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Aswang Sense-Making: Theorising Flesh and Contemporary Violence under Philippine State Terror

Abstract: In recent years, flesh has emerged as a rich and significant analytic for thinking about corporeality, especially concerning race, violence, and politics. It is also useful for illuminating the social and political consequences of violence in neocolonial states like the Philippines – the focus of this paper. In what follows, I will delineate compelling interpretations of flesh in Black feminist thought. Then I will examine how flesh emerges in Filipino peoples' sense-making through the *aswang* concept in Philippine folklore. Though *aswang* has been appropriated through colonialism and patriarchy, I will theorise how *aswang*-as-flesh gestures beyond the fixedness of identity and abject realities of oppression. Its refusal to be domesticated in the face of colonial and patriarchal oppression expresses an agency and resistance that materialise in encounters with violence. Ultimately, I will argue for a theory of flesh that invites new sense-makings of material, affective, and discursive encodings of violence and makes room for new iterations of politics to emerge.

'Life is poor in monsters. The fantastic is a world'.

— Georges Canguilhem, *Knowledge of Life*

Flesh breathes. And such breathing is the capacity for generative connection, for a different kind of sociality. Flesh only has, it only is, sociality. Erotic sociality. Shared feelings. Shared feeling. 'We flesh,' Baby Suggs preaches. And that we matters.

— Biko Mandela Gray, *Black Life Matter*

Introduction

What is more frightening, being hunted by a flesh-eating monster or confronting the man who claimed the devil's throne for himself? During former Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte's term, these terrors were one and the same. When Duterte declared that upon his death he would dethrone Satan and cook his tail in a stew, he was also announcing his legacy as a warmonger who authorised and enabled the murder of thousands of Filipinos during his 'war on drugs' (Manahan 2022). Despite the turnover to a new administration in 2022: Duterte's drug war is still being carried out through Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos Jr., and the death toll is steadily rising. When dawn reveals new victims of extrajudicial killings, it is likely that the corpses are laid out beside the road or in dirty canals that border a city, mangled and disfigured. Their blood stains

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the sidewalks where children would normally play; a metallic scent lingers in the air to signal an unfolding terror. One can only liken it to a scene from a horror film. This is exactly what Alyx Arumpac has captured in her debut documentary, *Aswang*. The film follows a young boy named Jomari and a priest-turned-photojournalist named Br. Jun, whose lives reflect the horror of life under the Duterte regime. Arumpac sets her documentary in Manila, a city haunted by encounters with an ever-present decay and violence: sirens blaring throughout the evening, neighbors sweeping away pools of blood on the streets, dogs barking in the slums, and self-flagellating strikes of penitent men during Lenten — images and sounds that merge to portray the vibrant yet precarious lives of Manila's urban poor residents.

Accompanying Br. Jun during his late-night assignments, Arumpac witnesses the aftermath of several drug-related killings and we, the audience, only catch a glimpse of it. During a meeting with other clergy, the photographer-priest notes that his funeral assistance program for the poor has seen a sharp increase in requests since Duterte's election in 2016 — one to two requests per week have become three to five per day. Lamenting the thousands of deaths enabled by the anti-drug campaign, Br. Jun poses a sobering question to his audience: why do these killings keep happening while we sleep? At Kian delos Santos's wake, Arumpac encounters Jomari, an orphaned boy living on the streets.[1] Both Jomari's parents were imprisoned for drug possession. Despite knowing that Kian was just murdered by police, Jomari casually relays his desire to become a policeman — an irony amid his entanglements with the carceral state. Another ironic moment emerges when the brother of another victim maintains he is still 'for Duterte' while mourning the injustice of his sibling's murder. Both he and Jomari bear the contradiction of their circumstances under Philippine state terror and violence, exacerbated by Duterte's no-mercy proclamation against drug users and 'pushers,' which ultimately targets the country's poorest populations.

Grief, rage, and disbelief punctuate the scenes that feature interviews with the victims' kin. In the face of these extrajudicial killings, those left behind struggle to make sense of the events. However, Arumpac offers her perspective about this monstrous violence, aptly reflected in the title *Aswang*. *Aswang* refers to a flesh-eating, shapeshifting monster in Philippine folklore and mythology, which Arumpac likens to Duterte and the state in their deployment of violence

1 On August 2017, 17-year-old Kian delos Santos was killed by police officers in Caloocan City who framed him for possessing drugs. This sparked a national protest calling for justice and accountability for Kian's murder. Over a year later, four policemen were charged with the murder and planting of evidence that resulted in Kian's death — the first conviction of police officers related to the drug war. See Gavilan (2018).

against the poor. As bodies strewn on the ground are juxtaposed with scenes of prisoners packed in tiny, dilapidated jail cells, these images offer a glimpse into the disorienting violence that befalls a people living under an oppressive and neglectful government. The culture of impunity and hyper-violence created by the Duterte regime persists despite the presidential succession of Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos Jr., who has repeatedly denounced the International Criminal Court's probe into the drug war and allowed the campaign to remain in operation (Venzon 2024). At least 352 drug-related killings were recorded during his first year in office, and Marcos Jr. has yet to publicly express any intention to call off the operations (Gavilan 2023). While there is a temptation to exceptionalise the violence deployed by both regimes, what was purportedly started by the Duterte regime is not a new phenomenon. The modern Philippine state, the monster depicted in Arumpac's documentary, is the culmination of a centuries-long entanglement with colonialism and its violence. The Filipino peoples carry their ancestors' encounters with genocide, occupation, dispossession, torture, and imprisonment within their bodies and shared memories. These encounters produce the imprints of a disorienting colonial trauma, and those who become intimately embroiled with the violent state machineries are forced to relive the trauma of their ancestors. How does one even begin to make sense of this and continue to live despite these violences? When one becomes prey of the predatory state, is there room for more than just survival?

