

Mix Mix Tayo:

The Many Pieces in Our Stories

by

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ABSTRACT

“Mix Mix Tayo: The Many Pieces in Our Stories” is a written reflection, exploring the creation of the dance documentary, *Carried Across the Water* as well as the community event, *Mix Mix Tayo*. The ideas behind these works are centered in storytelling, filipino american identity and community. This research explores the use of film, dance, event production and the mixing of elements to create new wholes in order to communicate these ideas. These works were imagined in response to a call that was felt from people actively searching for healing, community and ancestral knowledge.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my Lola. She had the most incredible hands I have ever known. They were strong, soft, wrinkled and brown and I am so glad I got to hold those hands. I am so glad those hands held me.

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LIST OF DEFINITIONS

1. Breaking: In chapter 2, I mention my cousins, “breaking in the basement.” The more common way of saying this would be “break dancing,” however that would be using a term generally deemed incorrect by those coming from the Hip Hop community.
2. Filipinx: This is a gender neutral term, alternative to Filipino or Filipina. Throughout this document I choose to use the three terms interchangeably, in an attempt at my own reconciliation when I consider the violence brought on by forcing gender conformity. I realize our knowledge around these ideas is constantly shifting, so in the future my ideas around this may seem dated.
3. Lola: Tagalog word for grandmother.
4. Tagalog: One of the main languages spoken in the Philippines.
5. Tita: Tagalog word for aunt.

PREFACE

As humans we carry stories in us, whether they are stories we are told, or our own moments we write, record, tell and retell. These stories shape us as individuals and also create bonds tying us together.

Recently, I have changed the way I think about the stories we choose to share with each other. There are certain instances from our lives that become *those stories*; the ones we share repeatedly over a lifetime.

Now when I hear a friend telling me a story they have told me before, I don't pause them and casually mention, "you already told me that." Instead I listen again, like watching a favorite movie or listening to a song on repeat. I notice the places where the rhythm of the story stays the same, where the dramatic pauses lie or the place in the story where the pace always quickens. I notice the way stories sometimes shift over time and I honor that too. It makes it no less real, that's just how this works. The way I think about stories has been changing over the past few years and this is just one example of that.

This document is a story too.

INTRODUCTION and the naming of things

In the summer of 2019 I went to the Philippines to honor the one year passing of my Lola's death, a tradition sometimes referred to as the *lowering of the mourning*.

There were prayers, processions to the burial site, the stripping off of black clothing to reveal white clothing underneath, and many more small beautiful gestures in ceremony.



photo of Lola from the lowering of the mourning.

Towards the end of that trip I found myself in Manila with my mom and my favorite tita. I told them I had a dance class and snuck away to a neighboring city to see a woman whom I met online. Her name was Alyssa, she had a few thousand social media followers she had gained from her side gig as a tattoo artist working from the bedroom of her home in Makati, Philippines.

It took me a little while to find her house, navigating crowded city streets, unfamiliar roads, and homes sandwiched close together. When I made it there it was late

afternoon and a stranger invited me inside. I walked into a living room dimly lit by the glow of an old box television. An elderly woman was lying on a bed; she reminded me of my Lola, small and frail, her brown skin soft and wrinkled, wispy white hairs gracing her aging head, creating an almost halo around her.

I felt longing for my Lola and I imagined the presence of this elder on the bed mirrored the presence of my own ancestors. I had lied to my mom and my tita about where I was going - telling them I was going to a dance class instead of an appointment for a tattoo. I was living inside this contradiction of wanting to honor the passing of my Lola in my own way and lying to my mom, who a few months earlier during a phone conversation told me if I got any more tattoos she would disown me. But here I was and it felt right.

Alyssa had come to lead me upstairs to her bedroom. We had been working together for weeks on the concept, so we were able to begin quickly. The tattoo was to be placed on my sternum, so as instructed, I stripped off my shirt and laid back on a small bed. The sheets were a faded pink with black ink stains all over, and on the corner of the mattress a line of ants marched towards the wall. As she pressed the stencil onto my chest, she asked me how I dealt with pain. She explained the day before a small tattoo took her over 6 hours because the client had needed so many breaks. I thought about pain and considered my tolerance pretty high, but at that moment I decided I did not want to request any pauses. Whatever pain came I was going to just feel it. During the course of the tattoo I only asked Alyssa to stop once. The ants from the mattress were crawling up

and down my arm and the side of my body, biting me all over. I brushed them away and we continued.

