



Embodying Maarte: Reinterpreting Queer Performances of Failure through Crip Inspirations

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Maarte is a Tagalog word used to identify someone, usually gendered through femininity, as being “extra” or acting in excess of expected behaviours. Through this creative work, I share a choreographic narrative that describes my 2019 dance piece, In the name of the mother...? Returning to this past performance of failure through crip theories of refusal and creativity, I embody a different dance of interpreting my excess gestures of queer sexuality and mad irrationality within Catholic rituals of prayer and amid settler colonial expectations of Canadian multicultural citizenship. Through the writing of this narrative, I pursue the excesses of my dance and return to a different reading of being maarte—a different feeling of my maarte being.

Hindi kita malilimutan,
Hindi kita pababayaan.
Nakaukit magpakailanman,
sa king palad, ang yong pangalan.¹

—Basil Valdez, from the song “Hindi kita malilimutan,” 1994

Prelude: A Time of Mourning

I am writing this on the morning of Good Friday, a solemn day in the Catholic Church. Although it has been many years since I have taken part in the rituals that accompany this day, I find myself repeating their gestures of mourning.

I light a candle, an act of remembrance. However, this is not a remembrance in observance of Christ’s Passion. It is a holding onto the memories I have forgotten—that I have chosen to forget through my queer separation from Filipino Catholic spirituality.

I pause for a moment of contemplation. I watch the stream of smoke swirl from the blown-out match. I watch it dissipate, becoming entangled with my prayer. However, this is not a prayer of repentance made possible by the sacrifice of the only begotten son of God. It is a *panalangin*, a prayer, that longs to be in relation with the Filipino-Canadian community through which I have come to understand any sense of belonging to my diasporic roots. This is a prayer, a *panalangin*, that longs to find belonging amidst mad² and queer routes.

I find myself lying down, face burrowed into a soft cushion’s embrace. However, this is not a prostration of reverence to the cross—a ritual usually performed by the priest in Good Friday services. It is a performance of another definition of prostration. It is a performance of my body’s physical, mental, and emotional collapse onto the bed beneath me. It is a prostration embodied through my body’s gestures of depression and anxiety.



I resist enacting the expected rituals of Catholic mourning. Instead, I perform the gestures that mourn a loss of belonging to what was once my cultural and spiritual community. And I can't help but understand them as gesturing to my *being maarte*.

Maarte is a Tagalog word used to describe someone, usually gendered through femininity, as being fussy and nit-picky. *Being maarte* is a common Filipino phrase used to describe someone who is "being a diva" or "acting extra." When I hear the phrase, I think of a parent scolding their child for being overly dramatic because they have not gotten their way or because they desire something that is deemed unreasonable. I forget any specific example of my actions ever explicitly described as being maarte; my body remembers the racing of my heart and the tension of my shoulders.

I listen to the embodied reverberations of my anxiety and depression. I feel my irrationality, my being made irrational because I cannot be okay with what has been "reasonably" given to me. I sense the echoes of a feminine embodiment that I must hide to pass as a heterosexual male—a queer performance I must keep closeted to gain access into a space of multicultural belonging. It is unreasonable for me to trouble the redemptive covenant of the Catholic Church and to question our belonging to the multicultural dream of the Canadian nation-state. It is unreasonable for me to search for different spaces of belonging that reveal and refuse the coloniality of church and state. I feel the irrationality of my anger and sense the echoes of madness pulsating through my body. I listen to the embodied reverberations of my being angry, of my being made mad. It is unreasonable for me to mourn the loss of the covenant that I no longer belong to. It is unreasonable for me to mourn the dreams that I have come to realize that we never belonged to.

I hear a voice inside saying, "Hay naku!³ Why are you being so overdramatic? Mourning? You haven't lost anything. You have been given so much to be here in Canada. Stop being so fussy, you're fine. If you feel left out, you should just go back to church. If you don't want to get out of bed, bahala ka na,⁴ but you don't have to be so maarte."

