

IMELDA'S DREAMING: APPLIED THEATRE IN MOBILIZING POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN FILIPINO CANADIAN DIASPORIC COMMUNITIES

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Abstract. This essay charts the practice of applied theatre that traverses transnationality. It demonstrates methodological intervention in creating diasporic performances by engaging open and emancipative dialogical encounters using applied theatre. The author deploys community-based theatre performance to activate political discourse for/with/among diasporic community members. Using autoethnographic and affective inquiry, this article instigates theatre as a process of artistic improvisation that animates historical persona, found space, and other theatrical elements to provoke political discontent and displeasure. The article raises several questions: How do we expand the performance praxis of community theatre and performance making for Filipino Canadian communities beyond exotic representation of culture of Philippine heritage? How can creativity and criticality be interwoven into performance making? How may applied theatre become a relevant performance praxis of community formation in a politically-divided diasporic community in Canada? By using autoethnography and performance ethnography, the essay scaffolds a praxis of community-based performance creation through the techniques of applied theatre as configured for diasporic communities, themes, and political predispositions. It constitutes the use of ethnography as self-reflexive mode of ethical intervention in performance re-roots itself from vernacular vocabulary of relational collaboration in community building to decolonize the praxis of applied theatre. Gesturing towards these Indigenous relational Philippine concepts as frameworks in applying theatre for diasporic performance creation, the paper argues that Filipino diasporic performance has the power to create a space for political discourse for/with/among diasporic community members.

INTRODUCTION: IMELDA'S DREAMING

IMELDA

(Holding her Sto. Niño) I'm too old now, Oh Señor Sto. Niño, tabangi ako. Please don't let my enemies condemn me for the things I haven't done...It's been too long, Ferdie, but your scent still lingers in my nose...The weight of your body pounding mine, heavier than a log. And yet, I feel as if I'm floating like a leaf blown by a wet breeze.

The lines above are taken from *Murupuro: The Island of Constellation*, a devised play I directed and co-created with Filipino Canadian community members in Victoria in 2018. Imelda was played by an actor from the Philippines who during the performance was seen wearing an infamous terno while clutching a small Sto. Niño. Imelda in the scene is sybaritically conjuring the memories of her sexual intercourse with her husband. The character is reminiscent of the wife of Philippine dictator Ferdinand Marcos who was known for her ostentatious lifestyle. She recalls the scent of perfume worn by her husband that lingers on her nose which is also a metaphor of the lingering scent of blood from the brutality and killings during the Martial Law era.

IMELDA ...No, Ferdie, no. Neither you, nor our American friends. No one massacred the Filipinos. Look at them, they are happy and enthusiastic. They are satisfied in their homeland. That is why they chose to die working in the Philippines rather than die working in other countries, like US, Japan, China, and Canada. Rest your soul, Ferdie, worry no more. You are now buried in the Libingan ng mga Bayani.¹ You are now a hero, thanks to Pres. Duterte. He is the one who will [re]instate us back [in]to power. He is [ruthless] and fearless, like you. He kills—like you. Remember, Ferdie: more Blood, means [a bigger] feast [for] us.

I juxtaposed this scene with my autoethnographic memory of my father who worked as a gardener of Malacañang Palace in the heydays of the Marcoses in the Philippines.

DENNIS My father worked as a gardener in Malacañang Palace in the early 1970s. Malacañang is the official residence of the president of the Philippines. When Imelda Marcos sponsored the Miss Universe pageant in 1974, my father became a contractual worker for the Folk Arts Theatre, the venue of this international pageant, clearing the land, digging the soil and planting Imelda's favorite ornamental plant, the bougainvillea. In the 1970s, my father was one of the young men who migrated from the province and found a life in the city under the enchantment of Imelda Marcos's flowering era of the . . . “the good, the true, and the beautiful” for a new Philippines — a mantra that would reflect the growing disparity between the rich and the poor and those in power and the muted people in the peripheries.

At the end of the performance, a talk back was facilitated by one of the com-

1. Libingan ng mga Bayani (Heroes Cemetery) is located in Manila's Fort Andres Bonifacio where Presidents for the Philippines and other declared national heroes and artists of the Philippines are laid. The burial of Ferdinand Marcos in the *Libingan ng mga Bayani* was controversial. He died on the 28th of September 1989 in Honolulu, Hawai'i. His remains were initially preserved in 1993 at the Ferdinand E. Marcos Presidential Center in his home province, Batac, Ilocos Norte due to political dissension between the Marcoses and former President Corazon Aquino. And in 2016, under President Rodrigo Duterte, the Supreme Court approved for the transference of the former president's body at the Libingan ng mga Bayani winning nine (9) votes over five (5) among the members of the Supreme Court justices. Protest rallies were staged by different activist groups in reaction to the decision.

munity leaders. During the talk back, some intense statements were spoken by the audience as reactions to the performance. In this essay, I present my autoethnographic notes on and about this performance piece. The performance explores the recent histories of political issues in the Philippines while characters sing, dance, and narrate stories about Super Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan). The city of Tacloban in Leyte Province was one of the ground zeros of the devastation brought by the typhoon. It is known to be the homeland of Imelda Marcos. Our playwright, Amado Arjay Babon sutures the political histories of Tacloban, the rise of Imelda Marcos, and the former President Rodrigo's Duterte's war on drugs with the topic of the play, climate crisis.

