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Fictive incoherence in Cynthia Dewi Oka's *A Tinderbox in Three Acts*: A poetic accounting with the 1965–66 Indonesian massacres

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ABSTRACT

Cynthia Dewi Oka's poetry collection *A Tinderbox in Three Acts* (2022) mimics the form of a play and introduces a chorus of voices to demand an accounting with the anti-communist massacres led by the Indonesian military between 1965 and 1966, which caused the deaths of over 500,000 Indonesians. In the tradition of documentary poetics, Oka's collection incorporates declassified US state documents from this period, yet she refuses the documentary imperative for narrative clarity. The collection's speakers argue and contradict one another, refusing to be contained by the single "official" narrative of Indonesia's development that erased the violent origins of Suharto's New Order regime. This article uses a methodology of "fictive incoherence" that resists the flattening documentary gaze, and, employing a queer of Colour performance studies lens, it argues that *Tinderbox* conceptualizes poetry as a site of performance that requires readers to confront their own implicated positions within occluded histories of violence.

KEYWORDS

Documentary poetics; Indonesian diasporic poetry; Cynthia Dewi Oka; *A Tinderbox in Three Acts*; queer of Colour performance studies; Cold War

Introduction: Reading a hole in history

Chinese Indonesian poet Cynthia Dewi Oka's (2022a) collection *A Tinderbox in Three Acts* begins: "There is a hole in my history … These poems do not presume to fill the hole. If anything, they press my ear to it […]. A hole, after all, can be a failure of containment" (5). The hole in history that Oka references is the failure to address the anti-communist mass killings and human rights violations committed by the Indonesian military in 1965–66. A mere 20 years after Indonesia's Declaration of Independence in 1945, the genocide led to the deaths of between 500,000 to three million Indonesians (the exact figure is disputed),[1] and the disappearances of many more. The events of 1965–66 also marked a transition of power in the newly postcolonial nation during which Indonesia's first president, Sukarno, was ousted and General Suharto's rise to power began. Suharto assumed the role of acting president in 1967 and his New Order regime lasted until 1998 (Oka 2022a, 14). The "hole" Oka writes about has been caused by the New Order's narrative manipulation that has occluded this chapter of Indonesia's history. It was not until 2016 that the Indonesian government held its first official discussion of the

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massacres and, even at this event, then-President Joko Widodo focused on "moving forward" and ruled out any apology to the former Indonesian Communist Party (Partai Komunis Indonesia [PKI]) (Kwok 2016, n.p.; Wardi 2016, n.p.).

Published in 2022, *A Tinderbox in Three Acts* (hereafter referred to as *Tinderbox*) addresses the long silence around this "hole" in history. Oka wrote this text from the diaspora as her family left Indonesia when she was ten years old and migrated to Canada because they felt unsafe as Chinese Indonesians under the New Order regime (Oka 2022b, 30:03). As alluded to in its full title, *Tinderbox* uses the form of a play structured around a cast of seven different characters who interrogate one another about the events of 1965–66. The collection also includes poems that incorporate US state documents declassified in 2017 related to the massacres. *Tinderbox*'s aesthetic practices resonate with documentary poetics (docupoetics), a genre that reanimates historical narratives of violence from wilfully incomplete or inaccurate official archives such as state documents or the mainstream media (Metres 2018). Oka notes that part of her poetic process in writing the collection was drawing found language from documents, primarily telegrams by American officials working in the Jakarta embassy, and "rearrang[ing] as needed" the language that described the 1965–66 genocide from an American perspective (Oka 2022b, 19:25). Currently, Oka lives in the USA and the necessity of grappling with national and family history using predominantly the US records available in this diasporic setting undoubtedly contributed to the text's innovative structure.

While the genre of docupoetics opens avenues for an aesthetic critique of Indonesia's sociohistorical context, this article argues that an over-reliance on documenting as the sole framework to interpret this text does not fully address its interventions. Within the mainstream western literary marketplace, texts like *Tinderbox* are often labelled as "global literature" and valued exclusively for their ethnographic qualities rather than for their aesthetic or literary merits (Castillo 2022, 16; Chuh 2019, 16). In this context, understanding *Tinderbox* solely as a text whose only purpose is to educate the (presumed western) world about the events of the 1965–66 genocide flattens its multicultural representation. This flattening is particularly limiting because Indonesian diasporic texts remain under-studied even within Asian diasporic literary studies.[2] *Tinderbox* is Oka's fourth book and literary reviews have noted the collection's formal innovations: Ho Kim Yunn (2024) notes how Oka's use of "bureaucratic communications as poetic media" captures the "multi-textured nature of Indonesia's political history" (n.p.) and Evan Wang (2023) also emphasizes how "every poem contains novel forms" in service of a "remembrance of history too heavy not to mention" (n.p.). However, apart from these reviews, little scholarly work on Oka's oeuvre exists. This article, therefore, redresses this lack of scholarly attention by focusing on *Tinderbox*'s aesthetic elements to foreground how the text accounts for historical violence without capitulating to the liberal humanist desires of western readers or weaponizing cultural performances to fit the needs of the nation state.

Inspired by *Tinderbox*'s theatrical structure, this article brings a queer of Colour performance studies lens to the documentary poetic tradition and coins the term "fictive incoherence" to describe how the text draws attention to *how* we read, while simultaneously refusing the documentary (and academic) imperative to fill a gap in history. Rather, the text privileges a "failure of containment" that addresses the inadequacy of a single, coherent, "official" narrative such as the one crafted by Suharto's New Order that

erased the regime's violent origins by legitimizing the killing of Indonesians by Indonesians. Indeed, the voices gathered in this collection exceed such attempts at containment. "Fictive incoherence" as a methodology proposes that *Tinderbox* is understood as a performative act that holds readers accountable to their reading practices as through grappling with meaning-making they face their own implication within occluded histories of violence.

