HOW TRANSGENDER WOMEN FIND THEIR VOICE

An Autoethnographic Exploration of the Sonic and Metaphoric

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Arielle Keil Abrau

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Abstract

This research project was a practice-led exploration that addresses the question: How do transgender women find their voice? Through autoethnography, I drew upon my lived experiences as a transgender woman to bring depth to this study through personal insight. This research project conceptualised voice into three distinct categories: (1) sonic voice; (2) voice as an idiom for identity; (3) voice in colonial contexts. The creative output is a short film entitled *Panaw Balik Sa Balay (Journey Back Home)*, where my voice functions as a narrative tool and a sonic representation of identity. Utilising artificial intelligence (AI), I replicated my voice at various stages of my life: as a young boy, as a teenager, and as a woman. These three distinct vocal phases reflect the transformative milestones in my life, positioning the sonic quality of voice as an integral aspect of identity. Moreover, the film, which is situated in pre-colonial Philippines, pays tribute to my indigenous Filipino heritage and my journey towards reindigenisation. The methodology is based on an autoethnographic inquiry that explores the concept of 'finding one's voice' through relevant identity theory frameworks – embodied identity theory, narrative identity theory, relational identity, and decolonial identity. Contextualising my unique path to womanhood within such theories contributes to a deeper understanding of transgender identity formation. Highlighting various facets of this journey such as embracing womanhood, reconnecting with indigeneity, and navigating societal expectations of gender performance.

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Chapter 5: Critical Commentary

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Arielle Keil Abrau

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Finally, I would like to extend my appreciation to my family. To my older sister Abegail, thank you for nurturing my queerness and creativity and for your help with the Bisaya portion of my script. To my parents, I appreciate your encouragement and support throughout this academic pursuit.

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Intellectual Property Rights

The researcher retains copyright in all illustrations, script, and other creative work produced and presented as part of this thesis and the accompanying film. However, the film incorporates licensed sound effects, and a photo texture. These elements are used in accordance with their respective licensing agreements.

A separate reference list detailing all assets used in the film is included at the end of this exegesis, following the main reference list.

Ethics Approval

This research project did not involve humans, human biological materials or animals. As a result, ethical approval was not required for the study. The researcher has adhered to ethical standards by maintaining reflexivity and transparency throughout the research process and ensuring compliance with ethical standards and guidelines.

Key Terminologies

To ensure clarity and coherence in this exegesis, it is crucial to familiarise the reader with particular terms integral to the study. Doing so, enables a deeper understanding of the research.

Transgender

The term ‘transgender’ encompasses individuals whose gender identity does not align with their birth-assigned gender (Clarke, 2022). In this research, the term is used to describe my identity as a binary transgender woman. Binary transgender identities conform to traditional and socially prescribed gender roles (Fiani & Han, 2020). As such, transness is viewed within the framework of the gender binary in this study. This perspective does not universally represent all transgender experiences, as some individuals do not adhere to the gender binary (Fiani & Han, 2020).

Queer

Within the scope of this exegesis, ‘queer’ will describe my transgender identity. Queer was once a slur used against LGBTQ+ people. The term has since been reclaimed (Worthen, 2023).

Chapter 1
Introduction

1.1 Introduction and Positioning of the Researcher

I spent the early years of my gender transition in survival mode. There were moments when I didn't know where my next meal would come from or if I would have a roof over my head that night. While I admire the resilience I had then, it meant that I could not pause and reflect on how far I had come. This research is an opportunity for me to do just that now. This study has allowed me to materialise my experiences into research that hopefully helps transgender women make sense of their journeys. My intention has been to humanise us in the eyes of those who do not understand us. This study is a letter to the scared girl I once was when she started her transition in 2017. It is a letter of gratitude – grateful for the transition milestones I've achieved and the woman I am today. Both became possible because that fearful girl never gave up, even in the face of uncertainty. With that same tenacity, I made my foray into academia, to contribute to the evolving field of transgender studies.

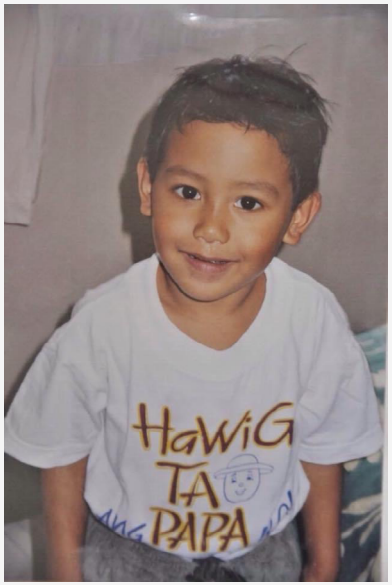
I had the privilege of presenting my research at the inaugural Rainbow Studies Now: Legacies of Community symposium at Te Herenga Waka (Victoria University of Wellington) on 23 November 2023. That experience connected me with other queer academics and researchers. It was through that event and the keynote speech that I truly fathomed the strength and importance of queer research. The legacy of queer history in Aotearoa is comprised of myriad stories from queer people, both past and present. They are stories of triumphs and tragedies. More importantly, they are stories that survived attempts at erasure. Understanding that every queer person is part of a larger narrative that transcends our individual existence is deeply humbling. This very understanding emboldened my perspective as a researcher, imbuing my research with purpose.

I was born in Davao City, Philippines, and raised in a conservative Christian household. Early on I displayed affinities for traditionally feminine interests and faced reprimand for it. When I was four, my family relocated to New Zealand (Figure 1.1). Initially, I tried speaking to my kindergarten peers in Bisaya[1], unaware they could not understand me. However, within six months, I had lost touch with my native language and adopted English spoken with a New Zealand accent.

1. Bisaya refers to both the language and the people from the Visayan and Mindanao region on the Philippines (Alunan, 2023).

Figure 1.1

Childhood Photo



Note. The researcher at age 4 shortly after moving to New Zealand in 1998. Own photo.

As a child, I experienced a constant tension between my religious teachings and my emerging queer identity. Even after immigrating to New Zealand, my family continued to practice our religion. Growing up, my sole exposure to my indigenous heritage was the knowledge that my paternal grandmother was Waray[2] and my maternal great grandmother was Tiruray[3]. The rest of my upbringing and worldview was primarily shaped by religious colonial doctrines. The religious teachings instilled in me as a child led me to believe that I was created fundamentally flawed and unworthy of salvation in the afterlife. This perspective was particularly detrimental during my formative years. Rather than experiencing typical childhood development, I grappled with the haunting notion of being destined for eternal damnation. This inner conflict only intensified as my natural femininity became increasingly difficult to hide.

Despite the inner turmoil I navigated during my formative years, I found support in my older sister Abegail. She was and still is my best friend. Some of my earliest memories with her when we first immigrated to New Zealand were her teaching me how to draw. It was in these moments that my love for creativity began to develop. I expressed my inner femininity through illustrations. Every sketch was of a powerful woman that existed in my imagination. Throughout my childhood, I filled countless

2. The Waray are an Austronesian ethnolinguistic minority group in the Philippines, primarily residing in the islands of Leyte and Samar (Payne, 2024).
3. The Tiruray are an Austronesian ethnolinguistic indigenous people who inhabit the Cotabato River Valley and its surrounding areas in the Philippines (Wood, 1957).

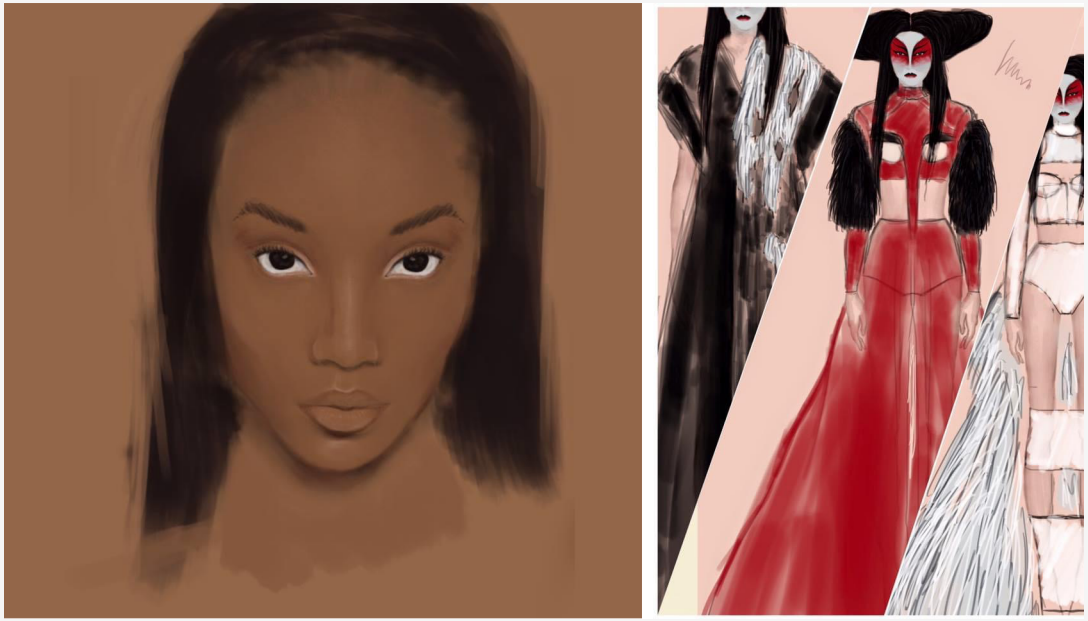
sketchbooks with warrior women, sorcerers, and mythical anthropomorphs. When I was 13, my older sister taught me to use Adobe programmes such as Photoshop, Illustrator and InDesign. Learning these skills early on gave me an advantage throughout secondary and tertiary education as I was already familiar with these programmes. During high school, when my sister was studying graphic design at university, she would bring me to her classes. Often, I'd bring my sketchbook with me and spend the class drawing alongside her. One of her classmates saw potential in my sketches and suggested I take up fashion design at university. I was unsure if my parents would approve, fearing that they would deem it too feminine. My sister however, fully supported me and encouraged me to pursue it. At 16, I began learning how to sew, creating digital fashion illustrations, and interning with local designers.

During my undergraduate study in fashion design, I began to embrace my queerness. At 18, online forums provided a safe space for me to explore and understand my transition options. Initially these options felt like unattainable dreams as I was too scared to follow through with it, knowing my world would change forever. The fashion school studio became my sanctuary. It is within the confines of this space that I was able to freely express myself through the women's wear I designed (Figure 1.2). Wearing my own designs eventually led to immersing myself in the art of drag (Figure 1.3). My first exposure to the art form was participating in a local drag competition for 'baby queens'[4] at Family Bar on Karangahape Road in 2014. That night at the competition was transformative, as it was the first time I met a community of other queer individuals. More importantly, it was the first time my femininity and queerness were celebrated openly. A close friend likened me to Cinderella. This was a fitting metaphor, as I would glam up in class with six-inch heels, only to switch to flats and remove my makeup before the train ride home.

4. This term refers to novice drag queens who are new to the art form and just beginning their journey in drag (Farrier, 2017).

Figure 1.2

Digital Fashion Illustrations



Note. Researcher's design sketches. These belong to her graduate collection during her final year of undergraduate fashion design study in 2015. Own work.

Figure 1.3

Drag Photo

Note. Self portrait of researcher in drag in 2016. Own work.

For a period in my life, drag was an escape. It numbed feelings of gender dysphoria. However, I faced a pivotal emotional breakdown at 22. The realisation that I could no longer live a lie was overwhelming. This led me to finally begin hormone replacement therapy (HRT) at 23. Early in my transition, I made the decision to quit drag, recognising that it had fulfilled its purpose in my life by giving me the strength and courage to embrace my true self.

This period was fraught with challenges. Within three months of starting HRT, I found myself estranged from my family and homeless. In this moment of vulnerability, with limited financial resources, I made a decision that might seem illogical to some. I invested the last of my money on permanent hair extensions and clothing to affirm my new identity. I made this bold choice when I was at rock bottom, with all of my possessions crammed into black rubbish bags. This decision signified a declaration of my fight for my transition. I prioritised my identity even amidst financial and social uncertainty of my daily life. Consequently, I felt an increasing detachment from my cultural identity. Being raised as a boy in a traditional Southeast Asian household, I was not exposed to the cooking traditions typically passed down to girls during their formative years. My progressive transition seemed at odds with the receding memories of familial and cultural ties. I initiated small steps to reconnect to combat this looming sense of cultural amnesia. I watched Bisaya makeup tutorials on YouTube and browsed memes in Bisaya to reacquaint myself with the language. The internet became a tool that guided me back towards my heritage and allowed me to discover recipes for the meals I enjoyed as a child.

During this period, I unearthed a broader understanding of pre-colonial Philippines. Contrary to the religious doctrines I grew up with, I discovered that my ancestors held queer individuals in high regard, notably the babaylan, many of whom were bayoguin/asog[5] (Alegre; 2022, Ildefonso, 2022). This insight reshaped my perspective on my religious trauma and the way I perceived myself. I began to replace the shame imposed by religion with ancestral worldviews. This quest to reclaim my cultural roots remains an ongoing journey and also permeates this research project.

5. These terms refer to babaylan (shamans) who were not biologically female, embodying what would today be recognised as transgender identities, or, as Garcia (2008) describes, 'gender-crossers'.

Early in my transition I began working at a call centre. Initially I was frequently misgendered on the phone . This often occurred when I transferred calls, and customers would later tell my colleagues that they had spoken to a man earlier, which I would hear about afterward. On other occasions, customers would mention a previous interaction, saying they had discussed the same issue with a man a few months prior. Upon checking their records, I realised they were referring to me. Despite my frustrations, it was in these circumstances that I truly understood the importance of my voice in assimilating into womanhood. In the case where visual cues are absent, the perception of my gender was purely sonic. As I experimented with tone and pitch, I used the my nickname Ari. Applying the gender-neutral 'Ari' shielded me from having to reconcile a feminine name with a voice perceived as masculine. Within 12 months, I was consistently perceived as female by customers. My new pitch and tone became habitual. The change alleviated apprehensions I had experienced socialising in my everyday life.

This unconventional journey to womanhood underpins the essence of my research. It is an amalgamation of my creativity, culture and queerness. The creative output of this study amplifies aspects of my identity that are marginalised in colonial societies, such as my transness and indigeneity.

1.2 Research Question

The research question at the heart of this study asks: How do transgender women find their voice?

This inquiry encompasses the physical and metaphysical aspects of voice, examining it as a sonic expression and a representation of cultural and personal identity. To do this, the research project engages with my experiences in feminising my voice, assimilating into womanhood and reconnecting with my indigeneity.

Sonic voice

The study explores my process of feminising my voice in the initial stages of my transition. Furthermore, this research acknowledges the challenges in that process, given that HRT does not affect the voice in transgender women (Bralley et al., 1978) . This exploration into the sonic identity is crucial, as voice is a sexual characteristic at the forefront of social interactions (Neumann & Welzel, 2004; Stewart et al., 2020; Weidman, 2014).

Personal identity formation

Beyond the physical aspect of voice, the research expands to how my new identity materialised. It explores how the physical aspects of identity align with social definitions of embodied femininity. This dynamic allows for external perceptions to align with my internal gender identity.

Transgender woman's identity as an indigenous person in colonial contexts

The research question encompasses examining voice as an expression of indigenous identity. This examination charts my journey of liberation from colonial religious ideologies in the particular context of a Filipina immigrant living in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Such ideologies marred my perception of my transness linking it to guilt and shame. In light of this issue, the study considered reconnection to my indigenous ancestry where gender diversity was celebrated. The discovery of my lineage enabled me to find my voice as an indigenous person – a voice with which I continuously negotiate and confront colonial constructs.

1.3 Aims of the Study

The study aimed to foster a deeper understanding of identity formation within a transgender individual. Moreover the research sought to delineate the intersections of transgender and indigenous identities in colonial contexts. It also aimed to contribute to the broader dialogues in transgender studies. The intended effect is to enhance the visibility and understanding of indigenous transgender narratives within and beyond academic spheres.