These multifaceted and messy political histories enable for the performance makers of *Murupuro: The Island of Constellation* a harnessing of political dialogue that normally doesn't happen in Filipino Canadian performance events. Anchored in storytelling which underpins a phenomenological articulation of embodied theorizing of community building, it works towards a collective deployment of participatory and dialogic conversations within diasporic communities that are oftentimes politically subdued. This article also facilitates discussions and raises questions on the agentic process of creative mobilization of community resources and political debate in Philippine diasporic spaces in Canada. By tracing the process of creating applied theatre performance that dives into the politics with and for community members in the diaspora, I draw on the playwright's autoethnographic thinking to flesh out an imaginative, participatory, and dialogic applied theatre creation among communities in the diaspora and back home, in the Philippines.



Figure 1. Francis is seen here holding a basin with the image of former Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos (1917–1989) beamed from the video projection. (Emmanuel 2018)

Here, I offer my perspectives on community building and formation through applied theatre and its power to engender emotions and instigate dialogue. I turn towards raising questions around organizing Philippine diasporic theatre performance to provoke criticality in producing performances beyond acts of performing nationalism usually manifested in Filipino social events, performance of Filipino folkloric cultures, commercially-produced concerts outsourced from the Philippines with performers from Filipino artists, and invented Filipino festivals presented in Canadian public parks. While social cultural performances function as celebrative modes of Filipino identity formation in the diaspora, they also underpin antiquarian, exotic, and capitalist production of identity making which can be dealt with in another essay. For this article, I aim to delineate a process of performance making and circulation that initiates critical discourse among and within diasporic communities in Canada. Particularly, I will look at my own experience collaborating with members of the community in Victoria, British Columbia. The process of thinking and writing of this essay is enacted within my liminal spaces with my one foot planted in my homeland, the Philippines, and the other one re-rooted in the diaspora. This liminality goes along with my gender and other identities I carry in my bones, flesh, and blood.

In this essay, I use autoethnography and performance ethnography to pose questions that mobilize shared responsibility in the logistical demand of producing community theatre to cultivate creativity and criticality among the diasporic Filipino Canadian communities. From a Filipinx lens, I argue that representation in Canadian theatre is not a major concern in diasporic community theatre but rather a cultivation of critical thinking to nurture a creative, dialogic, and collective pursuit for political education. I push this argument by narrating my own positionality as a migrant performance scholar and theatre director interested in exploring autoethnography not just as a method of inquiry but as a mode of complicating my own identity as a Filipino located within the ambit of Filipinx worldview.

Autoethnographic Interventions

I am an autoethnographer. I use stories to explore socio-political issues that impact the lives of people that I work and collaborate with. I blend this method of inquiry with ethnography. My conversation with fellow scholar, Dada Docot, offered me opportunity to reflect on how I can utilize this method that “embeds the ‘self’ in the processes of inquiry” while the researcher operates from outside of the “topic under consideration” in order to maintain the objectivity of the knowledge that is intended to be produced.² In this case, I employed autoethnography, a type of ethnography where the self is integrated into the process of inquiry.³ As required in this method, I interwove my personal narratives with the life stories of my collaborators as my way of developing self-criticality and positionality. In this essay, I will tell stories to demonstrate how autoethnography performs self-reflexivity, affect, and empathy to enact

2. Dada Docot, personal communication, March 30, 2017.

American Anthropological Association, “AAA Statement on Ethnography and Institutional Review Board.” (2021), <https://americananthro.org/about/policies/statement-on-ethnography-and-institutional-review-boards/>

3. Deborah Cohen and Benjamin Crabtree, “Evaluative Criteria.” *Qualitative Research Guidelines Project* (2023), <http://www.qualres.org/HomeEval-3664.html>.

social relationality in political dialogues within diasporic communities. These stories are written and recorded in this essay to illustrate a meticulous description of what transpired in community conversations that enact political tensions. Here I reflect what the anthropologist Clifford Geertz has called “thick description as a practice of writing that responds to social responsibility as an academic and artist interested in facilitating community conversations that aim for a cultivation of criticality propelled by the divergences of political ideologies.⁴ Carolyn S. Ellis and Arthur P. Bocher see autoethnography as a method that goes beyond “navel gazing” and that extends to acts of ethical and social responsibility.⁵ They state:

Autoethnography shows struggle, passion, embodied life, and the collaborative creation of sense-making in situations in which people have to cope with dire circumstances and loss of meaning. Autoethnography wants the reader to care, to feel, to empathize, and to do something, to act. (Emphasis mine.) It needs the researcher to be vulnerable and intimate. Intimacy is a way of being, a mode of caring, and it shouldn't be used as a vehicle to produce distanced theorizing. What are we giving to the people with whom we are intimate, if our higher purpose is to use our joint experiences to produce theoretical abstractions published on the pages of scholarly journals?⁶

