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Noreen Ocampo March 31, 2022

Filipina American Womanhood and Motherhood Through the Eyes of the Aswang

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An abstract of

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Abstract

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The transformations of the Philippine aswang are manifold. In her traditional mythology, the aswang lives as a beautiful woman by day and morphs into a malicious monster by night. Her most famous monstrous form discards her lower body, sprouts batlike wings, and targets expectant mothers and young children. In the context of colonial Philippines, Spanish friars deemed powerful Filipina shamans as aswang to destabilize the pre-existing social order, displacing the aswang's true identity through this false conflation. Now, as we look to the work of contemporary Filipina American poets, writers, and artists, we witness the aswang in her newest, most transformed iteration. Building on scholars' previous reflections on the aswang, this thesis engages with Filipina American writers such as Barbara Jane Reyes, Lynda Barry, Melissa R. Sipin, and Aimee Nezhukumatathil and examines the ways in which they invoke, reclaim, and reinvent this important mythological creature through the medium of literature. I examine these writers' work to explore how they utilize the figure of the aswang to portray Filipina American womanhood and the Filipina American mother, and I argue that the reclamation of the aswang as an empowering figure mirrors these writers' reclamation of womanhood and their complex relationships with their mothers.

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This thesis is dedicated to my mother. I think that all my work, in one way or another, is for you.

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INTRODUCTION

My mother tells me that there was magic to her youth in the Philippine province of Pangasinan. More often than not, she doesn't speak of a nostalgic, Studio Ghibli-esque magic that casts childhood in warm light — although I'm sure there's much of that as well. Instead, my mother tells me about magic that would strike a mischievous child with a sudden wave of sickness after climbing a tree they shouldn't have, only curable by an older woman's practiced spell. The magic of pins in little dolls, or little dolls alight over flame, and soon enough, someone, somewhere meets an unforeseen, inexplicable end. The magic of salt hastily tossed over a dismembered body in the street to prevent its spirit from returning and reclaiming it for harm and haunting. "But that's only in the Philippines," my mother says, as if we're safe here, in our suburban Georgia home. When I ask her, however, if she thinks the aswang can cross oceans, I note that she isn't sure of her response.

The aswang is one of the most well-known and highly feared Philippine mythological creatures. In his 1969 essay, "The *Aswang* Syncrasy in Philippine Folklore," Filipino scholar Maximo Ramos details the five main types of aswang, providing necessary groundwork regarding the creature that other scholars continue to use today. While Ramos positions each type in relation to more commonly understood European creatures for his Western audience to better understand, we will see that the aswang is remarkably unique even within its own umbrella and that this classification system is perhaps reductive. Nonetheless, under the greater umbrella of aswang, the five categories include: (1) the blood-sucking vampire, (2) the self-segmenting viscera sucker, (3) the man-eating weredog, (4) the vindictive witch, and (5) the carrion-eating ghoul (Ramos 238). Before delving into contemporary literary and artistic representations of the

aswang and its relationship to Filipina American womanhood and motherhood, I will first use Ramos' essay to briefly describe each variation in more depth.

The vampire aswang is similar to her typical European counterparts but is particularly notable for her disguise as "a beautiful maiden." The vampire aswang conducts her public life in this attractive feminine form, marries a young man to nourish herself with his blood each night until his death, and then finds another spouse. In other cases, she leaves her spouse unscathed and flies out at night to find victims in other villages (Ramos 238-9).

Like the vampire, the viscera sucker aswang is also traditionally an attractive woman by day; she is full-figured, long-haired, and light-complexioned but has a straw-like tongue to suck out her victims' internal organs (Ramos 239). Ramos explains, "At night the monster grows wings in place of its arms and discards its lower body from the waist down," earning the Tagalog name of manananggal, or "one who detaches" (240). If you recall, my mother must have been referring to the viscera sucker aswang when she described people tossing salt on a dismembered body, as this would be the bottom half of the creature, left behind after detaching. This aswang is also especially known for preying on pregnant mothers and consuming their unborn children (Ramos 240). In Hope Sabanpan-Yu's "Performing the Body in Filipino Narratives," she deems the viscera sucker as the most "virulent" of aswang and elaborates that she is "shown as disrupting reproduction and traditional family structures by rendering men impotent, creating miscarriages in women, arousing men and prompting them to commit adultery under her spell." Sabanpan-Yu also argues that this aswang "may be considered a symbol of sexuality" (61). We will engage with both this aswang and her relationship to sexuality later in this project, and from here, I will refer to her as manananggal.

The weredog aswang is likely more familiar to Western audiences. It is a man or woman, the former of which is more common, who turns to a ferocious animal by midnight. Despite its name, the weredog may transform into a dog, boar, or large cat and attack — and even eat — any villagers, from rambunctious children to pregnant women (Ramos 243). While we will focus more on the feminine-presenting aswang, we will see the weredog in action in my later discussion of cartoonist Lynda Barry's *One! Hundred! Demons!*.

The witch aswang is primarily a female figure who uses vindictive magic to punish those who have wronged her. Interestingly, the witch's irises are said to reflect images upside down, leading her to avoid eye contact to prevent others from discovering her true identity (Ramos 244). Ramos explains that in attempting to not appear as though they suspect others of being a witch, Filipinos have developed an "evasive glance," which has caused "Westerners [to] take them for being bashful when they are merely being prudent" (245). It is important to note that the witch aswang is different from the powerful Filipina shamans, who occupied a socially elevated role in pre-colonial Philippines. I will discuss them in more detail shortly.

The final aswang, the ghoul, seems to lack a feminine gender association. Its primary goal is to steal human corpses and devour them using curved nails and pointed teeth. It is mostly humanlike in appearance when it wants to be seen (Ramos 245).

With this project's focus on Filipina American womanhood and motherhood, it is most pertinent to note that of the five major types of aswang, three are traditionally known to be feminine figures. Raul Pertierra asserts in "Viscera-Suckers and Female Sociality: The Philippine Asuang" that "the asuang-complex often involves a direct inversion of Filipino values"; while he cites the aswang's preference of unspiced, raw human meat, lack of cleanliness, and willingness to attack someone within their own family as points of contrast when considering the typical

Filipino preference for spiced, cooked meat, cleanliness, and family kinship (324), other scholars' work highlighting the social power that women held in pre-colonial Philippines can also be added to this list. In her essay, "The Filipino Woman: Before and After the Spanish Conquest of the Philippines," Mary John Mananzan challenges the commonly held belief that only after Spanish colonization did Filipina women experience heightened social status. She highlights Filipina women's economic and social equality with their male counterparts, including within the family unit and Philippine society more broadly. Most importantly, Mananzan writes, "It is in the religious field that the predominant role of the woman in pre-Spanish Filipino society is unquestioned" (16). Because Filipinos believed their world to be inhabited by spirits, Mananzan explains, they placed particular importance on those who had the power to interact with the supernatural and preferred women to fulfill these religious roles. In Tagalog, these female shamans are known as the "catalonan," and in the Bisayan languages, as "babaylan." They are known by other names throughout the archipelago.

The female aswang, then, can represent a reversal of the power held by women in pre-colonial Philippines. In "*Aswang* and Other Kinds of Witches: A Comparative Analysis," Kathleen Nadeau cites Herminia Meñez, who hypothesized that the aswang exists as a result of Spanish colonization, as the Spaniards vilified and discredited Filipina shamans as witches or aswang (254). Nadeau writes of the manananggal, "Cut in half to remove them from their sexual organs, the viscera sucker concept emerged from women's midwifery work as they are always associated with this role" (255), again representing a jarring reversal of the equal and even elevated role Filipina women commonly held. Unlike the aswang, however, which are often known to present as beautiful women during the day, Nadeau emphasizes that "Spanish witches are not viewed as beautiful at any specific time," and as such, "the aswang myth is probably

derived in the pre-colonial context of Southeast Asia, rather than Spain" (255-6). Nadeau points out that upon arriving in the Philippines, Spanish colonizers vilified and demonized Filipina shamans, likening these women to aswang, and asserts that Spanish colonizers used the fear of the aswang myth to their own advantage in order to destabilize the societal power of Filipina shamans. Sabanpan-Yu supports this history, writing, "Spanish chronicles indicate how the friars contributed to the passing away of female priesthood…There were mass conversions and their success was such that the natives started to take their sick to church to be healed" (65). The Malaysian penanggalan is also very similar to the manananggal, as she is another female monster whose head detaches from her body to drink the blood of children or the blood of "remaining childbirth" (Nadeau 257), which further strengthens the likelihood of the aswang being indigenous to the Philippines, or at least Southeast Asia, and having existed prior to colonization.

Also missing from the literature studying aswang is the answer to one of my main questions: whether someone can be saved from being an aswang. Sabanpan-Yu references Margaret Magat's "Balut: 'Fertilized Duck Eggs and Their Role in Filipino Culture,'" an essay in which she uncovers the connection between balut, or fertilized egg embryo and popular Filipino street food, and the aswang. Sabanpan-Yu explains that there are four ways in which a person (seemingly of unspecified gender) can *become* an aswang: "by personal desire, by receiving *asuang* powers from an *asuang*, by accidental contamination (eating food touched by an *asuang*); or by being born to an *asuang.*" To deliberately become an aswang, Sabanpan-Yu explains, one must hold a "fertilized chicken egg against his/her belly and then tie it in place with a cloth around the body. After an unspecified time, the chicken from the egg passes into the stomach by a sort of osmosis." Sabanpan-Yu references Ramos' *Creatures of Lower Philippine Mythology* as well, where he writes of a similar ritual, but with two fertilized eggs; in Ramos'

version, the individual must undergo this process at a cemetery "after the Good Friday procession at night" and should "stand erect, gaze directly at the full moon without closing one's eyes" (70).

