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## Images from the Past: Stereotyping Filipino Immigrants in California

Melissa G. Flores

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“Stupid.” “Morally Inferior.” “Savages”; these were words that Americans used to describe Filipino immigrants who came to the United States in the 1920s and 30s.<sup>1</sup> In California, where most of these men settled, the public was outraged to see them gallivanting with young white women in taxi-dance halls that regularly employed women who were paid by patrons to dance with them. Critics also condemned the immigrants for their organization of strikes in the fields of Watsonville and Salinas during the 1930s. These actions reinforced the idea that these aliens were rebellious and innately difficult. What prompted this harsh judgment? Evidence suggests that although this disapproval was provoked by contemporary events, the roots of this discrimination can be traced to the not-too-distant past.

Scholars have extensively researched several aspects of Philippine-American relations at the beginning of the century, from the media’s portrayal of Filipinos during the “Philippine Insurrection” (a euphemism for the Philippine-American War during the time of the war that insinuated that the Filipinos were the transgressors and that it was their actions that prompted American response) to the treatment of Filipino men in the 1920s

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<sup>1</sup>*The Washington Star*, quoted in Christopher A. Vaughn, “The ‘Discovery’ of the Philippines by the U.S. Press, 1898–1902,” *The Historian* 57 (1995): 310; Edwin B. Almirol, “Exclusion and Acceptance of Filipinos in America,” *Asian Profile* 13 (October 1985): 401; Emory S. Bogardus, “American Attitudes Towards Filipinos,” *Sociology and Social Research* 14 (September-October 1929): 64.

and 30s.<sup>2</sup> However, research on the link between the earlier and later stereotyping has yet to be done. Close inspection of the images of Filipinos presented by the press and government during their struggle for independence and examination of stereotypes during their first large wave of immigration to California during the 1920s and 30s suggests that there is an important correlation. In fact, the categorizing of the late 1890s and early 1900s laid the foundation for the distortions that came later. Indeed, the later stereotypes closely mirrored the early descriptions of Filipinos in government records, newspapers, and periodicals. Tracing back the origins of this discrimination is essential to understanding why these men were subjected to poor conditions and maltreatment. The negative perceptions and discriminatory treatment of Filipino immigrant men in California during the 1920s and 30s were greatly influenced by the negative images and information supplied by the government and media to the American public during the Philippine-American War from 1898–1902.

This association between the Philippines and the United States began after the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898. Suffering defeat at the hands of the Americans, the Spanish surrendered the Philippines to the United States for twenty-five million dollars.<sup>3</sup> Although only Manila and its surrounding area were controlled, the American government chose to exert control over all of the islands. However, the native Filipinos resisted this decision and staged a revolt that started in 1898 and lasted until their pacification by American forces in 1902.

During that period, in America, the government and public were involved in a heated debate over whether the United States should annex the Philippines as a colony. Reports from govern-

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<sup>2</sup>Richard E. Welch, Jr., "'The Philippine Insurrection' and the American Press," *The Historian* 36 (1973): 34.

<sup>3</sup>Antonio J.A. Pido, *The Pilipinos in America: Macro/Micro Dimensions of Immigration and Integration* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1986), 48.

ment officials and journalists who had been to the islands conveyed images of savages in need of being Christianized, educated, sanitized, and above all, civilized. To those interested in the economic opportunities of the islands, the Philippine Islands were viewed as a rest stop and fueling station for United States warships in the Pacific and as a stepping-stone to profitable markets in East Asia. Thus, the United States decided that the Philippines would become a worthwhile territory of the United States and prepared it for its eventual independence.<sup>4</sup> As wards of the government, Filipino immigrants would enjoy privileges other immigrant groups did not have, yet would also face several challenges because of their status.

