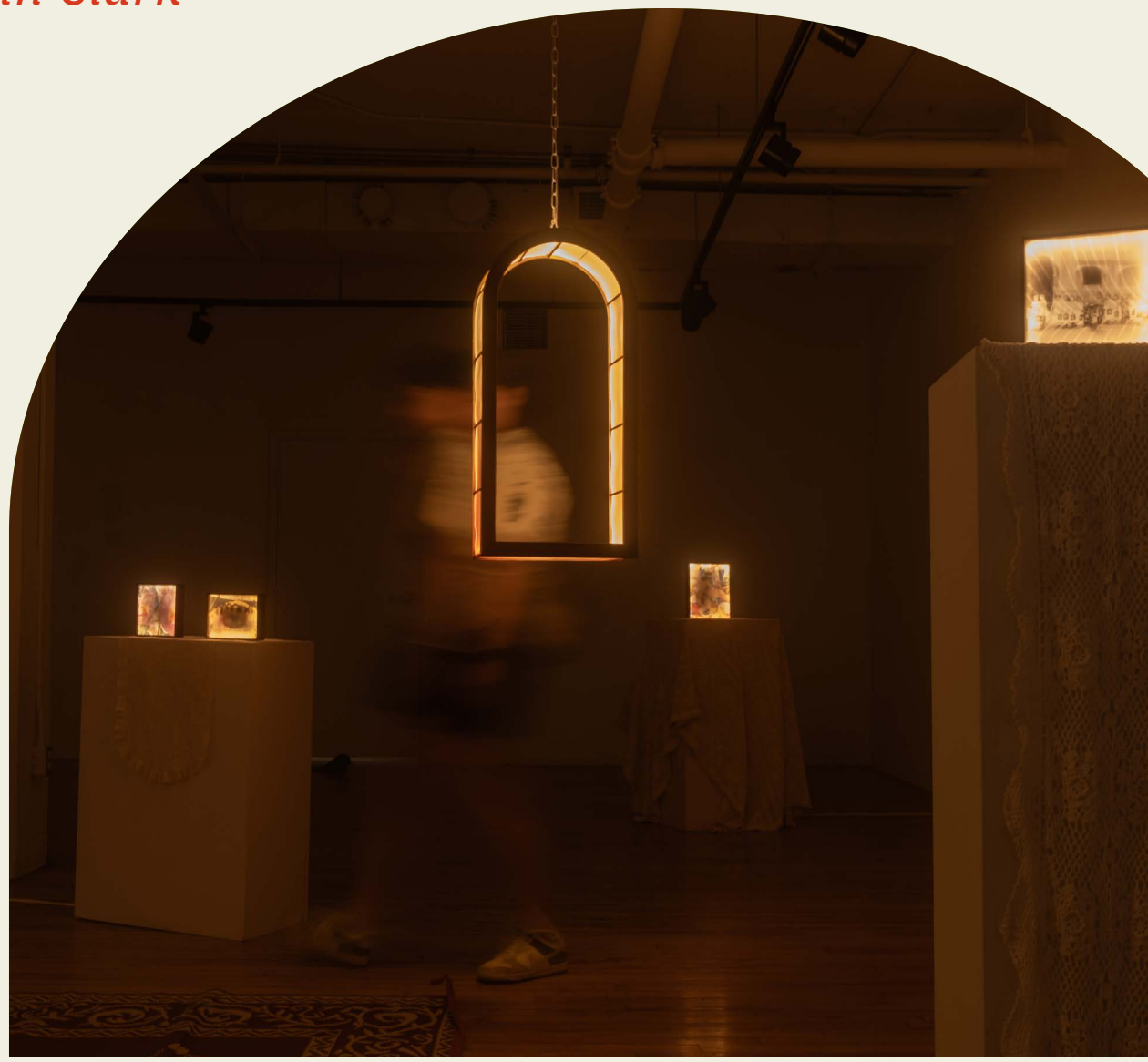
Spectral Embrace

[part i + ii]

by Erin Clark



A thesis exhibition presented to OCAD University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Masters of Fine Arts in Interdisciplinary Master's in Art, Media and Design

Graduate Gallery, 205 Richmond St. July 24th - 27th, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2025

Abstract

Spectral Embrace [part ii] is a collection of art-objects that recontextualize colonial histories through a decolonial lens, using the colonial archive of the Philippines (1898-1946) as a site of study. While rooted in the artist's lived experience as a mixed-race Filipinx raised in Bermuda, the installation blends archival and familial photographs to rupture linear time, reveal continuities of imperialism across time and space, and give back autonomy to the nameless faces within the archive. Each altar, warmly lit, is an offering to the ghosts interned within the archive. *Spectral Embrace [part ii]* is a counter-archive that collapses the boundaries of past and present and gives space for diasporic remembrance.

Acknowledgements

So many people have supported and contributed to this project over the last two years.

First, so many thank you's to my primary advisor, Immony Men, who has continually provided thoughtful conversation and kind feedback, graciously allowed me access to his research space when I most needed it, and who I have shared so many good meals and snacks with. To my thesis committee, Marissa Largo and Casey Mecija: it has been such a joy to work alongside fellow Filipinx scholars— your feedback and questions have made each iteration of this thesis better.

Thank you to my friends and co-conspirators: Kel Kitagawa, for the unwavering support and love, who helped me through both gallery set-ups and many, many, late nights; Jules Dufresne, who has been so generous with their time and energy throughout the years; Faye Pyatt and Jeremy Walker, who both traveled to the city to cut paper for me; and to Ruth Clark, my mom, who has always believed in me.

To those who visited the shows, and to anyone I have spoken to about this project, thank you for listening, and thank you for the support.

Table of Contents

Introduction
1.1. Inception 01
1.2. Methodologies 03
1.3. Research Questions 04
1.4. Scope and Limitations 04
1.5. Chapter Overview 05

Theory & Methods
2.1. Historical & Geographical Context 06
2.2. The Archive 08
2.3. Ghosts 09
2.4. Archival Interventions 10

The Hand and a Counter-Archive
3.1. Philippine Colonial Archive 12
3.2. The Hand [1st encounter] 13
3.3. Studio Work: Counter-Archival Project 14
3.4. Ethnography & Empire 17
3.5. The Hand [2nd encounter] 18
3.6. Studio Work: Ghostly Body 20

Embracing Ghosts
4.1. Making Altars 22
4.2. Studio Work: After-Image 24
4.3. Spectral Embrace [part i] 26
4.4. Critiques and Changes 31

Spectral Embrace [part ii]
5.1. Studio Work 32
5.2. Gallery Layout 33
5.3. The Work 34

Conclusion
6.1. Findings and Unanswered Questions 39
6.2. Final Thoughts 40
6.3. Future Work 40

Bibliography 42

Appendix A: Glossary 45

List of Images

A note on images in this thesis: All photographs are taken by me unless otherwise stated. If an archival photograph is featured in the work, its details will be listed here.

figure 1. My mom pointing at a photograph of her Nanay, my Lola, 07.25. 01

figure 2. A Bermudian house, Paget, late 1980's. 02

figure 3. Milkfish grilling, Pangasinan, 04.11. 14

figure 4. Assorted fruits, Pangasinan, 04.11. 14

figure 5. The Salonga family enjoying their mid-day meal, Pangasinan, 04.11. 15

figure 6. One of the first archival interventions, 12.23. 16
the image of the hand is "dw06HH002." in *Imperial Imaginings: The Dean C. Worcester Photographic Collection of the Philippines,1890-1913.* edited by Carla M. Sinopoli and Lars Foglin. Regents of the University of Michigan, 1998. CD-ROM.

figure 7. An installation in the Great Hall, 02.24. 20

figure 8. One of the first altars I made from acrylic, 06.24. 21

figure 9. (right) An edge-lit acrylic hand, 09.24. 22

figure 10. (left) Hands made of acrylic and digital transfer, 07.24 22

figure 11. Two ink drawings of a centipede, 10.24 23

figure 12. The wooden form of an altar being made, 11.24 24

figure 13. Wiring the frame, 12.24. 24

figure 14. *After-Image* hanging in the Graduate Gallery, 12.24 25

figure 15. Experimenting with the lights, 03.25. 26

figure 16. A photocopy of the two children hanging in my studio, 03.25 27
the photocopied image is "[Flower sellers in the Paco cemetery : Manila — 1899]; 619; 1899." In the digital collection *Philippine Photographs Digital Archive, Special Collections Research Center, University of Michigan.*

figure 17. An arch and a frame, taken by Laiken Breau 04.25. 27

figure 18. A closer image of the frame, taken by Laiken Breau 04.25. 28

figure 19. The three central frames, taken by Laiken Breau, 04.25. 29

figure 20. Younger me sitting in a tree felled by a hurricane, 2000's. 29

figure 21. A backlit frame, taken by Laiken Breau, 04.25. 30
the image being obscured is "School children : Noveleta, Cavite.; 1179; 1900/1930." In the digital collection *Philippine Photographs Digital Archive, Special Collections Research Center, University of Michigan.*

figure 22. Wooden frames after staining, 06.25. 32

figure 23. The invite for the show, 06.25. 32
figure 24. Stain samples 06.25. 32
figure 25. (left) A view of the gallery from the entrance 07.25. 33
figure 26. (right) Hanging the altars in the gallery 07.25. 33
figure 27. Spectral Embrace [part ii] 07.25. 34
figure 28. Arch 3 in center view 07.25. 35
figure 29. left to right: Arch 1, Arch 3, Arch 2 07.25. 35
figure 30. Group A, 07.25 36
figure 31. Group C, view of one side 07.25. 37
figure 32. Group C, view of opposite side 07.25. 37
figure 33. Group D, 07.25. 38

figure 1. My mom pointing at a photograph of her Nanay, my Lola, 07.25.

Introduction

1.1. Inception

Spectral Embrace [part ii][1] is a collection of art-objects that resurface and recontextualize histories of colonialism with the American-Philippine archive (1898-1946) as a specific site of study. Through the employment of decolonial methodologies it combines historical research and my own collection of family photographs to connect legacies of imperialism in the Philippines, Bermuda, and Canada. The collection of art-objects, altars, combine cut mylar and light to obfuscate and reveal these continuities across time and space.

Positionality Statement

Embrace [ii] is deeply informed by my lived experiences. I was born in Bermuda, a British overseas territory, to two immigrant parents. My dad, a Canadian settler of European descent, immigrated to the island to work for a local radio station in the early 80's. While my mom, a Filipina, worked as a nanny in Hong Kong alongside her older sister and later immigrated to the island in the late 80's. The island had a small but tight-knit community of Filipinos, many of whom started families around the same time.[2] Although I was aware of my racial difference and was often the only mixed-race Asian kid at school, my mom made sure I spent plenty of time within our community. I was confident in my identity.