An expansive body of scholarship focuses on body/bodies in connection with the violence of fascist regimes. These works have highlighted the materiality of personhood and what violence does to obscure and erase one's sense of being. One of the most enduring examples from this field is Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (1985), which narrates the political consequences of deliberately inflicting pain, as in torture or war. For Scarry, pain is a fragmenting, language-destroying encounter, 'bringing about, even within the radius of several feet, this absolute split between one's sense of one's own reality and the reality of other persons' (4). She centralises the body in her work, describing it as both subject- and object-figure of pain during torture and as the necessary object of verification that justifies war — the unmaking of one's world begins with the destruction and injury of one's body. Since its publication, Scarry's work has helped to spur more interest in the politics of the body, resonating with feminist theory, queer theory, Black radical thought, and settler colonial studies (to name a few). While the body is, undoubtedly, essential for understanding experiences of violence, it might not wholly capture aspects of violence that are felt through subjectivities undergoing constant depoliticisation and erasure, as in the case of the criminal and the colonised native. I turn towards another conceptual interlocutor to

mediate this conversation, one that lends itself well for weaving connections between violence, subjectivity, and colonial aftermaths: *flesh*.

Where the notion of the body directs our attention towards materiality, flesh is a signifier for what lies just beyond the material, pondering the experience of being without exiting the body discourse entirely. Merleau-Ponty (1968: 9) writes that flesh is an experience that we arrive to before 'the science of the body.' Spillers (1987: 67) expresses this idea as 'that zero degree of social conceptualisation that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography'; for her, the difference between body and flesh is premised on the distinction between those who are enslaved versus free — in other words, those who *get to have* a body, an object of legal subjectivity, versus those who are deemed flesh. Flesh becomes a useful link for exploring the spaces between materiality and spectrality, which helps us to further understand how one experiences their body while being embedded in various subjectivities (see next section). Flesh is also, undoubtedly, a religiously charged concept, 'irremediably Christian, always haunted by the incarnation' (Rivera, 2015: 1). Aside from its relevance in Christian theology, it has also been the object of theorisation within political theology (see Kantorowicz, 1957; Santner, 2011). However, the religious undercurrents of flesh are crucial for my exploration of how religious understandings and practices of Filipino peoples have been shaped by violence during both colonial and contemporary times.

I lean on flesh to offer a perspective on our ability to reckon with experiences of violence, which some characterise as the other side to language and the end of reason itself. I also venture to understand how subjectivity (and agency) is a relational and reflexive practice rather than a fixed and delimited mode of living. Although the Duterte regime relied on its sovereign power to execute violence, flesh is a mode of life that loosens this hold. When one bleeds from a deep wound, even pressure can fail to stop the gushing. Flesh, in all its excesses, is what emerges when we are cut open, reminding us that violence is not a thing to be owned. These meditations hold significance for political life in the Philippines in the light of continued atrocities that not only seem impervious to regime change but are co-constitutive of these regimes themselves. They challenge the idea of violence as a world-destroying experience that forecloses the possibility for any kind of politics. To affirm the idea that violence is where politics ends only upholds normative definitions of power, agency, and sovereignty and further reifies western notions of subjectivity, which are predicated upon defining the 'human' as having legal personhood (see Dayan, 2011). By thinking with and through flesh, I write with and alongside scholars of violence as well as my fellow people who continue to mourn, labor, and grapple to make sense of life

during a fascist time — they are the ones who unsettle the imposition of western traditions of thought, pointing us towards alternate modes of life that value the expressions and experiences of oppressed peoples around the world.

In what follows, I turn to Black feminist thought, which inspired me to think about flesh and its capacity for upending normative ideas of the human. As it becomes attached to Black life through the processes of racialisation and pornotroping, flesh represents an unruly excess that challenges 'the violent ethical and ontological implications of subject formation' (Gray, 2022: 22–23). Through the works of Hortense Spillers, Alexander Weheliye, Biko Mandela Gray, and Amber Musser, I argue that situating flesh relationally is useful for articulating and interrogating the relations of power that shape sense-making, modes of life, and practices of care. Next, I locate the emergence of flesh in Filipino peoples' narrativisation of violence through the flesh-eating folklore figure called *aswang*. According to Ramos (1969: 238), *aswang* is a creature 'most usefully understood as a congeries of beliefs about five types of mythical beings.' Existing scholarship on *aswang*, as well as various depictions and stories that appear in Philippine literature, cinema, and other media, reveal how *aswang* has been colonised, gendered, and sexualised to create fear and animosity within communities in the Philippines. However, as a syncrasy of creatures that escapes full taxonomisation, *aswang* fails to be completely apprehended by logics of colonial othering (Bender, 2021). I articulate how *aswang*-as-flesh is more than a representation of abjection, an experience that 'simultaneously beseeches and pulverises the subject' (Kristeva, 2010: 5). Like Black feminism's understanding of flesh, *aswang* emerges as an unruly mode of resistance against the operations of colonialism and patriarchy that relegate certain peoples to social death and bodily destruction. Though the violent tactics of othering have carried over from the colonial era into the modern neoliberal state, erasing the many ways of being and living that have nurtured and sustained the people, *aswang* survives. Her rage is certain. I conclude this paper with a brief meditation on the haunting of flesh as a disruption of linear modalities of time and historicity. Overcoming the logics of a humanity centered around western notions of the tangible, intelligible, and desirable, flesh carves out new ways to contend with the pasts, presents, and futures of Philippine society.

Flesh in Black Feminist Thought

Within Black feminist scholarship, flesh has become a generative concept for exploring the connections between (experiences of) violence, subjectivity, and politics. As an unruly and irreducible signifier of Black life, flesh becomes affixed to Black lives through the process of racialisation, even 'transmitted to the

succeeding generations of Black subjects who have been 'liberated' and granted body in the aftermath of de jure enslavement' (Weheliye, 2014: 39). The law is hardly of use to flesh, especially when it is law that legitimises and justifies violence as an act of necessary constraint (Gray, 2022). While racialisation depends heavily on legal and epistemic violence, becoming flesh always involves 'the calculated work of iron, whips, chains, knives, the canine patrol, the bullet' (Spillers, 1987: 67). Flesh becomes distinct from the body insofar as the White body, occupying the position of the subject, is always situated against/in relation to the Black flesh in captivity and abjection (*ibid*.). Producing this distinction is not merely an abstract violence. It is an act of dismemberment, and such acts of violence that wound, maim, lacerate, and tear up a captive body serve as the haunting confirmation and evidence of this splitting (Gray, 2022: 75).

