding the haptic, inciting the memorial and creative. The lines at the end of the second and start of the third stanza demonstrate a typical ecotonal interaction (“everything I touch// is fragile”), emphasizing both contact and breaking. Listening vibrantly, I hear these moments of encounter: the moments the speaker’s fingers meet each shell, brushing a thumb over the ridges of the exterior, pushing away wet, remnant sand that clings to the surface, handling each object with care; the shell’s edges rub against the speaker’s skin, leaving an indentation when pressed too long, the force of its structure pushing back; rotating the shell, the speaker admires its smooth, iridescent inside, softened by brine and the muscle of its former inhabitant, the colors glinting in the sun, shining with the memory of where a body has been. The moment is one of touching and parting—the enjambment and white space between stanzas interrupt the statement. Yet the fourth stanza returns, as if out of necessity, to touch. The lines “I can’t/ hold back/ from touching” indicate the speaker’s vibrant desire, the impulse to reach out to these marine relics, to hold them. The wavelike viscosity of the

stanzas throughout the poem further contributes to the ecotonal rhythm of things, coming together and falling apart. The stanzas form a cascade of pulses, lines rising and falling, forming and breaking. The speaker's inclination towards touch and the wavelike, shell-strung form of the poem illustrates a vibrant ecology—haptic, oceanic, in a continual state of forming, breaking, and reforming.

The next set of stanzas come after a break symbol, at once linking and dividing the sections.

stranger
not my husband
you offer

seabirds
cleft surf
the sun

ripping apart
the fog-strewn
shoreline (59)

Comprised of only three stanzas, this section is the shortest of the five. The section focuses on the shoreline as a site of disunion, as seen through the eyes of the “stranger,” clarified as “not” her “husband.” The address establishes a distance between this antagonist and the speaker, someone once close to her but since estranged. This figure “offers” a view of the shore that points out its subtle violences, things divided. The seabirds, reminiscent of their appearance in “Visions of Mexico” are present again, embodying those who dwell in-between. The “surf” is “cleft,” the waves acting as fissures. White space separates the subject “the sun” from its part in the next stanza, “ripping apart,” mimicking the tearing away. The perspective of this not-husband suggests an epistemological obstacle, counter to the speaker's desire to string

together things, the impulse of vibrant being. Making her art, stringing together memories at the shoreline is a difficult thing.

The speaker's impulse towards gathering seaside objects is also expressed in the third section, which recounts a memory from her childhood, jumping back nonlinearly in time. The speaker describes: "I am young...the child in me// scatters down the coast/ off the pebbled beach/ of Point Reyes...every pebble/ was a wonder// I could name only by color/ jade vermillion// sandstone buff/ or the inexplicable azure glass// I was alone/ gathering/ the polished stones// I still hold dear" (60). The reader witnesses the vibrant becoming of the speaker, traced to early experiences in childhood. Her poetics is informed by a lifelong affection for coastal objects—small pebbles, "polished stones," things to "gather"—creating, early on, a world for herself at the shore. She knows her world by color, "every" one a "wonder"—in brilliant greens and reds, in calm, ochreous tones, and the particular hue of "azure glass" that goes beyond description. The speaker reflects fondly upon this moment, "scattering" down the beach. She is seemingly "alone"—without anyone she knows—but surrounded by a vibrant world of touch and color. "Every joy," she states, "measures itself/ against the brilliance/ of that time" (60-61). The memory, like the luminous pebbles, shines.

In the fourth section of the poem, the speaker thinks about the ways she has cultivated other moments of brilliance in her own life. She begins with an address of the same non-husband, who continues to be a foil to her way of living/thinking/feeling. The speaker refuses to offer the not-husband pity for the "sheltered life" he has endured, and in contrast, demonstrates her own determination, fueled by her own acts of gathering and learned, matriarchal knowledge.

you said
you suffered
a sheltered life

I want to scratch
that envy
from your voice

I take refuge
in the fact
that every

pleasure
I've worked myself
like the fireplace

my grandmother built
still standing
all these years

every stone
set furiously
in place (61)

