

THE DAY THE DANCERS STAYED: EXPRESSIVE FORMS OF CULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract

How have performances developed by Filipino Americans over the twentieth century conveyed important lessons about culture, nation, and community? In other words, what do Filipino American cultural performances have to say about the formation of “national identity” and “community”?

I select three contexts to highlight these changes: the postindustrialization of the US economy; the reaction to race, taxes and education in the Bakke vs. UC Board of Regents decision; and the political realignment of the Reagan democrats. We see the continued immigration of Filipino so-called “professional” families to the United States. Their children seek senses of themselves amidst attacks on ethnic studies, affirmative action, and the presence of immigrants in California. And here the Pilipino Cultural Night (PCN) as a performance genre emerges. For the thousands of young Filipino Americans who have taken to the stage or for those who felt more comfortable in the wings, participating in these shows has been some of the only history lessons available about the Philippine revolution of 1896, the literary politics of Carlos Bulosan, the struggle of Ilocano and Visayan farm workers in Hawaii, the back-breaking labor in Salinas, Delano, Spokane, or Chicago.

They also turn their attention to the Philippines and to the outer diaspora, learning of the plight of overseas workers like Flor Contemplacion and the devastation of the archipelago’s natural resources. At the end of the twentieth century, performing a play or choreographing dances offers not only the possibility of entertainment, but also the chance to tell stories about the past, to call a community into being, to convey youthful insecurities, or to raise oblique and ambivalent critiques of the America they provisionally call home.

Cultural performances such as the PCN assume the burden of providing a “performative transcript” of who Filipino Americans are. With the dominant historical record so heavily biased toward professionals’ and elites’ accounts of the past, ordinary folks have often turned to the field of culture to symbolically enact what would not be possible elsewhere. But ordinary folks are not the only ones to recognize the power and dynamism of the terrain of culture. We already know that the powerful remind the rest of us of who they are, what they supposedly do, and why they deserve such an elevation station. In that alternative to the dominant historiography, we find oblique and sometimes parallel responses to the existing and oftentimes unquestioned written record.

Keywords

cultural performances, Filipino American Studies, Filipino diaspora, national identity and communities

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Editor’s Note

This paper also appears in *Filipino Americans: Transformations and Identities*. Ed. Maria P. P. Root. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2000. 163-82. © 2000 Theodore S. Gonzalves. All rights reserved.

The foreign folk dance troupes that keep visiting the US seem set on convincing their American audiences that life back home is just one big, happy, handsome hop. Russian, Indian, African, and Israeli companies have all been over in the last two years and now a troupe of Filipinos is on a cross-country tour showing that the simple life moves with a joyous lilt on their islands. The troupe is stocked with 20 lovely girls—all of them unmarried, all in their late teens, most of them less than five feet tall. All are given to flirtatious smiling while on stage. The men are lively and graceful. Their dances blend the islands' Muslim and Spanish cultures with a lot of high-spirited Indo-Malayan doings. After a fast tour through primitive war, funeral and victory rites, the girls and their male partners concentrate on harem ceremonials, fire dances and a harvest festival celebrating the riches of the rice crop. Before each show they gather to pray that the performance will go well. If it does go well—and it delighted viewers in New York—they end the show singing love songs to the audience.

—*Life Magazine* (1959)

Of all our arts, the dance has gone fastest and closest to achieving a native identity; our music, painting, and literature still have a hybrid look.”

—Nick Joaquin (qtd. in UNESCO)

Any study of the colonial world should take into consideration the phenomena of the dance and of possession.... The circle of the dance is a permissive circle: it protects and permits.”

—Frantz Fanon

Only in dance
is there union
Only in dance
Do spirit, soul, and self
Unite
That is why we like it

—“The Ballad of Billy Rivera,” Juan Gomez-Quiñones

CULTURE IS FOR-GETTING AND FOR-GIVING

In the past generation, something remarkable has been happening on stages on college campuses. We could talk of surfaces, of the theatricality of the event itself, of the visceral reactions generated when experiencing the show in a large dark room, seated patiently among others. Think of those times, and of those surfaces. Thousands of college-age students have taken the stage and have developed a sophisticated cultural form known as the Pilipino Cultural Night.

Think in terms of condensation or pressure points, in terms of the ways in which families are held together, or ways in which memories are kept alive. For the veterans of the event, think of the first time you saw the show. What was it like? What do you remember of the show? The costumes? Your friends and family members? Who was next to you? How have the shows changed? Think of the distances friends and relatives have had to traverse in order to get to the shows. How hard it was to find parking, to find the gig itself, to find tickets, to find a good seat. To find something to drink during the intermission.