Flesh is also projected with both surplus and deficit of gender and sexuality through processes like pornotroping, a term first used by Spillers (1987: 67) to describe the process of how one's 'captive body' is simultaneously sexualised to perform for and also objectified into another by their captor. Enabled through gender erasure and sexual queering, pornotroping also relies on the affective dialectic of White desire and domination/destruction to satisfy its cravings while carving its subjectivity in relation to Black flesh:

> Although the actual differentiation between desiring and conquering the flesh might not stretch further than the small tract of land located between nonexistent and very slight, it is nonetheless important to notice this ever-so-slight vacillation, because it gestures toward a conceptual galaxy — one not quite so far away as that other one — in which the flesh embodies both more and less, but above all something other, than it does in the world of Man (Weheliye, 2014: 111).

The sexualised ungendered flesh will always be unintelligible to the logic of White patriarchal sexuality, even as this logic depends on its very existence. Gray (2022: 88, 102) describes that the White male gaze materialises through the pornographic use of Blackness, further establishing itself as the subject through touch. But when the Black female body, which is supposed to be powerless, resists, she becomes a threat. 'More and less, but above all something other' is what characterises flesh (Weheliye, 2014: 111). It is not something that can be held completely within language, which is why we must instead situate flesh towards relationality rather than as a fixed identity. Musser (2014: 20) argues that this is how difference can be expressed without it being reified as essence or identity. Identifying and naming the relational lines out of which this process is operationalised and sustained — as in the case of racialising and pornotroping —

is what allows us to understand and interrogate the processes of becoming-flesh, even across various historical moments. When we recognise that relationships are not static in nature but instead materialise as we move through sociality, we may be able to find what Deleuze (1997: 22) calls 'revolutionary active lines of flight' that enables one to contend with their oppression.

Thus, the unruly flesh, unlike the captive and rule-bound body, is spilling with potential for illuminating and unsettling regimes of violence, even as these regimes seek to apprehend it:

> That's the problem with (and promise of) flesh. It's messy. It doesn't submit. It isn't legible. Flesh 'is not matter, is not mind, is not substance.' It refuses to play the political and ontological games of the subject. As such, the subject wrestles flesh to the ground. Subjects pin flesh down. They attempt to subdue flesh. They pierce flesh with their tools. They carve bodies — corpses — out of it. Attempting to (re)gain footing, subjects pin the plenitude of indeterminate flesh down into the motivations of a body (Gray 2022: 70).

Because the speech and movement of flesh are said to be unintelligible and indeterminate, the so-called 'subject' — one who distances themselves from the 'Other' — cannot help but enact violence against it, as Gray explains (2022: 77). But in being subdued, flesh always leaves behind traces of itself — a stickiness — as 'touch [is] a condition of and for violence' (Musser 2014: 29). So, to touch and be touched by flesh is to be dispossessed of one's centrality as a subject, '[reminding them] that they owe their existence to something beyond themselves'; in this way, flesh is especially vulnerable (Gray 2022: 74). Yet Black life simply cannot be captured or contained. Flesh is slippery, flesh is excessive. Though it is vulnerable to the violence that seeks to annihilate its being, flesh announces itself as the possibility of breaking from normative conscriptions of subjectivity that are rigidly determined by bracketing one's experience at the expense of another's — of the *Others*. Perhaps this is why Biko Mandela Gray still finds religious capacity in flesh. In eulogising the lives of Aiyana Stanley-Jones, Tamir Rice, Alton Sterling, and Sandra Bland, he calls attention to the possibilities that 'they incarnate beyond their deaths… [as] flesh vibrates beyond the opposition of life and death… these lives still speak' (Gray 2022: 26–27). For Gray, religious experience holds the potential for both violence and for life; the sacredness of Black life-as-flesh 'exceeds the categorical, calculative, and signifying schemes that would seek to reduce them into merely corporeal bodies' (*ibid.*). Flesh challenges the assumption that violence destroys all capacity for language and world-making. Flesh lives to tell the story, whether out of one's breath or from the grave. While it is important to analyze oppressive

apparatuses of regimes like the settler colonial state, voices from both the dead and the living, *flesh*, are also summoning our attention. We must listen because they, too, have a story to tell.

The Aswang Concept

Through fiction and mythology, monsters introduce us to fantastical worlds filled with terror, anxiety, and intense suspicion of the other. Tales of ghastly, loathsome creatures in various forms and figurations have always haunted our human imaginations across times, spaces, and cultures; they serve as a warning against the perils of the night, the risk of wandering into dark, menacing spaces least one encounters a looming evil. Against the backdrop of the Natural and the Human, monsters represent an unnatural 'other' that fails to be assumed into the so-called natural taxonomies of the earth. In his critique of the social construction of the 'abnormal,' Foucault (2003: 55–56) writes that the existence of the monster violates both the laws of society and of nature; the monster 'is the limit, both the point at which law is overturned and the exception that is found only in extreme cases. The monster combines the impossible and the forbidden.' Illegible, disordered, and excessive — these descriptors construct the murky shapes and textures of the monster. As creatures of anxiety, humans have deployed various methods to capture such beings, contain them, and drain them of their dangerous potentialities to wreak havoc, multiply, and — most significantly — live *among* and *with* humans. It is no surprise that racialisation, as a process of othering, often invokes the language of monstrosity to characterise what Canguilhem (2008: 135, 185) describes as 'a living being with negative value… the consequence of abandonment to the vertiginous fascination of the undefined, of chaos, of the anticosmos'. To depict a person as monstrous is to define them as heinous errors among the ranks of Man, full of excessive energies and indeterminate capacities. Therefore, is the monster not also a form of flesh?