Regarded as nationals rather than aliens, Filipino émigrés were protected by the United States government from deportation if they ever caused problems, a luxury other immigrant groups did not have.<sup>5</sup> Yet this would not be necessary for the next two decades because from 1902 to 1920 Filipino immigrants were not a cause for concern. During this period, the United States government sponsored a program that brought young men and women to the country in order to study at American institutions, several of which were in California.<sup>6</sup> These *pensionados* were generally unnoticed due to their resemblance to the numerous Latinos who inhabited the state and the fact that they came in small, manageable groups.

However, the 1920s and 30s saw a large increase in Filipino immigration. Many men came to the United States through recruitment by the government. Anti-Japanese immigration laws had left a void in the farm labor market and the United States government looked to the Filipinos, “our little brown brothers,” as many officials called them, for help. Supported by their families

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<sup>4</sup>Pido, *The Pilipinos in America*, 48.

<sup>5</sup>Pido, *The Pilipinos in America*, 65.

<sup>6</sup>Lorraine Jacobs Crouchett, *Filipinos in California: From the Days of the Galleons to the Present* (El Cerrito, California: Downey Place Publishing House, Inc., 1982), 31.

in the Philippines, thousands of men jumped at the chance to come to America. Their goal was to find a good job using the skills they had attained through years of Americanization at home. Not too long after their arrival, though, they were confronted with the same prejudice that previous Asian immigrants, the Japanese and Chinese, had faced. In some cases, it was worse. Legislation, such as denying the right to marry outside one's "race," and acts of vigilantism were directed specifically at Filipinos.<sup>7</sup> These men had come to America in hopes of finding success, but instead they found inequality and hatred.

Discrimination in the 1920s and 30s was fueled by the constant negative portrayal of Filipinos in the past. At the time of the Philippine-American war, government documents, news articles, and political cartoons transmitted a variety of pejorative images of the people in the Philippines in order to garner support for the United States's occupation of the islands. Natives were depicted in cartoons in newspapers and magazines as sullen, dark-skinned babies or toddlers. This portrayed them as helpless, mischievous children while the United States played the much-needed part of the adult shouldering the burden of caring for and disciplining them.<sup>8</sup> In a *Chicago Record* cartoon from 1899, President William McKinley was shown spanking a Filipino child with a paddle labeled "benevolent assimilator."<sup>9</sup> As the headmaster in an 1898 *Harper's Weekly* cartoon, Uncle Sam looked over a classroom full of dark skinned children. Emilio Aguinaldo, leader of the insurgent Philippine forces during the war, sat in the corner wearing a dunce cap.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>H. Brett Melendy, "Filipinos in the United States," *Pacific Historical Review* 43 (1974): 540-541.

<sup>8</sup>Vaughn, "The 'Discovery' of the Philippines," 314.

<sup>9</sup>*The Chicago Record*, 28 November 1899, in "Colored: Black n' White," private cartoon collection of Abe Ignacio, Jr., San Leandro, California (hereafter cited as Ignacio Collection).

<sup>10</sup>*Harper's Weekly*, 27 August 1898, Ignacio Collection.

This adult-child portrayal revealed the hesitation of Americans to accept the call of what writer Rudyard Kipling termed “the white man’s burden.” One cartoon that adorned the cover of an issue of the conservative magazine *Judge* in 1898 depicts this attitude perfectly. Figure 1 shows the caricature in which Uncle Sam flashed a bewildered look as he held a crying, incredibly fussy, dark-skinned child in tribal clothing with a tag attached to his leg. On the tag it was written, “Philippines with compliments of Dewey.” In the caption, Uncle Sam said, “Now that I’ve got it, what am I going to do with it?”<sup>11</sup> To many Americans, the Philippines were seen simply as a burden. [see *Figure 1*]

During a period in which darker skin was a sign of unrefined laborers, the Filipinos were lumped into this group as portrayed by caricatures that exaggerated the darkness of their skin. They resembled blacks, Cubans, and Hawaiians, who were all subjects of discrimination and believed to be in need of civilizing by the government. In one cartoon, Aguinaldo was depicted as the mischievous Topsy from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. “I’s so awful wicked there cain’t nobody do nothin’ with me,” he declared. “I keeps Miss Feeley [Uncle Sam] a-swearin at me half de time, ‘cause I’s mighty wicked, I is.”<sup>12</sup> This cartoon alleged two characteristics of both blacks and Filipinos: impishness and ignorance.