Here, we return to the idea of refuge. It may not be the same sense of linguistic refuge imagined in “Barco”/ “Refugee Ship,” that would have entailed docking comfortably in a singular cultural zone. Yet, through the ongoing process of poetic discovery and vibrant becoming—for now, finding language through shells—she has come upon one sense of safety. She can “take refuge”—find shelter, protection, fortification—in the certainty (“fact”) that the joyous parts of her life (“pleasure”) have been forged through her own work. “Every pleasure” is reminiscent of the elation she experienced as a child, where she discovered “every joy” in “every pebble.” The speaker draws a comparison between her own work and the work of her grandmother—“the fireplace,” which is “still standing/all these years.” The fireplace endures. As the grandmother stacked stones “furiously” in their place, the speaker strings shells, gathers pebbles, finds language of being and becoming. The section closes with a sense of the grandmother’s fortitude, forging structures of refuge through acts of fury; but the speaker works with a delicate medium of the ecotone, shells and small pebbles, which lack the sturdiness of the grandmother’s stones.

The speaker will nonetheless gather her materials, finding even temporary sanctuary in the work of becoming.

The final section of the ecotonal poem returns to uncertainty. The speaker describes: “I dust pebbles/ turn them/ to sheen// what I want/ is an unnamed/ thing” (62). She continues her haptic work at the seaside, led by a vibrant desire, finding what shines. What she wants cannot be named—cannot be fixed or identified by a singular title. The object of her desire is uncertain. There is still work to be done. The poetics, like the speaker, is ever becoming.

For now, I follow the stringing of shells and walks along the ecotone, as performed by the speaker in *Emplumada*, and I tap into the modes of contact and submerged thought expressed in *Under the Feet of Jesus*. I enact a sinking into a space of reflection, looking from below, beside the extractible subjects in Viramontes’ novel, who sense themselves erodible resources of deep earth and sea, reduced to shell and bone. I glimpse a vibrant Chicana becoming that acknowledges the continued oppressive acts of extractive capitalism and seeks respite in sensory and affective relation, echoing an aquatic animality incited through touch in shaded, safe spaces. Shifting in alignment with Cervantes’ poems, I encounter the ocean as a seemingly insurmountable space, ringing with implications of linguistic alienation, removal from generational, Indigenous knowledge forms, and the constraints and residues of colonial violence. I hear the desire for a poetics that might slow the naturalized traversal and destructive wake of conquest, scattering perception and normative thought at the site of contact between sea and sand. Chicana vibrancy continues, propagating in motions unexpectedly affiliate with the oceanic—its creatures, rhythms, and unboundedness.

In the Coda that follows this chapter, I begin to listen out for the connections between the ecotonal ecologies explored here and the vibrant desires of the characters in Lê’s *Gangster*,

holding together threads of refuge-seeking, animal proximity, and the interlocking histories of conquest at the Californian and Asian edges of the Pacific. I also gesture towards the oceanic resonances between Barot's vernacular poetics in *The Galleons* and the Chicanx formations examined above. Finally, I return to Cabrillo monument, this time to the tidepools at its base and consider its lifeworlds.

CODA

Depths and Shorelines

Throughout this dissertation, I have theorized *vibrancy* as a racialized, transpacific mode of being/thinking/feeling the world via multisensory, affective attunements. Vibrant being attends to the pulsations of historical violences—especially the repercussions of US settler-imperial nationalism and Spanish colonial-capitalist extractivism that have differently racialized and attempted to subjugate peoples across the Pacific and the Americas, contingent with a perception of such peoples’ subordinate degrees of rationality, civilization, and therefore, “humanity.” Such colonial perceptions shape the conditions of bodily entrapment and use assigned to the represented subjects I examine in this project. These conditions include what I call the *photographic captivity* of Vietnamese refugees in Chapter 1; the *tractability* of Filipinx, formed via compounding military-imperial and colonial humanist logics and violences, in Chapters 2 and 3; and, following Macarena Gómez-Barris, the extractability of Chicanx subjects in Chapter 4. Facing these prescriptive attempts to contain, deploy, and/or erode subjects’ prismatic multiplicity and livingness, vibrant being makes creative, multisensory responses—for example, by inhabiting memoryscapes that thrive in ruin and imagining the possibilities of animal-like living (Chapter 1), creating a sonic tapestry of *polyvocal interference* through readerly interactions with photographs and texts (Chapter 2), turning towards sunken histories and enacting poetic modes of mourning that honor an *archival longing* (Chapter 3), and developing an *ecotonal poetics* that refracts multiple political meanings, amplified by haptic, multispecies interactions at the shoreline (Chapter 4). All of these responses are driven by a desire to detect an ongoingness—a vibrancy that continues, that cannot simply be restrained, transported, killed off, or recycled into matter for continued abuse. Instead, vibrancy draws webs of ecological relation

