

# Because Love is a Roar: Sketching a Critical Race Poetics

written by Jason Magabo Perez | February 18, 2019



Featured Image Credit: Still from *Stranger Here*, Jason Magabo Perez (2015)

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I replay over and over again the scene of my mother's arrest. My mother is wearing a white short-sleeved polyester nursing uniform. Her long, straight, black hair is slightly pulled back. She is not smiling. She is holding her hands out in front of her. Draped over her hands is a black sweater. She is wearing black shoes. She is walking and walking across the street. She is walking and walking alongside two white men in suits. These white men are taller and heavier than my mother. Each time these white men step, their jackets flap open slightly. I imagine these white men to be FBI agents. I rewind the VHS cassette and this time I replay the scene in slow motion, volume still muted, image still blurry and shaky, to see what more I might discover. This is how the history begins for me.

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How shall you proceed  
to cite more, cite more  
ethically, more blood, lung,  
more bone, tongue, more

cracks, fractures  
of: from: within: between:  
subject & object, object  
& abject, [scene](#)  
[of subjection](#), violence  
& violated,  
truth & freedom,  
hunter & hunted,  
of: from: within: between:  
break & broke,  
dead & deadened,  
[remaindered](#)  
& [detonated](#) life,  
of delay & suspense—  
the mystery: 0, how,  
through what method,  
through what methodology?

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During the summer of 1975, approximately 35 patients in the ICU at the Ann Arbor VA Hospital suffered breathing failures. Five of these patients died. Because of this unusually high number of incidents, and because of the fact that such incidents had occurred on federal property, the FBI, in collusion with the VA hospital administration, launched a 10-month, one-million-dollar investigation. The FBI aggressively harassed and intimidated nurses, doctors, and other hospital staff. The investigation culminated in the indictment and arrest of two Filipina migrant nurses, Filipina Narciso and my mother, Leonora Perez, both of whom were on duty in the ICU during a number of the breathing failures. After a lengthy and exceedingly controversial trial, replete with racist, sexist, Orientalist, anti-immigrant accusations, based solely on highly circumstantial evidence, the two nurses were convicted of poisoning and conspiracy, and were sent to the Federal Prison Camp in Alderson, West Virginia. Months after, at the appeal of the defense, the FBI, demonstrating the weakness of its own shady and fabricated case, dropped its charges and the two nurses were freed. To this day, the case has never been solved, nor has the federal government offered any reparations or apology to the families of Narciso and Perez. Catherine Ceniza Choy provides a detailed account *U.S. v. Narciso and Perez* (1977) in [Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History](#). Choy highlights the damaging and dehumanizing legal and media narratives that framed Narciso and Perez. ["Filipino immigrant nurses Narciso and Perez," writes Choy, "emerged as dark, dangerous, and conspiratorial Filipino natives with the propensity to harm their American patients."](#) Much, if not all, of my work is animated not solely by a desire to perform a reparative and humanizing narrative of Narciso and my mother, but also by a desire to interrogate the impulses to narrate, to repair, and to humanize.

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I aim to develop here a contingent politics of citation. ["I would describe," writes feminist killjoy Sara Ahmed, "citation as a rather successful reproductive technology, a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies."](#) In the past couple of years, I've been moved to cite as central to my work my mother, Leonora Perez. "I don't believe in justice," says Leonora Perez. "They [the state, the U.S.] have no justice." In this citation, the world—one in which justice [in the U.S.] is not a thing, is nonexistent—is reproduced around my mother's embodied Filipina migrant pessimism, or her belief, not in justice, nor in the state, but in us. I cite my mother and thus am an indebted to her and the worlds she theorizes and causes.

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There goes my mother again—not smiling, her long, straight, black hair slightly pulled back, a black sweater draped over her hands—walking and walking across the street, walking and walking alongside two white men in suits. I'm attempting to reconcile what I hear from the VHS cassette—the news reporter announcing the indictment and arrest of this suspected serial killer—and what my mother, the suspected serial killer, in the scene hears—perhaps the delicate crunch of gravel underneath her black shoes, cameras shuttering, slow traffic passing, a crowd of onlookers speculating, the sound of vein against skin, the sound of a history beginning.