Think, also, of making associations across these categories (including, but certainly not limited to): constitution, entertainment, performance, democracy, narration, nationalism, culture, editing, authenticity, articulation. Ultimately, these shows mark the immediate past of Filipino Americans in the United States. What, exactly, is it? Is it an art form, a political movement, a political statement, a form of entertainment? Why are so many direly interested in it? What are some of the consequences? Do some students actually suffer in their academic work? Are Filipinos really the best dancers from Asia? Are Filipinos Asians?

To develop a cultural history of the PCN is to launch a line of inquiry that cuts across many disciplines: American history, Southeast Asian studies, performances studies, cultural studies, ethnic and Asian American studies, American studies, sociology, anthropology. Some of the other disciplines which would have relevance here would be political science, and political economy. The questions that the show raises for me are numerous. In a rather clumsy way, we could simply start by asking, *How does culture work? How does it change? Who is involved? What is being said? What are the investments and consequences?* The idea of culture at work is highlighted here. The PCN affords us a chance to examine a facet of culture—to found theoretical discussions, and intellectual spaces for the kinds of cultural practices that many young folks have chosen to undertake. Getting close to the PCN allows us a chance to ask some questions about what we do with our time, to attempt to piece together larger stories of ourselves in the United States—about the time and place around us, about some of the consequences for what is edited as Filipino and

Filipino American culture. Some other dimensions of these discussions also will include aspects of the debate about subjectivities, and the writing of histories. By subjectivities, I mean discourses which are two-fold. In one instance, we have an opportunity to examine how we come to shape meanings, bend stories or narrations, assume stances, poses, and styles—and thus effect a type of active subjectivity. A serious aspect of the study has to deal with the notion of the PCN as a straightjacket—not only as something which has been instrumental in the enabling of Filipino American identities in the United States, but also that which constricts. These critical reflections suggest how the PCN raises questions about how culture, politics, and history are related for this young immigrant community: how the stories we tell about ourselves are often managed, disciplined, monopolized, hoarded, dictated, maybe even railroaded.

Concerning the writing of history, the PCN affords us the chance to bear witness to the narration of a community's history as it takes place with some regularity on stages every year. Certain versions of Filipino and Filipino American histories are being authored, passed around, passed down, and (mis)handled each year. To inquire into the writing of history (and here, I'm using the term *writing* rather loosely) is to examine how histories are being generated, sustained, maintained, and circulated. One of the amazing aspect of this dimension of history-writing is that such intervention takes place amid thousands of learned academic writings which have constructed images, paradigms and notions about Filipinos and Filipino Americans as lazy natives, little brown brothers, fawning tutees of American democracy, and so on.

Secondly, the historical narration of the PCN takes place largely without the community's benefit of institutions that sustain memory as well as individuals who would determine the shapes of such lines of inquiry. Institutions like the Japanese American National Museum or the Chinese Museum of the Americas are quite a ways off for the Filipino community in the United States. As for faculty, we'd be hard-pressed in the present moment to name more than a handful of full-time, fully-tenured professors who focus specifically on the Filipino or Filipino-American experience (we need not concern ourselves with better "token" counts). The number is practically non-existent for those who hold critical positions such as department chairs, administrators, development officers, or even as advisors in graduate programs.

Would such a change in personnel and infrastructure really make that much of a difference in our communities? This has yet to be studied in great detail. What is certain for now at least, is that the PCN is one of the most dynamic history lessons that thousands of Filipino and Filipino-American youth have chosen to shoulder during their college careers

since the 1980s. Lastly, as I write this, the PCN is intriguing because it comes at a time in American history precisely when historically-challenged voices in the culture (even folks in our own community) are attempting to take American history back.¹ Studies on the PCN are part of that larger labor to recover parts of ourselves: Foucault (1980) suggested a labor of heeding “insurrectionist knowledges,” Yuji Ichioka (1974) turns our attentions to “buried pasts.”

STEPPING INTO IT

This essay grew out of some experiences I’ve had in planning PCNs in Northern California. Of course, one of the primary aims of a serious study of the PCN would be to return to the earlier shows—to show continuities as well as breaks in themes and concerns over the years.

Let us turn initially to reasons why it is important to study the PCN.

