Documentary Ethics and Trans Activism in the Philippines (with Curran Nault)

[opening music]

Dr. Juan Llamas-Rodriguez (JLR): Welcome to the Global Media Cultures podcast. I am your host, Juan Llamas-Rodriguez. Today we are talking about trans activism in the Philippines and the potential transformative power of documentary.

Our guest is Dr. Curran Nault, Assistant Professor in the Department of Radio-Television-Film at the University of Texas at Austin and a faculty affiliate of the LGBTQ Studies and the Center for Asian American Studies. They're the author of *Queercore: Queer Punk Media Subculture*, and their scholarship on grassroots trans media subcultures has been published in such journals as *Jump Cut, Transgender Studies Quarterly, The NeoAmericanist, Feminist Media Studies*, and the *Journal of Film and Video*, as well as various anthologies.

A public-facing scholar, Curran is the Founder/Artistic Director of the queer trans media festival OUTsider, co-producer of the documentaries *Before You Know It* and *Call Her Ganda* and the co-founder of the Austin Asian American Film Festival. Curran, welcome to the Global Media Cultures podcast.

Dr. Curran Nault (CN): Thank you. It's wonderful to be here.

JLR: I want to start by asking you, can you tell us more about your research and, I guess, practice interests? Why do these topics interest you and why are they an important area to study?

CN: Yeah, definitely. So my research centers on grassroots or DIY, do it yourself, queer trans media artivism, or art and activism. So what I'm really interested in is subcultural queer productions that are being created outside of, or at least on the outskirts of, the mainstream media industries and that are motivated by something beyond financial gain. They have activist aims, they're invested in community building over commerce.

For me, that's really where Queer culture exists in the world-making potential that we often associate with culture, because those are the spaces where creativity happens, where something out of the box happens, and where I think folks are really envisioning new

imaginings, new sociopolitical landscapes for how we might organize the world. So, yeah, in my mind, I consider my work really about the core of queer culture and queer cultural creativity.

JLR: Great. So today we're discussing your article, "Documenting the Dead: *Call Her Ganda*, and The Trans Activist Afterlife of Jennifer Laude," published in *Transgender Studies Quarterly* in 2021. So it's fresh off the digital publishing.

CN: Yes. Yeah.

JLR: Can you give us a brief history of this essay, starting when you started thinking about it or working on it? How did the ideas change in the process of research and of writing it?

CN: Sure. Yeah. Well, I'll give you a little bit of the backstory to how the article came about, which is also how the documentary that I wrote the article about came about, because they happened in tandem with one another.

So it all started in 2014 when my partner, who's PJ Raval, was the director of the film called Call Her Ganda. Both of us went to the Philippines to a film festival called the Pink Film Festival in Quezon City, in Manila, in the Philippines. PJ had been invited there to show his previous documentary, *Before You Know It*, which is about gay senior citizens.

But while we were there, he was put on a panel on gender rights, gender and human rights, in which he was on the panel with a woman named Virgie Suarez, who's an anti-imperial activist and also a prosecuting attorney in the Philippines.

She, as it turns out, is the person that the Laude Family, Jennifer Laude Family, who I'll explain in a second, hired for a key case that had just happened in the Philippines. And so, from this attorney, Virgie Suarez, we first learned the story of Jennifer Laude.

So Jennifer Laude was a trans Filipino woman who was murdered in 2014 by a US Marine. So that had happened about two months before PJ and I's trip to the Philippines. I'm sad to say that we had no real knowledge that this had happened. Maybe we'd seen a line about it somewhere on social media, but we really weren't aware of this case at all.

And so, hearing Virgie talk about this case on this panel was a shocking and also really embarrassing moment as people coming from the United States. We were the two US folks at

the festival and not knowing this story of something that our government was involved in that had led to the death of this trans Filipino woman.

So that was our first introduction to the story. At that same panel, we got the chance to watch a video from Jennifer's mother, Nanay Julita, in which it was just a YouTube, very basic style video where she was doing a direct address to us in the audience, pleading with us to bring Jennifer's story to our locations that we come to the festival from to find justice for Jennifer.

And so PJ and I, we talked a lot about this, about how could we not know about the story? What also came to our attention during that trip was there was a lot of activism happening in the streets due to Jennifer's murder.

