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Feeling Failure: Appnography and Its Affective Ties to the Ethnographer's Life

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Abstract:

My research seeks to understand queer Filipino men's digital lives in Manila, the Philippines, and Los Angeles, United States of America. It examines how experiences of failure inform complex negotiations online and offline in the search for connection, especially when feelings are amplified and complicated by social categories of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. I apply Rohit K Dasgupta and Debanuj Dasgupta's assertion from their study participants in India that the sharing of failure in virtual spaces generates different forms of intimate subjectivity forging affective bonds. This essay reflects on failure and disappointment as a prominent topic of ethnographic inquiry and methodological critique but specifically on how the feeling of failure seeped into various parts of the researcher's life – my writing, my thinking, my belief in myself. It is a feeling that endures. It is a testament to the need for continued ethnographic work, with a caution to the infectious insecurities animating the socialities of dating app relations.

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Feeling Failure: Appnography and Its Affective Ties to the Ethnographer's Life

Paul Michael Leonardo Atienza

Mobile digital technologies are transforming how people communicate with one another. Many promise quick and easy platonic, romantic, and/or sexual connections. With the intensification of people's reliance on and everyday engagement with mobile digital media platforms, the study of mediated intimacies is relevant and needed more than ever before. If the former CEO of Grindr, Joel Simkhai, assumed that its users all share a similar drive, stating, 'We visualize. We see before we hear before we think before we do anything else. That's how we are' (Signorile 2013), then how do app users react and respond to failure in connecting with other users on mobile digital media platforms? By mobile digital media, I mean the range of apps from messaging platforms on mobile phones (which include WeChat, WhatsApp, and Viber), social media (such as Facebook and Instagram), and socio-sexual apps (like Grindr and Tinder).[1] I group them as such because communication and connection amongst research participants often move from one platform to another. Although conversations and engagements may begin on socio-sexual apps, participants often employ multimodal communicative strategies, which they explained during informal interviews. These platforms are portals to an expanse of people similarly seeking connection. Yet achieving a match, a like, or a bond is hardly quick and easy. Ubiquity and access to more information do not correlate with quick or easy connections.

During my field research in Manila, the Philippines, and Los Angeles, United States of America, queer Filipinx/o men complained that it was difficult to find meaningful connections through socio-sexual apps.[2] My study

1 According to Andrew D J Shield (2018: 151), '"socio-sexual networking" … refers to the process of interpersonal communication among those open to forming erotic, platonic, and practical connections, sometimes simultaneously'. These platforms have been described in research and by study participants as 'dating apps', 'hook-up apps', 'sex apps', and by other similar terms. I deliberately use the descriptor 'socio-sexual', as suggested by Shield, in this article. If a study participant or another author uses a different term, I retain their term for accuracy of the quotation.

2 *Queer* is used as an umbrella term to designate both people who identify as members of the LGBTQIA+ community and those who seek same-sex intimacies but may not use *queer* as an identity designation. When referring to the study participants, I use their preferred identities at the time of our interview. Some identify as gay or bisexual or prefer not to identify their sexual orientation. Others do not equate queer identity with same-sex physical or romantic attraction.

seeks to understand the digital lives of queer Filipinx/o men and how experiences of failure inform complex negotiations online and offline in the search for connection, especially when feelings are amplified and complicated by social categories of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality. My original goal for this project was to find connections between queer Filipinx/o men in Manila and Los Angeles through an imagined and shared digital world, but my unsuccessful recruitment of study participants during my research time in Los Angeles motivated me to think through failures of connection, not merely the experiences of my study participants but also my own.

My field research draws from interviews and ethnographic fieldwork I completed in Manila from January to June 2017 and December 2017 to January 2018 and in Greater Los Angeles between June and November 2017. It consists of twenty-one individuals, with fourteen based in Manila and seven in Los Angeles. They were either currently enrolled in public, private, technical, or vocational institutions or had completed a college education. Many of the men in this study identified as gay, two participants as bisexual, and one did not want to categorise their sexual orientation. I honour these identities when writing specifically about their experiences but use the term 'queer Filipinx/o men' when discussing them as a group. I found these numbers to be small at first, but the stories of these men were so rich that they became the foundation of my dissertation that I defended in April of 2022.