First, the show is a mass form of a Filipino American centered event which provides another way to methodologically develop an aspect of Asian American and ethnic studies scholarship—to explore how expressive forms are vital areas of shared life experiences. Secondly, attention to the show allows us to embrace some political dimensions of the world around us: the show is both a symptom and a response to the climate of mass mobilizations of college students during the Reagan/Duekmeijian era, an era of Asian and Pacific/Islander Student Union (APSU) chapters on college campuses attempting to hold on to the gains wrought by a previous generation of Asian American youth through ethnic studies curricula as well as minority student services.

But first, I’d like to go back to one of my first eye-openers concerning these shows. Actually, it was not even one of the PCNs itself, but a Christmas show, San Francisco State University’s Pilipino American Collegiate Endeavor’s (PACE) “I’m Dreaming of a Brown Pasko.”² After having taken in that show, I threw myself into the planning for next spring’s show. It was a bit of a leap for me; up until then, my performing credits were largely musical, accompanying singers or other soloists in some jazz combo or lounge act format. This was different: I read for one of the skit parts—that year, the director insisted on calling it a “play.” In truth, the script amounted to much more than a skit. This year’s theme for the play was the founding of PACE in 1967. We got a heavy dose of history there, rehearsing in folks’ garages, classrooms, student union conference areas. Our script-writer researched PACE’s founding and San Francisco State’s strike in the late 1960s. We were stepping into a history of not only the group that would later be PACE, but Filipina/os’ participation

in the Third World Liberation Front's historic genesis of the 1968 strike which put ethnic studies on the map. Paris had its barricades of students, philosophers and workers: we had San Francisco State College. I came to learn as well some of the positive contributions that groups like PACE make to the academic and social life of Filipino Americans on campuses, a place that has the potential to build leadership and organizational skills, to develop valuable cross-cultural friendships, and a place to learn to be part of something larger than one's self.

Working on that show encouraged me to continue working with the (PACE) organization.

I decided to run as internship coordinator. That stint later offered a useful model for managing an intersection between the student organization, the Asian American Studies department, and local, on-and off-campus projects. My goal that year was to make explicit the linkages between communities, classrooms, and the organizational mission. One of the directives was to support the educational life of Filipina/os on that campus. Without a doubt, many people were more interested in the social aspects of gathering together; I was interested in that as well. But there was nothing from preventing us from framing the need for social activity within a larger understanding. At the time, young students started working on issues that affected many of our lives, such as violence, substance abuse, and the health threat of AIDS, among others. For Filipina/os to get together at all meant to get together under those conditions of death, dying, and survival. That is the level of importance I assigned to the work of PACE during those years. Those concerns were also tempered by dropout rates, shaky academic performances, and the rising costs of higher education in the state of California.

What I found as we turned our attention to the planning of the PCN in 1993 was the beginning of what would eventually develop into a criticism of the shows. Because of their commitment to the shows, students were taking incompletes in the Spring semesters from their courses. This was the opening to other criticisms; namely, how the show was becoming counterproductive to the success of Filipina/os on campus. A small group of members on the coordinating committee began to question the organization's role in promoting the value of education for Filipina/o youth. During this time as well, tuition was being driven up throughout California's institutions of higher education. While major campuses of the University of California garnered much television and print media attention, it was the California State University system (of which San Francisco State is a part) that was especially hard hit. Many students did not return; and, this only heightened the commitments of many around the organization to reassess the value of what we were doing with our time and energies.

When the summer came, planning for the upcoming year's PCN began to take shape. We met wherever we could: living rooms, porches, and coffee joints for the committee meetings. This was when we first began to raise questions about this process. At first, criticisms were unfocused, framed hastily around a cost-benefit analysis: for the time, energy, and money invested, we were not getting much return. My indices for success meant active recruitment, retention, and graduation of Filipina/o students at San Francisco State. If our group could not keep track of that larger goal, then everything else had to be re-worked. Those first debates were contentious and concerned just about every aspect of the production. As debates unfolded, it became clear that many of us had much more to say about the specifics of the show as well as about the more general statements surrounding notions of "culture" for Filipina/o Americans in the United States.

The terrain of the debate soon centered on the show's format. The question of "the one night" performance drew major criticisms. Why was "culture" represented on one night? For many, the format seemed too constraining, as if what we could say about ourselves could be summarized neatly in three or four hours (if you were lucky) on a stage. Larger questions quickly surfaced: What was meant by "culture"? When we began to ask this question, we took on a larger set of problems. Questions of representation and ideology were now being addressed. Why did we choose these symbols—these dances, music, costumes, formats? What was at stake in the theatrical narrations used to organize the show; i.e., the play's plot lines? What did the show say about our selves?