I am writing this on the morning of Good Friday, a day that once again embodies a time of mourning for me. As I long for all that I have forgotten through my failure to embody Catholic rituals of prayer—the songs, the food, the culture, the spirituality, the gestures through which I always found a sense of belonging to a Filipino-Canadian community and its promise of multicultural belonging—I find myself remembering another performance of queer failure through my maarte being...

Theoretical Introductions: Queer Performances and Crip Inspirations

The following creative work is a choreographic narrative that reflects on what I now come to recognize as a performance of queer failure. *In the name of the mother...?* was a solo dance piece performed in 2019 that shared a personal narrative of coming into my Filipino roots and my coming out through Filipinx routes.⁵ I return to this dance, influenced by Jack Halberstam's (2011) suggestion of failure as a queer artistic practice, recognizing it as a performance of being maarte. Halberstam reminds me, "Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (2–3). It is by reflecting on my gestures of failure, that I begin to reveal the surprising ways through which I embody my queer being in relation to choreographies of dis/ability.



By including the slash within the term *dis/ability*, I am influenced by Dan Goodley's suggestion to "keep disablism and ableism, disability and ability in play with one another, to explore their co-construction and reliance upon one another" (2014, xiii). Through my creative work, I engage in this play by invoking choreography as a site for navigating the co-constitutive relationship of ability and disability that is made meaningful through my interpretation of queer Filipinx embodiment. I take up J. Logan Smilges' (2022) invitation to return to "disability's pivotal role" (through its exclusion) in the political formulation of queerness; I take up their argument "for *queer's* return to its original pathology;" I take up their call to "shift [queer studies'] attention away from legible forms of queerness toward vast and shifting realms of the illegible" (9). In doing so, I find creative possibility in exploring the constellations of my queer relations to disability. I find choreographic inspiration in Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander's suggestion to engage my "co-motion" with the commotion through which disability studies invites me to interpret the queer disruption of my prayer (2005, 10). By returning to my queer performances of failure through a disability studies orientation, the following choreographic narrative attempts to interpret the excessive gestures that are made legible through an identification of my being maarte—the illegible gestures of my maarte being.

Before sharing this creative piece, I begin by introducing the theoretical orientations that have inspired this reinterpretation of my dance. In doing so, I am not attempting to theoretically analyse what I have created. Instead, I am attempting to understand the orientations through which I am directed to this creative act as the critical theoretical work in and of itself. I recall Sara Ahmed's suggestion that "Orientations are about how we begin; how we proceed from 'here,' which affects how what is 'there' appears, how it presents itself" (2006, 8). This introduction is less of a theoretical framing of my previous performance; it is more of an attempt to understand how I have come to be oriented to my creative acts of writing as the space through which I embody dance practices of theorizing. Following Ahmed, this introduction is the beginning where I work to understand the "here" through which I will proceed into my creative work as the embodied act of theorizing the "there" of my being maarte.

While my initial performance was created through a desire to navigate my queer performances of spirituality, a dance of failing to inhabit the spaces of my prayer, it is through the critical and creative orientations of disability studies that I use my choreographic narrative to reinterpret my gestures (Esteban, 2022a; Esteban, 2022b; Esteban, 2023). I am invited to pursue the excess movements that can be so easily made to disappear when my dance is labelled as an act of being maarte. Through my being made maarte, my gestures are easily marked as not belonging within the realm of the ordinary performance expected of me—an embodiment that for so long has been desired for and by me. Through an identification of my gestures as being maarte, they appear as extra to the ordinary and disappear as a possible way of being embodied, of living my embodied being (Esteban 2022a, 141; Michalko 2002, 5). It is through this disability studies questioning of embodiment that I further find inspiration in crip theories of refusal and creativity.