Ellis and Bocher assert that autoethnography demands vulnerability from the researcher. In creating a performance with the Filipino community members in Victoria, I learned about the lives of my collaborators, a host family opened their house for me to live for a certain amount of time while creating the performance, and I gained their migration stories as well as the event gossip that circulated about certain members of the community. Learning about the lives of people in their “natural setting,” as described by AAA, made me think of the “higher purpose” that Ellis and Bocher emphasize.⁷ I chose to work with the diasporic community members who had no formal theatre training because I want to push the boundaries of performance making and explore while reflecting Ellis's and Bocher's proposal to... “care, to feel, to empathize, and to do something, to act.”⁸

In employing autoethnography in research, the “self” is inscribed into the analysis of social phenomena and is the “most logical, viable, and useful route for conducting social research.”⁹ To think about the social, political, and economic issues around climate crises in the local community was to return to my own disaster experiences and trace their connection. I believed that an

4. Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 6. Clifford Geertz mentions that he borrows the term “thick description” (see also “*The Thinking of Thoughts – What is ‘Le Penseur’ Doing?*” *Collected Papers. Vol. 2: Collected Essays, 1929–1968*).

5. Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, “Analyzing Analytic Autoethnography: An Autopsy,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35, no. 4 (2006): 429–449, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241606286979>.

6. Ellis and Bocher, “Analyzing Analytic Autoethnography,” 433.

7. AAA 2021, para. 4. Ellis and Bocher, “Analyzing Analytic Autoethnography,” 433.

8. Ellis and Bocher, 433.

9. Virginie Magnat, “Conducting Embodied Research at the Intersection of Performance Studies: Experimental Ethnography and Indigenous Methodologies,” *Anthropologica* 53, no. 2 (2018): 213–227, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41473875>. Jim Miencazkowski, 2017.

ethical proximity between me and my collaborators required care where the power differential due to social, economic, and political disparities are present. Self-reflexivity is a necessary element in forging a relational connection and agentic collaboration for community members to hold and forge power with each other while performing their stories. When the self and the “Other” interact, a process of political consciousness arises along with feelings of anxiety and tentativeness, yet these emotions are relevant to the making and re-making of “self” with the “Other.”

In 2016, I received The Dwight Conquergood Award from the Performance Studies International (PSi). This award introduced me to the works of Conquergood. I was inspired by his commitment to interweaving social justice work with performance and theatre practice. Conquergood’s call for a “dialogic performance” in ethnography where the “self and the other” are tied together amidst circumstances and events that are “hold(ing) them apart” resonated with me.¹⁰ Coming from a country where multiple violences are a lived experience and struggle for survival is part of daily negotiation, I thought of Conquergood’s works as revelatory, intimate, and hopeful.

I think of autoethnography as a decolonizing method of research in which the researcher’s embodied and affective experience is part of the social inquiry. It blurs the subject-object relationship in research. For me, it enacts Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s proposal of “acts of decolonization” where research “must offer a language of possibility, a way out of colonization...” (204). As an artist and scholar from a country formerly colonized by Spain, USA, and Japan, I interpret this “language of possibility” by interweaving the narratives of local community members into my own disaster memories as a way of self-reflexivity, self-criticality, and positionality.¹¹ My positionality was a significant part of my theorization of an empowering practice of performance making that can be slippery when conducted in sites with a history of violence. I returned to my memories of disasters and situate them with the stories of climate change by community members that I worked with, as a way of broadening my social and political examination of climate crises in a local milieu. Self-reflexivity is an important component in my practice as a scholar and artist of applied theatre as it allows me empathic criticality. It positions not just my intention for understanding the complexities of the history of climate crises in the Philippines, but it also fosters critical empathy and care in dealing with difficult intersectional issues around climate change. Self-reflexivity and critical empathy are methodological practices in the field of applied theatre that are gaining importance, especially in enacting decolonization in research and pedagogy.

Ethel Tungohan’s “care activism” is relevant in this political imagination.¹² Tungohan went beyond the definition of activism from organizing and mobilization of political events into a more relational and kinship-based orientation of enacting power and agency. I render my autoethnographic inquiry on organizing community members who migrated in Canada during various

10. Dwight Conquergood, “Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance,” *Literature in Performance* 5, no. 2 (1985): 5, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10462938509391578>.

11. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2010).

12. Ethel Tungohan, *Care Activism: Migrant Domestic Workers, Movement-Building, and Communities of Care* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2023), 3.

periods of time for different reasons but mostly economic. Although Tungohan centers her work with migrant caregiver activists, I still found her theory relevant to apply to theatre with members of Victoria Filipino-Canadian Association (VFCA) and the Bayanihan Cultural & Housing Society (BCHS), most of whom are retired nurses but nevertheless have “embodied knowledge of oppressive structures and institutions to disrupt the status quo.”¹³ This article is a performance ethnography that describes and narrates political interventions that we carved out together within the community, using experiential and dialogic applied theatre techniques forged within diasporic community settings. I explored the process of community-based theatre creation while tackling difficult questions on transnationalism and nationalism among the community members. My objective is to offer a practice of mobilizing events for the diasporic Filipinos in Canada that performs criticality with shared space aims. I outline the process of making theatre by using autoethnography to capture Dorine Kondo’s “the corporeal epistemologies of ethnography” and “embodied fieldwork” that deploys performance in re-centering the divergent voices and multiple political persuasions of Filipino Canadian community members which have the power in “traversing multiple genres as ways of conveying the layered complexities of social life.”¹⁴

What is Applied Theatre?

