

Dance Planets

by Al Evangelista
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In every class remotely related to dramaturgy, I encounter performance studies scholar Elinor Fuchs's critical essay "EF's Visit to a Small Planet."^[1] When I was an undergrad, I was taught Fuchs's article twice. Grad school? Twice more. When I want to teach choreography and composition, I teach Fuchs's dramaturgy of planets. I'm grateful every time. When we take aspects of world-making as the work of a dramaturg, I believe that this is one way to arrive at our traumatic present. How to arrive in spaces of wide-ranging, inequitable, and systemic traumas? Or, how do I reveal this traumatic present as everyday, as repetition (ongoing, both physically and historically), as also a dramaturgy?

My parents imagined brighter futures. Their planet made of dreams. I find myself in a constant battle with how their imagined futures sometimes were (mis)guided and influenced by colonial mentalities.^[2] A planet of complication. Nevertheless, this planet is one in which their children flourished in opportunities, even though their own brown bodies did not. I even think my parents have multiple planets—worlds made in their imaginaries.

In section V, "Theatrical Mirrors," the shortest section of "EF's Visit to a Small Planet," Fuchs offers a consideration of multiple planets and how they could affect a dramaturgical world: "Important as these internal systems are, dramatic worlds don't just speak to and within themselves; they also speak to each other."^[3] In the paragraphs that follow, I expand on section V through a queer Filipinx American choreographic strategy and explain how the dramaturgical planets in these choreographies relate, speak, and move with one another. This strategy takes into account a range of planets, their array of invisibility and gravity. This is a dance with the incomplete as a practice of care. It's not just my planets or my parents' planets or the number of planets. It's also the orbiting pathways, the circuitous dance of repetition, release, and rotation through space.^[4]

Dramaturgy, to me, is an intimate act of analysis. Dramaturgy in dance—an analysis of bodies, movement, context, and performance—becomes entangled in these conceptual imaginaries even more when focused on queer Asian American performance. My choreography and dramaturgy, embodied by my Filipinx American body, fall into these traumas: my own, my family's, and my ancestors'. These owned and inherited traumas are invisibilized in a landscape of systemic oppression, but performance can highlight their embodied worlds. And yet they are more than all of these things. My dramaturgy is not simply connected to my Asian American history or identity; my performances do not simply represent Asian American histories. Many other histories and planets, often not seen, are part of my dramaturgy.^[5] Dramaturgy could be explained as research done for, by, and about a production. But what if those productions explicitly involve the personal and familial experiences of the researcher and performer? And why is it something worth revisiting within a container of performance? The practice of dramaturgy helps answer these questions. I work with the dance of planets to highlight the many complex pathways and vast space that, because invisibilized, become easier to ignore, to move with the emptiness and make it intentional. The process of making something not seen can be a choreographic or dramaturgical choice. In

Fuchs's work, the last instruction after all the amazingly detailed questions is to look at the planet from a distance, to squint. But these planets may not be visible or static, and they might not want to be visible. They move unseen. And as a choreographer noticing this movement and invisibility, repeating it in performance is one way to grow this complexity. If I were to expand on this, and move with and beyond Fuchs's essay once more, I would further imagine what this complexity might mean within my own performance work.

It might look something like this. A queer Filipinx American performer, choreographer, and artist-scholar's visit to dance planets:

My dramaturgy.

or feelings about my feelings.

My dramaturgy is

a Barong. Which might mean a symbol of resistance or might mean a perpetuation of US colonialism.^[6]

My dramaturgy is singing *Santo Niño* because as a child, I loved the upbeat tempo and clapping despite the Catholic prayer event that lasted hours.^[7] My uncles sometimes left the room because they were allowed a break outside, but children no matter their gender had to stay.

My dramaturgy is the lack of primary interviews from the St. Louis World's Fair "human-zoo" participants.^[8] One of the few direct quotes I could find is from Antero Cabrera, the 14-year-old translator known for singing "My Country 'Tis of Thee."^[9]

My dramaturgy is having to explain the preference to not be seen because sometimes being seen is more dangerous than they can imagine, not having had to imagine any sort of danger in their position.

My dramaturgy is recording a phone conversation with my mother about how line dancing (cha-cha, electric slide) in Filipinx American bodies cannot be attributed to a single historical event. After conversations with family still in the Philippines and other Filipinx American artists, I still could not identify a definitive or specific event (besides the obvious: cultural imperialism). But to not know where it originated beyond that? Is it dramaturgically necessary?