Scholars have also documented many strategies for warding off and even killing aswang. For example, Ramos emphasizes the "endogamous" tendencies of some early Filipino groups to avoid accidentally intermarrying with vampire (and likely other varieties of) aswang (239) and hypothesizes that the shape of early Philippine roofs was meant to deter manananggal, who can fly, from being able to perch upon them (242). The manananggal also fear knives, light, salt, spices, ashes, big crabs, sting ray's tail and can be killed by being pierced by sharpened bamboo, among other weapons (Ramos 240-1). As aforementioned, to avoid the witch aswang and to not appear as though they suspect others of being witches, Ramos writes that Filipinos developed an "evasive glance" (245). Lastly, the ghoul aswang can be scared away with fire, metals, spicy food, and loud noises, which Ramos proposes may inform Filipino funeral and wake culture and even their generally lively, social nature (246-7). Pertierra also asserts that the presence of aswang is often used as an explanation for complications in pregnancy, disease, and death and cites examples of Filipino men attempting to ensure the safe delivery of their child by demonstrating their masculinity and waving a sword in front of their home (324), marking an interesting shift toward men's growing power in the family unit.

In his 2011 documentary, *The Aswang Phenomenon*, Canadian filmmaker Jordan Clark highlights Filipinos' deep-seated fear for aswang, particularly in barrios but also in metropolitan cities such as Manila. Cognisant of the controversy regarding Clark and his lack of transparency regarding his whiteness while dominating a Filipino/a/x academic space, I cite Clark only to reference the Filipino voices that he includes in his documentary. One of these inclusions, writer

Percival Biadora, explains, “If labeled as an aswang, people are going to avoid you; people are going to look at you with suspicion,” which is the case for many people hailing from Capiz, the alleged home of aswang. With this legitimate fear that continues into the present day, it follows that the necessity to protect oneself and one’s family from aswang overshadows the possibility of saving an aswang from its frightening nature and violent tendencies.

Even if unbecoming an aswang is traditionally not possible, I would still like to raise the question that actress Maricel Soriano poses in *The Aswang Phenomenon*. After experiencing an aswang attack, she explains, it is unclear what happens to the victim. Thus, she asks: When do you die, and when do you transform into being like them? While I have not located an answer to this question, I believe that the phenomenon of becoming aswang is important to this project. After all, if we are to consider the intertwined nature of Filipina women and aswang, what does this mean for their daughters? What does this relationship look like, and how does it differ when we consider a daughter born to an aswang and a daughter whose mother becomes an aswang after her birth? We will discuss this mystery later when focusing on the daughter and her role in the mother-daughter relationship. We will also return to the idea of *unbecoming* aswang, as it is perhaps through contemporary Filipina American literature that the aswang is healed.

This project will focus on how Filipino/a/x American writers and artists such as Barbara Jane Reyes, Lynda Barry, Aimee Nezhukumatathil, and more reclaim the once — and perhaps still — horrific figure of the aswang to engage with Filipina American womanhood and mother-daughter relationships. As we will see, the characteristic coexistence of the aswang’s monstrosity and beauty are instrumental to these representations, and I believe that the aswang’s complexity renders her the ideal figure to use to further engage with Filipina American womanhood and, in particular, portrayals of the mother in Filipina American poetry. I open this

discussion from the vantage point of a Filipina American daughter of first-generation Filipino/a American parents and as an aspiring writer and poet who very much looks up to and writes in conversation with those whom I center in this project. In weaving myself throughout these writers' works, I also hope to bring the aswang to light and introduce and re-introduce her to the reader in her new form.

We will begin with a discussion of Barbara Jane Reyes' *To Love as Aswang* to build a better understanding of the aswang's transformation from horrific to reclaimed figure in literature, as well as the real-life transformation she experienced during colonial times. To hone in on the ways in which Filipina American authors use the aswang to engage with mother-daughter relationships, we will then turn to Lynda Barry and Melissa R. Sipin, both of whom rely on the aswang in an attempt to make sense of their relationships with their mothers. Afterward, I will close-read two poems by Aimee Nezhukumatathil to explore how we can witness traces of the aswang in Filipina American writers' work more broadly, and we will conclude with my own attempts to engage with the aswang through poetry, particularly through Jericho Brown's poetic form, the duplex. Above all else, in this project, I hope to make clear how the reclamation of the aswang stands also as a reclamation of Filipina womanhood and a way for us to better understand what it means to exist as a Filipina American in the contemporary world.

CHAPTER ONE: *TO LOVE AS ASWANG* AND THE ASWANG'S POETIC TRANSFORMATION

Despite the frightening forms of the aswang and her undoubtedly common appearance across Philippine horror folktales and contemporary media, we now see Filipino/a/x American writers and artists interacting with aswang in a more complex manner, investigating her history and often looking to her as a positive and empowering figure. I first want to begin with Barbara Jane Reyes' *To Love as Aswang* to establish a rich basis upon which I will build my project. In this collection of poetry, the aswang plays a central role, and Reyes immediately engages with the figure in a way that divorces her from her simpler past as a horrific creature.

She opens *To Love as Aswang* with the poem "To Pierce the Heart," introducing readers to the darker, more familiar conceptions of the aswang, many of which we briefly discussed earlier:

> They are sorcerers, and witches
> They are beautiful, but unchaste …
>
> They are entered by demons
> They are the devil's ministers …
>
> They are *osuang*, they fly
> They consume human flesh
>
> They will never deceive us
> They will never, never, love us. (1)

It is important to note that from the earliest mention of the aswang in Reyes' collection, she blurs the line between the aswang and Filipina shamans. I would assert that the "they" Reyes' speaker investigates over the course of this poem begin as Filipina shamans, then transform into the aswang. Reyes' speaker first calls these women "beautiful" but pivots into

asserting that they are “exceedingly ugly” and “extremely lewd” in the fourth stanza of the poem. From here, the speaker goes on to dehumanize these women, arguing they are “the devil’s ministers,” and demonizing them, finally, as “*osuang*.” Through this transformation, Reyes’ embodiment of Spanish colonizers through the voice of her speaker smartly echoes the Spaniards’ false but purposeful association between the aswang and Filipina shamans in an attempt to destabilize the existing social order and take control. In fact, the spelling of aswang as “osuang,” as we see in the poem, was first used by Juan de Plasencia, a Spanish friar who attempted to document customs of the Tagalog people (Blair and Robertson 320). Sabanpan-Yu also echoes Reyes’ language in her essay, writing of the Spaniards, “They denounced the *babaylanes* as primitive, unchaste women, practitioners of a fraudulent religion, and most of all, as priestesses of the devil” (65). As such, Reyes sets up *To Love as Aswang* with the foundation of Filipina shamans being forcibly transformed in this way and the true aswang being transformed into obscurity. I do not read this poem as entirely in the voice of a Spanish colonizer, however. To me, the final line, “They will never, never, love us,” seems not to come from the colonizer’s perspective. I believe that this line is the Filipina shaman or aswang — or perhaps both — subtly re-entering the poem at the end as Reyes alludes to the reader that *To Love as Aswang* is not a collection in which the colonizer is the triumphant protagonist.

Following her introduction of the aswang, Reyes begins to investigate the ways in which this forced transformation of Filipina shamans into aswang carries into Filipina women’s present-day experiences of violence. “To Read the Newspapers” is a found poem of newspaper fragments that give insight to the plight of working-class Filipina women, many of whom leave the Philippines to provide labor overseas. In this poem, Reyes presents the reality that many of these women face, including deprivation of basic rights, physical abuse, rape, and many

instances in which they have resorted to suicide. Even in this examination of more current and tangible struggles, I believe it is important to underline that we can still see shadows of connection to the shamans and aswang. Reyes includes the fragment, "'...her heart was missing. Her whole body was bruised, beaten, and burnt…' / '...' 'All she wanted was to go home'" (6), drawing a connection to the Spanish vilification of Filipina shamans by invoking the concept of the witch hunt with this image of bodies burning.

In other poems, like "To Go Along With Others," Reyes also illustrates the continuation and aftermath of this violence by providing crucial context to grim aspects of contemporary Filipino culture. While other cultures often celebrate Filipino people as warm and welcoming, Reyes explains the darker reasoning behind how this characterization arose and particularly focuses on how this expectation of kindness harms Filipina women. In the first part of this three-section poem, Reyes introduces us to a feminine figure, a "she," echoing the anaphoric nature of "To Pierce the Heart":

> She is forgiving; give it a month and everything is forgotten…
> She is online, oiled string bikini ass shot; subscribe to her, and see her yield to group opinion.
> She knows the art of forgetting. She opens.
> She loses face when she says no.
> She is smooth when offered what she can't refuse.
> She is altruistic in times of social stress and warfare.
> She is translated and she can't refuse.
> She assumes the translator's goodwill and she yields to his roughness. (13)

In describing this feminine figure, whom I take to again represent working-class Filipina women, Reyes creates the sense that this poem takes place in the current day, particularly as she sets part of the poem in the digital space, referencing the experiences of Filipina women who engage in sex work to make a living. At the same time, Reyes' images remain tied to the groundwork that she established in "To Pierce the Heart." War continually permeates this poem,

and when reading the line, “She assumes the translator’s goodwill and she yields to his roughness,” it is difficult to not think of Juan de Plasencia, his reflections on “osuang,” and his role in sharing his “discovery” of the aswang with the world while taking part in rewriting her into obscurity.