Historical context

The 1965–55 anti-communist massacres in Indonesia that ushered in the decades-long authoritarian rule of Suharto's New Order regime remain little known outside the Southeast Asian context. These mass killings took place in a newly independent Southeast Asian nation that, in the 20th century, had attempted to unify extremely diverse cultural, religious, and linguistic populations into one national identity following Dutch colonialism from 1800 and a brief period of Japanese occupation during World War II. While the perpetrators of the violence were the Indonesian military and paramilitary groups, these events did not take place in a vacuum. Post-1945 Southeast Asia was also the "hot" battleground where Cold War tensions had some of their most devastating material impacts and the Cold War context is important to understand the climate in Indonesia leading up to the massacres (Robinson 2018, 84).

After independence from the Dutch, Indonesia's new government was headed by Sukarno, a left-leaning, anti-imperialist, popular nationalist. He was often considered to be aligned with the PKI by western powers despite his lack of formal affiliation (Robinson 2018, 42). Hence, throughout the 1960s, the USA and its allies actively worked to weaken Sukarno's power (US Declassified Documents Online 1965; Robinson 2018, 83; US Declassified Documents Online 1965). While the exact level of involvement the USA and its allies had in the lead-up to the 1965–66 massacre is unclear, there is abundant evidence that they played a "critical role" in encouraging the army to act against the PKI (and ultimately Sukarno) and in the ensuing mass violence (Robinson 2018, 78). Leading up to October 1965, rumours about a military-led action against Sukarno began to intensify (Marching 2017, 18) and in this environment a small group of Sukarno loyalists decided to pre-empt a potential coup d'état by kidnapping and killing the most important generals in the Indonesian military (Larasati 2013, 3). This event, known as the "September 30th Movement", despite taking place early on October 1, resulted in the deaths of seven high-ranking military officials. The remaining military generals blamed the murders on the PKI and Gerwani (Indonesia's largest feminist organization), and embarked on a brutal campaign of arrest, torture, and murder of suspected PKI and Gerwani members that by mid-1966 resulted in at least half a million deaths (Robinson 2018, 3–7; Pohlman 2017, 23). Of relevance to Oka's family history and *Tinderbox*'s narrative, women artists and Chinese Indonesians were also specifically targeted due to pre-existing ethnic discrimination (Robinson 2018, 121; Larasati 2013 5; Oka 2022a, 14). The persecution against ethnic Chinese in Indonesia continued throughout the New Order regime, in addition to the ideologically identified targets of PKI and Gerwani members.[3]

For the USA and its allies, the massacres may have been one of the "most important victories" in their anti-communist agenda (Bevins 2020, 10). This period of intense violence that peaked in 1965 and 1966 marked Indonesia's swift political shift from a

neutral, left-leaning country with one of the world's largest communist parties to a staunchly anti-communist nation that would become one of the USA's most stalwart allies for the remainder of the Cold War. For the Indonesian people, 1965 marked the beginning of President Suharto's decades-long New Order regime. Even after the most concentrated killings and violence subsided, the government's use of propaganda and threats led to many of those who had been victims of violence becoming fearful of speaking up, a self-silencing that ultimately helped to sustain the very ideology under which they were persecuted (Marching 2017, 22, 35). While it is important to avoid simplistically framing the massacres and regime change as completely masterminded by the USA and other western powers, it remains clear that these outsiders brought their own agendas to Indonesia and influenced the unfolding events both ideologically and materially. This transnational scope leading up to the 1965–66 genocide emphasizes how Indonesia's immediate postcolonial emergence from Dutch colonialism was intimately entangled with the imperialist ambitions of other western powers. Indonesia's identity as an independent nation was forged in the often-violent negotiations of its place in the region and world amidst the overlapping waves of local, regional, and international Cold War politics that engulfed Southeast Asia during the latter half of the 20th century.

Where does a collection of poetry from a diasporic, Chinese Indonesian poet fit into this historical narrative? In 2015, the International People's Tribunal 1965 (IPT 1965) addressing the violence of 1965–66 was held in The Hague. Although not officially affiliated with any national government, the IPT 1965 took the form of a "people's" court and was driven predominantly by Indonesians in the diaspora because they "had more freedom to speak out" about this history than those still living in Indonesia (Larasati 2013, 33). Their work was a systematic condemnation of the human rights violations that took place and, similarly, Oka's work directly names both the Indonesian government and the complicity of US and other western governments in the genocide. Simply exposing the complicity of western powers, or even the actions of the Indonesian military, however, is not *Tinderbox*'s ultimate goal. Instead, *Tinderbox*'s methodology of "fictive incoherence" forces both the writer and reader to wrestle with their implication in historical violence that persists into the present. Oka's use of the US National Security Archive documents that serve as evidence of US intentions in Indonesia highlights the simultaneous freedoms and frictions of diaspora: her position within the US empire as a diasporic citizen gives her access to the archive that led to *Tinderbox*'s creation, even as that archive is a source of the epistemic violence that *Tinderbox* seeks to address through poetic accounting with empire, ethnic xenophobia, and self. This accounting is more than a statement of cause or even an explanation for one's conduct. Rather, in *Tinderbox*, accounting moves beyond description and towards accountability, both personal and communal.

