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## The Afterlife of Jennifer Laude: Trans Necropolitics and Trans Utopias

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# The Afterlife of Jennifer Laude: Trans Necropolitics and Trans Utopias

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## Introduction

For a moment, I forgot that Jennifer is dead. After spending hours reading about the protests that bloomed following her murder, going through their footage, and reading about the different ways she was memorialized, I briefly allowed myself to forget that her political life is now accompanied by the prefix ‘after-’. In her afterlife, Jennifer Laude’s name has become commonplace in conversations on contemporary imperialism in the Philippines, its diaspora, and beyond, for she has been the emblem of several queer and anti-imperial demonstrations in Olongapo City, Manila, Hawaii, San Francisco, and even New York over the last 8 years.<sup>26</sup> While I have, unfortunately, seen her corpse more than once—as different media have insisted on showcasing it with no prior warning—I *genuinely* forgot that she is no longer alive.<sup>27</sup> For a short moment, as I looked at the poster for the event commemorating the seventh anniversary of her death (Fig. 1), I wondered what her next move would be, what the next speech she gave at a protest would prioritize, and what she might be doing now, away from all the journalists and academics who crowd her public life. Laude’s afterlife, in this sense, is extremely palpable: its affective reach is expansive, as the political action that has been done in her name has produced moments that not *only* memorialize her but also counteract the reality of her death.

This is, of course, impossible—in a way. Jennifer Laude died asphyxiated in a motel bathroom in the Philippines on 11th October 2014. She was killed by a member of the United States’ army, Joseph Pemberton, a 19-year old marine who was part of a military training exercise conducted in Olongapo, where the United States has an established naval base that has transformed most of the local economy to cater to its visiting forces.<sup>28</sup> Pemberton had hired Jennifer to perform

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<sup>26</sup> Gina K Velasco, “Queer and Trans Necropolitics in the Afterlife of U.S. Empire,” *Amerasia Journal*, 46, no. 2 (2020): 238–252.

<sup>27</sup> Meredith Talusan, “How the Killing of a Trans Filipina Woman Ignited an International Incident,” *Vice News* (2015), <https://www.vice.com/en/article/avyd4z/how-to-get-away-with-murder>; PJ Raval, *Call Her Ganda: How One Life Galvanized A Nation*, 2018, 1 hour 33 minutes.

<sup>28</sup> Zachary, Frial, “Transgender, Transnational, Transpinay: Jennifer Laude and Trans Necropolitics in the Philippines,” Honors thesis (Georgetown University, 2018): 1–76.

sex work for him but, upon learning she was transgender, he killed her and ran back to the military base. However, though she was buried on 24th October 2014, less than two weeks after her death, her face and spirit refuse to remain underground.

Jennifer's afterlife has been full of vigor. There have been several moments where her spectral force has been wielded through political movements, as seen in a powerful protest in Olongapo City which unified trans people, other queers, working class individuals, and even Indigenous representatives in an effervescent burst of anti-imperial euphoria on the "National Day of Outrage"—the day of her burial (Fig. 2).<sup>29</sup> The protests, likewise, have not been limited to immediate responses to her death, since they have continued happening almost every year since. Some of the latest public protests took place in Hawaii and Olongapo City in September 2020, and even in 2022 there was a silent protest in the name of Laude during the latest graduation ceremony at University of the Philippines Mindanao.<sup>30</sup> Laude's afterlife, thus, seems to persist with self-renewing energy. Protests of all kinds have tied her name to the vibrancy and assertiveness that has been set forth by the activists who fight to bring her justice—primarily her family and other prominent trans activists in the Philippines.<sup>31</sup>

The protests that memorialize Jennifer Laude are not solely acts of post-mortem remembrance. Given that her death is entangled with a series of imperial systems that remain fully operational, protesting for Laude is inextricable from taking an anti-imperial and anti-military stance (and vice versa). The Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), the law that allows members of the US army to visit naval bases and (virtually) grants them legal immunity while in the Philippines, remains active despite Rodrigo Duterte's vacillations to terminate it in 2021.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, trans people—particularly trans women—in the Philippines remain subjected to a "necropolitical" regime in which "only by supplying their bodies as capital to satisfy male/Western/heterosexual desires (...) [can their] femininity" be recognized and their claim to life be made legitimate.<sup>33</sup> In such a broad imperial landscape, there is plenty to protest against, making the "achievements" so far seem few and short-lived. The initial momentum of the protests surrounding Jennifer's death led to

<sup>29</sup> Raval, *Call Her Ganda*.