In the second section of this poem, Reyes explicitly ties the poem’s happenings to colonial times, illustrating how the events of the poem exist as a result of this time. She writes, “What remains of war: apology and forgiveness.” In this way, Reyes explains how the reality of the “she” that she describes has arisen out of wartime; the stereotype of Filipino people as warm and welcoming did not occur of its own accord. After over three hundred years of Spanish colonization, followed by Japanese and American occupation, Filipino people have not escaped unscathed. Returning again to the first section of this poem, Reyes breaks from her first thirteen-line stanza to conclude with a definition that stands alone: “Meaning ‘to go along with others,’ pakikisama is the highest of Filipino community values” (13), and Reyes demonstrates how “apology and forgiveness” have permanently permeated Filipino cultural values. In the final line of this poem, she underlines the reality that this value has brought upon the Filipina woman in particular: “*She is one of the loneliest creatures in the world*” (15). Again, through the usage of the word “creature,” we see Reyes continuing to tie the villainized Filipina woman of the present-day back to her roots as the aswang.

A fourth of the way into the collection, Reyes shifts toward a more triumphant, empowering tone with “To Sing Praisesong” and turns this forced transformation of the shaman into aswang on its head. She begins in a place of lack, ignorance, and shame:

> We, city of never enough…
> We, city of open legs
> We, city of closed fists
> We, city of closed minds

We, city of walang hiya (22-3)

Reyes calls back to her definition of pakikisama, or going along with others, through the line, “We, city of walang hiya.” The Tagalog phrase “walang hiya” translates to “without shame” and is often used in a derogatory sense, to shame those who defy social norms and deem them “shameless.” As the poem continues, Reyes then presents a reversal of the shaman-to-aswang transformation: Filipina women, a group that now includes the speaker of the poem with the shift to the personal pronoun, “we,” reclaim their identities as babaylan and celebrate their new independence. Here, the “We” that begins each line now also performs numerous actions, instead of sitting on the outskirts of the aforementioned cities:

> We drum, we craft
> We, babaylan, we, griot
> We bear water and wisdom
> We uproot, we fly girls
> We use what we got
> We get what we need (23)

In the final lines of the poem, Reyes’ speaker then proclaims her — and her fellow women’s — identities as aswang, this continued anaphora seemingly invoking Gwendolyn Brooks’ “We Real Cool”:

> We, black haired aswang
> We, engkanto, diwata
> We, everywhere, unseen
> We laugh, we snake
> We do not belong
> We, a moonless song (24)

As we can see, this reclamation is powerful and complex. Although the speaker(s) of the poem “do not belong,” they assert that they are “everywhere, unseen.” Therefore, while the

poem's final note may not end on one of pure triumph, the speakers are on the way to re-embodying their power and are able to laugh once more.

I would argue that "To Sing Praisesong" marks the first important shift in *To Love as Aswang*. From here, the collection transitions into a new movement of poems in which Reyes more deeply explores the conflict between oppressive forces and Filipina women. In this new movement, Reyes opens the conversation to allow the reader to see the ways in which these women — who often blur the line between aswang and woman — fight back. For example, in "To Fear of Losing Oneself," Reyes positions her speaker's voices directly across from descriptions of colonizers' violence and illustrates the speaker using poetry and song in the face of harm, using the image of the manananggal returning to the lower half of her body:

> They blindfold us, they handcuff us — *We sing the poem of the breaking body,*
> Men with weapons, men with hubris — *We break the poem, we compose the self…*
> Men with stone in their veins, eruption — *We free through verse, we breathe, we call,*
> Devils dispensing the word of Law — *We call the self back to the self.* (30)

Then, in "To Remember," Reyes' speaker, now speaking in the singular first person, strengthens this sense of reclaiming and liberating oneself through poetry and song. She says:

> I saw the best poetas of my bloodline…
> Who found one another once again, in kundiman lyrics— …
> Who crafted mythologies to explain their own anger and loss, spirit animals, amphibian incarnations (47)

Based on this selection from "To Remember," we can see how Reyes' speaker views herself as connected to fellow Filipina writers, whom she refers to as "the best poetas of [her] bloodline," and celebrates them for rediscovering community through writing, or "kundiman lyrics." As explained by the Asian American literary nonprofit by the same name, kundiman is "the classic form of Filipino love song" in which "the singer who expresses undying love for his

beloved is actually singing for love of country." In a similar way, Reyes solidifies the connection of personal and political and how the form of poetry provides both a weapon of resistance and method of saving oneself.

Now, in "To Love as Aswang," Reyes more directly invokes the aswang and explores the overlap of the Filipina woman and the aswang:

> With razorblade eyes
> *With too much water*
>
> With animal teeth
> *We sometimes kill*
>
> With splintered hands
> *With too much life*
>
> With ribcage unlocked
> *We wither your roots*
>
> The Filipina is most sincere
> And will make a very good wife.
>
> The Filipina is a loyal partner,
> Deserving of all your love.
>
> The Filipina is the total package,
> Much more than meets the eye.
>
> The Filipina is not for you,
> If you cannot handle her claws. (31)

Here, Reyes draws influence from the entire aswang umbrella, instead of the more commonly referred to manananggal. "With animal teeth," for example, may refer to the weredog aswang or ghoul aswang, and "With razorblade eyes" seems to most directly invoke the witch aswang and her characteristic irises. More importantly, Reyes uses the aswang to empower "The Filipina," turning the usual fear-inducing nature of the mythological creature on its head: instead of serving as a tool for older generations to instill fear upon the younger, as we will see in Lynda Barry's work, Reyes transforms the aswang into a figure from which Filipinas can derive strength. Reyes reminds Filipinas of their strength to counter white male oppressors, whose commonly held, oversimplified perspectives on Filipina women she mocks in the first three lines beginning, "The Filipina is."

With many white men seeking "obedient" Filipina wives, often while serving in the army or even deliberately going to the Philippines in search of a spouse, Reyes addresses these men's

perspectives while also affirming that Filipina women are more than these men believe, as we can see through the shift from describing "The Filipina" as "most sincere," "a very good wife," "a loyal partner," and "the total package" to "Much more than meets the eye." By invoking the aswang through the poem's title as well as the poem's left column, where Reyes describes characteristic traits of the aswang, Reyes asserts that all Filipina women are aswang and can tap into her mythological power. Although the "you" she addresses in the poem is a hypothetical undeserving male audience, the title, "To Love as Aswang," and usage of the pronoun "we" solidifies that Reyes also addresses — and is perhaps more concerned about — her Filipina readers, wanting to empower them to reclaim this mystical strength and power despite common yet conflicting stereotypes that Filipina women are simultaneously too angry and obedient and submissive.

Finally, in what I would identify as the third and final movement of the collection, Reyes pushes the reclamation of what it means to be Filipina even further, no longer urging readers to witness the voice of the Filipina speaker alongside or in opposition to that of hypothetical colonizers or other harmful male figures. In this final movement, Reyes writes into existence a world in which Filipina women can fully claim their power without any presences acting to shame or vilify them.

Reyes writes an alternate timeline of revenge in "To Remember the Tita They Called a Bruja," rewriting the life of the Tita who was deemed a witch. At the same time, she does not create a lawless, heartless timeline, as sadness still marrs this Tita's triumph against her cruel employer:

> She ground glass fine baked into his flan
> She washed his rice with cobra venom
> She did not blink when his body convulsed …
> She beat her breast when they buried him. (64)

In “To Recite Tita Bruja’s Credo,” however, Reyes extinguishes any remaining sympathy, regret, or impulse for “apology and forgiveness.” She encourages the reader to gain inspiration from Tita Bruja’s bravery, writing this credo, or creed, inspired by her story in both English and the pre-colonial Philippine baybayin script:

> No love song. No need.
> No sacrifice. No worship.
> No mirror. No mimicry.
> No promise. No duty.
> No shadow. No servitude. (65)

Reyes continues this empowerment and mobilization of Filipina women in “To Survive an Apocalypse, a Girl Needs Light and Power,” still describing a feminine figure with the “she” pronoun, but now in a way that seems to address and uplift the Filipina reader:

> In lieu of starvation, she will break and enter, she will steal her daily bread
> In lieu of being sold to pedophiles and pimps, she will scavenge scraps and supplies
> In lieu of rape, she will stand watch tonight, so that her sisters may sleep. (76)

And in the final poem of the collection, “To Return a Heroine,” Reyes allows the reader to leave the world of *To Love as Aswang* with this image of the Filipina woman fully restored in her identity and power as a shaman. No longer is the speaker “unseen”; she takes pride in and is certain in her belonging:

> We tend to the body, baptism, medicine,
> We tend to the body, we guard the spirit.
>
> We charge through water, tsunami, typhoon,
> We charge through water, flanked by our kin,
>
> We march valiant, pressed and starched.
> We march valiant, in battle formation.
>
> We forge ashore, unsullied, ashimmer.
> We forget ashore as we swore. We return. (79)

In an attempt to contextualize the manner in which Reyes empowers her Filipina audience, I want to refer to Reyes' explanation of her understanding of rage and its role in challenging inequality and creating new futures in her conversation with Ire'ne Lara Silva of *The Rumpus*. I find that Reyes' elaboration on the power of rage in this conversation neatly echoes the narrative arc of *To Love as Aswang*, particularly as she cites Audre Lorde:

> Rage is complex, and it's so powerful, for a brown girl to come into a self-knowledge that is not afraid of rage, that does not perpetuate victimhood and victim narrative, that allows them to imagine something else to bring into being. So, this is from Audre Lorde: "Poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action."

