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# “OUR CULTURE RESOUNDS, OUR FUTURE REVEALS”: BUILDING A RESOURCE FOR FILIPINX AMERICAN PERFORMING ARTS

Mary Talusan

My paper discusses an e-book and archive project on Filipinx American performing arts that I co-created with my fellow collaborators of Ube Arte, a Southeast Asian performing arts research and education collective of ethnomusicologists and ethnochoreographers based in southern California. The e-book, entitled *Our Culture Resounds, Our Future Reveals: A Legacy of Filipino American Performing Arts in California*, is free for download and contains photos, videos, essays, and interviews with Filipinx American artists, musicians, and community organizers working in California. Since its release two years ago, it has been used in classrooms both at the college and high school levels, by folk dance organizations, and by individual artists as a resource, bringing attention and care to an overlooked diasporic community.

The idea for the project began some 20 years ago when I was a graduate student hoping to write my MA thesis on Filipino American music and performance. Little was available back then except for a few blogs and one article by Ricardo Trimillos called “Music and Ethnic Identity: Strategies among Overseas Filipino Youth” published in 1986. When Ube Arte started work on the e-book, a few more scholarly works were available on Filipino American performance such as Barbara Gaerlan’s *In The Court of the Sultan* (1992), Theo Gonzalves’ *The Day the Dancers Stayed* (2010), Lucy Burn’s *Puro Arte* (2013), Christine Balance’s *Tropical Renditions* (2016), Oliver Wang’s *Legion of Boom* (2015), and *Empire of Funk* (2014) by Mark Villegas, et al. Despite these great works, we still wanted to create a free and accessible resource for students, community members, and teachers on Filipinx American artists that included scholarly essays mixed with interviews, lesson plans about music and dance, and links to videos and photos on the California Revealed archive website. We were concerned that many students and teachers relied on non-scholarly websites or YouTube videos that lack sociocultural context, historical background, theory, or proper citation of materials. To remedy this gap, Ube Arte partnered with the UCLA Ethnomusicology Archive on a community outreach initiative to help connect Filipinx American communities with relevant archival collections on the California Revealed website. We received a

grant from California Revealed, and in just four months, we delivered the final product, our e-book, bringing together artists and scholars to explore the various motivations, perspectives, and experiences of a diverse community.

Through essays, interviews, artwork, photographs, and audiovisual recordings, this project opens spaces to discuss, debate, and discover Filipinx Americans' unique contributions to culture and performance in the U.S. Both the e-book and the archive are particularly important to address what communications scholar George Gerbner referred to as "symbolic annihilation,"<sup>1</sup> the absence, underrepresentation, and misrepresentation of marginalized communities in various forms of media, including fiction or nonfiction, and in public spaces. In their article measuring the impact of community archives, Caswell, et al. pointed out that when marginalized groups "suddenly discover themselves existing" in archives submitted by people of their community, this experience contributes to their health and well-being, healing, care, and recovery.<sup>2</sup> Healing comes about in part through the "preservation of narratives not found in mainstream institutions, and the promotion of community pride, citizenship, empowerment, and social inclusion."<sup>3</sup> By addressing this absence of representation for Filipinx American arts in California, we hoped that the project would bring about healing and care for our community.

The way that my co-editor Eleanor Lipat-Chesler and I curated the e-book's content was personal as well as scholarly—it was influenced by our age and generation, our preferences for certain genres like kulintang music, and by our concerns as mothers who are eager to pass on cultural knowledge to our children. The book's content is also a reflection of our friendships and ties to the community since we tapped into our close network of talented colleagues who we admire to share their own message in essays, interviews, and photographs. We highlighted topics that relate to the contents of two collections in the UCLA Ethnomusicology Archive: The Archiving Filipino American Music in Los Angeles (AFAMILA) Collection, which includes many hours of footage recorded from 2003–2004 of Filipino American performances all over Los Angeles, and the more recent Ube Arte Collection of over 900 digital and physical items donated by groups and individuals. These items are snapshots in time of individuals, cultural groups, church groups, school groups, activist groups, and neighborhoods. In fact, half of the book contributors appear in these recordings themselves. Embedded throughout the PDF are clickable play buttons that link directly to AV files on the California Revealed

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1. George Gerbner, "Violence and Television Drama: Trends and Symbolic Functions," in *Television and Social Behavior* vol. 1, *Content and Control*, ed. G. A. Comstock and E. Rubenstein (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), 44.

2. Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez, "'To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing': Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives," *The American Archivist* 79, No. 1 (Spring/Summer 2016): 63.

3. Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez, "'To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing,'" 64.

website. In the following, I explain different sections of the e-book and what genres of performance and issues they address.

## **The Beginning**

In the Foreword, Ricardo Trimillos provides us with a framework for understanding Filipinx identity in diaspora. Next, I offer a brief 100-year history of Filipino American music in California. Eleanor then makes a case for documenting and archiving our own lives now so that we can continue to write our own histories and represent ourselves to the public.

**Part I: Staging Our Culture** reveals the social justice activist roots of Pilipino Culture Nights on college campuses in California. This section is also an introductory handbook for those who seek to perform folk and indigenous music and dance, and to dress in indigenous attire with accuracy and respect.

**Part II: Embodying Our Heritage** digs deep into the knowledge and experiences of our communities' dance and martial arts leaders, examining how we use our bodies to represent, reinterpret, and transmit our cultural heritage to others.