1 *Spectral Embrace [part ii]* will be shortened to *Embrace [ii]* from here onward.

2 I will use Filipina/o and Filipinx throughout this thesis. When writing about someone who uses gendered language to self-identify I will use Filipina/o— this includes historical figures and communities that do not use Filipinx (here I am thinking of the Filipino community in Bermuda who immigrated in the 80s-90s). Filipinx will be used when writing about analytical frameworks, when referring to present communities, and when a non-gendered term is preferred.

At 18, I moved to Ontario for school– I was privileged enough to have inherited Canadian citizenship from my father. Growing up on an island with a continuing colonial presence, I was aware of race-based oppression; but it wasn't until I started learning the shared histories of slavery, colonialism, and settler-colonialism that I began to see imperialism's massive web across the globe.

Diaspora in Settler-Colonies

It is important to acknowledge that I live, write, and create on stolen land. Canada is a settler-colony which was built off the displacement and genocide of Indigenous peoples and the trafficking and exploitation of Black peoples. We live in a society built for the white European settler; colonialism wasn't just an event that happened in the distant past; it's the structure that Canada as we know it is built on. Slavery, settler-colonialism, and exploitation colonialism live in our present; meaning, our lives are materially affected by them.

figure 2. a Bermudian house, Paget, late 1980's.

I have found it difficult to properly describe and navigate my place on this land. Marissa Largo, a diasporic Filipina academic and artist, writes "while our bodies and histories bear the traces of colonial conquest and global exploitation, we inhabit the positionality of racialized settlers in Canada and have the potential to be complicit with the nation's ongoing colonial project."[3] Largo urges Filipinx in Canada to reject national belonging through multiculturalism and embrace other forms of relationality.[4]

Project Genesis

I entered graduate school with the intention of creating something for the queer Filipinx diaspora. This work has changed shape and form over time but has remained for my community; through *Embrace [ii]* I speak to the ghosts of the archive and the Philippine diaspora. These altars are not intended to appease the ghosts with an idealistic view of the present; they are a confirmation of continuity and a reminder to us in the present that there is still more work to be done. I hope this project can recontextualize archival materials by critiquing the ongoing legacies of imperialism. This project is the first of many, this is ongoing work, more interventions should be made. Engaging critically with history is necessary in an age of right-wing revisionism and fascistic regimes.

3 "Unsettling Imaginaries: The Decolonial Diaspora Aesthetics of Four Contemporary Filipinx Visual Artists in Canada," (PhD diss. University of Toronto, 2018), 8.

4 Largo, "Unsettling Imaginaries", 9.

1.2. Methodologies

As an artist who has only recently entered academia the research-creation framework seemed the least intimidating and most closely aligned with my own practice. A research-creation thesis treats the artistic work and writing as equally important; the creative process is integral to the research being undertaken.[5] Of the four sub-categories Chapman and Sawchuk outline, my project aligns closest with "creation-as-research". My research questions are answered not only through the gathering of research but also through the creative process, they are inextricable from each other.

This project deals with the archive and necessarily involves images with violent and dubious histories. Eve Tuck, a scholar whose work focuses on Indigenous research and feminisms, offers us "desire-centered research" in "Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities".[6] Rather than focusing on our communities as damaged, Tuck urges us to center desire. It can be all too easy to provide image after image of violent pasts; but a whole gallery filled with violent images cannot be reparative. I do not want to replicate harm, nor do I want to flatten Filipinx identity into one of victimhood. This research-creation is an intervention mediated by decolonial methodologies— it is built on decolonial scholarship and thought that does not want to repeat colonial harms.

Decolonial Methodologies

In *Decolonizing Methodologies* Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes "[decolonization] is about centring our concerns and world views and then coming to know and understand theory and research from our own perspectives and for our own purposes."[7] To use decolonial methodologies means to approach research in a way that resists imperialist logics by instead prioritizing the knowledge, well-being, and living presence of Indigenous peoples. Necessarily, we must understand the events and ideologies that lead to colonization. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, A Māori researcher and scholar, writes "*coming to know the past*" is a critical part of decolonial methodologies, but it is just one step. [8]

Tuhiwai Smith goes on to write, "to resist is to retrench in the margins, retrieve 'what we were and remake ourselves'".[9] This retrieval and remaking is the goal of my thesis; to retrieve traces from the colonial archive and remake them. This means we must resurface these painful pasts to reveal new ways of creating and being. When I say research, I also refer to my artistic practice; I am not just figuratively making something new from the colonial archive, but literally, materially. By layering images from the colonial archive and my own personal family photographs new stories are made. *Embrace [ii]* is not a scary story about colonialism; instead, this work complicates this narrative. These altars create a space primed

5 Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk, "Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and "Family Resemblances"", in Canadian Journal of Communication vol 37(1) (2015), 6.

6 In Harvard Educational Review (2009) 79. 10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15.

7 Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples, 3rd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2021), 43.

8 Ibid, 38.

9 Ibid, 4.

for reflection and conversation. *Embrace [ii]* aims to make visible these structures of oppression while renegotiating narratives of benevolent assimilation, and mutually beneficial colonialism.

1.3. Research Questions

This paper and collection of work seek to disrupt linear temporality by weaving the past and present into one story using colonial archives and my own familial photographs. When I speak of ghosts, I refer to the nameless faces and bodies captured within the colonial archive. I ask the following…

> Considering the colonial violence through which these images were produced, how can the ghosts of the archive be given a sense of justice in the present–– how can I give a ghost a body?
>
> How can I intertwine the colonial archive and personal familial records in a way that speaks to these echoes and repetitions across time, and how can these paralleled points disrupt ideas of linear progression?

By collapsing the view of past/present I reveal colonial afterlives, and counter-narratives. This collapse is not to uphold a narrative of 'progress' between past and present nor is it a nihilistic proclamation that nothing changes. Instead, this disruption points out continuities of struggle across time and space. Diasporic Filipinx do not need to belong in a settler-colony; we do not need to be benevolently assimilated. Instead, my project draws upon relationality between our past and present selves.

1.4. Scope and Limitations

My engagements with the American-Philippine archive are limited in some senses; I have completed research while living in Toronto. The archives I have accessed have been online only; I am limited to what has been deemed suitable to scan, upload, and publish by archivists. These images have been categorized either according by author, geography, or ethnic grouping; the archive is not whole it is fractured through its own classification systems. These classification systems are colonial in nature; whatever I retrieve from online repositories can be assumed to be an incomplete picture.

Filipinx people cannot be distilled into one universal identity. I do not discuss at length issues of national belonging within this paper, I do refer to lands whose borders were drawn up by empires, but I do not want to belong to an imperialist country. I use colonial constructions like "the Philippines" and "Canada" to describe the imperial forces that have shaped my life and so many others.

This thesis marks the beginning of my foray into academic research, and my engagement with decolonial methodologies. I make this work with care and intention—I do not want to replicate harm or concretize ideas of victimhood. I follow paths established by decolonial and critical theorists and artists that came before me

and I tread lightly into the archive. This body of work is another step towards acknowledging the ghosts of the archive and developing methodologies for further work. The approach and methods I outline here can make future projects a little more manageable—both for myself and for other diasporic Filipinx.

1.5. Chapter Overview

This thesis is written chronologically. It begins with the foundation of my methods and follows my artistic practice over the last two years and culminates with my thesis show, *Embrace [ii]* that took place in the Summer of 2025.

The second chapter, titled *Theory & Methods*, reviews the foundational learning that this research-creation is built upon. First, it gives geographical and historical context for both the Philippines and Bermuda. I cover both countries' colonial histories and their relationship with the settler colonies of Canada and the United States. I introduce theories of archive, haunting, and memory–– my framework is indebted to Black studies. Saidiya Hartman grapples with the archival remnants of the Transatlantic slave trade while Tina M. Campt examines both diasporic and colonial photography.

The third chapter, *The Hand & A Counter-Archive*, provides further historical context for the colonial archive and its representation of Filipinos. I describe the technological advances that gave way to the explosion of photographic materials taken on the islands. I draw on the work and writing of scholar, Nerissa S. Balce, and artist, Stephanie Syjuco, to critique and make sense of the colonial archive. I detail my first counter-archival project, an essay accompanied by digital collage, and others that followed during the first half of 2024. These projects mark the start of my on-going studio explorations and hold the first seeds of what is now *Embrace [ii]*.

The fourth chapter, *Embracing Ghosts*, follows my artistic practice in the fall of 2024 to the summer of 2025 I develop a visual language to depict haunting. Specifically, my interest in portals, doorways, windows and tombstones. I reflect on visual choices I made that were informed by my conservative Christian upbringing and my relationship to death and memory. I write more on bodies, agency, and the fragmented experience of engaging with colonial archives through the creation of *After-Image* and my first show, *Spectral Embrace [part i]*[10].

Spectral Embrace [part ii], the fifth chapter, describes my thesis show held at the graduate gallery from July 25th – 27th. Between shows I improved technical aspects of my work, making small refinements. I cover pre-show preparations, the layout of the gallery, and describe each individual piece from the show. In the final chapter I look back at the work that I completed over the last two years and the potential for future work.

10 Shortened to *Embrace [i].*

Theory & Methods

2.1. Historical & Geographical Context

Three generations of my family have been born in three distinct lands separated by thousands of kilometres of land and sea. The first was colonized by Spain, and later America. The second is still a British overseas territory. The third is a settler-colony. The dominant histories of these lands are told from the colonizers' point of view. I do not write about these places to negotiate a sense of national belonging to them, but rather to critique and explore the ongoing colonial presence within.

History, and the re-telling of the past is an integral part of this thesis. Though they may be hard to digest, Tuhiwai Smith writes, "Indigenous groups have argued that history is important for understanding the present and that reclaiming history is a critical and essential aspect of decolonization."[1] I am grateful for the Filipinx authors who have written critical histories for us; it is imperative that we retell and recontextualize our histories. The histories I relay here are not new, but they are often hidden or obfuscated; to know these histories is to know our context within the world.

The Philippines

Before exploring the history of the islands, I must point out that "The Philippines" as we know it is a colonial invention. The borders were drawn up and changed by Spain and later, the United States. While a Filipinx national identity does exist, the archipelago is home to hundreds of distinct ethnolinguistic groups each with their own practices and traditions. To honor these differences and to avoid representing Filipinx as a monolith, when the I will refer to the ethnolinguistic group when possible. My own family is Pangasinan—this is the name of the province, the language, and the people.

Spain was the first to colonize the Philippines; they exploited the land and her peoples from 1565 to 1898; the chronological end of the Spanish empire. Over the three centuries they occupied the Philippines, Spain used religion to "civilize" its people. Philippine nationalists began fighting Spain in 1896 while the Spanish-American war started in 1898. The Spanish-American war lasted only six weeks; during peace negotiations the future of the Philippines was heavily debated. Eventually Spain agreed to a payment of $20 million in exchange for the islands and surrendered claims to Cuba, ceded the island of Puerto Rico and Guam to the United States.[2] The Philippine nationalists believed that the United States would help, rather than hamper their hope for independence.