A poetic documentation

While "fictive incoherence" complicates the documentary impulse, Oka's aesthetic practices in *Tinderbox* do remain indebted to docupoetics. Docupoetics is a genre of poetry in which the poet engages with a specific archive, allowing their work to reanimate historical moments beyond the life experiences of the poet themselves. Philip Metres (2018) describes the genre as work in which the poet serves as journalist, documentarian,

historian, and agitator (2). At its best, this genre allows poets aesthetically to manipulate "the document" to "broaden its narrative, reveal its omissions, lay bare its brutality" (Briante 2020, 26, 34). An increasing number of writers have taken up docupoetics since 2010 to resist the violent erasure of colonial archives or to amplify voices and movements ignored or misrepresented by the mass media (Metres 2018, 1). By transforming documents into the poetic mode, docupoetics exposes the "mechanisms and structures" of colonialism and enacts a "refusal to be erased from the archive" (Perez and Colleps 2015, 9). This repurposing directs the socially constructive power of the document towards different, often decolonial, ends.

Simultaneously, Metres acknowledges that "the strengths of documentary poetry (its attention to preserving a history, its instructionality, its architectures) also risk the violence of silencing, naming, excluding that the documentary poetry attempts to redress" (2015, 70–71). One text that Metres highlights as an early example of the docupoetic tradition is Peter Dale Scott's (1989) *Coming to Jakarta*, a book-length "investigative" poem of "self-exposure" that, like Oka's work, quotes from US archival records about the 1965–66 massacres (Campbell 1998, 1; Gewanter 1998, 20). While one of Scott's stated intentions was to expose western (himself included) complicity in the massacres, the collection's incorporation of archival materials into a traditional lyric mode runs the risk of turning the Indonesian context into a stage for the white, male, first-person speaker to explore his own subjectivity (Campbell 1998, 2; Macphail 1998, 42).

Practitioners of docupoetics must also wrestle with the risk that documentary demands a flattening, *self*-humanization from minoritarian subjects to achieve legibility for western audiences. Drawing on film studies, Pooja Rangan (2017) and Jill Magi (2014) both note that the documentary genre is deeply implicated in a logic of exposure and visibility that judges who possesses the ability to envision subjectivity, and by extension who counts or does not count as human (Rangan 2017, 8; Magi 2014, 255). For example, as a diasporic Chinese Indonesian writer with US citizenship, Oka's positionality differs from that of Scott who writes across racialized and national differences. In contrast, Oka's personal connection to the Indonesian context, and the lack of knowledge outside Indonesia about the 1965–66 massacres, make it tempting for readers to understand *Tinderbox* as offering either documentary totality or self-humanization. Oka resists this conflation when she writes:

> I have not been a communist in Indonesia at the height of Western ambitions to crush communism in the Asia Pacific region, but I have been a Chinese Indonesian girl growing up under the New Order dictatorship established in the wake of 1965. (Oka 2022a, 5)

The history that *Tinderbox* addresses is one in which she has a personal stake but from which she is also removed, and therefore her work does not presume that complete legibility through documentation is either possible or the ultimate goal.

Oka's sensibility to these ethical questions surrounding the role of witness and the effects of exposure informs her poetic engagement with the archive. *Tinderbox* emerged in the wake of the 2017 declassification of nearly 30,000 pages of National Security Archive material documenting US activity in Indonesia related to the events of 1965–66 (National Security Archive 1965; Oka 2022b, 11:58). *Tinderbox* contains a series of poems that mimic these archival documents sent between officials in Washington and the US

Embassy in Jakarta. However, even when deeply immersed within it, Oka's relationship to the archive is a "hostile" one, based on her knowledge that the National Security Archive is incomplete and the documents contained within it are written from a perspective opposed to the welfare of most Indonesian people (Oka 2022b, 44:40). This series of poems resonates with the ethos of docupoetics as *Tinderbox*'s aesthetic manipulation of the documents reanimates historical narratives of violence occluded by both Indonesian and American archives.

There are six poems in the series, five titled "Telegram" and one titled "Memorandum", that structurally mimic the documents Oka encountered during her archival research. This visual mimicry is most apparent in the heading of each poem (see Figure 1).

The title "TELEGRAM" is rendered in an all-caps, bold font and surrounded by a mix of textual information such as "OUTGOING AMEMBASSY DJAKARTA" and non-textual visuals such as the black horizontal line, like that of an official telegram. While not an exact replica, there are striking similarities between the poems' form and the actual telegrams from the archive (see Figure 2).

The font style, placement of the heading, and horizontal black line at the top of the document are mimicked very closely in Oka's poem. While the exact form and

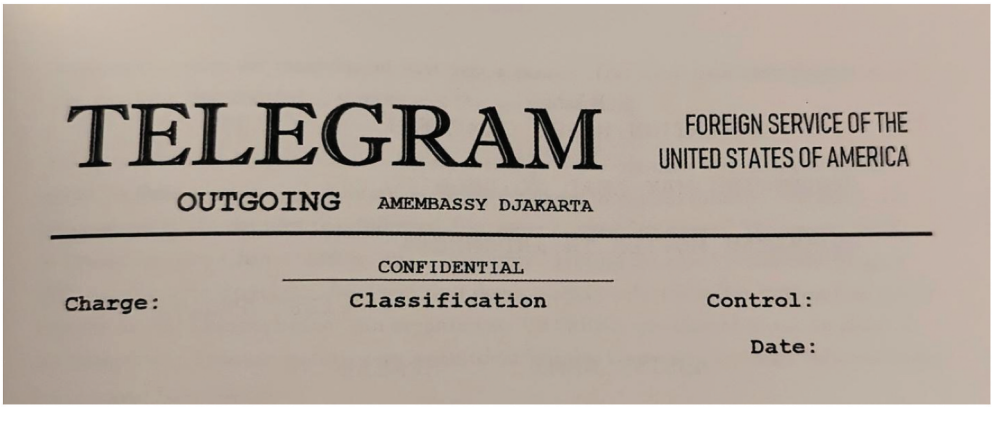

Figure 1. An image of the visual heading that begins each of the five "Telegram" poems from *A Tinderbox in Three Acts* by Cynthia Dewi Oka. Used by permission of BOA Editions, Ltd.