<sup>30</sup> KITV, "Dozens protest pardon of U.S. marine convicted of killing a Filipino transgender woman," *KITV* (2020), <https://www.kitv.com/story/42654202/dozens-protest-pardon-of-us-marine-convicted-of-killing-a-filipino-transgender-woman>; Jonathan Cellona, "Justice for Jennifer Laude: Groups oppose early release of Pemberton," *ABS CBN News* (2020), <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/multimedia/photo/09/07/20/protest-pemberton-early-release>; Mindanews, "Transgender grads' silent protests draw loudest cheers in UP Mindanao commencement rites," *Mindanews* (2022), <https://www.mindanews.com/top-stories/2022/07/transgender-grads-silent-protests-draw-loudest-cheers-in-up-mindanao-commencement-rites/>.

<sup>31</sup> Raval, *Call Her Ganda*.

<sup>32</sup> Frial, "Transgender, Transnational, Transpinay.," CNN Philippines Staff, "Duterte cancels order to terminate VFA with US," *CNN Philippines* (2021), <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/7/30/Visiting-Forces-Agreement-Philippines-United-States-Duterte-Austin.html>.

<sup>33</sup> Frial, "Transgender, Transnational, Transpinay."

Pemberton’s conviction, which was the first ever case of the Filipino judiciary convicting anyone under the VFA law.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, this “victory” has now been undone. The president of the Philippines, Duterte, granted absolute pardon to Pemberton in September 2020, sedimenting the ‘imperial impunity’ that the movements following Laude’s death, so full of hope, have sought to uproot.<sup>35</sup>

Yet, despite the apparent futility of the protests in her name, whenever “Jennifer Laude” is spoken, a trace of heroism lingers. She has been turned into a “martyr” by both nationalist politics and queer organizations, who have produced an afterlife for her through heroic aesthetics and narratives.<sup>36</sup> The illustration made to commemorate seven years after her death attests to this (Fig. 1), rendering her a “Wonder Woman” (the female superhero *by default* in American pop culture) but replacing the traditional US-themed costume with the colors of the transgender flag (pink, blue, and white) and her original pale skin with Laude’s unmistakable brown tone. Casting her as *the* champion for queer and anti-imperial liberation movements in the Philippines, Laude is remembered today as a “super woman.” As such, despite the (apparent) lack of success in achieving “substantial changes” through activist mobilization, Laude’s afterlife remains restless and heroicized. *Why?* How has Jennifer Laude’s afterlife, through her memorialization, reached this heroic status, not only amongst queer people in the Philippines but also in its diaspora? For the people who *laud* her, what does Jennifer Laude’s afterlife mean?

My aim is to situate Laude’s afterlife against the context of a continuum of necropolitical violence against trans people in the Philippines. Laude’s memorialization has been a crucial intervention that reconfigures trans bodies *in life*. In specific, I argue that the memorialization of Jennifer Laude has offered a paradigm shift away from a necropolitical logic that renders trans bodies *disposable* and *ungrievable*, offering instead an opening for trans and gender non-conforming people to see themselves as central and necessary to utopian imaginations of any anti-imperial Filipino futurity, as well as for its diaspora and beyond. Relying on Zengin’s framework, who notes how “trans people turn death itself into ways of becoming political and intimate subjects, remaking the conditions of their living,” I seek to understand Jennifer’s Laude murder not *only* as something inflicted to her but also as something experienced by a larger and collective body. In this case, by trans and (un)feminized Third World bodies of color.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Rappler, “Pemberton guilty of homicide,” *Rappler* (2015), <https://www.rappler.com/nation/pemberton-ruling-jennifer-laude>.

