

Reading Meredith Talusan's *Fairest*: A Queer Decolonial Critique of the U.S. Empire

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Abstract | This essay examines Meredith Talusan's *Fairest*, the first book-length memoir by and about a trans Asian woman. I argue that Talusan's gender and sexual reconstruction is an ongoing process of accepting, negotiating, and rejecting ideas deeply rooted in the white heteropatriarchy that prevails throughout the U.S. transnational empire. I first investigate Talusan's critique of the colonial mentality that is imposed on Filipinos, and their suggestion to resist such a sense of indigenous inferiority. Next, I explore how Talusan molded herself to blend into the masculinity-obsessed American gay culture that renders Asian men undesirable, but they ultimately realized that either passing as white or gay erased certain parts of who they really are. Last, I analyze how Talusan proposes a new direction of trans feminism that centers on woman-identification while rejecting the male privileges that they had enjoyed before gender transition. Inspired by nineteenth-century British women writers, Talusan revisits the colonial history of Filipino transgender people as victims of gender-based violence.

Keywords | LGBTIQ+, Asian American Queerness, Transwoman, Transfeminism, Filipino Transgender, Meredith Talusan, Sexual Fluidity, American Imperialism

Meredith Talusan's *Fairest*, published by Viking in 2020 and a finalist for the Lambda Literary Award in Transgender Nonfiction, is the first critically acclaimed memoir by and about a trans woman of Asian descent. *Fairest* is about a boy with albinism growing up in a rural Philippine village, moving to the United States, and pursuing education at Harvard University as an openly gay man before seeking gender reassignment surgery. The narrative of their personal life adds nuance and specificity to the still insufficiently researched experiences of trans women of color.¹ Using a transpacific, decolonial, and intersectional approach, I trace Talusan's journey from Asia to the U.S. and their transition from manhood to womanhood. I argue that Talusan's decolonial trans Filipina identity is formulated through an ongoing process of accepting, negotiating, and rejecting ideas deeply rooted in the white heteropatriarchy that prevails throughout the U.S. transnational empire.

Talusan, while growing up in the Philippines, embodied colonial mentality which falsely created a sense of inferiority among the colonized people who deemed the culture of the colonizer superior. However, Talusan eventually realized that such "colonial brainwashing" (Talusan 100) was imposed on their fellow Filipinos to be made into submissive imperial subjects. Talusan started to refuse this mindset. As a gay immigrant studying at Harvard, Talusan devoted themselves to gay liberation and submitted to Harvard's norm of an ideal gay man as white and masculine. However, they revealed that the 1990s gay liberation that used sex as a form of rebellion did not fully liberate gay men of color. Asian men were placed in the almost bottom of the racialized hierarchy of desire, who further confronted racism in the mainstream white queer community.

As a transwoman of color, Talusan was inspired by the works of nineteenth-century British women authors to reexamine the history of Filipino transgender people having been victimized by multiple colonial powers. Additionally, learning about the plight of cisgender women allows Talusan to distance themselves from the male advantages that they had enjoyed. Therefore, whether identified as a man or woman, a colonial subject at home or a sexualized minority in the U.S., Talusan has been continuously scrutinized for non-whiteness and non-conforming gender. Their life and memories are a template for turning decolonial critique into an intersectional queer critique, finally seeing and understanding how sexism, heterosexism, and colonialism limit everyone, and offering a new direction for trans feminists of color. Overall, this analysis of Talusan's queer narrative contributes to a body of work by scholars interested in decolonial queer critique by highlighting their implications for the Filipino diaspora context.

¹Talusan's preferred personal pronouns are she/they. Since in this article I investigate Talusan's life of presenting as a man and woman, I choose to use they/them/their to avoid confusion.