What was clear at this stage was that many of us in the organization were simply not asking these questions. For the most part, our coordinating body was busy preparing next year's show, albeit mechanically. This dimension of the production of "culture" was evident: we expected another PCN, we did not plan it. The show disciplined us; it told us more about the meanings of "Filipino"-ness rather than how the younger generation actively engaged in their experiences understood the term. It was "culture"—or, our varied, yet consolidated notions of it—that acted upon us, rather than us interacting with each other. By the end of the debates, I felt even more distant from the notion of PCN, even the term, "culture." It did not take much at that point to propose that we abandon the whole affair.

Two sides emerged on either side of the question. A small group attempted to raise the issue of re-formatting and re-programming, adopting an approach which placed the show within the group's larger commitments to students. However, the majority was frustrated by the change that was proposed. It certainly was not as bad as it could have been. PCN lore will recall how, on many campuses, friendships were lost and groups

devolved into competing and, at times, unworkable factions. In our own group, changes to the show, were met with a lot of skepticism. What both sides faced in common was how to negotiate an immediate future—this was new ground, and we were learning how to walk again. By including these anecdotal comments on the situation at campuses like San Francisco State’s cultural night, I am suggesting that criticisms about cultural practices can and should come from the very things which take up our time.

On with the Show...

PRODUCING CULTURE

Because the PCN is vulnerable to the charge of essentialism, which presents a static, singular conception of Filipinos in America, I have proposed an alternative format to the PCN, one deploying a strategic essentialism which aims to present one view of Filipinos of America. As such, this distinction and movement from “Filipinos in America” to “Filipinos of America” highlights a political moment, when students—who have engaged the strategically essentialist format—take hold of the means of cultural production; that is, “the political production of culture” (Spivak). Additionally, my intention in making this distinction is to provide a contingent rhetorical device for denoting a de-centered notion of “America” (that is, de-centered from Europe as its sole author), and for highlighting the development of culture from within the specific site of America, the rooting of expressive forms.

The case study used as an alternative to the traditional PCN model suggests a return to the political question of such activity. These meditations are based on analyses of nine PCNs, spanning a period from 1986 to 1996. All the shows analyzed were directed and executed by Filipino American student organizations at four-year colleges in northern and southern California. The shows are: University of California, Berkeley (UCB), Pilipino American Alliance (PAA), 1986; San Francisco State University (SFSU), Pilipino American Collegiate Endeavor (PACE), 1986; SFSU PACE, 1988; Santa Clara University, Barkada,³ 1992; SFSU PACE 1992; SFSU PACE 1993; UC Los Angeles (UCLA), Samahang Pilipino,⁴ 1994; UC Irvine (UCI), Kababayan,⁵ 1995-6.

LIFE’S ESSENTIALS

Before proceeding directly to the PCN, I take up a definitional matter by asking, *what is essentialism?* Although there exists no strict definition to the term itself (if there were such

a thing, it would be “essentialist”), E. San Juan takes it to be “a fixed, ontological essence or a unitary, transcendental category predicated on the epistemological reasoning supplied by anthropology, biology, and other physical sciences” (7). For Diana Fuss, essentialism is “commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the “whatness” of a given entity” (xi). What both definitions are pointing to is this lack of flexibility, the foreclosure of multiple, even contingent meanings concerning the “whatness” of culture which is my concern. Similarly, the PCN categorizes what we know, or should know, about Filipino and Filipino American culture.

The PCN is not mandated from above, nor legislated by institutions, governmental bodies. It is of Filipinos: that is, produced by us. However, I want to stress here, the show tells us less about ourselves, how we practice, see, do, and live—rather, it is the show which performs us as evidenced by the planning of the event, which takes place nearly one year in advance with the gathering of a committee of students. The committee chair delegates one task per person—costume acquisition/design, venue rental, choreography, script-writing, program design, set design, rehearsal coordination, bookkeeping, marketing and ticket sales, music rehearsal coordination, deciding where the alumni will be seated in the audience, and so on. Culture—as a dynamic, lived set of experiences, as a catalogue of pains, appetites, anticipations, and joys—is bracketed. Rather, “culture,” as the committee’s center of attention, is commodified, staged, packaged, and, most importantly through the PCN, implied. The committee is a witness not to a dialogue on what culture is (or could be), but to the division of its labor.