**Part III: Sounding Our Gongs** focuses on *kulintang* music traditions of the southern Philippines. It discusses the life's work of the late Danongan Kalanduyan, Maguindanaon American *kulintang* master who taught and founded Palabuniyan *Kulintang* Ensemble of San Francisco, as well as his legacy to teach *kulintang* to Filipinx American students who play it and play *with* it in creative and respectful ways today.

**Part IV: Enacting Our Visions** highlights how artists appeal to all of the senses to channel their unique visions. They use visual art, literature, theater, and community arts productions to process past traumas, disrupt oppressive systems, claim space, and create new modes of being.

**Part V: Raising Our Voices** focuses on the voice in the literal sense as well in the political sense. Singers sing our collective joy, pain, and nostalgia; activists call out for intersectional justice, and rapper Bambu aims, point-blank, for class revolution.

**Appendixes.** In the appendixes are finding aids for three archival collections: the AFAMILA and Ube Arte collections, as well as the records of the student organization UCLA Samahang Pilipino. We also provide a master bibliography of related sources and an index of multilingual terms.

## Promoting the Project

To reach community members, we used social media and email to launch our e-book and archive project out into the world. Within 6 hours of launching, we had reached over 1,000 people and got over 200 clicks. By the next morning we had reached 2.7 thousand people and got over 400 clicks. In the first month, we reached 40,000 viewers and had 4,000 clicks, an engagement rate of 10 percent, which is amazing. Most of our followers live in greater Los Angeles. The other top cities represented are in Southern California, the New York/New Jersey area, the Philippine capital region, and Zamboanga City in Mindanao, southern Philippines. Considering we had set out to create a work about Filipinx Americans in Southern California and in the diaspora, it seems we reached our target folks and beyond. Other search engines such as archive.org now list the archival material in e-book, increasing its reach to wider audiences. As of today, the e-book has been downloaded 4,048 times. Since it is free, this labor of love is not about money; it's about public outreach and care for our community, friends, children, and future researchers.

Here are some highlights of our analysis of the ways people are accessing the book. The most viewed image (Figure 1.) was a flyer for a FilAm Arts event celebrating Filipina artistic empowerment called “Burlesque Las Filipinx Deux.”



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

Several other of frequently viewed images (Figure 2.) were photos of Filipinx Americans performing music and dance of indigenous and Muslim cultural traditions of the Philippines. The most viewed video is a collaborative performance of Mexican Folklorico and Philippine folk dance. The most listened to audio is “Pabasa ng Pasyong Mahal,” a recitation of a *pasyon* (epic narrative about the life of Jesus Christ) that is performed for several hours. We don’t know exactly why these are items are the most viewed, but we suspect that in the case of the *pasyon*, the recording is being played to accompany *pasyon* rituals taking place in the U.S. I hope that this mini market analysis of our e-book demonstrates that an archive-and-community partnership with zero marketing budget can leverage both organic and paid social media tools to reach wider audiences. It also seems to support the commonly voiced assertion throughout the e-book that within the community there is a “hunger” for cultural knowledge grounded in scholarly work while also highlighting the voices of the artists themselves.

Many of the book’s contributors ask (in some form or another), “Who will carry this on? Is this book the end of the line?” Across the United States, Filipino American parents continue to seek opportunities for their children to study cultural forms that they, themselves, may or may not be familiar with. Cultural and artistic exploration is embraced as a way for youth to build skills, build confidence, and develop a sense of group belonging. Every year, Filipinx American college students produce elaborate culture shows on campus, despite having limited resources or contextual understanding. By using this book, they now have access to scholarly work on the larger context of Filipinx performance and videos of performances grounded in

research involving the participation of master musicians and dancers from Philippine cultural communities. It is our hope that the resources in this book will provide a show of care for the community, provide a resource and inspiration for future works, and make ourselves heard and represented in mainstream archives, accomplishing what Caswell, et al., described as “representational belonging”.<sup>4</sup> Archives, they argued, provide a way for marginalized communities to see themselves positively in publicly accessible media such as a community generated digital archive. Their respondents articulated how the archive was functioned as a community-building tool, a space to counter misrepresentation and stereotypes, and a way for community members to feel represented in larger society by seeing themselves in American history. A sense of “representational belonging” provided an “empirical basis of evidence on which to assert communities’ historical presence,” allowing communities to “prove the facts of their presence in the face of silencing, marginalization, and misrepresentation.”<sup>5</sup> Finding themselves represented helped to affirm their identities as an ethnic community: “This ontological affirmation has important affective implications, as community members respond emotionally to symbolic forms of representation.”<sup>6</sup> Finally, archives provided a way for the community to heal from past traumas of colonialism, exclusion, racism, and prejudice through “three levels of impact—epistemological, ontological, and social—[that] together undergird [the] conception of representational belonging.”<sup>7</sup> Ube Arte’s archiving work did not end with the e-book. Recently, we helped to establish the Filipino American Digital Archive (FADA) at CSU-Dominguez Hills to document Filipino American organizations and families in Carson, California. Many of the documents of these decades-old organizations have been sitting in boxes and garages. With the archive, they will soon be available for research, safe keeping, and to represent this specific community.

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4. Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez, ““To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing”” 57.

5. Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez, ““To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing”” 74.

6. Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez, ““To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing”” 74-5.

7. Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez, ““To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing”” 75.