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Land

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The Filipino Community in New York from 1898 to 1946 –
In search of the Promised Land

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Empire City: A Global History of New York

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The New York City is known for its “melting pot” metaphor. Indeed, this includes the Filipino community that has contributed to the multiculturalism of this city. Nevertheless, historical researches about the Filipino Americans in the New York City were still very limited. The first wave Filipino immigrants came to the land of the United States with their American dreams that was believed to be a model of civilization and prosperity. However, the experiences of the Filipinos in New York were rather different from their original perception towards America. This essay aims to address the lives of the forgotten Filipino community in New York during the colonial era (1898-1946). In addition, this article also argues that the concept of race largely dominated the colonial questions such as the Philippines independence and the US citizenship of the Filipino immigrants. Hence, the Filipino Americans encounter in New York during the colonial period evolves around the ongoing stereotypes and occurrences of racism.

The influx of the Filipinos to the American territory began at the conclusion of the Spanish-American War. The Philippines colonial era (1898-1946), established a hierarchical relationship between the Americans and Filipinos, have also led to the rise of the first wave Filipinos’ migration to the West coast like Hawaii and to the East, mostly to New York.¹ There were studies that have recorded the first instance of the

¹ Joaquin Laceró. Gonzalez, *Philippine Labour Migration: Critical dimensions of Public Policy* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998), 25.

Filipinos to the City. Filomento mentioned the arrival of the Filipinos as sailors in New York since the 1889, as the city was one of the largest ports for seafarers.² In the Personal Story of Philip Vera Cruz, a renowned Filipino American Labor leader, shared his experiences along with three hundred Filipinos on the ship to America in the year 1924. According to his memories, once the ship docked, many Filipinos were anxious about which place to go to in America and that they even have no idea of “how big America was”.³ For many Filipinos, America has been an unknown yet hopeful country, as some others chose to move to New York and others to California, San Francisco and etc.,. It is for them the path to search for the promised land for their American Dream. The precise figure of the Filipinos in the City grew by the late colonial period, principally in the 1930s, at approximately 1,982 Filipinos in New York.⁴ According to the records, most Filipinos stayed in the Queens, New York and have passed through the Ellis Island upon their arrival.⁵ A Filipino community was developed in New York along Sands and Washington Streets in the Navy Yard. The Manila Karihan Restaurant was also located in the areas of the Filipino community that offers dining and dancing.⁶ Filipino sailors and athletes in the 1920s would visit the restaurant, dressing up in their

² Filomeno V. Aguilar, “Manilamen and seafaring: Engaging the maritime world beyond the Spanish realm,” *Journal of Global History* 7, no. 3 (2012): 374.

³ Craig Scharlin, *Philip Vera Cruz: A Personal History of Filipino Immigrants and the Farmworkers Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000),60

⁴ Yen Le Espiritu, *Filipino American Lives* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 9.

⁵ Kevin L. Nadal, *Images of America: Filipinos in New York* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2015), 12.

⁶ Mary Yu Danico ed., *Asian American Society: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Sage Publications, 2014), 23.

fancy suits and spend their leisure time dancing in the city. The Filipinos mainly worked as service workers for example, dishwashers, kitchen helpers and all kinds of services including bellboys, bed makers, elevator boys, yard boys and busboys.⁷ However, most of the Filipinos arrived in New York as *pensionados*, which means immigrants were mainly scholars but not workers. To facilitate the “Americanization” of the little brown brothers, the US government issued the *Pensionado Act* (1903) to send small amount of Filipino “elites” from the wealthy families to study at Columbia and New York University through the US government educational grants. Although the *pensionado* program was launched with the purpose of the US colonial administration to ensure the Filipinos’ loyalty and so as to serve the colonial bureaucracy, the chance to encounter the American system has provided chances for the construction of Filipino identities. The *pensionado* program is arguably the most significant policy that allowed the Filipino scholars to develop a “long distance nationalism”, which determined the later movement of the Philippines independence. It was until the 1906 that there were fifteen among 178 students being sent to the New York for over half went to the liberal arts colleges and universities.⁸ However, the early 1900s was never a time for anti-colonial activities to take place, the US has repeatedly reassured the Filipinos for their independence when they are capable of self-government. The first *pensionados* were

⁷ Espiritu, *Filipino American Lives*, 9.