The film *Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home)* aimed to preserve marginalised indigenous knowledge and culture with a focus on pre-colonial Mindanao[6]. Additionally it sought to bridge the contemporary with traditional through applying modern animation techniques to early 20th century stop-motion film aesthetics. Additionally the film aimed to engage with new technological advancements in AI by employing voice cloning technology. Through this approach, I intended to recreate my voice across three distinct life stages: boyhood, adolescence, and womanhood. Utilising voice cloning in this way allowed me to narrate the film and echo the sonic aspect of the research question.

6. Mindanao is the southern most region of the Philippines. It is also where Davao City, my birthplace, is located.

1.4 Significance of Study

This research contributes to the growing number of studies in the field of transgender studies. The autoethnographic nature of the research means that it was conducted from the perspective of a transgender person. Veale (2017), a fellow transgender researcher, argues that the academic field still underrepresents transgender individuals and that non-trans researchers conduct most transgender studies. She emphasised that the perspectives of transgender researchers in transgender studies are crucial, as their personal experiences can deepen and diversify the understanding and narratives about transgender individuals. Transgender identities have historically been either misrepresented or underrepresented in media (Reitz, 2017). *Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home)* serves as a reclamation of transgender narratives and translates my personal experiences and perspectives in the creative output. Using methodologies such as narrative inquiry allows for the film's storyline to be grounded in my realities as a transgender woman.

Furthermore, the film represents Bisaya people, a minority also underrepresented in mainstream Filipino media (Grant, 2020). Schachter & Reid (2018) note that Tagalog is the most commonly spoken language in the Philippines, with over 90% of the population using it. Fernandez (2008) argues that the 'Tagalogisation' of the Philippines, while purportedly aimed at unifying the nation, achieves the opposite. By positioning Tagalog as the dominant language, it in turn marginalises other languages and cultures in the Philippines, such as Bisaya (Alunan, 2023; Fernandez, 2008). My film confronts this power imbalance in multiple ways. First, the film is narrated in English and Bisaya , making it a form of Filipino media in which native Tagalog speakers would have to rely on subtitles to understand the storyline. Last, the film references pre-colonial Philippine worldviews and uses terminology native to the Mindanao region. In doing so, it preserves and champions pre-colonial Mindanao knowledge. Several scholars highlight the importance of this focus. Fernandez (2008) and Reid (2017) note that most pre-colonial records in the Philippines disproportionately come from Luzon[7], as this area was among the first to convert to colonial religions. Scott's (1994) work further supports this claim. He primarily examined documented accounts from the Luzon area.

7. Luzon is the northern most region of the Philippines where Tagalog originates from.

These findings reinforce the argument that Bisaya in the Philippines face a dual struggle against Western neocolonialism and Tagalog dominance (Alunan, 2023; Fernandez, 2008).

1.5 Limitations of the Study

This section discusses certain limitations of the study that could not be addressed given the scope as a Master's degree project. My ongoing learning and skills development in using complex animation tools like Adobe After Effects may have restricted the sophistication of the final film product as I would have wished to achieve.

Additionally, the geographical and cultural distance of New Zealand from the Philippines, coupled with a lack of direct access to Filipino cultural elders, posed challenges in authentically representing indigenous practices and perspectives. These challenges highlighted the difficulties of bridging cultural gaps and ensuring authenticity when working outside one's native context. Furthermore, like most research into indigenous and pre-colonial subjects, this study was constrained by the historical impacts of colonialism, which has often sought to erase or obscure such cultures. The available information, whether passed down through oral traditions or scarce written records, may not fully capture the breadth and depth of the original cultural contexts.

This project's reliance on my personal narrative presented a limitation in terms of generalisability. The findings reflect a singular, subjective experience rather than encompassing the broader spectrum of transgender and indigenous experiences. However, generalising was not the aim of the project, which intentionally centered on my individual perspective.

1.6 Exegesis Structure

Chapter 1: Introduction
This chapter delineates the background to this study and the various facets of the research question. Additionally, it underscores the purpose, significance and limitations of this study.

Chapter 2: A Critical Review of Contextual Knowledge
Providing essential background and context for this research project, this chapter presents an analysis of existing knowledge foundational to the study. Key themes include transgender women and voice, identity theory, pre-colonial Philippines and decoloniality. Additionally, it examines shadow puppetry and

the work of Lotte Reiniger, whose artistry influenced both the animated film and its production.

Chapter 3: Research Design and Methodology

This chapter outlines the research methods and creative choices in this project. It includes the approach to upskilling in animation techniques and the tools employed during the creative process of the film.

Chapter 4: Creative Process and Film Production

Detailing the production process, this chapter outlines the stages involved in creating the film, including character and scene illustration, script and sound production, and the animation techniques explored.

Chapter 5: Critical Commentary

This section examines how the film addresses the research question by exploring its key facets: sonic voice, identity formation, and indigeneity. It highlights how these elements are grounded in my personal experiences as a transgender woman, while drawing connections to existing research.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This chapter summarises the research insights, creative outcomes, and contributions to indigenous and queer studies. It also addresses the potential for future research in these fields and offers concluding reflections on the study.

Chapter 2
A Critical Review of Contextual Knowledge

Introduction

This chapter reviews four key areas that formed the foundation of my research. It begins by examining voice in both sonic and social contexts. This section focuses on the interplay between the voice and physicality for transgender women. This chapter then looks into identity theories such as embodied and narrative identity theory. The discussion then shifts to pre-colonial Philippines, addressing concepts of decoloniality and reindigenisation. Last, the study looks into Lotte Reiniger's (1926) stop-motion animation. This exploration highlights how her work inspired the process and shadow puppet style of the characters in my film.

2.1 Voice and Transgender Women

Feld & Fox (1994) defined voice as both a spoken performance and a metaphorical symbol indicative of social status and influence. This earlier research underpins Weidman's (2014) anthropological study. She suggested that in Euro-Western modernity, voice frequently conveys notions of individuality, agency, and authority. At its core, she described the voice as "central to cultural, social, and political life" (Weidman, 2014, p. 38). She illustrated this with common expressions such as 'finding your voice' and the notion of an 'inner voice'. Expanding on this she described voice as:

> [...] a phenomenon that links material practices with subjectivity, and embodied sound with collectively recognised meanings, voice is a crucial site where the realms of the cultural and sociopolitical link to the level of the individual, a site where shared discourses and values, affect, and aesthetics are made manifest in and contested through embodied practice. (Weidman, 2014, p. 38)

Neumann & Welzel's (2004) work posited voice as a secondary sexual characteristic. They asserted that aspects such as frequency and timbre delineate sex-specific vocal qualities. In addition they argued that society frequently attributes individuals to a particular sex, based on these vocal characteristics. Stewart et al. (2020) noted that the paradox of a masculine voice paired with a feminine appearance creates a significant barrier for transgender women in socially integrating into womanhood. Hardy et al. (2013) asserted that "a male-sounding voice can lead to misidentification in the absence of visual cues and may cause some individuals to avoid speaking on the telephone or using drive thru ordering systems" (p. 201). McNeill et al. (2008) and Bralley et al. (1978) noted that, unlike their female-to-male (FTM) counterparts, the voice of a transgender woman is unaffected by HRT. They explained that in

the case of transgender men, androgen supplements masculinise their voice. Conversely, McNeill et al. (2008) and Bralley et al. (1978) observed that for transgender women, anti-androgen does not reverse the vocal changes developed during male puberty. Neumann & Welzel (2004) noted that, as a result, vocal therapy and phonosurgical techniques were developed to assist in feminising the voices of transgender women.

Vocal therapy studies date back to the 1970s. Bralley et al. (1978) focused on the efficacy of voice therapy to enhance the 'femaleness' of a transgender woman's voice. They sought to increase the habitual pitch of the client's conversational voice. It is important to note that their research described transgender women as 'transsexual men'. This term is considered outdated and offensive by contemporary standards (Peruzzo, 2024). Bralley et al. (1978) recorded the progress throughout the duration of their client's vocal therapy sessions. They then played the recordings for listeners alongside recordings of cisgender women and men. The listeners were tasked with rating the 'maleness' and 'femaleness' of the voice recordings. The findings determined that, while the client's voice was still discernible from cisgender women, the 'femaleness' rating of her voice increased by the seventh session of voice therapy.

Transgender voice research conducted decades later by McNeill et al. (2008), Yang et al. (2002) and Van Borsel et al. (2001) provided deeper insights to this field. The studies conducted by McNeill et al. (2008) and Yang et al. (2002) featured more participants and listeners in their experiments than Bralley et al. (1978). A majority of the participants across McNeill et al.'s (2008) and Yang et al.'s (2002) studies had undergone cricothyroid approximation[8] surgery alongside vocal therapy. Van Borsel et al. (2001) and McNeill et al. (2008) examined the relationship between physical appearance and voice in gender perceptions among transgender women. The study conducted by Van Borsel et al. (2001) involved video-recorded speech samples presented in three modes: auditory-only, visual-only, and audiovisual. Their findings revealed a significant interaction between appearance and voice. Femininity ratings from the auditory-only presentations were markedly lower than those from the audiovisual presentations. Conversely, femininity ratings from the visual-only presentations were significantly higher than

8. Cricothyroid approximation (CTA) is a surgical technique used in voice feminisation. It works by tightening the vocal cords to raise the pitch of the voice (McNeill et al., 2008).

those from the audiovisual presentations. These results highlight the interplay between voice and physical appearance, suggesting that the efficacy of voice training for transgender women is not solely dependent on vocal characteristics.

> As acceptability of physical appearance can influence perception of femaleness of the voice, speech pathologists involved in gender teams may consider devoting special attention to training clients with respect to physical markers of femaleness such as in clothing and makeup. Since physical appearance can apparently positively influence listeners' judgment of the femaleness of the voice, extra attention to physical appearance seems worthwhile, particularly in those cases where efforts to alter an individual's voice proved less successful and where other procedures (voice change surgery) are not an option. (Van Borsel et al., 2001, p.574)

The periods between the studies of Bralley et al. (1978), Van Borsel et al. (2001), Yang et al. (2002) and McNeill et al. (2008) illustrates an evolving discourse over three decades. This evolution aligns with surgical advancements as well as societal perceptions of transgender women. This shift is reflected in the terminology used to describe transgender in women in Bralley et al.'s (1978) research and the studies that preceded it. Despite the progress in voice feminisation techniques, there remains a notable gap in research regarding their subjective success. Neumann & Welzel (2004) and McNeill et al. (2008) identified a lack of data on the personal experiences of transgender women undergoing voice therapy and phonosurgery. Two decades later, Schwarz et al. (2023) and Leyns et al. (2021) echoed those concerns, illustrating a lack of studies to comprehensively understand the subjective outcomes of voice feminisation therapies.

My research contributes to the discourse by showcasing in my film the progression from boyhood to womanhood through the use of AI voice cloning technology. Employing an autoethnographic approach, it captures my personal journey in finding my sonic voice within an environment devoid of visual cues. This contribution is realised through a research-enabled practice, with the creative output (my film) serving as both a medium for exploration and a vehicle for presenting the findings.

2.2 Identity Theories

Identity has been defined as a construct that provides agency and guides individuals through the spaces they occupy (Kroger, 2004). However, Schwartz et al. (2011) describe identity at its core as the answer to two questions: who am I? and who are you? They argue that such simple questions compel deep reflection about one's self-perception and relational standing within broader social and

familial contexts. Waterman (1984) delineated identity as either a process of discovery or a process of construction. Self-discovery suggests that an ideal self already exists within a person and they uncover it through identity formation. A constructivist perspective proposes that identity is constructed through a person. Waterman (1984) proposed that these perspectives are fundamentally distinct and mutually exclusive. Schwartz (2002) contended that these perspectives can function synergistically. He attributed this belief to the potential interplay between the self and its surrounding context. Sedikides & Brewer (2015) outlined existing approaches to identity, which revolve around three key levels used to describe and make sense of it: individual; relational; and collective. The scope of my study focused only on individual and relational identity as most relevant.

Individual – Narrative Identity Theory

Schwartz et al. (2011) characterised individual identity as an expression of self-determination which a person actively shapes. Within this context, narrative identity theory is seen as a person's internalised and continually evolving life story (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Bruner (1990) argued that the journey to a storied self begins by making sense of past troubles. McAdams & McLean (2013) reasoned that individuals often derive meaning more readily from challenging experiences than from positive ones. Additionally, McAdams & McLean (2013) noted that the reflective process acknowledges personal flaws while facilitating growth and development.

Individual – Embodied Identity Theory

Giddens (2023) theorised the relationship between the body and self within the framework of embodied identity theory. He suggested the body serves as a site of expression for self-identity and social constructs. The physical form, in this context, is subject to external perception and regulation. Originally published in 1991, Giddens' (2023) work has attracted considerable critique, particularly from feminist scholars. Budgeon (2003) critiqued Giddens' (2023) conceptualisation of the mind/body binary. She argued that it inherently perpetuates sexism by oppressing women's bodies. According to Budgeon (2003) this theory has an inherent gender bias as women are more associated with the body and femininity, while men, in contrast, are linked more with thought and logic.

> Indeed, women, who have always been more embodied than men because of the association of the feminine with the body, have long been aware of the form and appearance of their bodies and the extent to which they are responsible for creating that surface in accordance with cultural ideals and images. (Budgeon, 2003, p.38)

Bordo (1993) observed that female bodies are imbued with greater societal significance. She asserted that women's bodies are more subjected to external control and attempts at 'enhancement'. She cited diet, cosmetics and attire as examples. Despite strict adherence to societal ideals, women are further subjugated by the male gaze, bearing the responsibility for men's reactions to their bodies. Bordo (1993) noted that "Frequently, even when women are silent (or verbalising exactly the opposite), their bodies are seen as "speaking" a language of provocation. When female bodies do not efface their femaleness, they may be seen as inviting, 'flaunting'" (p. 4). Her assertion broadens the theory beyond a simple mind-body relationship. She embeds it in sexist and oppressive ideologies. Within these ideologies, the female form carries broader meanings and embodies an inherent oppressor/oppressed dynamic.

Relational Identity Theory

Relational identity refers to the roles individuals hold in relation to others, such as being a parent, child, or co-worker. These roles can be defined and interpreted in various ways, reflecting attributes like a lenient or strict parenting style (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Schwartz et al. (2011) elaborate on relational identity, noting that it:

> [...] refers to one's roles vis-àvis other people, encompassing identity contents such as child, spouse, parent, co-worker, supervisor, customer, etc. Relational identity refer not only to these roles, but also to how they are defined and interpreted by the individuals who assume them. (p.3)

Marková (1987) suggested that individuals cannot establish relational identities in isolation. She argued that relational identities must be externally validated to become stable. Humberd & Rouse (2016) define relational identity as the extent to which individuals incorporate their role relationships into their self-concept.

Conclusion

Overall, when reviewing identity theories relevant to this research, it is clear that there is a sense of generalisation. Such generalisation is understandable because whether we actively engage with our identity, it is very much embedded in our existence. Embodied identity to some degree generalises the

experiences of women. Relational identity is widely applicable, as most individuals take on roles such as child, sibling, friend, or parent in their relationships with others. Schwartz et al. (2011) identified three distinct yet interconnected levels of identity that shape both self-definition and external perception. My study aimed to apply these theories to my autoethnographic research. Doing so enabled me to deeply understand the nuances of my pathway to womanhood. These insights informed the creation of a storyline for my film that directly addressed my research question.

2.3 Pre-colonial Philippines and Gender

The creative artefact of this study is set in pre-colonial Philippines, so it is important to examine gender diversity and the role of spirituality within that culture and time period. Additionally, the review of my ancestry and indigeneity connects directly to the navigation of colonial worlds, combined with empowering my voice.

