



Lesson

When the Political Becomes Personal: U.S. Imperialism in the Philippines

You cannot help this case, you cannot help the Laudes, if you just know things about the killing, if you just know things about the murder. Because it's not a simple case of murder.

- Virgie Suarez, Laude Family Attorney, *Call Her Ganda*

Overview

The United States has a history of imperialism that was intended to increase military reach, expand U.S. markets, identify and exploit cheap labor and resources and spread American culture and ideals. The policy and ideology of imperialism have led to devastating results for the economies and cultures of colonized nations around the world, including the Philippines. Inherent to a doctrine of imperialism is a suppression of indigenous cultures and, according to historian Kristin Hoganson, author of *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars*, a gender-based exercise of power.¹

In the documentary film *Call Her Ganda* we see how the legacy of U.S. imperialism persists in the form of ongoing U.S. military presence in the Philippines and legal protections afforded to U.S. military personnel who commit crimes on Filipino soil. *Call Her Ganda* reveals the injustices and imbalance of power inherent in this legacy and how it leads to violence against the Filipino population in general and, in the case of Jennifer Laude, the historical erasure and degradation of transgender identity and the inability of the Filipino people to fight for their right to punish violent crimes committed against them on their own shores.

In this lesson students will study how the history of the U.S. military presence in the Philippines has an impact on families like the Laudes and how the murder of Jennifer “Ganda” Laude reveals the tragic intersection of imperialism, gender, transphobia and violence.

**If students are unfamiliar with the disproportionate rates of violence against transgender individuals in the U.S. and around the world, it may be instructive to share this information:

Every day millions of transgender people in all regions experience rejection, stigmatization, harassment and physical violence because they do not conform with prevailing gender norms. Such violence may be physical (including murder,

¹ <https://yalebooks.yale.edu/book/9780300085549/fighting-american-manhood>

beatings, kidnappings, rape and sexual assault) or psychological (including threats, coercion and arbitrary deprivations of liberty).

- 2013 [United Nations Development Programme Discussion Paper on Transgender Health and Human Rights](#)

[Trans Murder Monitoring Map](#), a project of transrespect.org, monitors murders of transgender people by country throughout the world.

Important Note to Educators

Call Her Ganda includes violence and sexual assault that can be difficult to watch and talk about. Bringing these elements into a classroom conversation requires establishing an environment where students have been prepared in advance and exhibit the maturity to share and process this information.

To prepare for this lesson:

- Watch all the film clips suggested for this lesson prior to screening them in your classroom.
- Review the Resources of this lesson and familiarize yourself with the recommended organizations and materials.

Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Articulate the history and legacy of the U.S. policy of imperialism in the Philippines
- Analyze the specific ways the legacy of U.S. imperialism connects to the murder of Jennifer “Ganda” Laude and the subsequent legal case
- Remark on the effects of imperialist policies on individuals of all genders

Grade Levels: 10th—12th grade

Subject Areas

Economics, Global Studies, Media Studies, Psychology, Women and Gender Studies, World History.

Materials

- Film clips from *Call Her Ganda* and equipment on which to show them

Estimated Time Needed

- 2 class periods, with homework

Film Clips

Film clips provided in this lesson are from *Call Her Ganda*. Access the streaming clips for free on POV's website by visiting www.pbs.org/pov/educators. Borrow the full film from our DVD Lending Library by joining the POV Community Network.

Clip 1: Meet Jennifer Laude

1:00–6:19 (5:19 minutes)

Meet Jennifer “Ganda” Laude from the point of view of her mother. Her friends also describe her and recount what happened the night of her murder.

Clip 2: The Murder of Jennifer Laude

12:15–23:10 (10:55 minutes)

Description of the murder with a timeline and Joseph Scott Pemberton’s confession to his shipmate. Graphic images of Laude’s body and homophobic tweets about transgender people. Explanation of imperialist history, the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and why no U.S. soldier has ever been charged with a crime in the Philippines.

Clip 3: The Journalist and the Activist

32:35–37:10 (4:35 minutes)

Naomi Fontanos and Meredith Talusan discuss how the Laude case is impacting U.S. policy. Activist Fontanos talks about transgender identity, how Spanish Catholics “othered” trans identity, sex work, militarism and the trans community.