⁸ Mario Orosa, *The Philippine Pensionado Story*, 35-37,
<http://www.orosa.org/The%20Philippine%20Pensionado%20Story3.pdf>.

predominately men since the 1903. There were, however, only five women among 39 *pensionados* being sent to the United States in the following year.⁹ The first recorded arrival of the Filipinas in the New York as *pensionadas* was considerably in the year 1922 namely Josefa Abaya and Alberta Cabanos, both came from the Ilocos region of the Philippines.¹⁰ Some of these *pensionados* were sponsored by the Rockefeller Foundation to study in the Columbia University's Teacher's College.¹¹ Encarnacion Alzona was another Filipina who was able to acquire her doctorate degree from the Columbia University, New York in 1922, majoring history.¹² A historical record of Carlos P. Ramulo, a well-known Filipino diplomat, have also attained his masters in the Columbia University in 1919.¹³ There were also many successful experience of the Filipinos in New York. The *New York Times* have also described the successful art exhibition of a renowned Filipino artist Fernando Amorsolo in 1925, who also lived in New York during the 1920s and 1930s.¹⁴ The paintings of Amorsolo about the rural Philippines landscape were widely appreciated by many of the US officials that has brought his arts and reputation a transformation from provincial to international. It is

⁹ Orosa, *The Philippine Pensionado Story*, 35.

¹⁰ Bureau of Insular Affairs, War Department, *Directory of Filipino Students in the United States* (Washington, D.C.: War Department, 1922), 17.

¹¹ Catherine Ceniza Choy, *Empire of Care; Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History* (London: Duke University Press, 2003), 33.

¹² Noel V. Teodoro, "Pensionados and Workers: The Filipinos in the United States," *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 8, no. 1(1999):162-163.

¹³ Carlos P. Romulo, "General Carlos P. Romulo: Historical Photos, Footage, Anecdotes, Radiograms, Letters, and other treasures," Carlos P. Romulo Foundation, 2009, <http://carlospromulo.org/>.

¹⁴ "Art Prizes Awarded: Three Winners in Contemporary Exhibit Picked by Public," *New York Times*, October 30, 1939, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1939/10/30/issue.html>.

not only Filipino academics and arts were brought to New York, the boxing industry was also promoted in the city. Pancho Villa, a popular Filipino American boxer resided in Brooklyn, New York, was also able to make his fame from winning the match with an English boxer Wilde at the Polo Grounds in New York.¹⁵ New York was a city of opportunity and hopes for these Filipinos and Filipinas, who wished to bring the western point of view and advanced information back to their home country. For those who are seeking for career advancement, the city also carries the chances for them to gain international reputation.

As some Filipinos began to settle in New York and perhaps gained their successful life experience, there were also other encounters of the Filipinos that were seemingly unpleasant. The land of America was seen as a promised land for the Filipinos who have left their families for their advancement either financially or academically. However, the Philippines was considered an unfamiliar place for many New Yorkers at that period. The White Americans' argument to the annexation of the Philippines was based on the idea of "The White Man's Burden" that portrays the Filipinos as "half devil, half child", needed to be educated, civilized and Christianized. Kramer argued that during the Philippines-American war, US soldiers have described the Filipino characteristics as "filthy, diseased, lazy and treacherous", further terms such as "nigger"

¹⁵ "Wilde is matched with Pancho Villa," *New York Times*, March 6, 1923, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1923/03/06/105850970.html?pageNumber=17>.