Although I cannot hope to do justice to the multitude of plotlines one can trace throughout *To Love as Aswang*, I believe the forced transformation of shaman-woman to aswang and resulting re-transformation of aswang back into shaman-woman is a central thread that Reyes weaves throughout the collection. To pull my discussion into the other primary focal point of this project, Filipina mother-daughter relationships, I also want to note that it is unsurprising that engagements with the mother figure predominantly occur in the final movement of the collection, where both the tonality and speakers of the poems shift toward victory and peace.

Only after Reyes unravels the history of the aswang and rewrites the way we understand her relationship to Filipina American womanhood is she able to ask and answer the question, "*Where did your mother live?*" in "To Be Interrogated," leaving space at the end of the poem for the absence of an answer to exist as well (71). As a sort of preface to other Filipina American authors' engagements with the aswang and her relationship within the mother-daughter relationship, I also want to look at Reyes' poem "To Spend and Be Spent." Unlike the majority of the poems I previously discussed, which Reyes crafts with a more explicit connection to wartime and the Philippines under colonial rule, "To Spend and Be Spent" is more vulnerable in

its unpacking of the mother-daughter relationship. Reyes' speaker addresses their mother as Reyes writes:

> Inay, I'm with you in our homelessness
> Where you are always more manhandled and battered than I…
> I'm with you in our homelessness
> Where I piece together my gratitude, I am wounded but I am here
> I'm with you in our homelessness
> Where I hate that I hate you sometimes, Inay, I love you still. (61)

Here, Reyes brings a greater sense of humanity in her portrayal of the aftereffects of the violence she explored in earlier poems as she engages with the pain from a more personal point of view. She also begins to unfold the simultaneous tension and interconnectedness that exists between mother and daughter, which we will also witness and further explore in other Filipina American works.

Finally, in "To Love as Mother and Aswang," Reyes seems to present the poem from the perspective of the mother, who is simultaneously the aswang, and we begin to move in a direction that seems conducive to the daughter's healing in her relationship with her mother. Reyes writes:

> This is a hard question— It does not come free of charge— …
>
> I have been absent a lot It mirrors, then refracts the self—
> *With blistered mouth, we spill* The motherless self, the mother of self
>
> Forgetful, not regretting It happens, too, in the unfilled womb,
> *With callused knees, we fly* The prayer, the thanks, the why (77)

The "hard question" that the speaker brings up in the first line of the poem is unclear, but we may read it as "love" or the experience of loving as both mother and aswang, with the complicated history of the aswang complicating one's ability to experience and express love. In this poem, Reyes also writes the mother's confession: "I have been absent a lot" and I think

argues that perhaps healing is something we can instigate and create for ourselves. After all, it is through this poem that Reyes and other daughters are able to hear this near-apology and the explanation of the difficulties of living as the "motherless self, the mother of self." And it is through this poem that we become aware of how the aswang must survive. The speaker reveals, "*With blistered mouth, we spill*," and "*With callused knees, we fly*." Even as the Filipina woman in *To Love as Aswang* reconnects to and reclaims her mystical ancient powers, asserting that she is completely healed by the end of the collection is an oversimplification. In fact, it is perhaps only the daughter who is able to accomplish healing and empowerment and escape the cycle of aswang, or perhaps only the daughters that we are able witness in this healing.

CHAPTER TWO: THE FILIPINA AMERICAN MOTHER AS ASWANG

Like Reyes, cartoonist Lynda Barry incorporates the aswang into discussion of womanhood in her graphic novel *One! Hundred! Demons!*, a collection of what she calls "autobifictionalographic" short comics about her life growing up as a mixed-race Filipina. As Melinda Luisa de Jesús aptly describes, throughout the graphic novel, Barry explores "incidents and memories that trouble or haunt her — namely, her childhood and its manifold tragedies, large and small" (3), and in the chapter entitled "The Aswang," she hones in on how the aswang informs her understanding of her relationship with her mother; her relationship with her grandmother, who lives with them; and her mother's relationship with her (Barry's) grandmother. In "The Aswang," Barry learns about the creature from her grandmother, whose version of the aswang interestingly takes the form of both the weredog aswang and the manananggal. More specifically, Barry's grandmother explains, "'In the daytime she is a dog!'" (89), but "'at night she is a very beautiful woman who can cut herself in half and then she hides the bottom half. Then, look out! She can fly!'" (90). Despite still being a young girl in the story, Barry is more curious about the aswang than she is afraid— it is Barry's grandmother, to an extent, and, more notably, her mother who believe in and fear the creature. Potentially important is the fact that Barry's grandmother and mother, the latter of whom is mixed-race and half-white, both grew up in the Philippines while Barry grew up in Seattle. Barry seems to be a quarter Filipina, although this distinction is not specified in the graphic novel, and we can only assume from her lighter-skinned, red-haired appearance.

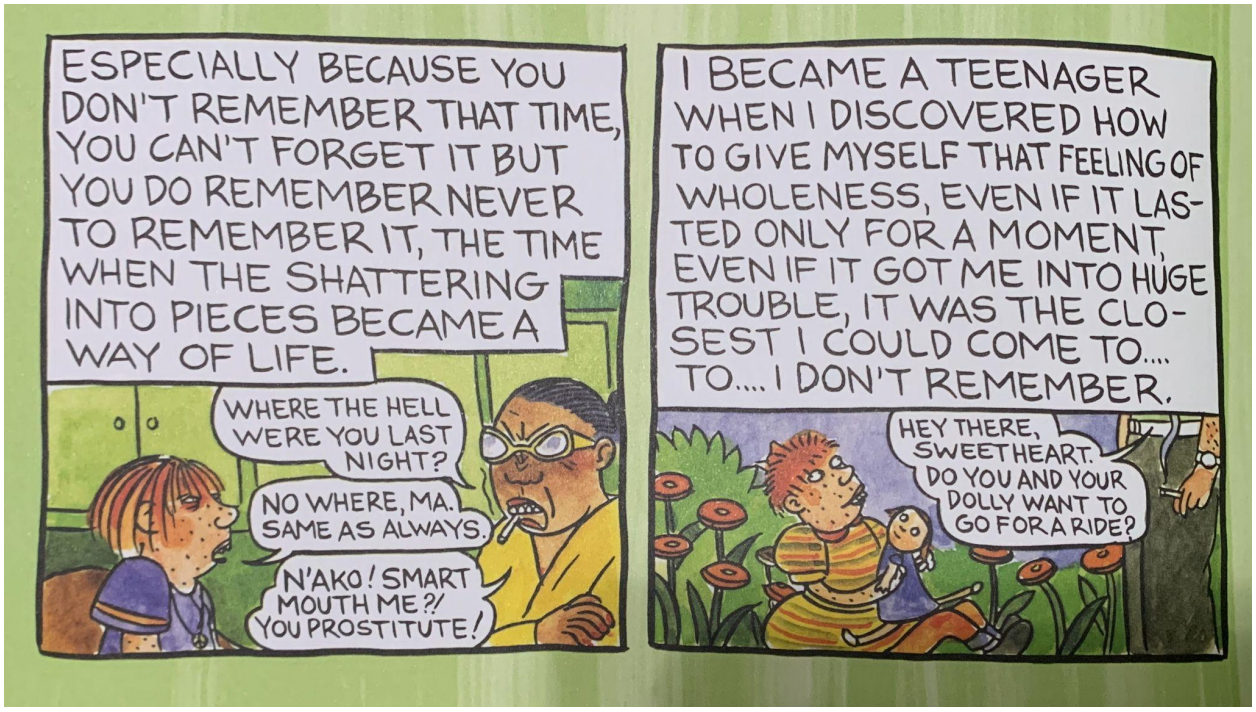
On the surface, discussing the aswang becomes a means of bonding for Barry and her grandmother, who answers Barry's unending questions about the creature. In an email correspondence with de Jesús in 2001, Barry provides more context:

> My version of the Aswang tale is the version I learned from several of my female relatives. My grandma, her sister, a second cousin, you know how the aswang gets brought up all the time in so many situations! They added or left things out depending on what lesson they were trying to teach us. Once Grandma told me the aswang was coming for me because I left my clothes on the floor!