The poor sanitation conditions of the Philippines also greatly concerned the American public. Americans envisioned the Philippines as a wretched, bug-infested wasteland, and inhabited by animal-like Filipinos who relished this way of living. Figure 2 depicts President McKinley standing in a river with a scrubbing brush while holding a Filipino child. “Oh, you dirty boy,” he reprimanded.<sup>13</sup> [see *Figure 2*]

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<sup>11</sup>Grant Hamilton, *Judge*, 11 June 1898, Ignacio Collection.

<sup>12</sup>*Judge*, 11 February 1899, Ignacio Collection.

<sup>13</sup>*Judge*, 10 June 1899, Ignacio Collection.

Most of all, these cartoons and articles depicted the Filipinos as being in need of civilizing. This meant receiving an American education, taking part in American pastimes, becoming Christianized, and abandoning their savage tendencies. The ultimate goal of the United States was to bring civilization to the Philippines by forcing American ideals upon the people. The government emphasized the importance of education in the islands and educated Filipino children in the teachings of the American way. Children were taught to value individualism and admire heroes such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.<sup>14</sup> According to the caption in one cartoon, the “American school-

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<sup>14</sup>Pido, *The Pilipinos in America*, 49.



*Figure 1*

A confused Uncle Sam cradles a temperamental Filipino child.

Reprinted from Grant Hamilton, "Information Wanted." *Barewalls.com*, 11 June 1898. <<http://artwork.barewalls.com/product/artwork.exe?ArtworkID=54168&thumbs=1>> (3 December 2002).



house in the Philippines [would] destroy superstition, ignorance, vice, etc. and eventually end the war and bring civilization.”<sup>15</sup> Americans believed that participation in American activities would help refine them. One cartoon depicted a Filipino who had undergone the civilization process. It stated that his “old habit of running amuck [sic] will aid greatly on the football field.”<sup>16</sup>

And although not all depictions of Filipinos were meant to be discriminatory, their descriptions still imprinted an image of savagery. Congressional articles often commented on the physical appearance of Filipinos, emphasizing the strong structure of their bodies. One such document includes a letter written by the Division of Insular Affairs of the War Department to be distributed to the House of Representatives, Senate, and rest of the Department that expressed Filipinos as “attractive in neither form nor feature, having strong jaws, thick lips, and flat noses... [but] they are fierce, dark, and strong, of rather fine appearance.”<sup>17</sup> The detailed descriptions suggested that officials treated the people like commodities. These images of Filipinos hearkened back to the views of Native Americans, who were also admired for their bodies and then forced to work their native land by the Spanish in the West in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Even more barbaric than their physical appearance was the attitude of the Filipinos. According to one American legislator, Filipinos were angry beasts who were ungrateful to the “heroically philanthropic” efforts to civilize them. This was a widespread sentiment since several cartoons depicted them with looks of anger on their faces while the government continued to bestow the gift of civilization upon them. The Filipinos were “discontented people, at heart

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<sup>15</sup>*Judge*, 24 December 1900, Ignacio Collection.

<sup>16</sup>*Boston Sunday Globe*, 5 March 1899, Ignacio Collection.

<sup>17</sup>Congress, *Letter from the Secretary of War*, 56<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1902, S. Doc. 218, Serial 4043.

disloyal and hostile,” as one Congressman stated.<sup>18</sup> Americans recalled these images once Filipinos began arriving to the country.

