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**Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila:
Working-Class Filipinos and Popular Culture, 1920s–1950s**
by Linda Maram

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Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila: Working-Class Filipinos and Popular Culture, 1920s–1950s

New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. 252 pages.

Those who have written about pioneering Filipino laborers in America and their recreational activities have always seemed to approach the subject from the outside, with a predisposition toward moralizing. Although progressive writers like William Saroyan, John Fante, and Carey McWilliams championed the “Filipino” in various ways, their portrayals nonetheless evinced a mixture of caricature, condescension, and sometimes hostility, unable to escape the colonial and racialized image of the Filipino as “little brown brother.” Meanwhile, Carlos Bulosan, Manuel Buaken, and P. C. Morante, from insiders’ viewpoints, wrote about the injustices faced by Filipino workers, but distanced themselves from their “illiterate” and lower class brethren. In a similar way, perhaps, labor leaders and heads of voluntary organizations, even American and Filipino sociologists in America concerned about Philippine independence and the cause of racial equality, frowned upon the foibles of Filipinos, especially their leisure time amusements, the most visible and notorious being gambling, cockfighting, boxing, loitering, and attendance at taxi dance halls.

Thus with some excitement I read Linda España Maram’s *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles’s Little Manila*, for Maram attempts to do something that others before her have not done: to see the work, community, and especially the leisure time amusements of Filipinos in America from *their* viewpoint. Maram’s contention is that social reformers, political leaders, and church leaders, not to mention respectable Filipinos and Philippine leaders from the 1920s to the 1940s, had always frowned upon Filipino workers for participating in these activities. Their hostility, based upon various forms of racism and class snobbery, could be gauged through their view that these activities promote idleness, laziness, crime, immorality, and many other unsavory traits. More than that, these self-proclaimed leaders, in collusion with the shady Los Angeles Police Department, had always attempted to regulate, if not shut down, working class pursuits, turning a blind eye to their own parallel illegal, albeit high class, activities.

Maram performs a singular task of resignification of Filipino labor history in this book, on several levels. She challenges received views (prejudices

In the last section Beller looks at the work of Emmanuel Garibay. He reads Garibay’s cannibalization of styles and icons as treatments of Filipino painting as a vernacular. In Garibay’s paintings Beller finds that “religion is grasped as a *technology* of domination, a *medium* of confrontation and struggle” (216, Beller’s italics) that “is wrought in solidarity with the socially disruptive power of the masses in search of liberation” (217). Beller astutely sees this artistic practice as following through Brocka’s insistence on forming the Filipino audience to confront them with their *pinagdaanan* (loosely translatable as the pathways of their hardships) in their urban experience.

Some may question Beller’s periodizations and the way he discusses class interests or quibble about other potential readings of the art works he analyzes. (Beller himself significantly cites some of these criticisms, such as that from James Clifford on page 282.) How, for example, might looking at literary experiments in various languages used in the Philippines prior to 1928, or the cultural production of the 1960s, change or perhaps extend his arguments about modernism and nationalist struggles? How might Beller read critique in less obviously protest-oriented early Philippine film, such as LVN’s *Giliw Ko*’s portrayal of the insertion of technology and American imperialism into Philippine life? How would he read the queer excesses figured in the *bakla* or the lesbian in Bernal’s *Manila by Night*? Whatever the answers, these questions gain a new significance in the light of Beller’s powerful work. His overarching argument is compelling and effectively connects the Philippines with global currents and theorizations about a world-media system’s visual economy. In his discussions of empire, value, and affect he persuasively shows how the Philippine experience contributes to theorizations of historic transformations in regimes of perception and organization. He convincingly reads Philippine art practice as a significant manifestation of theorizations about visuality. Against certain trends that speak of the impoverishment of critique, Beller understands Philippine art as salient and powerful affirmative critique. This book will undoubtedly be a reference point for those interested in Philippine visuality and its links to imperial technologies. Perhaps, as its most important labor, it issues a challenge for further critical work to refute, refine, or most likely extend his analysis into other spheres and artifacts of Philippine cultural history.

