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# Troubling Dance Film: A Documentation of *Panalangin seeks us...*

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## Abstract

In this creative work, we share a version of our dance film, *Panalangin seeks us...* Through an assemblage of photos, transcripts of creative audio descriptions, and poetic translations of embodied expression, we share an archive of the kind of work that can be created when practices of care and access are centred as the creative inspiration and aesthetic work of dance expression. Asserting this assemblage of texts as a dance, we take up the creative challenge of troubling how disability is, and reimagining how disability can be, made meaningful in dance film.

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### Introducing a Sense of Trouble

by Jose Miguel Esteban

“How do you defend this as a dance film?”

This was a question posed to me after a screening of our dance film, *Panalangin seeks us...*; this was the response we received after sharing a dance creation, developed through care and a longing to be together amid the isolation of collective work during a global pandemic. Being asked to “defend this as a dance film” reduced our creation to the vagueness of “this,” erasing the labour of love through which we attempted to embody a spirituality that might contest colonial impositions of faith.

A dance film and more than a dance film, our creation was our embodied interpretation of my Filipinx *panalangin*, a prayer to find diasporic belonging along mad and queer routes of isolation. In that moment, being asked to defend our piece in front of fellow artists, blindness was not, *could not*, be understood as a form of perception. Aesthetics of access were denied as valid artistic pursuits within the genre of “dance film.” Nothing uttered is neutral. The utterance, “How do you defend this as a dance film?,” is charged with judgment and assumptions. Erasure disguised as question pulled the rug from under our feet, denying me, my colleagues, my comrades, and our communities the space to honour and celebrate our forms of expressing, perceiving, and interpreting the dancing body— isolating our work as “other” amid the rest of the films being screened alongside ours. This was the response that stirred a sense of trouble within me.

“How do you defend this as a *dance* film?”

I reflect on the sense of trouble that I felt the moment those words were uttered during the talkback portion of the event that screened our film. These words were directed at me by the producer of the event, a representative of the organization that commissioned our work. I still feel a sense of trouble as I recall how such words were legitimized as artistic critique through the assertion that we had to defend our film because “there [was] no dance.” Yes, our film did not depict a dancing body—it did not portray my gestures of praying the rosary. Yes, our film did not show the image of my still body lying on the ground—it did not represent the acts of queer dressing and religious undressing that echoed within the stillness of my depressive meditation. And still, I question how it is that we can so easily make these claims to define what is and is not a depiction, a portrayal, a showing, and a representation of the dancing body.

Embedded in the question, then, was a definition of “real” or “true” dance. The act of defining what is and is not dance is embedded in a legacy of invalidating the creative expressions coming from embodiments of difference. Returning to the memory of this moment, I navigate this treatment of difference as the only artist explicitly exploring and advocating for an engagement with questions of access and blindness as perception through their work. I also navigate the harm of being confronted this way in relation to being one of the few racialized artists on the stage. I think about how my colleagues, friends, comrades, and our broader communities

would not feel like they belong on that stage where our work was shared—in that space where our expressions were regarded with disdain.

“How do you *defend this* as a dance film?”

I did not enter that evening naively thinking that everyone would understand what we had created. I was prepared for questions to be asked about our decision not to capture the image of my dancing body. I was ready to engage these questions, and to reflect on how our work attempts to push up against taken-for-granted conceptions of dance. I was excited to explore questions of how we come to understand, perceive, express, and share in dance and the dancing body—after all this was one of the questions that motivated the creation of this work. This was one of the questions that inspired the producers to commission the creation of our work in the first place. However, in having to “defend” the work, to “defend” myself as a dance artist, and to “defend” the expression of my dancing body, I mourn the possibility of sharing and honouring all that we navigated through the creation of our work:

- We engaged in a rigorous pursuit of care *as* creative practice, wondering how creative processes can work toward disability justice. We wondered what risks we would be taking by engaging in such a pursuit, and what aesthetic possibilities could be released through those risks.
- We navigated how questions of access can become choreographic and aesthetic inspirations for our work. Particularly inspired by the work of Blind author, actor, and playwright Devon Healey, an initial collaborator on our project, we questioned how we might decenter the sighted experience of dance. We wondered how we might distort the expectation to “see” the dancing body through her invitation to understand blindness as perception<sup>1</sup> and to engage in her practices of “Immersive Audio Description.”<sup>2</sup>
- We explored what movements are released through the dancing body, movements that might not be “seen” through the occularcentrism<sup>3</sup> of traditional film and dance aesthetics as they are embedded within a culture of sight.<sup>4</sup> We questioned how we might share such a multisensorial experience through the highly visual medium of film.
- We explored the movements of stillness and

wondered how we might share such minor gestures<sup>5</sup> through film.