I recruited the study participants directly through one-on-one communication on several socio-sexual app platforms. Platform-switching practices were integral for my research participants so that I conducted semi-structured interviews with them not only in person but also on several digital media applications. I made an effort to continue remote follow-up interviews with participants. Many of the participants shared their social media accounts with me and we followed each other through Facebook and/or Instagram. This became another form of communication between us.

In their pursuit of intimacies, as queer Filipinx/o men in my study shared with me, they experienced frequent forms of failure, generating various affective responses that shape their actions and beliefs. In their accounts, failure is not a totalising experience, nor do these experiences necessarily lead to definite endpoints. Such possibilities still create many forms of exclusions to intimacy, yet the queer Filipinx/o men who shared parts of their lives with me continued to aspire and hope for an experience of intimacy. Some openings and possibilities inspire responses and alternative paths towards the realisation of brief moments of connection and small moments of pleasure.

By thinking through my failures to establish rapport and gain access to the various groups I write about, my aim with this piece is to lean into moments of disappointment that continue to inspire feelings and spark ethnographic memories towards the potential completion of our research goals.

As Jessica Greenberg and Sarah Muir (2022: 317) write in a collection of anthropological work thinking through disappointment,

> *anthropologists inhabit an ethos of disappointment that we share with our interlocutors. For anthropologists and interlocutors alike, disappointment unfolds in open-ended fashion, allowing us to learn from inhabiting unresolvable contradictions, from managing the frustration and slow pace of change, and from reckoning with our continued attachments to unattainable and even harmful myths and ideals. In this way, disappointment affords the possibility of generating new genres of critique not to perfect the discipline but to understand its limits and conditions of possibility.*

From these moments, I seek to forge affective bonds with you, the reader, by sharing my experiences of failure (Dasgupta and Dasgupta 2018). The situated failures we experience in our research moves us towards another possibility of ethnographic method and intimacy.

Even as virtual sites allow for more ways of imagining queer worlds, digital spaces are rife with the same offline social stigmas that (re)create hierarchies of difference such as race, class, gender, and sexuality. I ask how these hierarchies, or what a study participant described as 'being judgy', are experienced differently by people using the same platforms in different places (see Atienza 2021). Many of the affective registers of gay Filipinx/o digital sociality often led to failure. A few of my study participants demonstrated how their experiences of failure gave rise to practices that both generate new exclusions and contest prominent ways of ostracism (see Atienza 2023b). These practices were invested with the aim of attaining an imagined form of romantic coupledom, yet different forms of intimate connections were not shunned in this process. As I focus this piece on the experience of failure, I acknowledge that my study was successful enough to generate sufficient information that was transformed into several peer-reviewed publications. I also continue to invite new participants as I work towards different writing projects.

My work extends scholarship from Filipino scholars who share important insights about dating apps amongst queer men in the Philippines and the diaspora. Recent work from Randy Solis (2020) provides a history of cruising practices or the active search for sexual encounters in public spaces that have become mediatised in the Philippines. Solis emphasises the dialectic relationship between physical space and communication technologies in the shaping of social meanings and strategies of cruising. As various queer Filipinx/o men explained during my field research, mobile media technologies both enhanced and expanded such tactics, but many also felt that it complicated the experience with added expectations of disclosure that took away from what may be considered more simple forms of consent and inter-

action. Jonalou Labor's (2020, 2021) key studies on self-presentation on mobile apps amongst young gay men in Manila document beliefs and practices on how digital representations demonstrate intent and motives for pursuing romantic and sexual matches on these platforms. Labor's research participants elaborate how mobile app users create idealised, refined versions of sought-after selves they believe would generate immediate connections, whilst a limited, formulaic self for specific audiences serves best in pursuit of romantic relationships. My study participants demonstrated such practices, and my ethnographic work describes how these viewpoints are applied to their assessment of writing, photos, and interactions on dating apps.