The design being placed on my sternum contained several elements: a moon, dots, sampaguita flowers and a traditional design variation symbolizing a canoe. It wasn't the tattoo I had originally imagined, but Alyssa had a very specific way she liked to work and she wanted all of the designs to be her own. I sent her ideas and suggestions, she incorporated them into something unexpected, but perfect. That tattoo may have only been a design to her, but to me it told a story. There's a legend in certain parts of the Philippines about the spirit canoe that carries us towards our loved ones in the after life. That boat was being placed on my chest, honoring the link to my Lola.



photo posted to social media by tattoo artist.

Months later, in the winter of 2019 I was finishing the dance documentary I had been working on for my thesis and struggling to come up with a title. I poured over notes, journal entries, interview footage, stories — trying to find the right words —

thinking of everything I was wanting to convey. One afternoon the title came to me and it felt like I had been thinking of it for months and just kept forgetting. *Carried Across the Water*, like all of the people and stories that have traveled all this way. Like the tiny canoe etched on my chest, it had been written on my heart ever since the lowering of the mourning.

We have moved so far from tribe and fire, but still we gather and tell stories. As I began my thesis research that is what I was most interested in: our connections to self, to each other, to history, and beyond. That is why I started by telling you about my journey to the Philippines and how it helped lead me to the final title for the documentary I worked on.

When I began my research I wanted to create a documentary exploring various parts of the Filipinx experience. I aimed to use dance and film to address ideas around representation, storytelling and the healing process that can be manifested through both art making and taking ownership of cultural narratives.

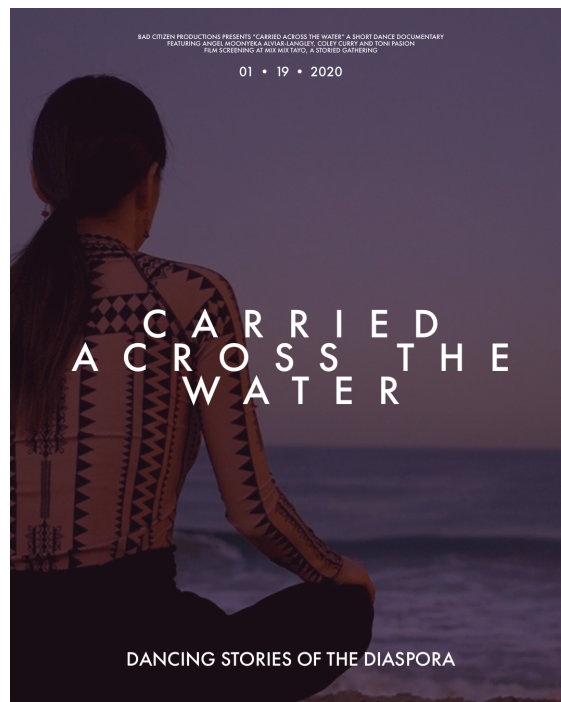
I have seen the stories of the Philippines rewritten, modified and erased through a history of colonization and imperialism that still exists to this day. The result of this becomes something analogous to a cultural anesthesia, where we live in such a way that we are numb. This numbness is not exclusive to any one cultural or social group, but since my work centered around people living inside a Filipinx experience, I will focus my thoughts in that direction.

In my search for stories I came across Christopher Booker's work, *The Seven Basic Plots*, he breaks down storylines into these categories: the meta-plot, overcoming

the monster, the rags to riches quest, voyage and return, comedy, tragedy, and rebirth. If I look even closer, I think nearly all of these archetypal stories can fit into one category: the search for identity.

Our search for identity is reflected directly into the questions I have been exploring. The ethnic and cultural identity crisis of Filipinx Americans and the lack of framework for addressing these are constant themes within the Filipino community. This comes up in the mental health profession, college courses, various academic conferences, social media threads, and numerous other places.

My work around questions of identity had a focused interest in using stories, film, dance, and collage in order to explore the themes of cultural identity that Filipinx people are already analyzing. I was going to use my skills as an artist to enter into the conversation.



Carried Across the Water film poster.

PUTTING IT IN CONTEXT

In the Fall of 2017 my life was shifting as I began coursework for graduate school. I had spent the last few years teaching dance and theatre in public high schools and I was ready to expand into new ways of thinking and operating in the world. I was interested in social justice and how this work directly linked to my ideas around dance. I was interested in thinkers like James Baldwin, whose 1963 speech to teachers in New York City became a guiding force in the work I was doing as an educator. He began his speech by identifying the role of teachers in overcoming injustice, not only in the classroom, but also in society.

To any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible – and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people – must be prepared to “go for broke.” Or to put it another way, you must understand that in the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classroom but in society, you will meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance.

There is no point in pretending that this won't happen (Baldwin).

These ideas pushed me back into the classroom and into the role of a student, in a desire to explore how I could be more effective in the world. At the same time I was also building a beautiful online network of people who, like me, were also searching for community within the Filipina diaspora. My graduate research and my Filipina

explorations felt dually focused on healing, specifically around issues of capitalist control, oppression and colonialism.