- We wondered how we might care for the dancer and the stories told through their body. We confronted ethical questions of how to protect the racialized body from being objectified by a white supremacist gaze.
- We navigated questions of disclosure and how to care for and protect ourselves and the precarity of our bodies when sharing stories of experiencing colonial, racist, ableist, and heteropatriarchal violences.
- We wanted to release a moment of healing, of discovering a form of spirituality that resists colonial expectations.

Ultimately, this film became a documentation of the ways in which we, as a collective, navigated our creative process through the limitations and possibilities of artistic practice amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, this dance film became a remnant of what we created through our rigorous artistic practices of care. We established this project with an understanding that our priority, and our improvisational task, was to center care as the impetus for everything we created. As a result, most of our creation was done in isolation—separated from one another as individuals or pairs, exploring our collaborative work across distances of space and time. It was this question of access<sup>6</sup> that inspired our creative process.

“How do *you* defend this as a dance film?”

I navigate a sense of trouble that does not merely arise from my own experience of hearing such an utterance. Through the command to defend our film as an expression of dance, another sense of trouble might be revealed—a sense of disability as trouble. Disability studies scholar Rod Michalko suggests that “[w]herever disability appears, in a person, in a classroom, in Disability Studies analysis, it appears as trouble in one form or another.”<sup>7</sup> Disability appeared in our film through our centring of carework,<sup>8</sup> through our practices of negotiating access, through our disruption of the site/sight of the normate body,<sup>9</sup> through our commitment to disability justice, and through the audiences that we hoped would find a sense of belonging within our creative process. Disability also appeared as trouble to the aesthetics of dance film as understood by the producer of the event. This trouble created a commotion that

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had to be responded to through its isolation from the other works presented that evening (works that I believe were pushing the boundaries of dance film as much as ours was hoping to). And this trouble embodies a “co-motion” that Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander invite us to engage with as we explore our movement together with the creative possibilities of disability performance.<sup>10</sup> Disability continues to appear as a form of trouble to me. This is a creative form of trouble that I desire to move with as we reveal how disability is made meaningful, reimagining the possibilities through which disability can be made meaningful within practices of dance film.

### A Note on Images and Descriptions:

Below, we share a transcript of the creative and poetic audio description that makes up our dance film, *Panalangin seeks us...*, interspersed with images from the film. Flipping the script of image description, we invite you to question how these images capture the dance that is being expressed through the transcript. We include these images as a description of the dance that is performed through our poetic translation of an embodied experience, helping us to pursue the stories that sight often fails to witness through capture.

### Panalangin seeks us...

I stand here  
in this place.  
I am alone  
in this space.

My neck is stiff,  
stretching up  
freeing itself from  
the heavy tug of shoulders,  
the weight shifts my body.

Leaves crunch in response  
to bare heels pushing  
into earth below.

...boxes brandishing  
familiar  
unfamiliar  
tongues,  
patterns unfolding  
a dear song.



I long to rest here—  
perhaps even to slumber and to dream.  
Lying on the dusty and the dirty rattan mat.  
I close my eyes.

Lyrics,  
my english knows.  
Impact,  
my Heart feels not.

Alone in my body,  
I prepare this space.  
Reaching into a box,  
reaching out for a stick.  
I draw it to my lips,  
black liquid oozing from its tip.

Behind branches,  
Lady of Sorrows.

I feel the presence of her gaze.  
Always watching me,  
watching me climb out of boxes  
stacked like skyscrapers—  
—memories dominating this space.  
Looking longingly as I climb  
trees that hold us in the sacred lineages  
of this place.

Sparkling serpents,  
sharp boots,

Stepping out of the stiletto supports  
that curve the arches of my feet,  
bracing the weight of my body and  
listening to the thud as  
my heels drop onto the floor.

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black mirrors,

My gaze is drawn down.  
My reflection gazes back at me,  
a mirror lies in front of me.  
My face is solemn,  
Not for prayer,  
but in nervous anticipation  
awaiting this performance.



mirror my unknowing,

Pick up the mandala patterned cloth below  
bottles full of rich red, dull purple, and  
white snow.  
Pull this tourist trap, bargained-down,  
blanket  
up to my lips.  
Wipe off the black liquid  
richness of a royal  
golden crown tumbling off my head,  
as I scrub polish dipped fingers.

Trying,  
hoping  
to make faith out of me.

Break the chain  
choking my neck.  
A black, beaded bracelet  
constricting my wrists.  
Pulling off the mesh  
draping my body.  
Pull off all that dangles  
from a single ear.

I shut my seeing,  
touch my holding

Holding the rosary I feel the  
Itch.

I feel the itch of the barong that rubs  
against

my skin.  
I feel the frustration of wearing this  
garment  
Forced to wear it  
to sit in discomfort  
in anger

anger through rituals of chafing,

scratching,  
rubbing.



Dawn a new dasal.  
Nature's hands  
holding signs,  
lying,  
a cross.  
Entering midway  
into the ether —

Itch.  
the chafe of fabric  
rubbing against  
my sun-kissed skin  
—kissed for too long,  
cloaked in piña.  
I desire to peel off...

anak, don't take it off  
the brown skin burning...  
son, I said keep it on  
anak, I said keep—

Breezy whispers,  
comfy words  
arouse the eyes to sound.  
Stir the ears to sight.