My dramaturgy is a complicated relationship to hip hop dance. Especially having grown up in the land of the Ohlone people, the San Francisco Bay Area, I tend to choreograph more productively when there is a good beat to a song. The dramaturgy in hip hop dance is starting to grow even more eloquently in academic spaces thanks to Imani Kai Johnson, Naomi Macalalad Bragin, grace shinhae jun, and J. Lorenzo Perillo, to name a few scholars.^[10] But what does it mean that a good beat is what drives more movement in my choreographic practice?^[11] This dramaturgical question could be essentialized to the steadiness of the beat, the bass better felt through the speakers, and the nostalgia of youth. It can also be complicated by the musicology and history of downbeats in dance or further complicated by the lived experiences of hip hop dance practitioners. Johnson mentions the nuance required in discussions of appropriation in hip hop culture.^[12] This too is part of the dramaturgy.

These orbiting pathways and their traces do not fully capture all dramaturgical motion in performance, nor should it. If the goal of dramaturgy is to create a fuller, more critical, and more nuanced performance and world, then my dramaturgy is intricately linked to but simultaneously complicated by the everyday and the loss in them. My dramaturgical practice as a queer, cis, Filipinx-American, artist-scholar (and as of this writing) Midwesterner takes all of these labels and throws them into the orbit of vast empty space. This dramaturgy, while performed onstage in singular events, is lived every day, unfolds every day, and dances every day. That is to say, we see only partially what is illuminated, what is possible, with detail we could never imagine, and that is okay. Otherwise, we reinforce a colonial approach of assuming we can and should fully know what it means to be any marker of difference.^[13] My Filipinx-American dramaturgies are incomplete and whole at the same time. The missing and incomplete are part of my post-colonial Filipinx-American framework. To return to Fuchs's "Theatrical Mirrors," the invitation to dance with more planets is always there in an ever-expanding multi-directional universe. To which planets do we hold ourselves accountable? What are we doing to dance with this ever-expanding complexity?

Through these complex dramaturgical orbits, I hope my performance work and dramaturgy provide care for the everyday. Sociologist Valerie Francisco-Menchavez demonstrates care work in Filipina migration as multidirectional.^[14] In my screendance *How to Dance with Filipinx Ancestors?*, I work with artist and scholar Julian Saporiti's track, "Gimme Chills" as the underlying music score. Julian Saporiti, performing as *No-No Boy*, has dramaturgical planets rooted in cross-cultural loss, Japanese American incarceration, histories of war, and abuses in Asia and the United States. When Julian Saporiti granted me permission to use the track first for movement research and then for the screendance work, the care work was present not just in the song or in the dance, but in the unseen interactions in the building of relationships, the sharing of archives, and the everyday construction of artistic practice and research. To be clear, this is not the same as the care work studied in Francisco-Menchavez's research that focuses on Filipinx export labor and the international flow of care. However, the multi-directional movement of care does link to the plural traces of planetary orbits rather than a dramaturgical planet in isolation.

Queer Filipinx American dramaturgy offers a dance with incomplete colonial and postcolonial narratives. These rich diasporic stories parallel a complex colonial and postcolonial history. We intentionally do not see all of these planets. This withholding can sometimes fail. Ultimately, this failure and repetition are parts of the dance work, whether intentional or not. Suzan Lori-Parks might call this type of dramaturgy "rep and rev."^[15] Imani Kai Johnson might call this dramaturgy a dance away and with complexity, at the very least pushing away binaries that hold us back when repeated.^[16] In the doing, I hope to choreograph invisible orbits that include the dramaturgical consideration of what is seen, not seen, lost, imagined, and moving in the opposite direction all at once, not in isolation. When my parents imagined opportunities in diaspora, the doing, the actual immigrating movement of their bodies is what put that dramaturgy into practice. And the moment here, now.