The United States justified their occupation of the islands under the guise of "benevolent assimilation"

1 Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 33.

2 Stephan W. Stathis, "Treaty of Paris and American Policy regarding the Philippines 1898; 1899-1901" in Landmark Debates in Congress: From the Declaration of Independence to the War in Iraq (CQ Press, 2009), 233,https://doi.org/10.4135/9781452240145.n27.

— this paternalistic and racist logic believed that America needed to guide the Philippine people towards self-government. The United States did not believe the Philippines was capable of independence. The Philippine-American war began in 1899 and lasted for three years.[1] Around four thousand American soldiers died; while it is estimated that between two hundred thousand and one million Filipino civilians were killed.[2]

The Philippines finally gained independence in 1946. However, in 1947 with the signing of the Military Bases Agreement, the United States was able to build bases and have permanent military presence on the islands.[3] The largest, Clark Airbase, was 36,000 hectares and was built on the ancestral land of the Aetas, no compensation was given nor was there any repatriation of the land.[4] The Military bases Agreement was later negotiated to 25 years; but subsequent agreements and deals have resulted in an almost unbroken American military presence since gaining independence.

Indigeneity

The Philippines is not a settler-colony; however, because of the layers of oppression and marginalization that occurred throughout the 350+ years of colonialism the term native is not synonymous with Indigenous. The islands were unevenly colonized and Christianised; there are Indigenous Filipinx whose traditions, ways of life, and ties to ancestral lands endure. This is not to say that all precolonial traditions have been eradicated from Christianised populations or that Indigenous Filipinx peoples have remain fixed, unchanged across the centuries.

Sony Coráñez Bolton, a Filipinx scholar, provides us with an explanation. He puts forth that the "intersection of imperial education, racialized disability, and the Indigeneity of the Filipino represents an extension of the logic of settler empire shaping the administrative life of coloniality in the Philippines."[5] Meaning, American empire in the Philippines imparted their views on Indigenous populations (eradication and genocide) onto their colonial subjects. If the Philippines wanted to be independent, they had to prove that they too could control their Indigenous populations.

Indigenous peoples across the Philippines have had to continuously fight for sovereignty against the United States and their fellow countrymen. I am writing this from a settler-colony, and it because of these layers of oppression that I hesitate to call all Filipinx people Indigenous.

1 Fighting continued in Mindanao until 1913.

2 Victor Román Mendoza, Metroimperial Intimacies: Fantasy, Racial-Sexual Governance, and the Philippines in U.S. Imperialism, 1899-1913 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 23.

3 "(Primer) Retrospect: US military bases in the Philippines and the movement that expelled it," Philippine Revolution Web Central, Information Bureau, Communist Party of the Philippines, September 2024, https://philippinerevolution.nu/2024/09/05/retrospect-us-military-bases-in-the-philippines-and-the-movement-that-expelled-it/

4 "US Military Bases", September 2024.

5 Crip Colony: Mestizaje, US Imperialism, and the Queer Politics of Disability in the Philippines (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), 153.

Bermuda

Bermuda, a lone island hundreds of kilometres off the east-coast, is a British overseas territory. Although the islands were uninhabited prior to the 15th century its history is not without bloodshed. Its first settlement was a group of British settlers bound for Powhatan Confederacy land (known as Jamestown, Virginia) who shipwrecked on the islands in 1609.[6] This forever links Bermuda to the dispossession of land and genocide of Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island. Although a plantation economy was never established on the island, slaves were still trafficked to the islands from the Caribbean and the Americas.[7]

Bermuda, as we know it now, is majority Black (over 50%) with a sizable minority of white Bermudians (around 30%).[8] However, the wealth of the island is divided across racial lines. The island is a popular tax haven for insurance companies, attracting the uber wealthy. The island's public schools are majority Black while the private schools are disproportionately white. The legacies of slavery and imperialism live on.

2.2. The Archive

My interest in the archive as a site of study began in the Fall of 2024 while taking a class called *Memory Matters/Making Archive*. The archive, in the literal sense, can be understood as a place where information, records and materials are stored and kept by an institution.[9] Archives are important for the preservation of history; however, they are not objective sources of information. Archives, especially state-run archives, collect their materials in service of empire.[10] Krista Mccracken and Skylee-Storm Hogan-Stacey in *Decolonial Archival Futures* write, "The archives historically and contemporarily legitimize colonial states. The archives act as proof of what belongs and does not belong to the colonial state."[11] Archivists mediate what is included, how documents and objects are categorized and quantified— archives are not neutral. Over the decades archival studies have turned away from claims of neutrality; and have begun interrogating the bias and power that official archives hold. However, this turn within academia does not mean archives are no longer enacting harm. Mccracken and Hogan-Stacey write, "Archives control the past, and by doing so, they control imagined futures."[12] An intervention within the archive is one method for decolonization.

6 Michael J. Jarvis, Isle of Devils, Isle of Saints: An Atlantic History of Bermuda, 1609-1684, (John Hopkins University Press, 2022), 6.

7 Jarvis, Isle of Devils, 7.

8 Government of Bermuda Department of Statistics, 2016 Population and Housing Census Report (Department of Statistics, November 2017), 31, https://www.gov.bm/sites/default/files/2016%20Census%20Report.pdf

9 Britannica Concise Encyclopedia, s.v. "Archives".

10 Nerissa Balce, Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 11.

11 (Chicago: ALA Neal-Schuman, 2023), 2.

12 Decolonial Archival Futures, 2.

Critical Fabulations

If the archive contains nothing but colonist propaganda, why should I devote my time looking at images and documents created in the name of empire? Is it possible to take colonial photographs and share them in another light? Within the 'official' archive there are gaps and omissions; no archive is whole. But these gaps give us space for narrativization. We can understand the intention behind the archive but try to move beyond the narrative it creates. The images in the archive are born from violence; to create something reparative from violence an intervention needs to occur. This intervention should center desire.

One major colonial archive is that of the Transatlantic slave trade. Sadiya Hartman, whose scholarship focuses on the black lives interned within the archive, wrangles with the gaps and omissions of the archive. "Venus in Two Acts" (2008), a text that holds the impossibility of and yearning for authentic histories, first showed me the possibility for something other than violence within the archive.[13] Hartman offers us critical fabulations; a way of using fiction alongside historical documents to imagine alternate narratives.[14] She acknowledges the impossibility and inevitable failure of this project–– in that counter-historical projects are never truly history–– but believes that tension to be productive.[15] Throughout my thesis I attempt to fill gaps and omissions within the colonial archive.

Critical fabulations, the re-telling of fragmented stories, is a desire-based approach to the archive. As I approach the images within the colonial archive, I choose archival photos and navigate these histories from this vantage point. The intention of my intervention is not to show how much we have suffered, but to expand the narrative. To bring humanity and voice to the ghostly faces within, and to create a space for learning and sharing for diasporic Filipinx.

2.3. Ghosts

Ghosts are intimately linked with gaps and absences. Avery Gordon's *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008), offers us haunting as a framework to understand how seemingly invisible structures affect us every day.[16] Colonialism and its effects are not readily visible, but we can feel it's effects in the present. Haunting implies that the past is alive and in the present; meaning it enacts itself on the present again and again.[17] Being haunted is not simply an event but a process of "transformative

13 Hartman writing centers around Black subjectivity within the Trans-Atlantic Slave trade's archive. Small Axe 26, 12(2) (2008) 1-14, muse.jhu.edu/article/241115.

14 "Venus in Two Acts", 13.

15 Ibid.

16 Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination, reissue (Minneapolis: Regents of the University of Minnesota, 2008), 24.

17 Gordon, Ghostly Matters, 17.

recognition"; a haunting calls us to recognize these structures and *do* something about it.[18] It is not enough to simply point out these structures; it is imperative, as Gordon puts it, that we provide a "hospitable memory for ghosts out of a concern for justice."[19]

Eve Tuck and C. Ree write, "Haunting is both acute and general; individuals are haunted, but so are societies. The United States is permanently haunted by the slavery, genocide, and violence entwined in its first, present and future days."[20] For Tuck and Ree justice is land back; and just as the United States is permanently haunted, so is Canada. But how are haunting and the archive related? If colonialism affects our present, the archive can be thought of as its physical trace. The ghosts of the archive are stripped of their voice; they call upon any who will listen to provide them with some sort of justice.

The justice I hope to provide is one of memory and representation. The altars are ghostly, they strategically hide and reveal identities and faces. This creates space for alternative narratives, ones that go against the archive. *Embrace [ii]* allows these ghosts to exist within a different context, to be remembered and seen in relation to my own family.

2.4. Archival Interventions

Looking at Images

To undertake a reckoning with the archive we must learn how to read and analyze it. Seeking meaning and signification within an image– reading it, comes automatically to me. Tina M. Campt, a black feminist theorist, who analyzes colonial photography, provides us with a counter-intuitive way of engaging with them in her book, *Listening to Images (2017).* Campt describes it as...

> "a method that opens up the radical interpretive possibilities of images and state archives we are most often inclined to overlook, by engaging the paradoxical capacity of identity photos to rupture the sovereign gaze of the regimes that created them by refusing the very terms of photographic subjection they were engineered to produce"[21]

The individuals photographed demonstrate a degree of agency through staging, affect, or other means. By engaging we can rupture the colonial gaze—a refusal of the terms of subjugation. We can see this refusal across colonial archives. We see the stare, the contempt, and the anger behind the seemingly blank faces.

18 Ibid, 208.

19 Ibid, 60.

20 "A Glossary of Haunting", in Handbook of Autoethnography (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), 642.

21 Ibid.

Campt asks us to look at the absences, the quiet, much like how Saidiya Hartman uses critical fabulations to populate the gaps. This helps to "reveal the haptic temporalities of photographic capture as pernicious instruments of knowledge production".[22] Both Campt and Hartman are especially interested in how the black body is documented, described, and presented within the archive. The visual language used to document black bodies is the very same that is used to document the Filipino body.

As we refocus our attention to the refusal contained within these images, we can read against the archive's purpose. The archive and colonialism are not supernatural forces; I do not mean to imply their inevitability. But rather, to describe the overarching structural qualities of colonialism. As I look to my own photographs, and the quotidian photos of the archive what do they tell me?

Liberatory Memory Work

In *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work* (2021), Michelle Caswell calls for users of the archive to activate records by freeing ourselves from the Western conception of linear time and instead taking up alternative theories of time in the name of 'temporal autonomy' and self-recognition.[23] Caswell is asking us to go beyond recovering histories; instead, archives should be activated in the present and create space for the viewer to see "themselves in a new light across space and time."[24] Instead of viewing the archives as *past* and thus inert, we should see them as alive and able to incite change.