Amidst the shifts that were taking place in my life and the forging of these new relationships I made a post on social media one day exploring some thoughts around what I have sometimes referred to as my “filipino nose job.”

It is common for Filipinos to have a wide flat nose, in fact I was born with this particular trait. During one family gathering, when I was still young, one of my elders repeatedly asked me why my nose was so flat. She trained me to answer that the reason was because a horse stepped on my face. Over and over in front of different people she would ask me, “Why is your nose so flat.” Over and over I would give my learned response to the amusement of my family.

Interestingly, I don’t remember any of this happening. It’s one of those stories from my own life that has been shared with me. What I do remember is my Lola pinching my nose. It’s common for Filipino adults to squeeze the noses of small children, encouraging the nose into a new shape. I wrote some of these thoughts online and I was encouraged to share a little more. As a result, I wrote a reflection that was published on a website called *hellapinay*.

If you look up the English definition for the Tagalog word “gigil” you’ll find something along the lines of, ‘the urge to pinch or squeeze something that is unbearably cute.’

Nakakagigil talaga ang bata.

That's how my Lola would come towards me when she was getting ready to pinch my nose. With that intention to squeeze me, her lips sucked back between her gritted teeth, a look of love so intense only a Filipinx would understand.

It's a contradiction that we understand, because we were raised with it. If you can imagine, it's something so cute you want to hurt it. I never question that those moments with my Lola were pure love, and I look back at the memories with deep affection.

However, in those moments, when she was coming for my nose, she wasn't just trying to hold herself back from hurting me because I was a cute kid. No, in those moments, she was trying to fix me.

Many Filipinxs have a wide, flat nose, but our obsession with European standards of beauty gives preference to a pointy, high bridge nose. So our moms, our titas, our lolas would pinch us into a shape that was considered more beautiful.

Grow, grow little nose.

A colonial mentality is a form of internalized oppression, it's a belief system that colonized people are inferior to their colonizers. The highly-colonial mindset of the Philippines means that, whether we were raised here or there, we were taught that we could be more beautiful with features that were more like our colonizers. Lighter skin, long straight hair, and that pointy high bridge nose to start.

For me, growing up in mostly white communities, there were a lot of features that my mother passed down to me that I resented. For example: my short, muscular legs. But people, both white and Filipinx, have often told me how lucky I am to be mixed-race, and this comment is always linked to the way that I look. They don't have to say the exact words, but from their perspective I benefit from both the "exotic" look of my mother and the white features of my father.

Nevertheless, when I was young I craved the long skinny legs and other attributes of my peers. I wanted to be beautiful, and to me, beautiful meant white. The healing from that self-hate is an ongoing process.

So, here I am again, facing a different contradiction. I love my little, pointy nose; whether or not it's a result of my Lola's Filipinx nose job. I also love those memories

of my Lola pinching me into shape. However, as I have come to understand the cultural context behind the pinching, it makes me sad too. We dedicate so much time and energy into trying to change ourselves into something we are not. We have internalized this belief that we are not enough, when in reality we are abundant with culture and beauty that is all our own.

I often reflect on contradictions and duality. It's an overarching theme to my life. Sometimes our happiness and sadness are linked so closely, they are the same thing. Two different sides of the same coin. As I've gotten older, and have taken the time to explore these contradictions, I embrace that I am not two conflicting ideas joined together. I am whole, I am both, and I'm learning to look in the mirror and gigil myself.

article from hellapinay.



photo of Lola holding me as a baby.

When this story was posted online, my social media connections grew even further. Many people reached out, telling me they deeply related to the content of the

story and the feelings I was sharing. In a way it seemed like my online feed was exploding with Filipinx stories.

A few months prior, Ruby Ibarra's album *Circa91* had released and it served as a rallying cry for this generation of Filipino Americans. An entire Hip Hop album dedicated to empowerment for Filipinx people, in each track I could hear her channeling the complexity of her identities and addressing issues around race and equality in ways that spoke truth into the era we are living in.

yo fuck a story arc if it don't involve no matriarchs
our mothers work from the ground up, they craftin' air like atr
with the butterfly sleeves naka filipiniana
pag nagsalita mga banat ay bala
'wag magtaka kung ako ay makata
bulok na sistema, korakot sa pera, bagsak!
but we puttin' our heart into darkness
they puttin' these pigs into office
oh you thinkin' you schoolin'?
but you hella lost 'cuz you Betsy Devos while I taught this
but look at my ate she movin so cold
can't hold a candle to her when she glow
flick of the wrist with the ilaw she hold
pandanggo sa ilaw, she drippin' in gold (Ibarra).