<sup>35</sup> Richard C. Cornelio, “Presidential Pardon to Pemberton is Imperial Impunity Writ Large,” *Philippine Collegian* (2021), <https://phkule.org/article/360/presidential-pardon-to-pemberton-is-imperial-impunity-writ-large>.

<sup>36</sup> Frial, “Transgender, Transnational, Transpinay.”

<sup>37</sup> Asli Zengin, “The Afterlife of Gender: Sovereignty, Intimacy, and Muslim Funerals of Transgender People in Turkey,” *Cultural Anthropology* 34 (2019): 78–102.



Fig. 1: Queer Filipino organization “Bahaghari” announces its online event to commemorate both its 7th anniversary and the seven years since Jennifer Laude’s murder. Laude is portrayed as resembling DC Comics’ hero “Wonder Woman” accompanied by the text “Fight the US and Chinese invasion, fight for the full liberation of The Philippines” in Filipino and “Be Lauder” in English.



In that sense, if Laude’s death is not only individual but also collective, so is her after/life. In the lingering utopian openings experienced by this collective trans body, she may herself be revitalized *in the future*. The anti-imperial futures of trans belonging—the utopian visions professed in the protests that call for justice upon Jennifer Laude’s death—are an afterlife for *both* dead and living trans people in the Philippines and elsewhere. It is precisely because of the little-to-no “change” done to the imperial structures that produce necropolitical terror for trans people in the Philippines that Laude’s afterlife appears heroic: it offers a tale of belonging and futurity to those whose bodies would otherwise be disposable and denied a present today. This makes Laude’s afterlife a radical re-signification and remaking of “the conditions of their living” for *all of us* trans people who see *ourselves* represented by Laude in one way or another.

### **Trans Necropolitics: Lives Disciplined by Death**

Jennifer Laude’s afterlife is located in the broader *lethal* structure of “trans necropolitics.” As many have noted, trans life holds an intimate relationship with death.<sup>38</sup> In the Philippines, as elsewhere in the Global South, to be trans is to be painfully aware of the “necropower” that structures one’s life. I think with Achille Mbembe’s concept of “necropolitics,” which refers to disciplinary processes that lead to “the subjugation of life to the power of death.”<sup>39</sup> In a trans context, this is a difficult reality to ignore. To many, trans lives are seen as “unruly bodies” on whomst biopolitical governance by the state does not suffice as a disciplining technology, so an alternative “biopolitics of disposability” is wielded against them: trans bodies of color are recipients of a “new kind of politics in which entire populations are now considered disposable, an unnecessary burden on state coffers, and cosigned to fend for themselves.”<sup>40</sup> This is leading to what several scholars and activists have identified as a global “transgender genocide” which is underway.<sup>41</sup> Trans people are primed to understand themselves as killable and disposable subjects. Trans lives are subjugated “to the power of death” through this awareness, producing their (*our*) subjectivities in relation to a feeling of constant vulnerability and disposability—death is an ever-present threat for the mere fact of existing while trans.

It is in this context that Jennifer Laude’s death acquires its meaning. Her death was wielded by imperial interests as a “civilizing technology that persists (...)

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<sup>38</sup> C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, “Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife,” *Transgender Studies Reader* 2 (2013): 66–76; Sayak Valencia, “Necropolitics, Postmortem/Transmortem Politics, and Transfeminisms in the Sexual Economies of Death,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, translated by Olga A. Zhuravleva, 6, no. 2 (2019): 180–193; Curran Nault, “Documenting the Dead: Call Her Ganda and the Trans Activist Afterlife of Jennifer Laude,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (2021): 24–57.

<sup>39</sup> Mbembe, Achille. *Necropolitics*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Nault, “Documenting the Dead.”