I was introduced to crip theory through Alison Kafer's question, "How do the meanings of able-bodiedness, and of disability, both create and result from a system of compulsion?" (2003, 79). As I return to my performance of being maarte, I wonder how such a question is inviting me to encounter the choreographies I have been interpreting—the choreographies I have been embodying. Reflecting on this question of embodiment through the act of "cripping," Robert McRuer (2018) further suggests:



Crippling always attends to the materiality of embodiment at the same time that it attends to how spaces, issues, or discussions get “straightened.” The critical act of crippling, I argue, resists “straightening” in a rather more expansive sense than we might think of straightening, at the moment, in queer studies, activism, or art. (24)

I move with McRuer to explore crip registers of refusing the impulse to follow the straight and narrow path of our being—one that is expected within multicultural imaginaries of belonging to the settler colonial nation state of so-called Canada (Cagulada and Esteban 2023, 136; Esteban 2023). By interpreting my gestures of failure as excess, I begin to understand the compulsions and expectations of the body that make meaning of my gestures through their failure to follow the straight path to an “ideal” figure. I begin to imagine my body’s refusal to replicate the figure that my performance of failure becomes excessive to: the Canadian multicultural citizen and its underlying registers of settler colonialism, heteropatriarchy, and white supremacy (Bannerji 2000; Thobani 2007; Walcott 2016).

Confronted once more with the heteropatriarchal imaginary of what it means to be a national subject, but this time through crip orientations, I now find myself moving with Jina B. Kim’s (2017) suggestion of a crip-of-color critique, a “move away from reform-oriented strategies that prioritize the attainment of legal rights, and toward more disruptive modes of organizing life altogether.” Sony Coráñez Bolton (2023) further adds to Kim’s call through his suggestion of a “crip colonial critique” that “unearths and scrutinizes the ways in which disability discourses fundamentally inhere within, animate, and propagate colonialism generally” (8). He reminds me that to reinterpret the colonial expectations of my being, I must attend to the meanings of disability that allow for such colonial becomings. I am moved by Kim and Bolton’s suggestions as they gesture to the creativity of choreographing different modes of be(com)ing within settler colonial myths of multicultural belonging.

To encounter myth is to return to the stories that inspire us, that breathe life into our realities. As storyteller Thomas King (2003) reminds me, “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (2). If we are constituted by the stories that proceed us, how do we assert our being more than the colonial myths through which we navigate and negotiate our becomings? How do I take a breath when the air I gasp for can no longer sustain my asthma-scarred lungs because of the colonial abuse of land, water, and sky—a situation that has become all too real on Turtle Island as forest fires rage and smoke fills the air. This is where I return to the possibility of choreographic interpretation through crip inspirations.

I am being reintroduced to crip theory as a creative endeavour as I recall Kelly Fritch’s assertion that “to crip is to open up with desire to the ways that disability disrupts” (quoted in Chandler 2019). Understanding my queer performance of failure as a resistance, and moreover as a refusal of the multicultural expectations that expect my spiritual gestures, I feel a sense of recognition within practices of crippling. I begin to recognize my failed performances of prayer as the spiritual gestures of refusal that are also dancing through different ways of be(long)ing. I begin to desire these creative gestures of failure as they disrupt the fixing of my identity as a colonial subject within Canadian settler myths of multicultural citizenship.

I recall Kafer’s suggestion, “Claiming crip, then, can be a way of acknowledging that we all have bodies and minds with shifting abilities, and wrestling with the political meanings and histories of such shifts” (2013, 13). I do not, however, seek to claim any identity through this dance, nor do I attempt to reclaim my experiences of mental anguish and its physical embodiments in a way that might give me any certainty of my identification. Instead, I grapple with the political meanings and histories that come alive through my returned performances of queer failure; I navigate crip invitations through Tanya Titchkosky’s invocation of a “politics of



wonder” to open up the possibility of reinterpreting disabled embodiment beyond single stories of shame and suffering (2011, 15); I follow Petra Kuppers’ invitation to embrace the speculative possibilities of crip stumblings within the boundaries between pain and joy, where sensual performances of their entanglements might be lived (2022, 3). Instead, I improvise a dance that seeks to grasp at and gasp for shifting inspirations of my embodiment.