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Maram might say) about Asian communities, especially those that set up ethnic enclaves—viz., Chinatowns, Little Tokyos, and so forth—as models for judging the Filipino community. Maram contends that such views privilege stability, the business class, and a sedentary conception of community. But the Filipino community, she argues, was necessarily a *mobile* one, as a result of Filipinos' employment in migratory labor, following the planting and harvesting of the crops throughout the western United States (37–39). Moreover, Filipinos faced housing segregation and discrimination and were thus shunted into red-light districts and relegated to substandard housing, where their only recreations were the vibrant, if also seedy, street life of the big city. Maram argues that Filipinos created “portable communities,” their Little Manila being a center that catered to and serviced their demands for provisional housing, food, amusements, and grooming. However, Little Manila was one in a series of centers, others being in Delano, Stockton, Seattle, and even Alaska, where they might successively be found depending upon the season and the nature of occupation they had. Newspaper advertisements showed the Filipino business community's awareness and recognition of the mobile character of their population.

For Maram gambling, spectator sports like boxing, the taxi dance halls, the wearing of zoot suits, and entry into the army during the Second World War, provided the spaces, not for depravity or dysfunction, but for deflecting and denying the power of hegemony. Maram's refrain is that Filipino laborers resisted the drudgery, the danger, and the monotony of time-discipline and exploited work either as rural agricultural laborers or as urban service workers. Leisure-time afforded them new “spaces” through which to construct more fulfilling time, to create community, to develop interethnic and interracial solidarities, and to express their desires as youth through “games of chance,” spectacles of nationalist heroism, displays of sexual prowess, and performance of style.

I especially enjoyed the core of this book, the three chapters on gambling, boxing, and taxi dancing. The chapter on gambling is decidedly interethnic and to a certain extent challenges the insularity of ethnic nationalisms as well as of ethnic studies research focused on particular communities. Indeed, Maram locates Filipino gamblers not within their own communities but inside of Chinatown's gambling dens, among the tongs, the fraternal associations, which at various times in Chinese American history has been described as criminal gangs for prostitution and gambling and at other times

as centers of nationalist agitation. Maram frowns at the larger society's obsession with criminality, disease, and vice in Chinatown, while the much larger syndicates of Italians and Jews, simply because they were Euro-American and white, escaped the notice of mainstream leaders. Inside of these dens, Filipinos found various reasons to stay, beyond the stereotype of criminality. There were free food, thrilling entertainment, and money to be made if one was practical in gambling, as most Filipinos were.

Filipino workers in Los Angeles also bet on Filipino boxers—the “golden age” of Filipino boxing, according to the title of Corky Pasquil's documentary, when boxers like Pancho Villa, Speedy Dado, and Ceferino Garcia ruled their respective divisions and gained respect as champions and as men. Indeed, Maram's contention is that these boxers through the workman-like way they boxed and through their generous behavior off the ring helped to dispel notions of Filipinos as passive or submissive, on the one hand, and savage and barbaric, on the other hand. Moreover, boxing as spectator event provided Filipinos in the U.S. with a venue for the construction of nationalism. Boxers became mythic heroes, boxing matches provided the drama for heroic narratives, and encounters in the ring—especially against white boxers—embodied symbolic resistance against the daily indignities endured under white supremacy in the fields, factories, homes, and other places where Filipinos worked.