<sup>41</sup> Snorton and Haritaworn, “Trans Necropolitics.”

with colonial intermittency through (...) technologies of murder as a way of indoctrination.”<sup>42</sup> As an “unruly body,” being transgender, impoverished, racialized, and feminized, her death serves as a reminder that those like her are *disposable*, hence *killable*. Already abandoned by the state in life, her murder shows that, unless she complied with the expectations set by the “continual and flexible (...) ways [of neoliberal capitalism] to extract surplus from the bodies [that] the nation-state itself wants to exclude,” death awaited.<sup>43</sup> By design, she was disposable and so are other trans people: “If there is no justice, not only will Jennifer be dead, *we will all be dead*,” claimed Naomi Fontanos, a prominent *transpinay*<sup>44</sup> activist in a protest following Laude’s murder.<sup>45</sup>

Jennifer’s death, thus, ought to be understood in relation to other trans and gender non-conforming bodies, rather than in isolation. Following Frial’s call to see Jennifer “not as a detached, individual body but as a node in a larger assemblage of dispersed but mutually implicated and messy networks”—a “collective body”—, her murder may be read as both collective and extended.<sup>46</sup> Her death, a “civilizing technology” wielded as disciplinary (necro)power onto others, is inflicted in a collective “body politic” that “regulate[s] populations (...) and (...) discipline[s] individual bodies.”<sup>47</sup> Her death produces a ‘corporeal excesses’ in ways that make its experience transcend to other bodies beyond her own.<sup>48</sup>

Likewise, her death is extended not only across bodies but also across time. In the necropolitical context of trans disposability, her death materializes Lauren Berlant’s notion of “slow death”: the “wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people (...) that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence.”<sup>49</sup> The forms of affect produced by her death are central to the necropolitical technologies that aim to discipline trans bodies. Without the trauma of her trans friends, the grieving of her family (both of which were extensively put on display by mass media), and the subsequent fear of other trans people in the Philippines, her (dead) body would be of no disciplinary use to

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<sup>42</sup> Valencia, “Necropolitics.”

<sup>43</sup> Aren Aizura, “Trans Feminine Value, Racialized Others, and the Limits of Necropolitics” in *Queer Necropolitics*, eds. Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman and Silvia Posocco (New York: Routledge, 2014): 129–148.

<sup>44</sup> “Transpinay” is a term that combines “trans,” from “transgender,” and “pinay” (or “pinoy”), which is a national identifier in the Philippines. “Transpinay” refers to trans Filipino women, whereas “transpinoy” refers to trans Filipino men.

<sup>45</sup> Raval, *Call Her Ganda*.

<sup>46</sup> Frial, “Transgender, Transnational, Transpinay”; Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret M. Lock, “The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work in Medical Anthropology,” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1987): 6–41.

<sup>47</sup> Frial, “Transgender, Transnational, Transpinay.”

<sup>48</sup> Snorton and Haritaworn, “Trans Necropolitics.”

<sup>49</sup> Lauren Berlant, “Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency),” *Critical Inquiry* 4 (2007): 754–780.



Fig. 2: Dozens of banners with Jennifer’s face calling for “Justice for Laude” rallied around the burning sculpture of an eagle, a symbol of US imperialism, to the unison chants of “USA Imperialist, Number One Terrorist!” or “Junk VFA, Justice for Laude!” (Image taken from *Call Her Ganda*, 2018, PJ Raval)



the state and neoliberal capitalism.<sup>50</sup> The trauma of her death, thus, is politically useful. As such, her death is both a collective and temporally extended act, and so is her afterlife.

Neoliberal necropower, however, does not *only* operate through the subjugation of life: it extends its sovereignty to rule afterlives too. Necropolitics discipline the living not only through the dispensation of death but also by deploying tools that include the “political production and destruction of the afterlife itself.”<sup>51</sup> Deploying power over the politics of grievability is key: “only some queer deaths are constituted as grievable, while other [queers] are targeted for killing or left to die.”<sup>52</sup> The disposability of trans lives necessitates disposable afterlives too. Turning trans people who are killed into “ungrievable” corpses is crucial to the necropolitical terror that systematically disciplines other trans people. Through this mechanism, death is routinely and ontologically inscribed into trans life. Death is integral to this political economy, as trans death is necessary for the governability of “unruly bodies,” making some lives disposable and their deaths ungrievable. Often, grief for trans death is denied, for those deaths are weaved into and normalized as a part of the social fabric itself. At times, grief may even be co-opted and colonized.