The first group of Filipinos that arrived to America after the United States took possession of the islands were the *pensionados*, who began came to the country as early as 1903 Those in California faced little discrimination because they blended into the Latino population already living in the state. Furthermore, because they kept to themselves, spent most of their time studying, and were few in number, they were little noticed. In 1912, there were only 209 Filipino men and women in the entire *country* receiving degrees or vocational training.<sup>19</sup>

However, the arrival of thousands of Filipino men in the United States as agricultural workers alarmed many Americans. From 1920 to 1929, over 31,000 Philippine immigrants arrived in California through the two cities of San Francisco and Los Angeles.<sup>20</sup> Disconcerted by the legion of immigrants coming from the Philippines, many Americans reacted by mistreating them. These comments and complaints made against the men echoed some of the same objections first presented to Americans during the time of the Philippine-American War. This unfavorable first impression of Filipinos combined with the stewing racial hatred towards these new “Orientals” prompted a new wave of racism towards this group. Views of Filipinos were largely negative and expressed the fear and intimidation Americans felt towards this group. For example, a geography professor from Stanford University during the 1920s observed, “they arrive green and simply as babes in the woods . . . . They evolve . . . into big-time gamblers, knife-fighters, and first-rate, brown-skinned Apaches. They show great aptitude in becoming acquainted with institutions

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<sup>18</sup>Congress, *Will the Philippines Pay?*, 57<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., 1902, S. Doc. 273, Serial 4239.

<sup>19</sup>Crouchett, *Filipinos in California*, 31.

<sup>20</sup>Adam S. Esterovich, *Facts About Filipino Immigration Into California* (San Francisco: R and E Research Associates, 1930), 47.

of a disorderly character.”<sup>21</sup> This view merged images created by the earlier media (babes emerging from the wilderness and violent, dark-skinned Native Americans) with activities Filipinos at the time were known to enjoy (gambling and patronizing “institutions of disorderly character” such as pool halls).

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<sup>21</sup>Almirol, “Exclusion and Acceptance of Filipinos,” 399.

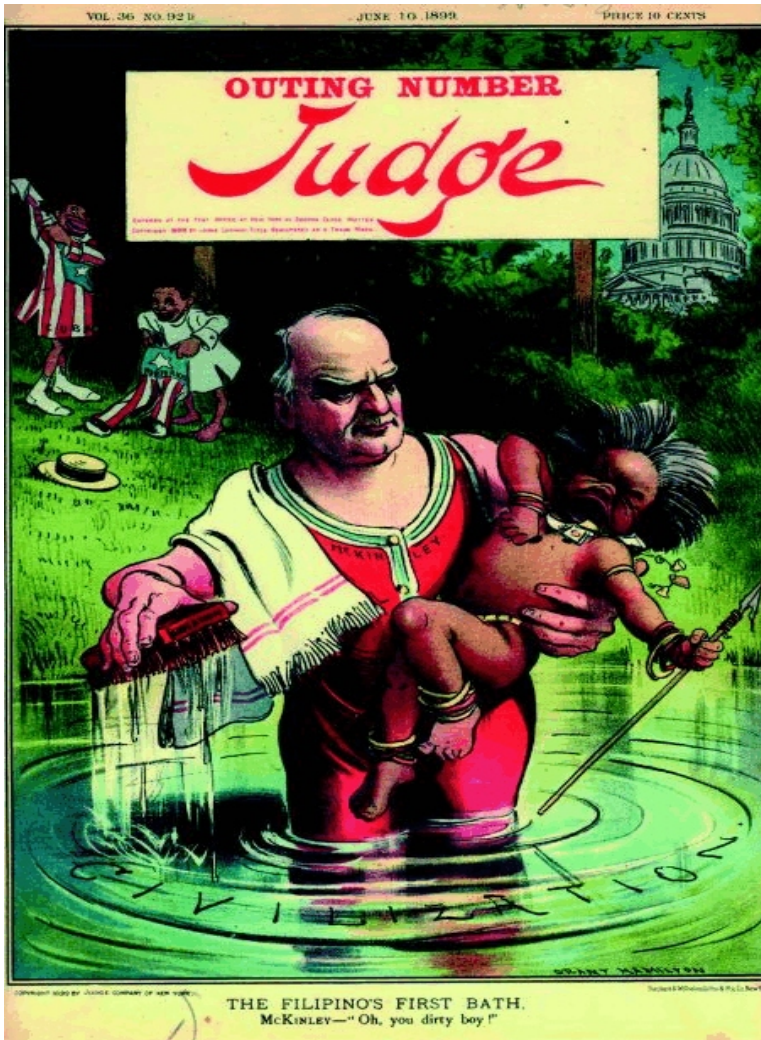


Figure 2

President McKinley washes a dirty Filipino baby in the foreground while clean Filipino children dress in American clothing.