In her influential book *Imagine Otherwise* (2003), Kandice Chuh redefines the function of Asian American literature as a “theoretical device” that “apprehend[s] and unravel[s] the narrative dimensions of naturalized racial, sexual, gender, and national identities” (x). In other words, ethnic literature is an important tool of revealing the internal contradiction of dominant ideologies of race, gender, and identity. To analyze this complexity, deconstruction is needed to not only destabilize the existing conceptual framework but to continuously search for knowledge and create new knowledge. Some scholars investigating queer Asian American experiences adopt a similar strategy. David L. Eng in *Racial Castration* (2001) analyzes how the Asian male is feminized in literary and cultural productions such as David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*. Eng extends his analysis of Asian masculinity to the whole ethnic group, claiming that racial castration is “a theoretical project examining the numerous ways in which articulations of national subjectivity depend intimately on racializing, gendering, and sexualizing strategies” (3). From a historical perspective, Asians were excluded from the national imagination of American citizenship, which is reflected in exclusive immigration policies and the racial stereotyping of Asian sexuality as “deviant.” The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 is the first and only law prohibiting the immigration of a certain ethnic group from entering the U.S. It provided a ban on Chinese laborers migrating to the country, but gave exemption to certain Chinese non-laborers, such as diplomats. Before that, the Page Law of 1875 basically considered Chinese women as prostitutes and prohibited their entry to the country. Anti-miscegenation laws such as the Expatriation Act of 1907 regulated the loss of citizenship for American women if they married aliens. The Cable Act of 1922 specified that women should be deprived of citizenship if they married an “alien ineligible to citizenship”—a category that included Asians. These factors combined led to Chinatown being a place of male cohabitation—a “bachelor society” that is so-called “deviant” (Eng 18). In other words, whereas Asian women were stereotyped as hypersexual and willing to exchange sex for money, Asian men were criticized for non-heterosexuality because of the lack of wives in Chinatown. Therefore, queerness for queer Asians is not only about overcoming constraints around non-heterosexuality but combating the racist tropes that emasculate men and hypersexualize women. In short, queerness for Asian Americans is also a racial critique (217).

Martin F. Manalansan and Anthony C. Ocampo use similar deconstructive strategies to describe the lives of queer Filipinos in diaspora. They both suggest that Filipino gay men do not follow a linear process of moving from tradition represented by Filipino culture to modernity represented by the mainstream white gay culture. Manalansan in *Global Divas* (2003) examines the immigrant life of Filipino *baklas* in the U.S. *Bakla*, a Tagalog term, combines the word for woman (*babae*) and the word for man (*lalaki*), which in Tagalog dictionaries is defined as a hermaphrodite (25). The term focuses on “effeminate mannerism, feminine physical characters (i.e., small, frail bodies, delicate facial features, and so on), and cross-dressing” (25). *Bakla* can also be used as a verb, meaning someone struggling to find a true inner self via both introspection and influence by outside force(s) (43). This outside force, in the context of *Global Divas*, is New York City and its culture, which embraced their queer identity more sincerely than their racial identity. Although the U.S. might be perceived as a more liberating place for Filipino gay men, Manalansan writes that they often returned to their own culture for comfort and belonging. One of his informants says that his apartment in NYC consists of

two parts—the American side and the Filipino side—and by crossing the room, “he traverses two boundaries of his two selves” (95).

Ocampo investigates how the biological heterosexual family fails to accommodate queer desire, and the coping strategies of second-generation gay Filipino Americans in Los Angeles. Influenced by Catholic religion and the negative stereotype of particularly white gay men, many Asian families found it difficult to accept their children's queerness. These children strategically perform a masculinity that lives up to the expectations of their parents before gradually coming out to them by educating them about positive images associated with being gay (Ocampo 171). As told from Manalansan's and Ocampo's research, the experiences of queer people of color are suffused with ambiguities and ambivalences, which are shaped by their intertwined racial and gender identities. For queer Filipinos, including Talusan whose work I will analyze later, it is an endless project of negotiating between hegemonic gender and sexual ideologies of the West and Asia. During this process, they create a decolonial queer culture as an important survival strategy.

My research is also guided by Jian Neo Chen's *Trans Exploits* (2019), especially the chapter reading trans Black-Native Hawaiian woman Janet Mock's memoir *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love and So Much More* (2014). Chen analyzes Mock's gender and sexual reconstruction while looking back to the histories of slavery, Black diaspora, and the 1898 Annexation of Hawaii. Chen relates Mock's self-exploration as a transgender woman to the intergenerational trauma of all Native Americans whose third-gender ancestors were eradicated by white settlers to impose Western heterosexuality and patriarchy. The author cites Deborah A. Miranda's research on California *joyas* whose third gender rendered them a special role of guiding the passage from life to death (93).² Beginning in the late eighteenth century, however, *joyas* were murdered by Spanish colonizers and those who survived were pushed underground. Sexual violence against Native women were justified by the racist claim that their bodies were “inherently impure and sexually perverse” (93). Compared to Native American invisibility, Black Americans were hyper-visualized in the discourse of white supremacy. For instance, it destroyed Black people's social and kinship relations and changed them into forced labor. Chen states that the slave ship in the Atlantic Middle Passage is “the womb that births blackness” (94), where Black women were deprived of agency as women and mothers while being forced to “transmit the nonhuman status of the black slave to [their] children” (95). Meanwhile, Black femininity was doubly scrutinized by both Black patriarchy and white patriarchy, which is illuminated in Mock's father's policing gaze of her femininity (97). Therefore, Chen inspired me to tie together the personal history of queer individuals and the colonial history of minorities. I situate Talusan's diasporic experience in a larger context of the imperial regulation of race and sexuality both in the Philippines and the U.S. This includes the psychological effects of colonization, the exclusion of men of color from the American queer community that is dominated by white males, as well as the dehumanization of transgender Filipinos by