Applied theatre is a form of performance that employs theatre technique in dealing with specific social, historical, and political issues through a collaborative theatrical process with community members who are not necessarily trained theatre practitioners. It is also a field of theatrical practice that gave birth to theatre-in-education, theatre for development, drama-in-education, prison theatre, etc. that engages with social justice directed towards human empowerment. Applied theater has been employed in various disciplines like health, law, education, development and youth studies, war, and diplomacy to discuss, complicate, and examine social justice.

As an applied theatre scholar and theatre director located within a diasporic site, I translate (im)migrant stories into performance forms that use various aesthetic elements to cultivate active community dialogue and social experiences. Having been in Canada for almost ten years now, most of my work is interested in pushing the boundaries of theatre-making by collaborating with immigrant communities. I trouble the notions of professional theatre by interrogating participation in theatrical productions: Who should be included in performance making, where it should be performed, and how theatrical collaboration should be exercised? I received my degree in the applied theatre program at the Theatre Department at the University of Victoria (UVic). The courses that I took during my two years at UVic significantly contributed to my initial conceptualizations of my creative trajectories in my PhD field research. Relevant in this education was the summer training course that I took with Tim Prentki in 2016. The course, THEA 590: Rehearsal for Revolution, allowed students to collaborate with community members in tackling a

13. *Ibid.*, 5.

14. Dorinne Kondo, *Worldmaking: Race, Performance, and the Work of Creativity* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 5.

particular issue through performance. I was part of a group that co-created a performance with an institution that provided care for the elders. Performing the stories of the nurses and caregivers, while attempting to inquire about the ethics of caregiving, deeply moved me. Instead of feeling demobilized by the overwhelming pressures of injustices in the world, I felt emboldened by the potentialities of applied theatre as a tool in understanding complicated issues of our communities. This period provided a challenging but enlightening learning experience for me in examining the social issues that engaged applied theatre as a tool of social justice.

Applied theatre scholars Peter O'Connor and Michael Anderson have identified ethical principles of collaboration that situate the local community members "as actors...with agency and control."¹⁵ I looked to their words as a guide in upending the power of the researcher as an expert to shift instead to a learner engaged in an inter-subjective or empathic collaboration with local community members. The latter are given power in the construction, production, and circulation of knowledge. Throughout this article, I will demonstrate how applied theatre was deployed in the transnational site to complicate nationalism by opening a site of discourse where politically diverging ideologies are expressed among Filipino diasporic community members. A performance piece was presented in a Filipino community center, attended by an inter-generational audience made up of Filipinos, Filipino Canadians, and Canadians. It was performed by volunteer community members, theatre artists from the Philippines, and international and Canadian theatre students. In creating this performance project, I also used participatory action research and practice-based-research to mobilize the community for a common goal. I was able to explore and create performances that animate stories of ST Yolanda and histories of other disasters while examining social injustice and other political issues in the Philippines like authoritarianism and cronyism. I kept on returning to Conquergood's words in thinking about performance as a mode of social transformation; he notes:

Instead of construing performance as transcendence, a higher plane that one breaks into, I prefer to think of it as transgression, that force that crashes and breaks through sedimented meanings and normative traditions and plunges back into the vortices of political struggle – in the language of bell hooks, as "movement beyond boundaries."¹⁶

I reflect this "transgression" within sites where performances in the diasporic communities in Canada are widely represented in Filipino festivals, fund raising, and fun games to see how other performance forms animate creative and critical diasporic communities.

Applied Theatre, Philippine Relational Concepts, and Performance Utopia

While most of these concepts are taken from Western scholarship, I re-root these values and principles within Waray and Tagalog relational concepts of

15. Peter O'Connor and Michael Anderson, *Applied Theatre: Research Radical Departures* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 21.

16. Conquergood, "Performing as a Moral Act," 58.

abat (affect), *pakapakapa* (searching), and *pakikipag-pulso* (shared pulsation). I thought of these concepts as building blocks of a decolonizing and ethical research practice that deflects the specter of colonial bondage from Western-centric ways of knowing. These concepts demonstrate mutual trust and respect that are necessary values in conducting the interviews, facilitating group workshops, observing, and participating in the quotidian activities of community members. *Pag-galang* (respect) is crucial in establishing a relationship of transparency. *Pag-galang* is the beginning of *pagtitiwala* (trust). I brought Filipino artists to Canada who helped me create the first iteration of the performance that was presented in Victoria. In the beginning of the project, I expressed to the leaders of the community in Victoria that we would need support for our accommodation and food; in exchange we would share our expertise in community art-making. Two of the community members opened their homes to us. Successfully, we established reciprocity that enacts mutual relationality with *pag-galang* and *pag-titiwala*. These relational concepts buttress the social and political work within our diasporic communities that enacts what Jill Dolan calls “utopian performative.”¹⁷ For Dolan the “liveness” of performance “offers us, if not expressly political, then usefully emotional, expressions of what utopia might feel like” which is exactly what transpired in the talk back after the show in a Filipino community center in Victoria, BC.¹⁸