Reprinted from "The Filipino's First Bath," *Black'n White Filipinos in American Popular Media: 1896-1907*, 10 June 1899, <<http://www.bwf.org/pusod/events/TMPrc8exscy5.htm>> (3 December 2002)

An example of the Filipinos's bawdiness was their attendance at taxi-dance halls, where ten cents entitled them to one dance with a white woman. As sociologist Edwin B. Almirol reported, the public was aghast to find out that these "little brown monkeys" (an obvious play on the phrase, "little brown brothers," that government officials used at the turn of the century) were socializing with racially pure women. Their actions were questioned since these men were "jungle folk" with obviously a "primitive moral code." These perceptions were influenced by the past images, which depicted Filipinos running around the jungles of the Philippines, unaware of what was right or wrong before the Americans came in and disciplined them. The thorough civilizing that they had endured before their arrival in the United States was clearly not enough to make them accepted. Thus the public was warned that an invasion of Filipinos, the "hordes of little brown men," had already begun.<sup>22</sup> President Calvin Coolidge cautioned the American public to beware of the "unassimilated alien child [who] menaces our children, as the alien industrial worker, who has destruction rather than production in mind, menaces our industry."<sup>23</sup> Filipinos were stuck with the stereotype that they were these brown savages, preparing to attack their unsuspecting hosts.

Another image that appeared often during this period and was influenced by the views from the past was that of the "unassimilated alien." Almirol used this phrase several times when he wrote about Americans' views of Filipinos during the late 1920s. By referring to Filipinos as unassimilated aliens, people at the time believed that these immigrants were stubborn and problematic and refused to accept American ideals. This was the grown-up version of the surly Filipino child who rejected the

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<sup>22</sup>C.M. Goethe, "Filipino Immigration Viewed as a Peril," in Almirol, "Exclusion and Acceptance of Filipinos," 397.

<sup>23</sup>Lewis Carlton and George Coburn, *In their Place: White America Defines her Minorities*, in Almirol, "Exclusion and Acceptance of Filipinos," 397.

generous gifts of education, Christianity, and most of all, civilization, bestowed upon the Philippine people by the United States.

Though many Americans saw Filipinos with suspicion, fear, and dislike, not all people felt this way. Some Americans had what *they considered* fairly favorable impressions of these immigrants. However, most individuals who held seemingly positive perceptions of Filipinos often saw them with condescension, and many of these views were influenced by previous reports made during the time of the Philippine-American War. They felt sympathy for their “brown brothers of the Pacific,” as one woman called them, when they heard about the plight of the people of the Philippines and their desire for independence. And citizens were surprisingly pleased with the behavior and physical appearance of the Filipinos they came across. They observed that the Filipinos were trustworthy and good workers. Americans were also impressed with the politeness and dapper appearance of Filipino men who worked in restaurants and hotels. One woman said that she “was drawn to them by their appearance, good looks, and manners. Their silence and self-control drew me to them.”<sup>24</sup> Apparently many Americans did not expect Filipinos to act in such a manner, testament to the fact that they thought of their “little brown brothers” as dark-skinned, pugnacious creatures, images that were thrust upon them earlier in the century.

Why did negative images leave such a lasting impression on the American public and affect their perceptions *twenty years* after they were first published? There are a few explanations for this. Many Americans knew very little about the Philippines prior to the Spanish-American War. Thus, they were first exposed to Filipinos by the United States government, which strove to portray American actions in the islands in a positive light, and by the press, the majority of which catered to the conservative views and framed the war in terms of “discipline and national honor”.<sup>25</sup> For several

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<sup>24</sup>Bogardus, “American Attitudes Towards Filipinos,” 60-61.