Mobile media platforms are sites to learn more about each other, test possible intimate connections, recruit new members, and affirm belonging. These formations do not escape failures of communication and connection. Each group sets up its forms and practices of exclusion and inclusion. The stories of my study participants also reflect my failures to attain rapport and intimate closeness during research. They reminded me of my failures of belonging based on class, body image, and age, in my ethnographic work but also in my personal life. Such failures affected how I was able to communicate with participants, conform to them, and access spaces amongst them, just as it shaped my confidence to be able to share with you a situated perspective of queer Filipinx/o digital sociality. As Martin Manalansan (2016: 2) writes, 'Filipino bodily energies from affect and feelings are conditioned not by idiosyncratic personal quirks but by the forces of history, culture, and social hierarchies. Therefore, these bodily energies are part and parcel of world making and world imaginings.' These feelings persist even as I write towards completing this piece. It bubbles up from histories of personal insecurity about my scholarly abilities. It recruits other emotions circulating around my atmosphere including the unyielding genocidal murder of Palestinian civilians in Gaza, the escalating legislative attacks on trans and non-binary people in the United States, and so much more. As I try to finish the edits to this piece, I am overwhelmed by the brutal response of my institution's administration to a week-long peaceful occupation of an administrative building. The California State Polytechnic University, Humboldt, is the first public state university in the United States that is part of many worldwide student-led protests that demand divestment of tuition money, investment funds, and research projects from support for the state of Israel. Over 300 police officers in riot gear were sent to arrest protesters in the vicinity of what the students had renamed the Intifada Hall during the early hours of 30 April 2024. As I think and write about failure in my research, I cannot detach it from this moment – one in which failures of humanity disproportionately affect so many in our shared world.

For this piece, I share the accumulative force of disappointment through a reflection of my ethnographic experience researching socio-sexual apps. I

first outline how I think about failure through affect theory and queer studies. In the subsequent two sections I share both the methodological obstacles I experienced during the fieldwork and my personal experiences of disappointment during field research with a focus on inadequacy. As Greenberg and Muir (2022: 317) suggest, the analysis of disappointment 'demands that we attend to ways of being in the world that are saturated with undecidability, irresolution, uncertainty, and dissatisfaction'.

Affective frameworks and worlds of failure

I choose an affective framework to bind the diverse practices of my study participants to demonstrate their vital queer world-making projects between online and offline sites of intimacy. Cultural critics Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth (2010) write that affect is synonymous with a 'force' that has the potential to drive humans to move and be moved. In addition, I find the following explanation from the coauthors Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth useful:

> *At once intimate and impersonal, affect* accumulates *across both relatedness and interruptions in relatedness, becoming a palimpsest of force-encounters traversing the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between 'bodies' (bodies defined not by an outer skin-envelope or other surface boundary but by their potential to reciprocate or co-participate in the passages of affect). Bindings and unbindings, becomings and un-becomings, jarring disorientations and rhythmic attunements. Affect marks a body's* belonging *to a world of encounters or; a world's belonging to a body of encounters but also, in* non-belonging*, through all those far sadder (de)compositions of mutual in-compossibilities. (Gregg and Seigworth 2010: 2, emphasis in original)*

Furthermore, Kathleen Stewart (2007) posits that everyday experiences connect people and form commonalities that shape public feeling. Through these everyday and ordinary attachments, we can examine the role of emotions, feelings, and senses in maintaining and generating sociopolitical structures.

According to media scholar Shaka McGlotten (2013: 124), Grindr and 'programs like it have become part of the texture of gay life, part of the media ecologies that shape our daily practices and desires, that transform how we think of ourselves and how we move through the world'. They add that although these technologies offer quick and easy modes of forming virtual intimacies, the limits of materiality persist. These limits refer to access to these technologies like the monetary cost of obtaining a phone or paying for phone service plans with data transmission constraints. Amongst my study participants in Manila, many shared the practice of frequently deleting socio-sex-

ual apps on their mobile phones. One particular user mentioned that they share their mobile device with other members of their family. Users have to consider phone battery power as well. These apps drain energy much more quickly because the phone processes more data information as it tries to load images onto the device interface. As another study participant explained, deleting Grindr from their device also freed up storage, allowing more access to other platforms throughout their day. In addition, social structures that place hierarchical value on particular ethnic, class, and gender identities stick on the surface of these digital frames.

