

Miles I.

Vallejo, California

Ang Tanging Alay ko

Oil on canvas

“I only offer you”, the name of the song that loops while observing the painting. The song was my grandma’s favorite and her friends, family, and acquaintances sang it to her right before she passed. Going with my continuous *We Are Not the Same* collection of paintings, zines, and posters, *Ang Tanging Alay ko* is a door frame sized canvas and painted onto it are my past relatives. Grandma Dely, Grandpa Alfonso, Grandpa Mariano, Great Auntie Peewee, Great Grandpa Eduardo, and Great Great Grandma Sophia. I collaged photos of them based on how I remember them. Photos I walk by in my house, or photos of them when they were in their prime. Beauty pageants, joining the navy, or wearing traditional clothing. When beginning my final project, the one thing I was certain of was that I wanted it to be very personal to me, something that nobody else could relate to. That's when I knew I wanted to explore my family tree. How did I end up in America? Who are the people who have helped me get to where I am now? My final project for Oxbow helped me connect more deeply to my ancestors. While painting, I felt multiple times the presence of whoever I was painting. My research towards this project has been mostly focused on spiritual Identity and how Filipinos cope with death like how we perform superstitions at funerals and our beliefs around spirits. The other half of my research was personal. I gathered photos, interviewed my mom on her own personal relationship with my past relatives, and found my own personal connection to my relatives. When I finished this painting I now sit with a full sense of where I came from and a sense of pride for who I am.

Ang Tanging Alay Ko



Miles I.

The Oxbow School

OS47

For years we knew that my Grandma Dely would die. In 1980 she obtained Hepatitis C, a horrible kidney disease that causes your kidneys to fail. She got Hep C due to a shitty blood transfusion from her Hysterectomy back in the motherland, the PI, the Philippines. This diagnosis required her to attend weekly check ups at Divita, the nearest dialysis facility. I sat in waiting rooms or my grandfather's Nissan Altima Van that he made me memorize the license plate of. It went 5GKT7... and so on. Grandma Dely would later take the big office printer looking dialysis machine home making it part of her nightly routine. Fluids pumping in and out of her kidneys nightly. She would go days without being able to get up because of the pain of dialysis. We knew she wasn't going to survive long enough to see me graduate high school but a slip on a wet floor in the Filipino supermarket caused the process to speed up. After the fall, trips to the intensive care unit became a regular occurrence. I sat in more waiting rooms for hours on end because I wasn't allowed to go into the unit. I sat outside eating low quality supermarket sushi and clam chowder not having a clue what was going on in there. The ICU visits came to a close and for the last bit of time she had, she was able to be at home. Friends, family, and extended relatives passed by on a daily basis. Twenty four hours before she had passed it felt like everyone she had ever met came by the house. For a brief moment, everyone stood around her. I had no clue what was going on. Her choir began to sing a song and everyone joined in. The song stuck out to me. The rhythm and the sway of the lyrics felt comforting to me even though I had no clue what they were saying. Everyone inside the house began to cry. They knew something that my eleven year old mind was not capable of understanding. The song had rooted itself in my mind.

When given this opportunity to expand my ideas for my final project I wanted to make a project that nobody could relate to. During my time at Oxbow I was one out of six students of color in a sea of twenty eight white students. Inside of that inner circle of students I was the only full Filipino/pacific islander student. There was not a single student who could understand me. I had white students compare being a student of color to being a white woman. I had white students try to explain asian food to me. I had white students cry over the struggles of being Filipino and when students and faculty ran to their side to comfort

them, I wondered “where was my comfort?” Ever since I found myself as an outsider, I started to fully realize myself individually as a Filipino American. I saw myself as different. For the first time in my life there was nobody else who looked like me. I started to express the fact that I was different because I used to repress the fact that I was. I started to see Filipino who represented themselves and outed themselves as being Filipino as “cringe” because they had pride in who they were. I also repressed myself for being Filipino because it felt like it was pointless in a community for Filipinos. I also cringed at the fact that so many Filipinos were playing into our stereotypes. I cringed when they would purposely arrive to family parties late and everyone would laugh because they were running on “Filo time” a saying used because there is a stereotype that Filipinos are always late. I grew up in Vallejo, California, a city where there is a community that looks like me. A city that is full of diversity. I had a community that could understand my struggles and relate to what I was going through. They taught me how to handle white racists and white saviors. I was too young to understand what these words meant and when I understood it didn’t stop. I had kids cover their noses when I opened my lunch. I had kids call me “dogeater” and then gestured to put a dog in a pot or who would call me a “Jungle Asian.” A lot of this changed in middle school when I found a new set of friends. A group of mostly Filipinos who never covered their noses at my lunch but always asked for a piece of whatever I had. Friends who would stand up for me and understand what I was going through. But once I got to a new school it all changed. Everyone thought they understood what I was going through. I started to compile lists and notes of things that they could never wrap their heads around. The way that we cope with death is a way that they would see as unreasonable.

