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In Order to Escort Her

by

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Abstract

In Order To Escort Her is a thirty-five minute hybrid-documentary in which Lila, my great-aunt, converses with her niece, my mother, about various supernatural creature encounters and spirit visitations from relatives. This is interspersed with a “visitation” from another close relative, communicating from a different time and space dimension. By weaving together supernatural stories and matter-of-fact accounts of resilience and survival, a magical world is created where boundaries between the material and the invisible realms blur. The main thematic concerns of this film are love, care, presence in joy amidst terror, and the journey of the soul.

Project Description

In Order To Escort Her takes up three central investigations. It asks whether love can propel spirits from other dimensions to intervene on our behalf, and secondly, it investigates the collapse of time that occurs by falling deeply into the present moment. Lastly it questions the continuum of presence and absence. These questions in *In Order To Escort Her* are subtle; they are metaphorically revealed throughout the unfolding of the film.

In order to create these questions, I juxtaposed a conversation that I structured between my mother and her aunt Lila with a voice over that I wrote. Lila’s stories reveal a relationship with the cosmos and non-material world that is a rather ordinary and normal part of life. I made a creative decision to center the film on Lila’s supernatural stories, interspersing them with the mundane (sounds of roosters, jokes about taking care of the baby) in hopes of in order to create a work of magical realism.

In *In Order to Escort Her*, the narrative is driven by one lengthy conversation between my mother and Lila. This layer of conversation reveals various dynamics that exist within their relationship- distance and intimacy, native language and generational loss of language, belief and skepticism, and presence and departure. This layer also contains the emotional and intimate stitching of the piece. The passing of time is made visible by the receding of afternoon light across Lila's face and the emotion is felt in Lila's leaning toward and away from the camera.

Can love propel spirits from outer dimensions to visit us? First, do spirits and mystical entities even exist? In the film I assume that they do. Growing up as a second-generation mixed-race Filipin@¹ I was exposed to a few mysterious stories from my mother and grandmother's homeland. These stories contrasted with the grey landscape and polluted skies of Staten Island and North Jersey where I lived. My grandmother Eva,² who raised me, would warn that a Philippine mythological creature, the *mananggal*, would get me if I didn't behave. Yet, these warnings had the inadvertent impact of invoking the delightful presence of the mystical. They colorfully intersected my world. Perhaps driven by this delight, I structured my initial interview questions to Lila around her mystical experiences with similar supernatural creatures. I intended for the viewer to accept this mystical worldview within the first few minutes of the film. Lila speaks matter of factly about her encounters with entities and spirits. In the past, coming from a Western perspective, I struggled to accept Lila's stories as they seemed to be rather nonsensical. However, in the years leading up to the making of my film I began to question the roots of my skepticism. In *The Wretched of the Earth* Frantz Fanon writes, "Imperialism leaves behind germs of rot which we must clinically detect and remove from our land but from our minds as well." (Fanon) I began to see the undertones of a colonized mentality in my assumptions and to release

¹ Throughout this paper I will refer to individuals of Philippine descent as Filipin@s.

² In the film Eva is also referred to as "Bebing".

layers of Western conditioning that disregarded these invisible realms. Therefore it was important to me to begin with the assumption that supernatural beings and other dimensions do indeed exist. I intended Western audiences to be surprised that Totoy, the second person Lila describes early on in the film, is indeed a ghost. I intended to confront Western assumptions.

Since my grandmother's death in 2008, I had contemplated whether spirits actually return to visit their living loved ones. I had some experience with the matter- on one occasion I felt my grandmother's presence. Additionally, I was told on a visit to the Philippines that Eva's ghost sat often on the stairs, sticking out her tongue and rolling her eyes to scare or delight the children. Also, my great-aunt Nanay Pilar told me a story of her being healed by Eva's ghost³.