McGlotten argues that investments in keeping up connections on these digital platforms require immense conversational and emotional labour. Users may spend large amounts of time creating and updating their user profiles as they hope to make the optimal digital avatar that would garner plenty of attention from other users. He refers to this labour as the importance of staying fresh (McGlotten 2013: 128). He writes: 'What you choose to disclose, and how, matters; you have to change a profile to stay interesting and relevant, to matter … Showing too much or not enough or never updating anything can all risk failure.' Queer studies scholar Senthorun Raj (2011: 5) elaborates on how bodies and desires are negotiated on the online digital platform: 'The constant (re)writing of profile statements and the various exchanges of photographs represents the differential points that bodies use to "connect". Connection, however, involves conversational and emotional labour to articulate a response to generic questions such as "So what are you looking for?"' Reflecting on his own experiences on the platform, Raj (2011: 5) adds that his online identity 'is rendered intelligible through how [his] pictures, conversation and captions are negotiated through norms surrounding physical aesthetics, muscularity (masculinity) and intellectual wit online'. With so much time and effort placed on maintaining digital aesthetics of freshness, negative feedback on such personal representations has inspired responses for how to deal with the bad feelings that come up from these communication misfires. One specific practice from a study participant in Manila was catfishing, the use of images not their own or lying on their profiles. Many in the city referred to people who catfish as 'posers'. This participant shared with me that the choice to catfish was motivated by the wish to increase their chances of finding connections with other app users also desperate to connect with someone.

My experience showed me that I had to be prepared to make adjustments to the image I chose to use on my profile when recruiting study participants. I started my field research in Manila with a clear facial photo on Grindr. After two weeks of minimal engagement, I changed it to a cropped image that focused on my shoulder. The change increased the messages I received from others wanting to start a conversation. Many had not read my profile information, which provided key information about my research pur-

pose and my motivation for being on the app. Although it felt good to start receiving messages, it made me doubt the quality of my initial photo with a clear view of my face. I began to wonder whether I was unattractive, which raised feelings of insecurity. In Los Angeles, I used a similarly cropped image of my shoulder when recruiting study participants. I remember one specific reply from a random Grindr user which started out well but quickly degenerated once we shared facial photos with each other. After seeing my picture, the user cursed at me, accusing me of pretending to be White. I did not have an ethnicity designated on my profile. Since many queer Filipinx/os use various ethnic categories, I chose to leave the ethnicity blank on my profile to avoid being filtered out because of that category (Hern 2020).

Jack Halberstam (2011: 3) argues that to live a queer life is to accept failure because of its role in queer community formation against heteronormative standards of success and production. For queer people, failure has been a way of life, a style, and an alternative to the punishing 'trying and trying again' logics or meaningless and obsessive competition of trying to fit into heteronormative assumptions. Halberstam (2011: 3) adds that 'while failure certainly comes accompanied by a host of negative affects, such as disappointment, disillusionment, and despair, it also provides the opportunity to use these negative affects to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life'. Here we encounter the push and pull between optimism and pessimism in which queer people negotiate everyday life – negotiations between resistance against and collusion with neoliberal ideologies. Working through Barbara Ehrenreich's (2009) scholarship that complicates positive thinking, Halberstam calls out the source of optimism as coming from US American exceptionalism and a delusional view that success only happens to people who work hard enough to reach their goals. What is lacking from this construction is the recognition of structural oppression that conditions people and their everyday lives.

