

Absence
Leaves
a Mark

ILLUSTRATING
FILIPINO MIGRANT
STORIES

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**Absence Leaves a Mark:
Illustrating Filipino Migrant Stories**

Nina Martinez
2024

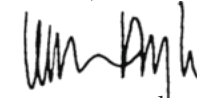
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for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of
Illustration at the Rhode Island School of Design
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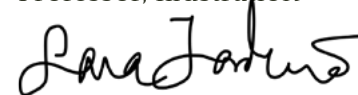
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Immigration rights
 - New Jersey / Immigration rights
 - Elmhurst, Queens / Domestic violence
 - France, Jamaica / Rights as a worker
 - Peru, Queens / Rights as a worker



ABSTRACT

From July to October 2023, I volunteered at Damayan Migrant Workers Association, a New York City-based grassroots organization run by Filipino im/migrant workers dedicated to combatting labor trafficking. Every meeting opened with the same reminder: stories shared in this room do not leave it. Illustration became a tool for respecting the privacy of the members, many of whom were undocumented. Avoiding faces, I copied down objects, places, maps, and handwriting.

Absence Leaves a Mark explores the idea of illustration as field note when working with migrant populations. Beyond depicting visual witness, illustrated field notes can contain findings from research and conversation. Illustration allows for creative use of space, cropping, and position, and embraces the subjectivity of experience.

My final project is a visual essay about Little Manila, a small area in Queens around which Filipino im/migrants have lived for decades. Created from notes taken during walks, conversations, and data analysis, I narrate my experience as a recent migrant from the Philippines discovering Little Manila, and depict the culture and issues of a community that strives to stay visible in the wake of a pandemic and under the threat of gentrification.



Trafficking Survivors
 Mothers
 Family Separation
 Woman
 40s-50s
 DWS/MW's



How to
 Protect
 11/16





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INTRODUCTION

Stories shared in this room do not leave it

In the summer of 2023, I met with Damayan Migrant Workers Association, a New York City-based grassroots organization founded, led, and staffed by former and current Filipino migrant workers. I spent weekends volunteering at their events. Many of their members had first come to seek help about an abusive employer or to get out of a trafficking situation. Many were undocumented. The staff would open each meeting with the same reminder: stories shared in this room do not leave it. Notebook in hand, I refrained from taking down names, faces, or specific events. Instead, I drew what I saw around me: trays of food, narrow hallways, writings on the wall. These illustrated “field notes,” inspired by the techniques of artist Jill Gibbon and anthropologist Michael Taussig, mean to record data from eyewitness, conversation, and research.

My interactions with Damayan brought me to Little Manila in Queens, New York. Filipino im/migrant workers have lived around this area for decades, but the city only officially renamed the corner to Little Manila Avenue in 2022 after a community campaign. In 2024, Little Manila endures, but it bears the scars of a pandemic that disproportionately affected migrant workers and now must ward off the threat of gentrification.

I propose illustration as a form of note-taking while protecting the anonymity of a vulnerable migrant population. My final project is a visual essay about my encounter with Little Manila as a recent migrant from the Philippines. Absence leaves a mark—empty or negative space communicates the invisibility of Little Manila and its people in mainstream media, but also their persistent work to be seen and heard.

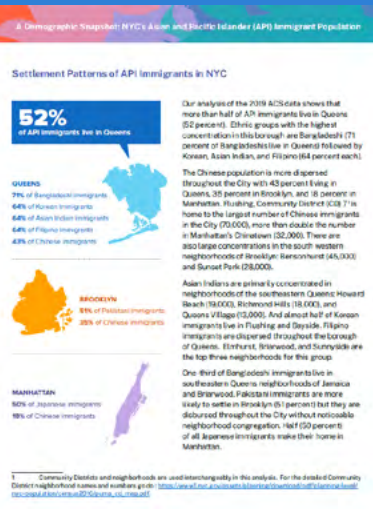




In 2015, author Kevin Nadal and the Filipino American National Historical Society published *Filipinos in New York City*, a visual history compiled from archival photographs sent by Filipino American community members. It spans from Filipinos' first arrivals in New York after the Spanish-American War in 1898, to the pivotal 1965 Immigration Act that saw a massive influx of Filipino nurses, to the enduring presence of artists and activists groups in Little Manila. The photographs were gathered from community contributions, resulting in the majority of them featuring special occasions and families in formal wear (fig. 1). There is a noticeable focus on upper- and upper-middle-class Filipino Americans who attended private universities in New York, participated in beauty pageants, and attended galas.