Pre-colonial Philippine society was vastly different from the current post-colonial period. Gender fluidity did not bear the same negative connotations that it does in present-day Philippines. Individuals who would be considered gender fluid or queer by contemporary standards held esteemed positions in pre-colonial times. The Tagalog goddess of fertility, Lakapati, is believed to have been intersex or transgender, further reflecting the acceptance of gender diversity (Alegre, 2022; Hontanar, 2023; Ildefonso, 2022). Additionally, pre-colonial Philippines was a matriarchal society. Marital practices reflected this structure, as men were required to work for the bride's family to prove their worth. Virginity was not a prerequisite for women to marry . Women's roles extended beyond domestic duties and submission, encompassing spiritual leadership and political governance (Alcantara, 1994; Alegre, 2022; Camacho, 2007; Ildefonso, 2022). Pre-colonial Philippine society operated under a four-cornered leadership structure, consisting of the babaylans (shamans), datu (chieftains), panday (blacksmiths), and bagani (warriors). Miclat-Cacayan (2005) emphasised that she describes this structure as 'cornered' rather than tiered, because all four roles held equal value in society and worked collaboratively.

Babaylans

Pre-colonial Philippines was a deeply spiritual society, where it was interwoven with daily life including governance. Babaylans served as spiritual leaders and prominent figures in society. They acted as conduits between spiritual entities and humans (Clara & Lanzona, 2005; Ildefonso, 2022). Notably, some babaylans were biologically male and embodied what we would now recognise as queer identities. Those biologically male were known as asog or bayoguin. They were fully accepted in society as women, marrying men like their cisgender counterparts (Hontanar, 2023; Ildefonso, 2022). Babaylans adopted a feminine appearance as pre-colonial Filipinos believed that spiritual efficacy was contingent upon femininity. (Clara & Lanzona, 2005; Ildefonso, 2022). One became a babaylan through inheritance or a vocational choice (Mercado, 1988). Babaylans had spirit guides known as bantays. The bantays played a crucial role in their ministry by offering teachings, empowerment and guidance. These guardians also served as conduits for the babaylans to connect with the spiritual world (Mercado, 1991; Rodriguez, 2019). In addition to their role as spiritual leaders, babaylans also acted as physical healers, diagnosing and treating ailments.

Animism

Many pre-colonial Philippine practices were rooted in animism. Nature was viewed as divine. From an animist perspective, divinity exists within nature, including plants, animals and mountains (Santos, 2008). Miclat-Cacayan (2005) noted that practitioners of animism were deeply connected to the natural world in a coexistent relationship. The connection was inseparable from nature (Mercado, 1994). They perceived the world as multilayered. These layers were home to various types of anitos (spiritual entities) that resided within them. The anitos received prayers and served as intermediaries between the physical and spiritual planes (Almocera, 2000; Dakudao, 1992; Demetrio et al., 1991; Mercado, 1994; Miclat-Cacayan, 2005).

Twin Souls - Kalag and Ginhawa

Pre-colonial Philippine society believed in the concept of twin souls, known as kalag and ginhawa. Bautista (2016) outlined that these concepts are deeply rooted in the creation and existence of human life. Kalag is a spiritual force that ensouls the unborn, and losing kalag during pregnancy could lead to miscarriage (Bautista, 2016; Bulloch, 2016). The timing of ensoulment, whether at conception or when the foetus begins to take on a human form (natawhan), remains a topic of debate among scholars such as

Bullock (2016) and Bautista (2016). However, both perspectives may be accurate. Sangadoy (2017) suggests that beliefs and names surrounding kalag and ginhawa vary from region to region in the archipelago.

Ginhawa merges with kalag upon birth, earning the name 'the breath of life'. Ginhawa remains in the body until physical death. Meanwhile, kalag is considered an astral soul that can leave the body to wander during dreams. In some cases, kalag leaves the body involuntarily. Rituals performed by babaylans can retrieve kalag (Aguilar, 2016; Bautista, 2016; Bulloch, 2016; Mercado, 1991; Salazar, 2007; Sangadoy, 2017; Tan, 2008). The harmony of kalag and ginhawa are essential to a person's well-being and reflective of their moral conduct. Pre-colonial Filipinos embraced a holistic approach to well-being. They considered the balance between kalag and ginhawa indicative of a person's ethical and moral health. Disharmony between the two arises from misdeeds (Mercado, 1991, 1994).

Conclusion

Alegre (2022), a fellow transpinay[9] researcher, described the gender-crossing[10] babaylans as her tran-cestors (a play on the word trans and ancestors). Exploring the lives of my tran-cestors, and by proxy pre-colonial Philippine spirituality, is important to my film. The film is centered on the hypothetical origin story of the first gender-crossing babaylan. Additionally, elements of pre-colonial spirituality, such as bantays, kalag, and ginhawa, are woven into the storyline. These elements contribute to the film's setting in pre-colonial Philippines, and perhaps more importantly, incorporating this knowledge into my film preserves the legacy of my tran-cestors.

2.4 Reindigenisation and Decolonisation

Re-indigenisation and decolonial ideologies underpin my research. It is through these frameworks and ancestral knowledge that I am able to find my voice as an indigenous transgender woman. While colonialism is not directly referenced

9. Transpinay is a term used to refer to transgender women in the Philippines. It combines 'trans', denoting transgender identity, and 'pinay', a colloquial term for Filipina women (Alegre, 2022).
10. Colonisers often referred to babaylans as transvestites or cross-dressers. Garcia (2004) argues that 'gender-crosser' is a more accurate term. This term acknowledges that babaylans not only adopted the appearance and demeanour of women but were also recognised as women in their communities.

in the film, it frames the insights drawn from the memories in my journey map (Figure 3.1). These memories influenced the development of the storyline.

There is a common misconception that decolonisation and indigenisation are synonymous. However, scholars assert there are distinct differences. The two concepts have a coactive relationship that reinforce and uphold indigeneity in colonial spaces. (Grafton & Melançon, 2020; Sium et al., 2012; Soares & Whitcomb, 2022; Tusasiirwe, 2022).

Sium et al. (2022) argue that decolonisation is a matter of decentering colonialism rather than simply rejecting it. They assert that decolonisation defies a single definition due to its complex and evolving nature. Such complexity involves ongoing negotiations around power, place, identity, and sovereignty (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2021; Sium et al., 2012). The intersection between decolonisation and indigenisation must begin with decolonisation (Grafton & Melançon, 2020; Tusasiirwe, 2022). Tusasiirwe (2022) argues that "it is possible to indigenise without decolonising first although this is not what this article advocates for. In fact, indigenising without decolonising is tokenistic, if not dangerous" (p.11). As these frameworks are acknowledged and decentered through decolonisation, indigenisation works in concert by centering indigenous knowledge (Tusasiirwe, 2022). Sium et al. (2012) argue that Indigenous knowledge is crucial for both resurgence and decolonisation. They warn without Indigenous knowledge, decolonisation risks merely becoming a theoretical exercise lacking any real transformative power.

Colonial Impacts

With Tusaiirwe's (2022) assertions in mind, it is imperative to understand the origins of colonialism in the Philippines and the implications it has today. Historical records analysed by Quintos (2012) indicated that, when Spaniards[11] first arrived in the Philippines in 1521, they were confused by the babaylans. Much of the confusion stemmed from their inability to distinguish which babaylan were asog due to their feminine appearance. Moreover, the Spaniards saw babaylans as a threat. The babaylans wielded societal power and did not adhere to gendered binary norms (Hontanar, 2023; Ildefonso, 2022; Quintos, 2012; Quirino & Garcia, 1960). Recognising them as formidable rivals for influence, the

11. Spaniards refers to the people of Spain, particularly in the context of Spanish colonisation of the Philippines (Stošić et al., 2016).

Spaniards asserted their dominance through brutality. They destroyed ritual instruments and executed babaylans to solidify their power (Alegre, 2022; Quintos, 2012). Spiritual practices were demonised and abolished. Filipinos were forced to adopt Catholicism as the dominant authority as sacred lands were destroyed and replaced by churches (Ildefonso, 2022; Miclat-Cacayan, 2005; Quintos, 2012). Miclat-Cacayan (2005) conducted interviews with babaylans. In her conversations she spoke with a babaylan named Iding who commented on the desecartation that remains an ongoing issue:

> The forest is now being destroyed because the Christians removed God from it. They put God in a building. If you do not see God living in nature, you would not hesitate to destroy [....].
> (p. 2)

The replacement of babaylans with Spanish missionary priests marked the transition of Philippine society from pre-colonial to Spanish colonial influence. This era also saw the emergence of machismo[12] (Asencio, 2012; Ildefonso, 2022; Quintos, 2012). During this period, the term asog, which once signified high social status, was replaced by bakla. This term came to be associated with cowardice due to its deviation from masculine norms. The term bakla has continued to carry negative connotations in present-day Philippines. Filipinos use bakla[13] as an umbrella term for transgender women, feminine men, and gay men (Ceperiano et al., 2016; Ildefonso, 2022; Mathews, 1987; Quintos, 2012). Foe (2014) noted the systemic reinforcement of colonial beliefs and the elimination of pre-colonial knowledge. He highlighted a 300-year period, beginning in 1625, during which no records of pre-colonial Philippine history were made publicly available. The exclusion of pre-colonial Philippine history from education curriculum has reinforced colonialism. As a result, post-colonial Philippine society glorifies colonialism while viewing pre-colonial cultures and practices as savage (Ildefonso, 2022; Quintos, 2012).

12. Asencio (2012) describes Machismo as a concept introduced by the Spanish conquistadors, characterised by male dominance, female subordination, and control over female behaviour and sexuality.
13. Alegre (2022) suggests that the origins of the term bakla remain uncertain. The word bakla likely blends the phrases babaeng akala ay lalaki (a woman assumed to be a man) or vice versa. Initially bakla primarily referred to gender but, by the 20th century, it also came to signify sexuality.

Moreover, most surviving pre-colonial materials are limited to accounts written by colonisers (Escote, 2023). Idefonso (2024) argued that colonial influences are a key reason why the SOGIE Bill[14] has yet to be passed. Cornelio & Dagle (2019) emphasised the resistance the bill has faced, with Ildefonso (2024) attributing this opposition to the influence of Catholicism and its demonisation of queer individuals.

2.5 Lotte Reiniger and Stop-motion Animation

Lotte Reiniger's (1926) creative process behind her shadow puppetry directly influenced my animation. I examined her traditional methods of rigging figures and applied a modern digital adaptation of these techniques. Reiniger is considered a pioneer in animation. She is often credited as one of the first filmmakers to venture into stop-motion animation (Martinez, 2022).

Lotte Reiniger, born in 1899, is widely regarded as one of the most prolific female filmmakers in the history of cinematic arts (Grace, 2017). Reiniger garnered international recognition for her work as an animation artist and a pioneering female film director (Martinez, 2022; Sterritt, 2020). One of Reiniger's key innovations, according to Sterritt (2020), was an early version of the multiplane camera[15], referred to as the 'tricktisch' or 'trick table'. The tricktisch later became an essential tool at Disney Studios. Reiniger's craft was deeply rooted in Scherenschnitte, a traditional German art of paper cutting. This artform served as her primary medium for creating narrative elements through shadow puppetry (Martinez, 2022).

Giesen & Khan (2017) noted that, during Germany's financial crisis in the 1920's, Reiniger and her collaborator Carl Koch worked on the film *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926) pictured in Figure 2.1. The film debuted in Berlin in 1926. This was the first feature-length animated film produced in Germany and was one of the earliest feature animations in cinematic history (Schöfeld, 2006). *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926) is among the earliest 20th-century films to depict a homosexual romance between male characters (Arcadia, 2021). An advocate

14. Initially filed in 2000, the SOGIE Bill aims to protect LGBTQIA+ individuals from discrimination based on their gender identity and sexual orientation (Gamalinda & Oren, 2024).
15. A multiplane camera is a specialised device used in traditional animation to create a sense of depth by filming multiple layers of artwork arranged on different planes (Hirano, 2020).

for the queer individuals within her social and professional circles, Reiniger once said “I knew lots of homosexual men and women from the film and theatre world in Berlin and saw how they suffered from stigmatization.”(Moritz, 2012, p. 18).

Figure 2.1

A Scene from The Adventures of Prince Achmed (1926)

Note. Screenshot from *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926). On the public domain.

Her approach deliberately subverted contemporaneous biases by portraying queer intimacy not as spectacle but as organic (Arcadia, 2021). According to Martinez (2022), this film is based on the Middle Eastern folklore *The Thousand and One Nights* (1909). She linked this inspiration to the Orientalism that was prevalent among the bourgeoisie of the time. During this period there was a particular fondness among the wealthier classes for archaeology and travel to ‘exotic’ locales (Martinez, 2022).

Sterritt (2020) highlighted that dexterity and speed were crucial during the production of *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926). The film involved the creation of approximately 250,000 images over a three-year period. He also noted that the characters were created as silhouetted marionettes which were meticulously fashioned from black cardboard and thin strips of lead. This project was physically arduous and time-consuming (Gambrell, 2011).

Reiniger’s artistic brilliance lay in her ability to deconstruct and imagine each component that made up the movements of her puppet characters (Currell, 2015). Currell (2015) suggested that this expertise was developed through years of careful observation

of people in various activities and emotional states. Stop-motion[16] detailed preparation includes interpreting motion into incrementally divided time periods (Gambrell, 2011). Reininger's skill and perceptiveness allowed her to translate a wide array of movements and emotions using silhouetted figures (Grace, 2017). Reiniger (1970) described her rigging technique in her own writings, explaining how each limb was cut separately and connected with wire hinges. These hinges were then flattened with a slight tap of a hammer to ensure fluid movement. She further discusses the intricacies of these hinges.

> In fixing the hinges make sure that the limbs overlap each other like scales: the neck on top of the head, the breast on top of the lower joint of neck, both upper arms on top of the shoulders, the chest on top of the bosom, the hips on top of the chest, the left thigh under the right one on top of the hips, both shanks on top of the thighs, and both feet on top of the ankles. (Reiniger, 1970, p.97)

Reiniger addressed the inherent stiffness of full-profile shadow puppet figures by combining profiled heads with bodies turned partly forward. This enhanced their expressive and decorative potential (Currell, 2015). Using this technique broadens the scope for more nuanced human expressions (Grace 2017). The subtlety of movement and expression in Reininger's approach were significant in the production of *Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home)* (Abrau, 2024). By applying this multidimensional perspective to character design in the film, I maximised depth of expression and movement in each character.

Conclusion

Central to this research is the preservation of indigenous and transgender narratives through creative practice. It is important that this preservation exists outside the realm of traditional research. Mediums like film and moving image reflect the indigenous storytelling traditions of passing down knowledge. Reimagining pre-colonial society through modern animation is a poignant way to bridge ancestral traditions with contemporary art forms. The film draws on visual storytelling techniques inspired by Lotte Reiniger's shadow puppet films. Her process shaped both the aesthetic and production of the film. Her method of overlapping limbs, influenced the rigging of the characters. The study also echoes Bralley et al.'s (1978) transgender voice research conducted through vocal recordings. While these recordings were studied, they were not made publicly available.

16. Stop-motion is a filmmaking technique where objects are physically manipulated in small increments between individually photographed frames. When the frames are played in sequence, the objects appear to move independently (Purves, 2010).

My film builds on this idea by using AI voice cloning technology to encapsulate this progression. Hearing this sonic journey is essential, as it directly addresses a significant part of my research question.

Chapter 3
Research Design and Methodology

Introduction

This chapter discusses the various tools and methodologies used in this study. Additionally, it also describes the methodologies that underpin the study which include autoethnography and narrative inquiry. Finally, this chapter details the methodology used in the creative process. This study employed a research-enabled practice approach integrating research, theories and ideas as the foundation of a creative output (Batty & Zalipour, 2024). This method ensured that indigenous knowledge and my personal insights as a transgender woman shaped the film.

Through the research I aimed to answer the question: How do transgender women find their voice? This inquiry examined the various layers of the physical and metaphysical[17] aspects of voice through making a short animated film. As a medium, animation is able to convey the nuances of the study through sound and visual storytelling. An animated film enabled me to incorporate AI voice cloning technology to capture the progression of my voice from boyhood to womanhood. This progression encapsulated the sonic aspect of my research question. Through illustrative work in the animated film, I incorporated indigenous visual elements such as textiles and ritual instruments. These elements are vital aspects of the creative output as they evoke pre-colonial Philippine society and worldviews.