were being applied to them.¹⁶ The ideas of race associated with the uncivilized labelling have essentially established the US legitimacy to conquer the Philippines. Reports being sent back to the US and posted on the *New York Times* has created a certain impression that the Filipinos has conducted the war with the Americans in “barbarous cruelty” that “disregarded the rules of civilized warfare” and all these descriptions were entirely blamed upon the “uncivilized races” of the Filipino troops.¹⁷ The *New York Tribune* has reported the “a head for a head” culture of the Igorrotes that explained the custom of chopping off the head of their enemy, hence known as the headhunting tribe. The media’s illustration and publicity of the “savage” practices of the Igorrote tribes has shaped the public perception of the “uncivilized” little brown brothers and manifested the need for the American presence, as the newspaper ended by stating “the head hunting of the Igorrotes will break down and disappear as soon as American rule can be established among them.”¹⁸ Thus, curiosity on the Filipinos and its uncivilized nature aroused public interest especially in New York. Truman Hunt has made use of this trend to launch the “human zoos” program that brought up the Igorrotes from the Philippines to dress in a tribespeople manner. Around 50 members of the

¹⁶ Paul A. Kramer, “Race-making and Colonial Violence in the US Empire the Philippine-American War as Race War,” *Diplomatic History* 30, no.2 (2006): 173.

¹⁷ “Cruelty Change Denied; Secretary of War Root Refutes Reports from the Philippines,” *New York Times*, February 20, 1902, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1902/02/20/101937012.html?pageNumber=3>.

¹⁸ “Our Flag is now 26 Years old. Yet its Birthplace is in constant danger of being burned down,” *New York Tribune*, June 8, 1903, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1903-06-28/ed-1/seq-34/#date1=1903&index=10&rows=20&words=Igorrote+Igorrotes&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1905&proxtext=igorrote&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1>.

Igorrote tribe, living in the mountain area of Luzon, was brought to the United States to display their culture and costumes. In the year 1905, the arrival of the Igorrote Tribe had certainly aroused the public attention in the midtown Manhattan, where crowds of around six thousand people gathered on the sidewalks along the Sixth Avenue until the Forty-Third and Forty-Fourth Streets. The Igorrote Tribes entered the Luna Park of the Coney Island also known as America's most popular seaside resort. The middle spot of the Luna Park was circled with fences and the Igorrotes were assigned to build their own village with their bare hands and feet, primitive tools such as the strips of bamboos while climbing up and down to construct an umbrella-shaped shelter in order to entertain those who paid to enter the park.¹⁹ Indeed, the topic that interests the spectators were the questions of whether the Igorrotes in the park hunt heads and eat dogs. Truman asked the tribal chief to perform a bloody sacrificial ceremony of a live hen, with the chicken blood collected and sprinkled over the roof, while the body was thrown into the fire as food. The controversy has also brought up the conflict between a New Yorker, the wife of the proprietor of Coney's musical railways, Mrs. Mary Jackman and the Igorrote tribes.²⁰ Mrs. Jackman reported to have lost her dog, Prince,

¹⁹ "From Luzon to Luna; Igorrotes Coming, 51 Streing, to build village at Coney," *New York Tribune*, May 09, 1905, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1905-05-09/ed-1/seq-11/#date1=1903&index=7&rows=20&words=Igorrot+Igorrote+Igorrotes&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=New+York&date2=1906&proxtext=igorrote&y=4&x=9&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1>.

²⁰ "Doggie was in the Soup; Bones from an Igorrote Kettle may solve a Mysterious Disappearance," *New York Tribune*, May 26, 1905, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1905-05-26/ed-1/seq-10/#date1=1905&index=2&rows=20&words=Igorrote+Igorrotes&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=New+York&date2=1905&proxtext=igorrotes&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1>.