More than a mere act of reclamation, the following is a choreographic narrative of my attempts to re-embodiment the creative inspirations that have been marked as too much, as unnecessary—as extra. This narrative method of choreographic interpretation is influenced by Devon Healey’s (2022) suggestion of blindness as perception. Critically reinterpreting the common phrase, *seeing is believing*, she suggests that “[n]ot accepting the world as it looks is blind perception” (132). While I return to my past performance by looking at photos and watching videos of me dancing, I am moved to recognize the gestures that remain unseen through the taken-for-granted sight of my dancing body. I return to these unseen gestures through Erin Manning’s invocation of the “minor gesture” and the improvisational possibility that comes from their being “overlooked” (2016, 2). I pursue these unseen and minor gestures as the excess gestures that the mere sighted perception of this past dance cannot see. Rather than sharing photos and videos of me dancing, rather than describing any reality of what my body did to embody the performance of a dance, I write a story. I dance through an act of writing that refigures the body as the site where the often-overlooked stories of struggle and dreams might be pursued. I share this narrative as an embodied act of choreographing my excessive gestures anew.

Through my written act of dancing this narrative, I wait with Tanya Titchkosky, Elaine Cagulada, and Madeleine DeWelles’ interpretive invitation to “enact[] a pause” upon encountering the dis/appearance of dis/ability (2022, 8), an invitation that is further influenced by Alia Al-Saji’s suggestion of a “phenomenology of hesitation” (2014, 136). Through this act of waiting, I move with Audre Lorde’s suggestion that “there are no new ideas. There are only new ways of making them felt” (1984, 39). I wait. I pause. I hesitate amid the stories that choreograph my being. I breathe in the possibility of crip inspirations and attempt to exhale an embodied practice of feeling into different interpretations of my dancing body. In doing so, my interpretation further becomes an act of choreographing different ways of being-in-the-world that have always been reverberating through desires for belonging, feelings of unbelonging, and the mad/queer routes through which I navigate the liminality of my (un)belonging. It is through the following choreographic narrative, that I share a description of *In the name of the mother...?* that attempts to embody anew my critical and creative performances of *feeling maarte*.

Embodying Maarte: A Choreographic Narrative

The performance begins with my entrance.

Dressed in a black mesh shirt, dark jeans torn at the knees, a pair of black velvet stiletto heels, and a golden crown atop my head, I strut onto the stage. House lights still on, I carry a box full of objects that invite my audience to join me in a ritual of prayer: a votive painting of Mary, candles, a barong,⁶ and a rosary.



The clack of my heels echo into the growing silence as the audience recedes into the emptiness of the space. The rhythm of Celebrities, the once-gay Vancouver night club, propels me onto this stage. My hips sway from side to side with each step—a metronome that marks the time of my remembering...

...mesh-draped memories,
queer debauchery hanging off my shoulders,
flowing down and
rubbing up against too-soon ripped jeans.

Past gyrations mapping
routes through my body.
Pelvic figure eights tracing
sleepless portals from Thursday 10 pm's to Friday 3 am's.

Salt-caked skin
remnants,
the dried-up fossils of sweat-soaked V-neck t-shirts,
acid-washed with citrus tequila chasers
sweet nectar of
forbidden fruit...

...the beat of this sensual strut slowly dissipates.

The confidence of each step falters into a precarity of finding support for the weight of this remembering.

Swaying hips no longer provide
counterbalance for buckling
ankles barely held up by metal
nails costumed into velvet-coated plastic stilettos.

A chill engulfs me.

A shawl of coldness attempts to cover
my brown skin flashing its pride
through scandalous holes,
my mesh-draped body.

I recognize this hug,

cold.
The absence of
heat emanating
from the spot

lit up

in front of me
a heavenly light



illuminates the darkness
surrounding me.

I can only know this darkness
everything that I am.

I can only know the spotlight
everything that I long to be.