Linear time believes in a logic of progress; the continual march of human existence going onward and upward. Oppression can be cyclical; things cannot simply get better because time has moved forward. The fascistic right-wing rhetoric being spouted by politicians today would have been unthinkable just a couple of years prior. Linear time is a predominantly Western conception; numerous cultures do not view time in the same way.

This call for archival intervention echoes my research-creation. This intervention or activation goes against the categorizing logics of the colonial archive. Rather than grouping images according to linear time, my thesis layers instances and moments that hold congruence. The past and present are brought close together. Time and space are condensed and stretched to make a reflection, an echo. I came across Urgent Archives well after I had begun my thesis; but it has so perfectly reflected my thought process while engaging with the archives.

22 Ibid, 9.

23 Michelle Caswell, Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work (New York: Routledge, 2021), 20.

24 Caswell, Urgent Archives, 6.

The Hand and a Counter-Archive

3.1. Philippine Colonial Archive

Most of the archival theory I read at the beginning of my degree focused on North America and Europe. Out of curiosity, I began searching for online repositories that had photographs from the Philippines. The archives I browsed were from American institutions and held a trove of materials from the early 1900s. The American colonial period in the Philippines coincided with numerous technological jumps. Namely, advances in photography, colour-printing and motion-picture.[1] This meant photography was an important tool during the United States imperial expansion; the Spanish-American war (1898) and the Philippine-American war (1899-1902) as both were covered heavily by the media. The Spanish-American war marked several firsts for the United States; the first war to be fought outside of the metropole, the first to use extensive telegraph communications and the first to use motion pictures as propaganda and documentary.[2] The Spanish-American war was one of the first spectator's wars.

The Philippine colonial archive can be characterized by the overwhelming number of photographs; they played an important role in persuading the American public that the Philippine-American war was a just and noble cause. We can read the American public's interest as support for the war or as novel fascination of imperial technologies. Either way, imagery of the war was popular. Nerissa S. Balce, a Filipina scholar, uses the colonial archive as a site of study in *Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive*. She resurfaces the logics of American imperialism and provides us with *abjection* a theory for "understanding how race and gender frame the narratives of the history of the Philippine-American War, the Philippine colony, and by extension, the global Filipinx diaspora.[3] She uses abjection to interrogate the Filipinx in the Western imaginary. Balce puts forth that early "American grammars of otherness, particularly nineteenth-century notions of "black inferiority," "red savagery", and white imperial identities," were applied to the Philippine people.[4] American empire was not only "instituted through violence, but was also created through photographic images that excised the violence of war or framed violence as American victory."[5] Just as the Philippines was entering the Western imaginary it was muted through existing grammars of imperial conquest.

1 Mark Rice, "Colonial Photography Across Empires and Islands," Journal of Transnational American Studies 3, no. 2 (2011), 2, doi:10.5070/T832011629.

2 Balce, Body Parts of Empire, 24.

3 Balce, Body Parts of Empire, 21.

4 Body Parts of Empire, 23.

5 ibid, 52.

Balce describes the photograph as being a tool to honor some subjects but repress others. Photographs were usually taken of people of importance or were taken in the name of science. She writes, "Bodies represented in the imperial archive are therefore mostly those of the nation's heroes, leaders, and upper class and of the nation's marginalized deviant."[1]

The Life of the Photograph

Although colonial images cannot be completely extricated from their purpose and the author's intent, they can offer multiple narratives. Just as Campt asks us to listen to images, Balce points out that images are "like living organisms."[2] These images from the past can exceed the original author's intent; they have desires of their own. The photographs of the archive have their own ghosts. What do these ghosts want? How can we communicate with these ghosts to offer them the justice they seek.

The ghost and the author of the photograph interact as well. Artist Stephanie Syjuco's deals with the colonial archive and the American imaginary. She states, "I do not make work about Filipino Identity; I make work about the white gaze, and those are two totally different things."[3] The white gaze and the ghost's desires contradict each other and create tension. To reject the white gaze and the narratives that surround it is the first step.

3.2. The Hand [1st encounter]

While sifting through photographs from the colonial period, I was drawn to a photograph of a hand, a woman's– brown, tattoo'd, and resting on a white background. [4] I was struck by how closely the hand resembled my own, we shared the same large finger joints that tapered into rounded fingertips. The photo, taken in 1908 is captioned "Hand of Tinguiane woman showing fresh tattoo." [5] Tinguian is an exonym given to the Itneg nation; their ancestral lands are in northwestern Luzon.[6] There was no mention of the woman's name.

The photograph was taken by Dean C. Worcester, a zoologist turned ethnographer. In October 1898, the same month that the United States and Spain met to discuss the Treaty of Paris, Worcester capitalized on

1 Balce, Body Parts of Empire, 56.

2 Balce, Body Parts of Empire, 48.

3 The Unruly Archive (Radius Books, 2024), 7.

4 The article, written by Christopher Capozzola, is titled "Photography & Power in the Colonial Philippines: Dean Worcester's Ethnographic Images of Filipinos 91898-1912)", MIT Visualizing Cultures, 2012, https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu/photography_and_power_02/index.html.

5 Dean C. Worcester, 1908, DW06HH002, The Dean C. Worcester Photographic Collection, University of Michigan Museum of Anthropology, Ann Arbor, MI.

6 'Tinguian' is a name given the Spanish Empire; from here forward I will refer to the Itneg nation by their chosen name.

his existing photography of Philippine people (from a previous ornithology expedition) and published *The Philippine Islands and Their People*.[7] His book argued for US intervention in the Philippines, he believed the Philippine people to need "civilizing" and was against Philippine independence.[8] He used his position as a scientist to publish propaganda in favor of colonization; the narrative created by him and the other colonists came at the expense of many other possible histories.

Balce describes Filipinos within the empire as "objects of "scientific" study, as objects of colonial rule, as subject people with no sovereign status and as objects of racial discourse."[9] Worcester's photographs belie his zoological training; individuals would be placed on white backdrops, without context, to photograph their clothing, jewelry, adornments and bodies. His colonial gaze exoticizes, eroticizes, and dehumanizes his subjects. The hand was an object in the archive, stripped of autonomy or personhood.

figure 3. Milkfish grilling, Pangasinan, 04.11.

figure 4. Assorted fruits, Pangasinan, 04.11.

3.3. Studio Work: Counter-Archival Project

As I sorted through countless images in the colonial archives, I felt a draw to look at my own personal collection. I am the keeper of most of my family's physical collection of photographs; I've slowly been trying to digitize them, but it's a tedious project. My sister and I were also very interested in photography as teens; I got my first digital camera in 2011. It's funny to look at the photographs I took then, I took the camera on a family trip in April of 2011 and so many of the images I took were not directly of family members. Instead, I took a lot of photos of food, the scenery, and plants.

7 Rice, "Colonial Photography Across Empires and Islands", 6.

8 Ibid, 17.

9 Body Parts of Empire, 13.

figure 5. The Salonga family enjoying their mid-day meal, Pangasinan, 04.11.

One image I have a particular fondness for is from a daytrip we took with my Titas, Lola, and cousins. We drove several hours to the Hundred Islands National Park, Pangasinan. The only way to get to the islands is by boat; my mom and Titas packed us a huge lunch in coolers which we had to carry onto the boat and to every subsequent island we visited—we even brought a tablecloth and a rice-cooker. This trip was the last time I saw my Lola, who passed away in July of 2012. The image shows all of us reaching our hands into the center, grabbing food.

Returning to the photograph of the hand, I felt like I had to do something. I created a series of digital collages alongside an essay I wrote about the colonial archive. These digital collages were my first foray into counter-archiving, an intervention. Although the audience was only myself, it was an important first step. I wanted to bring about some sort of justice for the ghosts interned within; I thought it was fitting to put the archival images alongside my own familial ones.

I placed the hand over that photograph and imagined her eating alongside us. A guest at the table. The last image was an assemblage of my own arms holding the ghostly hand. Our tattoos echoed each other's. The digital collages were a new object, not something made from disparate parts. A research-creation before I even knew what that meant. I would return to this embrace later in my practice. I wasn't quite satisfied with the outcome; I felt a need to do more. The images I created were digital— existing only on a screen; I was the only person to have experienced this new ghostly object. I wanted to make something tangible.

figure 6. One of the first archival interventions, December 2023.

3.4. Ethnography & Empire

While browsing archives I came across several images that were geographically tagged as "St. Louis, Missouri". The photographs were of Bontoc Igorot; one photograph even had a structure made from palm leaves. As I was clicking through the photographs, I thought they were mislabelled until I saw a postcard titled "Souvenir, Igorot Village, Philippine Photograph Co. World's Fair, St. Louis, 1904". In 1904 the United States held a World's Fair in St. Louis, Missouri. The Louisiana Purchase exposition at the fair had a section called the "Philippine Reservation"; it was one of the most visited exhibits at the fair.[10]

Over 1,000 Filipinos lived at the exposition for six months. The area was split into villages that showed the varying cultural groups across the Philippines; they were ordered according to racist social evolutionary theories.[11] The Filipinos present were organized according to how 'evolved' and thus 'civilized' they were; the Aeta and Bontoc were 'savage' while Christianised Tagalogs held the most civilized position.[12]

Throughout the course of the Fair objects and goods made by Philippine craftspeople were kept and later sold to institutions; a zoologist, on behalf of the University of Toronto, purchased several hundred items.[13] Necessarily this thesis focuses on the United States' role, but Canada is not exempt. Once the University of Toronto and the Royal Ontario Museum split into two entities the objects remained in the ROM's collection, unseen by the public, until 2008.[14]

Bonnie McElhinny criticizes the display's appeals to Canadian 'multiculturalism' over any discussion of imperialism or race.[15] I saw the display sometime around 2017, prior to learning about the St. Louis World's Fair, and did not register that the craftspeople who made the objects displayed were living in what amounted to a human zoo. In fact, I remember pointing out to my mom that the Asia-Pacific collection had artifacts from the Philippines. To have walked by those objects and not have known the dehumanizing context is a bitter revelation.[16]

Photography & "Truth"

Photography was used to repress those it captured; ethnographers disproportionately photographed Indigenous Filipinos; they perceived them as the "noble savage" while the Philippine natives were tainted by Spanish colonization. This over-representation of Indigenous Filipinos influenced the ways that the American

10 Mark Rice, *Dean Worcester's Fantasy Islands: Photography, Film, and the Colonial Philippines*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2014), 60.

11 Bonnie McElhinny, "Meet Me in Toronto: The Re-Exhibition of Artifacts from the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition at the Royal Ontario Museum," in *Filipinos in Canada: Disturbing Invisibility* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 225.