Over the course of various visits to the Philippines as a teenager and young adult, I was able to spend stretches of time with Nanay Pilar.⁴ Nanay Pilar and I developed a special bond based around our shared love of storytelling. She loved to tell stories and I loved to listen. My grandmother wasn't the storytelling type, so I relished Nanay Pilar's unusual stories. Where my grandmother kept secrets, Pilar confidently shared. It was during our visit in 2011 that I sensed this would be the last time that I would see her. During this time Nanay Pilar shared her fascination with alien encounters, UFOs, multiple dimensions, time travel and quantum physics, which sparked my imagination and curiosity. The compilation of all this evidence- relatives' encounters with Eva's ghost, Nanay Pilar's interest in time-travel, Tia Lila's supernatural stories and my own research into indigenous beliefs from the Philippines, energy work and quantum physics, inspired me to build further on top of the film's magical world, by adding a time-bending component. I decided to write a voice over that would bring the viewer into a constantly shifting flow between past, present and future. Riding this flow, the viewer would be left with

³ *Nanay* means Mother in Tagalog and is often used as a sign of respect for a range of female elders.

⁴ Nanay Pilar is Eva's sister, and Lila's sister-in-law and close friend.

the question, if dimensions can be traversed and ghosts can visit us, did Pilar's ghost intervene to help Lila survive Typhoon Yolanda⁵?

In the voice-over of the film, I wanted to incorporate stories that Pilar had shared with me during the visit in 2011. At that time, Lila was there helping Pilar recover from a surgery, and they spent long evenings sitting on the bench outside, watching frog documentaries on TV, eating, and arguing. One of their main disagreements was whether the “occupation place” they were both in as kids was called Malibago or Balibago. Thus, I learned of this place⁶ that served as a hide-away during the WWII Japanese occupation of the Philippines. As the oldest girl, Pilar cared for her younger siblings, Eva and Totoy (my granduncle). In the film I take the creative liberty to extend this caring to Lila, who was their younger neighbor (and eventually married Totoy). In 2011, Pilar recalled this “occupation place” with great passion, sharing both happy and terrifying memories. She referred to it as it a “nice sort of vacation place, where the creek and the sea meet. We put on shorts, and there you can catch your shrimps.” On the other hand she matter-of-factly recalled the terror. She described soldiers peering through the thatched bamboo walls of their hut, of young girls having to dress like old women to keep the soldiers from sexually violating them, and of a head being displayed on a pole as a marker of war.

I wanted to do Pilar's stories justice. I imagined Malibago as a time expanding and contracting liminal space where young people moved between extremes, moments of childhood play and terror. Here I imagined kids forced deeply into the present, riding the present into the next present. Also, I imagined Malibago as a place that would cement Pilar, Eva, Totoy and Lila's relationship in an unmatched way. I wanted to properly represent the expanding/

⁵ In the film, Lila discusses her experience during Typhoon Yolanda, known internationally as Typhoon Haiyan. At the time Haiyan was the most powerful typhoon ever to hit land. It killed 6,300 people in the Philippines and devastated Tacloban. In 2020, Haiyan is still among the top three most powerful land-falling typhoons.

⁶ Malibago was the occupation place's true name.

contracting nature of time here, so in my writing I chose to situate Pilar as a teenager in 1942, and speak in the present tense, psychically intuiting the future. Alongside the inclusion of Pilar's actual wording from 2011, creating her as young psychic poet was done to honor Pilar's personality, interest and talents, as I knew her.

Upon my departing the Philippines in 2011, I had the intuition to return to the Philippines to accompany Nanay Pilar in her final years. However, I didn't listen. I don't know what prevented me- whether it was the borders and limits on the visa, the expense of the ticket, the distance, a lack of courage needed to let go of my 9-5 life in New York City, but paralysis prevented me from stepping into what was calling me in that moment. Ever since, I have been marked by this paralysis. The final theme, then, of *In Order to Escort Her* is that persistent distance between loved ones due to cultural dissonance and borders. Moved by my past failure to follow my intuition to return to Nanay Pilar before her passing, I decided that my camera would observe my mother and Lila's handling of their goodbyes, their shifts between presence and absence.