In Philippine mythology, *aswang* refers to a conglomeration of monsters that haunt towns, villages, and other communities in search of vulnerable prey.[2] While stories about *aswang* and their varied formations and activities also trace origins from other provinces and islands in the Philippine archipelago, the province of Capis on Panay Island has been widely identified as *aswang*'s 'hometown' (Clark, 2022). Capis also happens to be one of the hotbeds of revolutionary activity, both during the occupation eras and in present times. This nexus is intriguing and significant for understanding how particular communities in the Philippines grapple with and narrativise their numerous

2 Also spelled as *asuang*.

experiences of violence. Before exploring this convergence, it is important to first explain aswang not as a singular type of creature or a kind of species but as a multiplicity; Maximo Ramos (1969) has commonly been credited for classifying *aswang* through its syncretic characteristics, using the term '*aswang* complex' to denote its nonsingularity. He transposes aswang through certain European folkloric creatures such as the vampire, viscera sucker, weredog, witch, and ghoul — these five 'types' make up the aswang concept (*ibid.*: 238). There are other names for *aswang* as well, which vary depending on the province or region from which a story originates and reflect how different communities have attempted to make sense of and define this composite being: *manananggal* and *mandurugo* among Tagalog and Bicol speakers; *mansaluan, wakwak, ongo,* and *mangalok* among Visayan speakers; *saan nakatawtawan* among Ilokano speakers (Pertierra, 1983: 320). The first Spanish missionaries to the Philippines also encountered stories about *aswang* and made note of their placement in the religious beliefs and practices of the indigenous communities. In a document called 'The Customs of the Tagalogs,' the sixteenth-century Franciscan friar Juan de Plasencia describes the variant forms of *aswang* among the twelve 'priests of the devil' and its activities of terror, cannibalism, and witchcraft.[3] These descriptions still hold fast today, suggesting the deep embeddedness of aswang in the collective consciousness of Filipino peoples.

Among the various forms that aswang takes, the *manananggal* (or viscera sucker) is most embedded in popular imagination.[4] This form is not usually found in European folklore but instead resembles the creatures of other Southeast Asian myths such as the Cambodian *srei ap* (Ramos 1969, 329). The *manananggal* appears in the form of a beautiful long-haired woman during the day; at night, its arms become wings and the upper half of its body detaches from its lower half, taking on a bat-like appearance. Using its long, proboscis-like tongue to enter roof or floor openings, it invades the body of its victims while they are asleep and sucks out their internal organs. Expectant mothers, whose babies are eaten through the womb, and the sickly, who produce a lot of mucus and phlegm, are among this creature's favored victims. Like other myths about night-wandering monsters, the *manananggal* returns to its body before

3 Among the 'infernal ministers' de Plasencia identified, '*osuang*' was named specifically as a flying creature that murdered men and ate their flesh. However, other creatures that were mentioned such as the *silangan, mangagauay,* and *hocloban* also resemble the *aswang* syncrasy introduced by Ramos; see Blair and Robertson (1903). Ramos; see Blair and Robertson (1903).

4 According to Ramos (1969, 241) this creature-form of the viscera sucker is named differently in other regions of the Philippines: '*Abat* among the East Visayan, *aswang na lupad* ('flying *aswang*') among the Bikol, *buruka* (a corrupted form of the Spanish *bruja*, 'witch') among the Iloko, *manananggal* among the Tagalog, and mangalok among the Cuyonon.

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dawn, living an isolated life in the jungle or other lesser-inhabited areas. Many superstitions and customs across various regions are said to have emerged as precautionary wards against the *manananggal* such as sleeping prone, one-room extended family home set-ups, steep roofings, hanging the carapaces of saltwater crustaceans on eaves, eating salty, sour, and spicy food, and setting up brightly lit wakes, infirmaries, and birthing spaces (Ramos, 1969: 242; Pertierra, 1983: 323).

Though the four other transmogrifications of aswang are different in shape and appearance from the *manananggal*, they still share several similar traits and behaviors: they transform from their human-to-monster form at night, live in the outskirts of towns and villages, are attracted to the weak and sickly, tend to avoid light and daytime activity, and are deterred by holy objects, spices, and pungent substances (Pertierra, 1983:1 322–323). During times of personal or communal stress, Filipino peoples would displace their fears and anxieties onto *aswang*, allowing them to openly tell their stories and collectively find ways of constructing sense and meaning of such experiences. *Aswang* has also become a symbol of the inversion of communally held values such as modesty and cleanliness, especially in reference to female *aswang*, who are known for engaging in sexualised behaviors such as exposing their genitals (ibid.: 324). Stories of *aswang* existed long before the Spanish arrived to colonise the islands in 1565. Despite the mostly successful efforts to Christianise communities throughout the Philippine archipelago, belief in the *aswang* complex still persist among the people. Over time, *aswang* became one of the pre-Christian beliefs that was assimilated into the newly acquired Christian religion. But this is not to say that *aswang* became an acceptable part of their world. Even within their syncretic theology and cosmology (referred to as *Malitbog*), *aswang* had always referred to creatures that existed outside the natural order of the world as aberrations. This belief allowed people to make sense of incomprehensible crises, such as floods and wars, that occur outside of what they considered as natural and harmonious for society (*ibid.*: 325–326, 328–329).

Aswang Sense-Making

As an aberrant, monstrous figure in Philippine society, *aswang* emerges as a distinct analogue of flesh. Part of *aswang*'s unintelligibility comes from the fact that this word can be used to refer to a singular creature or a multiplicity of forms. Its unruly existence as a multiplicity, consuming and embodying flesh, serves as an enduring reminder that horror and monstrosity are not merely imaginary constructs — *this* world has been shaped and sustained by their presence. Stories and depictions of aswang date as far back as the sixteenth

century. The presence of aswang stories signals more than just a community's spiritual or cultural preoccupations — they point to lived experiences and encounters of monstrous violence. Whether or not one finds these stories believable, they are undeniably an important part of Philippine mythology and cosmology, woven into the fabric of collective sense-making. But in a society haunted by the persistence of poverty, dispossession, displacement, and all kinds of violence, who or what exactly does *aswang* represent? Moreover, how do these representations — some of which contradict each other — inform us of the way Filipino peoples understand their political entanglements and situate themselves in their own tellings of history?