and accused the tribe for possibly eating her dog as the Igorrotes were known as “dog eaters”. Since then, the rumors about the Igorrotes’ theft of dogs for food began to spread across New York, an article published in the St. Louis Republic began to place negative comments about the dog eating habits of the “savages”.²¹ Prentice’s research has revealed that a huge fight occurred between the Filipinos and the forty Coney Island residents regarding the dog-meat consumption practice of the Igorrotes.²² The increasing fear of the natives about the tribal habits of the Igorrotes has heightened the tension between the Filipinos and the White Americans. There were also heated debates about the “nakedness” of the Igorrotes as newspapers have discussed on whether there was a need to “dress” the Filipinos.²³ The story of the Igorrote tribes in New York has placed the Filipino reputation under the negative light, in which terms such as “savages”, “niggers”, “barbarian” and “dog-eaters” began to appear in all types of newspapers that highlighted the need to “change” the Filipinos. An article in the St. Louis Republic has claimed by its headline that “Fair has reformed the dog eaters; Dishes of Canine Persuasion no longer tempt the Igorrotes; Like the American Diet”, which has also reflected the general opinion of the public for the “Americanization” as to “civilization”

²¹ “Gossip of the Savages at the World’s Fair,” *St. Louis Republic*, May 11, 1904, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84020274/1904-05-11/ed-1/seq-7/#date1=1789&index=0&rows=20&words=FAIR+GOSSIP+SAVAGES+WORLD&searchType=basic&sequence=0&state=&date2=1924&proxtext=gossip+of+savages+at+the+world%27s+fair&y=0&x=0&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1>.

²² Claire Prentice, *The Lost Tribe of Coney Island: Headhunters, Luna Park, and the Man Who Pulled Off the Spectacle of the Century* (Boston: New Harvest, 2014), 84.

²³ “Clothes for Igorrotes; World’s Fair Officials to Protest to President Against the Order,” *New York Times*, June 26, 1904, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1904/06/26/102418171.html?pageNumber=2>.

are essential to uplift the new colony.²⁴ Filipinos who took part in the World Fair witnessed the gaze of the spectators that includes bias, disgust and disagreement.

Apart from the Igorots, the American model reflected in New York was never a friendly space for the new immigrants, especially for those who aspired for a permanent stay. The territorial expansion of the US has certainly left questions about the civil potential of the Filipinos. The first Philippine Commission was led by the Cornell University, New York in the 1899, to investigate the “political, social and racial questions” of the Philippines. In the Second Volume of the *Report of the Philippine Commission to the President*, the Filipinos were categorized as the “Negrito Race” based on its physical characteristics such as “weaklings of low stature, with black skin, close curling hair, flat noses, thick lips and large, clumsy feet”.²⁵ Further racial comments regarding the intelligence of the Filipinos was that “they stand at or near the bottom of the human series” and the Filipinos are “believed to be incapable of any considerable degree of civilization and advancement”.²⁶ Such comments have essentially reflected the Americans’ view towards the inferiority of the Filipinos, therefore justifies the American imperialism. However, Filipinos were exempted from many of the immigration restriction act passed by the Congress, including the

²⁴ “Fair has reformed the dog eaters; Dishes of Canine Persuasion No Longer Attempt the Igorrotes; Like the American Diet,” August 22, 1904, <http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn84020274/1904-08-22/ed-1/seq-12/>.

²⁵ Philippines Commission, Government Printing Office, *Report of a Commission Appointed to investigate Affairs in the Philippine Affairs* (New York: Philippines Commission, 1900), 12.

²⁶ Ibid.

Immigration Act of 1917, 1921 and 1924. This allowed clusters of Filipino immigrants to enter US during the first decade of the twentieth century. Yet, legal, political, social and economic barriers remained to restrict the naturalization of the Filipinos. Although the Philippine Naturalization Law, Act No. 2927 did not specifically disqualify Filipinos to apply for naturalization, the provision was, however subjected to American laws that prohibited Asian Americans, including Filipinos from acquiring citizenship.²⁷

A case of Penaro Rallos in 1917 has filed a petition in the Eastern District Court, New York, arguing that he has a Spanish father that makes him “half white”. The Court established the interpretation based on the 1906 Naturalization Act, which extended the naturalizing acts to the persons that met the racial criteria of “white” ancestry.²⁸

Although the Court finally ruled that Filipinos are not White, this particular case has revealed the embedded racial limitations on the American nationality based on the federal policies. The difficulties for the Filipino Immigrants to become naturalized citizens was reflected in the case of a New York City-based Filipino immigrant and a WWI veteran Bernando Bunuan, who lived in New York and was not granted the citizenship.²⁹ According to the report of the Filipino American National Historical

²⁷ Swan Sik Ko ed., *Nationality and International Law in Asian Perspective* (London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1990), 345.