The City of New York Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs frequently releases quantitative evaluations and reports on their website related to New York's Asian immigrant population, which resides overwhelmingly in Queens. In June 2021, they reported that there were 54,295 Filipinos in New York City, with 64% living in Queens (7). Other notable statistics include that 12% of Filipino immigrants live in poverty, 61% of them are female, 23% are 65 years or older, and over half are college graduates. The publicly-available report is colorfully designed and concludes with a series of posters, titled *We Are More*, by artist Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya, commissioned by the city for their Stop Asian Hate campaign. The posters feature digital portraits of AAPI individuals with captions relating to common anti-Asian sentiments such as "I DID NOT MAKE YOU SICK" and "THIS IS OUR HOME TOO." (fig. 2)

Nadal's book, while community-engaged, privileges those within his social network or who have access to old family photos. The reports published by MOIA have a vibrant design with colorful infographics but must spread its focus across all immigrant populations in New York. In both cases, there is an issue of visibility.



Top row and center right: Figure 1. Photos of visibly wealthy Filipinos from *Filipinos in New York City* (pg 25, 29, 30).

Center left and bottom right: Figure 2. Pages 7 and 13 from *Fact Sheet: NYC's Asian and Pacific Islander (API) Immigrant Population*.

Demographic Snapshot: NYC's Asian and Pacific Islander (API) Immigrant Population

Conclusion

Despite a long history of having been in the U.S. and increasing numbers and political influence today, API immigrants continue to experience a recurring dynamic of "othering," which underlies the increasing xenophobic and anti-API hate crimes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Promoting deeper understanding of API communities, including their diversity and complexity, must be part of the national strategy to address this systemic racism. For more information about the City's Stop Asian Hate campaign and toolkits to address anti-Asian bias, discrimination and hate, visit the New York City Commission on Human Rights' webpage available at nyc.gov/stophate/hate.

"We Are More" is an art series that celebrates the resilience and courage of Asian American and Pacific Islander communities. The series seeks to break down tired worn-out clichés and stereotypes of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and forge in its stead a vibrant, multidimensional identity that encompasses the assistance and range of the communities. Featuring dynamic visuals, bold typography and human stories, "We Are More" is an award-winning series in partnership with Times Square Arts with subsequent installations appearing in Boston and other cities around the United States. Learn more and download all the images at stopahate.nyc.gov

SURVEY

Filipinos and New York City

LOST IN TRANSLATION

Reportage, Fieldwork, and Derrida

Reportage drawing is defined by art scholar Dr. Louis Netter as “the contemporary practice of drawing people and places *in situ* from observation, memory, imagination or some combination thereof.” (Netter 208) There is already much writing about drawing as a tool for documentation and how its visible hand emphasizes personal and subjective experience (Netter 209).

He writes about artist Jill Gibbon’s Ph.D. project in which she infiltrates an arms trading event in London and draws what she sees in her notebook. He makes a note of both external constraints—she had to conceal both her identity and her drawings—and her self-imposed rules—she allowed herself to continue drawing a scene even after the figures have moved on, or to composite multiple events across time into one drawing, but does not add to the drawing after she herself has left the location (Netter 214). Gibbon readily admits the political intent coloring her project, which in turn influenced what she chose to capture (Netter 213).

Other fields have found value in reportage drawing. In his 2011 book, *I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely My Own*, anthropologist Michael Taussig writes how drawing alongside his written notes has shaped his ethnographic practice. He discusses its use when, in Medellin, Colombia, he recorded seeing people lying inside a tunnel (2), a man juggling sticks of fire beneath a highway (8), and ex-ELN guerrilleros (18). Drawing, as Taussig sees it, “intervenes in the reckoning of reality in ways that writing and photography do not.” (13) He points out that photography is a separate process occurring outside of one’s notes, whereas drawing can exist seamlessly on a page with writing (21).

He talks, importantly, about how field notes are often viewed as private, disorganized data that is later translated into a polished, published text that shows no trace of the process. He raises the question: “what is lost in translation?” (33)

Gibbon’s and Taussig’s experiments both bring to mind Jacques Derrida’s writings on absence and presence. Written language is not the presence of something itself, Derrida writes in *Of Grammatology*, but a chain of signifiers referring to it, whether it is a physical object or an idea. The same goes, Derrida claims, for images. He writes, “The image is death.” (184) An image, whether visual or mental, uses signifiers to refer to something beyond itself, and necessarily falls short, resulting in the death, or absence, of the original. What is left is only a trace. Gibbon’s and Taussig’s drawings, often rushed, minimalistic linework, quite literally reflect that idea.

But does that make word and image inferior to physical presence? Derrida argues against this. People witness and remember the same events in different ways. Word and image, in the absence of the original, reflect that subjectivity. Absence is not the opposite of presence; instead, the two concepts rely on each other. When Derrida writes that “the image is death,” he does not mean it to be the opposite or end of the actual object; instead, the image makes the existence of that object all the more concrete.