Historically, *aswang* has been weaponised by colonial and state forces to create divisions within insurgent communities during times of political and social unrest. In these cases, the revolutionary is accused of being an *aswang*. *Aswang* stories have also been used to cast women as deviant and dangerous, which has enabled and maintained patriarchal control in families and communities. In these depictions, *aswang* becomes a representation of abjection — flesh-eating flesh — to ascribe a cannibalistic savagery onto the subjugated others while framing colonial and state powers as benevolent protectors, a patriarchal tactic of domestication (De Castro Svetich, 2005: 94). Ironically, many *aswang* victims generally belonged to the groups most suspected and accused of secretly being an *aswang* — villagers, peasants, women, and insurgents (*ibid.*).While these people were already being targeted to dissolve and scatter solidarities, their deaths, whether caused by *aswang* or by state forces, reveal that the material consequences of violence still fell upon those who were already being oppressed. However, *aswang* is more than just a narrative tool for control. *Aswang* is ungovernable and incomprehensible. Its refusal to be domesticated signals an insurgent potential that is already well-understood and deployed by communities in the Philippines in their resistance to ongoing state terror and violence.

Both Spanish and American colonisers sought to 'tame' Filipino peoples,[5] noting their perceptions of history have been shaped by their access to spiritualities that 'conjure anxieties and insecurities in colonial governance, and which offer unknowable alternative ontologies to the curated typology of colonialism' (Bender, 2021, 13). It was not enough that they gained political

5 Japan also invaded the Philippines during World War II, briefly controlling its government. However, existing scholarship about *aswang* and colonialism primarily addresses the Spanish and American occupations. Thus, I similarly direct my attention.

control of these island territories; to ensure complete submission, the natives needed to be evangelised. Before the Spaniards arrived from Europe, indigenous peoples were already participating in their own religions, worshiping spirits of their ancestors and spirits of nature.[6] According to Rafael (1988), the breadth of ethnolinguistic differences across various communities meant that the natives' religious practices were largely illegible to the Spaniards; thus, Catholic conversion became a means to assert both political and religious authority over the natives. However, the spread of Catholicism, as well as the incorporation of new theological ideas into everyday vernacular, did not mean that communities abandoned all their native beliefs and traditions. Many facets of the indigenous religions remained embedded in the consciousness of Filipino peoples, including the *aswang* concept. Because *aswang* stokes a deep fear and anxiety among native communities, it became a powerful tool for policing and dividing an agitated people. During the *Hukbahalap* Rebellion, joint US and Philippine military forces led by Edward Lansdale sought to outmatch the Huks' use of combat psychological warfare (or 'psywar') in which the latter were adept.[7] According to Lansdale (1992: 72–73), one of their psywar operations played upon the locals' fear of *aswang*:

> A combat psywar squad was brought in. It planted stories among town residents of an asuang living on the hill where the Huks were based. Two nights later, after giving the stories time to circulate among Huk sympathisers in the town and make their way up to the hill camp, the psywar squad set up an ambush along a trail used by the Huks. When a Huk patrol came along the trail, the ambushers silently snatched the last man of the patrol, their move unseen in the dark night. They punctured his neck with two holes, vampire fashion, held the body up by the heels, drained it of blood, and put the corpse back on the trail. When the Huks returned to look for the missing man and found their bloodless comrade, every member of the patrol believed that the asuang had got him and that one of them would be next if they remained on

6 The Spaniards, however, refused to acknowledge that the natives' forms of worship could be considered a 'religion,' citing the lack of an organised priesthood or temple, a founder, or written scripture; See Stephen Hislop (1971: 147–149).

7 The Hukbahalaps (Hukbong Bayan Laban sa Hapon or People's Army Against Japan) were an organised resistance group established by Central Luzon peasants communities and unions during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines. They fought alongside both the Philippine and US military against Japanese forces in a frail alliance; eventually they turned their attention towards fighting for national liberation and land reform. However, perceiving the Huks as a communist threat, the US directed and mobilised Philippine troops in a counterinsurgency campaign against the organisation. The Huks eventually surrendered in 1958. See Abinales and Amoroso (2005) and Kerkvliet (2002).

> that hill. When daylight came, the whole Huk squadron moved out of the vicinity.

For Lansdale, demonising the Huks became an effective propaganda strategy, as the circulation of tales about *aswang* among their ranks created disorder in their community. Among a people who identify themselves by and through their solidarities, *aswang* is not only feared because of its predatory nature; the human attacked by aswang also *becomes aswang*, thereby rousing suspicion and anxiety towards each other. To see one's own as an enemy — betraying their *own kin* and devouring their *own flesh* — is to cast oneself as abject and exist in corporeal negation. Fanon (1952: 110) articulates that becoming-abject is both a relational position and a process of negation: 'For not only must the Black man be Black; he must be Black in relation to the White man… Consciousness of the body is solely a negating activity.' He writes that the coloniser also maintains his distinction and dominion over the savage Others by reminding them of their ontological monstrosity: 'In the first chapter of the history that the others have compiled for me, the foundation of cannibalism has been made eminently plain in order that I may not lose sight of it' (*ibid*.: 120). Similarly, the Indio body is racialised, made to always appear in contrast to the standard of purity and civility of the White man. Made out to be monstrous flesh, Filipino peoples have been taught by the coloniser not only to introject depravity and inferiority but also to project contempt onto those like themselves — kin, neighbor, and community. Kristeva (2010: 5) affirms this idea when she critiques Lacan's notion of 'object of desire': 'There is nothing like the abjection of self to show that all abjection is in fact recognition of the *want* on which any being, meaning, language, or desire is founded'. For her, abjection is the project of another's phobia, obsession, and perversion, intersecting with each other and displaced onto the object of want — the slave, the insurgent, the *aswang* (*ibid*.: 45).