²As early as 1775, *joya* was used by Spaniards to name the California Indian men (Native Americans in the pre-contact period) dressing as women and having sex with other men (Miranda 261). Instead of applying Spanish labels showing sodomy to Indians or adopting the way in which Californian tribes referred to transgender people as “Cuit” “Uluqui” and “Coias,” Spaniards reappropriated the term *joya* to indicate “something more or different than the deviant ‘sodomites’ of their own culture” (262).

different colonial powers. I start my analysis of *Fairest* by examining how colonial mentality shaped the mindset of Talusan while growing up in the Philippines.

While still living in the Philippines, Talusan was a privileged boy with the look of a Westerner and they had lived with the idea of moving to the U.S. as far back as they could remember. Born *anakaraw*—a Tagalog term for albinism—Talusan had pale skin and blonde hair, which caused them to be regarded as beautiful, unlike dark-skinned Filipino children. Additionally, their obsession with the dream of becoming an American stimulated an interest in learning English with an American accent and imitating the behaviors of characters in American shows. One of Talusan’s favorite shows was *Silver Spoons*, which features an American boy, Ricky, who was metaphorically born with a silver spoon in his mouth. While watching the show, Talusan imagined themselves as an American boy who behaves like Ricky, including such behaviors as shrugging and cocking one’s head (47). After many years, Talusan had unconsciously absorbed many of Ricky’s mannerisms. Years later, Talusan was selected to perform in a show starring the Filipino actor Redford White to play White’s son. The show gave Talusan a second chance to perform a different identity and it brought them closer to the dream of being an American. Talusan writes that “it was as if dreaming of being Ricky had transported me inside that television and I had become him, a real American boy who lived in a giant house and got everything he wanted” (59). Meanwhile, Talusan frankly attributes their early admiration of the United States and its culture to “blind faith and colonial brainwashing” (100). They explain that Filipinos have a colonial mentality, having been “brainwashed to believe that Americans were superior, which meant that we still behaved as though we were colonized rather than as fully independent people” (64).

Psychologist E. J. R. David conceptualizes colonial mentality as being “characterized by a perception of ethnic or cultural inferiority that is [...] a specific consequence of centuries of colonization under Spain and the U.S.” and “it involves an automatic and uncritical rejection of anything Filipino and an automatic and uncritical preference for anything American” (David and Okazaki 241). That is, the colonized are *made* to perceive themselves as secondary and cultureless, who would blindly accept the fact that everything associated with the country that conquered them is superior to their own. In his monograph, *Brown Skin, White Minds* (2013), David thoroughly explains the psychological effects of colonialism in the Philippines. According to David, after Spain and the U.S. gained control of the island’s labor and natural resources, they imposed a binary ideological structure that rendered Western cultures “superior” and “civilized,” and indigenous cultures “inferior” and “uncivilized.” To reinforce this structure, the colonizers educated, Christianized, and trained Filipinos. After that, they established political, social, and economic institutions to solidify their superior position and further exploit indigenous Filipinos (54–55). When the Philippines became a U.S. territory in 1898, Filipinos were categorized as nationals, a status of neither citizen nor alien, who were not subject to immigration laws. Their unique status, however, did not guarantee them a safe place from racial bias and hate crime (38–42). While Filipinos in the early twentieth-century U.S. were being maltreated, their ethnic fellows at home lived in a social environment that had been largely taken over by Western entities in various cultural, economic, and military aspects. By the time the book was published in 2013, English was the primary language in education, business, and diplomacy; Filipino soldiers were trained by American soldiers as if sending a message that Filipino men and

women are less capable of protecting their own country; and Filipino economy was highly dependent on foreign sources to survive (43–44).

Talusan's life in the Philippines involved many moments of colonial mentality, as examined in David's research. First, David writes that people having Filipino characteristics such as brown skin and speaking Filipino languages are not as desirable as those with Western characteristics such as white skin, living in the U.S., and speaking fluent English (46). Talusan was a privileged child because of lighter skin and a "given" future in the U.S., as they knew that their family would eventually immigrate to the country. Second, English proficiency was seen as an indicator of social status and intelligence. Mocked by Filipino Americans who spoke "standard English," Filipinos who spoke English with a Filipino accent were often called "'FOB' (fresh-off-the-boat), 'backward,' or 'buckbuok'" (David 69). I previously wrote that Talusan learned from *Silver Spoon* to gain an American accent. This habit did not end when they arrived in the U.S. They further improved their American accent by watching television after being made fun of in an American high school (8, 122). Third, many Filipinos are exposed from a young age to the colonial message that presents the U.S. as superior via multiple forms of American popular culture. Talusan writes that they listened to American pop music on the radio and watched American television shows and films such as *Jeopardy!*, *Silver Spoons*, and *Dead Poets Society* in order to immerse themselves in a "better" American culture (27, 39, 45–59, 84–87).