In the comic, however, the presence of the aswang in conversation makes more apparent the rift between Barry's mother and grandmother, as Barry's mother becomes increasingly upset that her own mother and daughter continue to discuss the aswang despite her distaste, and Barry's grandmother makes fun of her daughter for still fearing the creature. Melinda Luisa de Jesús argues, "Barry brings a very esoteric Filipino folktale into the mainstream by revising it in a distinctly peminist [Filipina American feminist] way: she utilizes the folktale metaphorically to describe and also symbolize the generations of mother/daughter estrangement in her own family" (7). As de Jesús asserts, Barry uses the aswang to showcase the tension and conflict separating her from her mother and her mother from her grandmother, demonstrating how this dynamic is not unique to or centralized in her relationship with her mother. In de Jesús' words, Barry "reimagines the aswang symbolically as the monster of that estrangement" (8), as it is the aswang who enables Barry to see that the lack of love she perceives her mother to have for her may be a result of the same lack of love that her grandmother had for her mother as well.

Even as Barry must contend with her own strained relationship with her mother, she does not fear the aswang as her mother does. As Barry explains, "I wasn't afraid of the well-known monsters… There were other monsters though" (88). While she is not particularly afraid of the aswang, her mother is arguably scarier to both Barry and the reader. In Panel 8, Barry tells the reader, "[My mother] was unpredictable and quite violent. I was glad when Grandma moved in with us. She never actually protected me from Mom, but she did other things." And in Panel 16, we see this violence — which we also see in many of the other comics throughout the graphic

novel — in action as Barry's mother exclaims to her daughter, "'You wait! You'll see! You'll be so sorry you ever had kids! Children are a punishment! You just wait!'" Barry's tense relationship with her mother is one of the primary haunting tragedies of childhood that she explores in *One! Hundred! Demons!*, and she contends that her mother's scariness exceeds that of the aswang, calling her mother instead "another monster" entirely.



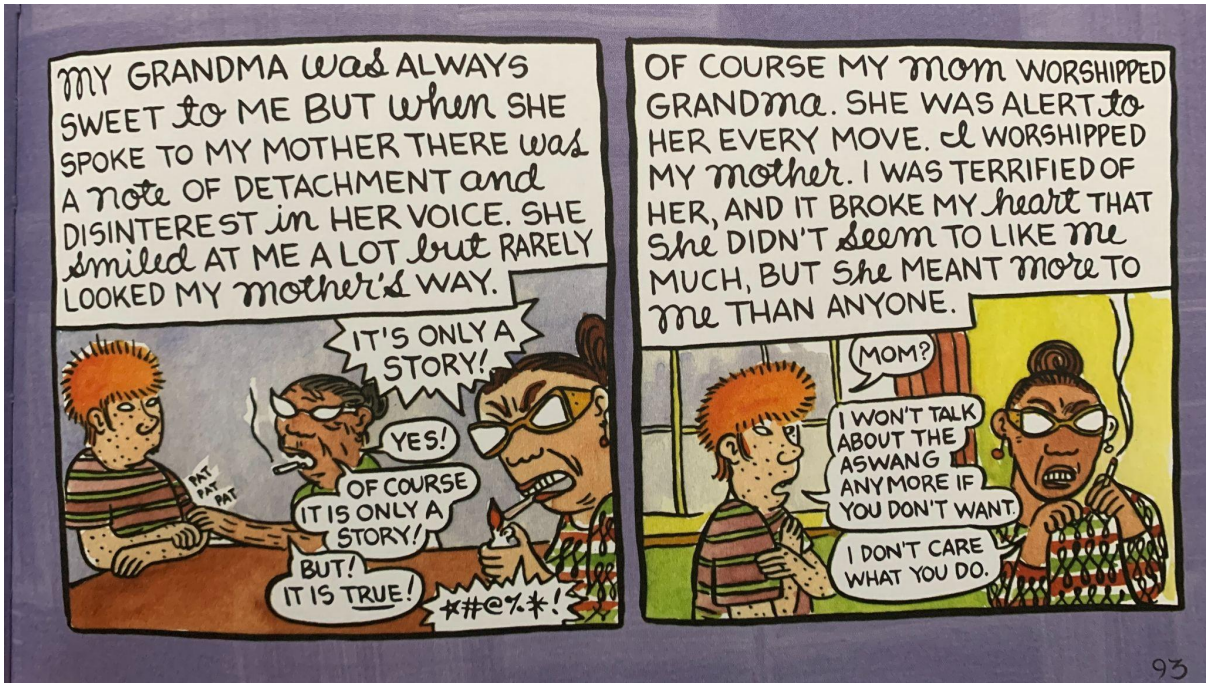
Panels 17-18 from "Resilience"

Here, the feminine embodiment of the aswang is more complex. While Barry's mother may exceed the aswang, de Jesús explains that "grandmas, like the aswang herself, suck the life from their own daughters by bonding with and thus 'stealing' their granddaughters' affection away from their own mother" (10). In other words, the tension is not isolated to the relationship between mother and daughter and is exacerbated by the presence of the grandmother, who reminds her daughter of her lack of love for her by showing the granddaughter an influx of

affection that makes the distinction clear. We might say that this tension is generational and cyclical, existing because of the strained mother-daughter relationships that came before. De Jesús seems to argue that it is primarily Barry's grandmother who occupies the role of aswang in their household, and I will also add that despite Barry calling her mother "another monster," her mother still bears a resemblance to the aswang by de Jesús's definition, as Barry's mother undoubtedly sucks the life from her daughter as well. In "San Francisco," for example, Barry's mother exclaims in Panel 7, "'I'm going to kill you! Where have you been?! N'ako, I'm going to kill you!'" I personally view both Barry's grandmother and mother as the aswang of Barry's childhood. Despite this relentless cycle of emotional violence, however, Barry notes that she "worshiped" her mother, which renders their complicated relationship all the more heartbreaking (93). In Barry's words, "I loved them both. It was in my blood to love them" (95).

Before moving on to another of Barry's stories, I also want to return to the curiosity and lack of fear that characterize Barry's relationship with the aswang. From the first conversation that Barry has about the aswang with her grandmother, we can see how Barry's youthful curiosity is what propels the conversation forward. While Barry's grandmother may claim to be more interested in watching "Let's Make a Deal!" on the television, Barry is unrelenting with her questions. On page 90, she asks a question about the manananggal that even I am unsure about: "Where's she hide her legs?" And on page 92, she asks for more important clarification: "Yeah, but how did that lady become the aswang?" Across my numerous readings of this comic, Barry's lack of fear, genuine curiosity, and sort of detachment that she maintains from the aswang are what most stand out. Although I cannot pinpoint what it is about Barry that makes this detachment possible for her, I believe that because Barry is able to interact with the aswang in this light-hearted way, she is the first of her maternal line to break from the cycle of aswang. I

believe that Barry understands the aswang, as she is the first to wonder aloud about the woman behind the story and think of the aswang with compassion. “The histories of vampires and people are not so different, really,” Barry remarks. “How many of us can honestly see our own reflection?” (94).



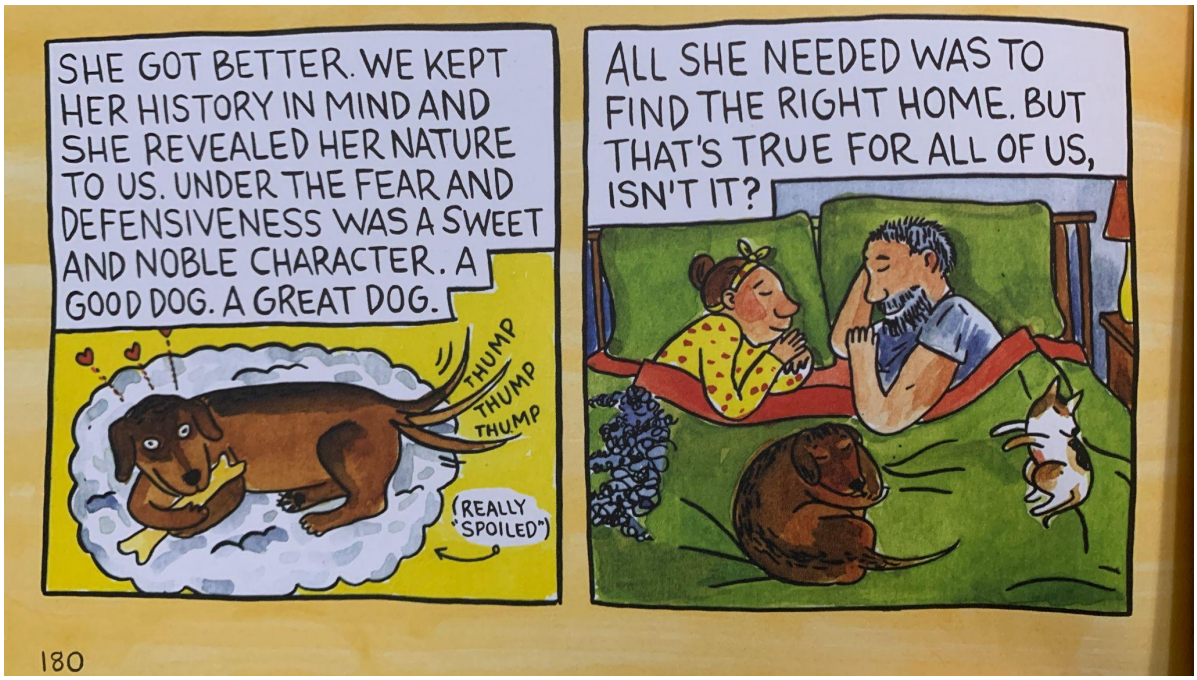
Panels 11-12 from “The Aswang”