and expresses felt proximities to seemingly distant, lost, or gone things through luminous, acoustic language—language that courses in rhythm with the oceanic, resounds to its depths, and crashes and recedes upon the shore.

It is my hope that this work contributes to studies of the intimate histories and imperial transits that loop Asian American and Latinx/Chicanx subjects into transpacific webs of relation, as well as to studies of racial ecologies and environmentalisms. Since I began this work, two essay collections have been published, *Empire and Environment* (edited by Jeffrey Santa Ana et al., 2022) and *Latinx Environmentalisms* (edited by Sarah D. Wald et al., 2023); the recent publication of these collections speaks to an increasing interest in literary and cultural studies scholarship that interrogates the entanglement of racialized modes of living with environmental and ecological precarities—especially those anthropogenically produced through colonialism and global capitalist development. These collections also point to epistemological and material projects that center the joint work of antiracism and critical environmentalism, including work that dialogues and moves in solidarity with Indigenous sovereignty, modes of living, and ecological knowledges.

As I move forward with *Transpacific Vibrancy*, I will turn towards Native Pacific Islander epistemologies that emerge within transpacific circuits of empire and exchange. I will examine “paniolo” (Hawaiian rancher) vibrancy and queer routing, analyzing representations of Hawaiian Indigeneity in diaspora and paniolo culture as forged by transpacific exchange routes. Paniolos trace their ranching practices to the 1830s, when King Kamehameha III commissioned Mexican vaqueros (cowboys) from Alta California to teach Native Hawaiians cattle ranching techniques (*Aloha Compadre* 27).¹²⁸ Reading Hawai‘i State Archival photos of cattle shipping in

¹²⁸ In *Aloha Compadre* (2023), Rudy P. Guevarra offers a sociological history of “vaqueros and paniolos” in Hawai‘i and focuses on the life of Joaquin Armas, the first documented vaquero hired by the Hawaiian Kingdom and who

the 1930s, Kristiana Kahakauwila's short story "Old Paniolo Way" (2013), and Victoria Nalani Kneubuhl's play "Paniolo Spurs" (1994), I will show how *paniolo vibrancy* emerges in disintegrating and relational oceanic forms of queer desire, toward the undoing of the normative bounds of gender, sexuality, and landed boundaries in flux with "oceanic mobilities" (Teves 147). Such work will also expand my project's engagement of settler colonialism in the Pacific.

This dissertation also leaves space for parsing some of the resonances that emanate from the oceanic imagery presented in the transpacific texts I examine. Throughout the chapters, I have analyzed representations and evocations of the oceanic not only as a transited space, but also as spatialized in terms of oceanic depths and as the meeting site of the shore. Here, I hold together some of the reverberant oceanic images from across the chapters and gesture towards the common currents that underlie the texts. For example, in Chapter 3, I analyzed the ways Barot's poetry in *The Galleons* presents the sunken space of the ocean floor as a site of wreckage, out of which gaps in galleons archives emerge; a confrontation with this space stirs an archival desire in the speaker of the poem as well as in the reader. Proximally, in Chapter 4, I investigated imagery in Viramontes' novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* of abyssal, pelagic zones and geologic processes that churn organic matter, especially bones, into tar and oil for colonial extraction; a comprehension of these processes catalyzes the character Estrella's awareness of her own extractability as a migrant worker. In both texts, the imagery of oceanic depths conjures particular affects surrounding the abuse of being transfigured into objects/substances of use—alternately, in the contexts of Filipinx enslavement and commercial objecthood and of Chicana labor and erodibility—instilling the sensations of a body, many bodies, being worn away, forgotten, subjected to immense pressure beneath the weight of so much water, in a place too

was "among the first group of vaqueros who were California Indian and Mexican mestizos of Indigenous descent" (26, 28).