In coming to terms with the essentialist logic of the PCN, I examine what serves as a static definition of Filipino and Filipino American culture. In defining what is, the PCN also defines what is not Filipino culture. Here is where the PCN falters as a durable vehicle for a dynamic discourse on culture, participation, and as a venue for creativity.

“I LEFT MY HEART ON IFUGAO MOUNTAIN”: THE PCN TODAY

The PCN is a sophisticated expressive form. Part of the complicated nature derives from its ability to narrate histories in creative ways. I begin this next discussion with a simultaneous reference to sentimentalized “returns”: the first refers to Al Robles’s short story, “Looking for Ifugao Mountain,” and next, the popular US American jazz standard, “I Left My Heart in San Francisco.” Robles is considered the “dean” of the “Flip” poets (as they called themselves), a cohort of Filipina/o American writers primarily located in the San Francisco Bay Area who were instrumental in developing needed community arts

and cultural expression (Syquia; Peñaranda et al; Campomanes). His poetry speaks from another generation of youth who, during the 1960s and 1970s, wrestled with questions of power, resources, and the definition of the Filipina/o experience in America. *Looking for Ifugao Mountain* (Robles) is a children's story which begins with an urban Filipino kid sitting in San Francisco's Portsmouth Square. He is spirited away on a journey to the Philippines, searching for a mythic figure that lives on Ifugao mountain. Along the way, he is beset by obstacles and warnings: the mountain is dangerous, go back. He presses on; as he nears the mountain, he is told by a guide that he will not find what he searches for on the mountain, but in the knowledge of the *manongs*⁶ who sit with him at Portsmouth Square. He returns to San Francisco, and begins listening.

The show cannot be considered without an understanding of the Filipino American student organizations which direct and execute this annual activity. Since the influx of Filipino students at college campuses in the 1980s, the PCN has become the central organizing activity for many student groups. During Spring academic terms, officers for the upcoming academic years are elected by the organizational membership; and usually, certain positions are reserved exclusively for coordinating PCN logistics. Beginning in the Fall, students are delegated various tasks—set design, costume-making, catering, dancing, music, and so forth—toward the final production. Many hours of rehearsal time and planning are sacrificed by several (hundred, in some cases) students.

Additionally, funding for the show is a long-term task. Although private donations and community sponsorships are encouraged and (at times) secured, the show's funding emanates from special accounts within the campus' funding structure. Particular sources may be sought in student government grants, from student activities offices, the office of the university president, and so forth. Also, the amounts granted for such shows have wildly varied: from a student organization's budget at a small campus, \$300, to nearly \$20,000 for one evening's worth of entertainment. Justifying such expenditures involves detailed records kept by the organization for any aspects of production concerns: securing a venue (the bigger the better), buying new costumes (last year's simply won't do), paying professional choreographers, catering receptions, mounting publicity and outreach campaigns, and so forth. I point to these two elements—namely, time and money—to underscore the fact that the PCN is a serious enterprise. The students organizing the show do not take their obligations lightly, and nor should we, the audience, receive the production in a similar fashion.

Turning from pre-production to the production itself, I notice five (although not exhaustive) consistent elements in the show's format and program, i.e., indispensable

characteristics in the essentialist logic of the PCN. These include: the opening of the show with both the Philippine and US American national anthems, the use of Tagalog in the programs, the marking of bodies through Philippine costumes, the standard (required) inventory of Philippine dance styles, and the narrative within the show as a vehicle for historicizing the Filipino American experience.

The traditional PCN opens with the Philippine and US American national anthems. Written by A.C. Montenegro, the *Pambansang Awit* (“Philippine national anthem”) is written in a standard march style, reminiscent of European and US American band musics. The lyrics speak to strong nationalistic strains which are commensurate with imagery found in Francis Scott Key’s *Star Spangled Banner*. At some productions, the choir deftly merges the tunes in a continuous medley. The effect here is of continuity—between two nations singing of prideful traditions of liberty, battle, and democratic “friendship.”

Second, Tagalog occupies a central role in these productions. The following partial list bears out the importance of framing the shows around what has become a nationalized dialect: SFSU PACE 1986, “Fiesta Sa Ating Bayan” (Celebration at Our Town); SCU Barkada 1992, “Pagsasama Sa Pamamagitan Ng Cultura” (Unity Through Culture); UCLA Samahang Pilipino 1994, “Ang Nawalang Kayamanan” (The Lost Treasure). Also, many of the shows feature a translation of the entire production, rendered in English and Tagalog. The issue of language here is central to the project of the PCN, in that as the Filipino community in the United States quickly develops into the largest Asian American ethnic group, the retention of language becomes a symbol of cultural unity, a reminder that Filipino culture has roots elsewhere and in other tongues besides English. More significantly, though, this use of Tagalog reflects the demographic shift from the dominance of Ilocano immigration in the pre-World War II era to the Tagalog-dominated post-1965 immigration. The net political effects locate the specificity of Filipino culture by laying claim to an indigenous language, and, therefore, to pre-European influences.