While the aswang does not explicitly appear in other comics in *One! Hundred! Demons!*, I would like to argue that she makes a subtle return later, in “Dogs.” In this comic, Barry interweaves her adult life and childhood as she discusses the early difficulties of taking care of her dog, Oola, whom she and her husband adopted from a shelter. Unlike Barry’s two other dogs, whom she describes as having “very good beginnings,” Oola was abused at four months old: one of her previous owners threw her out of a second floor window “to prove some sort of point” (174). As a result, Oola exhibits behavioral problems, sometimes biting Barry, but Barry —

although she states that she is not a perfect owner — understands why Oola acts the way that she does and continues to care for her new pet. For me, this understanding that Barry exhibits toward Oola immediately reminded me of "The Aswang," in which Barry tries to understand the aswang, rather than fearing her. In Panels 9 and 10 of "The Aswang," Barry states:

> Back then I knew a lot more about monsters than I did about people. Monsters were understandable. They usually had a reason for being the way they were… Monsters hardly ever started out as monsters. Something always transformed them. Was this also true of the aswang? (92)

This reasoning behind Barry's lack of fear and sympathy for aswang can be applied to Oola, and Oola also brings to mind Barry's family's version of the aswang, who appears as a dog during the day. In extending this understanding that Barry has for aswang (and her mother, as she recognizes the strain and heartbreak of not being liked by one's mother) to Oola, whose previous owners deemed a monster and returned to the shelter, she arguably breaks the cycle of estrangement in her family. Barry does not have children, but she ultimately does own three dogs with her husband and achieves a harmonious, loving relationship with the three of them by the conclusion of the comic. Although Barry initially struggles to train and foster trust in her relationship with Oola, "Dogs" ends on a particularly heartwarming note as Barry draws a contented Oola reposing on the bed with herself and her husband. Barry closes the comic on a note of love and understanding, writing, "All she needed was to find the right home. But that's true for all of us, isn't it?" (180). If we extend Barry's thinking to the aswang and her mother, we can see that Barry believes the aswang and her mother are simply isolated figures who have been mistreated, and in their own suffering, began to redirect their pain toward others. Like Reyes, Barry reinvents the aswang, but she also uses the image of the aswang to move closer to a place of healing, despite her estranged maternal relationship.



Panels 17-18 from "Dogs"

Upon first glance, Melissa R. Sipin's essay, "The Shape of My Mother's Body," seems to echo the ways in which Barry's engagement with the aswang further explores and represents generational trauma. In this essay, however, Sipin leans further into darker engagements with the aswang, interweaving the mythological figure into her attempts to explore her estranged relationship with her mother, who abandoned her and left her in the care of her grandmother, and the trauma of rape as it appears in both her grandmother's life as a Filipina comfort woman and her own adolescence with her father. To introduce the reader to her mother and her mother's relationship with her grandmother, Sipin writes:

> I think back to my birthmother: my grandmother always called her the Aswang. Selfish. Woman who only cared for herself. Woman who sold herself on the Internet—Craigslist ad: here is my body, dressed in black; here are my eyes: deadened, no revise that, drunk, fierce; here is my face: once beautiful, you can tell; the hair: frizzled and bleached; the face: yes, Filipina, yes, mail-order, yes, lovely, no, once lovely and lovely no more; and then the body: childish, small, short, desirous. The Aswang. Alluring. Woman my grandmother called selfish. Called female demon who ate the bodies of innocents: newborns. (89)

To me, this passage is in conversation with Reyes' "To Pierce the Heart," where Reyes writes, "She is online, oiled string bikini ass shot; subscribe to her, and see her yield to group opinion." At the same time, in Sipin's essay, the Filipina woman that she engages with is perhaps more concrete and real, and without any barriers of distance or fictionality from their subject matter, Sipin urges the reader to look at her story from the inside. We can see how the tension of Sipin's birth mother and grandmother's relationship reflects a similar sort of discontentment, disapproval, and even distaste that Barry's grandmother seemed to hold for Barry's mother. Similarly to Barry, this estrangement crosses oceans: Sipin describes being born and raised in Torrance, California, the first of her maternal line to be born in the United States. In Sipin's work, however, I would argue that she pushes a bit further, providing the reader with more

context regarding some of the reasoning behind this maternal estrangement. To further examine this complicated history, Sipin engages with what she calls the aswang's "tragic and ironic postcolonial narrative":

> This mythos of the Aswang got to me because of the rapes. My grandmother would tell me that my mother left because she was the Aswang. But to her—everything that was not ladylike meant that fatalistic doom—if you don't wash your dishes and clean the house like a lady, you'll become the Aswang; if you don't go to church and wear stockings and cross your legs while sitting, you'll become the Aswang; if you don't come home exactly five minutes after the class bell rings, then you're out kissing boys and, yes, you're the Aswang. (93)

As we explored earlier, in the colonial context, the aswang was transformed from a mythological creature and into a way for Spanish colonizers to vilify the socially powerful Filipina shamans and priestesses as mere witches and aswang, arguably disappearing in the process. Sipin also adds that when Spanish friars found that their insults were not enough to usurp these women's power, they "paid olgasanes, vagabonds and kanto street boys, to rape them" (93). In the essay, Sipin recounts her grandmother's sister revealing the truth about her grandmother on the day of her funeral. Like many of the women deemed as aswang during colonial Philippines, Sipin's grandmother was raped by Japanese soldiers during World War II. In this "postcolonial narrative," however, Sipin demonstrates yet another transformation of the aswang — and one that does not involve reclamation of her power. Much like Filipino parents who use the weredog aswang as a tool to scare their children into not going outdoors during the nighttime, Sipin's grandmother uses the aswang as a tool to shame traits she deems unladylike or sexually indecent. This haunting transformation arguably builds on the narrative pushed by Spanish friars and not the aswang in her purest form, instead implying that the aswang deserves her monstrosity, brought it upon herself, and is unworthy of attempting to reclaim her original power. Drawing a connection between her grandmother and the aswang but then demonstrating

how their grandmother uses the aswang to shame her own daughter, Sipin shows the reader many layers of complication and heartbreak.

Like Barry's case, this tension is not isolated to grandmother and mother and bleeds into the relationship between mother and daughter as well, and Sipin describes her ongoing struggle with the after-effects of being abandoned by her mother at a young age. At the same time, she pivots into this revelation: "No, my grandmother never called my birthmother the Aswang. She called her selfish, yes, but I learned the mythos of the Aswang in college. It was I who called my mother the Aswang" (89). With this revelation, the existing sense of complication grows. While Sipin's grandmother may have shamed her daughter for being unladylike or promiscuous, Sipin demonstrates how she has played her own role in exacerbating the hurt of the cycle of aswang in her family. Unlike Barry, Sipin writes from the midst of her trauma, still trying to move toward healing. From the depths of this place, Sipin cannot engage with the aswang with the same youthful detachment as Barry, and her essay lacks the same sense of resolve that Barry gives the reader by following "The Aswang" with "Dogs."

Even so, Sipin still moves forward in this essay. She imagines her mother as the woman she was, transforming her from aswang and back into human, though Sipin describes her as one without a face. At the end of this passage, however, Sipin introduces the added complication of describing her mother as missing her aswang body, bearing a resemblance to Reyes' "To Love as Mother and Aswang," where she writes of how the aswang survives despite her wounded existence. "With blistered mouth, we spill," Reyes writes, and "[w]ith callused knees, we fly" (77). At the end of her essay, Sipin explores a similar coexistence. She writes:

> The shape of my mother's leaving body is this:
>
> Red, gorgeous lips.
> A brimmed hat.
> Knock-off Nine West heels.

> Nails painted pink.
> Frizzy, dyed blonde dying hair.
> Ripped jeans.
> Shirt also ripped.
> Face covered in make-up.
> A blank face. No-face.
> Eyes: leaving.
> My mother's eyes: they were always lost, looking for her fangs and wings.
> Hands always empty, discolored, palms upward, palms eclipsed by the sun. (99)

And she imagines her grandmother's body:

> the smell of burned earth,
> her white barong dress,
> her pearls, her golden rings— …
> I say to myself: *I am no longer alone*.
> What do you say to the answer of survival?
>
> …
>
> Here are our eyes: hollow, but—
> no longer searching.
> Here are our eyes: no longer reaching for home. (102)

While Sipin's essay lacks the same sense of resolution that Barry gives the reader, if we consider the state of being aswang as hereditary, we can still view Sipin as having broken from the curse and cycle. In this conclusion, she characterizes her grandmother with an emphasis on her humanity through the cultural attire and accessories that she once loved, and she even describes her mother, who was once an aswang, as "looking for her fangs and wings" (99), no longer in possession of the same cruel power she once had. I wonder if perhaps Sipin envisions her mother as wishing to reclaim her power for good. Like Reyes, Sipin concludes her work with the sense that she, her grandmother, and her mother — although they have experienced pain and have played a part in each other's hurt — have now found a sense of belonging, a sense of home.

