

THE FRONT

MICHAEL Y.C. TSENG

Flowers and a piece of cloth, digital photo, 30 April 2025.

THE COVER IMAGE for this special issue was taken by Michael Y.C. Tseng at the vigil and community gathering held at UBC on 30 April 2025, a few days after the Lapu-Lapu Day Festival tragedy that took place on April 26th. The vigil brought together some 600 attendees, including many UBC Filipinx Canadian staff, students and faculty, as well as community members from allied and affected communities. It was organized by Sulong UBC and UBC Kababayan with the involvement of allies on campus, including Sprouts, the Central American Student Association and UBC Filipino Canadian workers.

As an act of tender witnessing, Tseng's photojournalism provides an intimate archive of sorrow and community in the aftermath of tragedy. In the images below, we glimpse, from his work, how vigils function not just as sites of mourning, but also as enactments of collectivity and care. Among other things, Tseng's photographic work at the UBC vigil documented the diverse ways that people showed up for and in community. We see attendees laying flowers and lighting candles (Figure 1); speakers and performers whose words and art served as rallying cries for community support and accountability (Figure 2); and organizers nourishing community through the provision of food (Figure 3).

In his artist statement below, Tseng reflects on "being there" as photo-journalistic ethics and the politics of seeing in and through the camera lens.

ARTIST STATEMENT

In Wim Wenders's 2023 film *Perfect Days*, Hirayama, a perfectionist washroom cleaner, asks his newfound friend: "Shadows ... Do they get darker when they overlap?" When I arrived at the memorial for the Lapu



Figure 1. Vigil attendees pay their respects with flowers and candles. Photo by Michael Y.C. Tseng.

Lapu Day tragedy at Kensington Park, as the shutter clicked, I realized that I had felt neither sadness nor shock since I heard the news. Have I gotten too proficient at looking at the images of absolute brutality? The photographs flashed in front of my left eye in the viewfinder: a racially ambiguous Filipino woman looking at the muddy grass, a couple embracing whilst looking directly forward, and the overly equipped policemen on the roof staring down at the crowd. Most people were looking at the flowers, and the politicians were staring at the speakers. I mumbled to myself: “Who was it that said ‘politics is not made up of power relationships, but relationships between worlds?’” Why am I looking when I am powerless in intervening in what I see, which means assimilating to what is in front of me and transforming that which articulated the “I” who clicked the shutter but a moment ago? Power of powerlessness? Are we more powerful when our powerlessness overlaps? Or more powerless? Would my photographs be more meaningful if I were not here but over there to document the absolute brutalities? Every time I see a question mark, I take a photo. I struggle to answer what my photographic practice is about, so I often answer: “wide angle lens and be there” – a playful quotation of the already playful “f/8 and be there.” I will be there over and over again to document these relationships between worlds that constitute politics and its propensity for systematic brutality until the quiet comes.



Figure 2. UBC music student Cat DeMello plays the violin at the vigil. Photo by Michael Y.C. Tseng.



Figure 3. Community and student organizers from UBC Sprouts gave out food and grocery items to vigil attendees. Photo by Michael Y.C. Tseng.

ARTIST BIO

Michael Y.C. Tseng is a photojournalist who wanders around on the unceded lands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. He is interested in cinema, labour, Palestine, cinema, aesthetics, and the police – in that order, and, yes, two cinemas.