Ibarra's words erupted out of my speakers and were splashed all over social media. She spoke with the unapologetic ferocity we are often told we don't have a right to. In this verse from *US*, Ibarra flows between English and Tagalog in an impassioned call to respect women and honor our elders. She weaves in images of culture, with the lyric about butterfly sleeves from traditional filipina clothing, and then in Tagalog tells us to recognize her skills as poet. In the next lines speaking about the need to put an end to corrupt systems involving money, policing and the educational infrastructure.

Ibarra became the soundtrack to my graduate school studies as I went deeper into the work of scholars like Paulo Friere and research around transformative pedagogy. Concurrently, I was educating myself on Filipina American studies and learning about ethnoautobiography. The extensive work of Leny Mendoza Strobel around post-colonial, indigenious, and Philippine studies helped to further create a framework for my research.

Creating cultures of peace is a circular process; perhaps a process without a known beginning and an end because both are known to us only as glimpses in the vastness of time and space. In the here and now, it is almost mandatory that as individuals we develop a cognitive understanding of the world we live in (human rights, globalization, racism, et.al) that will energize and embolden us to act for peace and justice (Mendoza Strobel 54).

Mendoza Strobel's writing and Ibarra's lyrics echoed back and forth to each other in my mind. We were all speaking the same language and these two became the individuals that I was in dialogue with as I laid the foundation for my thesis research.

STILL PROCESSING
a look into the creative process

“This study, ultimately, is about reconciliation and healing. It is about coming full circle, and finding a home and a voice of one’s own” (Mendoza Strobel).

In my second year of graduate school, I had more or less settled into the routines of being a student again. One thing that became apparent early on in this round of my academic career was an interest in film. As a result, by the winter of 2018 I had the ambition of creating a dance documentary for my thesis work. My intention was to collaborate with Filipinx artists within the diaspora and create a platform to share stories, woven together through the use of interviews and dance.

The film was a large undertaking, I experienced growth, burnout and a lot of learning. All things that are probably to be expected in investing multiple years into a project. Yet there was a lot of information that was unanticipated, and these became the gifts of the work. I learned deep lessons about undoing shame and leaning into vulnerability, these were some of the stories that revealed themselves to me in the creation of the documentary.

When I had returned to the Philippines to honor the passing of my Lola I was many months into my thesis project and that trip marked the beginning of the filming for the documentary. In addition to recording interviews, I was also getting footage of my family, the country, the traditions, the culture and perhaps what felt the most pressing was the need to film myself dancing.



photo of Lola's table in the Philippines.

I had been generating choreographic material for months and had envisioned a scene at my Lola's dining table. The dance would honor the role of food in Filipino culture and how we gather around the table to share stories and commune with each other. There were personal elements woven into the dance as well. The location itself was meaningful; it's this beautiful, long wooden table carved from a large tree that was removed from Lola's front yard a few years ago when they were remodelling her house. However, the story of food and gathering and my Lola's table, that was not the story I was meant to tell. Instead I encountered a story about shame and family dynamics and how to navigate and literally move through that in dance.

I waited until the last few days of my trip to the Philippines to film the dance scene, all of the ceremonies for Lola had concluded and Lola's house quieted down. As a result, there was more space and time to work on my project. I recruited my sister, Noelle, to help me with the camerawork. On the day of filming, I tied my hair into a knot on top of my head and put on a tan knee length dress with a plunging backline.



photo of my dress from the dance documentary.

I joined Noelle to begin filming the dance, when she saw me her face tightened. She looked a little heartbroken saying she wouldn't be able to help me anymore. I didn't understand what had changed in the past ten minutes, but Noelle explained she did not approve of my costuming and therefore could not support me in the way I was asking her to.

It seems simple when I type it out, a minor conflict, but it hit me in the gut. After weeks of being in the Philippines and having my mom say something like, "What are you wearing? Your *puwit* is *ano na*," every other day. I felt ashamed. I was embarrassed by my costume choice and my body. I hid in Lola's room for at least an hour, wondering if it was really important to film myself dancing in the Philippines.

It's interesting to think of how shame feels in my body. It feels hot and uncomfortable, like my skin is sitting too tight, like nothing can release quite right, not my muscles, not my breath. I access shame very easily, sometimes my face flushes when someone looks at me and I wasn't anticipating it. I hate these feelings, they make me feel small and limited. Everything I was experiencing was familiar, not only to my body, but

I realized it was a cultural experience as well. There is a common tagalog phrase, “walang hiya” it literally translates into, “no shame.” However, when someone in my mother’s generation would say this phrase it’s akin to an insult, it’s a phrase someone would say to put someone in their place.