This was also an eye-opening experience for both of us because these were really robust, fiery protests that were happening in the streets. They were also bringing together trans LGBTQ activists and anti-imperial activists in the streets. I had never really seen those kinds of forces mixed together, particularly in such a robust way. So that was also really powerful and educational experience for me as well.

And so, long story short, although it took us a while to come to this determination because PJ felt ... Even though he's Filipino American, he felt like as a Filipino American, he wasn't necessarily the right person to tell this story. It should be told by folks in the Philippines.

But we eventually came to the realization that there was an importance of educating people, bringing awareness in the ways that we became aware of with this trip back to the United States. The story needed to be told in the Philippines, for sure, but it also needed to be brought back to the country that had caused this in all sorts of direct and indirect ways through the histories of colonization.

And so, yeah, long story short, we decided that we were going to make a documentary about Jennifer Laude's case and what happened after the murder.

JLR: So one of the things you've been mentioning is the positionality as Americans being in the Philippines and the thorny issues around being an American ... Even someone like PJ, a Filipino American, representing this story. So could you talk a little bit more about that context of the relationship of US-Philippines and the neo-imperialist movements against that relationship as well?

CN: Yeah. I mean to give you the brief quick history, the Philippines, as a set of island nations that's in a strategically located position and in relationship to places like China, to Korea, is a resource-rich site. So it has been long colonized by different folks over the years. For the longest period of time is the Spanish colonization, which started in the 1500s and went all the way up until 1898 with the Spanish-American war.

Through the Spanish-American war, Spain essentially ceded the Philippines to the United States. And so, the Philippines, starting around the turn of the last century, becomes a colony of the United States and is really seen as the official beginning of the United States as a colonial power.

That officially lasts, that period of US colonization, until World War II, so 1946. But in all sorts of ways, the United States is still a neo-colonial power in the Philippines, so that legacy lives on in various ways.

One of the main ways that impinges on the story of Jennifer Laude, and that comes up in the documentary as well, is through an agreement between the US and the Philippines called the Visiting Forces Agreement. What that does is essentially any crime that's committed by a US service person in the Philippines, they are under the jurisdiction of the United States.

So essentially the United States gets to decide if that person goes to trial, what are the conditions of how that person goes to trial. You can imagine that that has allowed for all sorts of crimes on behalf of US military forces in the Philippines, sexual assaults, murders, other crimes, to go completely unprosecuted, to be swept under the rug.

And so, Jennifer Laude's case becomes one of the very first instances where a serviceman gets put on trial and is actually eventually convicted, although it's for a lesser charge than they had hoped for. But it's the first conviction.

So the context is very much imbued with this history of US imperialism that has allowed for the US to continually take advantage of its relationship with the Philippines, to treat Philippine citizens as disposable, et cetera. And so, going back also to your original question, that also creates a very complicated dynamic for PJ. Even though he's of Filipino descent, he still grew up in the United States. And I'm a White US citizen, so even more complicated.

So what does it mean to tell a story of another culture that your own culture has had this abusive history towards? But at the same time, as I was saying, that also opens up possibilities of challenging our own culture through that story.

Also, for PJ, I think this became an opportunity, at least on a symbolic level, to reckon with what it means to be Filipino American, to have these two identities that have been in conflict in a lot of ways, that have caused him to feel out of place in the US, as not fitting in in various ways or to feel a sense of tension between those two identities. So the film, in some ways, was him working through those tensions on a personal level as well.

JLR: Right. Right. So in many ways, the case of Jennifer Laude ends up being a flashpoint for a number of things, not only the case itself has been the first time that a US service member is actually tried in the Philippines, despite the Visiting Forces Agreement...

CN: Yeah.

JLR: But then also the film, in some ways, is a way to think about that relationship and what is the responsibility of American creatives to telling the stories of the Philippines and how to do that appropriately too, right?

CN: Yes, exactly.

JLR: So in some ways, *Call Her Ganda* is not the only artistic activist response to Jennifer Laude's death. Can you tell us a bit more about the general response to her murder through activist circles or artist circles and what shape did that take?

CN: So, as we know, the murder of trans women is all too common, not just in the Philippines but across the globe, and particularly trans women of color. In the United States, those deaths generally go ... People are not protesting in mass waves in the street when a trans woman gets killed. So there's also that that was really powerful and moving and compelling, and also really showed a certain lack of activism that's happening in the United States.

So there was that grassroots activism, but in a lot of ways, the film is really highlighting several of the different activist forces that are happening in relationship to the murder of Jennifer through three women who were, in various ways, doing different forms of activism.