Dolan’s “performance utopia” informed the framework of my creative project.¹⁹ Inspired to begin my field research in 2018, while witnessing the apparent injustices in many island communities, I carried Dolan’s vision of “...a common future, one that’s more just and equitable...” with every step I took during my trip back home.²⁰ Driven by her belief that theatre and performance engender “chances to live fully and contribute to the making of a culture” when co-created collaboratively, I turned to her ideas of “making of a culture” towards a “common future” fostered by the practice of an applied theatre that centered on foregrounding an Indigenized performance method formulated from existing performance culture in an island community.²¹ Inspired by my collaborative ritual performance project with Chaya Ocampo-Go, *WALANG-WALA/Point.Zero: An Immersive Discourse on the Cusp Between Disaster and Thereafter* (2014), I intermixed various creative modes of inquiry—storytelling, poetic inquiry, dance, place-based-inquiry, and musical improvisation—to explore climate change and its impact on island communities in the Philippines. Ocampo-Go examined the notion of *walang-wala* (nothingness or zilch) after the disaster. She discussed the process of commemoration of ST Yolanda through ritual performance, which she curated with me in 2014 at the University of British Columbia. The performance ritualized lamentation in the form of an immersive, visual, and sound sensorial curation that meditated on nothingness after the disaster. Through a multi-media and immersive presentation, the performance presented aural sensations that manifest the *walang-wala* one experiences after a super typhoon strikes a community, wreak-

17. Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 455.

18. *Ibid.*, 456.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*, 455.

21. *Ibid.*

ing total devastation. I kept returning to Ocampo-Go's conception of *walang-wala* as a theoretical iteration of creativity after my field research in 2018.

A Transnational Project

I led a group of artists in transforming a community center into a site of political discourse for complicating climate change as an embodied experience. Composed of Manila based theatre and film artists, Jon Lazam, Angel "Angge" Dayao, and Frances Matheu we facilitated the creation of the performance and mobilized the technical aspects of the production. On the 20th of September 2018, I landed in Vancouver after twelve hours of flight. When I stepped out into the airport, the coolness of the day and the fine drops of rain made me think of my homeland. The autumnal clouds softened the city's landscape. Known as Turtle Island, this ancestral land had gone through painful colonial histories under its European settlers. As a returning arrivant, I had to consider this history. My trip back to Canada marked the beginning of the transnational acclimatization for *Murupuro: Islands of Constellation*, the devised play created for my doctoral project—our bodies and creative imaginations would have to adapt to circumstances, time, and space. I began the pre-production work immediately after I arrived in Victoria, from Vancouver, by meeting with the community leaders of the Victoria Filipino-Canadian Association (VFCA) and the Bayanihan Cultural & Housing Society (BCHS).



Figure 2: Company Call. Cast and crew of *Murupuro/Island of Constellation* gather in a circle to share their emotions and aspirations with each other before the opening night. (Emmanuel, 2018)

These two community organizations in Victoria agreed to support my dissertation work. My affiliation with these organizations was forged when I was invited to be a guest lecturer of their Tagalog Language Course offered to second-generation Filipino/a/x folks and Canadians of European descent. I offered them a collaborative project during a meeting with the board members of VFCA and the BCHS in 2017. Eventually, one of the board members, Laila Pires, sponsored the accommodation of Manila-based artists, Jon Lazam, Francis Matheu, and Angge Dayao, in her home for the entirety of our Victoria tour. In addition, VFCA and BCHS asked their members to serve as performers in *Murupuro*. Members of other local organizations volunteered to prepare the food and execute other production and logistical demands of the performance project. Those who volunteered as performers were part of the VFCA's Sampa-guita Dance Group (SDG).

SDG has four decades of intercultural performance experience, appearing in different local arts festivals and at international events throughout British Columbia, including the historic Vancouver Expo '86 and the Victoria Commonwealth Games in 1994.²² VFCA was established in the winter of 1969 by those who came to Victoria as nurses and teachers. The convergence of these first Filipino settlers in Victoria led to a concerted effort in establishing a Philippine center, which became a reality in 2001 when VFCA acquired a piece of land and a building that it transformed into the Philippine Bayanihan Community Center (Bayanihan Center 10th Anniversary Program 2011). Since its establishment, the Bayanihan Center has become the fulcrum of a unique brand of Philippine intercultural programming and events. It was in this venue that we finished creating *Murupuro*.

I structured our work into three parts: *Papapakilala* (Introduction), *Pagsasanay* (Workshop and Rehearsal), and *Pagpapalabas* (Performances). *Papapakilala* introduced the ensemble to my dissertation work and the purpose of the project. It was in this phase that I facilitated theatre activities that aimed to build camaraderie among the volunteer artists: we played games and told stories about our experiences with typhoons. The second part was the actual creative process of installing the performance at Bayanihan Center; thus, the word *Pagsasanay*, which means continuously doing the task until one grasped the technique.