3.1 Autoethnography

According to Ellis & Bochner (2000), autoethnography is a methodology that "displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p. 739). That connection is the reason why I employed autoethnography in my research. As someone who belongs to marginalised groups in society, our voices are often silenced or diluted in broader discourse. Autoethnography affords marginalised people the agency to tell their own stories in academia. Zaharin & Pallotta-Chiarolli (2022) emphasise the importance of centralising trans voices in the field of transgender studies through autoethnography. They argue that this approach is critical to reshaping the narrative of transgender people. Edelman (2012) observed that these narratives typically centre on surgical genital modifications or reduce trans culture to stereotypes and comedic elements for others' enjoyment.

17. In this context, 'metaphysical' refers to the conceptual or abstract dimensions of voice, extending beyond its physical expression to include non-material elements such as identity, meaning, and cultural significance (Leddy, 2014).

Furthermore, autoethnography produces valuable insights as a qualitative methodology. Stutterheim & Ratcliffe (2021) note that "qualitative methods yielded insights that could only be provided directly by people with lived experiences of being transgender" (p. 10).

Gathering Data and Journey Map

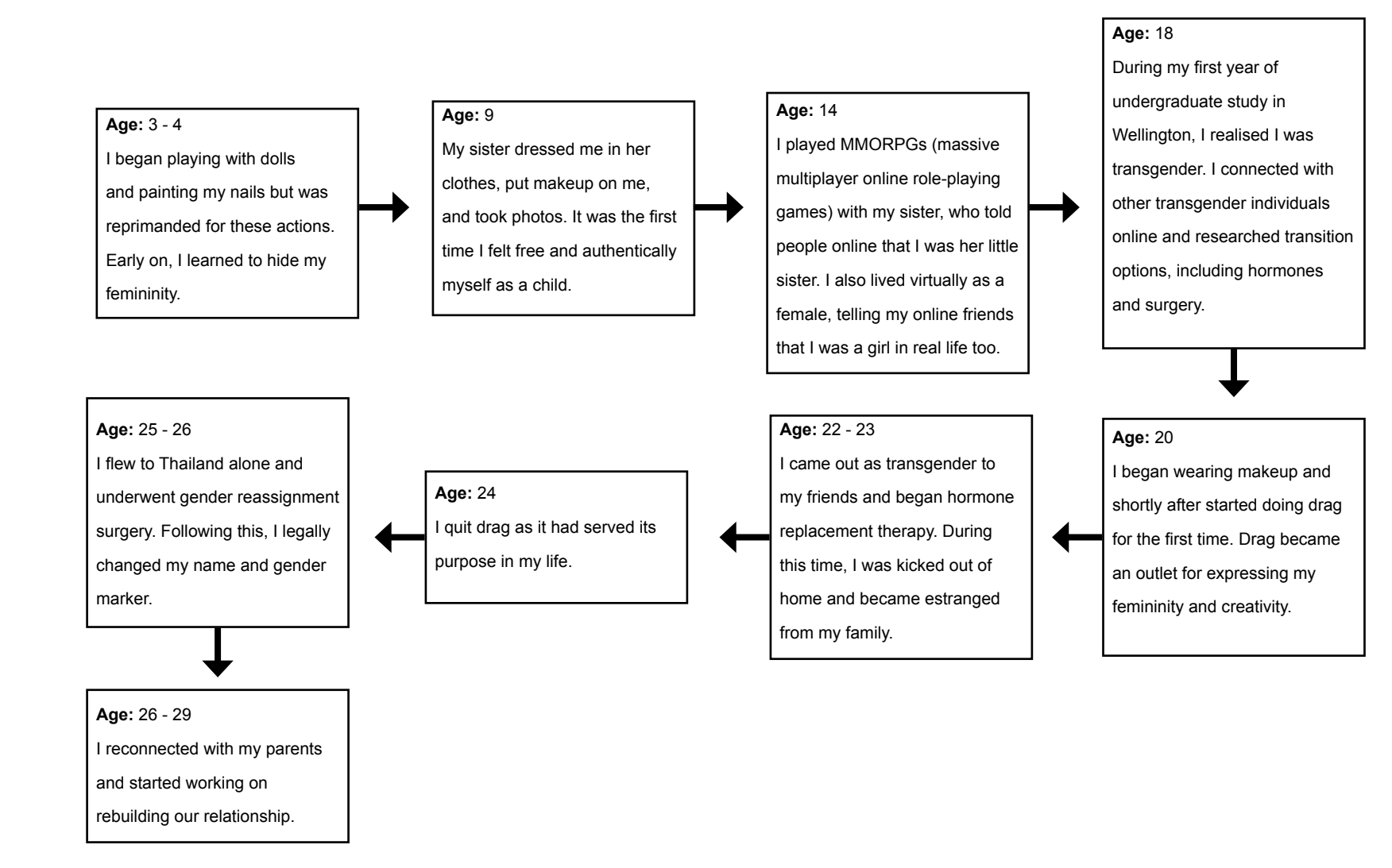
In my autoethnographic research, I applied methods outlined by Ellis et al. (2014) and Tarisayi (2023) to gather data, focusing on a memory work technique for structured recall and analysis of personal memory.

> Memory work entails mining one's past experiences through deliberate, structured recall. This retrospection seeks to evoke and reconstruct significant personal events. Memory-work prompts like free-writing or guided visualization can stimulate recall of buried memories. Reconstructing the context, sensations, and emotions of past experiences makes them available for contemporary sense-making. (Tarisayi, 2023, p. 58)

I recalled key moments in my journey from boyhood to womanhood and wrote them down as they arose. Afterwards, I organised these memories chronologically, allowing me to identify gaps. Having the memories arranged in this way provided a timeline that I could reflect on, making it easier to pinpoint any missing moments. I considered potential pitfalls of autoethnography identified by Chang (2006) and Fox (2021). They warned against solely relying on memory without consideration of other perspectives. To address this, I reviewed my generated memories with my older sister, using FaceTime as she lives in a different country. My sister and I had a close relationship growing up, and in many ways she raised me. She witnessed every version of me, either in person for the events I recount or through video chats after she moved overseas. By revisiting these memories with her, I ensured the validity of the memories recalled. I then transformed the recounted data into a journey map in chronological order (Figure 3.1). In the case of my study the 'data' is the memories recalled.

Figure 3.1

Journey Map of my Journey to and through Womanhood



3.2 Narrative Inquiry

To transform the data into a storyline for the film I used narrative inquiry as a methodology. Narrative inquiry typically refers to the collaborative relationship between the researcher and participant(s) that inquires into experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). Within narrative inquiry, the experience of participants are contextualised and understood "within larger cultural, social, familial, and institutional narratives." (Caine et al., 2019, p. 577). In this exegesis however, narrative inquiry describes the creative process wherein a fictional cinematic text is transposed from a series of curated self-experienced events. Researchers like Bryne (2023) outlined the compatibility of this methodology within creative practice. He noted that narrative inquiry can manifest across various mediums, including filmmaking. Polkinghorne (1995) explained that "narrative inquiry gathers events and happenings as its data and uses narrative analytic procedures to produce explanatory stories" (p. 5). I did not want to create a storyline that recalls these memories exactly as they were lived. Instead, I aimed to use these memories to inform the storyline and answer the research question. Doing so granted me the creative freedom to weave indigenous knowledge and worldviews into the storyline. Additionally it allowed me to use characters as aliases. This approach avoids the need to directly reference others involved in the memories, such as my parents. I took into consideration the ethical concerns of Tolich (2010) around privacy within autoethnography.

Polkinghorne (1995), referencing the earlier works of Dollard (1935), provided guidelines for synthesising data through narrative inquiry. These guidelines were applicable to my research and creative output. The guidelines for synthesising data through narrative inquiry consist of (1) including descriptions of the cultural context in which the story occurs; (2) considering the embodied nature of the protagonist, such as physical attributes and life stages; (3) acknowledging the influence of significant others in the protagonist's life; (4) focusing on the protagonist's choices, actions, and internal struggles; (5) addressing the historical continuity of the protagonist's experiences; (6) constructing a story with a clear beginning, middle, and end; and (7) ensuring that the narrative provides a plausible and understandable explanation of the protagonist's actions and responses (Polkinghorne, 1995). By carefully considering these guidelines throughout my research and film production, I ensured that the storyline of my film had depth. I discuss in detail below how the aforementioned guidelines structured the development of the script in Chapter 4.

3.3 Tools and Programmes Used

Macbook and iMac

For illustrative work and basic animation, I used a Macbook. I switched to an iMac when animating the film in Adobe After Effects for faster processing.

iPad, Apple Pencil and Procreate

For the initial sketches and storyboarding I used my iPad and Procreate[18] which I then exported as PNG files to retain image quality. I opted to use digital mediums, as I could easily transfer the files to my Macbook via the airdrop feature. This allowed me to quickly begin finalising the illustrations in Adobe Illustrator without having to scan hand-drawn images.

Adobe Photoshop

Adobe Photoshop was used for basic frame animation for objects in the frame, such as flame torches.

Microsoft Word

This programme was employed in the script writing. The features allowed me to colour code the script according to the different scenes in the storyboard.

Adobe Illustrator

Adobe Illustrator was used for digital Illustration of characters and scenery.

Adobe After Effects

This programme was used to create the film including subtitles and opening credits. Additionally, I used two different plugins within Adobe After Effects (AE): (1) Duik Angela[19] for rigging characters for movement; and (2) Paste Multiple Keyframes 2 to efficiently copy and paste multiple keyframes[20] at once. I also used AE for sound effects so that I could time them at exact moments in the film for example, the sound of hair being cut in Act I.

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18. Procreate is a digital art application for iPad. It is used for illustration, painting and animation.
19. Duik Angela is a plugin for Adobe After Effects that is used for character rigging and 2D animation automation. https://rxlaboratory.org/duik-angela-download/
20. Keyframes in Adobe After Effects are markers that define the starting and ending points of any animation. They allow for control over changes in an object's properties such as position, scale, rotation and opacity.

ElevenLabs

All voice cloning was done through ElevenLabs[21] by providing the AI model with audio clips of me talking at different points in my life.

Adobe Audition

The majority of sound production was done through Adobe Audition. I used this programme to refine the sound quality and reduce background noise in audio clips. It was also utilised to compile and refine audio for ElevenLabs. This included the audio from home videos shot on dated technology where audio quality pales in comparison to the capabilities of modern technology.

Microphone

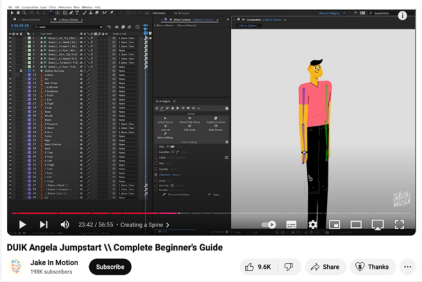
I used a Shure directional microphone[22] for recording the audio in a sound booth.

Tutorial Based Learning

As this was my first time creating an animated film I had a lot of self-directed learning to do. I learned from online resources such as YouTube tutorials to teach me how to use Adobe After Effects (AE) and the Duik Angela plugin (Figure 3.2) which I used to animate majority of the film. Initially the tutorials were to grasp the foundational skills required to navigate AE. Eventually I began to look up specific tutorials such as 'animating butterfly wings' for certain scenes (Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.2

Screenshot of Jake in Motion's (2023) Tutorial on Duik Angela.



Note. Screenshot from a YouTube tutorial by Jake in Motion, uploaded in January 30, 2023. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0RRBVnn2MA&t=1422s.

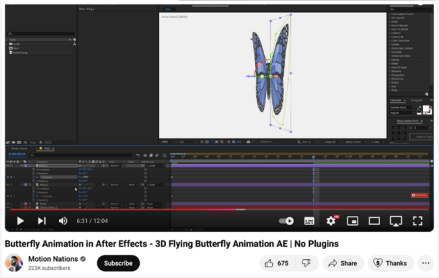
Copyright belongs to Jake in Motion.

21. ElevenLabs is an AI-powered platform specializing in voice cloning and synthesis technologies. https://elevenlabs.io

22. The cardioid directional microphone used was produced by Shure. Cardiod microphones pick up sound from the front making them ideal for voiceovers and interviews (Sebald, 2010).

Figure 3.3

Screenshot of Motion Nation's (2022) Tutorial on Animating a Butterfly in After Effects.

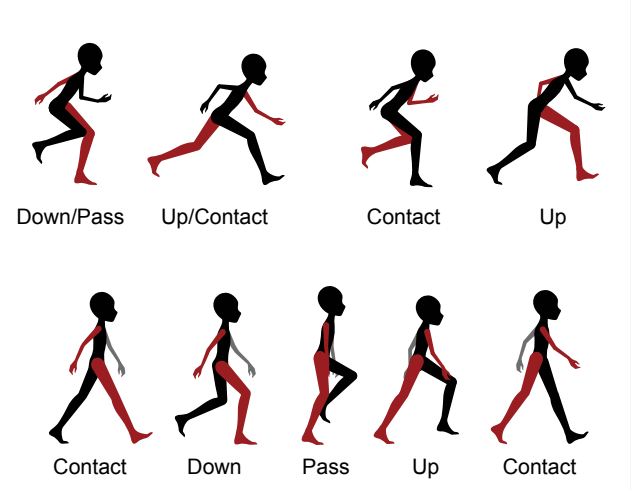


Note. Screenshot from a YouTube tutorial by Motion Nations, uploaded in March 31, 2022. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_4_wr_56R48&t=388s. Copyright belongs to Motion Nations.

I had to study the movements of people as well as quadrupeds[23] for the film. I then applied this knowledge to animating characters in the film. The foundational works of Williams (2012) in animating human movements proved to be a valuable learning resource (Figure 3.4).

Figure 3.4

Walk and Run Cycle



Note. This is the walk and run cycle diagram I made and referenced when animating characters for my film. Adapted from *The Animator's Survival Kit*, by Williams (2012), p. 176 – 177. Copyright 2012 by Richard Williams.

Storyboarding

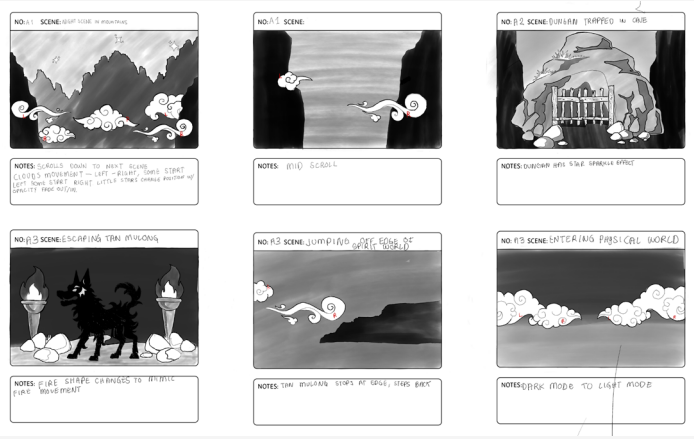
Storyboarding was completed after writing the script. This sequence allowed the script to shape the visual planning process. In turn, the storyboards served as a guide for the illustrations, ensuring that the visuals aligned closely with the narrative. At first, I created detailed storyboards to establish the film's

23. A quadruped refers to any four-legged animal, typically described as mammals that walk on all fours. The term is often applied in biological and mythological contexts to denote creatures with four limbs used for locomotion (Coros et al., 2011).

aesthetic (Figure 3.5). As production progressed, I adapted my approach. The skills I learned during the process began to shape the design and scenes.

Figure 3.5

Storyboarding of Introduction Scene in Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home)



Note. This storyboard was drawn using Procreate and informed the visual development of the animation. Own work.