In folk stories and popular media, women have also been commonly associated with *aswang*: 'The two most dangerous supernatural manifestations of them are generally described as beautiful women who prey on unsuspecting men or who attack parturient women' (Pertierra, 1983: 330). When women are problematised as monsters, their male counterparts are, in turn, viewed as victims. Meanwhile, other women are seen as potential threats and pit against the other. Since the 1920s, there have been numerous cinematic depictions of women as *manananggal*, thereby reinforcing the gendered trope that casts women as vengeful creatures. Within these narratives, the women-turned-*manananggal* are always portrayed as having once suffered but are now seeking to reproduce the harm they have endured. Thus, patriarchal domination becomes justified to subdue the *manananggal*, the woman-monster. Take, for

instance, the urban legend of Maria Labo, who was an overseas Filipino worker (OFW) from Capi's province. According to the story, Maria Labo became an *aswang* after her employer imparted his vampiric sickness to her. When she returned to the Philippines, her curse overtook her senses; she murdered and ate her children. When her husband discovered what happened, he attacked her with a bolo knife and left her disfigured.[8] Several variations of the story exist but what has remained consistent is the fact of Maria Labo's journey as an OFW who becomes an *aswang* and eats her children.[9] While this story vilifies Maria as a monster whose desire for flesh consumed her, it is important to situate her story in light of the socioeconomic conditions in the Philippines — the legend of Maria Labo originated around the time labor export was on the rise in the Philippines.

Since the policy was first implemented by Ferdinand Marcos in 1974 as a temporary solution to the country's worsening economic crisis — a clear result of his cronyism and corruption — women from all over the country would take on contract work overseas, most notably as domestic helpers, caretakers, and service industry workers. According to a survey conducted by Philippine Statistics Authority (2024), migrant women workers outnumbered their male counterparts in 2022: 1.13 million of the estimated 1.96 million OFWs were women. Though women have gained more access to the overseas labor market, Fernandez (1997: 214) argues that they are still vulnerable to hyper-exploitation as their work opportunities 'are limited to the domestic labor or sex labor sectors, both in the service industry.' That Filipina bodies are gendered and sexualised for domestication is eerily similar to how Black bodies are pornotroped. Yet despite the hardships and antagonism they may face in their personal lives and at a societal level, Filipinas continue to labor and carry the enormous burden of providing for their families, even when leaving home tears, them apart. While this image of dismemberment is a compelling metaphor, it is not merely an abstract representation. Like *manananggals*, a Filipina migrant worker must plant her feet at home as a sign of her return to domestic duties while detaching her upper body to remain productive elsewhere. The *manananggal* –– whose rage and consumption represent the excessive burdens she carries in her body and the limits of her long-suffering –– is akin to flesh in every way. As flesh, she gathers and announces her anger, rattling both patriarchal and capitalist structures that favor consumption over nourishment and control over care. As

8 *Labo* is an Ilonggo word which means 'to hack or slash,' which notably speaks to her disfigurement after her husband slashes her face. 149).

9 For example, in a 2015 film based on her story, Maria Labo was an OFW in Dubai who, after being raped in a van and was hospitalised, becomes an *aswang* after her friend, a fellow OFW, passes on the curse to her.

flesh, she simultaneously fails to live up to and transcends the identities of wife, mother, and daughter bound in relation to the patriarchal figures of her life. As flesh, she reminds Man that she will do what she must to liberate herself. No wonder he is afraid of her.

As a people whose ways of being and living are marked by constant exposure to systemic violence and oppression, is *aswang* merely the expression of anxiety towards a foreclosed destiny? What if we determined to see aswang in the same way that Black radical feminists chose to see flesh, that is, as an alternate mode of living unbound to the prescriptions of society and an insurgent disruption to colonial, patriarchal, and fascist powers even as it remains vulnerable to them? In her piece on the *aswangification* of women, Eisa Jocson (2022) revisits the story of Maria Labo and challenges the popular depiction of *aswang* as wholly abject and subjugated. Instead of determining that Maria Labo was merely a victim of systemic violence and the tragic circumstances of her life, Jocson invites us to consider Maria's *aswangification* as an emancipatory transformation that 'liberated her from the bonds of conventional familial and societal duties and constructs, extricating her from the exploitative system of the global service economy' (*ibid.*). By rejecting the notion that monstrosity is tied to abjection and tragedy, *aswang* becomes a portal for reclaiming agency and transforming the collective consciousness of Filipinos. Ultimately, Jocson re-interpellates Maria Labo as the embodiment of female rage that demands change and revolution. Thus, to become *aswang* is to break out of the mold of Man and defy colonial patriarchal powers that demand conformity. This feminist interpretation of *aswang* as subversive is powerful because it reckons with the monstrous body as openly defiant of societal expectations and duties to exercise and express agency. Jocson's argument aligns closely with Bender's challenge to Ramos's taxonomisation of *aswang*, which reinforces western binary fixations delimiting the natural and supernatural. Bender (2021: 30–31) cites Rafael's scholarship on the Catholic evangelisation of the Philippines to compare the desire to typologise with the desire to colonise — both acts of domestication. Furthermore, he articulates that for all the Church's efforts to subdue the Filipino peoples, it could not quite domesticate creatures like *aswang*:

> After all, a Spanish Catholic colonialism is subject to the same whims of spirits, ghosts, and gods that Philippine communities are — it is simply more plainly hierarchical and codified. The Spanish could not ever fully govern a spirit world in the Philippines because it resists discursiveness. In attempting religious conversion, the process of transforming the creatures of Philippine mythology into figures recognisable to the Catholic Church loses something

> in translation. The Church attempts to speak for the ghosts and fails to understand them. It cannot even begin to understand them, because by their very nature ghosts and spirits resist understanding (*ibid*.: 35).