During this phase, I engaged the ensemble in applied theatre workshops on dancing, chanting, and storytelling. The last phase of the performance project was the *Pagpapalabas* which was the performance phase. This was co-conceptualized with the board members of VFCA, namely Laila Pires and Dominga Passmore, and presented to the ensemble before we began our workshop, rehearsal, and performance. All of our rehearsals and performances took place in Bayanihan Center's two-storey building located on Blanshard Street.²³ Every Sunday, the VFCA and BCHS hold their regular Open House at the Bayanihan Center where volunteers sell traditional Filipino food to the

22. Ben Pires, "Victoria Filipino Canadian Association 50th Anniversary (1969-2019) Program." Sampa-guita Dance Group, Bayanihan Community Centre Victoria, BC: Canada, 2019.

23. We were originally booked to stage *Murupuro* in one of the theatres at the University of Victoria, BC. But due to some delays in our rehearsal schedules, we had to find another venue. Since the theatres at the Phoenix Building at the University of Victoria were all taken up for other events, we ended up using the Bayanihan Center's Assembly Room.

public.²⁴ Another regular program at the Bayanihan Center is “Feeding the Needy,” administered by Nora Acala-Duy, in which once a month, the Bayanihan Center is transformed into a cafeteria for homeless people who are given a free assortment of food. Aside from these regular programs, the Center’s first floor (Assembly Room) is also used for yoga classes, intercultural meetings, and is the site for passport renewals for Filipino migrants. Because of its wide dance mirrors, the Assembly Room is also used for dance classes and rehearsals. On the left wall are bulletin boards mounted with fliers advertising programs of organizations housed in the Bayanihan Center and newspaper clippings. A huge bulletin board that looks like a treasure chest displaying a bevy of performance memories is assigned to SDG. Dozens of photographs are affixed to this board, memorializing past performances of the group in tandem with some old postcards of the Bayanihan Dance Company.²⁵



Figure 3. Scenography at the Bayanihan Center. The Assembly Room was transformed into a black-box theatre with white paper rolls, white curtains, and one hundred copied photos of cast members. (Gupa 2018)

On the right side of the wall is a wide sponsorship board resembling a Philippine traditional house, the *bahay kubo* (nipa hut), that displays the names of donors who have contributed to the purchase of the building and its lot. The first floor extends to the kitchen and washrooms that lead to the back parking

24. I once attended this open house sometime in 2016 with some UVic students. The diners were composed of Filipinos and other nationalities interested in experiencing Filipino cuisine. Due to Covid-19, this program was temporarily cancelled.

25. Bayanihan, the National Dance Company of the Philippines, is a world-renowned folk-dance group supported by the Philippine government under the auspices of Philippines Women’s University and is an official performing group of the Cultural Center of the Philippines.

lot. The room has a low ceiling, with recessed, track-lighting fixtures and fluorescent lights. The second floor serves as the office and houses a conference room. Fashioning a performance space in this building was a challenge.

As soon as Jon and Francis arrived in Victoria on the 9th of October, I brought them to the Bayanihan Center. That day, we discussed different spatial performance configurations of the room we would perform in. With the help of a VFCA board member, Dominga Passmore, the team tried to set up a viable performance space by arranging and re-arranging the chairs into varied options that could provide the best stage configuration. This process allowed us to assess the geography of the Assembly Room as a potential performance space for our theatrical piece. Transforming the spatial environment of the Assembly Room was not easy. But it was a playful process that surprised us with its many possibilities and unpredictable results. Eventually, we decided to transform the room into a black-box theatre. We covered the walls with white, 26"x 60," Kraft paper rolls and hung white curtains to approximate a clean canvas. The dance mirrors were also covered with Kraft paper, leaving a small portion uncovered to provide an illusion of wider space. The white walls neutralized the atmosphere of the room.

We set up forty chairs and arranged them to resemble a thrust stage which the performance space extends to the audience. This configuration looked like an island with pathways in-between groups of chairs to the right and the left.²⁶ The pathways allowed multiple points of ingress and egress for the performers. One of my collaborators, Francis suggested that we cover some of the fluorescent lights with colored photo gel to enrich the lighting effect during the show. I printed and photocopied the profile pictures of the cast members on 8"x11" bond paper and posted these in different spots around the performance venue. These photos added to the scenographic quality of the performance that thematized absence and memories. They looked like fliers of missing people, resulting from Yolanda.

The Theatre Department of the University of Victoria provided us with sound and video equipment, which was very helpful in securing a technically-efficient production. The Department even sent a technical director to assist us in using the sound and video equipment. Soon enough, we had a built performance site with minimal lights, sound equipment, and scenic decor. Jon, Francis, and I would come to the Bayanihan Center at ten o'clock in the morning to fix the lighting and set up the scenography for the performance.

When Angge arrived in Victoria two days before the show opened, we synchronized with Jon's videos, the live and recorded music she had composed. During the Fall of 2018, the ensemble spent two weeks of building our performance project, when the trees' foliage had turned yellow and red, and occasionally rain fell, our mobility was affected; some members of the cast would come in late for rehearsals due to weather and other work-related issues. Nevertheless, the zeal in co-creating this community performance was palpable. Members of VFCA and BCHS, led by Leonor Santos, volunteered to prepare snacks and dinner for the cast members. Her team of volunteers

26. There were days that we had to remove the chairs because a renter would use the Assembly Room for yoga class or Nora needed the Assembly Room for her "feeding the needy" lunch.

would use the kitchen area in the afternoon and in the evening and would also help the cast in transforming the area into our backstage, where performers put on their costumes and make-up. We also used the parking lot as an extended backstage, which is where Francis was usually stationed for some of his entrances.