²⁸ Ian Haney Lopez, *White by law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 165.

²⁹ “What Filipina/o American History can teach us about the recent Executive Order on Migration?,” *Filipino American National Historical Society*, February 01, 2017. Accessed March 04, 2017. <http://fanhs-national.org/filam/what-filipinao-american-history-can-teach-us-about-the-recent-executive-order-on-immigration/>

Society (FANHS), there were more than 100,000 Filipinos, who have opted to stay in America to pursue their American dream and was stuck on the situation of citizenship.³⁰

The Watsonville Riots in California in the year 1930s have highlighted the tensions between Filipino American farm workers and the local residents. Filipinos were dragged from their homes and farms and were being beaten up by the Natives and Mexican mob.³¹ This particular incident has also led to the discussion about the

Filipino Immigrants in the northern part of the United States including New York.

Followed by the 1934 Tydings-Duffie Act, paradoxically called as the Filipino Exclusion Act, declared the Filipinos as aliens by promising Philippine independence,

the policy has worsened the social situation of the Filipinos as it aroused nativist sentiments. It was during the 1930s that the matter of economic competition of the

Filipinos and the White Americans was brought up and that many nativists argued that the very existence of the Filipinos by taking up mostly the “least-pleasant and least-

remunerated labor tasks” have essentially produced unemployment for the native population, who already are the “economically weakest”.³² Many of the migrant

workers, including the Filipinos in New York suffered as the economic crisis deteriorated. The nationwide Anti-Filipino sentiment has exposed the longstanding

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Rick Baldoz, *The Third Asiatic Invasion: Migration and Empire in Filipino America 1898-1946* (New York: New York University, 2011), 67.

³² “The Ramified Problem of Filipino Immigration,” *New York Times*, August 9, 1931, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1931/08/09/issue.html>.

social and economic problems created on the issue of the Filipino Immigration.

The New York City was, however, a place for the Filipinos to reconstruct their identity that had later made contributions to the Philippines Independence and efforts for naturalization. The common experience of the Filipinos in America has aroused a wide reflection on the western civilization. Carlos Bulosan mentioned that Filipinos were considered as a victim of mindless racism that often is associated with “negative connotations in racist ideology”.³³ For many Filipinos, the Promised Land did not wish them what they wanted and that the American model of civilization was filled with hypocrisy and racism. On the other hand, the growing resentment in the Philippines over the American rule has also aroused a trend of *Filipinism* that argues for the construction of Filipino identity in the absence of western influence. The former editor of *Elrenacimiento* (The Rebirth), Teodoro M. Kalaw have expressed his disagreement on the Americanization of the Philippines and argued that it was never a viable political option as American interests does not represent the needs and wants of the Filipinos.³⁴ Another scholar Maximo Kalaw also wrote *The Filipino Rebel* (1927) that criticized the political structure established by the American administration in the Philippines during the colonial period, describing it as hypocritical and cruel.³⁵ New York

³³ Carlos Bulosan, “Sound of Falling Light: Letters in Exile,” *The Diliman Review* (January-September 1960):206.

³⁴ Martin F. Manalansan eds., *Filipino Studies: Palimpsests of Nation and Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 71.