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Here we are, on a sunny winter afternoon in 2001, in our beloved San Diego, in R's bluish green Honda Accord, driving down Genessee Avenue. R is driving. C sits shotgun. I'm in the backseat. We're quiet, exhausted, and hungry. These are the days we're coming into our social consciousness as students at University of California, San Diego. These are our getting hella woke days before we could describe them as such. These are the days we're driving up and down the coast to meet with comrades: to fight back for affirmative action in the university; to launch a statewide campaign for Filipino American studies; to fight for a living wage for campus custodial workers. We continue down Genessee Avenue, away from the wealthy white city of La Jolla, toward Clairemont Mesa where black, brown, and working-class immigrant families live, where some of us students live. What is the objective of our exhaustion? To what end do we hustle in struggle? We pass Governor Drive, speed downhill passed the 52, back uphill and stop at a red light at

Clairemont Mesa Boulevard. The gutter is scattered with threads of tire, a Styrofoam cup, neon plastic boba straws, and dried palm leaves. From the center island, mothers and their children hustle bouquets of carnations and parolees sell local tribunes. The light turns green and we turn left toward Cotixan. At this point in 2001, we're merely emergent: all we know is the practice, the labor, the fight, overwhelming excitement, hours upon hours of meetings, paper bags of lukewarm McDonald's fries, boxes of room-temperature pizza, Hamburger Helper, cheap beer and Bacardi 151, dank ass weed, espresso, the occasional epic house party—symptoms of premature student activist burnout. We have no time nor template for reflection, no time nor need for the classroom. We hit another red light.

"Hey," says R. "You listen to this BLU Magazine compilation yet?"

"Yes," says C.

"I haven't," I say. "What is it?"

"There's this poem on here," says R.

"You," C turns around and says to me, "have to listen to it."

"You know which one I'm talking about?" R asks C.

"Yup," C says and turns to me again. "You have to listen to it."

R takes out the CD from its white cardboard casing, places the CD into the disc man, pushes the disc man adapter tape into the cassette player, turns up the volume, and as R drives on, "[Letter to Our Unborn Children](#)" begins.

"because freedom was more than bread"

"because not say was to vanish"

"because no one believed we existed"

Immediately, I'm captivated. We're now in the drive-thru at Cotixan. I want to cry or scream in affirmation. Something about this poem is reading me. Something about this poem is undoing me. Perhaps it's the simple use of parallel structure, the resistance to the sentence, the brokenness, the polyvocality of the poem. Here are three succinct theses on freedom, voice, and subjectivity. Here are reasons to keep doing what we've been doing. For those 00:04:07, and for several hours, several days, weeks, months, years, several repeats, I Was Born With Two Tongues, a group of four young Asian American poets from Chicago—Dennis Kim (Korean American); Emily Chang (Chinese American); Anida Yoeu Ali (Cambodian American Muslim); and Marlon Unas Esguerra (Filipino American Muslim)—incites in us a renewed sense of self and community, a renewed sense of solidarity and struggle, a grammar to interpret our fight, a grammar to address all that makes us wonder and wonder: How and why do we fight the long fight, the protracted fight? Eventually, we'll never have to press play again, for we will memorize every moment in this poem, and we will recite this poem at protests, in our term papers, in our chanting, in our screaming. But for now, on this sunny winter

afternoon, we listen, we listen close, and though we haven't memorized the poem just yet, we know this poem by heart.

"because this fits in the ball of my fist"

In "[Letter to Our Unborn Children](#)," 2Tongues examines the contradictions and struggles of Asian American histories through rupture, vocal rounds, layering, cacophony, and manifesto. 2Tongues begins with and employs the powerful refrain of the conjunctive "because."

"because there is no language to say it"

"because it is the destruction of language"

Speaking that which is unspeakable, that for which there is no language, and destructing and deconstructing mainstream historical narratives of Asian American life, 2Tongues articulates the conditions of possibility for the psychic terror and material struggle faced by the future. 2Tongues reminds us that our anger is ours, that "we were figments of white imagination," that "brown is beautiful," that "yellow is beautiful," that "complacent means joyless," that "love is a roar," that "love is a roar."

"Letter" is not only a performance of incredible poetic and vocal dexterity, but it is also, most importantly, an incisive theorization of Asian American life that is empowering and pessimistic, all at once historical and contemporary and future-oriented. This poem argues not simply *about* but *for* Asian American struggle in the U.S. and pan-Asian struggle abroad. This poem is about survival. This poem, I think, is a survival.

2Tongues models for us a radical and generative methodology. Through poetics and performance, through collectivity and collaboration, 2Tongues theorizes and documents the racialized, the gendered, the classed, the dead, the survivors, the war-torn, the transgressed, the transgressive. Through poetics and performance, 2tongues theorizes and embodies a complex pan-Asian and cross-racial solidarity. They speak toward and perform within a futurity in broken, fragmented, articulately intimate, yet resentful and carefully rendered English because for 2Tongues: "silence is the absence of freedom."

R pulls into our dirt parking lot and shuts off the engine. We replay the poem over and over while picking at our carne asada fries. The sun begins to set against the pink, blue, and orange sky. Students and workers begin to arrive home. Today, we needed this. We needed to name the language of memory and possibility caught in our throats, the unnamed feeling that has been keeping us awake at night, we needed this poetry, which Audre Lorde suggests "[is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought.](#)" From this moment on, we will remember this poem, this moment, and we will return to the critical power of poetics for the work it does and undoes for/in us.