As members of the indigenous psychology movement in the Philippines point out, the deployment of indigenous languages as a trans-national cultural expression has a tremendous impact for the theorization of “citizenship”—that is, those concepts specifying who belongs, and who does not (Enriquez). Indeed, as Enriquez asserts, if Tagalog or Pilipino is one of the languages spoken by Americans (it is one of the top ten), then it too, becomes an American language. Those, however, who would recognize Tagalog as the only language of the Philippines and as the dialect most often spoken by Filipinos in the United States need be mindful of the homogenization of the culture’s linguistic plurality, of which Tagalog is only one (albeit a major) part.

Third, the Filipinos presented on stage are culturally marked through “indigenized” costume. I say “indigenized” rather than “indigenous” to point out that there is a question as to the authenticity of the presentations—do they really wear those costumes in the Philippines (Gaerlan)? To say that something is indigenized is to point to an active and complicated process of editing. This is the process where a vision of Philippine life is manufactured, where the immediate origins may be located within the Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos’s management of cultural images through major exponents: the Cultural Center of the Philippines, and the national dance troupes which played to world acclaim since the 1950s. Those highly successful dance presentations have translated as a model for younger PCN organizers, eager to demonstrate the authenticity of Philippine cultural symbols. In the current period of PCNs, every aspect of physicality is rendered in its Philippine equivalent: headdresses, fingernails, clothing, weaponry, sashes, and so forth. Additionally, indigenized music is coupled with costuming to stage what Barbara Gaerlan notes as the “orientalizing” of Filipino culture (6). Careful observers like Gaerlan and Edward Said point out how this process of “orientalizing” is part of a larger historical process of robbing people of their history, of making them objects of study rather than participants in a discussion, of ensuring that the “Oriental” is “exotic,” “alluring”, and “mysterious”—a perspective which is supposedly rational, Western, and “progressive.”

Fourth, and crucial to the show, is the standard inventory of dances arranged in suites. Four suites of indigenized Philippine dance dominate the programs. Particular dances chosen for each suite vary at the discretion of program coordinators; however, the suites remain strikingly consistent throughout this examination. They include: the Spanish (or “Maria Clara”), the tribal or mountain, the Muslim, and the barrio or rural suites. A major addition by Filipino American students is the squeezing in of a “modern” routine which lets loose a contemporary choreographed sequence. The routine is “modern” not as in the European understanding of modern (jazz, for example) dance, but in contrast to the indigenized forms—actually more reminiscent of the Janet Jackson armies of hip hop street dance.

The effect here is to draw attention to the rich and eclectic inventory of dances emanating from the Philippines. This inventory throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s has remained static as it has also de-historicized the groups which are being (re) presented through the dances. Often, historical periods shift unevenly in the presentation of the program and are depicted often with little attention to chronology. Also, regions are (re)presented contiguously, without reference to linguistic, religious, or other forms of localized difference.

Fifth, the shows employ a narrative aiming to connect the various dance sequences for the purpose of historicizing the Filipino American experience. Often, characters in a skit or play are presented at the beginning of the show in need of historical help: they do not know their history. In a familiar turn of the quest motif, the characters meet guides—elders, spirits, parent-figures—who “transport” them to the Philippines. During their journey, the characters come in contact with a host of sounds and visions in the form of the dance suites. By the end of the evening, the characters reach an epiphanic state of cultural awareness and pride which they take back with them to the US. This motif—of the quest, and the “reverse exile”—is the most familiar one deployed throughout the shows. Literary critic Oscar Campomanes (1992) refers to this process as an exilic motif, used by Philippine-born and Filipina/o American writers turn their attention to the Philippines. Yet, for many of the young folk who put on the show, we have to consider the problematic of American-born Filipina/os who do not “go back” to a place where they have never been. For our young characters, “something” is missing, that which is re-placed by an “imagined return” to the Philippines where the “crisis” of Filipino American identity is “solved.” The tacit assertion being made here is that the Philippines is a sturdy repository of “knowledge,” a repository of authentic representations of Philippine life which can be accessed and brought back. The exercising of the reverse exile motif refuses to acknowledge the fact of cultural change, indeterminacy, and reconstruction at work in both the Philippines and in the US.