During the 1930s taxi dance halls became centers of attraction for Filipino workers. Maram does a fine job of tracing the origins of the encounter between “brown hordes” and “white trash,” epithets for Filipino patrons and the Euro-American working class women who worked the taxi dance halls. Taxi dance halls especially became the target of regulation and ultimately outright restriction. Maram convincingly argues, though not original with her, that white men felt threatened by the style, dance abilities, and manners of the nattily dressed Filipinos who attracted the attentions of white women. This jealousy and feeling of threat were the bases for race riots and pogroms, such as the Watsonville riot of 1930, which resulted in beatings of Filipinos and destruction of their property. Although mainstream society sought to place all manner of restriction on the taxi dance halls, Maram finds that both Filipino men and white women refused to obey these strictures. For Filipino men facing their exploitative daily grind, the taxi dance halls were sites for the recuperation of bodily control and autonomy and the performance of masculinity and sexuality; for Euro-American women, they provided a pleasurable and profitable

alternative to the drudgery of factory labor, institutionalized wage discrimination, and daily sexual harassment on the job.

Maram has a keen eye for the interethnic, interracial, and transgender dynamics of her story, in line with the race, class, gender, and sexuality consciousness of the new social history. While her story is focused upon Filipinos, Maram succeeds in creating a picture of an ethnic group in the multiethnic and multiracial context of the United States. They shared similar strivings for wealth with their Chinese neighbors, similar aspirations for the American dream with African American boxers, and similar desires for social affirmation, pleasure, and style with Euro-American and Mexican women. Maram, however, is too sophisticated to idealize the crosscultural relationships of her subjects, for they were not without their own tensions. She points to the old world animosity between Filipinos and Chinese rooted in colonial policies that favored Chinese businesses over native Filipinos. Likewise, boxing matches pitted Filipinos with other ethnic fighters, in some cases with largely Filipino crowds refusing to accept referees' decisions. And taxi dance halls became sites for inter- and intraethnic conflicts and jealousies over the attentions of white and Mexican women. Finally, there is the constant dynamic tension between working class Filipinos and the larger mainstream, predominantly white, society that was always seeking to circumscribe their activities and to regulate their movements.

The book does suffer from a few faults, especially in the last two chapters on the Second World War and the conclusion. There are needlessly redundant passages. In striving for context, the narrative is diverted and for a few pages seems to lose its focus upon Filipinos in Los Angeles, becoming about other ethnic groups or socioeconomic developments in the city. The segment on the Filipino zoot suit, perhaps as a result of the paucity of evidence, does not present the perspectives of Filipino zoot suiters themselves but relies on others' accounts of Filipino zoot suiters. Similarly, Filipino-Japanese relations are not really explored, and there are long passages on the internment of the Japanese but not on the Filipinos' relationship to them.

One also wonders how much stronger the book could have been if Maram had a more comparative, transnational approach that explored developments in the Philippines. Filipino boxers in the U.S. were closely followed in the Philippines. To what extent was there a shared *transnational* community in the making between Filipino immigrants and Filipinos in the Philippines made possible by this colonial sport. Similarly, the narrative of

the discrimination toward Filipino servicemen denied access to service clubs in the Second World War Pacific campaign might have been strengthened by an exploration of the discrimination faced by Filipinos from American colonial officials and military branches in the Philippines during the first few decades of U.S. colonial rule.

All in all, however, Maram has done a superb job of reexamining a subject that has been looked at from many different angles. Utilizing her own interviews with the surviving *manong*, the oral history collections of the Seattle Pinoy Archives, the University of Washington's manuscript collections, and the Carey McWilliams Papers, various government studies, and numerous unpublished sources, Maram has provided a novel approach to a much worked-on subject. She especially validates the importance of popular culture for Filipino and Asian American studies, bringing together the insights of Antonio Gramsci on hegemony and counterhegemony and C. L. R. James on colonialism and sport, and the new social history's emphases on looking at developments from below and above and on hearing the voices of subjugated communities.

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Transforming Technologies: Altered Selves—Mobile Phone and Internet Use in the Philippines

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Innovations in electronics have introduced a faster and more efficient means of storing, manipulating, and transmitting information. This digital revolution has furthered the convergent potentials of communication technology, allowing it to become a more dynamic participant in the new information age. In the Philippines the mobile phone and, to a lesser extent, the Internet were welcomed primarily because of the convenience they offer. So widespread is the use of the economical and highly mobile electronic com-