CHAPTER THREE: FILIPINA AMERICAN MOTHER-DAUGHTER POETRY AND THE SHADOW OF THE ASWANG

To build on the context of direct allusions to the aswang, I now want to turn to Filipina-authored texts where we see this influential figure permeate representations of the mother more subtly. With our greater understanding of the aswang, "At the Pumpkin Festival My Lips Burn Bright" by Filipina-Indian poet Aimee Nezhukumatathil becomes especially rich. She opens the poem by welcoming the reader to a pumpkin festival in Clarence, New York, where "Boys in flannel line up to see who can throw / [pumpkins] the farthest, spinning / through the air like suns too drunk / from summer's end" (1-4). In the third stanza, she then transitions into a warm but complex portrait of her speaker and mother. Her introduction of the mother in the poem is undoubtedly tender as she writes, "Every year I beg / my mother to plant a pumpkin / so we can harvest it together" (11-3), establishing an image of a daughter desiring to bond with her mother by growing something together in the garden. As Nezhukumatathil renders this relationship more nuanced through her description of the pumpkin, however, we can also more clearly see how the aswang manifests:

> A giant birthday cake for the woman
> who was born the day before Halloween,
> who I once thought was a witch
> when she cut my curfew in half
> with a wave of her thin hands.
> Seed & gutrot ≈ Stem & root.
> The crunch of toasted seeds—the only
> salty protection my mouth has against witches. (14-21)

In this representation of the mother, Nezhukumathatil evokes the characteristic day-to-night transformation of the aswang, describing the mother's sudden magical capacity as a "witch" who "cut [her] curfew in half / with a wave of her thin hands" (16-8). She also

emphasizes the mother's seemingly innate magical nature by referring to her Halloween-adjacent birthdate and having situated the poem at the pumpkin festival. With these images in mind, it is still easy to dismiss Nezhukumathatil's usage of "witch" as the European or American variation, but I would like to argue instead that the beginning of the poem makes this dismissal impossible. Nezhukumathathil sets the reader up in the pumpkin festival and provides important cultural associations surrounding the fruit:

> Some Chinese believe
> this fruit is the most lucky of all—so fertile
> and thumpy with a satisfying knock
> on its belly to plim pregnant women
> nicely round. (7-11)

Recall the manananggal's targeting of expectant mothers, with her goal being "to suck the baby dry, killing it" (Ramos 240). Like in Barry's "The Aswang," it is clear that the mother's embodiment of aswang-like traits creates a rift in her relationship with her daughter, who was once upset when her curfew was shortened. But in "At the Pumpkin Festival My Lips Burn Bright," the speaker's current and continued desire to plant and harvest a pumpkin with her mother to celebrate her birthday diminishes this conflict, which also lacks the intensity of Barry's representation of her mother. There is also a temporal distance between the speaker's understanding of her mother as aswang and the present moment. Moreover, in highlighting the Chinese belief in the pumpkin's benefits for fertility and pregnancy, Nezhukumatathil soothes the generational discord that Barry so effectively highlights: the speaker's perception of her mother as aswang is in the past, and she has made peace with the conflicts that once separated them. Now, she wants to participate in a ritual associated with child-bearing, demonstrating a sense of healing, forgiveness, and willingness to move forward.

As we arrive at the end of the poem, however, Nezhukumatathil seamlessly complicates her representation of the mother-daughter relationship once again. She writes, "Seed & gutrot ≈ Stem & root. / The crunch of toasted seeds—the only / salty protection my mouth has against witches" (19-21). In this planting and harvesting process, then, the desire for togetherness and sense of healing and forgiveness are complicated by the fact that from the same pumpkin that will celebrate the speaker's mother, the speaker gains a valuable byproduct: "toasted seeds" to protect her from witches and thus her mother. Considering how suspicion saturates this innocent image, Nezhukumatathil demonstrates that the daughter's healing has not yet come full circle and still continues to associate her mother with the witch aswang.

This notable coexistence of love and warmth and the aswang's frightening power within one Filipina woman is also present in Reyes' "To Love as Aswang":

With razorblade eyes	The Filipina is most sincere
With too much water	And will make a very good wife.
With animal teeth	The Filipina is a loyal partner,
We sometimes kill	Deserving of all your love. (31)

If we read the right column of the poem as genuine statements celebrating Filipina women rather than as mocking men who reduce Filipinas to objects of romantic and/or sexual interest, Reyes uses the poem to call the reader's attention to the coexistence of sincerity, loyalty, and terrifying, murderous power. While the violence of halving one's daughter's curfew pales in comparison to Reyes' direct allusions to the aswang and her harrowing warning, "*We sometimes kill*," I believe that this coexistence of opposing capacities is an important factor in these new representations of aswang-women, as it allows for Filipina authors to reinvent the aswang to better represent a multifaceted understanding of Filipina womanhood.

Filipina American rapper Ruby Ibarra accomplishes a similar effect in her subtle invocation of the aswang in her song, “Realness.” Ibarra uses this song to celebrate her personal growth and new “realness” and also pays an homage to the people and places that have contributed to this process. She addresses her mother in Verse 3, stating, “Mama look at me, this the person I become / Half beast, half girl with a sword for a tongue / Oddly, being this godly, take my prey and disembody.” While this song centers the daughter more than it does the mother, Ibarra reclaims traits of the aswang for herself, particularly with her reference to having “a sword for a tongue” and “disembodying” prey like the manananggal, and she uses the figure of the aswang as a source of power, much like Reyes. At the same time, the song, while upbeat, empowering, and confident, is also vulnerable. In Verse 2, Ibarra raps, “And when the sun go down, do you feel that moon? / I was that seed in the dark that no one thought would bloom.” Upon first glance, she seems to allude to the aswang’s characteristic day-to-night transformation but then turns the myth on its head by describing herself as a “seed” that has finally bloomed, rather than a girl who has turned to a beast in the night. By creating room for vulnerability even as she invokes figures like the aswang, Ibarra further contributes to the complexities that Filipina American writers and artists infuse in their associations of aswang and woman.

Returning now to Nezhukumatathil, in *Oceanic*, she precedes “At the Pumpkin Festival My Lips Burn Bright” with another poem that references — albeit more subtly — mother-daughter relationships, “When You Select the Daughter Card.” This poem, which Nezhukumatathil designates as “part of a reimagined Tarot deck,” focuses instead on the daughter figure, like Ibarra’s “Realness.” It also provides a sense of healing that serves as an effective precursor to “At the Pumpkin Festival My Lips Burn Bright.” Even in this healing and the distance that it establishes between the Daughter and traditional aswang, I would like to point

out that Nezhukumatathil's infusion of magic and the spiritual remains stronger than ever, both in her characterization of the Daughter and inspiration from tarot cards. I also believe that we can view the Daughter in this poem as a sort of healed aswang, no longer cursed to instill fear in and prey on those around her. Nezhukumatathil opens the poem:

> The Daughter imparts her bravery to those
> who are willing to collect urchin
> and pearl. She is sometimes mistaken
> for mermaid, but she can also walk quiet
> on the shore, symbolizing a harmony
> between earth and the dazzle of the sea. (1-6)

Like the mother's transformation into aswang, the Daughter in this poem is associated with a magical creature, the mermaid, whose general connotation is certainly less negative and frightening but is still a figure that would surprise an onlooker. Even so, Nezhukumatathil writes that the daughter "can also walk quiet / on the shore, symbolizing a harmony / between earth and the dazzle of the sea" (4-6), unlike the traditional aswang, whose transformations from woman to monster are motivated by desire to hunt prey and also isolate her from community by preventing her from living a peaceful life. While the traditional aswang is perpetually in conflict with her surroundings as a predator, the Daughter is at peace and enjoys her place among nature.

At the same time, Nezhukumatathil affirms the complexity of the Daughter card, pointing to the coexistence of obstacles and possibility of overcoming these struggles. We see this messaging in many tarot cards, such as the Three of Cups, which depicts a person distraught over two fallen cups yet unaware of the cup just behind them, perfectly intact, and the Ten of Swords, which traditionally depicts a figure who has been impaled by ten swords but also promises that the worst of one's pain has already passed. Similarly, Nezhukumatathil complicates the image of the Daughter in harmony with nature by writing, "This card is often associated with blue, /

blood-true, but sometimes chilled / from the watery mysteries of too many / narwhal spins" (7-10), which creates the sense that the Daughter may be troubled by these "narwhal spins," although the overall image remains youthful and innocent. The next lines, however, communicate a new gravity, "This card carries a suggestion / of permanent ink" (10-1). Nezhukumatathil then characterizes the Daughter as extremely — and potentially dangerously — powerful like the aswang, writing, "The power flowing / through the Daughter is oceanic, the rupture / of pillow lava on the seafloor" (11-3). Based on these lines, we can see that the Daughter's power has multifaceted potential and could be used to instigate destruction rivaling the strength of natural disaster, much like "The Filipina" in Reyes' "To Love as Aswang."

Despite the continued resonance with the aswang with references to the Daughter's magical nature and potentially destructive power, Nezhukumatathil does not undermine her striking, beautiful image of the Daughter as a healed aswang. Later in the poem, she affirms the existence of the Daughter's complicated past and complicated relationships to those around her but portrays her as not being tied to these tensions. "The card's lower half," Nezhukumatathil writes, "features a fountain pen, which symbolizes / history and future-history" (13-5), demonstrating how the Daughter is informed by her history but also moves into the future, and this detail also lessens the initially daunting nature of the previous lines, "This card carries a suggestion / of permanent ink." With the presence of the fountain pen, we see that the "suggestion" is merely that, and within the framework of reading the Daughter as a healed aswang, the Daughter is able to defy the permanent ink of history.

