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An Imaginary* Interview with a Philippines Collections Museum Donor

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Cover Page Footnote

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Creative and Literary Works

“An Imaginary¹ Interview with a Philippines Collections Museum Donor”

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Abstract

Ontological distance is the dehumanization that emerges from uninterrogated coloniality between colonized subjects and the oppressive systems. This distancing has occurred in the histories of U.S. teachers both domestic-based and abroad, especially in Southeast Asia. In Steinbock-Pratt’s (2019) historiography on the relationships between early 1900s U.S. teachers and their Filipinx students, ontological distance was “The crux of the colonial relationship was intimacy marked by closeness without understanding, suasion backed by violence, and affection bounded by white and American supremacy” (Steinbock-Pratt, 2019, p. 214). This dehumanizing psychological or ontological distance existed during U.S. colonial regimes abroad, specifically in Southeast Asia and continues on in some ways. By combining a critical analysis of journal entries from archives of the U.S. Thomasite teachers with restorying the weaponized objects these teachers brought back with them, from the Burke Museum’s Southeast Asia collections at the University of Washington, I use creative writing to disrupt the dehumanized narratives of Filipinx students from the 1900-1950s. Using tenets of Asian Critical Race Theory, I enact (re)constructive history and counter-storytelling to rethink former U.S. teachers’ exotifications of Filipinx peoples and lands. This dialogue hopes to contribute to decolonizing archival work, expanding processes of identity development, and modeling ways in which museum collections and archival work can intersect with Ethnic Studies education, creative writing, and teacher education.

Keywords: Philippines, Indonesia, teaching abroad, museums, colonial education, empire



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Background and Context

In this paper, I show how Southeast Asian museum collections and both historic and contemporary Southeast Asian American education intersect through coloniality and Asian Critical Race Theory. This is significant because both museums and K-12 education, as well as teacher education, serve one another as resources and spaces of learning; however, these spaces are deeply implicated in histories of colonialism – especially for Southeast Asian and Southeast Asian American students, peoples, and lands.

I, as a second-generation Filipina settler, am aware of the privileges I am afforded within U.S. education by way of my parents' immigration history, a result of U.S.-Philippine labor-based migration of the 1980s (Choy, 2003). I recognize the ways in which my parents' own Philippine-based education, a successor of U.S. restructured education, prioritized English language learning and westernized pedagogies and how their foundations of education continue to guide my work and my criticality as a former teacher in Indonesia and Las Vegas, Nevada. With this awareness, I am now a doctoral candidate at the University of Washington's College of Education and I am committed to disrupting monolithic and oppressive narratives of Filipinx students, both historically and currently, especially in systems of historic harm such as schools and museums.

My creative dialogue hopes to launch a discussion of the stories and objects of current U.S. teachers who work with Southeast Asian American students in the Seattle area and beyond by looking to the past. I first encountered archival evidence of U.S. Thomasite teachers' candid journal entries from Steinbock-Pratt's (2019) book project. I was shocked. These teachers recounted ways in which they intentionally used their White privilege and American nationality to manipulate and harm their Philippine students. While reading Steinbock-Pratt's historiography, I was also participating in Gabbie Mangaser's museology master's thesis project. I was invited to the Burke Museum's Southeast Asian collections to find an object that resonated with my identity as a Southeast Asian American. I found many objects from the Philippines; however, I was more interested in how these objects made their way to the museum. Looking through the ethnology reports, I learned that certain objects were donated by both U.S. Thomasite and Peace Corps teachers. These objects included clubs, whips, arrows, and spears. I realized the teachers' journal entries could provide stories for these museum objects. In my creative writing, I wanted to instead center stories, counternarratives, and (re)constructive histories of the Philippine students to disrupt "damage-centered" research (Brayboy, 2005; Chávez -Moreno, 2020; Iftikar & Museus, 2018; Tuck, 2009). Through combining these various methods, my creative piece puts in conversation one former teacher from the past with one current teacher in the present. Their interview expands on the experiences and knowledges of place-making in relation to their Philippine and Indonesian students, U.S. forms of colonialism, and anti-colonial pedagogies.

An Imaginary Interview

I met the donor for a cup of coffee yesterday. I wanted to chat with him about his gracious donation to the Burke Museum. Adding to the museum's growing Philippine collections, the donor gifted several objects he acquired during 1925 when he was teaching high school in Nueva Vizcaya. What follows is an account of our interview.

[Camille] Hello

[Donor] Kumusta

Oh.. yes, kumusta po. I see you learned some Tagalog?

Yes, beautiful language. I needed to learn so I could talk with some of my servants, even some of my students now that I'm thinking about it

Yea I actually wanted to talk to you more about your experiences teaching in the Philippines. You had just donated several of your things to the museum

I taught in Luzon! Nueva Vizcaya. The mountain province, you know. Yes, all of those objects I got while teaching in the Philippines. Beautiful, beautiful colony of ours. Heard there might be talks of statehood for you... [pauses] or them?

My parents are immigrants from Pampanga and Makati. I also heard there might be talks of independence and a revolution

Ohh... huh [pauses]

So, the objects. How did you get these things while working from a classroom? I imagine you must've been too busy teaching to... shoot around arrows?