FIELD NOTES

A methodology

In my research with Damayan, and then Little Manila, I test a system that combines ideas put forth by Netter, Gibbon, Taussig, and Derrida. In Damayan, the external constraint is in not taking down faces or details that would betray the anonymity of its members or their stories. Despite no such rule existing in my exploration of Little Manila, I reproduce this note-taking method and avoid faces in favor of places, objects, and signs, to see what kind of ideas or meaning I might discover. In both sites, I converse with community members, explore the physical locations and signs of life within them, and perform my own research.

I continuously find myself drawn to negative space, an element used frequently in illustration. I use it to indicate absence: absence of Filipino migrant workers' visibility in the media and an absence of a comprehensive understanding of Little Manila. Derrida writes that language and image leave a trace of the original in its absence. In my project, absence leaves a mark: more conspicuous, more permanent, and calling out to be seen.



ABSENCE LEAVES A MARK

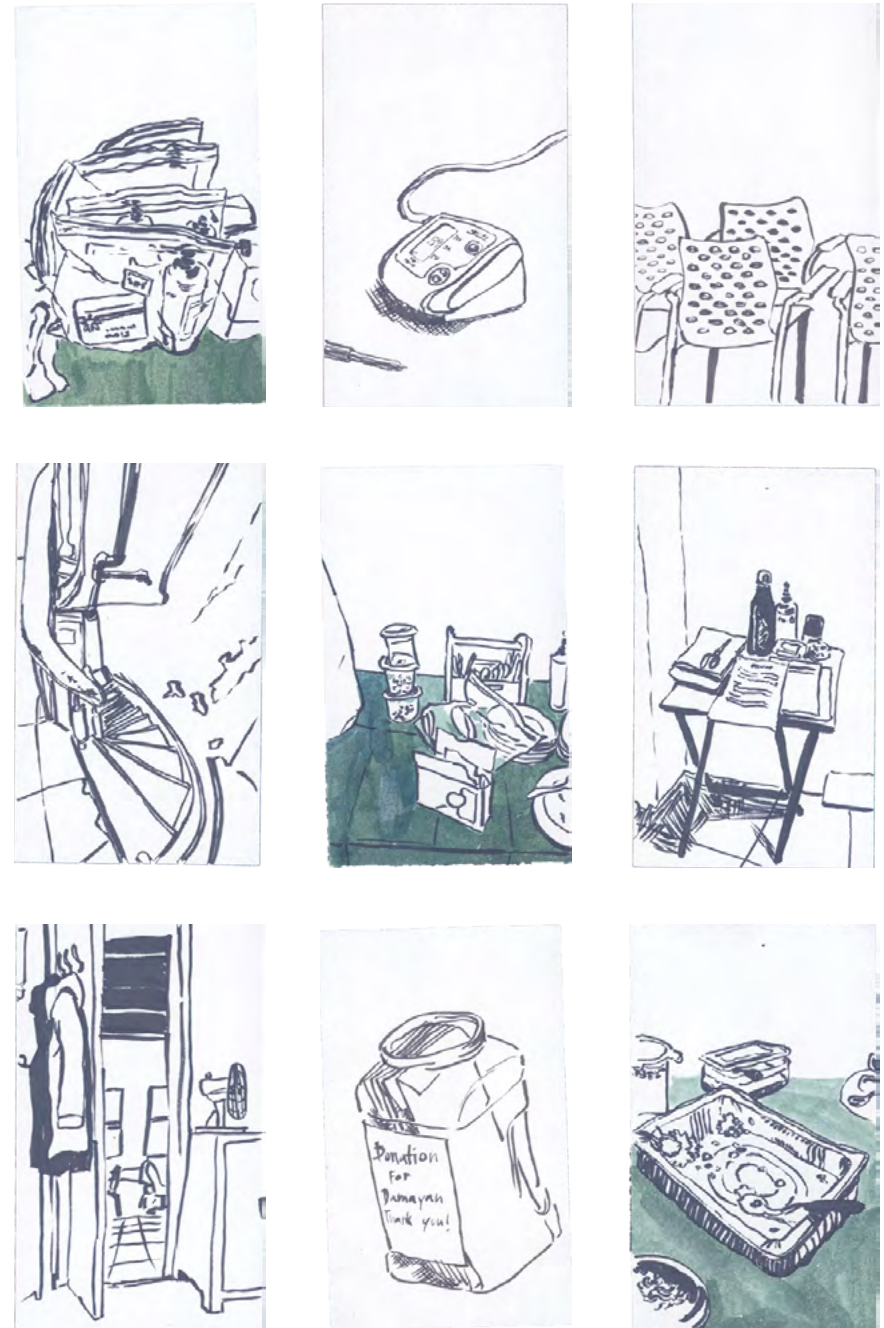
Damayan Migrant Workers Association

Damayan Migrant Workers Association is a not-for-profit grassroots organization based in Manhattan, New York, dedicated to addressing issues of Filipino migrant workers, such as labor trafficking, labor abuse, and discrimination. It was founded in 2002 by Linda Oalican, a former migrant domestic worker and labor abuse survivor.

