

THE SPECTACLE OF THE (TRANS*) (FILIPINX) BODY: EXTRA-NESS IN LYSLEY TENORIO'S "THE BROTHERS"

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"There must be pain. There has to be." I think of Eric on a table, surgeons cutting into his body, needles vanishing into his skin. I think of that studio audience giving him the thumbs-down, like a jury deciding his fate. I think of Ma telling Eric he was dead. "The things you do. To prove yourself. We loved him as is. That should have been enough."¹

The protagonist Edmond Dominguez of Lysley Tenorio's short fiction "The Brothers" delivers these words to Raquel, a good friend of his trans sibling Erica (whom he dead names as "Eric" throughout the story), as he attempts to make sense of trans* embodiment. For Edmond, trans* embodiment is riddled with multiple pains that stem from the physiological, the societal, the familial, and the emotional, to name a few. Moreover, trans* embodiment is excessive, requiring extra labor to simply be. "As is" isn't "enough."² What's more, the syntactical forms in the passage indicate simple sentence structures are insufficient to make sense of Erica's gender transition, as trailing clauses provide extra information to elaborate Edmond's thinking: "needles vanishing into his [sic] skin," "like a jury deciding his [sic] fate."³ While this vantage comes from a cisgender male, which renders trans* embodiment as partially unintelligible, the story engenders a fissure through which the trans* body can exist "as is," despite various attempts to obstruct it.

This paper charts new research territory for me, as I shift away from an exclusive focus on region, as I've done for nearly a decade, and explore further diasporic US Filipinx mediascapes. While the larger project that this paper fits into examines cinematic and televisual appearances of the Filipinx body, primarily as excessive to, as being in excess of, the narrative focus, this paper provides an entry point to also consider literary representations of the excessively mediated diasporic Filipinx body. I am interested in how Filipinx bodies appear in US film and television, in how their bodies are simultaneously legible and illegible, present yet absent, unremarkable yet excessive, ordinary

1. Lysley Tenorio, "The Brothers," in *Monstress* (New York: Ecco, 2012), 46.

2. Tenorio, 46.

3. Tenorio, 46.

and extra-ordinary. I couple the notion of extra with excess to arrive at that which is extraneous and thus tangential, extratextual and thus in need of context, and extraordinary and thus worthy of attention; as that which exceeds the normative bounds of narrative, ontology, and epistemology. Paying attention to the extra, to the minor, the seemingly insignificant, the peripheral, the image just beyond the reach of our visual and phenomenological perception, the excess, the excessive, the remainder, the reminder, reorients us toward the queer body, the trans* body, the racialized body, the colonized body, the crip body, the subaltern body.⁴ Such a framing loops back to my interests in region and the spatialization of race and sexuality. Here, I turn to the diasporic trans Filipina body, figured by Erica and Raquel in Tenorio's story, to consider the spatialization of alterity and her provocation to face elsewhere.

I propose extra-ness to read queer and trans* Filipinx being and becoming. While the concept of being "extra" can connote melodrama and spectacle, especially for queer and trans* embodiment and affect, I also interpret the term as a signifier for the surplus subaltern and as a vector that redirects our gaze elsewhere, toward nonnormative ways of knowing and being. This mapping follows scholars such as Lisa Lowe, Rod Ferguson, and Jian Neo Chen who reparatively read the racial-gender-sexual-able bodies who are surplus to capitalist exploitation as productive sources of knowledge and power that reveal capital's contradictions and provoke alter-narratives that refuse (as in reject) to imagine surplus as refuse (as in trash).⁵

"Extra" also can refer to background actors/characters who appear on screen in television and film. This connotation of extra-ness builds upon my previous ruminations on queer diasporic Filipinx ontological marginality. As I discussed in my article on Noël Alunit's novel *Letters to Montgomery Clift*, the novel provides an entry point to conceptualize Filipinx media presence as extra.⁶ A minor detail of the protagonist Bong's side job as a movie extra in B-movies becomes a major catalyst for the plot's resolution. When Bong's adopted sister Amada coaxes him to join her in becoming a movie extra to pass the time over the summer, she explains in response to his question, "What's an extra?" that "[t]hose are people who you see in movies who just sit there or stand there or walk by to make it look real. They're nobodies. They sort of take up space while the real action takes place."⁷

4. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).

5. Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Jian Neo Chen, *Trans Exploits: Trans of Color Cultures & Technologies in Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).

6. Thomas Xavier Sarmiento, "Diasporic Filipinx Queerness, Female Affective Labor, and Queer Heterosocial Relationalities in *Letters to Montgomery Clift*," *Women, Gender, and Families of Color* 5, no. 2 (2017): 105–28, doi:10.5406/womgenfamcol.5.2.0105.

7. Noël Alunit, *Letters to Montgomery Clift* (Los Angeles: Alyson, 2003), 84.

Humorously, Amada overacts in all her scenes, as she “blow[s] kisses at someone across the room” in one take and develops an elaborate backstory about being dumped by an imaginary boyfriend in another take, which results in her crying with “black mascara streaming from her eyes”—all of which elicits an angry response from Director Man.⁸ Fittingly, while serving as a movie extra, Amada performs as extra, over the top, and *puro arte* as Lucy Burns would frame it.⁹ Ironically, the movie extra cannot be ignored. In contrast, Bong fits the normative role of extra as he recedes in the background to help make the scenes more realistic and thus believable. And yet, his appearance catches at least one viewer’s attention, his estranged mother, who chances upon his movie. Both Amada and Bong’s performances as extras connect to Erica’s performative extra-ness in “The Brothers” as such disposable bodies nevertheless command audience engagement and reorient us to take seriously the extra-ordinarily mundane.

I engage Tenorio’s short story to think through the possibilities of being extra for gender, sexual, and racial-ethnic-post/colonial dissidents. It opens with a televisual appearance of the excessive Filipinx body: “My brother went on *Ricki Lake* to prove *he* was a woman” (emphasis added).¹⁰ While the story focuses on cis Filipino male narrator Edmond’s coming to terms with his sister’s life and death, its opening presents an alternate on-ramp to consider Filipinx mediated appearances. That Edmond introduces readers to Erica via televisual spectacle, on one hand reinforces the trans* body as nonnormative and prone to ogling; and yet, the spectacle of Erica’s trans* body drives the story’s plot to unravel the normative familial dynamics underpinning Erica’s estrangement. This televisual flash-in-the-pan, as Walter Benjamin would put it, opens a wider frame to consider Filipinx absent presence in US dominant cultural imaginaries.¹¹

Not only does Erica exceed normative gender scripts, but also her racial-ethnic identity exceeds typical media representations. Edmond is compelled to add, Erica “was different from the others [the show’s guests]. He [sic] was shorter, the only Filipino among them.”¹² As the last guest to walk out on stage in Edmond’s recount, Erica figures as an addendum to the transwomen who paraded before her. While Erica’s body is spectacle for viewers, as she proudly flashes her breasts after the audience boos her for not appearing “woman enough”¹³ in her “denim skirt and a T-shirt, a pair of Doc Martens,”¹⁴ her Filipinanness is both acutely visible and unremarkable. That is, Erica as a trans

8. Alunit, 86.

9. Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, *Puro Arte: Filipinos on the Stages of Empire* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

10. Tenorio, 27.

11. Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Schocken, 1968), 253–64.

12. Tenorio, 26.

13. Tenorio, 28.

14. Tenorio, 27.

Pinay stands out as the only Filipinx on screen, making Filipinxness hypervisible; however, in the context of US popular culture, and from the vantage of dominant cultural viewers, her Filipinxness is inconsequential to her reason for being on TV: to challenge audiences' binary conceptions of sex and gender. Accordingly, she escapes full epistemic capture.