Conclusion

This methodology chapter delineated how autoethnography and narrative inquiry inform a creative output that answers my research question. The section also discussed how I navigated pitfalls and ethical considerations of autoethnography from researchers such Chang (2016) and Tolich (2010). Additionally, the chapter outlined my approach to filmmaking, marking my first foray into this creative medium. Adopting a self-directed, tutorial-based learning approach enabled me to acquire foundational skills that were essential before progressing with specific aspects of the film. Through this, I gained an understanding of the principles of animation movement. This knowledge enriched my creative process.

Chapter 4
Creative Process and Film Production

This chapter examines the creative process behind the production of my film *Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home)*. It outlines the key stages of development, beginning with the scriptwriting process. The discussion then moves to sound production, exploring AI voice cloning technology. Following this, the chapter delves into the character design process. Finally, it details the animation principles applied to human movements, animal behaviours, and natural phenomena like flames.

4.1 Script Development

I started by creating a journey map that chronicled pivotal moments and milestones throughout my life. In this map I traced my journey to womanhood from birth to the present. It provided the structural basis for the film by dividing it into three distinct acts. Set in pre-colonial Philippines, the film features a bilingual script in both English and Bisaya. The script features a rhyme scheme that flows across both languages. I adopted a fluid rhyming structure to reflect the rhyme patterns characteristic of Bisaya poetry, as noted by Dorn (1994). Rhyme schemes in Bisaya poetry transitions dynamically between schemes, such as A-A-B-B-B and A-B-A-B-A (Dorn, 1994). One of the aims of my research was to elevate Bisaya culture and language through creative media. By incorporating these elements into my film, I addressed the marginalisation of Bisaya and the dominance of Tagalog in Filipino media. (Alunan, 2023; Fernandez, 2008). To ensure a strong and cohesive storyline, I followed Dollard's (1935) seven guidelines for narrative inquiry.

1. **Include descriptions of the cultural context in which the story occurs**

   Dollard (1935) emphasised the importance of describing the cultural context of the story. The researcher must consider how the protagonist's values, social rules, and worldview are influenced by their upbringing. This context gives meaning to events and the overall narrative (Bourdieu, 1990; Dollard, 1935). The film is set in pre-colonial Philippines, which allowed me to incorporate indigenous knowledge and worldviews. I included elements such as babaylans and spiritual entities to enrich the storyline. Additionally, the cultural context of the film allows me to anchor the visuals within pre-colonial Philippines.

2. **Consider the embodied nature of the protagonist, such as physical attributes and life stages**

   The researcher must consider the protagonist's embodied nature. These considerations include physical attributes and life stages. Factors like physique, genetic traits, and developmental changes shape personal goals and life

concerns. These factors provide context for actions within the narrative (Dollard, 1935; Lazarus, 1991). With limited details available in the silhouetted figure, the protagonist's shape and form become the primary focus. Over the course of the film, they transition from a boy to a woman with a more feminine figure and a long ponytail. As a young boy, the protagonist wears a loincloth similar to male warriors. By the end of the film, they don the garb of the babaylans. Despite this transformation, the fabric's colour and pattern remain consistent throughout the film (Figures 4.1 and 4.2). This continuity ensures that the viewer is able to recognise the protagonist, even as their form changes significantly.

Figure 4.1

Screenshot of Scene in Act I in Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home)

Note. Screen grab from *Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home)*, directed by Arielle Abrau, 2024 (00:01:42). Copyright 2024 by Arielle Abrau.

Figure 4.2

Screenshot of Scene in Act III in Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home)

Note. Screen grab from Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home), directed by Arielle Abrau, 2024 (00:06:34). Copyright 2024 by Arielle Abrau.

3. Acknowledging the influence of significant others in the protagonist's life

In developing the storyline, the researcher must examine the influence of significant relationships on their actions and goals. Developing the plot requires explaining the protagonist's connections with key figures such as parents, siblings, spouses, children, friends, and personal antagonists (Dollard, 1935). In my film, the protagonist's strained relationship with their parents plays a pivotal role in their journey. While the parents push the protagonist to engage in the teachings of warfare like other boys, the protagonist

yearns to dance like the babaylans. This conflict becomes a catalyst for the protagonist's evolution into a woman following their exile from the village. The resolution comes at the end when the protagonist returns and is accepted by their family. To emphasise this relationship, I used the same textile pattern on the clothing of the protagonist and their parents, making them stand out from other characters in the film (Figure 4.1 and 4.3).

Figure 4.3

Screenshot of Scene in Act III in Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home)

Note. Screen grab from Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home), directed by Arielle Abrau, 2024 (00:06:20). Copyright 2024 by Arielle Abrau.

4. **Focusing on the protagonist's choices, actions, and internal struggles**

   The protagonist is not merely shaped by their environment but actively interacts with and influences it. The story should highlight how the protagonist responds uniquely to events within their setting (Dollard, 1935). The film centres on the protagonist's journey of identity formation. It explores internal conflicts between their soul and physical form as well as external struggles with family and societal expectations. The story depicts the protagonist leaving their home village and finding themselves through solitude in the forest. The narrative is driven by their departure and eventual return.

5. **Addressing the historical continuity of the protagonist's experiences**

   The story must address the historical continuity of the protagonist's experiences. Past events shape the protagonist's present through habits, thought patterns, and memories. These habits may appear as motor skills, body movements, or ways of thinking. As a biographical being, a protagonist is also influenced by social events shared with their historical cohort, which provide context for their actions and perspectives (Dollard, 1935). The protagonist's desire to

become a Babaylan remains a constant theme throughout the film. In Act I, they are seen dancing like the Babaylans in their village, expressing their admiration for them despite societal expectations (Figure 4.4). The protagonist is once again seen dancing like the Babaylans in Act II. As the scene progresses, they fade into the evolved, feminine version of themselves, continuing the same dance (Figure 4.5). By the end of the film, she joins the other Babaylans as a spiritual leader. The narrative also begins and ends with the protagonist's kalag (soul), reinforcing the continuity of their identity.

Figure 4.4

Screenshot of Scene in Act I in Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home)

Note. Screen grab from Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home), directed by Arielle Abrau, 2024 (00:02:33). Copyright 2024 by Arielle Abrau.

Figure 4.5

Screenshot of Scene in Act II in Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home)

Note. Screen grab from Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home), directed by Arielle Abrau, 2024 (00:03:48). Copyright 2024 by Arielle Abrau.

6. Constructing a story with a clear beginning, middle, and end

A narrative analysis produces a story with a clear beginning, middle, and end, set within a specific context. The researcher must define the starting point and the resolution while presenting the characters as unique individuals within their situation (Dollard, 1935). The journey map that informed the film's storyline was divided into three distinct periods: childhood as a young boy, adolescence, and adulthood as a woman. This structure was applied to the film, which is divided into three acts, with an introductory scene that sets

up the narrative. Additionally, the use of Bisaya and English shifts across the acts. For example, Act II is entirely in English, as this act is a reflection of my time being estranged and disconnected from my culture. In Act III, the script returns to being bilingual, reflecting the protagonist's reconnection with their family and my reconnection with my cultural roots. The recommendation to present characters as unique is reflected in the protagonist. Their unconventional journey to womanhood and role as the first bayoguin (gender-crossing) babaylan make their story distinctive.

7. **Ensuring that the narrative provides a plausible and understandable explanation of the protagonist's actions and responses**

   The final guideline emphasised the importance of crafting a cohesive storyline that weaves disparate elements into a meaningful whole. This process often begins with defining the ending, which offers a perspective for selecting and organising key events. Each event derives its meaning from its connection to the overall plot, rather than simply compiling events (Dollard, 1935; Stake, 1980). For the film, I started with a rough storyline for the fictional origin of the first bayoguin babaylan. From the outset, I aimed to link the beginning and ending through the concept of the kalag. Building on this idea, I developed a storyline in which the protagonist becomes estranged but discovers their true self along the way. The narrative highlights the notion that aspects of our identity are innate and must be uncovered, a process revealed through the challenges the protagonist faces.

Orthodox Scriptwriting

Batty & Taylor (2021) position the 'doxa' as the genesis of scriptwriting. Rooted in Aristotle's philosophy, doxa refers to the shared and often unconscious beliefs that shape cultural practices (Bourdieu, 1996; Hondreich, 2005). Batty & Taylor (2021) assert that doxa precedes and informs the creative process through providing a somewhat universal template. Such approaches remain prevalent in mainstream screenwriting, as seen in industry manuals and guides (Alessandra, 2010; Batty & Taylor, 2021). As a filmmaking novice, the doxa was foundational in the script development. Mullins (2021) however, contends that a formulaic approach such as Dollard's (1935) scriptwriting guidelines compromise authenticity in storytelling. My film challenges Mullins' (2021) critique by demonstrating how formulaic structures can, in certain contexts, align organically with a story's emotional truth without diluting authenticity. My script's three act structure arises from the natural chronology

of my transition: childhood, adolescence and womanhood. The formula here is a reflection of my embodied reality rather than an adherence to a template outlined by Batty & Taylor (2021).

Queer Storytelling

Taylor (2024) frames queer storytelling as a rejection of resolution-focused narratives that are often rooted in heteronormativity. She argues that "the quest is to find queer story engines driven by something other than a constant forward momentum towards milestones, transformations, and epiphanies" (Taylor, 2024, p. 180). Instead, Taylor (2024) advocates for Le Guin's (2019) model of narrative as a continuous process that eschews resolution in favour of continuity. My research contends that some trans experiences require recognition of resolution as a form of agency. Taylor (2024) and Overall & Sellberg (2016) argue that gender transitions are ongoing, nonlinear and inherently reject traditional story arcs. This assertion however doesn't encompass all trans experiences. My experience includes medical, legal, and social milestones. All of which culminate into a completed transition. This linear trajectory from one binary pole to another stands in contrast to spectrum-based journeys that embrace fluidity. Given the vast spectrum of transgender experiences templates for queer storytelling should never be treated as universal.

Colonial cis heteronormativity has long held the pen that writes our narratives as transgender people (Dias et al., 2024). These stories are often centered on melancholy and oppression (Westbrook & Schuster, 2023). A resolution-based story arc when authored by a transgender person affords us agency to tell our stories of triumphs. I refuse resolution-less storytelling because my journey as a trans woman is marked by definitive resolutions. Denying such resolutions reduces my story to perpetual tragedy.

Script Development – Refining

I began the script development process with a timing test to ensure the film would fit within my target range of 5 to 8 minutes. As this is my first time making a film, I needed to consider the feasibility of managing tasks such as scriptwriting, storyboarding, illustrating, and animating. To gauge the script's duration, I read it aloud at a pace and tone reflective of the intended final film. The initial timing showed the script running for 12 minutes and 37 seconds.

This result prompted me to review and refine the script. I identified and removed elements that did not directly advance the core narrative. The revisions focused on highlighting the protagonist's journey to reconcile their soul's misalignment with

their physical form. It was essential to ensure that the storyline could be understood by viewers unfamiliar with pre-colonial Philippine culture. This enables engagement with a broader audience.

Script Development – Fluency Check

Although I can read and understand Bisaya well, I am not fluent in the language. To ensure the script's accuracy, I sought assistance from my sister and a childhood friend. Their feedback was invaluable in refining the wording and sentence structure. This input was especially critical for the final sentence of the script, where my sister provided precise guidance on how to phrase it.

My exposure to Bisaya has been predominantly conversational, limited to family interactions. As a result, I lacked familiarity with the deeper linguistic nuances of the language. The collaborative review also required adjustments to maintain the rhyme scheme throughout the script in the sections surrounding the corrected phrases.

4.2 Sound Production

I used the ElevenLabs 'instant voice cloning' (IVC) feature to create voice profiles for my film. The profiles represented my voice as a child and pre-transition. The process involved uploading WAV[24] files for each voice profile. ElevenLabs recommended using at least one minute of audio, providing more samples resulted in a more accurate clone. ElevenLabs also advised using audio that was free of background noise and consistent in tonality, performance, accent, and quality. For instance, if the source material lacked emotional variation, the resulting voice would also sound monotone. My source material included audio from my phone dating back to 2017; I also used home videos recorded on a camcorder. Since it was impossible to recreate my childhood or pre-transition voice, I worked with the available recordings.

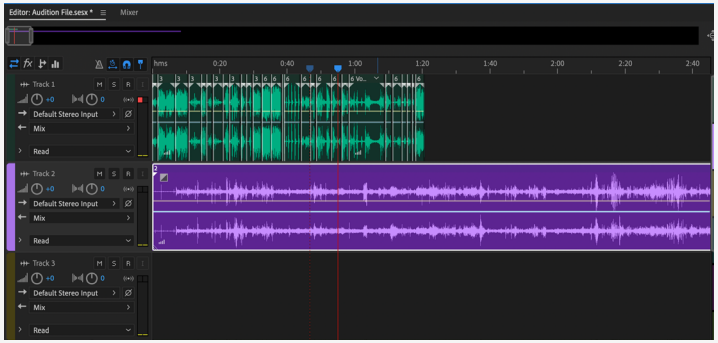
To improve the accuracy of the voice cloning, I processed multiple versions of the audio files in Adobe Audition (Figure 4.6). These files were then presented to the AI as distinct files to improve the overall quality of the cloned voices. Initially, ElevenLabs only offered text-to-speech functionality. Using this feature, I typed sentences, and the cloned voice would generate the audio. However, this posed several challenges. Firstly, I could not control how the sentences were spoken, including pauses and

24. A WAV (Waveform Audio File Format) file is a standard digital audio file format used to store high-quality, uncompressed sound data.

inflections. Second, the output often leaned toward a United States American accent, which did not match the intended voice. Due to these limitations, I decided to momentarily pause sound production and shift my focus to the animations and illustrations for the film.

Figure 4.6

Sound Processing in Adobe Audition



Note. This screenshot shows the process of compiling the audio from video samples into a single file for export as a WAV format. Own work.

Voice Cloning Childhood

Cloning my childhood voice presented several challenges. The first issue was the lack of modern recording technology at the time the videos were recorded as seen in Figure 4.7. I relied on videos filmed on a 30-year-old family camcorder. The recordings were of poor quality and contained significant background noise. Additionally, the outdated technology meant I couldn't directly transfer the videos to my computer. To address this, I sent the tapes for professional digitisation to ensure the best possible quality. Once digitised, I sifted through six hours of footage, noting the timestamps whenever I spoke. This preparation helped me efficiently locate and extract these segments for use in Adobe Audition. I was limited with the amount of footage with me speaking. The clips were short, often no longer than two sentences at a time.

Figure 4.7

Screenshots of Home Video Recorded on Vintage Camcorder

Note. Researcher as a child shown in screenshot.

To address these issues, I used noise reduction in Adobe Audition to minimise background noise as much as possible. However, the inherent poor quality of the recordings restricted the extent of these improvements. To compensate for the small number of usable audio samples, I rearranged the audio in different order to create varied files for the voice cloning model.

ElevenLabs Speech to Sound Update and Finalised Sound

While I was nearing the completion of the film's animations, ElevenLabs introduced new features in an update. The new speech-to-sound feature enabled me to upload clips of my speech, which I could reproduce using the saved voice profiles, such as my adolescent and childhood voices. This enhancement addressed the earlier issues with the default American accent and achieved a more authentic reproduction of my speech patterns. I decided to clone my current voice to ensure consistency across all voiceovers. I recorded myself reading various scripts, producing approximately 28 clips, each roughly 30 seconds long. These recordings were then uploaded to ElevenLabs' voice cloning model to create a coherent and uniform voice throughout the film.

Using a Shure directional microphone I recorded the audio in a dedicated recording room at the university. I printed out the script and followed it chronologically to streamline the editing process later. To maintain vocal health, I kept a hot drink nearby. I experimented with various vocal expressions to enhance the narrative, like whispering the name 'Kahayag' in the second act to add a dramatic effect.

I found it challenging to switch between Bisaya and English. Each language requires different tongue movements, which made the constant back-and-forth disorienting. To mitigate this, I recorded the Bisaya and English lines separately and merged them in Adobe Audition.