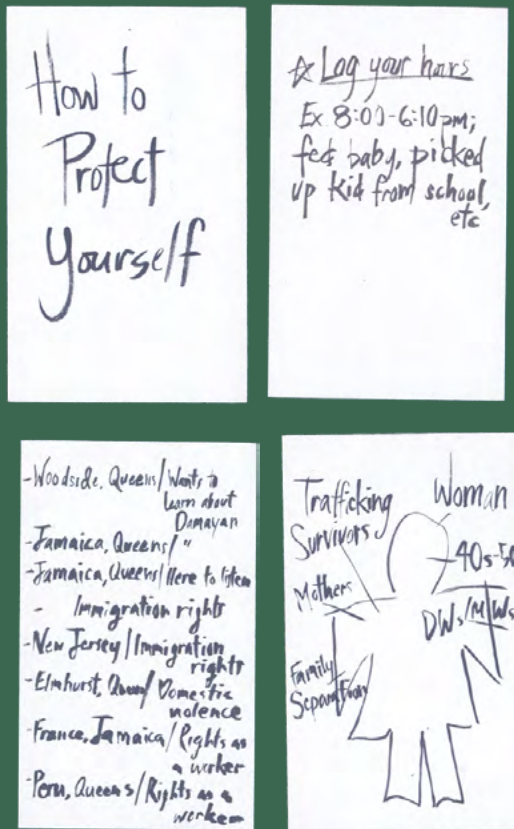
Today, it is headed by executive director Riya Ortiz, Linda's daughter, and the full-time staff is almost entirely composed of Filipino im/migrant workers.

I volunteered at Damayan events, overseeing registration, clicking through slideshows, and cleaning up. This allowed me to sit in at meetings and observe Damayan's community-building strategies. I attended multiple legal clinics, members' meetings, an outdoor health screening, and a political discussion.

Stories shared in this room do not leave it. To respect the privacy of attendees seeking legal and immigration assistance, I followed this system: I would not draw their faces or defining features or take down names. Drawn on 3" x 5" index cards, their smallness and vignette-like nature emphasize the privacy and anonymity being granted to the human subjects (fig. 3).



Right: Figure 3. Objects and spaces from Damayan events.



I captured the trays of food brought by members, forms and pens crowded on foldable tables. In drawings focused on specific objects, I often omitted background details, and my sketches of rooms only reveal a small section of them, typically the corner. I also recreated things the director wrote on posters and boards and mimicked her handwriting. When she asked attendees to describe the typical Damayan member, she wrote their responses on the board and I copied them down (fig. 4).

I used a brush pen, as its strokes most accurately replicate the speed and pressure of the gestures of my hand. The fluidity and translucency of ink also emphasize the temporality of the image, both in the fleetingness of the moment captured and the quickness with which I had to draw it.

Like Taussig, I worked to create drawings that “come across as fragments that are suggestive of a world beyond, a world that does not have to be explicitly recorded and is in fact all the more “complete” because it cannot be completed.” (13)

Figure 4. Writing by the executive director on sheets and boards. From left to right: an excerpt from a list of tips on how to protect oneself from labor exploitation, the locations and motivations of attendees, the “typical” Damayan member.

During one event, a staff member pulled me aside to tell me that they had two new attendees interested in becoming members of Damayan, and asked me to take their ID pictures on my phone. I was surprised to be entrusted with this task. The members stood before a wall with a false wood veneer as I took their photos.

Struck by this moment, I impulsively drew the members' photos by replicating the wooden texture around them, leaving the space of their actual figures blank (fig. 5). This was my first use of inverted negative space in the exercise, and I later would find myself drawn back to it repeatedly.

Over this four month period, I felt I had gathered a small but intimate profile of the Damayan community. They were generous and collaborative, catering events on their own, contributing monetary donations when able, but also driven and protective, ensuring that attendees' consultations with lawyers happened in private rooms away from others.



Figure 5. Drawings of the ID photos.