The daughter is also not confined to the powers of a mermaid, or even aquatic-based powers, as Nezhukumatathil likens her power to lava. In fact, this poem is saturated with difficult coexistences, but ones that Nezhukumatathil asserts the Daughter can overcome. She writes, "By

seeking / to understand and accept the more salty aspects / of yourself, you might grow another arm or leg, / pointing at your truest love" (15-8), and the image of the healed aswang grows more malleable to each person seeking a lesson from the Daughter card while deviating from the fear of difference, which has contributed to many Filipinos' fear of alleged aswang. It is also notable that through the Daughter card, Nezhukumatathil encourages acceptance of "the more salty aspects" of oneself as salt is one of the known aswang deterrents, particularly the manananggal, who cannot return to the lower half of her body if someone has salted it. In "At the Pumpkin Festival My Lips Burn Bright," Nezhukumatathil also notes that the pumpkin seeds provide salty protection against witches. By urging the reader to accept and embrace this saltiness that appears in both poems and in shifting to the "you" pronoun, Nezhukumatathil arguably asks us to accept the aswang within.

Nezhukumatathil then closes the poem with a final image:

> The Daughter symbolizes
> a knowledge of the mysteries of family found
> inside of a mollusk but does not restrict you
> to dozens of scallop-eyes spying on you.
> The Daughter reminds you to look
> for moon-glow on every leaf and sea grape. (21-6)

With the image of "dozens of scallop-eyes spying on you" (24), Nezhukumatathil creates the feeling of the Daughter's family and ancestors looking upon her, likely with the potential for judgment, and emphasizes that she is part of a collective. The Daughter, however, is free. Her tarot card, most importantly, begins, "The Daughter imparts her bravery to those / who are willing to collect urchin / and pearl" (1-3) and ends with a reminder "to look / for moon-glow on every leaf and sea grape" (25-6). Although the Daughter remains connected to "the mysteries of family" and her "oceanic" capacity for power and destruction, she chooses to indulge in simple

sources of contentment. As this poem — much like Nezhukumatathil's other work — continually urges the reader to move toward childlike joy and wonder, I believe the Daughter has healed from the generational curse of the aswang and that Nezhukumatathil argues this healing is possible for all Daughters as well. In response to Maricel Soriano's question of what determines whether a victim of an aswang attack becomes like the creature or dies, Nezhukumatathil would perhaps assert that the Daughter's ability to find and appreciate sources of wonder in the world keeps her alive and propagates her healing.

CONCLUSION

In retrospect, perhaps I should not have asked my mother whether the aswang can cross oceans to reach us, but rather: How do we carry the aswang with us? How does she inform our relationship with each other and ourselves? How can we learn from the aswang and reclaim her in a way that helps us move toward understanding? I believe that Filipina American writers' allusions to the aswang in their exploration of womanhood and their representations of their mothers — whether intended or not — help us to understand the often complicated nature of both Filipina American womanhood and mother-daughter relationships. More than this, the multifaceted ways in which these writers engage with, subvert, and reinvent the aswang in their explorations demonstrate a sustained and pertinent desire to write forward and toward healing. I believe that none of the associations of Filipina women and mothers with aswang come from a place of hatred or maliciousness; from Lynda Barry's candidly heartbreaking representations of her mother's own experience of maternal estrangement to Aimee Nezhukumatathil's affinity for the protective nature of pumpkin seeds, these writers share an underlying tenderness for their mothers and arguably write from a place of love. As a result, the writers I have centered in this project leave their readers with the sense that while there is hurt and yet more healing to be done, we can empower ourselves to move forward.

At the dinner table one night during the tailend of my progress toward the ever-daunting completion of this project, my mother asked me what I had been holed up in my room doing. The persistent clack of my keyboard, she said, was audible from downstairs. After my unthorough explanation of something I had spent the best and worst of the past few months thinking deeply about, my mother looked at me and said, "Oh."

She spun the small lazy susan that sits atop our table — one of her most exciting TJ Maxx finds, one that I think reminds her of her family's dinner table back home — so I could reach what remained of last night's lechon paksiw. Lechon paksiw is a sour pork dish that, like most Filipino cuisine, magically tastes better the next day. I served myself first, the vinegary stew seeping into my rice.

My mother watched. "Well," she said finally, "do you believe in it?"

I swiveled the lazy susan back toward her and began to mix my rice, pushing the eye of a peppercorn to the edge of my plate. "I don't know," I said, choosing to give the easy, expected answer. "Maybe back then. Maybe in the rural areas of the provinces."

I would like to think that the combination of this project and the literature that I examine throughout it are more than enough evidence for one to know where I really stand. After all, it is simple: I am the aswang in the way I continually detach and reassemble the disparate elements of myself in search of something more resilient. My mother is the aswang in the way that she is unconquerable while in pursuit of something she wants, in the way that she always persists. I admit that I know little about the women in my family, but I do know that both my maternal and paternal grandmothers are also strong in a way that exceeds words and that they have survived more than they should have needed to. They are the aswang, too.

For me, it truly is simple. I imagine the aswang persisting inside all the women in my family. I see her lurking in the most rural provinces, taking flight at midnight and promising to herself that she will no longer scare the children. I see her parading through Manila, pondering whether to buy banana cue from the street vendors. I see her in the aisles of Seafood Cities across the United States and Atlanta's own Manila Mart, still hungry after all this time. In my mind, she has learned to fit in, meet people's eyes, and smile from the heart regardless of the

direction in which her irises reflect the world. Let me answer my own question: the oceans, however many of them there are, would never have posed a problem.

Although I have spent many pages attempting to unravel the complexity of this impossibly knotted web of Filipina women, aswang, aswang-women, and more, let me again make a case for simplicity. Here, I look back to Nezhukumatathil for inspiration on how to return to the bones of something we have found to be so complex. Her short story, "The Witching Hour," locates the innocence that can exist between mother and daughter, even in the face of someone like the aswang.

Nezhukumatathil writes of both her mother and the aswang fondly:

> In my mother's wild bedtime stories, the aswang came alive, and was more visceral to me than any giant lumberjack that liked to eat flapjacks and had a blue cow. Her voice softened when she told these stories—I'd have my head in her lap and she never acted rushed, even if she had a stack of paperwork to finish before work the next day. We always rushed—to the dentist, to my sister's violin lessons, to find me toy dinosaurs at ten o'clock at night for a diorama due the next morning in Science class—but never when she told me those stories at night. (*Four Genres* 343)

I think it is radical how she reaches behind the layers of the aswang and comes back with wonder, curiosity, and openness, and I particularly appreciate how, in this story, the aswang is beautiful in her monstrosity, not simply when she is apart from it. The aswang is someone that brings Nezhukumatathil closer to her mother, an aspect of her culture that she defends and fights to keep alive. I recall the innocence with which Lynda Barry engaged with the aswang in her own youth. Perhaps living as, with, and because of the aswang can truly be this simple, and we can do away with our sloped roofs and sharpened bamboo. The aswang, as much as she stands for centuries of feminine resilience in the face of unspeakable terror, can also stand for this childlike wonder and desire to understand someone who is different from oneself. Here is where

we begin to bridge the gap: What will bring the aswang peace and comfort? How can we make her feel at home in her new home? Who has the aswang become now?

EPILOGUE

Duplex

No one knows how the body reattaches.
In the dark, I wait like a pale scar.

In the dark, I wait, impatient and scarred.
My mother tells me, *Forget about hope*.

I can tell my mother remembers hope
when she discards her legs in the night.

When she discards her legs in the night,
my mother flies back to the land of salt.

My mother flies, back in the land of salt.
Above the Spanish roofs is the red morning.

The Spanish roofs are red and mourning.
They know she can never stay for long.

I know why she never stays for long.
No one knows how the body reattaches.

Homecoming

Once, my mother promised to haunt me.

I imagine her ghost-palm, a greeting

at the arch of my foot. My father chants

bari bari bari to warn the sleeping

spirits as he pours hot water down the drain.

I become that tiny doll, rotating in flame.

I've decided: I won't salt her body. I'll wait

until I hear the beat of her wings.

Duplex

This is not a dream. This is the future:
My mother throws me into the sun.

> When my mother throws me into the sun,
> wings erupt from my back like a blessing.

The wings at my back are her blessing.
In her prayers, I learned to trust my blood.

> I trusted her prayer and learned my blood.
> We cracked salt in the dark of our mouths.

We leapt into the sky, the salt in our mouths.
My wings reach further than my mother's.

> My wings always reach back to my mother.
> The ocean beneath us is an endless body.

Our endless bodies and the ocean beneath:
This is not a dream. This is the future.

When the aswang first visits Jollibee

the door is heavier than she imagined,
and she does not expect the gold

sound of bells. Inside, the children
are rounder than ever, red-faced

with sweet tomato and cheese.
Their mothers blot their soft cheeks.

Their fathers peel the last chicken
from the bone. What makes the taste

of it so jolly? The aswang counts
her coins and wonders how much

the bee understands. The boy
at the register seems to know

the answer. His smile lights
his eyes as he asks for her name.

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