Carlo Pagunaling, a Manila-based costume maker who designed the costumes, had created a ritual attire of 88 the *Asog* (shaman) for Francis. The long costume was made of *abaca*.²⁷ It covered his chest and the lower extremities of his body. But since it was constructed with flowing strands of fiber, it left his body receptive to the cold of the autumnal weather. Francis told me about his experience during our preview, while awaiting his cue for the prologue: “There was no blanket. I was barefoot. There were two White people who saw me while the show was running. They took me for a homeless beggar. I told them that we had an ongoing show. And so all was well. Nothing beats that experience.” (*Walang blanket. Nakayapak din ako. May dalawang puti na nakakita sa akin while the show is running. Naawa. Akala nila pulubi ako. Sabi ko we have an ongoing show. All is well kaps. Walang kapantay itong experience.*) One of the cast members, Ligaya Agravia Agapito, suggested that he wait for his cue in a warmer place, and so the following day, she offered her van for Francis to use as his “backstage.”

Pagmamalasakit (compassion) is a Filipino core cultural virtue that illustrates *kapwa* (relationality) that is perfectly expressed in Ligaya’s gesture of offering her van to Francis as a backstage venue. Engaged care in *pagmamalasakit* is a performance principle that we learned in the process of co-creating this performance as well as social relationality in the shared embodiment of *kapwa*-inspired resourcefulness (as with Ligaya’s gesture). From the root word, “*sakit*” (sickness or pain), *pagmamalasakit* is an attenuation of pain to help ease the discomfort or the suffering of another person. This concept provides creative imagination to reduce, if not to eliminate, the suffering of others. The cast in this performance employed *pagmamalasakit* as a code of ethics of collaboration that results in mutual respect, openness, and shared creativity. Beyond personal individuation, *pagmamalasakit* as an engaged care is a relational principle in a collaborative theatrical enterprise that exemplifies social cohesion similar to a *prusisyon*, a Catholic ritual usually performed during a town fiesta. Applied theatre in this case is a space for care and creativity.

First Show in Victoria

When the audience enter the performance venue, they see an old Filipina woman seated on a chair with her grandchild. The two are watching an NBC news report on Typhoon Yolanda on TV. On the right side of the room, behind the chairs, is a woman in a suit standing near the video-sound station where Jon and Angge are located. She plays the role of a Philippine Senate Secretary who annotates the Senate Emergency Meeting for Yolanda.

Close to the door leading to the second floor are two women holding notebooks. Daisy Breuer and Agnes “Agie” Myhre are the Filipino Canadian

27. *Abaca* (*Musa textilis*) is known as Manila hemp. Samar Province produces export quality of *abaca*.

community volunteers collecting money for the fund drive; they are mobilizing the collection of disaster aid funds for Yolanda survivors. Involved in the actual collections of money during the fund drive that VFCA organized in 2013, their actual experience in raising funds allowed them to emote appropriately, as they told me. VFCA had collected US\$150,000 (PhP 6.2 million) for the fund drive, which the Canadian Red Cross helped in distributing (Pires 2019, 21). During the show, Daisy and Agie, as characters, are excitedly taking calls, performing their roles animatedly: “Hello, this is Bayanihan Center...Yes we are still accepting donations for Yolanda...Thank you!”

The sound from the television begins to reverberate inside the space; this serves as the cue for a chorus of women to enter the performance space. These women are Yolanda survivors looking for the missing and dead bodies of their mother, father, child, relatives, sisters, and brothers after the storm surge in Tacloban City. They roam around the room; some are wailing, and some are praying. One of the women starts singing, “*Iliganon na Buotan*” (The Kind Iliganon); this functions as another sound cue for all the characters to exit the performance space.

When the women leave the center stage, VFCA Board Member Laila Pires takes centerstage and explains the rationale of the performance. After she delivers her opening remarks, she introduces Kristy Charlie of the W̱SÁNEĆ territory for the welcome speech. Kirsty is an Indigenous woman from the Saanich Peninsula and the village of Tseycum First Nation. A ceremonial opening by two women who are leaders of their communities off-sets the heavy prelude of the performance. When they leave the stage, the lights are turned off.

A hissing sound is heard. Angge plays her Indonesian string-instrument, the *Kecapi*; the hat produces an ominous tone coming from the live instrumental manipulation of the musician. One of the women characters turns on the overhead projector (OHP); it flashes text—“*Siyahan nga Kaagi* (First Station) Pahimatngon/Warning.” When the OHP turns off, Jon begins his first video by projecting my picture in Ati-Atihan costume taken in 1982 for the *barangay* fiesta (feast of the town patron celebration) of Barangay Pinyahan. The video overlaps with my recorded voice. This is the beginning of the first Kaagi.