12 Rice, *Dean Worcester's Fantasy Islands*, 60.

13 McElhinny, "Meet me in Toronto", 223.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid, 224.

16 I am unsure if the didactics have changed between 2012, when McElhinny wrote the chapter, and when I first saw the objects at the Museum.

public perceived the Philippines. Many Filipino intellectuals were upset by this representation; some did not want to be associated with 'savagery' and felt that these depictions hurt their case for independence.[17] Again, I must reiterate the layers of oppression that are determined by ability, class, and perceived intellect.

As demand increased for images of the Philippines many Americans rose to the occasion. Worcester himself described his endeavors as "truth-telling" ones. Mark Rice, a historian who wrote a book on Worcester, writes "[his] words suggest that he recognized that the truthfulness of photography was not inherent, that the camera lens was not a transparent window onto the world…. [the truth] was something that had to be coaxed out of the camera."[18] Meaning, Worcester was all too aware that the photographer mediated what the viewer saw. Worcester would interpret, fabricate and outright lie about images he published. [19] He went so far as to present two images as before and after shots of a Bontoc Igorot man who was influenced by America's civilizing power.

3.5. The Hand [2nd encounter]

In the winter of 2024, I decided to revisit the photograph of the hand; I wanted to see if I could glean anything more about the woman's identity. I began my research with Filipinx tattooing. Tattooing was practiced across Austronesia, including the Philippines, in precolonial times.[20] Many of these tattooing practices share commonalities but are still distinct. The mass conversion of lowland communities to Catholicism meant that tattooing has been continuously practiced in Indigenous Filipino communities who retreated further into the mountains to avoid Spanish attempts at conversion or were already too remote for the missionaries.

While looking into Filipinx tattooing I came across Lane Wilcken, a scholar of Filipinx tattoos. He points out common motifs that are both tatoo'd onto the body and woven into clothing.[21] He posits that since some Indigenous nations, like the Itneg and Kalinga to name two, view tattoos as an of a person's clothing we can see the same motifs on skin and cloth.[22] We can even see tattoos changing over time before

17 Coráñez Bolton, Crip Colony, 160.

18 Rice, Dean Worcester's Fantasy Islands: Photography, Film, and the Colonial Philippines, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press 2014), 2.

19 Rice, Dean Worcester's Fantasy Islands, 178.

20 Analyn Salvador-Amores, "The Recontextualization of Burik (Traditional Tattoos) of Kabayan Mummies in Benguet to Contemporary Practices" in Humanities Diliman 9(1), June 2012, 56.

21 Lane Wilcken, Filipino Tattoos: Ancient to Modern (Atglen, PA, Schiffer Publishing Ltd, 2010), 14.

22 Wilcken, Filipino Tattoos, 15.

Spain arrived; precolonial peoples were not in stasis until colonization; just as Indigenous peoples are not relics of the past.[23] These ideas reflect my own relationship with tattoos—as an extension of oneself. A way of inscribing meaning into your corporeal form.

Mistaken Identity

It was while reading about Filipinx tattoos that I came across Wilcken's writing on the ghostly hand. He too saw the photograph of the hand, labelled as Itneg. Wilcken describes Itneg women's tattoos as intricate armbands that ran the length of the forearm but did not extend to the hand. [24] These tattoos were intended to cover the skin of the forearm which were usually adorned with beaded bracelets. Knowing this and looking at the ghostly hand, we can see clearly that the tattoo only covers the back of the hand and does not go past the wrist. Wilcken points out that the woman was likely mislabelled within the archive and was more likely to be an Isnag woman. [25] The Isnag knew that tattoos were "marked upon the soul" and would tattoo a canoe on the backs of their hands known as *andori*.[26] This tattoo represented both the canoe that would take souls to the afterlife but also meant safe passage for the wearer.

This was revelatory. It is one thing to know that colonial records are inaccurate but another entirely to see so-called-official records unravel for yourself. I am glad to know she has made it to the afterlife safely; but how many other ghosts in the archive are grossly miss-appropriated?

The retelling of history across this paper is essential to the project; we cannot visit colonial repositories and expect to get the whole truth. We can only glean pieces and fragments–– which often amount to a one-dimensional view of a people. I cannot know the complex inner-life of the Isnag woman, but I can take these fragments and traces of her and make something new. This thesis begins and returns to the colonial archive; but the archive is just one aspect of the project. Colonial rule over the Philippines has materially changed and shaped the lives of my past relations and myself. However, they are not the only interesting thing about us and our experiences.

23 Salvador-Amores, "Recontextualization of Burik", 60.

24 Filipino Tattoos, 27.

25 The Forgotten Children of Maui: Filipino Myths, Tattoos, and Rituals of a Demigod (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013).

26 Wilcken, Filipino Tattoos, 62-63.

Archival Bodies

We can view our bodies as archives in and of themselves. After all, a tattoo'd body has been inscribed upon. This line of thinking echoes the Isnag's marking upon the soul. Mark Joseph Calano, a Filipino scholar, compares tattooing to archive by being both memory and ritual in one—these tattoo'd bodies create narratives and counter narratives.[27] In the absence of recorded histories, tattoos contribute to the archive-making process in a more expansive way. These counter 'official' historical accounts. Just as images have their own life, tattoos do as well they have significance and meaning that the colonial archive can hide but not totally erase.

3.6. Studio Work: Ghostly Body

While working through these ideas, I had a chance to show some work at the great hall. I decided to revisit the hand again, now being more well-informed. Rather than completing the process purely in the digital, I wanted to experiment with the translucency of paper.

During the process for this piece, I began painting on mylar, both frosted and clear. I also printed several iterations of the arms onto transparencies. I had a simple lightbox that I used when transferring work from sketch to paper that I used to stage different layouts. This is where I first began working with light. I realized that light would become a fantastic way of showing the ghostly quality of the transparencies.

figure 7. An installation in the Great Hall, 02.24.

27 Mark Joseph Calano, "Archiving bodies: Kalinga batek and the im/possibility of an archive". Thesis Eleven 112(1), 2012, 98.

I found it quite intuitive to work in this way as it was very similar to the way you use layers in Photoshop. Much of my illustrative work is similar to collage and uses masks, layering, and transparency to create different effects. Working with light allowed me to explore those same qualities in the material realm.

Since my light box was quite small, I was restricted to an 8x10" rectangle. I wanted to go larger; I decided to print out my arms and the ghostly hand on thin bond paper. I then cut them out and layered them on the wall having some areas overlap and come away. I adhered them to the wall with magnets and nails, creating distance between the layers.

I wanted to create something physical, material, a body for the ghost. An alternate body made from my own as an offering. Her hand, an object in the archive, is embraced in an act of care. The piece resulted in something I was not quite happy with. But I was glad I could share her story with my cohort. The installation was still missing elements. I wanted to use light, I wanted scale but perhaps this scale was too large, and I wanted more interaction and overlay between the arms. With these things in mind I was eager to create more work.

figure 8. One of the first altars I made from acrylic 06.24.

figure 9. (left) An edge-lit acrylic hand, 09.24.

figure 10. (right) Hands made of acrylic and digital transfer, 07.24.

Embracing Ghosts

4.1. Making Altars

Moving into the spring and summer months I was still chasing transparency/opacity and light within my work. As I was sketching and ideating, I returned repeatedly to an arch shape. This shape echoes a doorway, a window, a niche, maybe a bit liturgical. I wanted something more concrete that my previous work had lacked. I began working with acrylic rather than just paper and began using the facilities at OCAD to do my own laser cutting. This way I could cut down on the hands-on intensive cutting process.

The Philippines is majority Catholic, my own family, who are protestant, are an outlier in that regard. But Catholic aesthetics are very familiar to me, I grew up in churches. Not only for Sunday service, but the halls that we would use for Filipino Association parties, meetings, and gatherings were in Catholic churches. I've spent so much time as a kid just kind of hanging out at churches, crawling under the pews, pretending to drink from the communion cups, standing on the stage belting out songs and climbing the stacks of chairs in the storage closet.

Although I have distanced myself from Christianity, the iconography is comforting. Church windows are portals. While it might make sense to completely refuse the visual language of Christianity, as it was a tool for colonialism, I cannot erase the 300+ years of Christian conversion that took place over the archipelago. When I invoke Catholic imagery, my interest is in complicating my relationship with it. To take these images that have been the source of anxiety and self-hatred for so many queer Filipinx and to renegotiate my understanding of them, to make them a source of comfort, feels like a reparative justice.

As I try to bring comfort to the ghosts of the archive, I offer them these motifs. The altars I create are constructed from my experiences and my family. It is fitting that a tombstone can also be an arch. Just as I am engaging with the ghosts of the archives, many of my relations have become ghosts as well. Burial sites and graves are heavy with significance just as my altars are. Although I might not know the names of every individual in the photograph, I can create a space that encourages reflection.

Diasporic Tattooing Practices

My research into the practice of tattooing across the islands sparked new curiosities about the diaspora's relationship to tattoos. Intent on following these curiosities, I sketched the first few altars. I wanted to avoid directly copying the archival photographs, I didn't feel as if I knew enough about any one tattooing practice and I did not want to make a simulacrum of what I thought to be "authentic". Although some Indigenous communities are more than happy to share tattooing practices (Kalinga tattoo artists have even come up with an entire genre of tattoo reserved for tourists) Indigenous peoples are not a monolith; just as Filipinx are not a monolith.

I write this section carefully, and with the understanding that Indigenous peoples across the world have fought to keep their tattooing practices alive in spite of colonial efforts to eradicate them. I do not write about diasporic tattooing practices to insert myself, but as a way of relating to my own body. Rather than replicating the visual style of northern Luzon tattoos, I turned my attention to the imagery that I felt best resonated with me. When I say resonate, I do not mean a shallow kind of relation but instead objects and images that I have found myself continuously drawn to throughout my life and ones that I have already taken into my artistic practice. Across Oceania and the archipelago, we can see the star, the centipede, and the fern inscribed on bodies and cloth.

The centipede holds a special place for me. As someone who grew up on an island, I'm familiar with centipedes, especially the big ones. I was always fascinated by how many legs they had; they seemed like an impossibility–– almost alien. The centipede is a symbol that exists across the Pacific; Wilcken has a whole section dedicated to the centipede. To the Kalinga, centipedes are messengers from the ancestors and to the Samoans the centipede is a marker of someone who can endure immense pain. [1]

Serendipitously, two years before writing this thesis I had two large centipede's tattoo'd onto my body. I bring this up not to say that I have some sort of profound connection with being "Filipino" but rather to point out an echo, a repetition, that made itself known in the process of this project. When I see the centipede, I see it as a long repeating chain interlinked and agile. Not only relations of blood but also found family, diasporic community, and other kinds of relationships.

figure 11. Two ink drawings of a centipede, 10.24.