As David warns us, colonial mentality can be passed on from one generation to the next and in the long term it slows down the process of raising political awareness and building solidarity with other disempowered groups (133). The ultimate phase of colonialism consists of making the colonized believe that oppression and exploitation are the natural costs of producing a new civilization. Internalizing such thoughts, Filipinos with colonial mentality automatically deny the injustice done to their own people by the colonial and imperialist powers of Spain, Japan, and the United States. They are also not able to relate their own oppression to the struggles of immigrants from other Asian countries and members of other races. Fortunately, Talusan stopped worshipping the United States when they "felt shame" at being a Filipino who had been "brainwashed to believe that Americans were superior" (64). An entirely different article could be written dealing with Talusan's fear and shame with regard to their relationship with other Filipinos, queer partners, and the transphobic American public. Here, however, I emphasize only that Talusan's shame in this context productively enabled them to learn about the binary power dynamic that exists between Filipinos and Americans because of internalized oppression. Elspeth Probyn in *Blush* says that shame can lead to self-evaluation and even transformation, and I argue that Talusan's shame at realizing their own colonial mentality enriched their criticism of the American colonization of the Philippines. After fifteen years of waiting, Talusan's family was called for an immigration interview at the U.S. embassy in Manila. During the interview Talusan had a realization:

I realized I no longer worshipped Americans like [the immigration officer], or the promise of living in such a rich country and becoming white myself, indistinguishable from those creatures with so much power who ruled the rest of the world, who every day decided on the fates of us brown people pleading to be

let into their country, a situation they themselves created when they conquered us against our will, used our land and our hands for free to enrich themselves. (99)

Here, Talusan reveals the fact that the massive immigration of Filipinos into the U.S. is a situation that the Americans created in the first place by exploiting Filipinos' territories and labor, but this pressure to emigrate ironically became the American dream of many Filipinos who wish to leave their homeland.³ Although Talusan admits that they no longer wished to blend into white culture, they still invested tremendous efforts in hiding their immigrant identity after moving to the U.S. For example, Talusan completely submitted himself to Harvard's standard of what constitutes the most desirable gay man.

For Talusan, the Harvard of 1990s was a place that encouraged gay people to challenge the norms of heterosexuality and monogamy but inhibited gay men of color from questioning the exclusivity of the predominantly white gay community. According to Talusan's memoir, Harvard gave them an alienated feeling of being a poor immigrant student in the world's richest school, whose norms are defined by centuries of white elitism. Harvard expected Talusan to grow into someone who could "think freely" and to be "groundbreaking and innovative, yet also to conform to whatever arbitrary standard the university decided I should meet" (49). For example, Talusan was enrolled in a course named "Topics in Gay Male Representation" in which the Harvard professor assigned the well-known article "Is the Rectum a Grave?" by Leo Bersani (115). In this essay, Bersani drew attention to rampant violence against gay men at the height of the 1980s HIV/AIDS crisis. He calls upon gay men to not apologize for their promiscuity, which had been strongly criticized due to the supposed connection between HIV/AIDS and gay sex; nor, according to Bersani, should they embrace monogamy as a positive outcome of the HIV/AIDS epidemic (25). Talusan's sexual relationships and artistic activities indicate that they religiously practiced Bersani's advice of using sex as a form of political rebellion. In various places in the book, Talusan posted dating advertisements in newspaper (156), tried threesome sex as a transgender woman with two other men (163–164), and was actively seeking sexual partners in gay men dominated theaters and bathhouses (146, 173). In addition, Talusan performed a show called *Dancing Deviant* encouraging viewers to "take shame out of sex and the body" (200). But the show was denied funding by Harvard for reasons of decency (197).

However, pursuing gay liberation as taught by white society did not exempt Talusan from having to be placed at the bottom of the racialized hierarchy of desire, which is topped by white men. That is, being sexually liberated did not automatically translate into a favorable position on the homoerotic market. I wrote above that due to immigration laws that favor Asian men over women and anti-miscegenation laws, numerous Asian men without wives lived in bachelor societies and were accused of "deviant" sexuality for their male cohabitation. Filipinos in particular were regarded as "'little brown brothers' who need 'fifty or one hundred years' of close supervision 'to develop anything resembling Anglo-Saxon political principles and skills'" (Lee 175).