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- [2] René Alexander Orquiza, "Lechon with Heinz, Lea & Perrins with Adobo," in *Eating Asian America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 177-85.
- [3] Fuchs, "EF's Visit to a Small Planet," 9.
- [4] My deepest thanks to Kevin McDonald for dramaturging this article and helping me arrive at this point.
- [5] Katherine Profeta, *Dramaturgy in Motion: At Work on Dance and Movement Performance* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), 87.
- [6] Mina Roces, "Dress, Status, and Identity in the Philippines: Pineapple Fiber Cloth and Ilustrado Fashion," *Fashion Theory* 17, no. 3 (2013): 341-72. See also Mina Roces, "Gender, Nation and the Politics of Dress in Twentieth-Century Philippines," *Gender & History* 17, no. 2 (2005): 354-77.
- [7] Christina H. Lee, *Saints of Resistance: Devotions in the Philippines Under Early Spanish Rule* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).
- [8] Al Evangelista, "How to Dance with Filipinx Ancestors?" in "Six Illuminated Videos," *Journal of Embodied Research* 4, no. 2 (10 October 2021), <https://doi.org/10.16995/jer.91>.
- [9] Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013). See also, Alfred C. Newell, *Philippine Exposition: World's Fair, St. Louis, 1904: 40 Different Tribes, 6 Philippine Villages, 70,000 Exhibits, 130 Buildings, 725 Native Soldiers* (St. Louis: s.n., 1904), <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uiuc.2869262>, and Carl Wilhelm Seidenadel, *The First Grammar of the Language Spoken by the Bontoc Igorot: With a Vocabulary and Texts, Mythology, Folklore, Historical Episodes, Songs* (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1909), Special Collections Research Center, University of Michigan Library.
- [10] Naomi Bragin, "Shot and Captured: Turf Dance, Yak Films, and the Oakland, California, Rip Project," *TDR/The Drama Review* 58, no. 2 (2014): 99-114. See also, Imani Kai Johnson, "Black Culture without Black People: Hip-Hop Dance Beyond Appropriation Discourse," in *Are You Entertained?: Black Popular Culture in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Simone C. Drake and Dwan Henderson Simmons (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 191-206; grace shinhae jun, forthcoming, "Asian American Liminality: Racial Triangulation in Hip Hop Dance," in *The Oxford Handbook on Hip Hop Dance Studies*, ed. Mary Fogarty and Imani Kai Johnson (New York: Oxford University Press); J. Lorenzo Perillo, *Choreographing in Color: Filipinos, Hip-Hop, and the Cultural Politics of Euphemism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).
- [11] Alan Chazaro, "A New Generation of Filipino Hip-Hop Builds On a Deep Bay Area Legacy," *KQED*, 26 October 2021, <https://www.kqed.org/arts/13905208/a-new-generation-of-filipino-hip-hop-builds-on-a-deep-bay-area-legacy>.

[12] Johnson, "Black Culture without Black People," 191-206.

[13] C. Nicole Mason, "Leading at the Intersections: An Introduction to the Intersectional Approach Model for Policy & Social Change" (New York: Women of Color Policy Network, 2010).

[14] Valerie Francisco-Menchavez, *The Labor of Care: Filipina Migrants and Transnational Families in the Digital Age* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2018).

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[16] Johnson, "Black Culture without Black People," 191-206.

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Table of Contents:

- "Introduction to Asian American Dramaturgies" by Donatella Galella
- "Behind the Scenes of Asian American Theatre and Performance," by Donatella Galella, Dorinne Kondo, Esther Kim Lee, Josephine Lee, Sean Metzger, and Karen Shimakawa
- "On Young Jean Lee in Young Jean Lee's *We're Gonna Die*" by Christine Mok
- "Representation from Cambodia to America: Musical Dramaturgies in Lauren Yee's *Cambodian Rock Band*" by Jennifer Goodlander
- "The Dramaturgical Sensibility of Lauren Yee's *The Great Leap* and *Cambodian Rock Band*" by Kristin Leahey, with excerpts from an interview with Joseph Ngo
- "Holding up a Lens to the Consortium of Asian American Theaters and Artists: A Photo Essay" by Roger Tang
- "Theatre in Hawai'i: An 'Illumination of the Fault Lines' of Asian American Theatre" by Jenna Gerdson
- "Randul Duk Kim: A Sojourn in the Embodiment of Words" by Baron Kelly
- "Reappropriation, Reparative Creativity, and Feeling Yellow in Generic Ensemble Company's *The Mikado: Reclaimed*" by kt shorb
- "Dance Planets" by Al Evangelista
- "Dramaturgy of Deprivation (??): An Invitation to Re-Imagine Ways We Depict Asian American and Adopted Narratives of Trauma" by Amy Mihyang Ginther
- "*Clubhouse*: Stories of Empowered Uncanny Anomalies" by Bindi Kang
- "Off-Yellow Time vs. Off-White Space: Activist Asian American Dramaturgy in Higher Education" by Daphne P. Lei
- "Asian American Dramaturgies in the Classroom: A Reflection" by Ariel Nereson

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