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In each creative writing class I teach, I invite students to begin tracing their literary genealogies: What bodies, what work, what bodies of work make your language and futurity possible? [How, following Kiese Laymon's rigorous humility, I ask, do we pay homage to the sentences that have made us?](#)

Throughout my doctoral dissertation, I began to conceptualize a heuristic called *critical race poetics*. I'm the kind of writer—because of my mother's thick Tagalog tongue, because of my father's mad Ilocano refusal to master the oppressor's language—that seeks permission prior to every performance of English. Thus, I arrive at this possibility called *critical race poetics* because it challenges me to claim with more intention my genealogies. I arrive at *critical race poetics* through a practice-led inquiry—over a decade and a half of failure and recalibration and self-doubt—in fiction, poetics, performance, and experimental documentary filmmaking. *Critical race poetics* is but a humble gesture that I hope helps me become better at saying what I need to say, at honoring what I need to honor. It is unrelenting in its contingencies, unrelenting in its gratitude to its ancestors, unrelenting in its incapacity to make promises. It perhaps has its own desires to be thought through. It perhaps has its own desires to be problematized and revised over and over again. At its core, *critical race poetics* is a theoretically-inflected, wildly experimental, qualitative research and creative writing methodology that blends together narrative strategies/interventions of critical race theory (CRT) and poetry techniques of contemporary documentary poetics. *Critical race poetics* is grounded in the political goal of resisting and eradicating colonial and racist state violence in manners material and discursive, legal and cultural. Yes, I do imagine a world within which courtroom proceedings that involve indigenous, black, and brown life hear and feel—in addition to the violence of legalese—the poetics of our communities! *Critical race poetics* prioritizes CRT's insistence on what Mari J. Matsuda has called "[looking to the bottom](#)" as a way of assembling racial knowledges from varied and various epistemological positions, and, in particular, as a way of foregrounding the knowledge of those who have been targets and victims of colonial and racist state violence. *Critical race poetics* involves a deep and sustained interrogation and reassemblage and redefining of archives of racial knowledges. *Critical race poetics* borrows strategies from performance auto/ethnography, oral history, archival research, literary and textual analysis, Third Cinema, and discourse analysis in order to attend to the gaps in knowledge in present scholarship about colonial and racist state violence. *Critical race poetics* extends the work of those critical race theorists who in their own research and writing have experimented with narrative and lyrical forms such as autobiography, fiction, poetry, and legal analysis, what Carl Gutiérrez-Jones has read as "[critical race narratives](#)."

Specifically, *critical race poetics* aims to expand the methodological repertoire for critical race theorists and researchers in allied fields, and strengthen and clarify the theoretical impulse of creative writers. (That is, if we continue problematically to distinguish between researcher and creative

writer.) I think, too, *critical race poetics* begins to name, perhaps imperfectly, perhaps prematurely, some of the dynamic thinking and writing of contemporary poets and cultural producers working with archives of colonial and racist state violence. Maintaining the political impulses of CRT—i.e. antiracist politics, looking to the bottom, interdisciplinary analysis, narrative intervention and experimentation, rigorous self-critique, *critical race poetics* relies on the deployment of various techniques from disparate poetic traditions and documentary poetics: cut-up; collage; blackouts; interjections; appositions; oral histories; autobiographical lyric; critical and creative revisions of archives. In short, *critical race poetics* experiments with, improvises, and imaginatively reprocesses and repurposes archives of racial knowledges. To be clear, ‘poetics’ here refers to both a premise and a practice: on the one hand, ‘poetics’ refers to a feminist, antiracist, anticolonial, marxist, pro-people politics of archival research and historical production; on the other hand, ‘poetics’ refers to the particular poetry techniques that contemporary documentary poetics affords. *Critical race poetics* challenges researchers to revisit, reassemble, reevaluate, and reanimate archives of colonial and racist state violence. In doing so, researchers generate various kinds of racial knowledges that can help us reconsider the nonlinear, non-narrative, associative logics of colonial and racist state violence. Ultimately, what *critical race poetics* seeks to generate are contingent, “[fugitive knowledges](#)” that make possible a multitude of un-disciplined discursive practices, performances, and community formations—all in the project of resisting and eradicating colonial and racist state violence.

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Yes, I’m watching the scene again. This time we return to 2001. We’re in C’s living room in Mira Mesa. The room is dark. The VHS cassette plays. The footage is shaky. Again, there walks my mother—white nursing uniform, black sweater over hands, black hair, black shoes. “I can’t believe this happened,” says R. The image on the screen is at times too bright. In some frames, my mother is merely the outline of a silhouette. In others, she is only her black hair, the black sweater covering her hands, and her black shoes. In most frames, all I see is that my mother is most probably there, in the scene, in the street, emerging, fading, then emerging again, still not smiling, still walking and walking directly into this volta, this history, this violence. “Imagine,” says C in a most lovingly radical way, “how often this happens to people of color, how often this happens to women of color.”

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