³⁵ Jennifer McMahon, “The Malenolence of Benevolent Assimilation: Cultural Critique in Early Philippine Literature in English,” *Englishes* 23, no. 1 (2004): 142.

witnessed the Filipinos' struggle to shape the Filipino identity through wearing costumes and forming organizations. Steinbock argued that the politics of dress were especially demonstrated by the Filipino students in the United States, where the Filipino *pensionados* studying in the Columbia University, New York, would choose to wear native dresses in specific events and in their home country.³⁶ This enabled the formation of Filipino identities that defines "modernity and tradition on their own terms", which is also a form of self-representation that demonstrated their patriotism. The New York City then became a place for these intellectuals to gather and plan for the Philippines independence. The first assembly of the Filipino Students' Federation of America was in New York at the Eighty-Seventh Street with members such as Carlos Ramulo.³⁷ Indeed, Ramulo has later returned to the Philippines and claimed the Igorots were being misrepresented in America that created a common impression that the average Filipino wore a "G-string".³⁸ The *Philippines Herald* was a monthly journal published in the New York City by the members of the Filipino Students' Federation of America, at first the main topics was about education and later became discussions about the Philippines culture and heroes that fought for the Philippines independence. There are also organizations created that claimed to advocate Philippines independence

³⁶ Sarah Steinbock Pratt, "It gave us our nationality: US Education, the Politics of Dress and Transnational Filipino Student Networks, 1901-1945," *Gender & History* 26, no.3 (2014):570.

³⁷ Nadal, *Images of America: Filipinos in New York*, 19.

³⁸ Augusto Fauni Espiritu, *Five Faces of Exile: The Nation and Filipino American Intellectuals* (California: Stanford University Press, 2005), 30.

such as the *El Club Progreso Filipino* (The Filipino Progressive Club) that was stationed in Brooklyn, New York. The members of the club had also created *The Philippine Review*, a monthly journal that discussed the Philippine politics in relations to the work of the Philippines independence.³⁹ The naturalization issue remains to be a barrier for the Filipino Americans as they went on to be “aliens” in the nation. The Public Law 360 allowed the Filipinos to join the military service during the Second World War. General MacArthur gathered the support from the War Department and so publicly argued for the equal payment and allowances “regardless of nationality”.⁴⁰ However, the Congress turned down the equal-pay policy. The Filipinos activists continued to steam up the debate about the Filipino citizenship rights in 1944 by arguing that the Filipino community has contributed to the US wartime service and their civic fitness for American citizenship. One example was the Filipino National Council in New York lobbied for the nationwide campaign to press the US Congress to amend the naturalization laws. In 1944, the American Legion claimed that “Filipino people have proven their loyalty to the United States in time of our national emergency... they have supported the American ideals of democracy and proven themselves worthy of the trust placed in them”, which marked the success of the Filipinos’ effort to strive for their full

³⁹ “Filipino Organize Club,” *New York Times*, November 23, 1913, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1913/11/23/100661937.html?pageNumber=12>.

⁴⁰ Jose Abeto Zaide, “They just fade away,” *Manila Bulletin*, January 10, 2016, <http://2016.mb.com.ph/2016/01/10/they-just-fade-away/>.

citizenship rights.⁴¹ However, the naturalization of the Filipino Americans was rather seen as a reward for their wartime contributions and racial makeup to the Filipinos.

To conclude, this article has reflected the lives of the Filipino American in New York and their continuous effort to seek for the answers of the Filipino question such as the Philippine independence and naturalization rights. The New York City has indeed created opportunities for many *pensionados* and talents. However, the city also revealed the existing hypocrisy on the issue of race in many circumstances for example, in the case of the Igorrote tribes and the unfit “characteristics” of Filipinos to become the US citizens. All these barriers created by the American society have essentially affected the livelihoods of the Filipino Americans in New York. The Promised Land may have turned their hopes down as it is filled with double standards that is entirely based on racial prejudice. Yet, we also witnessed the efforts of the Filipinos either individually or collectively, for nearly half a century, to win over the rights that was believed to be essential for the Filipino American community.

(Words: 3,987)

⁴¹ Baldoz, *The Third Asiatic Invasion: Migration and Empire in Filipino America 1898-1946*, 209.

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