Contextual information: In the ensuing court case, the U.S. military attempted to stall past the one-year requirement for resolution. Virgie Suarez, Julita “Nanay” Laude and Fontanos organized protests and spoke at rallies to put very public pressure on the government to move the case forward. Ultimately, Pemberton was found guilty by the Filipino court, but he is being held in a U.S. military facility.

Clip 4: Pressure, Policy and Influence

1:20:13–1:28:20 (8:07 minutes)

Julita “Nanay” Laude, Ganda’s mother, describes how an American lawyer offered money in exchange for dropping the case. Instead, Nanay accepted financial support from then-new Filipino president Rodrigo Duterte. Meredith Talusan reflects on Pemberton’s life and background in the United States. Duterte and Donald Trump meet, and their interactions demonstrate the ongoing complexity of military and economic interactions between these two nations.

Lesson Opening

Introduce the film by reading this short synopsis from [CallHerGanda.com](https://www.callherganda.com/):

When Jennifer Laude, a Filipina trans woman, is brutally murdered by a U.S. Marine, three women intimately invested in the case—an activist attorney (Virgie Suarez), a transgender journalist (Meredith Talusan) and Jennifer’s mother (Julita “Nanay” Laude)—galvanize a political uprising, pursuing justice and taking on hardened histories of U.S. imperialism.

Activity: Day One

Students will use clips from *Call Her Ganda* and the associated film transcript to conduct a [Socratic Seminar](#) on the following essential question:

How does the murder of Jennifer “Ganda” Laude reveal the ways that imperialist policies intersect with gender, violence and transphobia?

As a class, students will watch each of the clips and use the reflective questions on Handout One: *Call Her Ganda* Note Catcher to write their initial reactions, thoughts and feelings. Before showing each clip, read or project the reflection questions on Handout One associated with that clip. After each clip, offer students a few moments to complete their note taking.

Spend a few minutes discussing each clip with the class to assess for understanding and briefly explore any questions that are raised.

**For clarity, read students the contextual information between Clips 3 and 4 provided above.

Homework:

Students will take home their notes and the transcripts for each of the clips to prepare their answers for a Socratic Seminar on Day Two on aspects of the following essential question:

How does the murder of Jennifer “Ganda” Laude reveal the ways that imperialist policies intersect with gender, violence and transphobia?

Activity: Day Two

Review the Classroom Contract for Socratic Seminar dialogue, wherein students will use evidence from the film clips to respond to one another as they discuss the following open-ended dialogue prompts:

1. Director PJ Raval says, “*Call Her Ganda* is a protest against the extreme violence and discrimination that trans women face around the globe. It is a tribute to the 3.4 million Filipinos living in the U.S. and diaspora. And, it is a lesson for a global audience largely ignorant of the legacy of U.S. imperialism in my parent’s homeland.”
 - In what ways did the clips you watched achieve the director’s stated goals?
 - Is it your experience that the legacy of U.S. imperialism in the Philippines is largely unknown in the U.S.? If not, what have you learned about it? If so, why do you think that is the case?
 - Describe your understanding of the function of U.S. imperialist policies: What is the purpose of imperialism? How does imperialism affect individuals and families living in colonized countries?
2. Discuss moments in the clips where it is visible that imperialism affects people of different genders differently.

3. Many of the tweets and comments in response to journalist Meredith Talusan's articles are extremely transphobic, such as, "Indeed Pemberton is the victim," and "Justified homicide. (Pemberton) should get the red-carpet treatment back to America..."
 - How do you believe Jennifer Laude's transgender identity influenced how this case was prosecuted in the Philippines and perceived around the world?
 - Discuss the history and cultural norms you've learned about that you believe influenced the nature of those tweets.
4. How do you see the legacy of imperialism in the Philippines influencing the current political situation with Trump and Duterte? This [New York Times article](#) describes the meeting between Trump and Duterte that is depicted in the film.
5. How does the murder of Laude reveal the ways that imperialist policies intersect with gender, violence and transphobia?
6. Do you see the case of Jennifer Laude resonating with domestic politics happening in the U.S.? In what ways?