After my mother leaves the interview room a slight tonal shift occurs in the pacing of my editing and Lila's address of the camera. I depict Lila as a resilient artist, who spins a song out of departure. At this moment I am reliant on my cousin as my interpreter; this echoes my mom's absence and my challenge in knowing Lila and Tacloban. I consider this shift my artistic signature in the film. Here I am left with Lila, unable to understand her, except through art/song. Through art and song, however, she and I can build a deep bond. Here is my generation's challenge.

By weaving together these various layers- Lila's stories, my observations, and Pilar's memories situated into the present-past, I erased borders between realms. The result is a poetic

hybrid documentary that serves as a meditation on Diaspora, old age, love, care, the transitions of the soul, and falling deeply into the present.

Research Analysis and Application in the Film

In Order To Escort Her's sense of the supernatural is additionally inspired by the animist beliefs of indigenous Philippines, wherein all things are imbued with spirit. Despite colonization of the Philippines by various empires, much of this indigenous belief has survived in thought and practice, sometimes merging with the dominant religions of Catholicism and Islam.

In indigenous Philippine worldview, spirits and other supernatural creatures inhabit the world. The Philippine concept of *anito* generally describes spirits found in the environment. The *anito* “dwells in every animate and intimate thing or creature, as well as in nature. Anitos exist as the *mangmangkik* in the forests or trees, the earth-dwelling entities *Kaibaan* and *ansisit* that usually reside in trees or the *bunton* (termite mound), the *bag-bagutot* that dwell in shrubs, and the *namagayak* or the soul of the pagay in rice plants.” (86, Apostol)

The following are but a few examples of the supernatural characters alive within the Philippine psyche. The *mananggal* my grandmother sometimes invoked was a type of vampire with a severed torso, who flies in search of prey and sucks out the hearts of fetuses with a long tongue. Accounts exist of Spanish colonizers' observations of the belief in the *mananggal*. The following is an account by Fr. Juan de Plasencia, in *Customs of the Tagalogs* (1589).

The seventh was called *magtatangal*, and his purpose was to show himself at night to many persons, without his head or entrails. In such wise the devil walked about and carried, or pretended to carry, his head to different places; and, in the morning, returned it to his body—remaining, as before, alive. This seems to me to be a fable, although the natives affirm that they have seen it, because the devil probably caused them so to believe. This occurred in Catanduanes." (Blair and Robertson)

From the region of the Western Visayas, *Agtas* are short beings with large eyes that live in the mangroves and swamps. They are jolly creatures, often smoking and laughing.

Phantasmas appear at dusk or on midnights when the moon is bright. They appear and vanish into nothingness. They wear white, appear forlorn and travel on deserted trails. Supposedly, the *phantasma* can only harm those who glance at them. Muscular *ungos* and *bawos* are invisible, and naked except for loincloths. They are only visible to children, smoke their signature pipes and live in the *nunok* tree's branches. They play tricks on passers-by, such as flicking them and stealing from them. (Arens)

Joseph Allen Ruanto-Ramirez complicates this idea of these creatures.

I...look at how these monsters, demons, figments of our imaginations are actually more than that; it is actually a manifestation of us. The Aswang, in the form of a Manananggal, was severed from the waist; her lower body wanders the land as her upper body flies through the air searching for her prey. She was the healer, the cultural bearer, the leader, the educator, the astronomer, the artist that the Spaniards and Catholicism wished to silence, oppress, and erase. She was colonized and split in half, one bound to the earth, the other travelled and transverse. She is killed by what is considered pure, holy and by extension, civilized.

The Pilipinx American is also severed- cut from the spirit and the mind. Where they long to know the past, the precolonial, the indigenous while living in the land of the colonizer. They are colonized; their tongues severed just enough to not speak with other Aswang (pl), but can still mutter enough to sound like one. They straddle multiple realms and lands, across water and skies, trying to look for their bottom half that is still attached to the land their ancestors came from, one day hoping to stand completely as their ancestors did. (Ruanto-Ramirez , 27)