Little Manila, Queens

Little Manila is a small section of Roosevelt Avenue in Queens, New York frequented by Filipino im/migrants (Nadal 65). The blocks, entirely located beneath the elevated 7 line, are populated with Filipino groceries, restaurants, salons, and courier services. The Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs reports that, as of 2021, 64% of Filipinos in New York live in Queens, with the majority in the neighborhood of Elmhurst, right off Little Manila.

I was introduced to Little Manila through Damayan when they held a free health screening there in September 2023. A conversation with a staff member revealed to me that many of their members—domestic workers and caregivers—return from work in upstate New York and the Upper East Side, take a train down to Midtown Manhattan, then finally the 7 home to Queens. A large number of the Filipinos living are employed in healthcare and domestic work (Philippine Statistics Authority).

In March 2024, I interviewed Jaclyn Reyes, a Filipino–American artist, community organizer, and co–founder of LMQ Bayanihan Arts, an initiative that looks to involve the Little Manila community in public art projects. She spearheaded the successful campaign to rename the corner of Roosevelt Avenue and 70th Street to Little Manila Avenue (Reyes).

Bayanihan Arts’ most recent projects, including the Little Manila Avenue street sign, were dedicated to memorializing the Filipino healthcare workers who were affected by the pandemic (Reyes). Several news articles refer to Elmhurst Hospital as an epicenter of COVID-19 at the height of the pandemic (Carrington). The hospital is located in the Elmhurst neighborhood, where a majority of Filipino Queens residents live. Despite only making up 4% of registered



nurses in America, nearly 50% of nurses who have died from COVID-19 have been Filipino (National Nurses United 5). Erwin Lambrento, a nurse working in Elmhurst Hospital, passed away in May 2020 (Visaya).

Simultaneously, Little Manila is resisting gentrification. Reyes says that its location is attractive due to its proximity with the Long Island Rail Road, 7 train, and LaGuardia Airport, and that corporations and real estate companies have attempted to buy the blocks. She emphasizes that the root cause of the issues of both domestic and healthcare workers in Little Manila is bad policies—both in the Philippines and the United States. A poor economy and labor export industry have driven Filipinos out of the country to work abroad, and America’s lack of protections for immigrant workers has allowed them to slip through the cracks. “Like, yeah, we got the street sign,” she says, “but how many aunties died because of it, you know?”



Figure 6. Scenes of Little Manila.

I made multiple visits to Little Manila over the course of six months from September 2023 to February 2024. In some instances, I was accompanied by Damayan staff for events or outings; in others, I was alone, left to explore the area myself. During all of them, I took notes in several forms: photos, videos, audio recordings, and of course, sketches. I was most often drawn to the area's location beneath the elevated train, the signage, the historic brickwork, and marks of Filipino culture such as religious icons and straw brooms (fig. 6).

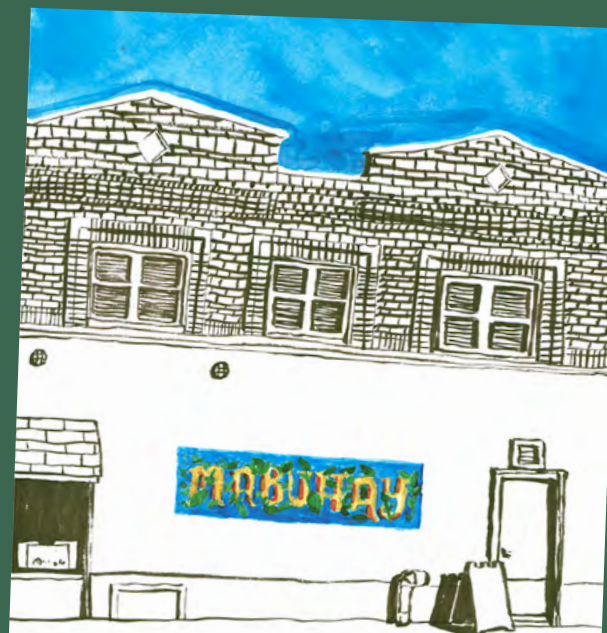




Figure 7. A sketch of my evening out in Little Manila in February 2024.

A defining moment occurred in February 2024, near the end of my visits. After attending a legal clinic by Damayan, the staff invited me to dinner at a restaurant to celebrate the birthday of a worker's mother. We left the Manhattan office as a group and took the 7 train to Little Manila.

The restaurant, named Kabayan, was fully staffed—and filled—with Filipinos, including a live band. At one point, the band encouraged diners to join a line dance, and many of us did. I wanted to record the moment without explicitly capturing anyone's identities. Lacking my notebook and pen, I began recording video on my phone, and held it in my hand as I danced with everyone else. The resulting video captures not only my hand's movements as I swayed in unison with others, but also everyone's voices singing along to Gloria Gaynor's *I Will Survive*. With only this recording to guide me, I attempted to recreate the moment in illustration, with attention paid to the light, energy, and density of people and sound (fig. 7).