Jennifer Laude’s death, in that sense, is contested through a war of the afterlife. Her remembrance has faced attempts of destruction that seek to render her corpse ungrievable. Rodrigo Duterte’s pardon to her murderer, Pemberton, for example, reads as a governmental declaration of neglect. To the state, her death is not a source of grief, for it is not even a loss. It is part of the necropolitical constellations that facilitate neoliberal governance of the racialized poor, which has now become a defining feature of Duterte’s presidential term.<sup>53</sup> Likewise, the continued validity of the VFA tells a similar story. Any grief produced by her death is not requisite enough to command political change, even if the “Next Jennifer” is impending. The death of Cindy Jones Torres, another Filipino trans woman, in almost identical circumstances in August 2021 is, unfortunately, not surprising.<sup>54</sup>

These deaths are central to a looming “continuum of neocolonial governance” that haunts the Philippines to the day.<sup>55</sup> Even Jennifer’s burial was, in part, co-opted: she was buried with a banner containing both her chosen name (Jennifer) and her deadname, serving as a reminder to trans people that, *even* if

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<sup>50</sup> AP Archive, “Cremation of transgender Filipino as US agrees handover Marine suspect in killing,” Youtube (2015), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IA8hsVtumsE&ab\\_channel=APArchive](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IA8hsVtumsE&ab_channel=APArchive); Raval, *Call Her Ganda*.

<sup>51</sup> Zengin, “The Afterlife of Gender.”

<sup>52</sup> Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Posocco, “Introduction” in *Queer Necropolitics*, eds. Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Posocco (New York: Routledge, 2014): 1–29.

<sup>53</sup> Frial, “Transgender, Transnational, Transpinay.”

<sup>54</sup> Metro Manila Pride, “Justice For Cindy Jones Torres and All Lives Lost to Hate Crimes!” *Metro Manila Pride* (2021), <https://mmpride.org/post/justice-for-cindy-jones-torres-and-all-lives-lost-to-hate-crimes/>.

<sup>55</sup> Valencia, “Necropolitics.”

they get to be grieved, they may not be remembered for who they are but rather as who the state wishes to classify them as.<sup>56</sup> They continue to be disciplined post-mortem as their personal histories are rewritten in ways that nullify their “unruliness” in life.

Nonetheless, these deployments of necropower over her death have, at large, been muted. Jennifer is remembered in dominant narratives as herself, converted into a symbol of both anti-imperial and trans resistance. Laude’s memorialization is situated in a larger challenge to the necropolitical regime that disciplines trans lives. The “corporeal excess” of her death, while being a key component to the “slow death” of other trans people, is also reclaimed in her afterlife in a project of “de-necropoliticizing” trans existence.<sup>57</sup> In the way activists remember her, she is no longer produced as a disposable, ungrievable body. Her death hurts, and it is in this hurt that her life is reinscribed with worthiness. She was supposed to live, and it is not ‘normal’ that she was killed.

The politics of her afterlife, hence, do not only perform a specific mode of memorialization but offer an opening to re-signify trans life and possibilities in the Filipino context as well. As activists, friends, and supporters alike mobilize her afterlife in a way that transforms the *life* of other trans people, the idea of “postmortem/transmortem politics” that Valencia speaks about becomes unstable.<sup>58</sup> If trans life and trans *afterlife* are hard to separate, it is hard to tell where the “post” in “postmortem” even begins. As alliances have been established across the boundaries of life and death by trans activism in the wake of Laude’s death, her afterlife has been transformed to render her a “grievable body,” opening horizons of possibility in the process. In return, this offers a critical intervention that allows for different imaginations of trans existence in the Philippines or wherever else trans people of color are subjected to disciplinary projects that employ the means of imperial necropower. By protesting Laude’s death and making her a grievable body, a horizon of possibility for trans futurities opens.