This notion of the manananggal being a manifestation of the Filipin@-American is something I can personally relate to. I agree that this concept concerns all colonized Filipin@s. though I would reframe Ruanto-Ramirez's "split" as a simultaneous holding of two disparate energies or realities. In my film, my mother learns from her elder yet maintains a skepticism, listens yet leaves, experiences relationship yet commodifies the experience by buying a souvenir,

a Filipiniana dress. Through my camera work, I hope to hold this simultaneity. I believe that in honoring this simultaneity, those Filipin@s willing to decolonize their minds can begin to heal the split. Lila's stories in the film relate back to indigenous beliefs of the Waray-Waray⁷ people and the surrounding Visayas region. The Waray god Badadum calls upon dead relatives to welcome a person to the underworld. Indigenous belief in the Western Visayas suggested that boats, rather than coffins be used as a resting place, as these were thought to carry the remains to the underworld. Paths to the underworld were associated with rivers. (Demetrio) This may explain why my great-grandmother, upon her death, saw her relatives row a small boat towards her to escort her soul, as Lila describes in the film.

I looked to a range of additional works to inform *In Order to Escort Her*. Specifically, I looked at hybrid documentaries and works of magic realism as well as works created with a post-colonial lens. Téa Obreht's dimension-colliding novel, *The Tiger's Wife*, was an influential example of magical realism. Obreht intersects a present war with a past war and she weaves the violent atrocities of war with the roaming freedom of two supernatural figures, the Deathless Man and a (human) wife of a tiger. The tiger is a symbol of freedom, having liberated himself from a zoo that crumbled during a bombing. The main character's grandfather is the storyteller of these legends and dies pursuing the Deathless Man, whom he follows back to his own birthplace. In linking the grandfather's birthplace with the symbolic Deathless Man, Obreht complicates the idea of home/ homeland. In positioning the main character's grandfather inside of the intersection of multiple dimensions, Obreht suggests their simultaneous existence. I was inspired to attempt a similar simultaneity in my film. I utilized various elements- pacing, the

⁷ Our family is of Waray-Waray descent and speaks Waray.

juxtaposition of interview and poetry, and sound design to indicate a present that is a portal to co-existing time dimensions.

I was also greatly inspired by Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a masterpiece of magical realism. Similarly to Marquez, I intended to present contrasts- old and young, fantastic and mundane, material and spiritual. Like Marquez, I aimed to build a world where the supernatural is as ordinary and commonplace as the daily chores.

I took copious notes from director Apichatpong Weerasethakul's choices in his film *Uncle Boonme Who Can Recall His Past Lives*. The mythological creatures encountered by Uncle Boonme have obvious similarities to the entities Lila discusses in my film. In a few shots I also directly reference certain animals that occur in *Uncle Boonme*'s first scene, specifically the water buffalo, and continued with multiple shots of cows. In addition, the pacing of *Uncle Boonme*, is precise, almost mathematical. I edited my film thinking about Weerasethakul's pacing, and his shocking jump to an unexpected scene. Weerasethakul's building of sound to imbue the ordinary with magic and his usage of facial expression to break the fourth wall and disarm the viewer were all of great inspiration to me. Weerasethakul dislocates time and space with great mastery.

Other influential films were *History and Memory* by Rea Tajiri, *El Palacio* by Nicolás Pereda, *The Act of Killing* by Joshua Oppenheimer, *Stories We Tell* by Sarah Polley, *Tongues Untied* by Marlon Riggs, *Marie & Me* by Barbara Hammer, *Nostalgia for the Light* and *The Pearl Button* by Patricio Guzman, *Atlantics* by Mati Diop, *Turumba* and *Perfumed Nightmare* by Kidlat Tahimik. Books that influenced my film included *M Archive* by Alexis Pauline Gumbs, *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy and *Love Medicine* by Louise Erdrich. I was also inspired by the movie *Donnie Darko*, and the HBO Series *Lovecraft Country*.