I reach centre stage and enter my pause. I find myself in a moment of hesitation.

The house lights have faded and my audience has disappeared into the darkness. I find myself alone. I carefully place the box down at my feet and begin to undress. First the heels, then the torn jeans, and then the mesh shirt—I perform this unanticipated ritual of disrobing.

About to pick up the box again, I look to the corner of the stage, now lit with a bright spotlight. I still cannot feel its warmth. Picking up the mesh shirt once more, I drag it against my face to wipe off the black lipstick and eyeliner that hides my anxiety. I carefully remove the black choker adorning my neck and the black stud earring hanging off my left ear lobe. Slowly drawing both hands past my face, I lift the golden crown off my head. I let it drop to the ground. Expecting a loud clank—I instead hear a soft thud.

I am ready to enter into the warmth.

Picking up the box,
I walk
barefoot forward
toward the illuminated spot
light
that forbids
every remnant of my previous costume,
left behind
forgotten
in darkness.

I can now enter the stage of my performance, this sacred space of my prayer.

I arrange the items in preparation for my prayer: propping the painting of Mary up against the box, lighting candles to illuminate her image, putting on my barong, and picking up the rosary. I kneel, facing the darkness in front of me, and attempt to enact the sign of the cross. My right hand moves up to my forehead. It is unwilling to make contact, stopped by the barely audible mumbling that comes out of my mouth.

A woman's voice echoes into the space:

Anak, where are you?

Saan ka na—my son?

My son, saan?



I once again feel the tension that arises from attempting to enact that ordinary performance of prayer. A prayer that I have come to know so well through my Filipino Catholic roots. I inspect my preparation of the space and the dressing of my body. I look down upon myself, kneeling, and recognize my gesturing to that ritual of prayer. And still, I am not recognizable. A mother's voice cannot recognize her son. Her son does not recognize the prayer passed down from his mother.

I find myself breathing in
the tension.

Unbelonging shoots up my neck.
I have removed my choker,
and still, I feel something choking me.

Clawed muscles wrap around
my throat,
wringing out
every
drop
of moisture.

My voice
left parched
exhales
a desert wind.

I inspire a tension that expires the excess mumbles spilling from my mouth, a prayer
—unrecognizable.

My gaze follows these sounds as their echo cascades down my body
—unrecognizable.

Unrecognizable—I no longer see...
two small hands pressed together
not wanting to drop
his fingers pointed up
to an unattainable
heaven above

...the image reflected back at
me in the priest's chalice.

Unrecognizable—I no longer see...
the wide-toothed grin
the rubber tsinelas⁸
once naturally made
both now a synthetic display of
“my Filipino heritage”

...the image taken of me for



a third-grade
multiculturalism project.

Unrecognizable—I no longer see...
the upright spine of
a kneeling mannequin
for the barong's embroidered
silk fibres echoing
the wood grains of a rosary in hand

...the image drawn as a
reflection of my first
communion.

Unrecognizable—I no longer see...
the buzz cut of a boy
whose gaping mouth
mirrors the O-shape
of eyes opened wide and ready,
scared for the flash

...the image fixed onto
my Canadian
citizenship card.

Unrecognizable—I no longer see...
a self
now engulfed by
reverberations of mesh
quaking through the body's
out of time fleshy
gnarled fingers
crawling through the mess
of sensual encounters
confessing stench
that drop and dip into
yells of rage
clawing at skin
scratching out

...my self

I cannot recognize my self through my prayer. I cannot recognize my prayer through the slurred sounds of this self. And still, I tongue through a delicious cadence of words, dripping from my mouth. My lips squeeze shut and then open again, dispensing freshly squeezed juice
dripping
through
memories of
mesh-draped
gyrations mapping



salt-caked skin
silk fibres echoing
the wood grains of a rosary in hand.

Clawed muscles wrap around
the buzz cut of a boy
whose gaping mouth
forbids
every remnant of my previous costume
left behind
forgotten.