### **Trans Utopias: Queer Imaginings in Laude’s Afterlife**

Utopianism is the feeling that is felt with most force in Laude’s memorialization. Her remembrance blurs the boundaries between the present and the future and between life and death to open space for imagining anti-imperial and trans utopias. Here, “utopia” may be understood through Muñoz’s framework: it is a methodology of escape to a “*then* and *there*” based on the desire of “what might be.”<sup>59</sup> For queers, who are prescribed a life ruled by necropolitical terror in the “straight world,” utopia is found “building and doing in response to that status

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<sup>56</sup> “Deadname” refers to the name assigned to her at birth, which she no longer used.

<sup>57</sup> Valencia, “Necropolitics.”

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia, 10th Anniversary Edition: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

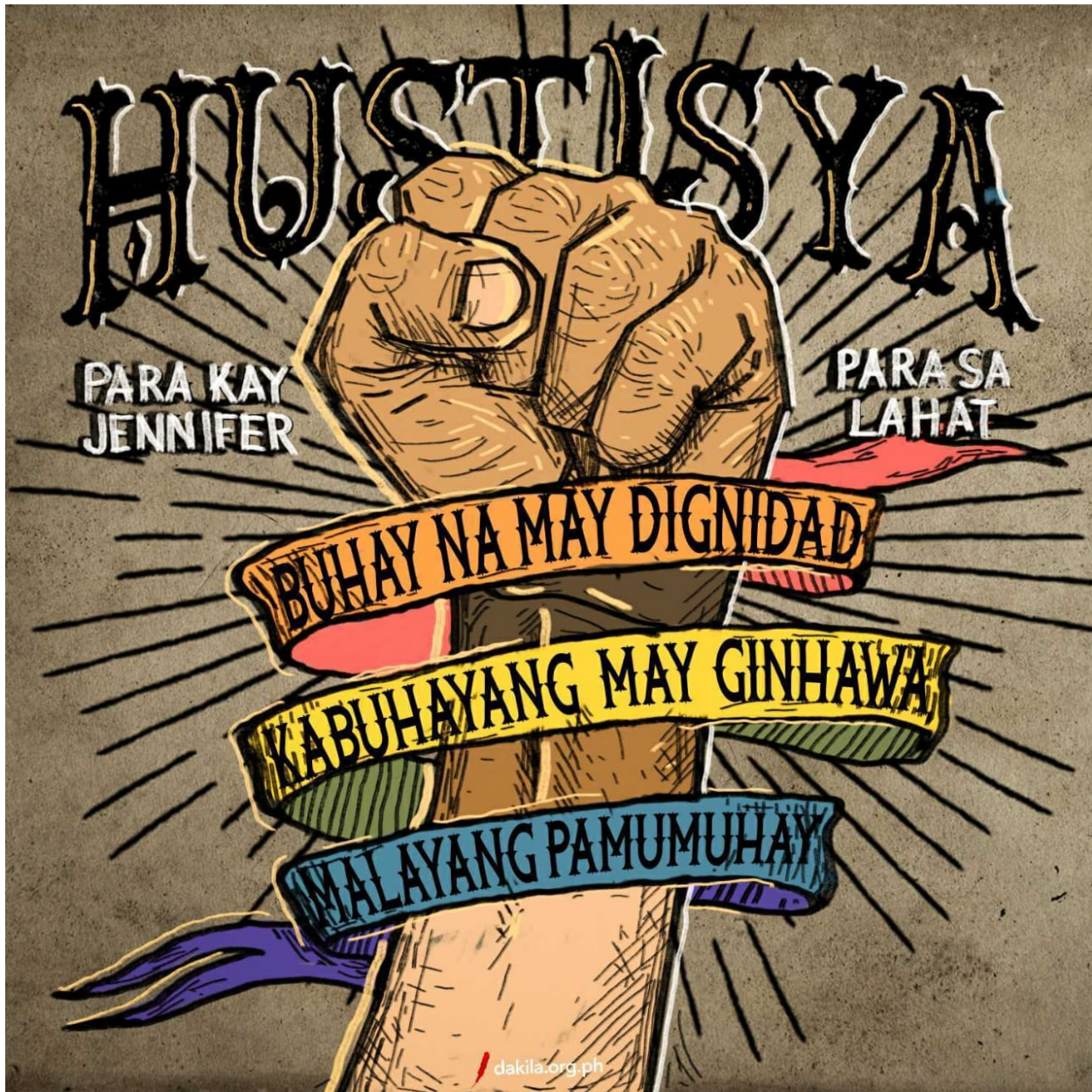


Fig. 3: Activist Filipino collective “Dakila” commemorated six years since Laude’s death with artwork. A fist, symbolic of resistance, is accompanied by ribbons in the colors of the LGBT+ flag and the caption: *“Justice for Jennifer, for all. Life with dignity, Livelihood in Peace, Life in Freedom.”* (Reprinted with permission from Dakila)