I discovered that using the voice clone of my current voice did not yield satisfactory results. It exhibited many inconsistencies and often defaulted to an American accent. This was puzzling considering the fewer issues with the adolescent and child voice clones that had less original audio input. After numerous attempts without improvement, I used the original raw recordings. Using Adobe Audition, I applied a single band compressor and speech volume leveller to ensure the sound quality of the ElevenLabs voiceovers was consistent with the raw recordings. I finalised the voiceovers and added background noises and sound effects using Adobe After Effects. This step

ensured precise timing, especially in scenes depicting kalag and ginhawa in conflict, where I synchronised lightning sound effects with the visual lightning strikes (Figure 4.8).

Figure 4.8

Screenshot of Scene in Act I in Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home)

Note. Screen grab from Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home), directed by Arielle Abrau, 2024 (00:01:49). Copyright 2024 by Arielle Abrau.

Issues with Bisaya

Using ElevenLabs for the voice synthesis yielded a notable improvement in sound quality and accuracy compared with earlier attempts, especially with Bisaya pronunciations. Although ElevenLabs does not support Bisaya directly, resulting in occasional pronunciation issues. I found this particularly with the Bisaya ‘t’ sound. I managed to remedy this by recording multiple iterations of challenging words within a single take. Usually, one of these attempts would capture the pronunciation correctly. For minor inaccuracies, I relied on subtitles in the film’s post-production to ensure clarity for the audience.

For the narration in the introductory scene, I utilised one of the default voices from ElevenLabs. After producing samples with three different voices, I selected the voice labelled ‘Callum’ because it best matched the solemn tone of the scene.

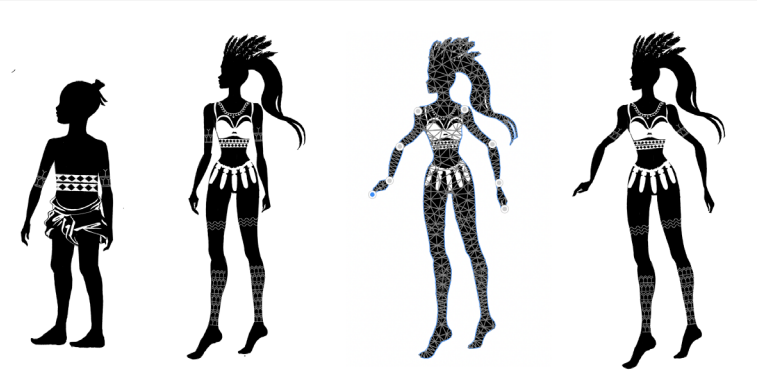
4.3 Character Design, Rigging and Animation

Character Design

My initial character design sketches were focused on exploring the aesthetic of the shadow puppet figures (Figure 4.9). At the time, I had no clear idea of how I would animate them. The first animation technique I tried was the puppet warp tool in Photoshop. However, I quickly realised that this method was unsuitable. The tool was destructive, making it difficult to revert to the original default pose. This method also distorted the limbs rather than moving them at the joints. For example, the upper and lower arms warped when I tried to move just the forearm, as shown in Figure 4.9.

Figure 4.9

Initial Character Sketches and Puppet Warp Rigging

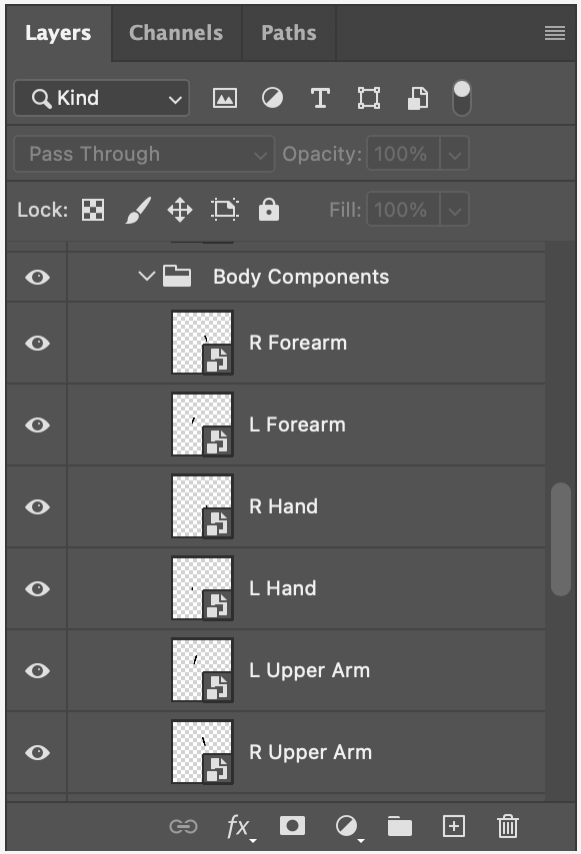


Note. The initial concept sketches of the protagonist. Own work.

I understood that I needed an animation method that allowed independent movement of the limbs. Seeking a solution, I applied the character design and Duik Angela rigging techniques outlined by Jake In Motion (2023). This approach to character joints aligns with Reiniger's (1970) work where she detailed that limbs should overlap like scales. Joints are circular to allow a full range of movement, and guides are used to ensure precise limb overlap during animation. They are then rigged using the Duik Angela plugin in After Effects. This approach informed my subsequent character designs (Figures 4.10, 4.11 and 4.12). I began breaking down sketches into individual limbs and carefully identifying joint placements.

Figure 4.10

Labelled Body Part Layers



Note. This screenshot shows the labelled body parts for character animation, organised as layers. Each limb was labelled with L (left) or R (right) to ensure clarity and organisation during the rigging process. With multiple limbs to manage, this systematic labelling made it easier to identify and work with specific layers efficiently. Own work.

Figure 4.11

Warrior Character Rigged in Adobe After Effects

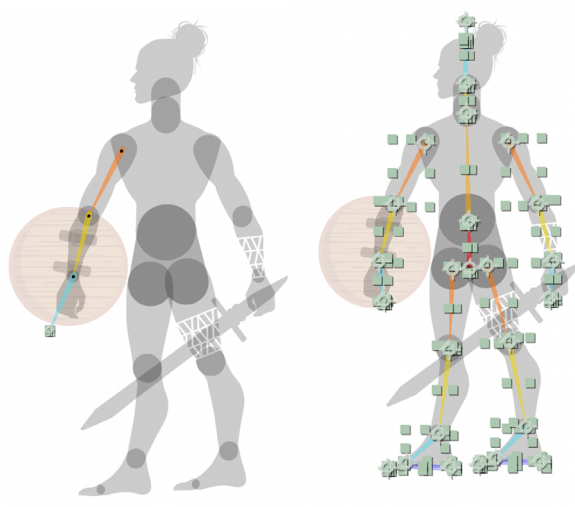


Figure 4.12

Babaylan Character Parts Alongside the Assembled Character

Illustrations

I began by sketching characters and objects in Procreate and then digitising them in Adobe Illustrator. Initially, I focused on including every detail in the sketches to guide the digitisation process (Figure 4.13). However, as I progressed, I realised I could repurpose certain illustrations, such as limbs for multiple characters and objects (Figures 4.14 and 4.15). This approach allowed me to create rougher sketches in Procreate, reducing the need for intricate details.

Figure 4.13

Sketches of Objects Alongside the Digitised Version in Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home)

Figure 4.14

Repurposed Object Designs in Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home)

Note. Elements of the stage and houses in the village were repurposed to create the house in the introduction scene. Additionally, the stone relic featured in Act II was repurposed to design the cliffs and cave scene in the sky world depicted in the introduction. Own work.

Figure 4.15

Sketch and Digitised Version of Tan Mulong Character

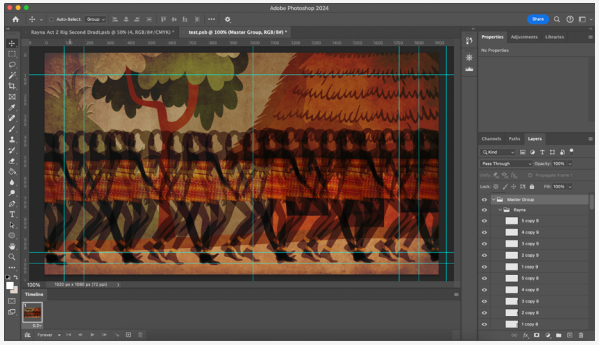
Note. The character design for Tan Mulong involved repurposing elements from earlier designs. The limbs were adapted from the protagonist's design as a child. Own work.

Animation

I experimented with a digital adaptation of traditional stop-motion techniques inspired by Lotte Reiniger, using frame-by-frame animation in Photoshop. I applied Johnston & Thomas' (1981) technique of duplicating frames to slow down movement and reducing frames to speed it up. While this approach offered control over timing, it proved overly complex. Each character's movement required individual adjustments, which became cumbersome when combined with background panning and moving elements like stars (Figure 4.16). The animation also lacked fluidity and appeared erratic.

Figure 4.16

Stop-Motion Animation Experiment in Adobe Photoshop



Note. This was an experiment in creating a stop-motion animation of Act III, where the protagonist walks back to the village. Each frame of the protagonist had to be a separate layer and labeled, which significantly increased the file size, making it challenging to work with. Own work.

To address these issues, I transitioned to using Duik Angela for rigging and animated the film in After Effects. After Effects allowed for more precise handling of individual elements in the film. Additionally, built-in presets like dissolve and light rays provided a broader range of effects to easily enhance the film. Achieving these effects with traditional stop-motion techniques would have been far more challenging.

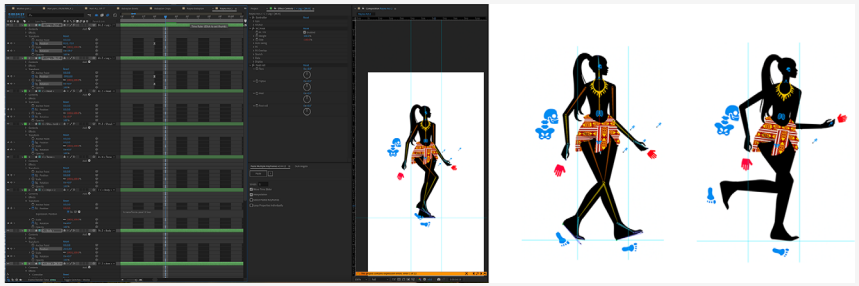
Humans

I referenced the work of Williams (2012) for the walk and run cycles of the human characters. He identifies four fundamental poses that define a walk cycle: contact, down, pass, and up (Figure 3.4). These core positions establish the foundation of a walk cycle, simplifying the animation process and making it more accessible and easier to execute. He discusses them in side profile positioning, which works for my illustrations as they follow Reiniger's character design with side-facing head and limbs with a front-facing body. Williams (2012) provided insights into the nuances of how each limb moves during the cycle. It also went into specifics such as foot roll. I applied these principles to the character rigged in Duik Angela using key frames, which also allowed me to rotate the toe to allow the foot to 'peel' off the ground when walking (Figure 4.17). I colour-coded each pose key

frame, such as contact, pose, and up (Figure 4.18). This approach ensured that movements like walking could transition into dancing. Additionally, it helped me organise the key frames, making it easier to distinguish those used for walking, dancing, and other character movements.

Figure 4.17

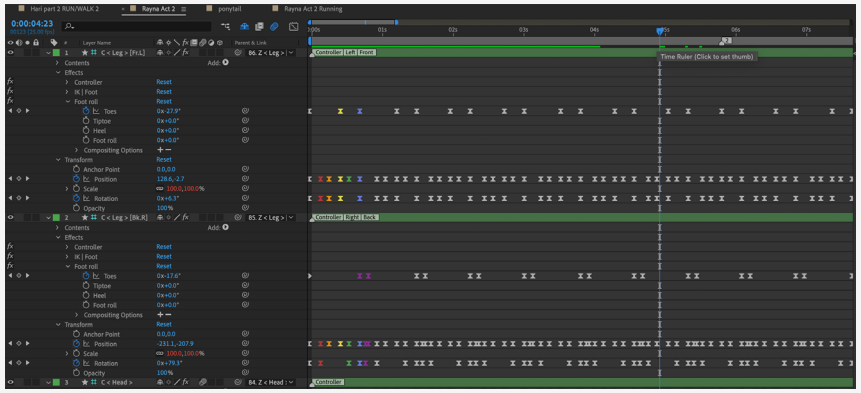
Character Being Rigged into Different Walk and Run Cycle Poses



Note. This screenshot shows the process of positioning the character using the bone controller in Duik Angela according to the walk cycle. I also created in-between poses and keyframed the movements to achieve smoother transitions. Own work.

Figure 4.18

Colour Coded Keyframes in Adobe After Effects

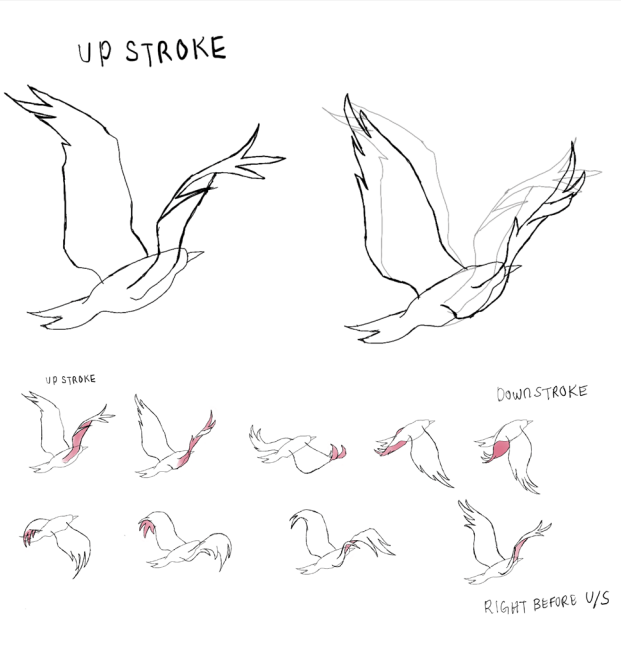


Birds

Baier et al. (2013) and Crandell & Tobalske (2015) describe wing movement as consisting primarily of two key poses: the upstroke and the downstroke. These are complemented by in-between frames that create fluid motion. Crandell & Tobalske (2015) emphasise the importance of recognising the flexibility of wings, which can bend and twist throughout their movement. The work of Baier et al. (2013) and Crandell & Tobalske (2015) informed the animation of the bird briefly seen in Act II (Figures 4.19 and 4.20).

Figure 4.19

Sketches of Bird Flying Frames



Note. This sketch illustrates the process of animating a bird in flight. I used the same body for all frames, varying only the wings to create movement. The top image demonstrates how I overlapped frames and adjusted opacity to ensure a smooth transition between each frame. I applied Johnston and Thomas's (1981) method of using double frames to slow down movement and single frames to speed it up. This technique was incorporated to make the wing flapping slow at the upstroke and downstroke poses while accelerating during the in-between frames. Own work.

Figure 4.20

Bird Flying Frames and Scene in Act II in Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home)

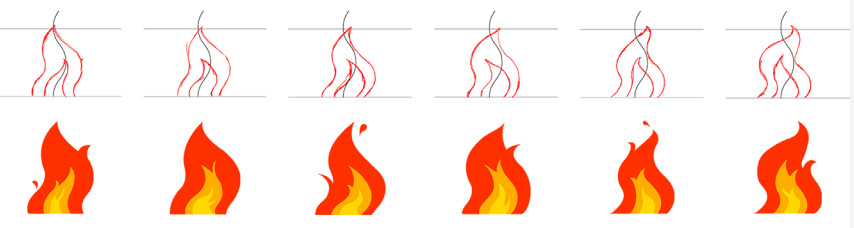
Note. The animation was created using frame-by-frame animation in Adobe Photoshop, exported as a GIF. I began by drawing the upstroke and downstroke poses, then added the in-between frames to ensure smooth movement. Since the bird only appears briefly on screen (00:04:26), I opted not to rig it using Duik Angela. Own work.