Legibility to be intelligible to the state becomes a mechanism of complicity for white supremacy. Drawing on James C. Scott's 1998 book *Seeing Like a State*, Halberstam explains that the ordering of undisciplined and fluid ways of being or knowing has resulted in making such forms esoteric against the state's perceived simplification of such facts. Halberstam clarifies that

> *for Scott, to 'see like a state' means to accept the order of things and to internalise them; it means that we begin to deploy and think with the logic of the superiority of orderliness and that we erase and indeed sacrifice other, more local practices of knowledge, practices moreover that may be less efficient, may yield less marketable results, but may also, in the long term, be more sustaining. (Halberstam 2011: 9)*

If Halberstam claims that to fail is a way of queer life, then these queer subjects generate practices on mobile digital media to reduce the effects of failure. Halberstam interprets failure

> *as a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique. As a practice, failure recognises that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed, failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities. (Halberstam 2011: 88)*

Failure is, therefore, subversive and productive.

This raises the question of why queer subjects continue to stay complacent with ordering strategies within their online app communities. Here I invoke the work of Tara McPherson (2012) and her historicisation of modularity within the digital culture of the United States. McPherson writes that convergence with developments of computational technology and the struggle of racial formation movements in the United States in the 1960s coincides with the use and prevalence of disciplining structures embedded in software applications and computer operational systems. She explains that the design of digital computational frameworks influenced the partitioning of identities, specifically of race, during the formative years of the internet in the mid-twentieth century. McPherson offers lenticular logics, a term based on the coating of 3-D postcards, as a way to describe how modular mechanisms obscure the deciphering of simultaneous and multiple images, suppressing relation and context whilst privileging a clear construction of the whole (McPherson 2012: 144). Such vantages allow a certain coherence to an otherwise messy configuration. Here we can examine how queer socio-sexual apps are designed to simplify user management and sort information into organised sequences. User profiles are structured as symmetrical squares along gridlines where demographic information is partitioned within designated boxes within a visual window. Demographic options of race, weight, height, and age are pre-programmed for users; therefore, any information that deviates from these categories would need to be provided in additional textual explanations in the body of the user profile. Through form and design, mobile digital media platforms are structured and programmed to be complicit with the modulatory frameworks that parse difference into recognisable boxes. The privileging of an ordered wholeness, where gross differences between users work against the apps' strategies to connect users with each other, constitutes the playing field on this digital platform.

Thinking through the concept of failure in queer lives, I suggest that anticipating the possibility of failure and one's various affective responses is part of the negotiation digital users must navigate in their everyday interactions on the virtual playground. From self-regulatory methods users draw

on to conform to dominant norms of desirability amongst queer men to the internal structures that frame the mobile software application as divisive modulations, playing the social app game of making connections is not easily won.

Failure can be generative. As Rohit K Dasgupta and Debanuj Dasgupta (2018) suggest, whether to prescribe with optimism, pessimism, or a mixture of both, people choose to participate in seeking connection online. They also have the choice to adhere to disciplining guidelines. In their study of public chat threads on digitally mediated social media platforms in India like Planet Romeo, Dasgupta and Dasgupta point to affective bonds shared in these virtual sites as a potential for different futures away from homonormative aspirations of a productive subject. One option for people to navigate the failures of digital life is to imagine ways to undo systems of oppression through understanding and deploying tactics and strategies of marginalised voices and perspectives. My study demonstrates how queer Filipinx/o men negotiate different layers of sociotechnical infrastructures to experience the possibility of an intimate connection even if they must go through many forms of failure.[3] One of my study participants explained to me that they intentionally used false photos in their profile, what others in Manila called being a 'poser' or what in Los Angeles was termed 'catfishing', in the hope of finding a hook-up. Gordon, a professional in their mid-twenties from Manila, shared with me how they used a photo of a friend on his Grindr profile to lure potential hook-ups.[4] They would ask the matches from Grindr to meet them in a public place. Often the fact that they looked different from their Grindr profile would result in a quick exit from the potential hook-up. But in a few instances, though the men would be upset, they would still allow Gordon to perform oral sex on them. These failures produce various types of affects that influence (in)actions both to move (in a physical sense) and to be moved (in an emotional sense). Despite facing extreme limitations, the Filipinx/o men in my study continue to move towards the possibility of an intimate connection.