TRACING LITTLE MANILA
the visual essay

Figure 9. A rainy day in Little Manila
replicated with acrylic paint resist.

The final project is a visual essay with 2,250 words and 30 illustrations in the format of a longform journalistic piece. It is an overview of the current state of Little Manila, two years after it was given its name by the city, as well as a profile of certain members of the community who work to address its issues.

The piece opens with an anecdote about my experience volunteering at Damayan's free health screening in Little Manila on September 2023. I give a brief history of the area, then share the challenges it faces today: the threat of gentrification, and the disempowerment caused by a political district map that cleaves the community in half.

I share Jaclyn Reyes' account of the campaign and unveiling of the Little Manila Avenue street sign, and through this reveal statistics about Filipino nurses in the US, particularly those in Queens. I talk about my experience volunteering with Damayan and the issues faced by Filipino domestic workers. The piece concludes with the story of my evening at the restaurant with Damayan staff.

The final illustrations, made entirely with acrylic ink on watercolor paper, utilize a combination of color, linework, and negative space (fig. 8). My palette was mostly limited to the green of the elevated train, sky blue, red for interiors, and sepia for architectural detail, except for moments in which a specific color was significant (straw brooms, religious icons, or the lighting in the restaurant).

My linework pays conspicuous attention to brickwork and signage. I allowed the contours of negative space to define the rest of the streetside. In an illustration that depicts the Damayan health screening during a rainy day, I first created the raindrops with white acrylic paint on a blank piece of paper. When I brushed green ink over it afterwards, the acrylic naturally resisted the color, and I was able to create a translucent rain effect (fig. 9). Negative space, overall, became a tool to give a sense of form, space, and dimension.

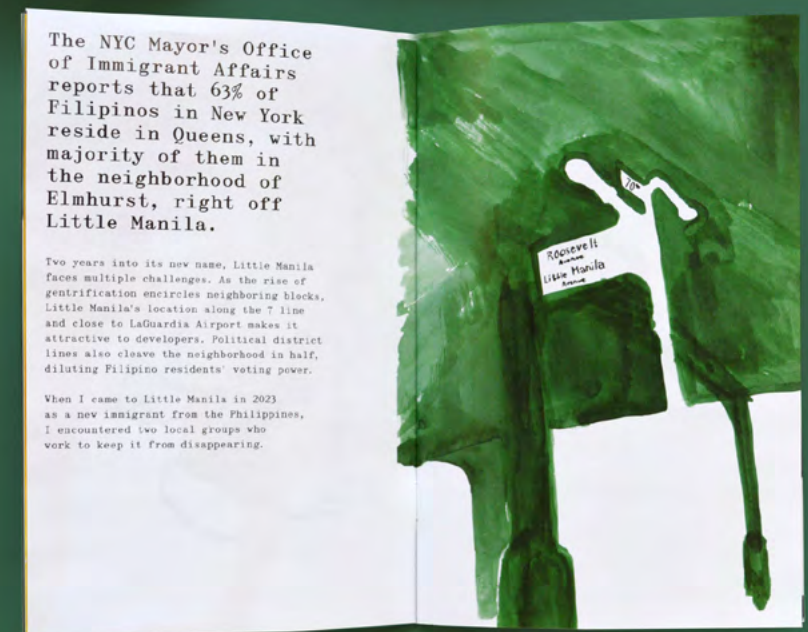
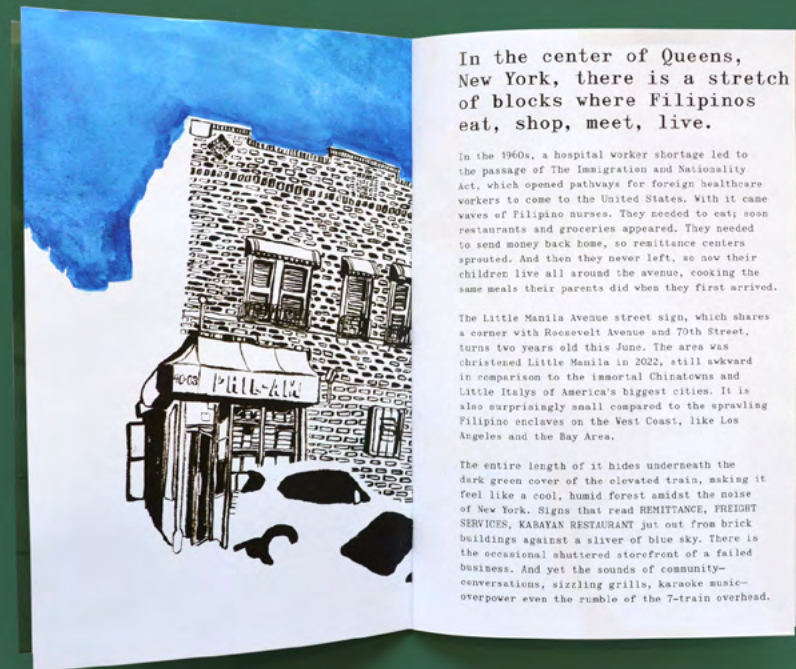