of nothing (but death) assigned.”<sup>60</sup> Muñoz urges queer imaginations to engage with the ‘world-making potentialities’ that comprise utopia, requiring us to squint to “strain our vision and force it to see otherwise, beyond the limited vista of the here and now,” aiming for the “horizons of possibility” instead.<sup>61</sup>

The ways in which Jennifer Laude has been memorialized, then, are distinctively utopian projects. Resisting the ungrievability allocated to her death, the intersectional and transnational remembrance she has been given negates the necropolitical context of *the present* and opens alternative visions of what trans life “might be.” In so doing, it articulates an alternative mode of trans utopia that is not only reliant on the future—it lingers “as an act *of* the present, *in* the present and *for* the present” as well.<sup>62</sup>

In that sense, utopian imaginations have been a defining tone of Laude’s afterlife. Reclaiming the future has been a central aim of the work that activists have made to remember her. In the “National Day of Outrage,” Naomi Fontanos’ speech made this clear: “we fight against capitalism, we fight against racism, sexism, and militarism.”<sup>63</sup> The struggle for a different *then* and *there*, an alternative world unshackled from these imperial structures, has set the tone of the “Justice for Laude” movement. Even amongst protesters whose grief and rage have been mobilized not because of direct solidarity with queer and trans struggles but rather because of anti-imperial nationalist sentiments, the search for utopia prevails. In their call to “junk VFA,” a Filipino society liberated from the imperial grip of the United States is envisioned.

However, trans-specific utopias, imagining futures away from the rule of death of the present, have also blossomed. This is particularly noticeable in the artwork produced in different moments of her commemoration. In different pieces, utopian calls have ranged from claims to alternative forms of trans life, characterized by peace, dignity, and freedom (Fig. 3)—that which is denied to trans people today—, to casting Laude (and thus other trans women of color) as a superhero whose liberation entails “the full liberation of the Philippines” (Fig. 1). The latter, in particular, extends the possibilities of utopia to include Laude herself. Killed for not being “feminine enough”—for Pemberton murdered her when he discovered she was not cisgender—, her portrayal as a feminized superhero articulates an afterlife for her in which her womanhood is not contested, nullifying any necropolitical attempt to do so.

Moreover, Laude’s remembrance has, in adequate utopian fashion, enacted alliances that give her afterlife a body that transcends and negates the *here* and *now*. The multi-sited phenomenon of protests in her name are indicative of this.

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Caterina Nirta, *Marginal Bodies, Trans Utopias* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>63</sup> Raval, *Call Her Ganda*.

Filipino diasporas have led several movements in her name through queer and anti-racist organizations (primarily in the United States), but the transnational alliances have not been reduced to diasporic connections only.<sup>64</sup> Upon Pemberton's pardon, he was first relocated to a military base in Hawaii, and native Hawaiians seized the opportunity to protest against US' imperial militarism in the island.<sup>65</sup> Other activist scholars, likewise, have called for interracial alliances between trans movements in the United States, emphasizing that other trans immigrants and/or people of color are equally subjected to necropolitical terror in the face of the empire.<sup>66</sup> The potential for transcultural alliances has been an outcome of Laude's afterlife.