Because the Church cannot control nor understand these creaturely spirits, remnants of indigenous beliefs and practices emerge in the gaps for which Catholic doctrine could not account. To this day, many families and communities still believe in the existence of aswang, which is often reflected and upheld in common rituals such as announcing oneself to potential spirit-guests in a room or space or hosting a lively, celebratory wake for the dead. Since the *aswang* is neither legible nor fully knowable to our human sensibilities, Bender chooses to sit with its unknowability in the hope of both reckoning with and disrupting coloniality (*ibid*.: 71). Similarly, Jordan Clark, who founded *The Aswang Project*, also problematises the Church's view of *aswang*. By appealing to early Tagalog peoples' understanding of their relations to deities and mythical creatures like *aswang*, Clark undermines Juan de Plasencia's classification of *aswang* as part of 'The Twelve Priests of the Devil':

> We must remember that some of these mythical beings existed in the spirit realm and would, on occasion, appear in human form. Even though they were considered harmful and the natives feared them, they were not considered 'evil.' They just did what they were supposed to be doing… Due to Plasencia's Catholic mindset and the Spanish mission to cleanse the lands of 'heathens,' early Filipinos were trained, forced, or convinced to associate some of these beings with the devil. The Spanish were successful in eliminating the belief in deities and de-powering the spiritual leaders, but they were no match for superstitions regarding folkloric beings (Clark, 2015).

Though *aswang* is a malevolent creature that wreaks havoc and causes disturbances within a community, it does so in accordance with its given nature and place in the world. This differs from Catholic tradition, which identifies the devil as a much more sinister being who is actively at war with God and his people. Bender (2021: 26) also affirms the people's implicit understanding of *aswang*'s place in society, that this being is not something to control but someone who also inhabits their world. On the other hand, the coloniser is a stranger to that world, an alien to a land that is brimming with a life unbeknownst to them. Ironically, their use of *aswang* to create fear and acquiescence is what allowed people's belief in these creatures to endure despite centuries of occupation and inculcation into a different religion. As Clark iterates, the coloniser may have been able to convert the people, but *aswang* lingers in the wake of their departure. Like flesh.

To Haunt the Living (Hell Out of You)

In *aswang*'s supposed birthplace, Panay Island, a rare genetic disorder known as X-linked Dystonia-Parkinsonism (XDP) occurs among several of its men, who display symptoms such as loss of bodily control, involuntary eyelid quivering, and postural instability. All known cases of this neurodegenerative movement disorder are traced to a common ancestor in Panay and passed through the maternal line (Lee et al., 1976, 2011).[10] Moreover, medical research suggests that the genetic mutation responsible for the disorder was introduced to the Olongo ethnic group of Panay over 2,000 years ago (National Organisation for Rare Disorders 2003). Agreeing with the public health doctor who appeared in his documentary, Clark concludes that this disorder, which has manifested across more than 50 generations, explains the connection between the region and the aswang phenomenon (Clark, 2013). Prior to the publication of this XDP research in 1976, these involuntary tremors and abnormal torsions would have been understood as monstrous, and the people affected by the disorder would have been shunned by their communities. Despite evidence of the neurological disorder, XDP patients remain socially stigmatised and associated with *aswang*.

According to Canguilhem (2008: 134), the existence of monsters undermines our confidence in the order of life, which is why we are gripped by 'radical fear' at the appearance of divergence in our world. This error, this aberration in nature, haunts us and we are overcome by a primordial anxiety that demands the annihilation of this 'failure of life.' But maybe *aswang*, one of many among the population of monsters, serves to remind us that the fantastic is also capable of populating a world, just as Canguilhem imagines (*ibid.*: 145). Poking at the rigid structuralist norms that governed the science of his time, the French philosopher and physician levies that 'there is nothing monstrous about monstrosities' as even accidents point towards life proliferating (*ibid.*). Yet the monstrous still exists because of its negative relation to Man. Foucault (2003: 56), who was Canguilhem's doctoral student, extends his mentor's line of inquiry by maintaining that the monster's capacity to create anxiety is not solely because of its violation of the law — it leaves the law speechless and trapped, triggering the will to violence. The law, as a normalising force in society, has always been complicit in the routine and institutionalised violence that pervades our everyday lives through policing, imprisonment, displacement, poverty, and other conditions/experiences deemed 'necessary' for a functional democracy (Duff, 2024; Neu, 2018). But what differentiates the monster from

10 XDP is also widely known as *Lubag*, an Ilonggo word that describes torsion, the (involuntary) twisting of one's body.

everyone else living under the law and its capacity for violence? Perhaps, we may find some direction in Cavarero's (2011) work on horror, which locates violence beyond its role in political strategising (as in the 'war on terror') and in delimiting the 'abnormal.' While terror is catalyzed by fear, triggering evasion, flight, and panic, she writes that horror evokes a different response. In a political imaginary of horror, the monster, as an object of abjection and condemnation, ignites what she describes as 'instinctive disgust for a violence that, not content merely to kill because killing would be too little, aims to destroy the uniqueness of the body, tearing at its constitutive vulnerability' (*ibid.*: 8). What's at stake is not only one's life but the uniqueness of being itself. While the law wears down on us, even to the point of death, its violence is not always evenly deployed. Duterte's war on drugs shows us that a different horror was unfolding beyond the routine police violence that poor urban neighborhoods were already experiencing. Despite the institutionalisation of violence today, society has not completely 'progressed' from the horrors of the guillotine, quartering, and stake burnings. But the existence of monsters tells us that the law has not entirely captured and repurposed violence either.