The story's form further enables Erica to remain opaque. Although the story's title, "The Brothers," might suggest an even focus on Edmond and Eric/Erica, its first-person narration style positions Edmond as the protagonist. Such a narrative mode delimits what readers have access to. In Spivakian fashion, Erica, the trans Pinay immigrant subaltern cannot speak.¹⁵ And yet, her televisual presence and appearance in dialogic flashbacks complicate her subaltern unintelligibility. The story's opening spectacle gives way to tragedy as Edmond states, "That was the last time I saw Eric [during her televisual appearance on *Ricki Lake*]. Now he's [sic] lying on a table, a sheet pulled to his shoulders."¹⁶ According to the coroner, Erica died from an asthma attack, though the actual circumstances of her death remain unclear.¹⁷ As the story progresses, Edmond continues to juxtapose the past and present, as he and Ma plan Erica's funeral. Ma hosts a vigil that turns into a dinner party at their home. Edmond notices an unfamiliar, out-of-place guest who "looks like she came to dance instead of pray": Raquel, one of Erica's trans sisters.¹⁸ Edmond decides to drive Raquel home, since she's inebriated—her way of mourning Erica's death. Raquel's home turns out to be Erica's apartment in San Francisco. Edmond bonds with Raquel and begins to recognize Erica for who she is. The next day, Edmond meets Ma at the funeral home to prepare for the evening's viewing. Unexpectedly, she binds Erica's breasts, despite Edmond's protests. This climactic moment resolves with Edmond driving Ma home in silence, dropping her off at the foot of their driveway, and instinctively driving across the Bay Bridge toward San Francisco to reconnect with Raquel.

Whereas Edmond fails to acknowledge Erica's gender transition at the beginning of the story, by the end, he exhibits a more elastic conception of gender through Raquel. Throughout the story, Edmond dead names Erica and fails to use "she/her" pronouns to refer to his sibling. However, he's able to properly gender Raquel, as the last line of the story reads, "And *she* [Raquel] opens to me" (emphasis added).¹⁹ In fact, Edmond never misgenders Raquel in the story. Such an ambivalence seems more authentic, as Edmond attempts to make sense of a brother he once had and a sister he failed to understand and

15. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

16. Tenorio, 28.

17. Tenorio, 46.

18. Tenorio, 37.

19. Tenorio, 50.

accept. Erica's death in effect prompts Edmond to face a double death: the death of Eric, and his postponed grief; and the death of Erica, whom he barely knew by choice. Erica is a body that Edmond must confront. The narrative is Edmond's journey to seeing Eric as Erica. However, Raquel functions as the conduit through which Edmond comes to see Erica as Erica. When Raquel clarifies to Edmond, "All of this . . . I did for me," referring to her trans body, and in response to the epigraph, he realizes his flawed perspective on transness. Edmond's literal bridge crossing from the East Bay to San Francisco, which he "never cross[es]," coincides with his symbolic crossing from rigid gender binaries to blurred intimate boundaries (for example, there's a charge between Edmond and Raquel that isn't clearly articulated as purely platonic or erotic).²⁰

Although Raquel appears to Edmond in real life, she nevertheless functions as a kind of mediated representation. Edmond is mesmerized by Raquel. In his reverie, he convinces himself, "Right away I knew what Raquel was, but so much of her looks real, like she was born into the body she's made."²¹ Raquel snaps him back to reality as quips, "You're staring at my tits, hon."²² This play on realness connects to Edmond's exchange with Erica after her surprise appearance on *Ricki Lake*. While Erica reveals her hair isn't real but extensions, she asserts, "But the rest of me is [real]."²³ Since they speak over the phone, and since Erica doesn't clarify, readers can interpret Erica's realness as both bodily and ontological. Such mediated encounters destabilize what authentic realness is. Erica's televised realness is just as real as Raquel's face-to-face realness.

Jack Halberstam offers a compelling approach to trans* representation that makes room for Erica's spectacular mediated appearance. Halberstam proffers, "It is generally a good idea not to approach the visual materials documenting trans* life with a moral framework that leads only to adjudication; instead, we are better served by considering the formal methods by which trans* experience can be represented and the benefits and liabilities therein."²⁴ For Halberstam, a focus on process, on the conditions of possibility that allow the trans* body to appear in visual media, is more generative than fixating on so-called good or bad representations. Halberstam's approach to trans* subjectivity resonates with Peter Feng's approach to Asian American media representation with an emphasis on contingency. For Feng, "[t]o describe subjectivity as contingent suggests that subjectivity is not a thing to be located, but a process from which the world is perceived."²⁵

20. Tenorio, 41.

21. Tenorio, 39.

22. Tenorio, 39.

23. Tenorio, 30.

24. Jack Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 85.

25. Peter X. Feng, *Identities in Motion: Asian American Film and Video* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 153.