Thus, the traditional PCN possesses elements which demonstrate that Filipinos do have a culture, that they are visible, despite the persistent, institutional erasure from US American “official” history. Although the intent of the show varies according to the organizing group (perhaps to demonstrate the cultural significance of the Filipino in America) the effects of the shows leave viewers with a static notion of “culture.” In this sense, the political aspects of subversion, defiant cultural assertion, and a vibrant re-articulation of the racial order are left behind, in favor of increased technical mastery of performance and concomitant symptoms of spectacle and extravagance à la Cecil B. DeMille. The show has become predictable, repetitious, and increasingly problematic in justifying its expenditure of thousands of dollars for one evening’s worth of *entertainment*. Consider when we are being “entertained,” that is, occupied or being kept busy. For months at a time, students tax themselves, their studies, and their parents in preparation for the show. The audience is held in thrall for an evening. In the matter of a few hours, it is over. Indeed, we have come a long way from a “dime a dance.” Throughout the early part of the twentieth century, dancing in taxi dances temporarily satisfied needs for companionship and the sting of loneliness, while depleting their hard earned depressed

wages (Cressey; Vedder; Catapusan). These histories allow us an opportunity to link aspects of popular culture with the social conditions of Filipina/o American communities in the United States.

STRANGERS FROM A DIFFERENT (STRATEGICALLY ESSENTIALIST) SHORE

Not all shows are alike. And, by applying more critical energies to this expressive form of cultural production, a “strategically essentialist” approach suggests some possibilities for a re-situating of the “political” dimension of these cultural productions. By “strategic essentialism,” I mean the application of Lisa Lowe’s “model for the ongoing construction of ethnic identity ... [which Lowe views as] ... the making and practice of Asian American culture as nomadic, unsettled, taking place in the travel between cultural sites and in the multi-vocality of heterogeneous and conflicting positions” (39). What this offers for those of us who are observing the show is a way of understanding culture as being changeable, actively built up from our discussion and labor. This is quite a distance away from the static confines of the present PCN model, where “culture” is replicated through familiar Philippine dance suites from the year before, and where Filipino culture is presented as a seamless tapestry of sounds and visions which are internally consistent. Borrowing from Spivak, Lowe highlights the “strategic use of a positive essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest” (39). Oftentimes, “culture” is something which belongs to the past—the best of what has gone before, and that which continues unchanged today.

I highlight “political interest” here because the terms of the shows are framed by fundamental questions: Why put on the show? Who is listening? What is being said? Lowe’s model is further textured by Elaine H. Kim’s claim that Asian American identities are “fluid and migratory” (4) in addition to Radhakrishnan’s view of “contingent” identities (211), which challenge the program of the traditional PCN model. Both Kim and Radhakrishnan point to a view of culture then which is open to the possibilities of change and editing. Culture, more specifically, cultural practices, are not simply items in a box to preserve, to be shown with reverence, or to be stored in its pristine state. Rather, the PCN offers students a chance to think of “culture” as a messy process, loaded with contradictory meaning, subject to human error as well as collective realization for what cultural historian George Lipsitz has referred to as the “social struggle for the good life.”

I offer as a case and as a response to the above challenges, an alternative program:

SFSU Pilipino American Collegiate Endeavor's 1993 production of "Cultural Evidence." Note also that the discussion of this show is not meant to be definitive, merely suggestive. The format of Cultural Evidence differed sharply from the traditional PCN model. Lasting over three days, the series of shows attempted to spend less than the previous years' one-night galas. The overall emphasis of Cultural Evidence was to provide a "venue" for the creativity of its members and its surrounding community (Belale 2).

Throughout the three-day event, Cultural Evidence aimed to showcase original work and alternative expressive forms of Filipino Americans. The first evening was devoted to film and spoken word/musical improvisation. The film screening featured works written, directed, and produced by Filipino Americans. The "Spoken Word" event featured poetry and prose written by students and former members. A musical (jazz) dialogue was also offered. Some of the evening's works were also presented at the National Asian American & Telecommunication Association's 1993 International Film Showcase as well as the Asian American Jazz Festival.