My generation has taken this phrase, “walang hiya” and flipped it. “No shame,” as in, this shame is not mine and I refuse to hold it. We say this proudly, write it as a caption in our social media posts, tattoo it on our bodies, wear it on t-shirts. We say this, because we don’t want to feel ashamed of who we are.

I knew I had to dance, but I didn’t want to dance around the table in the main room of the house. Even though Lola’s house was quieter after the ceremonies, that meant there were about 8 or 9 people around, instead of 15 or 20. Despite the fact I was telling myself not to be ashamed, I felt like I had to dance the feeling out of my body. I filmed the piece on the roof of the house, where the laundry was hanging to dry, where no one was around. Some of the intended choreography stayed, a lot of it shifted in a response to what I was feeling in that moment.

If I am honest with myself now, the dress would not have fit the choreography at the dinner table. The dress was a last minute thrift store find before I left for the Philippines. I liked the earthiness of the tan color and the swishy flow of the fabric when I moved. I appreciated the open back because it felt like a little inside joke with myself - in how I have often said my ancestors have my back. But now I can’t see the dress fitting into that original choreographic concept of me at Lola’s table. It seems like it would have

been out of place and even more so it seems like the dress was part of a necessary impetus to carry me towards the story I needed to tell.

The crux of my research is in story. Embedded inside my philosophies of sharing circles, collecting memories, reflecting experiences, uplifting culture, and revealing truths - these are the reasons I am continually drawn to storytelling, in all its various forms.

Stories have the power to draw us together, to reveal the thought patterns and deeply ingrained beliefs of a culture. When I shared the story about Lola pinching my nose on the internet, numerous people reached out to reveal similar incidents, occurrences rooted in the Filipina experience. Social media had become a powerful tool in my life as I was investigating my own identity and cultural roots. It was a tool for the masses to bring together people of the diaspora.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Considering that I wanted to share stories grounded in the Filipinx experience, as I began my thesis project I first had to find other people who were willing to join me in the process of creating and storytelling. Instagram became a distinct place to initiate the work and I started to reach out to people. By January of 2019 I had two committed collaborators: Moonyeka from Seattle and Toni from Los Angeles. At this early stage in the process, I tried to include other dancers from the Phoenix area, but they were unable to commit at that time.

In many ways the project felt rooted in social media. Instagram had connected me with the dancers and many of the musicians who ultimately became a part of the project as well.

With Toni and Moonyeka committed to the project, I had to decide how I wanted the three of us to work together remotely. We had multiple forms of communication committed to the project: email and text threads, Instagram messages, a shared google drive and regular video chats. For the first few months of collaboration, I would send the dancers questionnaires and articles to initiate dialogue. I spent a lot of time just trying to get to know Toni and Moonyeka on a more personal level and to observe where intersections existed inside of our stories and experiences.

STORYTELLING

Ultimately, I came to the conclusion to include myself in the film as well. Originally I did not see myself as part of the film in an on screen presence. I was focused on exploring other roles: facilitator, film director, cinematographer, editor, dramaturge, event organizer, storyteller. Then the question was posed to me — how would I be present in the film? I thought it was obvious, all the roles I just listed were going to have an influence on the film, my voice as an artist would certainly be present. However, I soon recognized my resistance to being in front of the camera was more of an unwillingness to be vulnerable. While I often prefer not to take center stage, I understood by placing myself as a figure in the film I would be pushing myself in ways that would ultimately help me to grow.

After all, I was interested in stories and in part I was interested in what it meant to be a storyteller. As I collected stories from my own life, my family, friends, Toni and Moonyeka, I noted commonalities in our anecdotes and narratives. Meanwhile I delved

into the work of visionaries who were also interested in the cultural significance of stories on humanity, such as anthropologist Wade Davis.

I returned my attention to a post I had seen on social media, a mother shared the following questions that had been displayed on the wall of her child's classroom:

Who writes the stories?

Who benefits from the stories?

Who is missing from the stories?

By investing time in researching Filipina stories I was considering the reality that so many of the narratives I absorb belong to a dominant cultural group that not everyone identifies with. Taking in these somewhat homogenized narratives is not entirely alienating, as Wade Davis mentions in his TED talk, “we all share the same adaptive imperatives. We're all born. We all bring our children into the world. We go through initiation rites. We have to deal with the inexorable separation of death, so it shouldn't surprise us that we all sing, we all dance, we all have art. But what's interesting is the unique cadence of the song, the rhythm of the dance in every culture” (Davis).

Through the creation of my dance documentary I was seeking to highlight stories I had rarely seen given a platform. With the growing belief that stories, much like language or dance carry so much more than what we consider at face value. Stories communicate ways of thinking and can be an example of, “the sum total of all thoughts and dreams, myths, ideas, inspirations, intuitions brought into being by the human imagination since the dawn of consciousness... It's a symbol of all that we are and all that we can be as an astonishingly inquisitive species” (Davis).