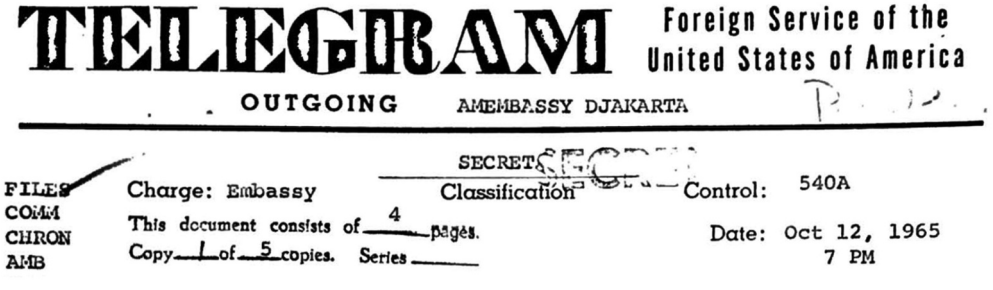

Figure 2. An image of the heading from an archival document from the National Security Archive, "US Embassy in Jakarta, Telegram 971 to Secretary of State", declassified in 2017.

specific documents Oka used while writing her poems vary, these basic details remain consistent across the archival materials. By visually invoking the documents, Oka's text forces readers to confront the paper trail of violence, despite both the Indonesian and US governments' refusal to recognize responsibility for this period of history.

Through these archival poems, Oka points out the violence enacted first onto the bodies of Indonesian people, then once more onto the historical narrative. The text is found language sourced from the documents themselves, and rearranged in an all-caps, typewriter-like font. The third telegram poem is a list of actions, all prefaced by the word "to":

(TO) BURY RATHER THAN
(TO) THROW IN RIVER
(TO) PRESAGE
FANTASTIC HARVEST
(TO) SIGN NO DEATHS (Oka 2022a, 50)

The all-caps typesetting adds a hyperbolic sense of emphasis as this poem references acts of violence against physical bodies: the choice between burying or throwing into a river. Yet the bodies are not referred to as bodies but rather alluded to in the description of a "fantastic harvest" which dehumanizes the victims. Equally absent from the poem are pronouns that indicate the subject enacting the verb. Instead of, "we bury", or "you bury", "(TO)" stands in the place of the pronoun, so there is no sense of an actor taking ownership for the actions within the poem. By removing an active pronoun, Oka heightens the reader's experience of the abdication of responsibility that permeated the USA's official stance towards the events of 1965–66.

Similarly, the final archival poem, "Memorandum", represents Oka's poetic contestation of the purposefully incomplete nature of the US archive. This poem is, in Muriel Rukeyser's (2005) classic words, a striking example of docupoetics' ability to "extend the document" (844). "Memorandum" has the same aesthetic as the "Telegram" poems with the title in a large, all-caps font. In a smaller size of the same typeface, the subtitle reads: "Prepared for the 303 Committee" (Oka 2022a, 86). This sets up the expectation that a document-like poem will follow. Yet, rather than a poetic reconfiguration of language found in Oka's other "Telegram" poems, the body of the poem consists of only four lines of text:

Washington, December 8, 1965
[SOURCE: National Security Council, Special Group/303
Committee Files, Subject Files, Indonesia. Secret. 4
pages of source text not declassified]

(Oka 2022a, 86).

Following these four lines is a blank page that emphasizes that the "incompleteness" of the official archive is not an accident but rather a purposeful redaction by the US state. Though a significant number of documents were declassified in 2017, many were not, and Oka shows those exceptions and how failing to declassify the details of the memorandum erases the specific role that the USA played in Indonesia in 1965. The poem's maintenance of the blank space on the page represents a reality of compounded violences: first, the USA's role in the historical violence perpetrated against the Indonesian

people; and second, the redaction of knowledge that would identify a responsibility for those past actions.

In response to this elision, "Memorandum" also models the affordances of poetic response to the violent erasure of the archive. Below the blank space, the true body of the poem is a long footnote that inserts additional information into the document. Quoting from a separate document, "Note on US Covert Action Programs", published by the US Department of State, Office of the Historian, this footnote informs the reader that the 303 Committee was an executive body "to review and approve covert action programs initiated by the CIA" and the activities overseen by this programme included "propaganda; economic warfare [...] and support of indigenous anti-Communist elements in threatened countries" (Oka 2022a, 86). This information is corroborated by historian Geoffrey Robinson (2018) who notes that as early as 1964, memoranda from the 303 Committee revealed a plan to bolster anti-communist forces within Indonesia to reduce the influence of the PKI (105). The poet's addition of this footnote explicitly counters the redaction of information about the 303 Committee activities in the original December 8 memorandum. In an interview with Peter Conners, Oka explains her intention to "show the hand of the poet" through these footnotes to remind the reader that the poem was a "made thing" (Oka 2022b, 56:50). The footnote is not simply the neutral addition of information, but also a pointed critique of the initial withholding, putting the poet into the role of "historian" and also of "agitator".