1 Wilcken, Filipino Tattoos, 82.

4.2. Studio Work: After-Image

Ruminating on the centipede, I knew I wanted to create an altar that incorporated them. An archway, that echoed Catholic architecture while the segmented panels reminded me of stained glass. From my prior counter-archival work I knew that this piece needed to have presence and hold space. I wanted to incorporate mylar and transparencies to simultaneously hide and reveal.

figure 12. The wooden form of an alter being made, 11.24.

Following the previous body I made for the ghosts; I returned to the photograph of my arms. Looking at my tattoos again I can see the reoccurring visual of interlinking chains. This portal, made of my arms, would allow the viewer to see past/present/future in the way the circular images interact with each other. I wanted the portal to be an offering to the ghosts of the archive as a construction of my identity made of my own body.

figure 13. Wiring the frame, 12.24.

The Show

After-Image, its first iteration, was made of laser-cut plywood, mylar, and bond paper. I chose relatively inexpensive materials and print methods to ensure I could make several arches. It was hung in the Graduate gallery at 205 Richmond alongside others' work from the Asian Diasporic Media Praxis class.

The arch consisted of two scenes: a photograph of my arms ran along the outer perimeter holding the arch while a centipede curled around the inside. The imagery is fragmented, broken up by the architecture of the arch, but continuous. The layers of mylar and paper created a ghostly effect; the distance between the layers varied making the arms and centipede come in and out of focus. This piece felt like a milestone; I had made something that reflected the melancholy and fragmented experience of engaging with colonial archives.

I hold the ghosts of the archive, just as they hold me.

figure 14. *After-Image* hanging in the Graduate Gallery 12.24.

figure 15. Experimenting with the lights, 03.25.

4.3. *Spectral Embrace [part i]*

Pre-Show Preparations

After I had shown *After-Image* in December of 2024, I was excited to make more portals. It was affirming to have had so many kind words from visitors at the gallery, fellow artists, and students. Before making the first arch I made quite a few prototypes to make sure I got the dimensions just right. One prototype was a singular frame with led lights strung through and transparencies on either side; I liked the way the light reflected off the table and how it mimicked a picture frame. I decided to take this further by making a wooden prototype.

I also wanted to explore more ways of layering the mylar over a light source. *After-Image* had a ghostly quality where the mylar and paper met and moved apart creating areas of blurriness. This quality, the showing and hiding, was something I wanted to experiment more with. I made more prototypes with cut out mylar. The way that the paper and mylar were fitted into the frame made some areas move further or closer to the light, creating more depth.

These frames were a happy accident, not something I originally planned on making. The double-sided frame echoed portals and were visually similar to picture frames. The size of the frames also meant I could make several of them; I had so many archival photographs I wanted to work with but wasn't sure what I could do. The familiarity of a photograph in a frame would re-contextualize the archival photographs. Rather than the ghosts of the archives living in an online repository, searchable only through keywords and an alphanumeric code, they could live in a house, within a frame. Become family.

The Show: Arch

figure 16. A photocopy of the two children hanging in my studio, 03.25.

This arch, structurally, is the same as *After-Image*. An archival photograph I came across had two children holding floral wreaths in a Manila cemetery. The photograph, taken by Worcester, was one of the rare ones that showed Tagalog people. The two children held wreaths made of plumeria, a common flowering ornamental tree. These flowers are common in Bermuda, and in the Philippines. One wreath is an arch, echoing a tombstone, while the other is in the shape of a cross. Seeing the floral arch, I knew immediately I needed to make my own version, in conversation with the photograph.

The outside of the arch has an image of plumeria flowers while the inside was an image of my arms holding the center. I am holding the ghosts of the archive, offering them this arch, much in the same way the children in the cemetery offered their wreaths. Accompanying the arch, I had a small frame mounted on the wall. This frame held the photograph of the two children with layers of mylar on top. Cut through the mylar was the shape of my hand. Hiding the children's faces but revealing the wreaths they held.

figure 17. An arch and a frame, taken by Laiken Breau, 04.25.

figure 18. A closer image of the frame, taken by Laiken Breau, 04.25.

figure 19. The three central frames, taken by Laiken Breau, 04.25.

The Show: Frames

The first frame has a photograph of me in a tree after a hurricane. I'm in my early years of Primary school. The tree that fell is a rubber tree; the kind whose aerial roots grow wide and strong. The opposite photograph is one from Worcester's collection. It is a photograph of a large tree, displaying aerial roots like my photograph. Layered on top of the photographs are cut-out images of roots and branches.

figure 20. Younger me sitting in a tree felled by a hurricane, 04.25.

figure 21. A back-lit frame, taken by Laiken Breau, 04.25.

The second frame has a photograph of me in my school uniform on my first day of school. I'm standing in front of my mother's garden where she grew lilies, papaya, and a scraggly bird of paradise. Like most overseas territories, Bermuda follows the British school system. Meaning I wore a uniform all through primary, middle, and high school. The photograph on the opposite of the frame is a group of school children holding up a sign that reads "we speak English". These children, likely taught by an American teacher, are solemn faced. On top of these two photographs, I placed silhouettes of banana leaves. Allowing the mylar to cover the faces of the children but reveal the letters on their signs.

The final frame has a recent photograph of my mother's hands captured in 2024 when she came to visit. The opposite photograph is of her at 16 standing in her garden in Dagupan, Pangasinan, ready for her prom. This photograph is the oldest one I have of my mom; many of her family photographs were lost to floods that come regularly to the area.

4.4. Critiques and Changes

After *Spectral* [i] I had a good idea of what I wanted to keep and what I wanted to change about my work for *Spectral* [ii]. The gallery space I was given for Spectral [i] was very stark. It had three white walls with rail lighting, grey floors, and one side of the gallery was open to a hallway with fluorescent lights. I did the best with what I had at the time, but I knew I needed a more enclosed space where I could control the lighting better. I had used colour gels to soften the light a bit inside the gallery space, but I do not think my work looked as good as it could have.

I had also been leaving the wood on my arches and frames unfinished with just a bit of wax on top to keep it texturally smooth. The all-white gallery paired with the very pale wood meant there was very little contrast within the space. Both Immony and Marissa recommended I play around with staining the wood. Marissa suggested looking at wood-working from the Philippines; more specifically Narra wood which has a saturated brown color when varnished. Immony also suggested that this would be more in-line with a diasporic aesthetic similar to the dark wood furniture that many Southeast Asian families love. I had been unnecessarily attached to the unfinished wood look and once I had tried different stains out, I very quickly realized that was the right move.

Another change that was suggested was to make the wiring of the frames invisible. I had done my best to keep it neat and unobtrusive, but you could see the cords running along the plinth and to the wall. A cleaner look that removed the noise of the cords would better echo framed family photos. The combination of wires and stark whiteness made the space seem more clinical and less warm.

I felt good about the work I showed at *Spectral* [i] and was excited about refining the pieces.

figure 22. Wooden frames after staining, 06.25.

Spectral Embrace [part ii]

5.1. Studio Work

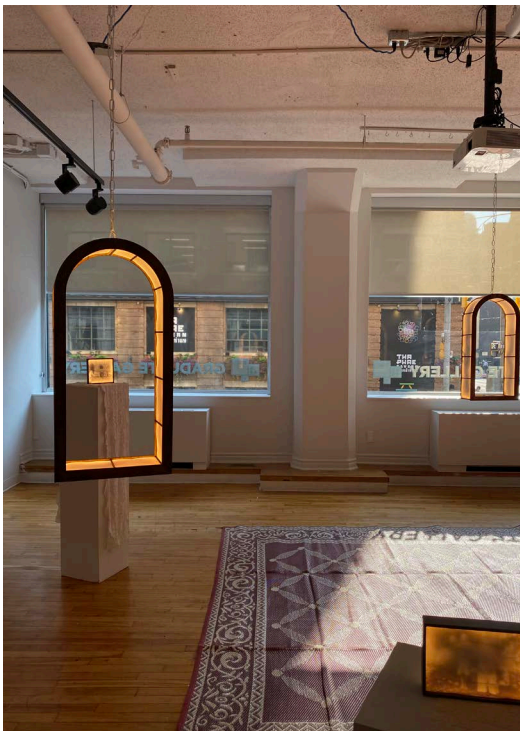
In the months between my first show and my second I tried to make as many improvements as possible structurally for both the arch and the frames. This included changing the way the frames were wired, trying out different stains and making the printed aspects more accurate so they were easier to assemble. For the most part the work during this time was more technical and less theory based.

figure 23. The invite for the show, 6.25.

figure 24. Stain samples 6.25.

5.2. Gallery Layout

I had the graduate gallery located at 205 Richmond St. for four days in July. I was excited about using the space as it had lovely warm wood flooring and two large west-facing windows. After my show in April, I was determined to make the gallery space much more inviting this time around—I wanted visitors to linger rather than walk in and walk out.



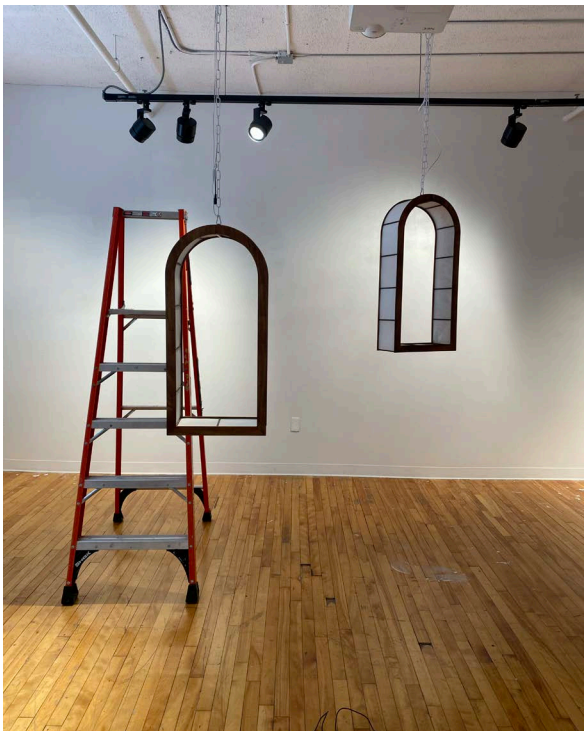


figure 25. (left) A view of the gallery from the entrance, 07.25.

figure 26. (right) Hanging the altars in the gallery, 07.25.

I broke the gallery up into two sections. The main area was delineated by a woven mat–– borrowed from Immony's research space–– where the three arches hung above. This created a nice seating area for visitors to view the arches.

For the plinths I found some nostalgic textiles to add softness. I chose doilies, pieces of lace, and a frilly tablecloth all in varying shades of white and cream. These materials reminded me of my mom's house, particularly the mixture of dark stained wood and white lacy crochet doilies. Looking at photographs of my mom's house growing up filet crochet and lace crochet were both popular textiles. Aesthetically, I wanted the frames atop the plinths to mimic side-tables or mantles filled with family photographs.

figure 27. *Spectral Embrace [part ii]*, 07.25.