Figure 8. Spreads from the visual essay.



Figure 10. A map showing the political districts containing the Filipino neighborhood in Queens.

Another category of illustration in the essay was maps (fig. 10). Rather than use traditional linework, I described the map of Manhattan and Queens by surrounding them with large washes of color. I then only articulated what was necessary for the topic at hand: political districts, the location of Elmhurst Hospital, or the commute of many Filipino domestic workers.

The piece overall became a study not just of absence, but place and focus. I drew three portraits: Jaelyn Reyes, Linda Oalican, and Riya Ortiz (fig. 11), but generally avoided including human figures in my illustration. This was to keep focus on Little Manila as a place, as well as my own personal experience of exploring it.

At the very end, I am joined again by other figures inside the restaurant, to emphasize that Little Manila exists due to the community that keeps it alight, and alive (see fig. 7 again).

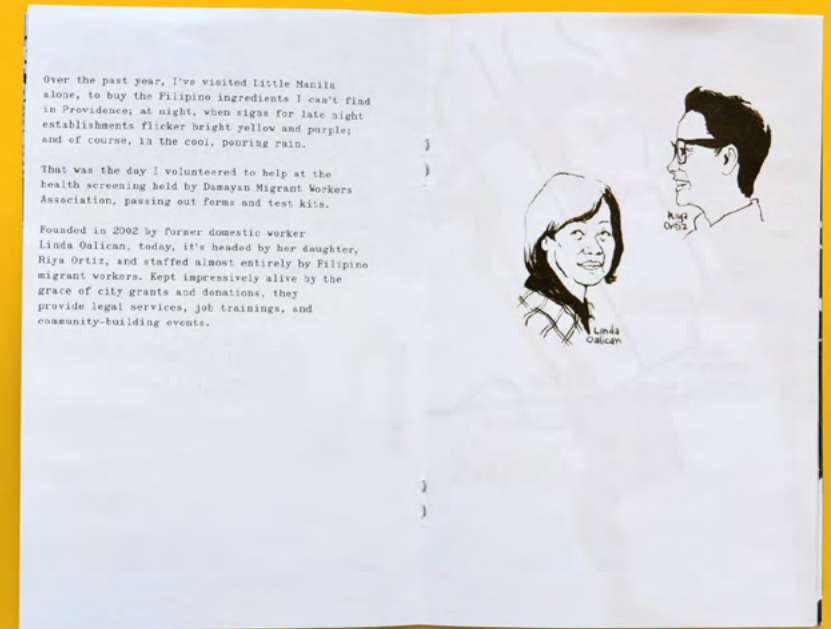


Figure 11. More spreads from the visual essay.