Flames

Natural elements like smoke, waves, and fire often move in an 'S' pattern or wave-like motion in animation (Gilland, 2009). To replicate this movement in my flame animation, I used a sine wave[25] as a reference to guide its movement. I created the sine wave in Adobe Illustrator and imported it into Adobe Photoshop. I used it as a template for shaping the flame's motion. To maintain consistency, I also added a horizontal line to establish the flame's base, ensuring its position stayed fixed throughout the animation process (Figures 4.21 and 4.22).

Figure 4.21

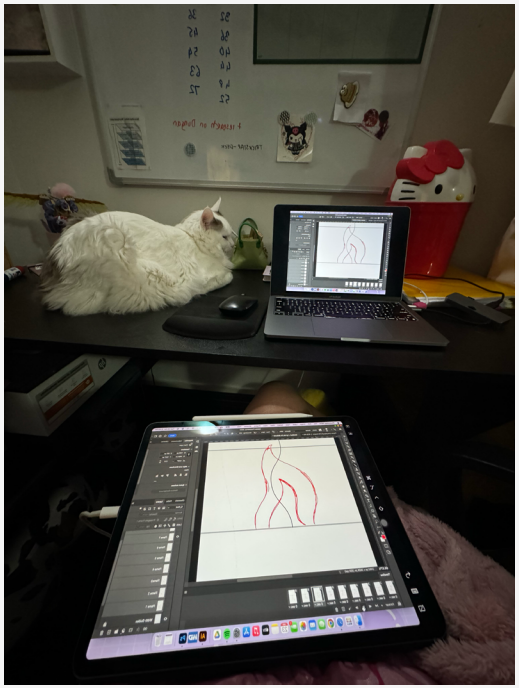
Sketches of Flame Animation Process



Note. The initial sketches and digitised versions. Own work.

Figure 4.22

Flame Animation Process



Note. Using my iPad as a tablet via the Sidecar feature on my MacBook, I sketched the flames for the animation. Own work.

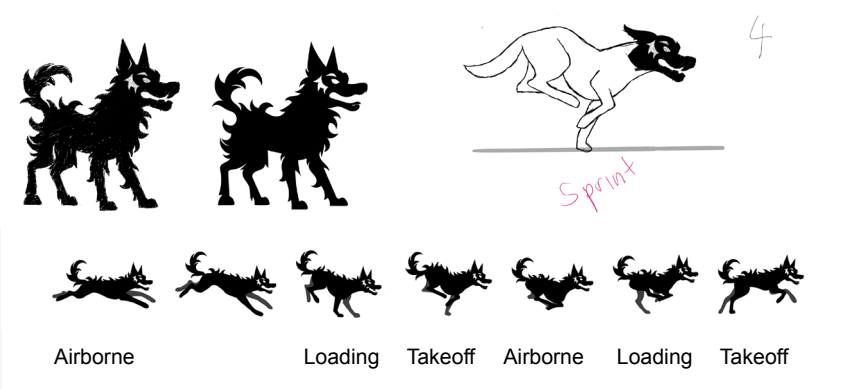
25. A sine wave is a smooth, wave like curve that oscillates symmetrically above and below a central axis.

Dog

For animating quadruped locomotion, I drew insights from the research of Skrba et al. (2008) and Coros et al. (2011). For the film I had to animate Tan Mulong's[26] dog running after the protagonist as a kalag (Figure 4.23). According to Coros et al. (2011), a quadruped leap comprises three main stages: loading, take-off, and airborne (Figure 4.24).

Figure 4.24

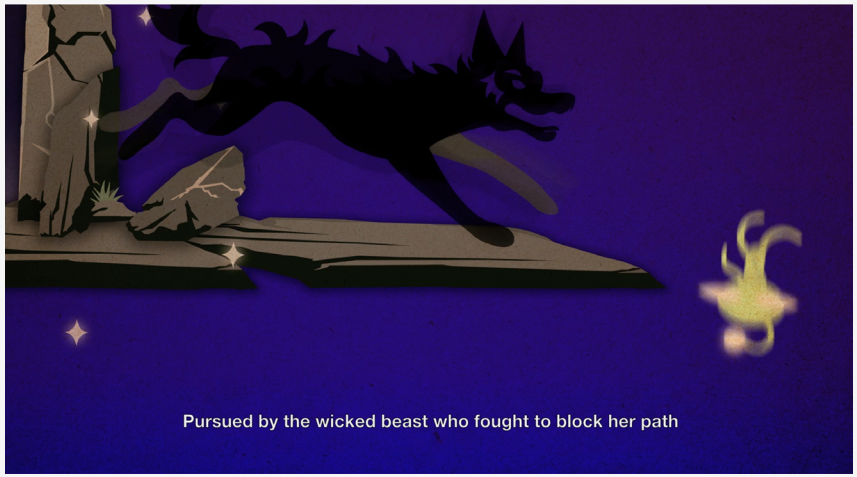
Tan Mulong's dog Concept Sketch, Frame Sketch and Digital Illustration



Note. I began with a concept sketch for Tan Mulong's dog. I then drew the frames of the dog in Procreate, applying principles by Skrba et al. (2008) and Coros et al. (2011). I then digitised them in Adobe Illustrator. Own work.

Figure 4.23

Tan Mulong's dog Running in Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home)



Note. I drew and illustrated each individual frame of the dog running and created a frame-by-frame animation in Adobe Photoshop, which was then exported as a GIF. Since the dog would only appear briefly, I opted not to rig it in Duik Angela. Screen grab from Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home), directed by Arielle Abrau, 2024 (00:01:07). Copyright 2024 by Arielle Abrau.

26. In pre-colonial Bisaya folklore, malevolent spirits, such as the egkantu, could capture a soul and imprison it in a spirit cave guarded by Tan Mulong, a mythical figure whose spirit dog possesses one mammary gland and two genitals (Gaverza, 2022).

Chapter 5
Critical Reflection

This chapter analyses the film and its response to the three facets of my research question: voice, reindigenisation, and identity formation. It begins by examining the role of sonic voice in the film, highlighting my literal vocal journey. The chapter also explores how the film embodies my reindigenisation journey and reflects my process of decolonising my thoughts. Finally, it adresses how identity theories narrative, embodied, and relational underpin my study.

5.1 Voice

I was forced to confront the irreversible changes brought about by puberty, which had permanently altered my voice. I feminised my voice working in a call centre, where visual cues were absent. In my early days I was frequently misgendered over the phone. This environment was akin to Van Borsel et al.'s (2001) listener experiment. Customers acted as 'listeners', and the feedback I received (either in real-time or later via surveys) reflected perceptions of the femininity of my voice. As I navigated these interactions, I experimented with various vocal tones. I adopted a trial-and-error approach rather than a structured method. This exploration period was crucial as it enabled me to mould my voice until it was perceived consistently as female. The shift was gradual and marked by feedback from clients who began recognising me as female during calls. I aimed for a natural voice that I could sustain in daily conversations without straining my vocal cords, avoiding falsetto tones that felt inauthentic. Reflecting on this method, I realise that, subconsciously, I was working towards elevating my habitual pitch during conversations, aligning with the objectives outlined in Bralley et al.'s (1978) research. Being misgendered over the phone was initially challenging. However, this environment ensured that my voice could be perceived as feminine without the aid of visual cues. This was especially important during the early stages of my transition, when my body was still adjusting to HRT and before I underwent gender-affirming surgeries.

Finding a voice that resonated with my identity was more than an exercise in vocal training; it was an integral part of my social transition. This observation aligns with the findings of Neumann & Welzel (2004), who emphasise that for MTF individuals, maintaining a voice that sounds male despite a female external appearance significantly hinders their acceptance and integration within society as women. Additionally, a female-sounding voice grants transgender individuals passing[27] privileges that

27. In the context of transgender women, passing refers to being recognized as a woman and indistinguishable from their cisgender counterparts (Tamàs Fütty, 2010).

allow them to evade discrimination and potential violence (Tamàs Fütty, 2010).

5.2 Reindigenisation and Decoloniality

In many ways, this film embodies my decolonisation and reindigenisation journey. Researchers such as Foe (2014) note the 300-year period where records of pre-colonial Philippines were withheld . Quintos (2012) and Ildefonso (2022) highlight the current education system in the Philippines has historically glorified colonialism. In this sense, the film is my act of defiance against colonialism, preserving and drawing from ancestral knowledge despite attempted erasure by colonial forces. Additionally, this study reconnected me with my Bisaya heritage. I lost touch with my mother tongue after immigrating to Aotearoa in 1998. Crafting a bilingual script allowed me to not only relearn Bisaya but also to contribute to the limited body of existing Bisaya media. My delonisation journey embodies Mignolo & Walsh (2018) and Sium et al.'s (2012) view of decoloniality. They assert that it involves transforming one's thinking, knowing, being, and doing. Exploring ancestral beliefs such as kalag and ginhawa has enriched my understanding of life and death. Through these beliefs I liberated myself from the colonial religions that raised me and the shame they imposed. Iding, a babaylan interviewed by Miclat-Cacayan (2005), discusses how colonial powers failed to recognise the inherent spirituality in nature. As a result, they built churches over sacred lands. Similarly, decolonising one's identity involves dismantling the metaphorical church within our minds and the associated colonial legacies. This shift in one's psyche relocates the divine out of churches adorned with stained glass and restores it to its rightful home among the world, nature, and beings with whom we coexist.

Although the film is set in pre-colonial Philippines, its storyline reflects my personal struggles against colonial doctrines. The blending of pre-colonial settings with colonial narratives highlights the challenge of reconciling my indigeneity with colonial gender constructs. As a binary transgender individual, my actions remain constrained within the bounds of social acceptance. The process of deprogramming colonial mindsets involves challenging repetitive colonial thought patterns. Furthermore, it requires one to recognise the pervasive influence of colonialism. Navigating this landscape as a transgender woman consists of valuing the non-binary gender models of my ancestors while managing the pressures of a colonial, binary-focused society. Performing gender to meet societal expectations

ensures my safety and allows me to be recognised as a woman within Western norms (Pryzbylo & Rodrigues, 2018; Tamàs Fütty, 2010).

5.3 Film Acts

Introduction and Act I

My research aligns with scholars like Schwartz (2002), who argue that identity is both personally constructed and a process of self-discovery. The film establishes a self-discovery perspective in the introductory scene. Early in the storyline, the protagonist's kalag (soul) mistakenly enters the wrong body. Throughout the film the protagonist seeks to reconcile this inner conflict. The dissonance centres on their connection to the babaylans and femininity, contrasting the ideals of warfare and masculinity that they reject (Figure 5.1). This tension is depicted in scenes where kalag and ginhawa clash, which are informed by studies from Mercado (1991; 1994). He outlined the holistic perspective of pre-colonial Filipinos, where physical well-being and the soul were deeply interconnected. This discord mirrors my own journey, marking the genesis of my path to womanhood. As a child, I lacked the vocabulary to articulate how I felt. Despite this, I understood that who I was inside did not align with my assigned gender. As a result, a majority of my life was spent grappling with these internal contradictions.

Figure 5.1

Screenshot of Scene in Act I of Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home)

Note. Screen grab from Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home), directed by Arielle Abrau, 2024 (00:02:04). Copyright 2024 by Arielle Abrau.

Act II

In the beginning of Act II, the protagonist is exiled (Figure 5.2). They enter a period of solitude where they are free to express their true self. This section of the film aligns with the principles of narrative identity theory as outlined by McAdams & McLean (2013). They argue that the process of constructing a storied self begins with making sense of past struggles. In this case, estrangement serves as a catalyst for character development. Following this, the protagonist evolves into her authentic self. During her estrangement, the protagonist is able to grow her hair long again and dance like the babaylans. Similarly, my own

experience parallels the protagonist's journey. While estrangement is inherently painful, it gave me freedom to fully embrace and commit to my transition.

Figure 5.2

Screenshot of Scene in Act II of Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home)

Note. Screen grab from Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home), directed by Arielle Abrau, 2024 (00:03:16). Copyright 2024 by Arielle Abrau.

Towards the end of Act II, the protagonist traverses through foliage and fauna (Figure 5.3). In the following scene they receive an amulet from a bantay (spirit guide). This moment marks their official transition into becoming a babaylan. This segment was informed by the research of Mercado (1991) and Rodriguez (2019) on babaylans and bantays. The foliage and fauna serve as a metaphor for the challenging aspects of my journey to womanhood. These harsh realities I perceived as a rite of passage.

The subsequent scene with the bantay and the amulet symbolises the attainment of womanhood (Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.3

Screenshot of Scene in Act II of Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home)

Note. Screen grab from Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home), directed by Arielle Abrau, 2024 (00:04:40). Copyright 2024 by Arielle Abrau.

Figure 5.4

Screenshot of Scene in Act II of Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home)

Note. Screen grab from Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home), directed by Arielle Abrau, 2024 (00:05:02). Copyright 2024 by Arielle Abrau.

These realities are rooted in embodied identity theory. Giddens (2023) asserted that in embodied identity theory the body becomes a site of expression and societal interpretation. Budgeon (2003) notes the intrinsic sexism in this theory.

> Indeed, women, who have always been more embodied than men because of the association of the feminine with the body, have long been aware of the form and appearance of their bodies and the extent to which they are responsible for creating that surface in accordance with cultural ideals and image. (Budgeon, 2003, p.38)

During the early stages of my transition, I came to understand that womanhood extended beyond the gender euphoria of my youth and internal feelings. Being a binary transgender woman meant finding my voice within a society that scrutinises and regulates bodies based on social constructs. As Budgeon (2003) asserts, our bodies are not merely biological, they carry and convey deep-seated social meanings. This phase of identity formation involved emphasis on physically embodying my gender through fashion, cosmetics, and cosmetic surgical procedures. This aligns with Bordo's (1993) concept of women disciplining their bodies to conform to idealised feminine standards. Salzberg & Chrisler (2006) expand upon this through their discussion of the disproportionate emphasis on women's appearance compared to men. Salzberg & Chrisler (2006) underscore the potential psychological damage this can inflict. I perceived this intense focus on my body as a rite of passage into womanhood despite my personal belief that women are more than their physical appearance.

Coming to terms with the heightened significance of my body within societal constructs was overwhelming. It impacted me more deeply than I initially realised. In hindsight, one of the most challenging aspects of transitioning into womanhood was navigating the male gaze. The male gaze evoked feelings of degradation and fear, leaving me feeling unsafe. Oliver's (2017) research offers insight into these emotions, explaining how this desire can make women targets for sexual harassment and assault. Transitioning from never being sexualised to having many aspects of myself objectified has been psychologically damaging.

Rai (2019) argues that women are often held responsible for men's reactions to the female form. Similarly, Bordo (1993) asserted that women's bodies are frequently seen as speaking a language of provocation. According to Bordo (1993), when we do not cover ourselves, our bodies are perceived as inviting attention. To this

day, I struggle to reconcile with the male gaze. It persists regardless of my personal beliefs or how I feel on any given day.

Many cisgender women are often conditioned from a young age to navigate these constructs through family and societal reinforcement (Budgeon, 2003). However, I faced these expectations much later in life when I transitioned. As an adult, I had to confront and adapt to these constructs without the early socialisation that many women experience. For me, as a binary transgender woman, conforming to these expectations was crucial for social acceptance. Przybylo & Rodrigues (2018) highlight the unique pressures transgender women face asserting that "this pressure is felt especially by transgender women who are expected to perform normative femininity supremely, with no margin for error, facing discriminatory expulsion from the category "woman" if they fail" (p.10).