5.3. The Work

I showed my work at the Graduate Gallery from July 25th – 27th. In total I had ten works.

Arch 1

This arch is a reiteration of the very first arch I made the only change is that the wood is stained darker. The outside shows my arms holding the portal, clutching what lies within. The inside is a curling centipede. The layers of mylar make the image fade in and out of focus.

Arch 2

The second was a direct inversion of the first. I inverted the image and switched the placement of the centipede and the arms. Now the centipede holds the portal and what lies within; my arms are resting inside. This inversion speaks to the cyclical relationship between us and the ghosts.

Arch 3

The third is an improved version of my previous plumeria arch. I changed the colour of both prints to a warm orange red and used cut mylar to emphasize the layers being hidden and shown.

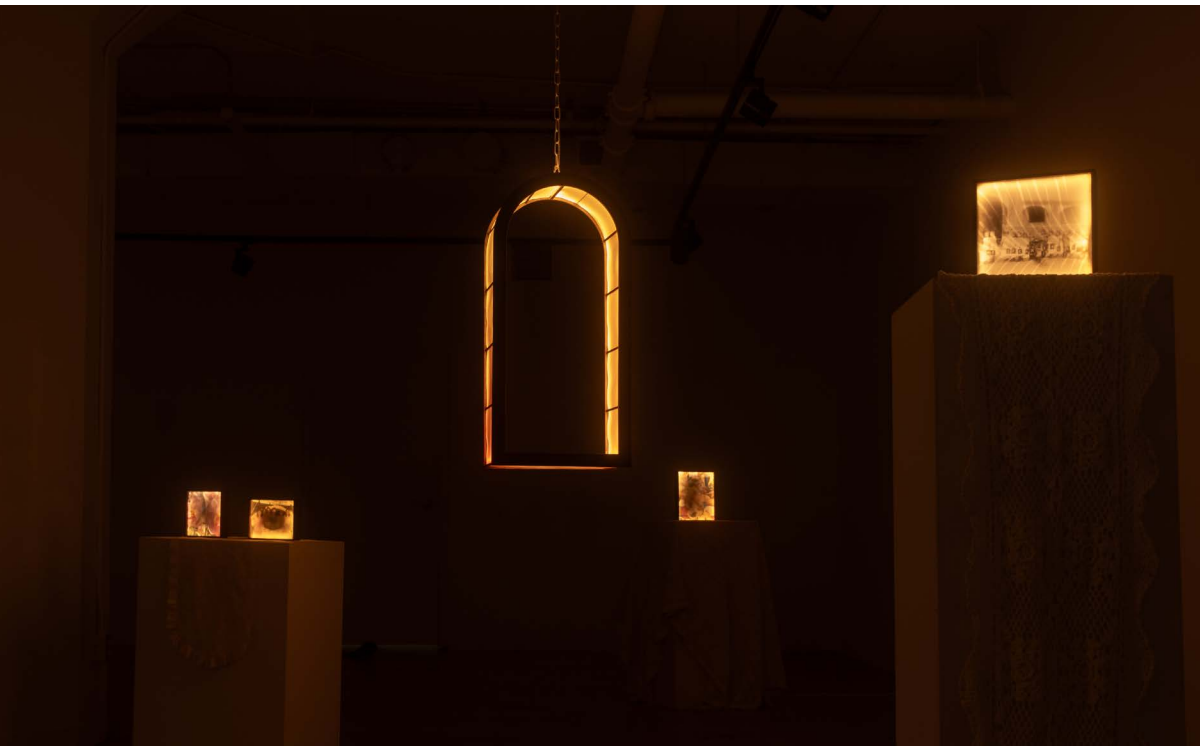
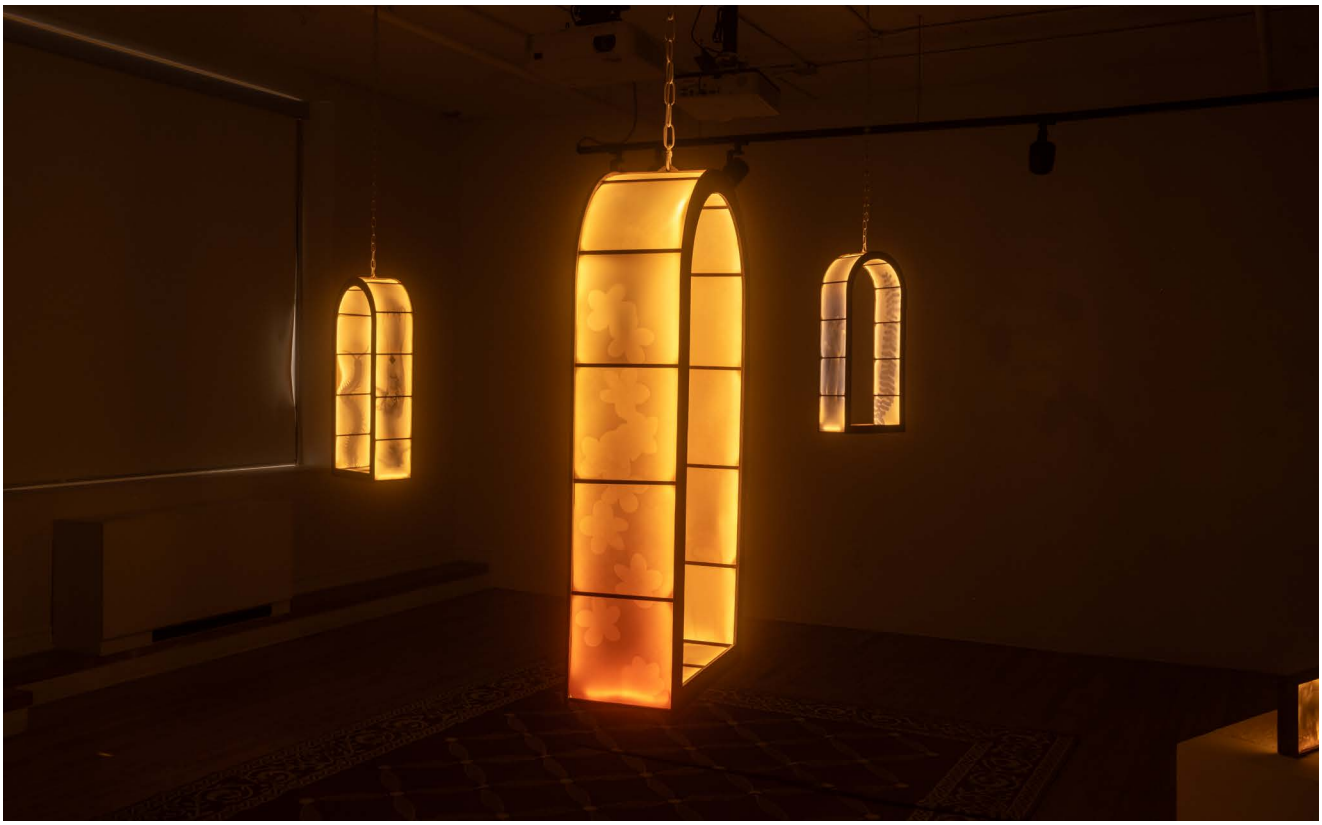


figure 28. (left) Arch 3 in center view, 07.25.

figure 29. (below) left to right: Arch 1, Arch 3, Arch 2, 07.25.



Group A (Frame 1 & 2)

In the same plinth grouping was another frame on a lower plinth. This one had a photograph of me standing in my mom's garden as a child in Bermuda and on its opposite a photograph of my mom going to prom in Pangasinan.

On one side was the photograph of the hand with a mylar cut-out of my own hand reaching for her. The other side had the photo of my family eating with their hands at the picnic table, overlaid was a cut-out of the ghostly hand. This piece felt like a circular moment; I started my archival interventions with a digital collage of these two images and to have been able to make another piece with the same imagery felt right.

figure 30. (left) Group A, 07.25.

Group B (Frame 3)

This frame is unchanged from my previous show (other than the wood stain); however, this time I let this piece stand alone. On one side was a photograph of me standing in my school uniform in front of my mom's garden while the opposite was a group of children in Manila holding up a sign that read "We speak English." I think this piece works much better as a stand-alone rather than grouped with other frames.

figure 31. Group C, view of one side, 07.25.

Group C (Frame 4 & 5)

Two frames sat on this plinth. The first is the same from *Embrace [i]*. The two children holding the flower wreaths; its opposite is a group of my mom's friends in Bermuda, ready to dance and holding arches of flowers. The dance is called *Bulaklakan*, the dance of floral garlands. This repetition of the arch shape, paired with my mom's smiling friend group contrasted with the two serious faced children on the other side. But both images show an appreciation for the flower, whether in celebration or in mourning. Overlaid on top are silhouettes of arches.

figure 32. Group C, view of opposite side, 07.25.

The second frame is a photograph of my Lola, napping after the large meal we shared in April of 2011 at Hundred Islands, Pangasinan. The opposite was a photograph I took that same year of one of her many orchids in her garden. My lola loved flowers, especially orchids and she passed down that love to my mother and to my sister and me. I paired these photographs with images of orchids. This piece is to honor my Lola.

figure 33. Group D, 07.25.

Group D (Frame 6 & 7)

The final grouping has a cutout of the centipede across the two frames. Stretching across both sides. The first frame has a photograph of me as a toddler being bathed in a basin while its opposite is a baby being washed in a basin in 1937. The second frame has a photograph of my Lolo and Lola in Pangasinan and its opposite is a Tagalog couple sitting for a portrait in the late 1890s. I returned to the centipede and the meaning of ancestors, family, and continued existence. Although my photograph was taken in Bermuda and the others in Luzon they are being shown in Canada. It's important to highlight the interplay of spacial and temporal jumps between each image and work.

Conclusion

6.1. Findings & Unanswered Questions

The colonial archive was made to categorize and quantify its subjects. To capture their bodies, faces, and cultures, and flatten them into something easily digestible. Even now the archive is inaccessible to the relations of those it inters, countless images are housed within American Universities–– and may have not had eyes on them in decades. These photographs are owned by institutions.

Understanding the context of the archive, we, as diasporic Filipinx, can make interventions that seek to repair rather than re-harm. We can complicate the narrative. *Embrace [ii]*'s goal was to make a hospitable space for the ghosts of the archive. The ghosts are present within the space, but have their own bodies, their own armor–– the altars made from wood, mylar and light. Their identities and faces are slightly obscured but the impression of them remains. *Embrace [ii]* has created a space that is primed for conversation and memory for diasporic Filipinx.