In *Stories We Tell*, director Sarah Polley questions if one can truly know a person, in Polley's case a family member, amidst the myriad ways we perform identity. Through her film's form and structure, Polley challenges the idea of the authentic self. Even between lovers, Polley suggests, the "authentic self" may actually be a performed self. Perhaps it is in the performance that authenticity lives. I similarly play with the idea of performance and authenticity in my film, detected through Lila's song and in the inclusion of signs of construction and directorial intervention, as well as a significant jump cut near the start of the final third of the film. This jump cut in my film is at a precise moment where the viewer just received and is processing important information about Lila. After the jump cut Lila re-tells what she had just introduced us to, however in a deeper manner. The jump cut alludes to the multiple ways we can tell stories, refocuses the viewer's attention and reveals both my intervention as a director and my construction both of truth and of the film itself.

In *Marie & Me*, director Barbara Hammer finds freedom as an artist in the observation of her subject Marie. Without the burden of words, explanation, sound, Hammer is freed to focus on her observations. Observing acutely, Hammer seems to locate joy at its purest. I thought about this film as I fell into the role of cinematographer, unusually freed behind the camera by my incomprehension of Waray-Waray, the language in which Lila and my mother spoke. I made the decision that this film should be in Waray-Waray, and that I would trust the unfolding of the conversation that I structured but did not explicitly lead. Like Hammer, I was thus able to concentrate visually on the emotions and energetic tone of the room.

Structurally, I took some inspiration from *The Fantastic Mr. Fox* by Wes Anderson, *The Little Hours* by Jeff Baena and again, *Uncle Boonme Who Can Recall His Past Lives*. All of

these employ the pacing of sound and music to build toward a shock. Similarly, I created a meditative pace that cycled into an emotional climax.

In Order to Escort Her continues the trajectory of the hybrid documentary in the sense it plays with the viewer's doubts, it invokes both emotional intimacy and distance, and contains "reality" within a clearly constructed, poetic narrative. I consider Lila, my mother, and Pilar as "co-creators" of the film. My mother is a "co-creator" because she had freedom to stray from the questions I provided to her to follow the trajectory of the conversation, knowing that I didn't know what was being said. Lila is a "co-creator" in that she, as a storyteller and performer, acknowledges her audience and breaks the fourth wall. She knows we might not believe her, and at times she plays the story up. Pilar is a "co-creator" in that her unusual wording from our 2011 visit has been adapted into my poetic voice-over.

Thesis Production Process

My thesis film in its current form morphed out of a previous incarnation. Originally I had planned to create a film about nuances in the relationship between my mom and her sister who spent her life working as a domestic worker in the Middle East, investigating the glaring differences in their lives that were essentially created by the shifting U.S immigration policy between the late 1960s and early 1980s. I had planned to channel the spirit of my grandmother Eva, and somehow add her in as an observer of the relationship. However upon arriving in the Philippines, unforeseen circumstances prevented that film from being made. I therefore shifted my idea, deciding to approach it through a more intuitive manner. I would channel the spirit of my great-grandmother to create a film that had healing potential for my family members. Inspired by my readings on indigenous Waray beliefs, including the mythological creatures,

immortals, and relative visitations I discussed earlier in this paper, as well as by my exchanges with Nanay Pilar, I chose to step into practicing these ancestral technologies, to step into what the Bukidon indigenous people of Panay call *tayuyon*, about which Maria Christine Muyco notes:

..the motivation behind the act of healing and the employment of certain musical and movement structures that produce a path or system by which a kind of transcendence emerges through and within the ritual. This transcendence is a form of *tayuyon*, or flow, where dancers feel they are in a higher form of consciousness when they connect with the spirits through felt sound and movements.” (Muyoc)

I already had background as an energy worker/ healer within the system of Reiki, which was useful, and suddenly after making this choice to switch away from my aunt and channel my great-grandmother, synchronicities started to occur. I was able to engage family members to help me in the creation of the film. My cousin Rhonalyn (Lila’s granddaughter) was a big collaborator energetically. My cousin Elmo was instrumental- he served as a necessary guide, translator, scout, driver, companion and guard of my equipment. I trained both Elmo and Rhonalyn in sound recording, and they both recorded various sections of the film. One day, quite by accident, Elmo took me to Malibago, the “occupation place” that Pilar discussed in 2011. Although we had not intended to find it, let alone shoot there, suddenly I was in the place that had echoed throughout Pilar’s life, and I instinctively knew that it would become a big part of the film.