Flesh eludes capture, just as *aswang* swerves the nets and bullets deployed against it. There is no use in theorising flesh to capture it. Instead, I offer *aswang*-as-flesh to contend with the logics of hyper-knowability and hyper-legibility that the state attempts to harness against those it seeks to destroy. When agency seems lost or impossible, I am reminded of the ones who live at the fringes of society, such as those entangled in Duterte's drug war. They embody a kind of politics that challenges the meaning of 'end' and 'loss,' even in the face of annihilation (Mbembe, 2019). They also give us an idea of how violence and its excesses often materialise beyond the event, carrying what Daniel (1996: 5) contends as 'complex agendas and already begun meditations such as demands for justice, revenge, forgiveness, freedom, and relief.' Western historiographies have largely assumed violence as a technical apparatus of sovereignty, wherein agency becomes understood only vis-a-vis sovereignty. Those at the receiving end of violence are often seen as having no agency, yet this idea does not hold up in the presence of flesh. If agency is not an object to be granted or given but rather expressed and exercised through sociality, is not becoming flesh a self-reflexive practice, in which one is situated differently to the world? What would it look like to embrace becoming-flesh to disrupt linear modalities of time and historicity that seek to erase the Others of society — in other words, to haunt the living as beings of flesh?

Perhaps, one way to disrupt this linearity is by engaging with stories as a practice that recalibrates one's vision of the world. As discussed, it is through

literary mediums such as fiction, folklore, and mythology that we are introduced to the fantastic, a time-space that activates alternate imaginaries of life, activity, environment, and relations. Through the fantastic, social norms can be challenged, dismantled, and reimagined; being and subjectivity can be turned inside-out, ripped to pieces, deformed and reshaped into something that refuses society's ways. Such stories can cast long shadows against a child's bedroom wall in the late hours of night and can conjure haunting faces as we are falling to sleep. Such stories lead communities to exile women and allow colonisers to throw Huk insurgents off guard. Storytelling is a political act that materialises tangible outcomes. Shaped by the intertwining of experience, imagination, and superstition, stories are the reason *aswang* outlived both the occupation eras and their violent erasure of languages, histories, and cultures. The power of *aswang* lies precisely in how we use it to reimagine our pasts and illuminate our present realities. These stories, which allow us to reflect and express our social and political agency, will outlast those who do not share any historical kinship with this creature.

While Alyx Alumpac's documentary provides a particular perspective about *aswang*'s place in contemporary Filipino imagination, there is another perspective that dares us to see *aswang* through the clarifying lens of the fantastical. *May Tiktik sa Bubong, May Sigbin sa Silong*, a Tagalog anthology of stories, summons the *aswang* multiplicity as conscious, self-reflexive beings contending for and expressing their own complicated needs and desires while navigating a world that sees them through fear and stigma. Allan Derain (2017: 1), the anthology's editor, introduces the modern *aswang* as having been exasperated by people's use of the crucifix to counter its presence. Derain cheekily wonders whether the *aswang*'s ancestors must have been confused by their first encounter with the crucifix:

> What kind of new power is this? Surely, there must be a fascinating story behind this piece of wood being shoved in their face by this foreigner who just arrived. They just cannot comprehend where and from whom this story originates. The fear that we all have as humans towards the unfamiliar must be the same fear that rose in the *aswang*. Their fur bristles because they can tell that the story of the man hanging on the cross is powerful, and they intuit that their destinies will now hinge upon the fate of the man on the tree. What kind of crime did this man commit that he was punished in such a way? Will the foreigner also do this to those like him? Is this a warning? It is a tragedy that this newcomer who understands this tale also holds the power to use it to subdue them (*ibid*.: 1–2, my own translation from Tagalog).

In this tale, Derain reimagines history from the perspective of an elderly *aswang* who is determined 'to become a symbol, bearing and embodying the contradicting histories, opinions, and interests of various communities. They will textualise themself to become 'target practice' of language analysts and practitioners. They will reside within the consciousness of a nation as a limit-marker of the visible world to help their people differentiate themselves (family, clan, tribe, ethnicity, nation) from others (foreigner, stranger, outsider, enemy)' (*ibid.*: 2–3, my own translation from Tagalog). Now, *aswang* has truly emerged as a multiplicity. Within the anthology's enchanting chronicles, *aswang* have become the Mayon fire thief, Captain Gimo of the Huks, the CIA agents responsible for Lansdale's anti-communist campaign, the unfortunate victims of a massacre, a jealous lover, a queer man, a communist rebel, and a power-hungry politician. In these textual and visual stories, readers become privy to various *aswang*'s feelings, opinions, and perspectives that grow and change as they interact with humans and other beings in the world — the first chapter even introduces us to *aswang* anatomy and ethics, which details their various features such as their proboscis-like tongue and self-segmenting ability as well as their lifecycle from birth to death. These stories also remind us that while *aswang* takes on many forms and may appear in different ways to different people, they are still visceral beings who 'have flesh and blood while also feeding on flesh and blood' (*ibid.*: 8, my own translation from Tagalog). As beings of flesh, *aswang* point us towards other ways of seeing, understanding, and inhabiting a world.

This take is fundamentally different from Arumpac's account of aswang. While Arumpac shines a light on the monsters that prey on the poor, Derain and his fellow authors flip the script and theorise against the misconception that monsters are one-dimensional beings capable only of living in negative relation to humans. Instead, we are encouraged to imagine a *bangungot* who visits a sleeping Marcos every night, quietly taunting him about his family's vile atrocities. We are told of a *manananggal* discovering Duterte might be suffering from long-term liver failure and seizes this opportunity to secure her next meal. The budding animosity between the Marcos and Duterte camps becomes the result of a curse placed on the government by a *mangkukulam* denied justice during the Commonwealth era? To this end, *aswang* becomes a symbol of more than just the struggle for national identity and self-determination; *aswang*-as-flesh represents the collective trauma of a people left to fend for themselves after being subjugated, dispossessed, and slaughtered over generations. Perhaps the documentary's warning about *aswang*'s looming approach was not meant for children after all. Against the backdrop of a hazy moonlight, the disembodied

voice is, rather, a warning for the likes of Duterte and Marcos. On the streets and in nearby creeks, flesh and blood are crying out for justice. Their screams signal the beginning of a haunting.

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