One is Naomi Fontanos, who's an amazing grassroots activist. She's the founder and executive director of a transgender rights group called GANDA, Gender and Development Advocates for the Filipinos in the Philippines. So she's one of the key figures in the film who is one of those people that was marching in the streets and demanding something being done.

Virgie Suarez, who I mentioned before, who's the prosecuting attorney and also an anti-imperial activist, is using the law to put pressure on getting justice done for this case. So you have Naomi in the streets, you have Virgie Suarez in the courts.

Then a third main character, Meredith Talusan, is a journalist from the United States. She's also a Filipina American who was trying to bring this story to the attention of the wider public and using the press to amplify the story, to get interest and make sure it didn't get swept under the rug. You also have Jennifer's mother herself, Nanay Julita, who's, in a lot of ways, the reminder of the human cost and the humanity at the center of this of Jennifer's murder.

So I think those characters in the film are representative of the different forms of activism that were happening or are still happening in relation to this murder of Jennifer Laude. There's also been other works that have focused on the death of Jennifer Laude, including there's a narrative film by Jun Lana called *Die Beautiful*, which is a fictional take on Jennifer Laude's death, although it's a fictionalized version. I don't think they used her name in that film.

So there's lots of stuff that has happened. It's become a huge flashpoint in the Philippines for thinking about LGBTQ rights, trans rights, for sure, and also raising these questions of continued US imperialism in the Philippines in a really big way.

JLR: Right. Right. Yeah. It's interesting that there are all of these different levels at the institutional level, like protesting on the street, the trial, where the response is happening, and then the film captures these different levels through the different women who are working towards bringing justice for Laude.

CN: Exactly. I think the woman part is really important there too, that it's these folks who are marginalized in multiple layers on top of layers ways. Not only are they from the global south, they've experienced this history of colonization from places like the United States. In certain cases, they're trans, they're also women in this paternalistic society as most are. So the fact that that activism is coming from the ground in all sorts of meaningful ways, I think, is really powerful.

JLR: So one of the things you mentioned is the ... What was surprising was the protests on the street for the murder of a trans woman of color, which is we know that there are a lot of trans women of color being murdered around the globe, and yet there is not a huge push, let's say, from mainstream groups for protesting or bringing attention to this. So that becomes a significant aspect to that.

It also becomes one of the main things that you're thinking about in terms of using documentary to bring awareness to or to think through these kinds of issues. So can you tell us a bit more about that, about thinking about documentaries about trans people and the theoretical framework that you're using to think about the politics around that?

CN: Another thing that was colliding in this particular moment, when we learned about the Jennifer Laude case and visited the Philippines, I also happened to be reading a bunch of different works on the concept of necropolitics, which was really just taking off around that time, although it was coined in the early 2000s by Achille Mbembe.

The work on necropolitics, which is extending Foucault's idea of biopolitics, is that the way that power is working in our contemporary society is not just about organizing life, how we can live, but also with making death and putting certain populations at a position where they don't have access to full life.

We can think about the conditions of continued colonization, histories of genocide, et cetera. We can think about Black Lives Matter in the US and the ways in which White supremacy is propped up, exists on the back of Black bodies in all sorts of symbolic and literal ways.

So I was reading that work and, on a subset of that work, it was actually really coming out of queer studies, queer necropolitics, or trans necropolitics work, was talking about the representation, including documentary representation, of death and how it worked with this concept of necropolitics.

And so, people like C. Reilly Snorton, Jin Haritaworn, Aren Aizura were writing about how the deaths of trans women are often exploited for the value of other projects in politics, including through documentary practice, meaning that a trans woman is murdered and then her name is evoked in various remembrance ceremonies or political causes to support policies that are really to the benefit of white gay men and not trans women of color, or a trans women are murdered and then there's a documentary made about that case that just puts money in the pocket of the documentary filmmaker. Nothing really goes back to help those communities that were affected by these acts of violence.

And so, I was reading this work at the same time that this documentary project landed in our laps. And so, I was really, from the start, thinking and having conversations with PJ about what is the responsibility of a documentary filmmaker and telling these kinds of stories and how do you work against those extractive, exploitive politics that are part of this necropolitical documentary impulse, and that those questions really informed the essay that I wrote.