When a loved one passes we celebrate the house for seven days straight. Friends, family, co-workers and people who they have only met once come to celebrate their life. Lots of food is brought. There is singing and praying and a sharing of memories. After the seven days, there are two funeral days and finally the burial day. During the two funeral days is where non-Filipino people wouldn’t understand. You cannot wear red because it invites bad spirits. You must cry loudly to let the soul on the other side hear you. We put rosaries, sentimental items, and flowers into the casket so the dead will feel comforted in the after-

life. Any babies in attendance must be passed over the casket so that no bad spirits are taken back home, because of this pregnant women are not allowed to attend. Food that is eaten after the funeral but in the parlor should be eaten but not taken home. When the procession leaves, coins are thrown at the car to bring riches to the lost family member. During the burial all flowers should be placed on top of the casket. For each flower not buried there will be that many more deaths to come. I thoroughly believed in this because Grandma Dely, her sister, and [her brother?] all died five years apart from each other and I made sure that at my Grandma Dely's funeral all the flowers made it into her casket. All of these superstitions are rooted in tradition and are built on a majority of Filipinos spiritual Identity. Even though I do not necessarily believe in every superstition, it brings comfort to us and helps us cope with whatever happens to our loved ones in the after-life.

Spiritual Identity is the manner in which an individual's spiritual beliefs change their perspective on the meaning of life. Individuals' beliefs about the after-life, the universe, Gods, and enlightenment all intertwine uniquely into everyone's own spiritual identity. Unique to Filipinos and other Southeast Asian countries is that we reject western counseling and keep to traditional coping mechanisms and native healing processes strongly aligned with our superstitions.

Another aspect strongly held with Filipino beliefs is the belief in souls. Growing up my mother made me go to CCD, a catholic church group, probably because Grandma Dely forced her to put me in there. I spent two years learning about Jesus Christ and why he is my savior but once I got my first communion my mother let me leave the youth group. I was relieved. It was so boring to me and I felt like I didn't have a connection with God. Later, when I started to mature and Netflix was in my hands, I became obsessed with cult documentaries. I watched as a single man as he told people that he was God himself while people blindly followed him. This led me to believe that Jesus Christ was the same deal. I strained further away from Catholicism and after Grandma Dely died I had no force or obligation to go to church anymore. I started to believe that Jesus Christ wasn't really my lord and savior and I am not sure if God

exists. I do believe that people surround themselves in religion and gods to help themselves be less scared of death and what comes after it. I do strongly believe in souls though. I believe that deep inside of ourselves we have an essence that is built up over time that carries on after we die. I don't believe that we can necessarily have a soul that roams around in a whisp-like form after we die but an energy that I have felt before. I have witnessed and heard experiences of medium-like energies and have felt the presence of souls before. For instance, after Grandma Dely had passed my mother had a dream. In her dream my late Grandma Peewee, Grandma Dely's sister, came to my mother and told her that she has a box of bags and that she wants them. My mother thought the dream was odd and called Grandma Peewee's grandson, Arvin. She told him about her dream. He replied in shock because everytime he walks in the garage, there is a box of Grandma Peewee's handbags sitting there. This experience solidified my belief in souls. Another time, after my Grandma Honey's family friend had passed during covid, her and her sisters all slept in the same room because they were scared of spirits and ghosts of their past family coming to haunt their souls.

Death of a loved one is a very odd feeling. My first death I experienced was my Grandma Dely in December of 2016. On the way back from school, my father pulled over before we got to my grandparents house. Somehow, I immediately knew. I started sobbing and turned my head away from my father in embarrassment knowing how much I was going to cry. I sobbed for the next five hours. It felt unreal. My Grandma Dely raised me during my childhood. Everyday after school my Grandfather would pick me up and when I got to my grandparents house my Grandma would watch TV with me, cook for me, and dance with me. My grandparents' house felt like my second home. So when she passed, I couldn't wrap it around my ten year old mind. The next morning I still couldn't believe it. The past twenty four hours felt like it happened in my dreams that night. My Grandma Dely's death broke me.

On the other hand, in 2020 my Grandfather, Grandma Dely's husband passed from complications which I presumed to be covid. I didn't shed a tear. Maybe it was the fact that growing up I watched dementia slowly take over him to the point where he couldn't even remember my name and called every male

presenting person by my Grandma Peewee's grandsons name, Arvin. Maybe it was because I was stuck in a long-time toxic "men don't cry" phase. I felt guilty for not crying when my sister and mom were crying but it was just the way I coped. 2020 was a rough year and I felt like I was at a point where I couldn't care less about what was going on around me. The more and more I experienced death around me, the less I became sad about it. I became comfortable with the term "death." Maybe it was due to the fact that I believed in souls carrying on in the after-life or my half-ass belief in all the superstitions we performed at my Grandma Dely's funeral to secure her well-being in her after-life.

