

## The Filipino 'exhibit' at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair, Missouri

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how the St. Louis World Fair influenced attitudes toward Filipinos. It considers the larger framework of the Filipino body as representing a nation, the colonial penetration and geographical conquest, and examines the inscription of its people through their representations and performances at the 1904 World's Fair. The discussion shows the potential for imagination, and how different consciousnesses can arise even out of the most "traditional, primordial" image. It is through this imagination that more intersecting identities can be formed, ones where the complexities of an indigenous subject can be recognized with a more nuanced awareness.

**Keywords:** American imperialism; Filipino; film; indigeneity; Philippines; photography; World Fair

The tropes of savagery and docility are products of American imperial fiction about Native Americans and African Americans, and these representations formed and informed popular discourses about the Filipino colonial subject. (Balce, 2006, p.94.)

"Filipinos: don't they eat dog?" It was this one question directed to me that provoked such a sense of insatiable curiosity and shameful repulsion to the point where it inspired me to search for an answer. Not an answer to whether members of my ethnicity actually consumed "man's best friend", but of how such racist cultural and ideological representations of Filipinos were formed, and why they are still prevalent. In my quest, I found an image, a photographic historical artifact dating back to the 1904, of indigenous Filipino subjects, half-naked, chanting in a half-moon circle, beating on instruments. There was something different about the image in the background there was a modern building a stark backdrop to the simple huts that were the dwellings of the performing indigenous tribesmen. This image dated back to the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair in Missouri, a massive display of imperialist America. The United States of America as a cultural and economic imperialistic power is not a new theoretical concept. The fair on the exterior was an attempt at understanding different cultures, but implicitly was a grandiose statement attesting to the Americans as an official superior world power.

The World's Fair created a sphere where racialized, gendered bodies became legitimate objects of surveillance and spectatorship. Officially known as the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition, the St. Louis World's Fair commemorated the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the purchase of Louisiana from France by the United States. At that time the United States itself was not geographically large, Louisiana comprised nearly one-third of the terrain (Pilapil, 1992). The fair was a phenomenal display of showmanship, internationalism, and technology; paying customers witnessed an array of glamorous architecture, new-fangled cuisines and miscellaneous carnival festivities. Consisting of 1,272 acres of fairgrounds, and drawing nearly 20 million visitors, it was described by the President of the Exposition, David R. Francis as "A gathering of all nations...each bringing comprehensive representations of the productions of its arts and industries, its newest and noblest achievements, its latest discoveries, its triumphs of skill and science, its most approved solutions of social problems..." (Vergara, 1995, p.111). This event was a barely veiled exercise in colonial (mis)representation as white audiences indulged in Orientalist curiosity towards the Filipino historical and cultural exhibits.

The spectacle of the Filipino exhibits at the 1904 World Fair notoriously sketched Filipinos in exotic yet “uncivilized” manifestations. Filipino tribes, invoked as representatives of the whole Filipino people, were exhibited as savages, headhunters, and dog eaters, a name that has stuck until today. The 1904 fair, which up to that time was the largest in the world ever recorded took place at an historical juncture when the U.S. was beginning to wield its imperialistic weight as a world power, having recently acquired new territories overseas, including the Philippine Islands.

The Filipino Reservation was one of the most expensive projects of the setting, costing almost 2 million dollars. It was spread over 47 acres and covered with nearly 100 structures. The Reservation was reported to have 75,000 cataloged exhibits and 1,100 representatives of the different peoples of the archipelago” consisting specifically, the popular exhibition of “18 Tinguians, 30 Bagobos, 70 Bontoc Igorots, 20 Suyoc Igorots, 38 Negritos and Mangyans, 79 Visayans, and 80 Moros (Vergara, 1995).

Photographic images from a film documenting a ritualistic dance showed men dressed in “g-stringed” loincloths exhibiting a nakedness that is presented for consumption by the American spectator as generic racialized Filipino subjects. This visual and cultural consumption was not only a sphere of fetish and sexual exoticism, but reaffirms notions of cultural, racial, and economic superiority. At that time, America’s belief in racial superiority of whites over racialized ‘darker’ ethnicities (especially African Americans) informed the foundational imperial principles on which the fair was established.

In the early 1900s the effects of abolition of slavery in America were still evident; however the descendants of slavery were still viewed as a subaltern community by a unanimous white population. Based on this racist ideology, the publication of the “backwardness” of multiple non-white races within the fair translated the United State’s global and national empirical conquests as evidence of the transcendence of “Caucasian” races over their “colored” counterparts.

Deeper in the background of the photographs, is a modernized building erected in a position ‘overseeing’ the natives. With several levels and many windows, the massive structure is fenced off from the “rural” makeshift village setting. One can only speculate as to which building it was, or its purpose, but its position in the photograph juxtaposing the village and its “primitive” inhabitants is a statement on the Westernized colonial influence of “modernity” in relation to the “traditional” simple hut dwellings, constructed from cheap wood and thatched roofs. In a space where innovative scientific advancement seem to dictate the superiority of one race over another, the simplicity of the indigenous Filipinos’ structures made it easy to instinctively classify them as an entertaining, subaltern people. In the context of a contemporary building looming over a carefully constructed indigenous village, the creators of the Reservation effected a contrast between the two worlds.