It also informed in a lot of ways what we tried to do with the documentary and how we tried to do certain things differently. In no way do I, through the essay or through the way that we did the documentary, pretend to have all of the answers, but rather it's both of those things are a reckoning and then try to work through the thorniness of these difficult questions.

JLR: Right. Yeah, it's difficult, right? I think a major step in how you're talking about this is just acknowledging how even the documentary practice, when it's coming from, let's say, just full of good intentions and under the banner of bringing awareness to social issues, ends up self-perpetuating the very similar practices of not allowing full life or exposing particular subjects to certain forms of death, when it's just documentarians who are profiting off of telling the stories of murdered trans women, or when the life or the cases of specific trans women are just subsumed into the larger gay cause. Then it ends up mostly just benefiting gay men.

CN: Exactly.

JLR: All of those things end up being replicated in the artistic practice. So just acknowledging that and being reflexive about how to push back on that is an important first step.

CN: Exactly. Yeah. I think also, and this is a conclusion I come back to again and again, both in the essay and probably today, I'll mention this again, but just realizing that the documentary itself isn't the activism. It shouldn't be the conclusion or the end point, like, "Oh, I've made a documentary. I've raised some awareness. My job is done." It's really the beginning. It's like what do you do with that documentary and what do you do afterwards is the real, I think, activist project or the important part in a lot of ways.

JLR: Right. Part of that, you mentioned this in the article, the way that documentary is the beginning ... I think the way you phrased it is like it's an “aesthetic call to ethical accountability.” So if the documentary is the beginning, can you tell us a bit more about how you were thinking about how does *Call Her Ganda* in particular begins that process? How does it stand in as the starting point for that ethical call?

CN: Beyond that simple idea of the documentary, oh, it informs you of something that happened, now you're aware, the job is done. Like how can a documentary go deeper than that? In my essay, I talk about that both on an aesthetic level and some of the aesthetic choices that were made in the documentary that I think or hope maybe push the audience to be more reflective, to want to be more active in their response.

Then I also talk about what's happened around and after the making of the documentary, which in a lot of ways, again, I think is the most important part. In addition to talking about necropolitics in the essay, I also talk about there's the concept of hauntology, this logic of ghosts that are not really present or absent. They're not really dead or alive, the idea of things that keep returning to us that are really part of the past.

They're the ways in which the past, present, and future collapse through the realm of the ghost, because the ghost is the past that comes back, but that also points us to possible futures, the ways in which memory and possibility are all intertwined here in this space of death or deathliness.

And so, I also use that concept of thinking about the ways in which the documentary tries to haunt the audience, to possess the audience in various ways as this mode of putting them in a position of having to be more thoughtful and more accountable and active in relation to their response.

So one of the things that I had talked about, for example, is the repeating image in the documentary of Jennifer Laude. There's footage, it's one of the only footage that exists of Jennifer Laude that she had her friend take on a cellphone, where she's in a red dress at a pageant ceremony, which is a big thing particularly among the trans community in the Philippines, is pageant shows where they do fashion and performance stuff. It's a moment of really wonderful community and support and folks being able to celebrate their fabulosity and excellence and find joy.

And so, this footage of her is this moment of this absolute happiness and joy as she's getting ready for this pageant in her red dress. That footage of her repeats multiple times throughout, over and over again, in the film.

I think that's important as a reminder of this life, in this moment of this really heightened aliveness of Jennifer that we can't forget about and that we can't move past. Jennifer, in a lot of ways, isn't gone and won't be gone or won't be able to rest until we ourselves wrestle with these issues of transmisogyny, racism, colonization that caused her death.

So I think there's something, to me, really important about breaking with the ways in which documentaries often happen in a linear fashion, where it starts with, "Oh, here's the facts of the case or the details of what happened," then X, Y, and Z happens afterwards. It's not a linear narrative. These are cycles, again, of transmisogyny, colonization, racism. So you can't really tell the story in that way.

We can't just move past the murder. We can't move past Jennifer Laude and get to what's after. We should be haunted by it. We should be entangled in it in all sorts of ways and not just be able to wash your hands off it.

So I talk about stuff like that. I also talk about, for example, there's a section of the documentary that recounts the details of the murder of Jennifer, which was a really grizzly, horrible murder, where she was drowned in a toilet by this US Marine, Joseph Scott Pemberton. The ways in which that happens is through a series of images of the places where the actions occurred, but they're entirely absent of people.