³The U.S. colonization of the Philippines led to the second wave of Filipino migration to the country. Erika Lee writes in *The Making of Asian America* (2015) that around 150,000 Filipinos migrated to Hawaii and the continental U.S. during the early twentieth century (174). Filipinos immigrated to the Hawaii islands were mostly laborers and those who later arrived in San Francisco were likely servants to U.S. navy officers (178).

Their work was feminized, for instance, in the military, as those enlisted in the U.S. navy were only asked to do “women’s work” such as preparing meals for officers and cleaning up their living spaces (176). In terms of sexuality, Filipinos were called “feminized males, not homosexual yet not fully heterosexual either” (Ngai 113) insofar as they lived in a “womanless” group but were especially attractive to white women, which caused white men to see them as a threat. Harvard, in Talusan’s account, is a miniature version of the predominantly white gay community that marginalizes gay men of color. Talusan disappointedly admits that non-white gay men occupied only “liminal places” at Harvard, where “looks so determined our place in the gay pecking order and our lack of attractiveness had so much to do with our race and femininity” (3–4). This means that white and masculine men are the most desired within gay communities, whereas Asian men are automatically feminized and waiting to be penetrated. Talusan realized that they belonged to the group of Asian men with an “undesirable” physical appearance because “[I] didn’t puff up my chest or speak in the lowest voice possible” and “my gait wasn’t halting and my hips swayed a little when I walked” (122). Talusan was seen as a “femmy twink” (122) who only attracted old men and was often the bottom.

Despite consciously being aware of the racialized and feminized construction of gay Asians as unwanted, Talusan still “made the utmost effort to be as un-fat, un-femme, and un-Asian as possible” (143). To adopt a white gay lifestyle, Talusan regularly went to the gym, only slept with white men, dismissed Asians as partners, and learned from white gay men to use sex as “a form of political rebellion in the time of plague” (123, 146–47). In his book, *The Making of a Gay Asian Community* (2002), Eric Wat confirms this pattern of Asian men seeking white males as sex partners on the West Coast in pre-AIDS Los Angeles. Wat writes that the white-Asian male coupling was accepted as a natural relationship, even as natural as heterosexuality. On the contrary, Asian-Asian gay couples were called “lesbians.” For “rice queens” who have a special interest in hunting for Asian partners, their Asian lovers are “geisha boys” who might be as muscular and strong as whites but were still expected to be “boyish, innocent, and pliant” (Wat 62). On the other hand, Manalansan in *Global Divas* suggests that white-Filipino gay coupling is not universally patterned on the racial assumption that lower-class Filipino men completely depend on middle- or upper-class white men: exceptions exist wherein a Filipino has highbrow cultural tastes cultivated back in the Philippines whereas his white partner is a telephone lineman, and, in those cases, the Filipinos financially support their white boyfriends (Manlansan 109–17). Examining the activities of gay Filipinos on dating apps, Paul Michael Leonardo Atienza in “I Think I’ll Be More Slutty” claims that Filipinos still see desirability as the golden standard of a gay man, a stereotype that exists both online and offline, in Los Angeles and in Manila. A Filipino gay man’s offline activity of improving physical appearance through exercise may lead him to select partners from a larger online dating pool ranging from old white men to young muscular Asian men.

Talusan had maintained as masculine an image as they could imagine, although they occasionally practiced cross-dressing, which gave them more pleasure. In his book, *A View from the Bottom* (2014), Tan Hoang Nguyen contends that Asian gay men, despite often being positioned on the bottom in sexual intercourse, also experience pleasure. This was partially true for Talusan. Talusan did obtain pleasure from having white partners, both in a stable relationship with a wealthy British professor, Ralph, and in temporary

relations with other men. At the same time, however, Talusan became increasingly unsatisfied with their complete submission to Harvard's gender norm that strictly tied gayness to masculinity. Talusan compares their gay experience to "belonging to a strict church" and noting that "it was the specific, masculinity-obsessed form gay male culture took in America that I eventually couldn't tolerate" (137). Conforming to either standard, whiteness or masculinity, would mean that Talusan failed to be seen as their complex real self. On the one hand, Talusan admits that their whiteness is related only to education, wealth, and beauty, not actual European ancestry (165–66). Pretending to be white forces Talusan to hide their Filipino origin and make invisible all their efforts to accommodate a mainstream culture that is hostile to Asians. Furthermore, while manifesting maximum masculinity Talusan lost their freedom of expression—that is, the right to decide what form of femininity they wanted to embody. Instead, Talusan had to "negotiate every feminine accessory or mannerism with a strict gay church that constantly threatened to reject [them]" (137). Hence, Talusan frames their decision to become a woman as an effort to be seen as their "complete self":