Another motive for the juxtapositioning of the “modern” and “primitive” may be attributed to the Philippine Exposition Board, whose members (primarily American) insisted that the Reservation be portrayed in fairness and objectivity, as realistically as possible of the Filipinos and their culture. The villages were constructed to surround a replicated model of Manila, the capital of the Philippines, which contained landscaped plazas and contemporary edifices. “The objective of the Reservation’s physical layout was quite obvious: to contrast the more civilized city in the center with the primitive villages at the periphery,” (Vergara, 1995, p. 120). In order to exhibit an “honest” depiction of the Filipinos, the narrative extremes of civilized and savage were portrayed, along with some tribes who were considered semi-civilized. This broad characterisation of “civilized” was then determined to produce a fair colonial representation of the Filipino natives, posited once more against the standards of the Modern West. This stance of cultural determination and authoritativeness of setting the precedent for what constitutes as “civilized” once again hinges on the racist self-affirmation

of white domination. Such a spectacle reiterates the splendor of such multi-cultural inclusion, of how “honest” the exhibit was as a representation of the people:

The exhibit was...an honest one. While all of 70 or more groups of people in the archipelago could not be represented we had the least civilized in the Negritos and the Igorots, the semi-civilized in the Bagobos and Moros, and the civilized in the Visayans...the exhibit was a faithful portrayal. (Vergara, p.121).

It was not enough for the indigenous peoples to be simply viewed, but they were also subjected to perform hourly ceremonies and sanctimonious rituals over and over. Infrequent sacred rituals such as elections of chiefs, ancestor memorials, and marriages were compounded into a monotonous daily routine, for the viewing pleasure of the crowds. The main attraction however, was the ethnographic display of the dog-eating performed by members of the Igorot tribe.

The film *Buntoc Eulogy* is primarily based on a Filipino-American’s lifelong search for his roots through the villages of Mountain Province and through museums and archives in the U.S. (Fuentes, 1995). It examines the diasporic relationship between the U.S. and the Philippines and how the World Fair has historically influenced attitudes toward Filipinos and which still have effects in present times. A larger framework is the idea of the Filipino body as representational of the nation of Philippines, the colonial penetration and conquest geographically, paralleling the dominance of its people, as done so through their exploitation and mistreatment at the 1904 World’s Fair. As Espiritu explains:

The history of U.S. colonialism in the Philippines reminds U.S. that immigrant lives are shaped not only by the social location of their group within the host country but also by the position of their home country within the global racial order. (Espiritu, 2003, p. 6)

With this quote, Espiritu considers how a nation’s people become reflective of how they are viewed. I suggest that the opposite effect can also happen; that is, the view of a nation can foreshadow how its people will be viewed. “The politics of location and the belittling of the nation or the gendering of it, can be a foundation to the engenderment of its people,” (Espiritu, 2003, p. 6).

“Bontocs are the head-hunters...These Bontocs are the dog eaters” (Fuentes, 1995). The film documents and explores the indigenous Filipinos’ exhibition of 1904, the exploitation of the natives and the measures taken to keep them “within” a colonial fantasy narrative (Fuentes, 1995). Fuentes, uses a combination of re-enactments and actual footage, to describe how tribal Filipinos were displayed like “circus animals”. The film shows how hundreds of tribe people, after living quiet and peaceful lives for centuries were separated from their families shortly after the American invasion and shipped to the United States for the fair under inhumane conditions.

One of the worst hardships for participants, upon their arrival in the U.S., was the daily pantomime of rituals. This was not only an extreme insult to the agency of the Igorot culture, but more importantly, it showed an utmost lack of respect, and disempowered the subjects as these forced rituals were performed without heart or spirit. One particularly moving scene in Fuentes’ film shows Westerners “gawking in awe” at the Ifugaos as they perform an “exotic ritual” unaware that the displaced tribes people are actually mourning their comrades who froze on the journey to St. Louis (Fuentes, 1995). This pivotal moment of the film, showed that even in death, the bodies were not to be left intact, they were literally examined, dissected, and put on display, paralleling the invasive actions already taken upon their culture. “The language of the dead, their silence...the physically dead body itself, dissected for social consumption, which is symbolic of the nation it came from” (Raphael, 2000, p. 221).

In addition, in another powerful scene the killing of a dog by the Bontoc Igorots is depicted, and the shock and intensity of watching it once again made me re-examine my role as a Western feminist, participating in practices of “spectatorship,” viewing it from an imperialistic gaze. The re-inscribed violence and exotification of a people, through film or image creates a static notion where the subjects viewed lose complexity, are transformed to be objects for consumption. I was consuming the scene as much as the villagers were reluctantly consuming the dog, and it makes one wonder if I had any real right to view the film and how my claims on a cultural authenticity legitimated my position as a conscious spectator.

Although the 1904 St. Louis Exposition was more than a century ago, the ongoing processes of colonialism in relation to the dislocation of Filipinos is continuously re-inscribed in the representation of a cultural history, of the role of America as an imperialistic, colonizing power, Gonzalves states:

Certain versions of Filipino and Filipino American histories are being authored, passed around, passed down, and mishandled each year...to inquire into the writing of history is to examine how histories are being generated, sustained, maintained, and circulated. (Gonzalves, 2000, p.164).

The representations of my ancestors reflects how something from such a long time ago has the power to influence contemporary thought, and static representations of gendered, subaltern subjects. But this process of taking something seemingly “dead” and static and transforming it into a vehicle for discussion shows the potential for imagination, and how different consciousnesses can arise even out of the most “traditional, primordial” image. It is through this imagination that more intersecting identities can be formed, ones where the complexities of an indigenous individual can be recognized with more awareness.

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### **Author Notes**

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