So you can imagine, again, a more traditional documentary. You might do some reenactment of the murder or just leave it to talking heads to tell the story. But I think in presenting these spaces that are signifying absence and loss and the residue of what happened there, there's a feeling of haunting to those spaces as the story is being laid out.

But I think there's also something about not having the escape of an easy representation of what happened, but instead of having that be implanted in our minds where we see these empty spaces of where the death happened and we have to imagine it, that pulls us as an audience into the text because it's in our brains now. It's in our heads. We're having to envision it internally inside of us. And so, I hope that there's something about that internalization that makes us unsettled, upset and angry, and then hopefully more riled up to do something.

JLR: The different aesthetic decisions that you point to are not only very consciously about this awareness of the past as implicated with the present and possibly pointing to a different future. But I think as you point out the way it invites ... Not only invites, but forces the viewer to be more involved in thinking through the series of events and when they happened is in some way that beginning of thinking about that accountability. It would be very different, as you point out, to have a reenactment which just tells us the "facts."

CN: Right. Externalizes it, yeah.

JLR: Exactly. It's like, "Oh, now I know what happened," but rather it's forcing you to actually think through and internalize those facts, right?

CN: Yeah.

JLR: But as you pointed out, this is just the beginning. It would be simplistic to think that, oh, this forces the viewer to really self-reflect and we just assume that media transforms the world simply by not showing us the thing, right?

CN: Yeah.

JLR: So can you just talk a bit more about what comes after that? So how does the film get picked up or what are the different works that have followed from the film to think about applications or what to do?

CN: Yeah, exactly. And so, yeah, there's a hope that, aesthetically, the film maybe does some things differently that get the audience to be more active in their response or more reflective about these issues. But like I said, it really is about what's beyond the documentary, what the documentary can do, not what the documentary is or does itself.

And so, we thought a lot about that. The documentary ends with a call to action for the audience and a link for them to go to the website for *Call Her Ganda*, where they can donate money to the Laude Family. The money goes directly to Jennifer Laude's mother, Nanay Julita, who is not only suffering this great loss but is living a very working class life trying to deal with all of the costs that come with litigating a case and so forth. So that money is extremely needed in this instance.

So there's that, but then there has been a huge impact campaign that PJ Raval, the director, and his team, myself included but more on the outskirts, have enacted in the ... Now I guess it's been almost three years since the documentary was initially released in 2018, and we're still doing, or he's doing really, those impact campaign stuff really on a daily basis.

And so, from the beginning ... Like the film premiered at Tribeca in New York in 2018. The next day after the first screening, we gathered together local activists who were involved in a number of different causes that were related to the documentary, whether it'd be trans justice or whether it'd be thinking about Filipino culture and activism or anti-imperial activism.

We also gathered a bunch of folks in the Philippines who we zoomed in — who knew that that would become the way of our lives soon — and had just days-long brainstorming discussion about issues of the documentary and how the documentary could be useful. Like what can we do now to actually make an impact, make some change that would actually be useful?

A lot of things came out of that brainstorming session and several subsequent ... We did brainstorming sessions at many of the different premieres in different cities around the US and also in the Philippines.

A lot of things came out of those brainstorming sessions that we've been implementing ever since. That's a wide variety of things like community screenings that have been attached to various fundraising efforts, sometimes directly related to the film. Maybe it's an organization like Gabriela USA, which is a feminist Filipina anti-imperial organization.

But then a lot of causes that are adjacent to the topic of the documentary have also taken it up. For example, there is an organization called Diversidad Sin Fronteras, which is particularly responding to the US culture of incarceration and migrant detention, and specifically how that's impacting trans women in the ways in which they are being caged in these facilities.

And so, not the same story, but a connected story in terms of US imperialism and how it's being enacted on trans women and trans bodies. And so, there was also a fundraising event that happened for that organization where they also screened the film and talked about the issues in it.

And so, all of that, I mean, again, it's not a perfect solution, but I think it's all done in this mindset that the documentary itself is not the activism. It's what happens after the documentary and with the documentary that matters in continuing to try to find ways to work against that necropolitical problem of extracting and then walking away. Like can we find ways to give back, make a difference, try to change the conditions that led to this murder happening in the first place?

JLR: Right. Right. I think the distinction is key. The traditional way that we think about it in terms of a documentary, especially documentaries made by people who are not from the community, is very much an extractive relationship. It's the coming in, filming the story, and then leaving and profiting off of the sharing the story with the world.