[W]hat I wanted was to be seen as my complete self—my gender, my race, my history—without being judged because of it. I wanted people close to me to see an albino person who had learned how to look and act white so the world would more readily accept her, and understand how that had been a key part of her survival. I wanted people to see how that albino person was also transgender, how she transitioned to be able to express her femininity and had surgery so she would be perceived as being like any other woman, her qualities appreciated on those terms. And if she ever hid who she actually was, it was only so that she could be granted entrance into worlds she couldn't otherwise reach, worlds that should rightfully belong to everyone, not just those who happen to uphold the prevailing standards of whiteness and womanhood. (166–67)

By saying "complete self," Talusan strives to be seen as a transgender person of color struggling to blend into white culture while embodying a certain form of femininity. Their gender and sexual reconstruction is not simply a transition from one gender to another and from the sex assigned at birth to the opposite sex to achieve a sense of certainty and security in terms of gender embodiment. Rather, it is a process filled with twists and doubts, progression and regression. Talusan molded themselves to first meet the social expectation of a colonial subject to blindly admire Western culture. Despite their suggestion to resist colonial mentality, Talusan submitted themselves to another standard—the masculinity-obsessed American gay culture, which seems to reinforce colonial mentality. Nonetheless, this was a crucial step for Talusan to realize that hiding behind the mask of a white muscular gay man erased their real identity as a Filipino immigrant hoping to embody a larger extent of femininity without being scrutinized. Talusan's life reveals that a racialized subject's optimal survival strategy is not simply to accept or reject the rules that are created by the U.S. empire to further exploit them. Instead, they learn about the social norms that devalue them, mold themselves to meet these expectations, question, and reject them, and then repeat this process. This is not a linear process of transformation, but a spiral structure of making important progress while looking backwards.

Talusan's transition to womanhood is closely linked with their deconstruction of the meanings of race and gender based on their own experiences as a colonial subject and gay immigrant. I have analyzed Talusan's identities as a colonial subject and a gay man. In the next section, I focus on their narrative of becoming a woman. I investigate how Talusan relates their personal life to the plight of nineteenth-century British women writers and female characters in these authors' works, a connection which helped Talusan toward their final decision with regard to gender transition. As Talusan eloquently states, "if I could see how being a woman was not the objectively ideal gender and still want to be one, then I was meant to be a woman after all" (296). Put another way, Talusan identified more with women's challenges than the power that is naturally given to men, an advantage Talusan had taken for granted when presenting as a man. These challenges involve the obstacles confronting British white women and transgender Filipino women in the colony when pursuing intellectual and spiritual advancement, and gender-based violence faced by women characters in the nineteenth-century British literature and women in the twenty-first century U.S.

Talusan shows empathy with British women authors whose works indicate that many white women, as victims of sexism and patriarchy, were trapped within their households and discouraged from pursuing intellectual advancement. Majoring in literature at Harvard and once spending a summer in London on scholarship provided Talusan with access to numerous readings covering a wide range of topics. Particularly interested in nineteenth-century British women authors, Talusan read both the classic and less popular works of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë, George Eliot, and Christina Rossetti. For example, Talusan's booklist included *Emma* (1815), *Jane Eyre* (1847), and *Middlemarch* (1871), as well as *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Villette* (1853), and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, and Christina Rossetti never married, and Charlotte Brontë did not marry until her late thirties, which made Talusan realize that it was extremely hard for women writers to "be both devoted to their personal passions and fulfill the expectations of their society" (155). Talusan explains that it was the Western ideology of sexism that discouraged women with talents from seeking intellectual pursuits, a tendency that is absent in traditional Filipino culture:

Having grown up with no notion that women were in any way inferior—the president who took over from our dictator a woman, my grandmother fully equal to my grandfather in terms of running their business affairs, an indigenous culture that did not promote the idea of male superiority except for the colonial influence of machismo—the idea of women being kept out of intellectual pursuits simply because of their gender was infuriating, and studying their efforts to produce art under these conditions enraptured me. (169)