Act III

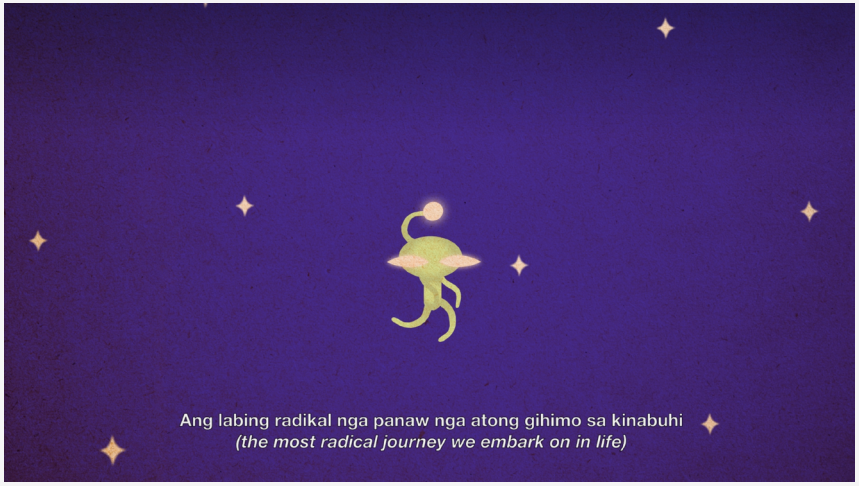
In Act III, the protagonist returns to the village where she grew up and reunites with her family, who welcome her as a babaylan. This marks the resolution of the storyline. Her journey of self-discovery and embracing her true identity in isolation is now accepted by others. Marková (1987) and Humberd & Rouse (2016) argue that relational identity is shaped through validation from others, as individuals incorporate their role relationships into their self-concept. Similarly, I also reunited with my family after a period of estrangement. Losing this part of my identity was deeply unsettling. Familial connections, formed from birth, play a fundamental role in shaping personal and relational development (Kochappilly, 2013). Reconnecting with my parents required navigating my role as their daughter and redefining my place within the family dynamic.

This reunion highlighted notable shifts in how my parents engaged with me, particularly in policing my attire. A memorable instance occurred during a beach outing with my family post-transition. Wearing a bikini, I faced my mother's disapproval. Her judgement was rooted in the conservative values of our Christian upbringing. Her criticism, focused on my attire's modesty, or perceived lack thereof, did not impact me as deeply. I attribute this to the absence of such modesty norms in my formative years. This simple moment was pivotal, affirming my identity as a daughter within my family. Being subject to modesty expectations traditionally imposed more strictly on women than men highlighted a significant shift in my familial role (Ellis, 1899).

Finally, the last scene of Act III shows the protagonist transitioning through past versions of herself before fading into kalag (Figure 5.4). This moment ties back to the film's introduction, reflecting the idea that self-discovery is a key aspect of identity formation (Figure 5.5). The ending emphasises that, at the core of identity formation, we are souls inhabiting a physical form, striving to understand ourselves and the spaces we occupy.

Figure 5.5

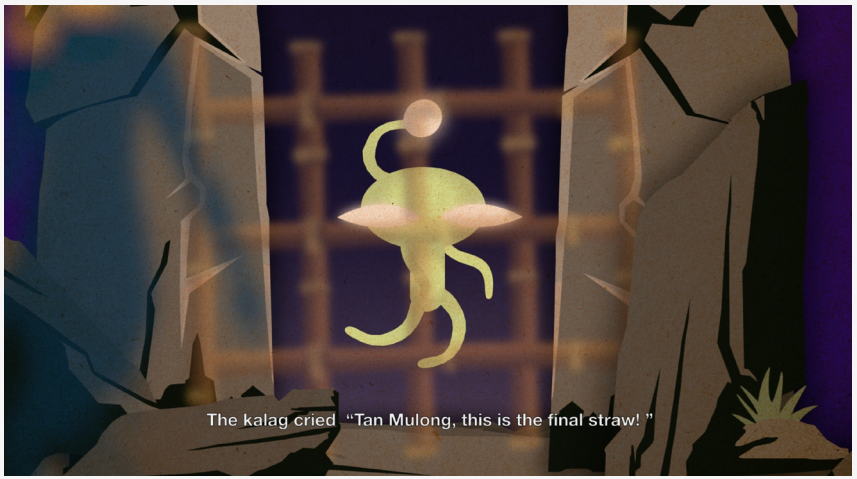
Screenshot of Final scene in Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home)



Note. Screen grab from Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home), directed by Arielle Abrau, 2024 (00:06:59). Copyright 2024 by Arielle Abrau.

Figure 5.6

Screenshot of Introduction Scene in Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home)



Note. Screen grab from Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home), directed by Arielle Abrau, 2024 (00:00:58). Copyright 2024 by Arielle Abrau.

Chapter 6
Conclusion

This creative practice was a period of significant skill acquisition. In a time of rapid advancements in AI technology, I was particularly drawn to AI voice cloning. This became the foundation of my film. I wanted to create a story narrated by past and present versions of myself using this technology.

This study was my foray into filmmaking and animation. I used Adobe After Effects and plugins like Duik Angela for the first time. Reiniger's pioneering work greatly influenced my approach. Her innovative techniques were instrumental in the design of her animations. This innovation was influential in the creation of my work. Reiniger's methods for character rigging were invaluable, including her approach to the use of perspectives to improve movement.

The study also allowed me to reconnect with my culture and heritage. Writing a bilingual script was my first experience working in my native language. It also helped me engage with my indigeneity and my ancestors' worldview. I am proud of the skills I developed within the project's timeframe. I learned to combine scriptwriting, illustration, sound and animation to tell a cohesive visual story. The study demonstrates the potential of new AI technology in creative practice, particularly in sound production. Looking ahead, I see AI voice cloning streamlining sound production. This would be especially useful in cases where voice actors are unable to perform due to illness or other unforeseen circumstances. While there are ethical considerations to address, such as potential misuse, I believe this technology has the potential to advance filmmaking in meaningful ways. The proviso being that a values-centric approach is taken through the production phases.

The research project aimed to contribute to the marginalised and often unheard voices of both transgender women and Bisaya people using cinematic storytelling. The film contributed to the small but growing body of research on transgender individuals with indigenous heritage. In particular, within the context of the Philippines. While there is increased media representation of transgender people, many Filipinos still struggle to distinguish transgender identity from sexual orientations such as being gay or lesbian (Reyes et al., 2024).

This research project added to the limited body of Bisaya media. This film amplifies the voices of queer Bisaya people, who are both a cultural and sexual minority. The film added to the

emerging corpus of research which focuses on transgender individuals with indigenous filipino heritage.

This study provided a unique perspective by converging the principles of sonic voice, reindigenisation, and identity formation within the context of transgender women. This is a strategy I have yet to encounter in existing research, notably within creative practice. In an era marked by moral panic and organised transphobia, transgender identities are often demonised and reduced to harmful stereotypes (Amery & Modon, 2024). This study humanised transgender identities despite the prevalence of hateful rhetoric. Additionally this research demonstrated the potential of transgender people taking control of their narrative through creative media.

6.1 Summary of Key Findings

Through this film and autoethnographic research, I have explored how transgender women find their voice and navigate identity formation. This study aligns with McAdams & McLean's (2013) assertion that such journeys often begin with internal conflict. For me, this struggle arose from my inner self being at odds with my assigned gender. It persisted until I transitioned, which resolved this tension. However, this introduced new challenges. Budgeon (2003), Bordo (1993) and Rai's (2019) observations of womanhood resonate with my experience. Early in my transition, I focused on physically embodying femininity and conforming to social ideals. I soon became aware of the repercussions. As Budgeon (2003), Bordo (1993) and Rai (2019) explain, women's bodies are often subject to external regulation and oppression under the male gaze. Transitioning required navigating societal norms that many cisgender women are commonly socialised into from birth. It forced me to confront new realities, including losing male privilege, experiencing misogyny, and adapting to the expectations placed on women. This study also examined the relational aspects of identity, particularly the shift from being perceived as a son to becoming a daughter upon reconnecting with my family. This process reflects Marková's (1987) assertion that relational identity is shaped through external validation and cannot exist in isolation.

Additionally, the research highlighted the importance of sonic voice in the lives of transgender women. Building on the work of Neumann & Welzel (2004), this study affirms that voice is both central to identity and a secondary sexual characteristic through which others perceive us.

By working in a call centre, I feminised my voice, echoing the research of Van Borsel et al. (2001). Finally, this study explored decolonisation and indigenisation as pathways to liberation, drawing on insights from Sium et al. (2012) and Tusasiirwe (2022). These approaches allowed me to reject the shame colonial religions associate with queerness. These insights enabled me to centre ancestral knowledge, where gender fluidity is celebrated and revered.

Ultimately, this research investigated identity formation and finding one's voice through various identity theories. This study emphasised that this journey is both an introspective process and a negotiation of external social constructs and relationships. This work recognised the integral role of culture and indigeneity in shaping identity, demonstrating that finding one's voice is deeply interconnected with the contexts that define who we are.

6.2 Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study create numerous opportunities for future research in transgender and indigenous studies. Future investigations may benefit from autoethnographic and ethnographic methods to expand the qualitative data set.

This would allow researchers to compare the lived experiences of transgender individuals from diverse backgrounds. This approach could specifically explore the differences between indigenous and non-indigenous transgender women. This could potentially, reveal the unique influence of cultural heritage on identity formation. Extending this comparison across indigenous cultures could further uncover significant differences and shared experiences.

There is also potential to broaden the research to include non-binary individuals and female-to-male transgender people. This would enrich the understanding of how gender identity intersects with cultural identity. Such inclusivity would ensure that future research reflects the true diversity of the transgender community, enhancing the dialogue around identity and culture.

These studies would not only contribute to transgender and indigenous studies but also support more inclusive social sciences and humanities research. Future research could influence the development of culturally responsive support systems and, policies for diverse transgender populations.

This research and film mark the beginning of my journey as a creative practice researcher in transgender studies. This study is not simply a path to a postgraduate qualification. The academy has equipped me with the skills to frame my work within queer studies and broader social and political discourse. I plan to pursue doctoral studies to further explore the complexities of the binary transgender woman experience through an autoethnographic lens. Using creative practice, I aim to explore new modes of expression where technology intersects with various creative disciplines to produce queer-centric creative artefacts.

I have submitted my film to a variety of film festivals, particularly those focused on queer and Indigenous cinema. So far I have had my film screened in The First-Time Filmmaker Showcase. Additionally, I will share my film at the next Rainbow Studies Now: Legacies of Community Symposium in 2025. With my research complete, I also intend to present my findings at future symposia to further engage with academic and creative communities.

6.3 Closing Remarks

This Master's journey has been one of reconnection with my culture. It has also deepened my understanding of my ancestors way of life. I was able to reconnect with my childhood self through AI. This became an unexpected support to my research, taking me back to the days when my younger self unknowingly laid the foundations for this research. It has also been a journey of introspection. Through this study I investigated my personal experiences and recognised how they intersect with ongoing discourses and existing research. Creatively, this process has been a journey of skill development. I recall the challenge of using unfamiliar animation software. This period was fraught with moments where I found myself with my face buried in my hands, uncertain if I could continue. However, I am grateful for the perseverance I displayed, as I have gained invaluable skills I will continue to build upon beyond this research.

As the discourse surrounding transgender and pre-colonial identities continues evolving, I aim to contribute through an autoethnographic lens. I firmly believe in autoethnography as a powerful research methodology. Our collective stories drive change within and beyond academia. My hope is that this change leads to a world where the narrative for transgender women shifts from one of despair to one of celebration. A narrative where our identities and journeys are honoured despite the adversity we face.

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Appendix 1

Panaw Balik sa Balay (Journey Back Home) Script

Introduction

Sa Kahilum ang gabii Pero malagot ang isang dungan

(The night was still but one soul was agitated)

Far from the lands where spirits danced beneath the sun.

Na prisohan ang espiritu sa Langob ni Tan Mulong.

(The spirit was imprisoned in Tan Mulong's cave.)

All that remains is ember from a flame that was once so strong.

Nawad'an akong kusog Pero kinahanglan nga buhaton nako!

(I'm losing strength but I need to do something!)

The dungan cried "Tan Mulong, this is the final straw!"

She fled from the egkantu cave and all it's relentless wrath.

Pursued by the wicked beast who fought to block her path.

In desperate strife she sought a refuge keen.

Within a womb her spirit hid unseen.

Nakagawas nako.

(I'm free)

Hulat... lalake ang bata?

(Wait... the baby is a boy?)

Unanhon unta nako og check kog babae og lalake ang bata...

(I should have checked if the baby was a boy or girl...)

PESTE!

(DAMN!)

Act I

Sa pisikal nga kalibutan, natawo ako og lalaki,

(In the physical world I was born as a boy)

pero ang akong kalag sulod kay babae.

(but, my soul inside was a girl.)

Kalag and Ginhawa, out of sync as pandemonium ensued,

Deep in the chaos, harmony was eschewed.

Teachings of warfare and hunting I rejected and shunned

kay gusto ko maging parehas sa babaylan.

(because I wanted to be like the babaylan)

In finest cloths, the babaylans danced with grace,
Their jewellery glistening, reflecting Labulan's face.

Through their amulets and instruments they danced and swirled,
bridging the physical with a diwata-filled world.

Sa gabii nga tanan kay natulog, musulod ako pakan sa kagubatan
(At night when everyone slept, I would sneak into the forest)
aron makasayaw ko tibuok sa gabii parehas sa mga babaylan."
(So I could dance all night like the babaylan.)

Pero isang ka gabii, nadakpan ko sa akong ginikanan.
(But one night I got caught by my parents)

Engrossed in disappointment and anger, my father cut my hair.
To be punished for my joy seemed unjust and unfair.

With nothing but the clothes on my back, I ran deep into the woods.
Leaving behind a familiar world, I ran as far as I could.

Unsure of where I'm headed but I vowed to never return,
for I would rather be exiled than face judgement stern.

Act II

There I was, alone, estranged and sombre,
My native village fades, a speck in yonder.

Deep in the wild, I found a place to call home,
and for the first time, I stood ready to fend for my own.

With the forest as my stage and the moon illuminating my dance,
I mirrored the babaylans I once watched in a trance.

Each morn with the songbirds, I'd hum a sweet serenade
and with each note that I sung past hurts seemed to fade.

Once cut through reprimand but like a fulfilled prophecy,
my hair grew long carrying with it tales of my odyssey.

Kalag and Ginhawa in harmony intertwined,
Physically and spiritually, my being aligned.

I began to find my voice in the depths of my solitude,
for it is in being outlawed I found vigour and fortitude.

As I was coming of age a call deep inside stirred.
A Kalag's soft whisper, could be felt and heard.
Like a beckoning revelation devoid of spoken word.

There I stood, my eyes locked on the peak on Mt Indang.
A quest to vindicate a child exiled and young.

From the base of the mountain I trecked and traversed.
Through foliage and fauna to heal generations accursed.

Upon Mt Indang's zenith, a relic of power and grace,
A shrine of a passed Babaylan, a sacred, hallowed place.

As I approached, an amulet glistened, beckoning me near,
with courage, I adorned it, as a bantay appeared.

Acknowledging my journey, of transformation and might,
bestowing upon me clairvoyance and foresight.

'Kahayag' she whispered, heralding a new name and era.
A revolution on the horizon, for which I'm the flag bearer.

Act III

Gikan sa taas sa Mt. Indang, nidagan ko pinaagi sa kagubatan,
(From the top of Mt. Indang I ran through the forest,)
bound for my old village, unsure if I am still welcomed.

Abot ko sa gawas sa akong pangunahan barangay.
(I arrived at the outskirts of my old village.)
My heart paces as anxiety begins to amplify.

Samtang naglakaw ako sa baryo, natanawan ang mga tawo sa ako.
(As I walked through the village, everyone looked at me.)
In their midst, I stood, a transformed spirit who once was an outlaw.

But now accepted by all in joyus revolution.
Both a reunion and full circle resolution.

I told them tales of my journey and the wisdoms I learned,
and the powers of divinity that I solemnly earned.

“Ang kinaiya sa tawo dili gitakda sa pagkatawo kondili pinaagi sa kontribusyon.”
“Gender is not defined at birth, it’s about your social contribution.”
These very words I uttered sparked social evolution.

A village reimagined, old traditions redefined.
Asog and women, as Babaylans, intertwined.

As the sun set on the old world, the village peacefully sat.
My story immortalised in the stars and forever a reminder that

the most radical journey we embark on in life is the journey back home, back to oneself.

ang labing radikal nga panaw nga atong gihimo sa kinabuhi mao ang panaw balik sa balay, balik sa atong kaugalingon.
(the most radical journey we embark on in life is the journey back home, back to oneself.)