But a lot of what you're pointing out is, one, it's just more of a cyclical relationship of bringing this story, but as a way to think about how to change the conditions that led to that story happening.

CN: Exactly.

JLR: Then also building out from that. So I think, as you point out with the different organizations that hosted screenings or discussions after screenings, a lot of the issues, the transmisogyny, racism, colonialism, that really come together in this one case are also coming together in a lot of different cases, in a lot of different circumstances.

So using that as a launch point to talk about these broader issues that affect numerous communities around the world is also helpful to see those points of connection, those solidarities across, transnational solidarities even.

CN: Yeah. One of the key things that we discovered that the film could be is a point of connection that brought different groups that maybe weren't activist groups that weren't necessarily talking to one another or had a reason to come together for something. It became a way for them to come to a screening or come to a discussion and get to know each other and then develop their own projects and solidarities and collaborations coming out of that.

So I think you hit on something that's super key. In some ways, the text itself becomes not even so important anymore. It just becomes a reason for different people to be in a room and amazing activist things can happen from those people gathering together.

JLR: So one of the ways you talk about this moving beyond the documentary, you have what the documentary can talk about, is the trans activist afterlife as a concept that you're thinking through in this article. Could you tell us a bit more about that and how you think through this concept in *Call Her Ganda*?

CN: For me, that idea of the afterlife has multiple meanings, this idea of the hauntological understandings of death as not being something that we can dismiss or move beyond really easily fits with this idea of the afterlife, that in a lot of ways Jennifer's legacy lingers on, the causes of her death linger on, and that we're existing in that moment where it's our responsibility to honor Jennifer's legacy and also it's our responsibility to change those conditions.

That idea of that afterlife is that liminal space after a death, that it's the space that we can't move beyond that then requires certain amounts of action. So that's one of the ways I'm thinking about afterlife. I'm thinking about afterlife in terms of what we've been discussing, in terms of the afterlife of the documentary, that the life of the documentary is not just like you made it. It's like what happens afterwards.

But also the film itself is focused, I mentioned this before, on the women who are impacted in various ways by the death of Jennifer Laude and then how does it impact them and then what do they do with that. So it's also about the continuation in some ways of both, again, the legacy and also about the problematics that produce Jennifer's death and the ways in which the various women of the documentary are continuing to grapple with those tensions and with those issues as well.

JLR: Right, right. In keeping with the thinking about the past, it's not your past. It's imbricated in the present and the future. In many ways, despite her murder, Jennifer Laude continues on as a symbol, but also as a real person that impacted all of these women who are now still grappling with the conditions that led to her murder and how to fix them in the future as well.

CN: Exactly, yeah. I think the idea of the afterlife, I think, is also important in terms of thinking about the afterlife of colonization too, all of these things. Like the idea of the postcolonial, we're not past it. It's the aftershocks, the after-effects, the aftermath, or the afterlife, the ways in which continues to impinge on us.

JLR: One of the things that I think is really fascinating about the way you start the article and how you lay out your contribution is basically what you mentioned earlier, which is your own involvement in the film that you're analyzing, how you came to it, how you started thinking about these ideas, and also how you were in conversation, I guess, with the director of the film as he was doing it.

So can you tell us a little bit more about that process? A, why was it important for you in the article itself to lay out the connections for the reader from the beginning of your involvement in the film and with the case? Then why is this important for the theoretical or the scholarly intervention that your work is doing?

CN: Yeah. I mean, first and foremost, I wanted to acknowledge my own relationship to the documentary, just to be honest and upfront about it, and so that readers can judge what I'm saying accordingly, including thinking about the ways that my perspective is compromised and can be challenged in various ways.

But I also really wanted ... I mean the pieces really, and the ways that I approach academia in general really, is often about asking questions rather than trying to come up with the absolute answer to something, especially when we're talking about something as thorny and ethically complex as this trans misogynist, colonizing murder and the ways in which documentary ethics

and death are really very complicated, because there is no easy answer to that and there's no easy out of that.

So I also really wanted to implicate myself within the thorniness of these ethics and the ways in which we're all complicit with these politics even without us realizing it. So I really wanted to put on display the ways that I was grappling with these issues in the essay, my own, I guess, imperfections and the ways in which I'm trying to work through these dilemmas and the ways in which I'm complicit in various ways and the ways in which some of the criticism I'm making might be bad or aren't ethical.