Reflecting on my Philippines trip and choices and synchronicities thus far, I decided that the voice over and edit should be made by again collaborating with ancestral energies. A mistake I made was to spend a few too many days in the first part of the trip stuck in Manila trying to interview my first cousins about their mother, my aunt. I believe the universe was sending me signs- first there was a flood, then I couldn’t get a hold of my cousin, then I learned

some uncomfortable things about her life and felt that it would be the wrong time to make a film featuring her. During this time I was able to shoot in Nanay Pilar's old house, but finally I realized that I indeed needed to get back to Tacloban.

Another challenge was dealing with the climate in the Philippines. I had never shot before in such a hot place! A big challenge I encountered was holding the camera steady while getting eaten by mosquitoes. I also noted that on future trips I would need hiking boots, as I was frequently sinking in the mud. I felt and still feel inspired to continue making films in the Philippines, and one key takeaway was to continue my working relationship with Elmo. He was absolutely essential to the making of the film.

Additionally, I was in the Philippines for three weeks and felt pressed for time. I learned that I should have built in more time for reviewing the footage and alternating production and rest days. One or two months would have been more appropriate. Trying to balance the demands of spending time with my family and on production was difficult, as well as managing migraines that the heat brought on. Also, I learned that the future projects I take on must resonate with me on a deep spiritual level- obviously this one did. I learned that in addition to research, physical exploration is a necessary first step for me to take before committing to a project. I did get a greater sense of how aesthetics inform my desire to commit to projects- future projects must also resonate on an aesthetic level, both visually and aurally. I learned that I love shooting landscapes, that I think a lot about color, depth, movement, light and framing, and that I prefer projects that dislocate time and space and combine observational footage with a contrasting component such as voice over, non-synchronous sound or abstract images.

In addition, I was in the midst of editing my film during March- December of 2020 during the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. Though I had already intended to work with Pilar's

stories from 2011, it was the momentous overturn of “normalcy”, death all around, and confinement to the liminal space of quarantine that I felt I needed to connect with in order to see the relevance my film would have in a changed world. Thus, in imaging Pilar’s “occupation place” as a liminal space, I found lessons from my elders’ experiences and resonance with the moment I was living in.

Audience and Exhibition

The primary audience I hope *In Order To Escort Her* will reach is Filipin@s and Filipin@ Americans, and secondarily artists and those inclined towards the spiritual. I intend to submit it to a range of film festivals, including Asian American ones, then eventually publish an excerpt on my artist website with a note informing people how they can access it in full. I intend to continue working with Rhonalyn and Elmo to ensure all my relatives have easy access to viewing the film and to ask their assistance in eventually screening it in Tacloban. I have already shared large sections with Rhonalyn, my mother and Lila. Once the film is complete it will be sent in full to Lila. I am in irregular contact with Victor Sugbo, a celebrated Waray writer living in Tacloban, and I am considering reaching out to request his assistance in screening the film. I would like to share it in circles of Philippine artists and academics, including the Center for Babaylon Studies and Philippine American Writers and Artists, Inc., an arts center in San Francisco. I will ask my advisor Karen Hanna, and other Filipin@ academics if they would use it in their syllabi. I have been contemplating how to hold in-person screenings since theaters are closed, and have some ideas for putting on an outdoor film fest next summer with the screening of my and my colleagues’ films.

I do not anticipate any legal issues arising. My fiancé may create music for the film, and if this is not completed, I may continue with the music already in the film, which was free use. Sounds recorded are all my own and I do not use any archival material.

In conclusion, I feel immensely grateful to have devoted the past few years of my life to working on such a heart-expanding project. I feel honored and humbled to have received the inspiration to move steadily through its unfolding, and I am eager to complete the process by sharing it with my family members, my circles and wider audiences. I hope it resonates with audiences and encourages viewers to listen to their elders' stories and perhaps find inspiration to create art in collaboration with stories that might otherwise be forgotten.

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