And yet this footnote concludes not with a call to fill in the gaps in history with more accurate documentation but rather with a call for imagination in the final line that reads: "'Not declassified' means **use your imagination**" (Oka 2022a, 86; emphasis in original). What, we might ask, fills this moment of imagination? What should we imagine in the absence of knowledge that is "not declassified"? Recalling Oka's opening statement that "these poems do not presume to fill the hole [in history]", this article proposes that her demand for imagination is where *Tinderbox* turns from a logic of exposure towards a methodology of fictive incoherence found in the theatrical structure of *Tinderbox*, which imagines not a single truth but a collective accounting.

Performing fictive incoherence

This article, therefore, establishes "fictive incoherence" as a methodology of self-conscious fictionality that builds upon archival documents, yet is characterized by a resistance to clearly delineating a frame of reference. There are two explicit textual moments that crystalize the definition of fictive incoherence. The first is the statement within the text itself that *Tinderbox* "is a fictional work. It is fictional because it must be" as there is no "official Indonesian record" of the killings (Oka 2022a, 17). The second is Oka's stated "resistance to narrative clarity" in the face of government propaganda that told a very particular story and weaponized such "clarity" against anyone accused of communist ties (2022a, 51). These two inclusions indicate that fictive incoherence as methodology deepens a hostile relationship to the archive by foregrounding acts of imagination that exceed exposure and instead honour a chorus of heterogeneous, unruly perspectives. Fictive incoherence is more than merely the sum of aesthetic features in Oka's text, but also signals her methodology of proposing a procedural shift in how the poet engages with her archive and how readers engage with the text.

Oka's methodology of fictive incoherence to engage with the archive exceeds the bounds of the documentary impulse as a useful theoretical framework, a critique also present in the evolution of docupoetics. Metres acknowledges an "ethical bind at the core of any documentary poetry project that attempts to reclaim history as some totality" (2015, 70–71). Magi concurs, referencing Bhanu Kapil's (2001) *The Vertical Interrogation of Strangers*, a docupoetic text structured around a series of interview questions, to note that "in the face of documentary and its limits, fiction fills out the truth" (2014, 266) as Kapil turns from documentation to fictive self-interviews that subvert the power dynamic between interviewer and interviewee. Like Kapil, Oka also turns towards fictionalizing as a crucial component in reckoning with erasure, violence, and truth without defaulting to a logic of definitive exposure.

Tinderbox also enacts fictive incoherence through its theatrical structure. Identifying the collection as being "*in Three Acts*" recalls the structure of a play and sets the stage for this comparison of poetic text with performative action. Spread throughout the three acts are a series of interview-like "interrogations" that take place between seven ghostly characters, named in a cast list at the beginning of the collection, and each belonging to different facets of Indonesian society (Oka 2022a). The seventh and final ghost listed, named Nonik, is "a desire made of anti-historical matter" and stands in as the alter ego of the poet and is the facilitator of each interview/interrogation (Oka 2022b, 12:58). In keeping with the theatrical form, these poems read like the script of a play, constructed entirely of dialogue and a few sparse stage directions.

Given this form, this article suggests that understanding these poems through the lens of "performance" is crucial to describe *how* fictive incoherence functions as a guiding methodology for poetic and aesthetic practice that leads to a transformed relationship to questions of historical truth, narrative, and violence. In her canonical definition of performance studies, Diana Taylor (2003) notes that "performance" is paradoxically understood as "simultaneously 'real' and 'constructed'" (3). She acknowledges Richard Turner as a proponent of the idea that performance reveals "culture's deepest, truest, and most individual character", while for other scholars "the constructedness of performance signals its artificiality [...] antithetical to the 'real' and the 'true'" (Taylor 2003, 4). Viewing fictive incoherence as a performative act embraces this contradiction: the scripts of *Tinderbox*'s imagined interrogations are artificially constructed and also speak to cultural truths – like the state-curated history of Indonesia's leftist movement – foreclosed by the violence of historical events. Allowing space for this contradiction is one of the ways in which fictive incoherence privileges voices suppressed by official state narratives.

Fictive incoherence draws specifically upon a queer of Colour critique orientation to performance studies, a branch of the field that emphasizes the critique of exposure as an underlying logic. For example, Vivian Huang (2022) offers a significant intervention in her theorization of "inscrutability" as a performed aesthetic strategy. She suggests that inscrutability, "that which cannot be searched into or understood", resists the burden of liveliness or "the burden to perform as a legible subject for a dominant gaze" (2022, 17, 20).[4] Inscrutability connects the failure of exposure as a political tool to the specific stakes of the Asian body, which has long been viewed through an orientalist perspective as unknowable, mysterious, and other (2). While Huang's work focuses on the embodied aesthetic of inscrutability, Oka's text also positions incoherence – that is, resistance to "narrative clarity" – as another mode of inscrutability. Fictive incoherence draws upon

inscrutability's aesthetic resistance to exposure as it resists the racialized and gendered demands to conform to specific, legible performances of subjecthood, both for the characters within *Tinderbox* and also for Oka as a woman of Colour author crafting their shared narrative.