Similarly, these utopian alliances have not been imagined transculturally only but also trans-*temporally*. Some regional Southeast Asian organizations, such as ASEAN SOGIE Caucus, have prompted imaginations in which past, present, and future trans people across the region come together in resistance.<sup>67</sup> Particularly thinking of the colonial erasure of trans and/or gender transgressive Indigenous identities, a shared history of imperial anti-transness can establish solidarities across Southeast Asia. Thus, Laude's afterlife has been given a collective body that effaces colonially-ascribed geographical and historical boundaries to imagine trans anti-imperial utopias. Her remembrance mobilizes a re-signification of trans life that goes beyond the "here"—the Philippines—and the "now": trans people of color who are subjected to imperial necropower *anywhere* may all find in Laude's afterlife the utopian potentiality of a livable past, present, and future for themselves too.

### **Conclusion: After/lives that matter**

The memorialization of Jennifer Laude, thus, tells a story of utopianism and resistance in the face of the "slow death" produced by necropolitical networks. The conditions of her life and afterlife are being radically re-signified. In the grief, hope, and resistance mobilized for her, she is being, in a way, revived: the disposability and ungrievability that regimented her life and death are being fought against. This, in return, is mobilizing utopia for trans people—visions of what life "might be" are being imagined, as Naomi Fontanos has urgently called for: "the trans community needs to learn that we do not need to sell our bodies to survive."<sup>68</sup> Learning this, however, in a context where things appear unchanging is not easy—imagination and a "squinting" vision are both required. Jennifer Laude's afterlife, nevertheless, offers precisely that.

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<sup>64</sup> Velasco, "Queer and Trans Necropolitics."

<sup>65</sup> KITV, "Dozens protest pardon."

<sup>66</sup> Velasco, "Queer and Trans Necropolitics."

<sup>67</sup> Mikee Inton-Campbell, "Transnational Transness: Imagining the Connections Between Southeast Asian Queer Identities," *ASEAN Queer Imaginings* (2021): 27–37.

<sup>68</sup> Raval, *Call Her Ganda*.



Her mass remembrance, infiltrating institutions previously complicit with the trans necropolitics that led to her death, whispers a song of change. Even major religious authorities in the country have grieved her, re-signifying her, and other trans people’s disposability.<sup>69</sup> In the midst of this, connections between trans activists have blossomed in the Philippines and elsewhere, strengthening mutual aid networks that radically change the material opportunities that trans people have access to in response to necropower and its complex technologies of death.<sup>70</sup> Thus, while utopia may be found in the openings of futurity, it is just as much about “what is *already* happening.”<sup>71</sup> Through Laude’s afterlife, trans life is *already* being transformed.

Laude’s life, death, and afterlife, hence, are experienced collectively. Trans activism has re-signified her death with an echo that ripples across all trans bodies of color: her life was not disposable, just as *ours* is not. Her utopian remembrance is the promise of a different afterlife for all trans people too: living or dying, there is a life *after* this one that is free of empire and its deadly violence. Her afterlife, thus, is collective and continued just as her murder was. If her death is ours—for it is central to our slow death—, then our life ought to be *hers* too. Jennifer Laude, in that sense, is not *really* dead. The arbitrary line of what ‘life’ is relies on an individual model of the body that trans existence simply does not fit, at least not while subjugated to imperial necropower. As such, that I forgot, even if just for the briefest moment, that she is dead is not coincidental. The vigor of her afterlife, carried on by trans people of color in life, expands our possibilities of living as well. Jennifer Laude’s spirit is our utopia, for it is our very own spirit too. The duty to honor her, hence, entails honoring ourselves, for in our own transness Jennifer lives on.

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<sup>69</sup> Robert Shine, “Filipino Religious Superiors Affirm Their Solidarity with Murdered Transgender Woman,” New Ways Ministry (2018), <https://www.newwaysministry.org/2014/11/08/filipino-religious-superiors-affirm-their-solidarity-with-murdered-transgender-woman/>.

<sup>70</sup> Naomi Fontanos, “#TransLivesMatter: Ms Naomi On Being A Gender And Development Advocate,” *OpenTable MCC* (2020), <https://opentablemcc.ph/blog/worship-podcast-2020-11-22-trans-lives-matter-ms-naomi-on-being-a-gender-and-development-advocate/>.

<sup>71</sup> Nirta, *Marginal Bodies, Trans Utopias*.

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