Closing Activity

In pairs or small groups, have students evaluate the seminar with questions. Following are some suggestions:

- Were there moments during the Socratic Seminar when dialogue became difficult? If so, was there a pattern to when that happened?
- What did you learn from this dialogue that was new or surprising to you?
- In what ways, if any, did these clips and the Socratic Seminar change your prior understanding of the issues chronicled in the documentary?

Extensions/Adaptations

- Research the activist movements represented in the film and others happening around the world and discuss the role of activism in overcoming the legacy of imperialism.
- Explore the history of the Philippines and the U.S. more deeply and tie it to the current political context in the Philippines and in North Korea.
- Trace the historical roots of discrimination against people with transgender identities in the Philippines, India, the United States and elsewhere around the world to make connections around how imperialism influences sexual and gender diversity.

Handout One
***Call Her Ganda* Note Catcher**

Clip 1 Reflection Questions: Who Is Jennifer Laude?

- How did Jennifer Laude's friends and family see her?

- After watching this clip, what further questions or concepts would you like more information about?

Clip 2 Reflection Questions: U.S. Imperialism in the Philippines

- What do you think attorney Virgie Suarez means when she says, "It's not a simple case of murder"?

- Who do you believe should be responsible for holding Pemberton accountable for his crime?

- After watching this clip, how would you describe the historical and current relationship between the Philippines and the United States?

- The Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) is the legal agreement that describes U.S. military rights on Filipino soil. From what you've learned so far, how would you answer lawyer Harry Roque's question, "What's in it for the Filipinos?"

- After watching this clip, what further questions or concepts would you like more information about?

Clip 3 Reflection Questions: Transgender Identity in the Philippines

- How did imperialism change the ways transgender people were seen in the Philippines?
- Did learning about the historical ways that transgender identity has changed in the Philippines influence how you see the legacy of imperialism influencing the events of Laude's murder?
- What further questions or concepts would you like more information about?

Clip 4 Reflection Questions: The Ongoing Legacy of Imperialism

- Compare the U.S. offer of money to Nanay to Duterte's offer. What do their offers have in common? How do they differ? Why do you think she accepted Duterte's offer?
- In what ways does the legacy of imperialism seem to influence the transitional government in the Philippines seen in the film?
- What do you think the filmmaker is suggesting in the final scenes showing U.S./Filipino talks, popular protest and footage from the military leave tapes?

Resources

[GLSEN: LGBTQ Inclusive Sexual Health Education](#)

Resources for understanding and teaching LGBTQ students.

[Anakbayan-USA](#)

Filipino activist youth network in the United States.

[Frontline World: "1898–1933: America's Colony"](#)

Frontline website page for *A Conflicted Land: Rebellions, Wars and Insurgencies in the Philippines* on U.S. imperialism in the Philippines.

[National Center for Transgender Equality](#)

Group working to raise awareness of and advocating for rights and protections for transgender people in the U.S.

[The New York Times: "A Transgender Paradox, and Platform, in the Philippines"](#)

This 2018 article by Aurora Almendral covers the complicated religious, political and community relationship to transgender identity in the Philippines, including transgender congresswoman Geraldine Roman's passage of legislation protecting transgender rights.

[Office of the Historian: "The Philippine-American War, 1899–1902"](#)

This article on the website of the Office of the Historian provides background on the war between the U.S. and the Philippines and Philippine independence.

[Savage Acts](#)

Savage Acts, a short documentary, links the pageantry of fairs to the story of the Philippine War, America's first attempt to claim an overseas colony and a turning point in U.S. foreign policy.

Standards

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science and Technical Subjects

(http://www.corestandards.org/assets/CCSSI_ELA%20Standards.pdf)

RH.11-12.2 Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

W.9—10.2d Use precise language and domain—specific vocabulary to manage the complexity of the topic.

W.11-12.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

SL.11—12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

SL.11—12.2 Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

SL.11—12.3 Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis and tone used.

Content Knowledge: (<http://www2.mcrel.org/compendium/>) a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McREL (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning).

Language Arts, Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Language Arts, Standard 2: Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.

Language Arts, Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

Language Arts, Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.