Throughout *Tinderbox*, the poet's alter ego, Nonik, has a series of conversations or "interrogations" with each of the ghosts that showcase the performative and inscrutable nature of fictive incoherence. There are also two poems where Nonik converses with the entire cast of ghosts. In the first of these group poems, Nonik draws a clear connection between the fictive/imagined in response to the demand to "use your imagination" made earlier in the poem "Memorandum". Nonik asks the assembled ghosts: "Do you understand why you have been imagined?" (Oka 2022a, 52). Later in the poem, Nonik answers their own question: "I am imagining you to prove it is still possible to imagine – [...] this conversation" (53). This statement reads as an *ars poetica* for the collection; or, in other words, this imagined conversation is Nonik's answer to what it means to "use your imagination" in response to the redaction still present in the official archive.

Performance's dual nature insists that what is artificially constructed (or imagined) might *also* speak to a realness that only appears through the performative act. *Tinderbox*'s poetic relation to the US archive is necessarily a fictively incoherent and hostile one, in part because "no Indonesian official record is available to contest or corroborate [the US archive]. The Indonesian official record is a ghost" (Oka 2022a, 18). Turning to the performative rather than the documentary impulse takes this statement literally. This imagined, poetic conversation between ghosts allows the unfurling of a new centre of knowledge. Rather than seeking official or objective recognition from the Indonesian government, this poem responds fictively to realize a deeper truth of what could have been and model a vision of what might yet be possible. These ghostly interrogations staged within *Tinderbox*'s pages stake their own claim as an alternative Indonesian official record.

The conversations that Nonik imagines into being through these interrogations consist of a chorus of conflicting voices that fail to cohere to the single version of truth propagated by the Indonesian state. The conversation opens with a disagreement between the ghosts. The poem begins:

NONIK: [tape whirring]

So.

SATRIA: Here we are.

DEWI: The onion's lost skins.

BUDI: There is no we.

NONIK: Do you understand why you have been imagined? (Oka 2022a, 52)

Even before Nonik can ask the guiding question "Do you understand why you have been imagined?", the ghosts begin to bicker. Following Satria's statement, "Here we are", Budi counters: "There is no we." Sandwiched in between these two contradictory statements, Dewi's description "The onion's lost skins" feels abstract and unmoored – almost as if she were talking to herself. There is no consensus among the ghosts about why they find themselves together in this imagined interrogation.

Later in this same poem where Nonik states the importance of their poetic project, incoherence and disagreement abound:

NONIK: I am imagining you to prove it is still possible to imagine –

IMAN: But not necessary.

SATRIA: What an English speaking thing to do.

NONIK: – this conversation

(Oka 2022a, 52–53).

Nonik's first statement is disrupted by the disparaging comments of Iman and Satria. While imagining this conversation might be possible, it is unnecessary, according to Iman (a diasporic ghost who fled the New Order to the USA). Satria (a former nationalist prisoner under Sukarno's government) also dismisses the imagined conversation as an "English speaking thing to do", implicitly questioning Nonik's Indonesianness as well. Incoherence features prominently in this interrogation poem as the ghosts argue and contradict one another. Yet the text does not try to corral them into any semblance of narrative clarity. Rather, the fact that these differing perspectives can coexist on the page is one of the poetic affordances of this form: during the 1965–66 massacres and in the following New Order era such disagreements might have proved fatal or were foreclosed before they could be aired.

The creation of poetic space for disagreement and the coexistence of multiple voices is extended further in the second group interrogation poem where the ghosts argue even more ferociously with one another. As the conversation becomes heated, some of the ghosts' voices are "muted": Jaya (the ghost of a civilian who participated in the massacres) threatens the others and is muted by Nonik; Satria is also muted by Hwi Siang. After their muting, the contributions of these two ghosts appear in the dialogue as black, redacted boxes so their words are no longer available to the reader. For example, at the end of the poem, Budi (a PKI member) and Hwi Siang (the wife of a BAPERKI member)[5] seem to find a moment of solidarity:

BUDI: In the mountains, even the trees turned out to be informants.

HWI SIANG: I would have hidden you.

BUDI: I would have marched for you.

SATRIA: [redacted]

DEWI: I would have

DEWI: [tape clicks off]

(Oka 2022a, 90)

The moment is speculatively rendered through the grammatical structure of "would have" as the poem gestures towards an imagined moment of solidary between Chinese Indonesians and Indonesian leftists. Although Satria also exists within this same conversation, what he "would have" done is redacted behind the black rectangle. Given that

Satria expressed support of the massacres earlier in the poem (Oka 2022a, 87), while Budi and Hwi Siang represent two of the groups targeted in the killings, it is likely that violence lurks behind the blackness. But, unlike the missing histories of actual PKI members who were "disappeared" from their families and homes, the poem preserves a space for Satria's commentary, even as it withholds the contents of his remarks.

The poem ends on another act of withholding as the "[tape clicks off]" right after the ghost of Dewi (the Gerwani member) speaks. The abrupt end to Dewi's statement without any indication of what she would have done inserts a lack of narrative clarity into the poem. All three legible comments start with the same hypothetical phrase "I would have" but the visual black box of Satria's words and Dewi's truncated statement foreground the role of incoherence in the interrogation as their comments disrupt the reciprocal flow developing between Budi and Hwi Siang. The truncation of Dewi's comment might suggest an act of censorship or silencing that represents how Gerwani members were silenced by the military and how the group was terrorized into non-existence. However, extending the frame of the reading to include the stage-like direction "[tape clicks off]" suggests that instead of censorship, this abrupt end to the interrogation protects Dewi from exposure and instead preserves the inscrutable, imagined quality of her presence. Stating that the "[tape clicks off]" focuses on the mechanical act of the recording ending but says nothing of whether the conversation between the ghosts ends or continues. Instead, it is simply the audience who loses access to the conversation. Dramatizing the removal of access reminds readers that record-keeping is an incomplete action and that a subject's inscrutability must be taken as seriously as their documentation.