Despite the failures of the here and now for the gay Filipinx/o men in this study, I interpret their practices and beliefs of mobile digital media as hopeful stances. José Esteban Muñoz (2009) argues in *Cruising Utopia* for an approach to hope as a critical method that acknowledges the importance of reflecting and learning about the past to imagine a potential utopic future. He proposes that we see queerness as a horizon to think beyond the anti-re-

3 I use the concept of sociotechnical infrastructures as an analytical lens to study unequal arrangements and access to complex systems that shape quality of social interaction and definitions of attractiveness. These complex systems include transportation infrastructures and access to technological hardware and data storage along with social differences such as class and gender as forms of power that inform different ideas of aesthetic beauty (see Atienza 2023a).

4 All personal names used in this article are pseudonyms.

lational, antisocial, anti-utopian critique in queer studies. Muñoz gestures towards moving past the presentness and negativity that advocates and celebrates no future. He suggests that we become attuned to the potentialities found in aesthetic representation that moves beyond the here and now.

Failing to be Filipinx/o: frustrations in method from a 'native' ethnographer

I am Filipinx/o. I was born in Quezon City in the Philippines. I emigrated to the United States at the age of nine and became a US citizen. I worked hard to keep ties and connections with family members in the Philippines. Part of my interest in the study of mobile digital media is through these initial shifts in communication during the 1990s when technologies rapidly became more available to consumers. I am also a queer cisgender man. These incomplete explanations of my subjectivity serve to constitute me as a 'native' researcher. Although the concept of 'native-ness' has been critiqued (Appadurai 1988; Ferguson 2018), we cannot control the stereotypes others may have over the social identities we inhabit. This section focuses on how digital platforms hide and obscure social identities – both of the researcher and of our potential interlocutors – and how interactions towards recruitment of study participants can lead to many frustrations. Reflecting briefly on the methods I used, I advocate for the prominent role of failure in sharing our ethnographic processes.

I arrived in Manila to start a five-month research period in January 2017. Three weeks later, I was frustrated with my failure at enrolling participants. I had come prepared with multiple mobile phones and tablets. I had printed multiple paper copies of my consent form. I had assumed that it would be relatively easy to find a group of people willing to participate in my study since many I encountered during preliminary work the previous two summers were already sharing with me their experiences with and opinions on trying to find relationships, friendships, and sex on digital platforms. I reached out to the individuals from my preliminary research trips and to local scholars and university groups. I finally began engaging directly with users on various socio-sexual applications frequently used by queer men in Manila, like Grindr, Scruff, Growlr, and Blued. But many of the contacts I made were apprehensive to share their stories. I was often asked, 'Don't you know what this app is for?' These methodological failures led me to adjust my recruitment practices, which eventually resulted in a modest response rate.

Questions about methodology in the analysis of technology in everyday use constantly evolve. Research about technology must deal with the medium's rapid updates and reboots. My initial reading of Sarah Pink and Jennie Morgan's concept of 'short-term ethnography' drew me to their formulation of visual ethics. It includes

> *an ongoing process of informed consent, which is particularly important for building trust in participants … [This process] moreover establish[es] channels of communication beyond the fieldwork setting with participants from the outset and continues [these channels] after [the research] … expanding the ethnographic place by enabling participants to enter into our post-fieldwork temporality in decisive ways. (Pink and Morgan 2013: 358-359)*

Far from being 'quick and dirty' qualitative research, short-term ethnography celebrates the intense relationships between researcher, local people, places, and theories as alternative ways of knowing and is not a short cut. Though a careful reading of their work showed that short-term ethnography does not speak to my multisite research, Pink and Morgan's thoughts about informed consent as captured in the quote previous is a model I actively deploy in my study.