Geographic in form, Feng's notion of subjectivity rejects stasis in favor of mutability.

While Erica's appearance on *Ricki Lake* may be less than ideal, it nevertheless indicates that she is real, that she exists. Albeit fictional, such daytime-talk-show fodder brings me back to my adolescence during the nineties wherein queer and trans* bodies flashed on the screen as beacons of another world that I was not yet quite fully cognizant of in SoCal suburbia. As a minoritarian spectator, I have learned how to recognize parts of myself fragmentally refracted on screen. Such symptomatic reading has enabled me to see racial-gender-sexual nonnormative embodiments that often figure as background to the action taking place in the foreground; hence, my fascination with cinematic and televisual extras who may seem like nobodies but are in fact somebodies. As Halberstam goes on to explain, the visibility of the trans* body as captured by media is less about affirming a fixed ontology and more about re-seeing the world queerly, askew.²⁶ The trans* body, and queer bodies more generally, invite alternative epistememes that reveal another world is possible alongside, or perhaps more aptly in spite of, the white supremacist capitalist imperialist cis-heteropatriarchal ableist world that oppresses us all.

Conclusion

My focus on popular culture and mainstream US cultural representations of Filipinx aims to counter the notion that Filipinx are invisible in US mediascapes. The popular adage, "Three hundred and fifty years in a convent, fifty years in Hollywood," that Sarita See cites on the first page of *The Decolonized Eye*—with "convent" as metonym for Spanish colonial rule in the Philippines, followed by US colonial rule figured as "Hollywood"—highlights the role of mainstream US visual media in shaping Filipinx subjectivity.²⁷ Although See doesn't elaborate on Hollywood representations of Filipinx, her work nevertheless reminds us, alongside Allan Isaac (who does gesture to Hollywood), that Filipinx exceed the boundaries of foreign and domestic as they paradoxically straddle both positionalities.²⁸ As extra, and thus addendum to the main narrative, in such mainstream appearances, I argue that Filipinx in US popular culture engender a Muñozian disidentificatory site of meaning if we, as audiences, are willing to reorient our attention toward them.²⁹

26. Halberstam, 89.

27. Sarita Echavez See, *The Decolonized Eye: Filipino American Art and Performance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xi.

28. Allan Punzalan Isaac, *American Tropics: Articulating Filipino America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

29. José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

The extra is a form of excess. In my chapter contribution to *Q & A: Voices from Queer Asian North America*, I forward “Filipinx” as a discursive framework that orients toward the excesses of “Filipino” and “Filipina” as nationalist and racialized signifiers for people of Philippine descent.³⁰ More specifically, the plural form of Filipinx, “Filipinxs,” homophonically correlates with the concept I propose, “PhilippinExcess,” to decenter the Philippine nation and to amplify local and regional diasporas that not only exceed the national and the racial as dominant forms for the demonym “Filipino/a/x” but also exceed the diasporic that often aligns with the scale of the national. That is, if “Filipino/a/x” connects bodies to the Philippine nation, as a diasporic qualifier, it similarly conceives diasporic bodies in relation to a host nation—for example, “the US Filipinx diaspora.” Instead, I propose Filipinxs as PhilippinExcess: a collective embodiment that exceeds the signifier Philippines and that foregrounds process as a mode of being and becoming. Rather than present Filipinxs as an a priori ontological position, I trace the moments in which Filipinxs materialize as excess and extra, as surplus bodies and supplements to the dominant. Such a conception aligns with Shilpa Davé’s concept of accent as a form that materializes Brown voice and Brownface performance in mainstream US culture and Anne Cheng’s *Ornamentalism* as a framework that recasts the racial-gender subject as mere adornment and addendum, both of which imbue the marginal as sites of ontological and epistemic possibility.³¹ Mike Atienza’s dissertation on the mobile digital lives of gay, bisexual, and queer-oriented Filipino men in Manila and Los Angeles particularly illustrates how “Filipino” is an unstable term that functions more as an analytical category than a fixed nationality or racial-ethnic identity.³² I transpose such a phenomenon to Filipinx, again using the X to emphasize extra-ness.