In middle school, history class never talked about anything concerning or considering Filipinos. The only thing I ever heard was that a Portuguese explorer, Ferdinand Magellan, was eaten by the people of the Philippines during his long conquest across the seas. Therefore, ignorant classmates thought that Filipinos were inherently cannibals. I was so pissed off that I started asking my mom to teach me about real Filipino history. My mom taught me about how Indigenous Filipino tribes worshiped trans-women because the tribes thought of them as goddesses. She taught me how the star on the Filipino flag stands for independence from Spanish rule in the 19th century. She taught me about the Filipino "human zoos" in the late 1800s and early 1900s where white people took Filipinos and Africans from their countries and put them in "human zoos" for white people from America and Europe to see the "savage people." The indigenous people were forced to perform inhuman challenges for the viewers amusement, such as eating dogs to shock the white people or wear tribal clothing that was unfit for cold winters. The "human zoos" sparked an interest and disgust for myself to have my own history class. I started to dive into my own family history and trace back how my family came to America and why they left the Philippines.

Alfonso Mateo (Grandpa Poonching)

My Grandpa Alfonso was born in Orion, Bataan Philippines in 1935. He grew up with three brothers and one sister. Later along the way he met a woman who he would eventually marry, Adalida Jose (Dely). They gathered their belongings along with Alfonso's father Pedro Mateo and flew nineteen hours over to America. In 1962 Alfonso moved to Norfolk, Virginia, where he trained for the Navy. A few years later he

joined a city of men on water, the USS Kitty Hawk. He served as a chef to the white sailors and pilots, over hearing and listening in on the stories the men shared of their sights of the Vietnam War. Did he want to join the Navy? No, but he did not have a choice at the time. Although not being active on the warfield, he still feared being on the USS Kitty Hawk and heard the horrors of bombs being dropped. As he got older, he started to become less and less himself. The Vietnam War did something to his mind where he stopped remembering everyone's name and he couldn't speak fluent Tagalog or English anymore. Some nights when I lived at my grandparents house for a few months were sleepless nights. Whether it was due to the beeping coming from my grandma's machine that pumped fluids through her kidneys or the blurred noises coming from the kitchen of my grandpa and mother arguing for unknown reasons. I could only faintly remember what their argument was but I remember broken glass being cleaned up late at night from my grandfather throwing a drinking glass across the room in anger. It was not his fault for not being able to remember certain things but his brother who lived down the street wouldn't even let him get on medication like antidepressants. The few weeks he was on antidepressants I felt like I had a new Grandpa, someone who I wasn't scared of. When he later passed in 2020, all I could think about was the bad moments, moments when he would yell at me and grind his teeth. But as the years went on I slowly forgave him for the way he was. Seeing old pictures from times when my baby brain couldn't remember things made my views shift. There was a time when he cared for me and I shouldn't have let his mental health affect my views on him.

Adalida Jose (Dely)

Adalida was a beautiful hardworking young woman. She had three sisters and two brothers who she grew up with in Olongapo, Philippines. When she was young she attended pageants which she almost always won. She was incredibly hardworking. She worked in the field doing[]. After birthing Alden and Meg Mateo who later became my uncle and mom, she got a hysterectomy in the Philippines and a mix up in blood transfusion gave her Hep C, a disease that affects your kidneys. But in her youth and adolescence she thrived. Old photos of her show her living her life and dancing, [etc]. She was the most kind human being I have ever met. She did whatever she could for me with the fact that she was always in pain. While being administered with injections of who knows what by my mother, she still taught me how to fry and cook lumpia while I was younger. She showed me how to make filling from scratch and how to roll up the egg roll and how to fry them to a crisp golden brown. I would wash dishes with her and do chores around the house which she made fun of because that meant she didn't have to do them herself. After she passed in 2016 I always have a vivid memory of her. Whenever Grandma Dely pops into my mind the first memory I have of her is of her holding onto the fridge door in the kitchen as she stretches. She then just starts dancing as if nobody's watching. She moved her arms in the air and swayed side to side while listening to Ang Tanging Alay ko, a slow prayer song that was her favorite. The same song her family, friends, and acquaintances sang to her twenty four hours before she passed. Every so often when I remember the name of the song, I close my eyes and just listen. I remember all the moments in time when she listened to the song with me.

Being different and learning about my family history and the Filos before myself has opened up my eyes to accept myself for who I am. I am a Filipino American, my skin is brown not pale and if I don't have a physical community around me, I have my ancestors beside me. I will keep furthering my own personal knowledge on who I will be and what my art stands for. I keep working to have pride in my Pacific Islander heritage and work to never go back to when I hated myself and others who expressed their culture

in ways I couldn't. I keep learning, practicing and I will continue to perform traditions that my past ancestors did in honor of them getting me to where I am now.

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