These two group interrogations showcase fictive incoherence as an alternative, poetic methodology for wrestling with violence, whether through the enactment of embodied violence or the violent manipulation of narrative. The ghostly, imagined speakers of the poems argue and contradict one another, refusing to be contained by the "official" narrative of Indonesia's development that erased the violent origins of Suharto's New Order regime. Even those speakers hostile to Nonik or to other ghosts are granted a conditional type of space for while Satria and Jaya are muted, they are not removed from the poem. By mediating a space for disagreement, the poem enacts a different mode of relationality towards its speakers. In these poems, *Tinderbox*'s theatrical structure draws on the affordances of performance to enact a fictive incoherence that insists upon the coexistence of inscrutability and accountability.

The final example of *Tinderbox*'s commitment to fictive incoherence is the poem titled "Whereabouts". This poem takes the form of a map of Indonesia overlaid with fragmented text, black dots, and lines that loop between the dots (see Figure 3).

The visual logic of this poem resists a coherence that would impose a false sense of order onto acts of senseless violence. The subtitle "Locations various, 1965–66" and bold type of the Indonesian city names scattered within the text fragments hint that the points on the map and the connecting lines are intended to mark sites of violence that took place during the genocide of 1965–66. Yet the lines between different points of violence are neither circular nor linear; they curl, crossing back over themselves before disappearing into the black dots, leaving the reader uncertain which was the end and which the origin point. The tangled lines remind us that the story was never as simple as the military

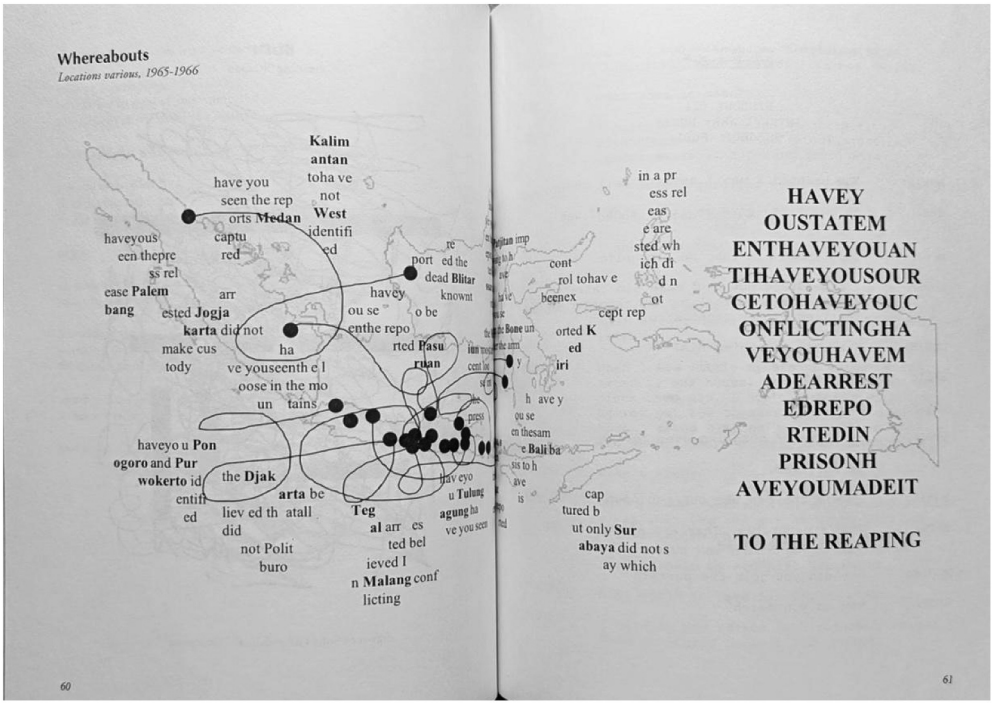

Figure 3. An open spread of the poem "Whereabouts" showing the crease in the centre of the poem where the shape of the book hides part of the image. From *A Tinderbox in Three Acts* by Cynthia Dewi Oka. Used by permission of BOA Editions, Ltd.

defending Indonesia from the "communist threat"; instead, political leftists, women's organizations, artists, Chinese Indonesians, and anyone even accused of being a communist were all swept up in flattening rhetoric that justified carte blanche killings. The looping lines eschew "trajectory or destination" to linger in the feeling left behind by injustice and violence.

Language within the poem is splintered, yet an active reader might be tempted to piece together the fragmented letters in search of meaning. Doing so uncovers a series of disjointed statements such as "have you seen the reports **Medan** captured", "have you seen loose in the mountains", and "**Tegal** arrested believed In **Maleng** conflicting" (Oka 2022a, 60; emphasis in original). The disjointed presentation of the text epitomizes the incomplete picture within the official archives of the violence enacted upon the Indonesian people. However, in addition to fragmentation, there is also a further layer of incoherence. Rather than just drawing on fragments of found language, Oka removes the spaces between words, crushing them together as often as she tears them apart. This textual presentation recalls the self-silencing in the wake of the 1965–66 genocide, conversations held in rushed whispers as words blurred together or cut off abruptly mid-syllable. In addition to systemic and archival violence, there existed (and still exists) a personal-scale relationality to violence – a relationship that reading these poems challenge us to interrogate.