As I have written before (Atienza 2023b: 2503), I find the concept of appnography or appnographic methods compelling in thinking through my methodological journey. What the scholars of leisure studies Luc Cousineau, Harrison Oakes, and Corey Johnson (2019) call capacious affordances for the study of digital lives, appnography is an analysis of the many practices of connection, use, and meaning-making through mobile digital media platforms that is intensely aware of the perceived binary between the real and virtual. This binary flattens the digital self's intersubjective constitution with technology and space. Appnography must be reflexive and transparent in the various power relationships not just between researcher and participant but also in the unpacking of what it means to be a user, their temporalities, and their place-making. Feminist and queer theories must also serve as foundational lenses of appnography in the examination of digital cultures. This framework teases out experiences of the silenced, the othered. It provides nuanced perspectives on human interactions concerning various platform software on mobile technologies.

In the multiple non-responses or the gentler 'not interested' or 'no thank you' messages that I received from potential study participants, it is the accumulated minutes of initiating conversations that compound the disappointment of not being able to secure participation. I kindly thanked each person who responded for their consideration and moved forward to the next potential recruit. Some of these conversations did lead to in-person meetings. For one promising interaction it took us several days before we found a time and place convenient for both of us to meet. The prospective interlocutor suggested a nearby outdoor food hall constructed from stacks of makeshift shipping containers. It was a lively spot, and the space led to a pointed conversation in which the interlocutor questioned my 'Filipino-ness' seeing that I had left the Philippines at the age of nine. The potential participant started to ask

me about historical events during the Philippine-American War of 1898 and then professed his loyalty to the Philippines' then current president, Rodrigo Duterte. He backed his position with examples of how Duterte was 'correcting' the miseducation of Filipinos around the world by placing online a proliferation of information about truths that previous administrations had withheld from the public. I held back and agreed with many of his assertions. But the shock from his questioning of my cultural and ethnic identity as a Filipinx/o reverberated in my mind, heart, and soul. Growing up an immigrant Tagalog Filipinx/o in southern California, I had worked hard to keep my language proficiency so that I could continue to communicate with my cousins and wider family who were still living in the Philippines. In my new community in the US, this language – to me a privilege and blessing – was the source of ridicule, mostly from my Filipino American classmates who teased me about it. But in the Philippines it was the lack of an accent whilst speaking English that became the source for questions about my ethnic origins: 'You were born in the Philippines? Your English is so good,' to which I would reply that English and Language Arts were my favourite subjects in primary school. The questioning on the US side also makes clear that many US citizens of all ethnic backgrounds do not know the imperial history of their settler state in the Philippines.

During my recruitment drive in Los Angeles, I thought that the race and ethnicity filters that were still available on socio-sexual app platforms at that time would help me focus on Filipinx/o-identified profiles. But I now learnt that the choice to include race and ethnicity on profile demographics varied. Filipinx/o Americans chose a range of ethnic identifiers, including Asian, Pacific Islander, and even South Asian on their Grindr profiles. A few chose Latino but many more declined to add this information. Others wrote combinations of ethnic identities such as Spanish and Pacific Islander to avoid the often-limiting category of 'Asian'. In brief chats, many of these potential participants confirmed the avoidance of the term 'Asian' on their profiles. Some shared that their darker skin often does not match the US-centric imagination of light-skinned East Asian men. This produces confusion during app communications with potential connections. The limited understanding of the 'Asian' racial category comes with gendered stereotypes, namely that these men have slender bodies and are on the receiving end of penetrative sex. Deviation from these expected roles in how one presents oneself on the app leads to a lack of engagement from others. To increase the chance for connection, some of the men I spoke to chose different features they believed would garner interest. For the physically fit men, it was the headless torso photo that would attract initial hits from potential partners. But some reported that once they shared a clear photo of their face, these potential partners would often drop out of the engagement.

These app practices are familiar to me. During personal use of these apps, I would crop images of myself to display what I thought were my most desirable body features. Often I would choose my defined shoulder and top of the arm. I also decided not to disclose my ethnic and racial identity. I remember engaging with a potential connection, a conventionally attractive White man in his late twenties. But as soon as I shared a clear face photo, there was a pause in what had been a series of quick responses to each other. After a few minutes, he replied: 'You're not White. Why are you fucking lying on your profile.' Then his profile disappeared from the grid, signalling that I was blocked from his view and would no longer have access to him again. But contrary to his claim, I did not lie. I just did not share that information. And indeed, his assumption about my racial and ethnic identity based on a bare shoulder and arm was odd to me since I have dark brown skin. Several of my study participants and potential interlocutors shared similar experiences. The intense evaluations that queer men practice on socio-sexual apps generate multiple exclusions in a virtual plane that promises quick and easy connections.