Technical Aspects of Improvement

Looking at this thesis from the vantage point of having finished it, I can see many areas where I have room and space to continue this work. I have interacted with these archives only through the digital realm; while online repositories are valuable it has made me realize how limiting it is to only view materials through and online interface. Physically seeing the documents, reading the annotations, and accompanying documentation feels more visceral. It's a more direct way of uncovering histories.

I will say that my biggest regret was the omission of didactics and text in my exhibitions. While I was present for the duration of both shows, and therefore able to talk visitors through each piece it's very possible that some parts were left untouched or un-answered. The work is done a disservice; the depth and nuance of each piece can easily be lost without the proper context. The work must be positioned within the broader conversation of history and colonialism.

Viewing the Show

I always had the intention of inviting other diasporic Filipinx to the show. However, I was uncertain if my family would be able to experience it together. My mom still lives in Bermuda while my sister and nieces live about two-hours away. I was able to set aside a day for all of us to experience the space together–– just us. Although this gathering was planned last-minute, it was a defining moment for the project.

With my family in the gallery the space became filled with potential for conversation and reflection. The space opened up new avenues of dialogue and conversation that are hard to come by when we have the chance to visit each other. Across the three generations of my family, my mom, my sister, and my nieces our experiences and lives can seem so far apart. Embrace [ii] created an instance, a moment, where conversation about colonialism, its effects, its meaning, and our lives, felt at home.

With each family member I was able to walk through the gallery, look at the altars, and relay my research to them. But more than just repeating my research, the space allowed for conversation and a

dialogue to form. My sister and I, who share childhood experiences of growing up in Bermuda, were able to talk about ideas of 'belonging' and 'not-belonging' in the national sense but also within diasporic communities.

My mom, whose parents were born under American Imperial rule and who lived through WWII, looked at the archival images and told me stories about their lives during and after the war in Pangasinan. Often the sentiment shared by diasporic Filipinos in my mom's generation is that U.S. colonial rule helped the archipelago. That benevolent assimilation was good, and preferable to Spanish rule.

To my nieces the space was one where history didn't seem so far away–– so impersonal. Reading and learning about history can often feel like a chore, especially when the histories we read are told through the colonist's eyes. We walked around the space, sat on the mat, and gazed up at the lights. I told them about colonialism–– relaying to them my reasoning for making the altars, for creating the space. Although our time was limited, and I still feel like more can be said to them, this being their first encounter with the archive felt special. They did not have to see the same violent images as me, depersonalized and on a screen. It felt so incredibly special to have had this time with my family. To have a space where dialogue and curiosity is expected, which feels so antithesis to the colonial archive.

6.2. Final Thoughts

The archive has been central to my practice. Engaging with official archives and looking through my own personal photographs critically has exhumed the gaps and omissions that exist within colonial narratives. Archives are not neutral; they shape and are shaped by imperial powers and have historically served to legitimize colonial states. However, this also means archives are ripe for intervention.

Through Saidiya Hartman's critical fabulations we can find alternate histories and find noise in the silence. The practice of archival intervention, then, becomes not just about recovering lost histories, but about reimagining what the archive can be. It becomes a space where ghosts––those erased or overlooked in official narratives—can find new life through critical engagement. This ongoing work invites us to question the boundaries of what is deemed "official" history and to offer a more inclusive and restorative vision of the past. Through this process, I hope to continue providing agency to those whose voices have been muted by the colonial archive, offering them the recognition and justice they deserve.

6.3. Future Work

I have been unable to cover everything that I learned throughout this thesis. I have tried to only include parts that were immediately relevant. I am drawn to further explore the intersections of botany and empire. The colonial archive has so many images of plant life, animals, and people. The ways they are framed are ways in which the empire exerted control on the land and her people. Inscription is another theme that reoccurs throughout my research. Cutting, etching, marking, and tattooing; inscribing the body, the land, and the archive itself with colonial ideologies is a key theme within my work. How do these hauntings leave their mark on people and histories?

Beyond the theoretical realm, I would love to begin more archival interventions. Especially ones that take place within, or in direct conversation with the archive. There are so many things that are missed while looking at a reproduction of a photograph, there are logs and descriptions that never make it online. It feels important to interact with these things in a material sense. My future work will continue to push the boundaries of archival intervention. Not just to activate archival materials but to put them into conversation with contemporary issues and anxieties. These photographs are living and can offer us new ways of seeing and knowing. This project, and future ones, seek to transform these materials into objects that can spark resistance and liberation, both for the living and the dead.

Bibliography

Ahlgren, Ingrid, and Kathleen Trocino Geneta. "Flattening Identity: Colonial Accumulation and Hidden Archives at Harvard's Philippine Collection." *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 23, no. 2 (2022): 254-263. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/gia.2022.0038.

Balce, Nerissa S. *Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016.

Calano, Mark Joseph. "Archiving Bodies: Kalinga batek and the im/possibility of an archive." *Thesis Eleven*, 112(1) (2012): 98-112. https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513612450502.

Campt, Tina M. *Listening to Images*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

Capozzola, Christopher. "Photography & Power in the Colonial Philippines: Dean Worcester's Ethnographic Images of Filipinos (1898-1912)". *MIT Visualizing Cultures*. 2012, https://visualizingcultures.mit.edu /photography_and_power_02/index.html.

Caswell, Michelle. *Urgent Archives: Enacting Liberatory Memory Work*. New York: Routledge, 2021.

Chapman, Owen and Kim Sawchuk. "Creation-as-Research: Critical Making in Complex Environments." *RACAR: Revue d'art Canadienne/ Canadian Art Review* 40(1), 2015: 49-52.

Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Reissue. Minneapolis: Regents of the University of Minnesota, 2008.

Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe 26*, 12(2) (2008): 1-14. muse.jhu.edu/article/241115.

Jarvis, Michael J. *Isle of Devils, Isle of Saints: An Atlantic History of Bermuda, 1609-1684*. John Hopkins University Press, 2022.

Mccracken, Krista and Skylee-Storm Hogan-Stacy. *Decolonial Archival Futures*. Chicago: ALA Neal-Schuman, 2023.

McElhinney, Bonnie. "Meet Me in Toronto: The Re-exhibition of Artifacts from the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition at the Royal Ontario Museum." *Filipinos in Canada: Disturbing Invisibility*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012.

Mendoza, Victor Román. *Metroimperial Intimacies: Fantasy, Racial-Sexual Governance, and the Philippines in U.S. Imperialism, 1899-1913*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015.

Largo, Marissa. "Unsettling Imaginaries: The Decolonial Diaspora Aesthetics of Four Contemporary Filipinx Visual Artists in Canada." PhD diss. University of Toronto, 2018.

Rice, Mark. "Colonial Photography Across Empires and Islands." Journal of Transnational American Studies, 3(2), 2011. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8fz4t188

Rice, Mark. *Dean Worcester's Fantasy Islands: Photography, Film, and the Colonial Philippines*. Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2014.

Salvador-Amores, Analyn. "The Recontextualization of Burik (Traditional Tattoos) of Kabayan Mummies in Benguet to Contemporary Practices." *Humanities Diliman* 9(1), June 2012: 55-73.

Syjuco, Stephanie. "Hands Floating, Faces Recognized: Escaping the Anthropological Gaze." Peabody Museum of Archeology & Ethnography. Harvard University. Accessed January 17th, 2025. https://peabody.harvard.edu/stephaniesyjuco.

Tuck, Eve and C. Ree. "A Glossary of Haunting". *Handbook of Autoethnography*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2013: 639-658.

Tuck, Eve. Suspending Damage: A Letter to Communities. Harvard Educational Review, 2009. 79. 10.17763/haer.79.3.n0016675661t3n15.

Tuhiwai Smith, Linda. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 3rd ed. London: Zed Books, 2021.

Wilcken, Lane. *Filipino Tattoos: Ancient to Modern*. Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing Ltd, 2010.

Wilcken, Lane. *The Forgotten Children of Maui: Filipino Myths, Tattoos, and Rituals of a Demigod*. Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2013.

Appendix A: Glossary

Reading the Glossary

Below is a glossary I compiled of terms that the reader might not be familiar with or want to refamiliarize themselves with. It best reads in order as some terms help define others, but each entry can also stand alone.

British Overseas Territory (BOT)

A group of 14 territories that are part of the United Kingdom and are considered sovereign territory but lie outside of the British Isles. All 14 territories are islands–– most of which are in the Atlantic Ocean. Bermuda's population of 64,000 is around 25% of the entire BOT population.[1] Notably, those born in Bermuda do not automatically qualify for Bermudian or British citizenship.[2]

Colonialism

A "fundamental inequality between metropole and colony, often codified in law, and resulting in a basic dependence of the colony on the metropolitan power."[3] More often than not, this is established through violence.

Diaspora

At its simplest, a group of people who have dispersed from the same land and share a common connection. To me, diaspora should not be confined to one overly restrictive definition; diasporas are not a monolith. I consider myself to be a part of the Filipinx diaspora.

Empire

A state or nation that exerts power over "areas and populations distinct culturally and ethnically from the culture/ethnicity at the center of power."[4] This center of power can also be called the metropole. Typically, empires are backed through violence and coercion via military power; the Spanish empire and the American empire are two that I mention throughout this thesis.

1 "Bermuda", Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK, UK Parliament, September 2024, https://www.uk-cpa.org/where-we-work/uk-overseas-territories/bermuda.

2 "British Overseas Territories Act 2002", Legislation.gov.uk, The National Archives, 2002, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/8/contents.

3 "Colonialism" in Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2006), https://search.credoreference.com/articles/Qm9va0FydGljbGU6MTE0ODYyNA==?aid=152979

4 "Empire" in International Encyclopedia of Human Geography, https://search.credoreference.com/articles/Qm9va0FydGljbGU6NTg0Njg=?aid=152979.

Ethnography

A way of researching other peoples through "first-hand exploration and immersive participation in a natural research setting."[5] Historically, ethnography has centered around Indigenous bodies and has been used to deny sovereignty and personhood.

Exploitation colonialism

Wherein "superior power incorporates, usually by conquest, peoples of different ethnicities and levels of development… there is usually an official ideology … whereby the colonizing power aims to bring up the colonies to the levels of culture and material standards of its own society."[6] The metropole extracts wealth and labor from the land and people; exploiting them.

Hegemony

The dominant ideology: the 'norm' that is defined by those in power; usually in service to themselves.

Imperialism

It can be thought of as the driving force behind colonialism; it "refers to rule by a superior power over subordinate territories."[7]

Settler Colonialism

Wherein "inhabitants of one country establish colonies in another country" in the process the Indigenous peoples whose ancestral lands were taken and occupied are displaced and/or exterminated.[8] In the case of North America, co-currently the Trans-Atlantic slave trade traffics Black slaves to act as the labor force of the new colony. Colony and metropole are one in the same.

5 "Ethnography" in Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2006)

6 "Colonialism" in Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology 1st ed.

7 "Colonialism" in Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2006)

8 Ibid.