deep for sunlight, too far away from breathable air. In these chapters, depths convey the imperilment of people subjugated and exploited under colonial rule, the wake and iterative extractivist forms of which extend across centuries (e.g., from Spanish conquest in the Pacific and Americas to modern-day agribusiness in California).

Oceanic depths also recall the imagery that pervades Lê's *Gangster*—especially the underwater home that her brother, who drowned in the South China Sea, inhabits. In this space, the narrator imagines that her brother is “polished,” like shells, by the turning of the sea, assuring her that he will “not fade at all” but “only shine brighter” (146). In Lê's novel, these depths evoke a personal, familial loss—a space that houses the brother, the lost object, at the bottom of the sea. I have also shown how Barot's “Galleons” poems suggest the flickering connectivity between familial and colonial traumas, as well as the archives they present (their silences and drowning repetitions, their waterlogged and wavelike materiality); and I have shown how photographs from *The Pakinggan Archive* similarly transmit familial affects and track the residues of war and US empire. Throughout these chapters, oceanic depths resonate as an archival space for both personal and long-historical loss, which are often entwined; they are housed in the rooms beside each other, occupying proximate parts of the imagination, holing up in the same pit in the body, sinking down to the same ocean space that seems so far away.

Shorelines, in the texts I have examined, present ecotonal sites for the encounter of such archives and their contingent affects. In both Lê's *Gangster* and Cervantes' *Emplumada*, shorelines emerge as memorial and refuge-making spaces. Lê's novel concludes with a scene of the narrator and her family on the beach in San Diego. In a moment of suspension, the narrator runs toward the waves—towards her brother, towards the far-off shore of Vietnam—drawing together these places, people, and all that they mean. At another site, just up the California coast,

represented in Cervantes' poems "Starfish" and "Shells," the speaker forms a poetics through walks along the shore. Via multispecies interaction and an engagement with the dissolving and refracting materiality of the ocean, the speaker finds language to express her own "in-betweenness"—particular to her navigation of English and Spanish, her feeling of distance from her Chumash heritage, her sense of not fully belonging in either the US or Mexico. In both instances, we might read the California shoreline as an alternative space for finding the safety to think/feel/be otherwise, driven by a desire to detach from false narratives of the US nation as a "good refuge." While the sense of refugeehood evoked in *Gangster* is forged specifically in relation to narratives surrounding the humanitarian crisis following the War in Vietnam, the sense of refugeehood in *Emplumada* draws attention to longer histories of the genocide and displacement of Indigenous peoples in the Americas. Especially as conveyed in "Barco de Refugiados"/ "Refugee Ship," Cervantes' speaker senses herself a "refugee"—more in the sense of perceiving her own "homelessness" than implying an immediate need for flight from war or crisis. Bolstered by references made across *Emplumada* to the colonial annihilation of Native Americans and to the speaker's traversal of US and Mexican borders, the speaker's "refugee" sensibility becomes legible as one indicative of the necessity of flight from historical violences that continue to impede upon her everyday—creating an anxiety about a self ever in danger of an impending colonial threat of removal, a status where home/safety/refuge is ever revoked.

Taken together, the examples of refugee/ "refugee" peril that instigate the creative modes of sensing interrelation at the shoreline underscore the cross-temporal violences of empire. As I articulated in the Introduction, the US imperial logics that drove the militarized takeover of sites across Asia and the Pacific, initiated by territorial acquisition after the Spanish-American War in 1898 and perpetuated throughout the 20th century, rely on the purported imperatives of US