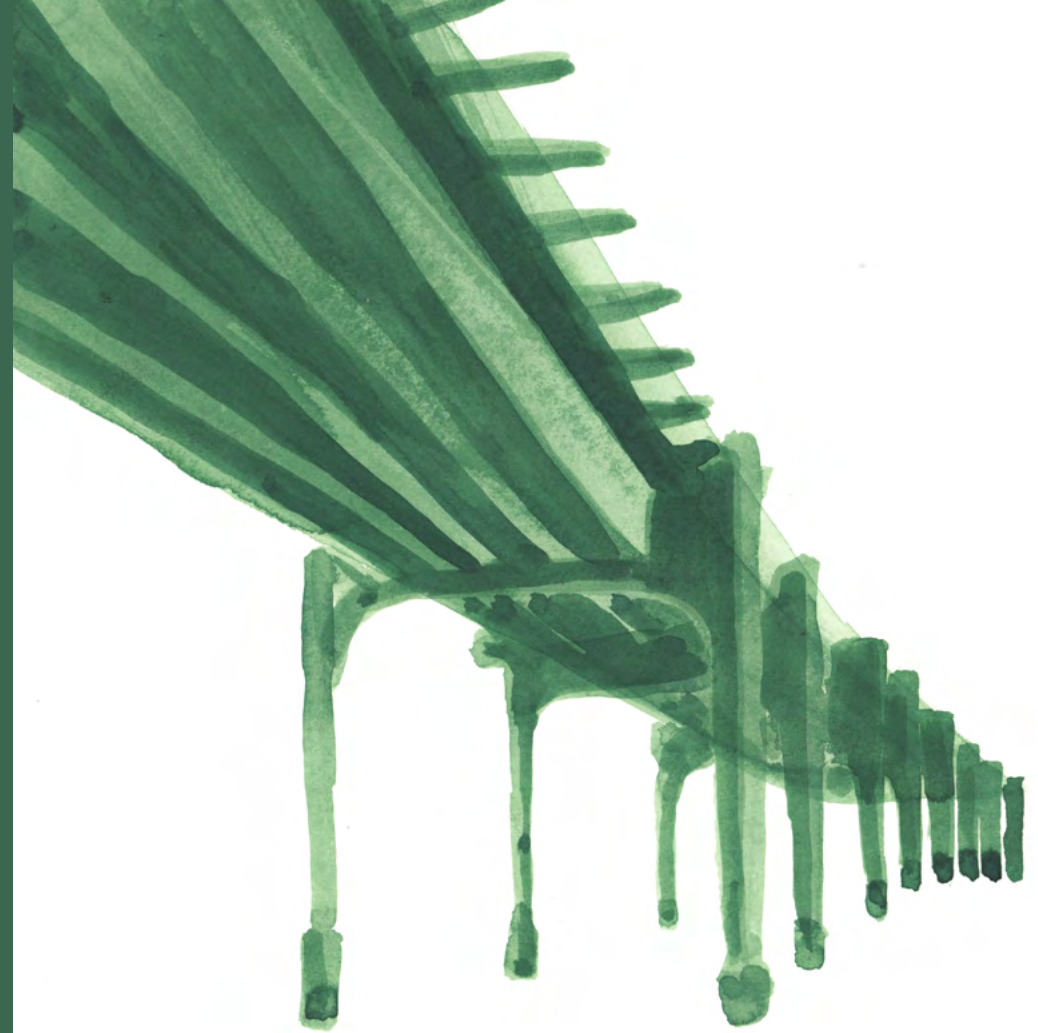
CONCLUSION

A sense of home

This project looked to explore illustration as a form of note-taking when recording and sharing the stories of Filipino migrant workers. Many of my personal impulses as an illustrator—preference towards ink, use of negative space, avoidance of faces—worked together to compose a profile of Little Manila that can be understood as both an introduction to the area as well as an individual’s personal recollection of it. Initially born from the constraint of protecting Damayan members’ identities, the use of anonymity helped to highlight the invisibility of these people in mainstream media.

The visual essay occasionally featured maps. They served as a helpful visual to demonstrate multiple layers of research, such as census data, existing maps, information obtained from conversation, and personal travel experience. The illustration of political district lines dividing ethnic enclaves was a particularly interesting project and could be applied to other communities in New York.

The research and illustration produced from this project can continue to be published in new forms and contexts. While the intended audience of the visual essay was for educated readers of news and magazines, there’s a rich opportunity to place this work before the Little Manila community itself. What would their opinion be on a new immigrant artist’s interpretation of their home? How do they themselves see Little Manila? Now that a relationship has been established with LMQ Bayanihan Arts, who ask these kinds of questions themselves, a larger-scale, more community practice-oriented project could be attempted.



I had embarked on this project in July 2023, viewing myself as an outsider studying the Filipino diaspora. I realized over time that the communities I interacted with viewed me as part of theirs—quite accurately, as I am now an immigrant from the Philippines. My sense of home had quietly shifted over the course of this thesis, and now resides somewhere hazy and uncertain, encompassing an entire route across the Pacific Ocean, between two Manilas.

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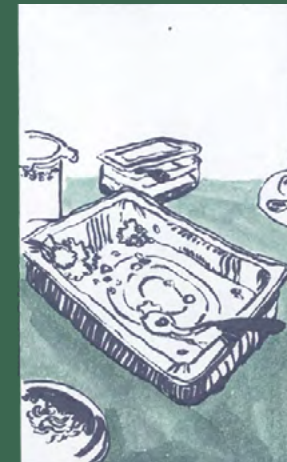
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Immigration rights
- New Jersey / Immigration rights
- Elmhurst, Queens / Domestic violence
- France, Jamaica / Rights as a worker
- Peru, Queens / Rights as a worker



Trafficking Survivors
Woman
40s-50s
Mothers
DVs/MVs
Family Separation



How to Protect



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NINA MARTINEZ IS AN ILLUSTRATOR
FROM METRO MANILA, PHILIPPINES