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This invocation  
doesn't need us  
on our knees,  
discerning trees for forest

Still.  
finding a way to rest in this  
itching to escape,  
to come out  
of this box.  
Walls closing in,  
push against  
velvet and velour  
draping over my face  
amidst the pink sequined serpent  
cascading down my shoulders.  
step back

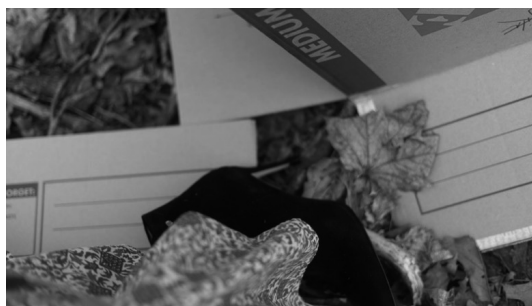
and  
trip over  
satin stiletto silhouettes  
as I crumple to the floor,  
limbs tracing the corners  
to find a crevice,  
to find an opening through which I might...

Balikbayan,

pahinga.

Return,

or rest



have yet to sit  
on the ends of  
another conjunction

Pahinga, balikbayan.  
Rest or return

have yet to mark  
the same borders.

Panalangin...

Open,  
unravelling.  
Playing with tradition,  
rhythmic trouble.  
Makers of a new—

—old maarte.

...seeks us.

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**Jose Miguel (Miggy) Esteban** is a dance/movement artist and educator based in Tkaronto/Toronto. Miggy is currently a PhD student at the Department of Social Justice Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, where his research is oriented through disability studies and dance/performance studies to reimagine educational praxis. Influenced by disability arts and culture, Black radical traditions, Indigenous storytelling, and queer performance, his dissertation project engages in embodied practices of improvised research-creation to re-interpret curriculum as a choreographic site for inspiring pedagogies of/through dance. His work has been published in *Canadian Theatre Review*, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *Journal for Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, *Liminalities*, and in various edited volumes.

**Elaine Cagulada** is an educator, poet, and PhD Candidate in Disability Studies in the Department of Social Justice Education at University of Toronto. Her research engages single stories produced by and within the institution of police, revealing, through counterstory, beautiful possibilities for how we might understand deafness, disability, race, and policing differently. Calling for a critical narrative turn to the beginnings and endings we place on the human condition, her work encounters carceral enclosures and practices as sites of dependence and resistance. Influenced by teachings abound in disability studies, Black Studies, Indigenous philosophical traditions, and alternative sociology, Elaine wonders: what different meanings of deafness, disability, and race, what radical possibilities for Being, might be let loose with and through interpretation?

**Phil Kim** began exploring dance, videography, and cinematography while attending McMaster University for their “Justice, Political Philosophy, and Law” Undergraduate Program. Upon graduating, he decided to lean into his creative passions, specializing in dance videography to study the ways in which framing and camera motion contextualizes and/or accentuates dance movement for the viewer. Phil currently works as a social media manager, after completion of a Post Graduate Diploma in Public Relations & Communications.

**Dedra McDermott** is a new-generation Black artist-researcher, emerging curator and movement dramaturg. She holds a BFA in Choreography and Performance (York University) and an MA in Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies (University of Toronto). Her artistic research explores identity, memory, and grief—utilizing autoethnographic methodology to weave movement and literary choreographies to create live, filmed, and installation works. McDermott is currently an MFA candidate in Criticism and Curatorial Practice at OCAD University (Supervised by Dr. Andrea Fatona).

#### Notes

- 1 Devon Healey, “Blind Perception: DisAppearing Blindness...with a Twist,” in *DisAppearing: Encounters in Disability Studies*, eds. Tanya Titchkosky, Elaine Cagulada, Madeleine DeWelles, and Efrat Gold (Toronto and Vancouver: Canadian Scholars Press, 2022), 134-145.
- 2 Devon Healey, “The Language of Blindness and its Rapport with Sight: Immersive Descriptive Audio and Rain-bow on Mars,” *Public* 33, no. 66 (2022): 130-142.
- 3 Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1993), 3.
- 4 Tanya Titchkosky, Devon Healey, and Rod Michalko, “Blindness Simulation and the Culture of Sight,” *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 13, no. 2 (2019): 123-139.
- 5 Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.
- 6 Tanya Titchkosky, *The Question of Access: Disability, Space, Meaning* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2011).
- 7 Rod Michalko, “Double Trouble: Disability and Disability Studies in Education,” in *Disability & the Politics of Education: An International Reader*, eds. Susan L. Gable and Scot Danforth (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2008), 405.
- 8 Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018).
- 9 Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 8.
- 10 Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander, “Introduction: Disability Studies in Commotion with Performance Studies,” in *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance*, eds. Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 10.