FILM STUDIES

Concurrent to my exploration of stories and online interactions with my collaborators, I also spent time building my knowledge of film and documentary. I was approaching this as a low budget production, where I was taking on the role of videographer, director, producer, editor and also needed to take into consideration how I was handling lighting, sound, and equipment in each of the different shoot locations.

By taking on so many different film roles it was difficult to gain a deep knowledge of any singular job, but I was committed to the idea of making a film and moved forward with the resources I had available.

COLLAGE

I had many different ideas converging: racial identity, long distance collaboration, storytelling, film, dance, and I was excited to explore ways all the pieces fit together. Collage has been a primary process of creating that I have enjoyed for a long time. In each step of the process I searched for ways to pull together abstracted and disjointed ideas. As I collected information from myself, Toni, and Moonyeka I asked about stories, dreams, family legends, traditional folk tales, superstitions and belief systems.

In the amassing of this information, I asked the dancers to track it with me. I used the information and our conversations to generate exercises for material building of our dances. I was facilitating the experience, but I asked each of them to be responsible for creating their own choreography and invited them to also choose a Filipinx musician they would be interested in collaborating with. As we sourced material there were movement

themes each of us created that subsequently appeared in all of our dances to further tie us all together as we worked towards the film and the future presentation of the work.



Above: mixed media collage I created in an art class my second year of graduate school.

Below: promotional materials I created for my thesis



THE EVENT PROCESS the naming of things continued

Early on in my creative process, perhaps even before I knew I was making a documentary there were other ideas that started to crystalize. I had a desire to create a community event that felt like a large family gathering. A place where people could physically and tangibly share in aspects of Filipinx culture. I wanted an event where people could interact with the environment, with my research, and with each other. Where everyone could gather to share stories.

When I call to mind images of my family gatherings, I think of course about the love we share and the joy that I get from coming together. I also think of paper plates piled with lumpia and pancit, people gathered around the TV singing karaoke, games, dancing, laughter, sharing.

At family gatherings throughout my childhood it wasn't uncommon for there to be various displays of talent. My cousin's breaking in the basement and MCing, someone playing the piano, or sharing video from a recital. There was also the Christmas when my younger brother, Justin, was missing both of his front teeth. At home he and I made up a silly dance and lip sync routine to go along with a recording of "All I Want for Christmas is My Two Front Teeth." He played the part of the young boy wanting his teeth, and I was the sister helping him write his letter to santa.

That winter we went on a mini tour, performing our rendition of the holiday classic for family members time and again. Justin and I had long since grown bored with the routine, but we were the main event as far as entertainment that year. I even recall a

couple performances where we wore matching plaid pajamas. We have long since retired that routine, but it's one of those stories that live on in our family lore.

My memory of the performances of "All I want for Christmas is My Two Front Teeth" represents a mixing between cultures. As we were lip syncing along to a novelty holiday song, rooted in American conventions, the family surrounding us holding those paper plates piled high with Filipino food. This is a story that lives on for my family, and it also represents ideas that feel second nature to us: to share stories, to perform for each other in order to entertain ourselves, and to create a personal amalgam of all the things we know.

In the winter of 2019 as I was finishing my documentary, I was focusing more on the creation of the event. As with my documentary I was struggling to find the title for the event, in my mind they were two distinct offerings, and as such needed to be named separately. I started doing mind maps and writing all the words that felt connected. I was drawn to english words like: gathering, us, thesis, story, sharing. I was also thinking of tagalog words like kanta, meaning "song," or tayo which can translate into different meanings including: "us," or "let's go."

I was especially drawn to the idea of a Filipino dessert called *Halo Halo*, which can be prepared many different ways, but generally includes ingredients such as fruit, beans, tapioca pearls, cheese, coconut, ube ice cream, and topped off with shaved ice and evaporated milk. It's a multi-colored, beautifully layered frozen treat that is extremely popular. The name of the desert *Halo Halo*, literally translates into "mix mix," the idea

being when the sweet drink is served that the person eating it takes their spoon and stirs it up to mix up all the flavors.

I had lists and maps of these words I was connecting to, but I couldn't make them fit together. I couldn't situate the words to help me explain what I was trying to present. It was my mom who came up with the title *Mix Mix Tayo*. I was rattling off words to her and explaining my intention to create an event that brought together all kinds of people to share in different aspects of Filipinx culture. When she made the suggestion it felt like a gift and an epiphany at the same time. "Mix Mix" because you need to stir it around to mix up all the flavors and the word "Tayo" can have lots of meanings depending on how you say it, but has a general meaning of, "Us." The title fit, the idea of the different layers, collaging it all together, and inviting everyone to feel they were part of something.