national security and wartime necessity—often in the name of protecting democracy and offering aid and the means of modernization to postcolonial “third world countries.” These logics build upon and variegates the settler colonial tactics the US employed during its earlier era of Westward expansion that resulted in the war of aggression against Mexico and the acquisition of its lands in 1848; and indeed, the US nationalist and expansionist efforts of the 19th century reiterated the terms of 17th and 18th conquest and genocidal dispossession of Native Americans, founded upon the racializing subordination of “others” inherently inimical to white European enlightened subjecthood (i.e., deploying racializing rhetoric and acts of genocide that also echo Spanish humanist thought and settler colonialism in the Pacific and Americas from the 15th through the 19th centuries). This much-abbreviated historical perspective draws attention to the linked lineages of thought and material changes that become apparent when considering the resonant, oceanic imagery that appears across the two texts, which represent two distinct subjecthoods.

The flights in *Gangster* and *Emplumada* have different temporalities and landscapes—different senses of delay and reaction, and alternate effects that follow war and ruin, genocide and displacement. These violences with different centers ripple outward and through time, their concentric circles washing, immediately or eventually, over different subjects. In the texts I examine, these violences accumulate on the California shoreline, where subjects find ways of living in the world—through touch, through animal embodiments and encounters, through surging towards what threatens to be forgotten or eroded, reaching out to presences that still signal to those who dwell in the gathering and dissolving spaces of the ecotone.

As so many of the texts I examine in this dissertation do, I will close by making a return. In the last pages of this work, I reflect upon my visit to the Cabrillo National Monument in the late summer of this year.

Return

The fountain in the photograph is gone now. I'm not sure what took its place. Different buildings and facilities have cropped up at the top of the cliff along the single road that leads to the monument. To get to the national park, you have to drive past a series of government offices and Navy buildings (home to the Tactical Training Group Pacific, Naval Information Warfare Center Pacific, Arctic Submarine Laboratory, and other offices and centers attached to Naval Base Point Loma). Further down, you pass the Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery. Rows and rows of small, white headstones line the stretches of green, grassy slopes that reach to the edges of the cliffs, set against a wide view of the ocean and sky that lie beyond. On days like the day that I have chosen to visit, a cold Sunday morning as summer is turning to fall, the horizon is at times, barely discernable. Clouds and fog roll in, and the sky and sea become the same shade of grey.

The park is quiet when my sister and I arrive. We've both been here before—primarily because the spot is good for its scenic hiking trails or for a place to show nice San Diego views to friends and family who come to town. Neither my sister nor I have ever lingered by the Visitor Center long enough to see the exhibit on the “Age of Exploration,” but we walk through the space today. There are a couple of other families here at the park's opening hours, and both groups speak in Spanish. So as my sister and I look through the exhibit on Cabrillo's journey on the *San Salvador* and his 1542 landing in San Diego, the only sounds we hear are brief, low remarks in Spanish—about the dead-eyed mannequins dressed as conquistadors in steel armor, the impressive representation of a cross-section of a galleon and attention to its design for warfare, the Kumeyaay artifacts in one corner of the room—and the snap of my camera as I take

pictures of the panels.¹²⁹ “Estaba buscando Asia,” one of the visitors remarks to another, reading wall text about Cabrillo’s journey.¹³⁰

I take a picture of my sister looking over a large map of Baja and Alta California in the middle of the room, a glowing trail of red delineating Cabrillo’s route along the coast (see Figure 9). She snaps a picture of me standing between the galleon cross-section panel and a glass-encased, reduced-scale model of the *San Salvador* constructed according to specifications outlined in official 16th century documents stored in the Naval Museum in Madrid (see Figure 10). There’s not much for us to say in the space, and because (like Barot’s speaker) I am thinking, always, of the galleons—and specifically, of Barot’s *Galleons*—all I can think of when I look at the exhibit is that it is not enough. At the time of taking the pictures, being there on-site, all I feel is an odd, hollow feeling (attached to those words, “not enough”), and I keep moving along with the briskness of the day, tiring of the objects and wall text, and wanting to step back out into the open air outside the exhibit which is cool and grey and picks up the sea.