The second evening presented the "Hip Hop Experience." Again, emphasis was lent to artists actively performing within the reach of the campus. This approach featured all aspects of hip hop culture, of which Filipino Americans continue to be a major creative force. The range of forms included scratching/mixing, dance, rap, and graffiti styles. The unexpectedly large attendance of the event drew Filipino American hip hop artists from throughout the Bay Area: Q-Bert, Bubala Tribe, Urban Soul, Lani Luv, to name a few. Not merely a miming of African American style, Filipino American hip hop demonstrates how younger segments of the community are accessing, struggling, and coming to terms with the most vital cultural forms of late twentieth century America. It is not surprising that we find Filipino Americans engaged in hip hop. Filipinos have taken part in aesthetically innovative moments in American culture. Consider the zoot-suiters and be-boppers of another generation; Filipino American hip hoppers of today not only participate in, but rearticulate the form through a distinctive and improvisatory soulful style.

The third night saw a return to the traditional model, albeit with many alterations. This finale was the venue for what remained of the large-audience traditional model; although, indigenous dance from the Philippines was not the centerpiece of the show. With only the mountain and tribal suites representing indigenous dance forms, the finale featured a pastiche of sounds and visions not found in the traditional PCN model. A series of pieces written, directed, and performed by students covered much ground in experimentally theatrical forms: a reading of a poem featured in a Filipino American literary journal; a meditation on *Pinay*⁷ adolescence and personal maturation; a lengthy

epic-documentary of Filipino history, with the narrator-(Lapu Lapu)-as-prophet; a play raising the problem of inter-diasporic conflict; and a dialogue set to the rhythm of two *Pinoys* talking about how Filipinos created jazz. With the attention to the dance forms displaced, Cultural Evidence organizers left open the problematic of their editorial decision to highlight certain suites. Left out of the program were the barrio suites (which features the show-stopping *tinikling*⁸ and the Muslim suites' *singkil*⁹ (one of the most dazzlingly over-produced numbers in many repertoires).

This eclectic, sometimes unfocused, and largely uneven finale lacked the presentational unity or clarity of other PCNs. However, the effect of Cultural Evidence accomplished much in taking to task larger theoretical and political concerns with definitions and expressions of "culture," and with the articulation of what Lowe referred to as "multiplevocality." In strategizing with essentialisms rather than receiving them uncritically, Cultural Evidence organizers set the static inventory of dances aside (note that the dances were not wholly jettisoned), and opened the creative spaces for its members to actively engage in a conversation over what they felt was important, over how they viewed their "culture." They highlighted the process of identity as an unfolding set of contradictions and possibilities, rather than the fixed structure of identity to be (re) presented. Thus, as Filipinos of America, participants of Cultural Evidence reached deep into the Philippine tradition while stretching wide the range of constructive sources for engaging the US American terrain through film, improvisational music, poetry, and so forth. From shore to shore, the nomads press on.

CODA: DANCING MATTERS

This critical review of the PCN has had two aims: to reveal not only multiple meanings of Filipina/o American cultural production as it unfolds on the stage, but to cast an eye to the creativity of Filipina/o American expressive forms in general, which have been sorely neglected by the traditional PCN model. Cultural Evidence organizers did not edit any more than their previous cohorts. Instead, the major contribution of those organizers was their recognition that they were editing in the first place.

The stakes involve not simply fighting over what to include in or dismiss from the show. The PCN affords an opportunity to found discussions on what we do with our time and our labor, to question how we carry ourselves, to pose questions whose answers may not seem readily available. The PCN may be a venue opened for the experimentation with contingency, transgression, testimony, and even entertainment. In another sense

of the term, “entertainment” calls on reception, the welcoming and harboring, as in to “entertain an idea.” For Filipino Americans seeking such “entertainment,” the PCN could do more than simply keep one busy; rather, it can set aside some time for laughter, tragedy, surprise, and wonder—to entertain our selves.

NOTES

- 1 *Pasko* is Filipino for “Christmas.”
- 2 See Buchanan’s 1992 Republican National Convention Speech.
- 3 *Barkada* means friends.
- 4 *Samahang Pilipino* means “Filipino Organization.”
- 5 *Kabayan* is “countryman.”
- 6 *Manong* is used to refer to a Filipino man with deference and respect.
- 7 *Pinay* is colloquial for “Filipina.”
- 8 *Tinikling* is the Filipino national dance which involves dancers skillfully maneuvering between large bamboo poles.
- 9 *Singkil* is a traditional Filipino dance that recounts the epic legend of the Darangan of the Maranao people of Mindanao. Dancers maneuver through crisscrossed bamboo poles.

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