Our preview was attended by just family members of the cast and crew while the opening and closing shows drew a wider audience. Among these were faculty members of the Theatre Department and Indigenous Governance of the University of Victoria, members of the Intercultural Association of Greater Victoria, and a Member of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. After each show, Laila would facilitate a public dialogue on climate change in the Philippines. On the last night of our show, it was raining; though cold outside, the discussion indoors was heated. Many provocative questions were raised during the public forum after every show and one of the highlights was when a member of the audience from Tacloban raised a question on the representation of Imelda Marcos as a corrupt and ostentatious government official in the performance. He asserted that the performance had glossed over the failure of President Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino, Jr., in dealing with the tragedy brought about by ST Yolanda in Leyte. This triggered a reaction from another audience member who stood up and suggested not to avoid engaging in political discus-

sion:

AUDIENCE 5: (Can I say something, please? Because we're going deeper into politics now. Actually, the show is really nice. Very informative. We just have to be careful next time because it's already happened. This is a show. So, we should have to be careful by mixing politics in [a] show like this. My only say right now is it has happened. So, we just actually [need to] enjoy the moment.

And another member of the audience jumped into the conversation by asserting: "No, I think you have to incorporate politics to a certain degree —" and the room buzzed in agreement. The fiery exchange between the two viewpoints continued:

AUDIENCE 6: No, I think we have to incorporate politics. (Applause from some of the audience)

AUDIENCE 5: Yes, I agree but you cannot depict just one...

AUDIENCE 6: ...no, no, because there are so many corrupt officials in the Philippines...

AUDIENCE 5: Exactly. But [you can] not only [depict] one president—

ENSEMBLE MEMBER: Don't talk at the same time please...

AUDIENCE 5: ...and you cannot depict every one of them. So, if there is somebody, if there is one little segment that would evoke then bring back what the experiences are. Of course, if you go to Ilocos, of course they would be pro-Marcos. I'm from Iloilo and I grew up [there] and how bad it was during my time, right? So, politics is politics. It's how you perceive it and the experience you incorporate [in]to it [the play]. That's how I look at it, so I don't think there's anything wrong with politics being with theaters as long as [it is] done in a way that will evoke emotion, reaction. [Like the] one we are in now.

Outside the performance venue, the rain continued to pour. And inside the room, the temperature of provocation was high which Laila was facilitating the discussion. When theatre transforms itself into a convection of encounters, heat suffuses courage to confront histories that we tend to forget. The provocation that erupted during this encounter between Audience 2 and Audience 3 underscored the plurality of the audience's political subjectivities that an applied theatre performance could bring about. Members of diasporic communities who are unable to participate in political discourse within their local communities in their homeland can exercise their social and political imaginaries in sites of contestations that applied theatre can offer.

In this volley of heated exchanges, I had to keep my bearings. I listened to the sentiments of individual people about the pressing issues around graft and corruption of humanitarian aid affected by Yolanda. I was confronted by the urgency of voices that aimed to claim political discourse from members of the communities who had not been given opportunities to engage in safe community dialogues on Philippine governance and politics. For a community that is already divided, political discussion is almost taboo. Criticality is a privilege of the few—especially for Filipinos in diaspora, many of whom came to Canada to alleviate their lives from economic challenges by engaging in two to three jobs, simultaneously, as im/migrants. Open debate among the audience unfettered their voices regarding corruption and non-disbursement of international aid to local community people directly impacted by the super-typhoon.

For Filipinos in the diaspora in British Columbia, there is an absence of spaces for open political discussion where contradictions in views are encouraged in the community. But that night, following the performance, applied theatre exemplified an empowering process in civic literacy among diasporic communities within a space of inclusivity and one that was also non-discriminatory. Difficult questions may not have been fully answered but it indicated that civic engagement propelled by applied theatre performances can increase awareness of a political discourse that is often restrained in diasporic gatherings. The artistic possibilities of applied theatre in tackling difficult issues of climate change inspired our eventual collaboration and kinship, which operated in the creation of community-based theatre performance, sustaining our collective growth as a creative and critically-engaged community.

Epilogue

The day before Angel and I flew back to Vancouver to conduct another theatre workshop with Victoria friends, the temperature in Winnipeg was -6 °C. It was cold. Jon and Francis left Canada three days after we arrived in Vancouver from our Winnipeg tour. Angel, on the other hand, stayed on for a few more days in Victoria. On the day she departed for Manila, the weather was beguiling. After the rainfall, the clouds parted to show the sun. “Okay, Sir, I won’t cry. We will see each other anyway in Manila. Thank you for everything” (*Sige Sir, hindi na ako iiyak. Magkikita naman tayo sa Pilipinas. Salamat, Sir, sa laha.*), she said to me, before she went to the boarding gate at the airport. It was a long journey for her and had been for all of us. Arrivals and departures in-between encounters with people and communities were strengthened by the unchanging commitment to an art form we all respect, theatre—far and near, here and there—under the changing seasons. Jon once told us in one of our group-sharing sessions after a performance, 94 “The changing of the seasons comes around when people leave” (*Sumasabay ang panahon sa paglisan ng mga tao*). The season of departure is also a new period for another journey. I am always hoping that the journey is always towards the social and political emancipation for many Filipinos, both from homeland and in the transnational communities.