It is not until I return home later that day and look at the pictures that I tease out that hollow feeling. I look at the cross-section that shows the hold where the food is stacked in barrels and the livestock cramped together. I imagine the creaking of the wooden hull, the deep, thudding noises that carry down through the decks above, the certain darkness here, and see another kind of abyss, another submarine space that was a space of fear. I look at all the text on the walls and the blood-red trail of LEDs that lines the edges of land and water on the long map set out like a dining table and hear the absent voices and feel the horror and desperation of “not enough...not enough” (Barot 11).

¹²⁹ Near the Kumeyaay artifacts, a panel recognizes that diseases brought by Spanish explorers after Cabrillo killed thousands of Native peoples, and also that descendants “of the ‘Iipay, Tipay, Tongva and Chumash” of Southern California are still living and connected to the land today (“Wall text”).

¹³⁰ In English, “[Cabrillo] was looking for Asia.”



Figure 9: "Age of Exploration 1," Olivia Anne Lafferty, 2024.



Figure 10: "Age of Exploration 2," Eliza Faye Lafferty, 2024.

We step back outside into the air, where it is still morning and still bright. We wander down to the famous statue. More tourists have arrived and take pictures of the view of the bay and downtown and the ocean, not of the conquistador. We decide to drive down to the tide pools, where an entire expanse of grey-blue ocean lies before us, and the wind picks up around the sandstone outcroppings. Tourists clamber to the edges of the rocks (moving right past a fleet of yellow and orange signs that read, "STAY BACK: Unstable Cliff Edges Extreme Danger") and

try to get close to the water. As my sister and I move along the walkable, sandy zones, we realize the tides are too high for us to see any of the creatures that live in the intertidal zones visible at other times of the year. Since I have been to other tide pools around San Diego before, I know that beneath the cover of water live all kinds of tiny creatures and plant life that attach to the rocks and make their homes in the shallow pools—limpets, mossy chitons, sea anemones, hermit crabs, black tegula snails, barnacles, sea urchins, mussels, and algae called dean man's fingers. Today, marine life remains submerged.

There is sound and movement all around me—shorebirds sweeping the sky, parents wrangling children, the violent crash of waves upon the faces of the cliffs, footsteps on slick surfaces and muted sand, and wind from the west brushing the whole scene. There are plaques posted by the National Park Service that draw attention to the site's geologic history—describing how mud and sand eroded from the shore, flowed into the ocean and cut into the sea floor, spreading out in layers, and compressing sediment into rock over millions of years, how seismic activity pushed the rock above sea level, and how waves carved out the shoreline. Another plaque describes how the changes in the water level in the cove are caused by gravity and the motions of the Earth and Moon and Sun, and another states that over 400 species of marine life live in the intertidal zones, adapting to shifting conditions or relocating if need be. I crouch by the boulders in the upper tidal zones and look at the broken shells that skirt the larger rock formations, and I peer down at the cove where aluminum cans, colorful plastics, and driftwood get caught on polished rocks and tangles of brown kelp and sea grass.

I attend, briefly, to all these things, and yet what overwhelms the scene is the expanse of ocean and sky. Everything, all forms of life feel small against the water that goes on and on, stretching to the north and south and west and wrapping all around the edges we stand upon.

I know the histories this place holds because I've listened for them. I know that bodies have washed ashore. I've seen the pictures of the wreckage of trawler boats from Baja from the newspapers. I know that somewhere on the Peninsula there are shell middens that are residues of Native life and there are fortresses and statues built by different settlers. I know that once, after three flights from Manila to Anchorage, to a Navy facility in San Francisco, to the San Diego airport, and after two changes of clothes that were ruined from sickness on the journey, my grandmother was here with my grandfather for a window of time.

It is here at edge that I can accordion things. In the opening poem of *The Galleons*, "The Grasshopper and the Cricket," the speaker describes how his grandmother's mind "is like a compressed accordion, the far/ points now near, more present than the present" (Barot 1). When I listen to the world, I enact the exhale of the instrument, the folding of its pleated bellows, drawing together the expanded parts. Pallets open, and air, like breath—sonic, vibrational, haptic—pushes through metal reeds. I hold a present full of compressed points, taking far away and past things into a now. When "not enough" settles into that hollow place, I know to breathe out and draw everything close, to meet time at its creases, and press my palm into a page.

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