In contrast with white women who were "kept out of intellectual pursuits simply because of their gender," Talusan learned that not only were Filipino women not considered inferior to men, but transgender people in the pre-colonial Philippines were not as marginalized as they are today. They write that "among my own indigenous ancestors, select male-bodied people who lived their lives as women were held in high esteem and found themselves husbands, in domestic life treated identically as other women" (279). One group of men presenting as women were Shamans. Brenda Rodriguez Alegre points out that the pre-colonial Philippines was a matriarchal society where women were

revered for their power of procreation (54). This power was accompanied by the abilities of healing, communicating with the spirits that also have the power of procreation, and confronting the attacks of evil forces (54). Therefore, women were usually elevated to a class of spiritual leadership with the common name of *babaylan*, although in different religions they were called by different names. Some powerful *babaylans* were called as “*Baylan* or *baylian*, *asog*, *bayok*, *catalonan*, *mumbaki* or *itneg*” (54). Although some *babaylans* were born women, others were men identifying as women. This group was known as *bayas* who were “male priests characterized by being effeminate, uninterested in sex, and never participating in warfare. Their penis size, it was rumored, was only half a finger long. Using a special language, they could summon spirits (*wurake*) to conduct them heavenward in order to recover the soulstuff (*tanoana*) which had fled an individual, causing her to fall ill” (Andaya 66). In indigenous culture, *bayas* occupied a neutral third space outside the binary structure of male and female, femininity and masculinity. However, Spanish missionaries upon arrival in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries wrote reports renouncing their “defective” transvestism (Brewer). At the time, women were excluded from Catholic priesthood, and Spaniards brought over this sexist point of view to the island. The missionaries used gender non-conforming Shamans as a confirmation that it was not only the female body that the Devil was attracted to but femininity itself (Brewer). Since then, transgender people have been subjected to sexual violence by different colonial powers.

Alegre introduces Walterina Markova, during the Japanese colonial period of 1942 to 1945, as a man dressing like a woman entertaining soldiers and later being forced to provide sex services (57–8). Markova is a *bakla*—a Tagalog term for a man with feminine appearance, which I have explained above. Stories of *baklas* like Markova and those of cisgender women constituted the collective memory of Filipino comfort women and men.⁴ More recently, the increasing U.S. military presence in the Philippines further encouraged the selling of female bodies, including many trans women, for sex service. The most tragic case of a Filipino trans woman being the victim of crime committed by an American serviceman is the murder of Jennifer Laude by Joseph Scott Pemberton in 2014.⁵ As Talusan contends, the Filipino indigenous culture “did not promote the idea of male superiority” (169) and the capabilities of third gender Filipinos were fully recognized in the pre-colonial period. Powers including Spain, Japan, and the United

⁴An estimate of 80,000 to 200,000 Japanese, Korean, Chinese, Taiwanese, Filipino, Dutch and Indonesian women were forced to provide sex service to the Japanese military during the Pacific War (Mendoza 248). These women were called “comfort women.” Katharina Mendoza argues that “the comfort system can be understood as a disciplinary institution that, through the use of women’s bodies, disciplined the soldier with the intent of creating a body that was both intelligible and useful for furthering the Japanese imperial project” (251). Maria Rosa Henson’s *Comfort Woman: Slave of Destiny* is one of the few memoirs written by a Filipino woman narrating her experience of working in Japanese military brothels.

⁵It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze Talusan’s activism in revealing the violence that trans Filipina women face, especially with regard to their detailed reports on the killing of Laude and the trans movement’s pursuit of justice for Laude’s death. Talusan’s publications on Laude’s death include: “How the Killing of a Trans Filipina Woman Ignited an International Incident.” *Vice*, 26 Feb. 2015, www.vice.com/en/article/avyd4z/how-to-get-away-with-murder-0000602-v22n3; “Jennifer Laude’s Death Would’ve Caused an Outcry—If She Wasn’t Transgender.” *The Guardian*, 28 Jul. 2015, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jul/28/jennifer-laude-death-transgender-philippines; “The Aftermath of a Marine’s Conviction in the Death of a Philippine Trans Woman.” *Buzzfeed*, 3 Jan. 2016, www.buzzfeednews.com/article/meredithtalusan/the-aftermath-of-jennifer-laude-and-joseph-scott-pemberton.

States brought over a colonial standpoint of sexism that not only demonized indigenous femininity but led to the rape and murder of transgender individuals.

Talusan continues to investigate this colonial concept of sexism by revealing the social expectation of women and the subsequent danger of meeting this expectation. Talusan “learned about trying to live up to an ideal of attractiveness but being beset with obstacles as soon as you approached it, how the prettier you are, the less you’re taken seriously, how you become more vulnerable to harassment or rape” (289). In addition to British women authors, Talusan shows empathy to the women characters in these authors’ literature. Talusan highlights Rossetti’s portrayal of the plight of women, including how easily women may be lured by male temptation in “Goblin Market” and the way women exist only to impress men in “In an Artist’s Studio” (155). “Goblin Market” narrates the story of young women being tempted by fruits of goblin merchants, because of which some even lose their lives. At the end of the story, Lizzie saves Laura’s life by purchasing some fruit from the merchants, although the merchants attempt to force Lizzie to eat the fruit herself. “In an Artist’s Studio” presents several portraits of the same gorgeous woman who was only captured for her beauty, which indicates the objectification of women. Like these women characters, Talusan confesses that “so much of me had been molded by my desire to be worthy of other people’s approval” (155). Here Talusan refers to herself maintaining an attractive gay figure. Practicing cross-dressing was their rebellion against the social expectation of a masculine gay man. However, it meets the expectation of a beautiful woman, which made Talusan easily become a target of sex violence. Talusan encountered a man from a gay bar who desperately and violently kissed them against their will without knowing that Talusan was a man (294–95).