Mix Mix Tayo event poster I created for my thesis.

THE FILM

Carried Across the Water premiered on January 19, 2020 as part of an evening length event *Mix Mix Tayo*. The film showed twice throughout the evening and consisted of four main sections. The opening sequence of the film was made up of shots taken throughout my journey to the Philippines, Seattle and Los Angeles. The background track for this section is a song called “Sa Puso Mo” written and performed by Filipino artist RV Mendoza who is based in Detroit, Michigan.

This sequence led into the opening section of the film, where I was in LA getting ready to shoot with Toni. Whereas I had initially been resistant to being a part of the film, by the time I was done editing, I realized I was the central figure of the documentary. The film had become about my personal journey to reach out to people within the diaspora and ask them to join me in my soul searching and storytelling process. After I introduce and interview Toni, the film shifts to the first dance sequence, which features Toni on a beach at sunrise. She is wearing a garment created by an LA based Filipinx fashion designer, Ginto Seeds. The design on the costume is meant to reflect the traditional tattoos of many of the indigenous tribes native to the Philippine islands. As Toni moves across the sand the sound of the waves is accompanied by a tapping sound, the music track “Batok” co-written by Toni and LA based Filipino musician Abe Lagrimas. Similar to Toni’s costume, the musical composition is inspired by the traditional technique of tapping tattoos onto the skin.



Toni in Carried Across the Water.

Shortly after Toni's section concludes I carry the audience along with me to Seattle where I meet up with Moonyeka. This is the second section in the film, but it was the last portion of the documentary that I shot. I can visually see my fatigue on screen as I am sitting in the airport talking to the camera. I introduce Moonyeka and again the film shifts to a dance sequence. We had intended to shoot near a lake at Discovery Park in Seattle, but when we arrived the scene was over crowded with people. We improvised and found a nearby tree which became the location of the dance. The sound of leaves crunching and wind blowing transitions the audience into a musical track "Unmasked Infatuation" produced by Seattle based, Filipinx artist Nic Masangkay. Moonyeka is beneath the canopy of the tree in a white, satin dress purchased from a thrift store. Their costume is a nod to the expectations of society and Filipino culture placed upon them. Moonyeka's movements become more chaotic along with the sound of the music, they

seem disoriented and distressed, as if they want to tear the dress off their own body. The scene dissolves as Moonyeka finds solace at the base of the tree.



Moonyeka in Carried Across the Water.

As Moonyeka's piece concludes I carry the audience with me once again, this time to the Philippines. I share pieces of my journey and as the music starts I begin to walk throughout my Lola's house. There is an almost haunting quality to the opening of the musical arrangement, "Showed Up" written by Bay Area based Filipinx duo Astralogik. As I arrive on the roof of Lola's house surrounded by laundry hanging to dry the music transitions to a nostalgic, romantic sound.

When I shared with Toni the story about how I shifted the content of that dance in response to the conflict with my sister she offered me a beautiful reflection. Toni suggested I had to move the dance up onto the roof, in order to be closer to the ancestors. In viewing the film now there are certain shots where the monsoon rains are clear

backdrops to the movement. In my mind this adds to the story of being carried with the water.



Coley Curry in Carried Across the Water.

In the final scene of the documentary Toni is back at a beach, this time at sunset. As the song “O’ahu” by LA based Filipina artist Low Leaf progresses, it is revealed that all three of the dancers are together: myself, Moonyeka and Toni have converged. As we move through the dance, scenes from my travels are interspersed into the choreography. Some of these moments are continuations of shots from earlier in the film, and others are completely new. In doing so I’m trying to honor the multitude of stories, seen and unseen, that have supported this journey.



Trio in Carried Across the Water.

THE EXPERIENCE

Throughout the *Mix Mix Tayo* event I looked for ways for people to share in stories. Whether it was through an introduction and meeting someone new, singing a karaoke song, looking at a photograph, learning about traditional foods - I wanted to offer multiple ways for people to engage.

In the first room as people entered the event space there was a spread of Filipino food, a place to participate in karaoke and I had also created a document, which I called *Story Sharing*. These were papers that I distributed on tables and other surfaces throughout the area. As people were first arriving I made a point of inviting everyone to use these handouts to prompt each other to tell stories. I invited people to use the Story Sharing papers to meet someone new or learn something more about someone they came with.

Story Sharing

What stories do you have to share? Grab a friend or a stranger and use these questions to help share your stories with someone.

What is something you learned about yourself last week?

How are you, really?

Is there anyone who's changed your life, but doesn't know it?

Do you or have you had repeating themes in your dreams?

Do you have any favorite family traditions?