Social categories are operationalised on digital media platforms, creating disidentifications and misplaced expectations. This section focused on interactions amongst potential study participants through categories of race and ethnicity, but other parts of our subjectivities are reduced to boxes to check or lines to select on prefigured digital interfaces. Perceived gender expression and socio-economic class were highly scrutinised. These are not new provocations in the study of human interactions in general. In the sharing of these frustrations, I hope that connection and intimacy may form through an affective solidarity, a shared intimate subjectivity.

Personal failings

The litany of failures in connecting with queer Filipinx/o men during this study led to uneven coverage of participants in the two cities. As I mentioned earlier, these digital groups have been a big part of my personal life as a queer Filipinx/o man. I experience the sense of intimate and erotic possibilities my participants share. I close with the most influential moment for this imbalance: the sudden break-up with an intimate partner in Manila just as I was beginning my field research in Los Angeles. This partner was another immigrant Filipino scholar I met at my college nearly a year before departing for research in Manila. We met through mutual friends and a tiny Filipino community tied to the university. Neither of us expected an intimate closeness to develop since he did not identify as gay and I had been very honest about my sexuality and current relationship. We enjoyed an energising intimate bond for several months and planned to support each other through the completion of our degree programmes. Despite being clear with each other that we

wanted an open relationship, I was deeply affected when his romance with a new lover developed rapidly and was documented in real time on social media platforms. I saw them grow closer and become intensely enamoured in shared Instagram and Snapchat videos. That moment made the failures and anxieties of my research participants more vivid as I experienced the inevitable loss of this lover. Mobile digital media were streaming my failure in intimate connection as a queer Filipinx/o man. I became depressed, and jealousy quickly emerged, resulting in an obsessive attachment to my ex-lover.

During the last six months of my field research, my mind was preoccupied with questions of what went wrong in that relationship. It was difficult to sustain focus and energy, which compromised my recruitment of study participants in Los Angeles. Deep feelings of depression, insecurity, and lack of self-worth lasted nearly a year and a half. I credit Ariana Grande's song 'Thank U, Next' for helping me find a different vantage to the loss of this relationship, but the sense of a lack of self-worth continues today. The focus on failure amongst my study participants reflects both on my long history of similar experiences on mobile digital media and the execution of my research plans for this study. The feeling of failure towards personal intimate connections seeped into other parts of my life – my writing, my thinking, my belief in myself. Related insecurities persist today. This fragmented experience of time and space during my field research resulted in the writing of brief responses and the inclusion of a small participant pool that composed the sections of my study focused on Los Angeles.

With this reflection on my experiences of failure during and after appnographic research, I want to highlight the affective turns that simultaneously animate research participants and researchers. The publication of research results often focuses on the successes of the research process. The emphasis on success in sharing research output minimises the role of failure and its related feelings in complex world-making amongst human relations. With this reflection I wish to remind fellow researchers to acknowledge the role of our failures in the process. As scholars of human experiences, we must include the way in which our humanity is intertwined with that of the people in our work. We must not forget how our biases, our relations, and our investments shape our work. Perhaps it will allow us to see the spectrum of engagement that informs the small slice of human experience we construct from the shared lives of our research participants.

Let me close with what a wonderful friend and colleague described as a shared difficulty in the writing of this type of research – one that is closely tied to our personal histories. He said that, as queer Filipinx/o immigrants, we yearn to feel a connection with and a history embedded in the Philippines – a youth that could have been. There is visceral pain through the imagined loss of a certain gendered, classed, sexual life in the Philippines. It reverberates with the intimacies that we never experienced. It is yet another failure,

an emotional and mental block, that comes from intimacies of a particular kind. Writing this is painful in many ways. It is a feeling that endures.

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