Talusan further relates their experience of being harassed to other women’s plight told by the female performers of the show called *The Vagina Monologues*. Talusan auditioned for the show as a man in October 2001, and by the time they performed several nights in February 2002, they had decided to permanently transition to womanhood (285, 296). The performer’s group had twenty women studying at MIT, and one of them told the story of a woman being given the choice of whether to be raped or killed (289–290). Hearing this, Talusan recalls their story of being chased by several men after one of them approached Talusan and threatened Talusan for not agreeing to have sex with him (290). Relating their traumatic experience as a trans woman to cisgender women, Talusan realized that “what I went through as a trans woman was not fundamentally different from what they’d been going through their entire lives” (290).

Reflecting on women’s plight made Talusan start reconsidering the advantages of manhood which they had enjoyed for a long time when identifying as a man. They eventually alienated themselves from this male privilege. Talusan admits that “I identified with the challenges women faced rather than the power of men and found myself experiencing regret over the ways I had taken advantage of being male, how I didn’t do household chores like the women in my family, how I was consistently praised for being smart while girls were only expected to be beautiful” (296). Talusan also recalled how much freedom they felt as a nineteen-year-old young man during a summer trip in London (289). A man did not need to pay attention to danger while wandering on the street and going to clubs late at night, which could have been dramatically different for

the other gender. Using Talusan's words, "[m]y great adventure would have been compromised, and yet that compromise suddenly felt like an unavoidable part as a woman" (290).

I argue that Talusan's rejection of male privilege is a key step of questioning what Adrienne Rich terms "male-identification" (190) and progressing towards her notion of "woman-identification" (199). Rich defines male-identification as "the casting of one's social, political, and intellectual allegiances with men" (189). She cites Catharine A. MacKinnon from *Sexual Harassment of Working Women* that the effect of male-identification means "internalizing the values of the colonizer and actively participating in carrying out the colonization of one's self and one's sex. [...] Male identification is the act whereby women place men above women, including themselves, in credibility, status, and importance in most situations, regardless of the comparative quality the women may bring to the situation" (190). Put it another way, when identifying with men, women accept the opinion that men's values are naturally entitled, and men's authority cannot be challenged. Talusan's confession—that they had taken advantage of the power that is only given to men—stands in opposition to such male-identification. Instead, Rich proposes woman-identification as a form of "female power," with which women see other women as "allies, life companions, and community," and together they can "*change the social relations of sexes, to liberate [themselves] and each other*" (199, italic in original). Developing from Rich, I argue that Talusan as a transwoman of color practices woman-identification by cultivating empathy with other women for their shared vulnerability to gender-based violence. Talusan suggests that "[t]he fact that I could experience these threats and hear terrible stories from other women only fortified my belief that I should be a woman myself" (296).

In this article, I have analyzed the formation of Talusan's decolonial trans Filipina identity as described in their recently released memoir *Fairest*. I have examined how Talusan, as a colonial subject, gay immigrant, and trans Filipina woman, continuously conforms to, negotiates with, and rebels against the heteronormativity that prevails throughout the U.S. transnational empire. Both at home and as part of the diaspora, Talusan navigates the rules of white heteropatriarchy while confronting the widespread colonial message of American superiority as communicated in American popular culture, white gay cultural practices that value desirability and visibility, the policing of white women for domesticity, and the regulation of indigenous non-normative gender. Talusan's critique of the colonial ideas normalizing whiteness, gender, and heterosexuality reveals that Filipinos and Filipino Americans, Asian gay men, white women, and trans women of color are all situated together within the framework of white heteropatriarchy, although I have no intention of claiming homogeneity within each group, nor of saying that the struggles of different communities are identical.

Talusan's *Fairest* is still one of the few book-length memoirs by and about a trans woman of color ever published in the United States. As a pioneering work, *Fairest* contains Talusan's decolonized knowledge of race, gender, and sexuality, cultivated as they traveled between the Philippines and the United States. As *Fairest* suggests, a new trans politics should indicate the intersection of gender, sexuality, and colonization. This intersectionality provides a basis for female power that unites women from different

backgrounds but having shared experiences of oppression due to the colonial influence of machismo.



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