[Laughs] You saw my bow and arrows? Beautiful, aren't they. You should see the sheaths on the arrows. Exquisite weavings and detailings on those. Yes, during the week I taught a lot. I was teaching English to high schoolers. Such wonderful students, so loyal, so eager. A little clan-ish but hey, that worked out well when I taught those boys basketball [laughs again] But yes, those arrows. My weekdays were used teaching the great American ways of our language and our sports too, but my weekends and time off. Oh, those were mine and those arrows were my company.

What would you do or where would you go with the arrows then?

The Philippines - beautiful place - gets really hot right? I mean you probably already know. It's so humid. So much forest, you have to see it for yourself. But I mean, the other American teachers couldn't really adjust. They'd get what we'd call "philippinitis"-

Like they're sick of being in the Philippines?

Yea, well no I mean, no. The tropical climate was too much for them. They'd get low energy. I mean these folks couldn't so much as get up and teach, couldn't even think sometimes because of the heat, the humidity, the adjustment to the culture

Wait so they'd get neurasthenia?

Yes, that! We'd call it... [pauses, quietly] philippinitis... But so! I didn't want to be like that dreary

bunch. Have you heard of... what was it called by them? Calangaman!

Kalangaman? You mean the island?

Yes, that's the place! So, sometimes on my weekends and off days I'd take a boat there. Usually by myself, sometimes my buddy Herb - Herbert, another American. He taught in the Philippines same time as me. Sometimes, Herb would come down with me and we'd just become a real savage on Calangaman

What do you mean by "savage"?

[Laughs] Well you saw those arrows! We'd practice our archery there. We realized Calangaman was deserted, except by occasional fishermen, so that island was pretty much mine! At first I was just shooting around, but after being there for a few days I realized I needed my own food so I'd try my hand at what the headhunters do, you know

[Pauses] so you'd go on these trips, most often by yourself

Yes, sometimes Herb - Herbert would come with

Sometimes Herbert would join you. You'd bring your bow and arrows. Can I ask what else you'd bring?

Sure! The bow and arrows, you're correct. Also brought with me a spear. Did you see the spear? I donated that too. Beautiful piece. Real handy too. So I brought the spear, and that was about it. We'd just leave right after teaching on Friday, boat was already packed

Different set of clothes?

Just the clothes on my back! Because- ... I don't know if I can say this to you [pauses] Well you're a modern gal. Hey, you probably are used to this too. Once Herb and I get to the shore, we strip down to our G-strings, just like real savages. We grasp our spears and we race along the beach yelling like headhunters. It was real wild [laughs] we definitely adjusted

... No, I am not used to *that*. But okay, so what else would you do on Kalangaman?

We would explore the island. Really lay claim to it. It was isolated. Away from all the people and schools, the American GIs in Manila, civilization really. Oh, one night when we were there, Herb and I could see all these fishing canoes coming up from Cebu towards our island. Get this. We armed the place and fought them off!

With your spears and arrows?

No, of course not. See my servant back in Nueva Vizcaya, great boy. He taught me how to make a cannon out of bamboo. Can you believe that! Intelligent people, your kind. So we made ourselves a bamboo cannon and fired them off at the canoes [laughs]

Hmm I hope those bangkas were okay...

[Still laughing] Oh I had a great time. No more wilderness to explore and claim like that here though. Oh what were you saying?

Oh I actually wanted to ask you about the last 2 pieces from your generous gift to the museum. You also donated a wooden club and a braided whip? [pauses] These pieces... um, were these pieces maybe connected to the culture of Nueva Vizcaya?

The culture of Nueva Vizcaya? Didn't know they had a culture, just thought they were Filipino?

Well, I mean. So, somewhat similar to you, I guess... I taught English to high schoolers in Indonesia-

Oh! Did you get to Bali! I heard beautiful, beautiful things about those islands and those people. You know, the Dutch do wonders. Didn't know you're Indonesian

I didn't say I was. And, so I taught in Malang. It's a city on the eastern side of Java, and I came back with-

You must've come back with some good stuff huh. You know, you kind of look Indonesian, bet you adjusted just fine

I came back with a mask based on Javanese tari topeng or mask dance. Malang is known for carving and painting the wooden masks that are used by the tari topeng dancers

Wow! Now, I feel like I should be interviewing you huh. Are you going to donate your mask from... what was it called?

Tari topeng. Well no, because my friends from Malang gifted me a replica and rightly so. I didn't need to be taking from their wood carvings. I've hung up the replica in my apartment. It reminds me often of my time there, the friendships, my students, things I'm still processing about the decision to even teach in a place I am not in relations with... It reminds me that I'm still learning

Oh... wow, huh

So, I wanted to ask you. What do the wooden club and the braided whip remind you of?

About the author



Camille Ungco (she/her/siya) is the child of Kapampangan and Tagalog immigrants. She is a PhD candidate in Language, Literacy, and Culture and a Community Partners Fellow at the University of Washington's College of Education. Ungco's research interests focus on the intersections of U.S. empire and anti-colonial teacher education. Ungco collaborates with and learns from the AsianCrit Collective at UW, Filipino Story Time - Seattle, Future Teachers of Color at UW, and the Transnational Filipinx Diaspora Studies Graduate Research Cluster.

Note

1. Actually imaginary. Based on archival evidence from Steinbock-Pratt, S. (2019). *Educating the empire: American teachers and contested colonization in the Philippines*. Cambridge University Press.

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