What's your favorite song lyric you can think of off the top of your head?

What's your go-to karaoke song?

What's a lesson you've learned in love?

Think of someone you admire, why did you choose this person?

What about yourself is hard to admit?

What's your favorite way to spend a weekend?

What's something you'd tell your younger self?

Are there any superstitions that you practice/embrace?

What was a moment that dramatically changed the course of your life?

What's your favorite word or phrase?

Is there a character you identify with (movie, book, tv, comics, etc), why?

Is there something you can share that you've crossed off your bucket list?

What's something you love about yourself?

Story Sharing from Mix Mix Tayo event.

In addition to these offerings there was an art gallery which was comprised of art from Filipinx artists from around the country and old family photos, most of them I had found when I was going through items at Lola's house.



Performer, Bri Adrias during Mix Mix Tayo.

The night concluded with live performances, and just like the performances of my past family gatherings there were no stage lights, no microphones. Everyone who was still present was asked to gather around and witness live music and dance. When I invited these performers, most of them were nervous and didn't know how to approach the event. I explained by having them sing or dance, I wanted to provide a glimpse into their living room and a personal moment in their lives. In doing so I believed it to be a moment that speaks to who we are, and what our stories are as children of the diaspora.

ANALYSIS in art making

In December of 2019, a month prior to my thesis event, I attended a dance class at Jukebox Dance Studio, the same location where I presented *Mix Mix Tayo*. The class ended up being an exploration space, where dancers could workshop any ideas that were circulating for them. I hadn't expected such an open ended opportunity and I wasn't sure how to begin. These are my reflections from that class:

I wasn't sure where to begin or what goal I had, but since I've been thinking so much about shame that seemed like a place to start. Considering where it lives in the body and how to not give shame such easy access to my being.

I sat for a while and tried to locate where shame was in my body.

It was holding me back, I was living inside the expectations of what other people in the room might be doing and thinking.

I found myself bound in knots, as I often do. Held.

There was also a feeling in my right hip flexor, shame was there.

My body reflected the knots and the recognition of the tightness in my hip.

I gathered it up in the first song. Tried to find it. Allowed it to manifest and explore how it felt. When the second song came with it's repetition of

“deep inside deep deep deep inside”

I tried to pull it out from me. The shame. Imagining it pulling from the deep recesses of my muscle memory, my living memory, my ancestral memory. I was going to have a funeral for my shame. And as soon as I recognized that was my course of action, I knew there would need to be many deaths for a long time in order to really let Shame go in the way that I want to.

I gathered that shame from my body and pulled it into my right hand pouring it into a spot on the floor.

The thought passed through my mind that I didn't want to leave some kind of shame portal for another dancer to stumble into when they were in class, so I found a knot in the "wood" and thought maybe somewhere in this flooring there was a remnant of a tree, and that tree could remember the forest it came from and maybe I could send my shame there. Because the earth can heal us.

It became a procession of traveling back and forth to the grave site, the knot in the wood. Feeling where shame pulled me back and allowing myself to pull away. Not all deaths are sad. Deaths are a natural part of the cycles we live inside. I could choose to honor and I could choose to ignore the place where shame now lies.

Journal entry.

Shame was running through my mind, because of how it had come up inside my thesis project. At the time of this class I was getting very close to presenting my work, I was deeply immersed in it. That class, that moment, expanded my perception of the dance I filmed in July while I was in the Philippines. At that time, I felt the familiar sensations of shame rising inside my body, I did not want to move, but I made a choice and that became a ceremony in itself. Intuition brought me to the rooftop of my Lola's home and allowed me to step closer to my ancestors in order to share a piece of our story.

THE END
a conclusion of moving forward

Now, in the spring of 2020 as I look around me the world is clearly in crisis. The inequities of our systems are rising to the surface amidst the coronavirus pandemic. While many people around me are wishing for things to “go back to normal,” I find myself wishing for the opposite. I’m simultaneously terrified and filled with hope for what the future brings. “Normal,” was not truly working for us. It was comfortable, especially for those in privilege, myself included, but “normal” was not serving all members of society.

As I prepare to exit the academic bubble of graduate school I feel the call to deepen my commitment to my communities. Throughout my masters program the signature at the bottom of all my outgoing emails read, “seeking equity, empowerment, social justice, truth and love - one revolution at a time.” My research around storytelling was part of the exploration for revolution. Over the past few years I sought out ways to tell stories. I carry this work forward because in telling our stories we are creating pathways to remind us of how we can be in relationship with ourselves, each other, and the planet.

After I presented my thesis work I posted the words of Toni Cade Bambara to social media, “The role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible.” I am helping other people find ways to embody liberation and live inside of movements that feel expansive and fully alive.

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