That's actually part of the conversation that I'm wanting people to have, including critiquing the arguments that I'm making or the choices that I'm making as I work through these difficulties. Hopefully that prompts people to delve into the difficulties themselves and not be afraid. I feel like it holds us back in various ways if we're afraid of thorny, difficult, complex things that don't have an easy answer because we're afraid of saying the wrong thing or doing the wrong thing.

There is no easy answer. Like, "oh, if do it this one way, I'm going to get critiqued or people will be upset." But at a certain point, if you want to make a difference, you have to work through it. You have to try and learn from other people and learn from the experience.

JLR: Right. Right. In some ways, I guess, it's doing a similar move as thinking about the documentary as the beginning of a series of activist responses is thinking of the article as the beginning of a series of conversations that allow you to rethink those things, right?

CN: Exactly. Yeah, for sure.

JLR: So I guess related to that, have you built on this work, or are you thinking of building on this work now that it's been published?

CN: I'm actually at the point where I'm starting to think about my second book project, because it's been a few years since my first book, believe it or not. One of the things that I really am interested in is thinking about the complexities of death in relationship to the LGBT community and LGBTQ representation.

Going through this project really brought me back to the root of my queerness in a lot of ways, which I grew up in the 1980s in small town Massachusetts. And so, for folks that are younger, it's maybe hard to imagine. But at the time, it's before the internet. It's before we really have much in terms of mainstream representation, public representation of LGBT people.

The '80s is also the era of HIV/AIDS, where gay men are dying in mass numbers, gay men in particular, but also all sorts of people are dying of HIV in mass numbers, and the government doesn't care because those people are seen as expendable, as not important, which, looking at the response to the current pandemic, is really striking of how the government cares or does not care.

But growing up in that moment, my introduction to LGBT culture and seeing other gay people in the world, I was seeing gay men dying of AIDS on the nightly news, essentially. So coming into queerness for me was imagining that I was coming into an identity of death or that to be gay was I was going to get AIDS and I was going to die. That was a message that came to me from all sorts of places.

So I think there's something about coming into being interpellated into an identity that is seen as marked for death or that's going to die that really affects your psyche in a lot of ways. And so, going through this project, I started to rethink and revisit a lot of those early feelings and thinking about the ways in which queerness and death have been intermeshed in these complicated ways.

So the long-winded answer to your question is I'm contemplating a project that's going to be thinking about those intersections that will build upon a contemporary moment where death in trans identity are the things that are intertwined, but then also points back to those histories of HIV/AIDS and who was being marked for death in those kinds of particular moments. So, yes, this piece, I think, in a roundabout way will influence some of my future work.

JLR: Right, right. You mentioned at least one connection so far, which is the current pandemic reminds us of necropolitics and the way that certain populations are just not allowed full life or are thought of as disposable by those in power. But are there any other recent developments in the world that have added or changed the ideas that you were thinking through as you were working on this piece?

CN: I think one of the things that's really come to the forefront in recent years of this conversation that's been happening for a while is the importance of focusing on things like trans joy in addition to tragedy. This also comes up in relation to Black Lives Matter, that we have these images being disseminated again and again of Black people being murdered, which is traumatizing in all sorts of ways. So what does it mean if we switch our focus to thinking about Black excellence and Black joy or trans excellence, trans joy?

And so, I think that's something that I've thought a lot about since the documentary came out, since my essay came out as well, is how do you reckon with maintaining a sense of joy, that sense of excellence, even when representing or thinking about a tragedy or a murder of a trans woman? I think we could have done more in that regard in the documentary.

It comes partly through those images of Jennifer Laude in the red dress that I was talking about that are these moments of great happiness for her and get that vitality and joy. I think we could have done more with that. I think I could have done more with thinking through those tensions too in my work.

So that's something that I have thought a lot about is this idea of trans joy, trans excellence, and how that really needs to be part of this activism as well.

JLR: Curran, thank you for joining us.

CN: Yeah, thank you so much. This was fantastic.

[closing credits music]

JLR: This episode of the Global Media Cultures podcast was produced by me and edited by Alan Yu, and closing credits music by Cloud Mouth. This project is supported in part by the School of Arts, Technology, and Emerging Communication at the University of Texas at Dallas. Global Media Cultures podcast introduces media scholarship about the world, to the world. I'm Juan Llamas-Rodriguez. Thank you for listening.