I no longer see..
myself breathing in
the tension
gnarled fingers
crawling through
the upright spine of
an unattainable
heaven above
sleepless portals from Thursday 10 pm's to Friday 3 am's
that drop and dip into
yells of rage
my voice
left parched
exhales
"my Filipino heritage."

Picking up the box,
I walk

A woman's voice echoes into the space:
Anak, where are you?

barefoot forward
toward the illuminated spot.

Saan ka na—my son?

I find myself breathing in

My son, saan?

sweet nectar of

A woman's voice echoes into the space:

forbidden fruit...

Coda: A Time for Mourning

I am writing this on the morning of Good Friday, a solemn day in the Catholic Church. Although it has been many years since I have taken part in the rituals that accompany this day, I find myself repeating their gestures of mourning.



I light a candle, an act of remembrance.

I pause for a moment of contemplation. I watch the stream of smoke swirl from the blown-out match. I watch it dissipate, becoming entangled with my prayer.

I find myself lying down, face burrowed into a soft cushion's embrace.

And as I resist enacting the expected rituals of Catholic mourning through my present interpretations of such gestures, I remember the excess feeling of anticipation that would engulf me each year. I feel the sensation of anticipation that would reverberate within me as a child every Good Friday. I would remember all of the special treats I would soon be enjoying in celebration of Easter Sunday, some of them which I had prevented myself from having as part of my Lenten sacrifice. I would pause in a prayer of thanksgiving for the traditions of being together as a family—with immediate family in Canada, visiting my favourite cousins in America, or through big family reunions in the Philippines. I would feel the embrace of a chance for rest through a post-meal siesta or by watching movies and playing video games with my siblings and cousins. In my mind and through my body, I would imagine a dream world—an anticipation of bliss. It is through this anticipation that I return to another meaning of being maarte, being artistic. It is within this embodied space of feeling anticipation that I release the creative excesses through which I find desire in my artistic being.

I am writing this on the morning of Good Friday, a day that once again embodies a time of mourning for me. And as I take this time *for* mourning, I inspire a different way of inhabiting the temporality of my being maarte. I find myself moving through Kafer's suggestion of crip time as "flex time not just expanded but exploded" (2013, 27). This time for mourning explodes any linear sense of temporality as my act of anticipation dreams into being different futures through the present performance of my past failed gestures. Amid the pain of mourning all that I have lost and forgotten in failure, I wonder what joys might be released through an anticipation of the artistic life that I am assembling—an excessive life that I am narrating through the embodied interpretations and reinterpretations of my critical remembering and creative re-memberings. I wonder what artistic embodiments of desire might be opened up to us through the excesses of maarte be(com)ing.

Notes

1. Translation: I will not forget you./ I will not forsake you./ Etched forevermore./ in my palm, your name.
2. Throughout this piece, I use the lowercase "m" to mark a distinction between my engagement with the phenomenon of madness and the act of (re)claiming Mad identity—an act that I am still in the process of navigating as I work to understand my experiences of mental/bodily anguish and embodied/enminded difference amidst colonial and heteropatriarchal expectations of my being.
3. *Hay naku* is a Tagalog expression of frustration and disappointment.
4. *Bahala ka na* is a Tagalog phrase that in this context could be translated to, "it's up to you, do what you want."



5. Negotiating when I use the term “Filipino” versus the more gender and queer inclusive term “Filipinx,” I am navigating the tensions between religious, colonial, imperial, and familial roots of belonging to my Filipino identity and my dreams for queer routes of Filipinx be(com)ing.
6. The *barong* is the national dress of the Philippines. It is an embroidered long-sleeved and collared shirt often made of *piña*, a silk of pineapple fibres. It is usually worn on special occasions such as weddings and baptisms.
7. Here I play with the echo of a mother’s call in Tagalog, *Saan ka na anak?*, which can be translated in English to “Where are you son?”
8. *Tsinelas* is the Tagalog word for slippers, usually used to refer to rubber flip flops.

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