Like the other poems discussed, there are no pronouns in "Whereabouts" that that indicate who might be responsible for the actions of arrest, report, and capture. However, the repeated second-person query of "have you" implicates the reader in the textual encounter. The tone grows increasingly accusatory in the oversized text-block: "have you statement have you anti have you source to have you conflicting have you have made arrested reported in prison have you made it // to the reaping" (Oka 2022a, 61). The block contains no spaces until the final line and looks ambiguously like a sealing stamp or a silhouette of a human head (61). While this text-block appears to prioritize visual shape over language, decoding the internal queries directed towards the "you" also demands the reader to ask ourselves where we stand in relation to the text and the violence that echoes through it: would we have a statement or source or conflict? What or who would we have made, arrested, or reported? If "reaping" is gathering the fruits of labour, how then have we "made it" to living with the harvest of violence in our lives?

Part of the poem is swallowed within the crease of the book's spine so even the most diligent reader will find it impossible to see the full picture of the map or piece together every single fragmented word. Even as the text demands the labour of building meaning from the reader, we will inevitably fail because of the materiality of the book in our hands and of the words on the page. The material object itself blocks our knowing. In this moment of legibility's failure, *Tinderbox*'s insistence on fictive incoherence reminds us that moments like these are a "failure of containment" that opens us to the possibility of holding a book in our hands and knowing that the work is incomplete, incoherent, and still in need of imagination – but that to truly acknowledge our own implication in the world, we must do it anyway.

Conclusion: Towards an imperfect accounting

In *Tinderbox*, Oka crafts an innovative, poetic reckoning with the violence of the genocide that reordered the shape of both Indonesian and her own family's history. From the vantage point of diaspora, *Tinderbox* takes on the "hole" left in Indonesian history by the erasure of the 1965–66 genocide. By incorporating the visual echoes of US State Department documents, *Tinderbox* turns to the aesthetic practices of docupoetics to establish a necessarily hostile relationship to the imperial archive and push back against the singular version of truth offered by official sources. Oka's poetic practice turns the visual and textual forms of the archival documents against themselves to critique the way both the Indonesian and US governments have manipulated the official narratives to occlude the truth of the violent killings and human rights violations that birthed the New Order in 1965–66.

Simultaneously, *Tinderbox*'s poetic call for accounting with this history acknowledges that simply exposing these past crimes does not equate to justice. Despite, for example, the existence of Joshua Oppenheimer's documentary film *The Act of Killing* (2012) and the IPT 1965 in 2015 that exposed many of the crimes committed during the genocide, the Indonesian state's sanctioned message prevails with the assistance of victims' self-imposed silence. There are many similar instances in the history of the US where the exposure of imperial or settler-colonial complicity does not end the violence. For example, journalist Vincint Bevins (2020) traces how Indonesia's drastic, social reorganization that

began in 1965 became a model for other US-backed dictators around the world (162, 174). Transregionally, historian Davorn Sisavath (2021) also suggests a metallic genealogy of American imperialism between Southeast Asia and the Middle East as Cold War-era Southeast Asia was used as a testing ground for the explosive technology of cluster bombs and other ordinances that would then be used to devastating effect in Iraq and Afghanistan in the early 21st century (234). The USA's ongoing support of Israel is another current case of military assistance being provided by the USA despite documentation of the violence enabled by American resources (Rubio 2025; UNRWA 2025). These entangled histories of regional politics, US imperialism, and enduring violence suggest that a new mode is needed to relate to histories of violence and to relate such histories to each other while surviving in their wake. *Tinderbox* breaks from the practice of self-imposed silence that Oka grew up within to ask: what might we do better in the face of violence and erasure as the geopolitical order of the world continues to shift?

An imperfect, partial answer to this question begins to take shape in the fictive incoherence created by *Tinderbox*'s performative structure. Structurally, an integral component of the theatrical encounter is the audience. The "audience" of this text is the reader; we are a crucial part of *Tinderbox*'s relational methodology. This inclusion of the audience/reader is grounded in Nonik's "failure to accept coherence as the best thing we have to offer each other" because, as they assert, "coherence is linear or circular. It mitigates risk. In the progression of a march, or in the loop of a hook, I am safe from the feeling that possesses no trajectory or destination" (Oka 2022a, 51). Nonik's failure to accept coherence is a refusal to settle for normative modes of legibility – for example, the protest march or the narrative hook – that can be co-opted by hegemonic power and instead invites the audience/reader into the risky space of incoherent, destinationless feeling that nonetheless dares us to imagine our relationality otherwise. Through fictive incoherence, *Tinderbox* challenges us to enter into the act of reading as an embodied and performative methodology to inform our material interactions with worlds both on and off the page.

Notes

1. The number of people killed in the massacres is unknown. Five hundred thousand is the most conservative estimate and some perpetrators have been recorded as "boast[ing]" about killing up to three million people (Robinson 2018, 120; Marching 2017, 22).
2. In the North American context, Li-Young Lee, a canonical figure of Asian American literature, is a rare exception. In 2015 a six-part series on Indonesian literature in translation in *The Margins* offered the possibility for further dialogue that this article aims to build upon.
3. For further reading on this historical context, see Marching (2017) and Robinson (2018).
4. See Rachmi Diyah Larasati (2013) for another example, specific to the Indonesian context, of the pressure placed upon racialized and gendered bodies to perform as legible subjects for a dominant gaze.
5. BAPERKI was an organization supporting the interests of Chinese Indonesians that was dismantled in the wake of 1965.

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