<sup>25</sup>Vaughn, “The ‘Discovery’ of the Philippines,” 314.

decades, these descriptions would be the only ones supplied to the American public, so the only way they could understand these people were through these images. Until World War II, any other report from the Philippines simply confirmed the poor conditions of the islands and the people. For example, in a 1928 article for the popular magazine *Forum*, Katherine Mayo, an expert on Asia (and a resident of India for several years), commented on the “malignant cesspool” that was Manila and the natives’ hatred of “this new foreign devil called Sanitation.”<sup>26</sup>

These unfavorable reports worked in conjunction with the sentiment of Americans who were unhappy with the influx of immigrants coming to America. Clinging to demeaning and racist images provided ammunition to their nativist mission to exclude Filipinos. Although Philippine immigrants were allowed by the government to come to America as wards of the state, the public ultimately saw them as “Orientals.” Thus, they were subjected to the same discriminating practices that the Chinese and Japanese immigrants had faced before the Filipinos arrived in the United States. This included the prohibition from owning land, voting, and becoming citizens.<sup>27</sup>

The association with other Asians became dangerous for Filipinos because it stirred-up anti-Asian beliefs. Many white agricultural workers feared that they would lose their jobs to the new wave of immigrants from “the East.” This sentiment was especially shared by numbers of people in California, where a large number of men from the Philippines worked in the fields of the Central Valley. The build-up of resentment due to the organization of farm workers into labor unions and the fact that they socialized with white women in taxi-dance halls during their free time led to vigilantism and riots. One well-known riot broke out in 1930 in Watsonville. During a four-day attack, mobs numbering

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<sup>26</sup>Katherine Mayo, “Sanitation at the Sword’s Point,” *Forum*, February 1928, 222.

<sup>27</sup>Almirol, “Exclusion and Acceptance of Filipinos,” 396.

up to seven hundred chased Filipinos down the streets and attacked and shot at them randomly, killing twenty-two-year old Fermin Tobera<sup>28</sup> The next few years were tumultuous for Philippine immigrants since they ran into trouble merely by participating in everyday activities. “In many ways it was a crime to be a Filipino in California,” observed the famous Filipino-American writer Carlos Bulosan.<sup>29</sup> The actions of the government and press certainly did not make the situation any easier for these men. Originating from newspapers, magazines, and Congressional records, the idea that Filipinos were savages that deserved maltreatment permeated the minds of the white American public.

Obviously this is not the only case in United States history in which a group of people were discriminated against and faced maltreatment. However, despite several studies on many dimensions of Philippine-American relations, little has been done to dig deep into the origins of the initial reactions to Filipinos in America. After exploring the circumstances in which the United States entered the Philippines and sought to civilize its inhabitants and the reasons that ignited the violence against Filipinos in the 1930s, one can see that events from the earlier period had a tremendous impact on what happened during the later period. Newspapers and government documents promoted their actions in the islands as necessary because, as they successfully convinced Americans, these were a surly people in need of the guidance of the United States. Without any previous knowledge of the native Filipinos, these were the images that came to mind when citizens thought of the Filipinos. The first large wave of emigrants from the Philippines to the United States during the 1920s and 30s faced the brunt of the abuse and violence from a public that could not help but

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<sup>28</sup>Howard A. De Witt, “The Watsonville Anti-Filipino Riot of 1930: A Case Study of the Great Depression and Ethnic Conflict in California,” *Historical Society of Southern California* 61 (1979): 297

<sup>29</sup>Carlos Bulosan, *America is in the Heart* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1943), 121.



hearken back to the press and governments' images from the past when confronted by these foreigners. Although relations between not just recent immigrants but also those who arrived during the beginning of the twentieth century and Americans have drastically improved (though some may argue that complete acceptance has yet to be achieved), the study of the origins of discrimination against Filipinos should not be ignored in order to prevent such an occurrence to them or any other immigrant group in the United States from happening again.