Certainly, the X of Filipinx conjures transgender, nonbinary, and queer people of Philippine descent. Kay Ulanday Barrett, Karen Buenavista Hanna, and Anang Palomar’s essay “In Defense of the X” rightly highlights the materiality of Filipinx embodiment as opposed to mere discursivity. However, Lukayo Estrella’s poem that opens their essay presents the X as a referent for that which is extra: “Not M or F enough, that we were too X, too Other?” (emphases added), thus revealing its epistemic potential alongside its material reality.³³ Indeed,

30. Thomas Xavier Sarmiento, “PhilippinExcess: Cunanan, Criss, Queerness, Multiraciality, Midwesterness, and the Cultural Politics of Legibility,” in *Q & A: Voices from Queer Asian North America*, ed. Martin F. Manalansan IV, Alice Y. Hom, and Kale B. Fajardo (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2021), 318–30.

31. Shilpa S. Davé, *Indian Accents: Brown Voice and Racial Performance in American Television and Film* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

32. Paul Michael Leonardo Atienza, “The Promise of Intimacy: Gay Filipino Men on Mobile Digital Media in Manila & Los Angeles” (dissertation defense, University of Illinois, Zoom, April 8, 2022).

33. Kay Ulanday Barrett, Karen Buenavista Hanna, and Anang Palomar, “In Defense of the X: Centering Queer, Trans, and Non-Binary Pilipina/x/os, Queer Vernacular, and

their affirmation of language as dynamic supports my framing of the X as processual.³⁴ Sony Coráñez Bolton's conceptualization of the X in Filipinx as an analytic provocation for comparative racialization vis-à-vis Latinx further gets at the excesses of Filipino/a/x epistemologies and ontologies centered primarily on the Philippines.³⁵

In a conversation with a colleague a few years ago, I was confronted with the limits of "Filipinx" as an epistemic term. Would my research and scholarship be readily searchable in the same way that "Filipino" or even "Filipina/o" would? And yet, the potential for algorithmic failure points to "Filipinx" as an ambivalent site of opacity and clandestine operability away from the dominant gaze. For those in the know, it can be a tool for queer kinship, however fraught and provisional (this relates to a point Andrea Alakran, one of Barrett et al.'s interviewees, makes: "So far, 'Filipinx' is how we've been able to see and locate each other in this wide world of diaspora, unbelonging, and cis-heteronormativity."³⁶

Trans* studies is fleshy; it enjoins us to reckon with the body. Accordingly, Erica in Tenorio's "The Brothers" is material; she doesn't figure merely as metaphor for unstable boundary crossings. While Edmond literally sees "nothing" when Erica reveals her breasts on national television because "they blurred him [sic] out, head to toe," Erica's bodily presence cannot be ignored.³⁷ She is not nothing. She is something, someone, blurred out on screen. This excessive erasure, in lieu of "simply cover[ing] [her] breast with a black rectangle," results in a form of opacity.³⁸ Diegetic audiences and non-diegetic readers alike are confronted with an illegible but still material body that we cannot see through because she exists, she matters, she is matter. Erica isn't refuse (as in trash); rather, her material body refuses ontological certitude. Her wayward appearance and presence as extra gestures toward the ruin of cis-heteropatriarchy and the renewal of fleshy minoritarian relationalities.

the Politics of Naming," *Alon: Journal for Filipinx American and Diasporic Studies* 1, no. 2 (2021): 125, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/48644330>.

34. Barrett et al., 136, 139.

35. Sony Coráñez Bolton, "A Tale of Two 'X's: Queer Filipinx and Latinx Linguistic Intimacies," in *Filipinx American Studies: Reckoning, Reclamation, Transformation*, eds. Rick Bonus and Antonio T. Tiongson Jr. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2022), 284–90.

36. Barrett et al., 141.

37. Tenorio, 31.

38. Tenorio, 31.