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Undecided Empire

The Travails of Imperial Representation of Filipinos at the Greater America Exposition, 1899

This article examines the first formal exhibit of Filipinos under American rule at the Greater America Exposition in Omaha, Nebraska, in 1899. It focuses specifically on the remarkably discursive forms of representation at a time before official discourses of empire and the "Philippines" or "Filipinos" were established. In this sense the exposition marked a rare instance of true colonial encounter in which the contingencies and vulnerabilities of empire were plainly manifest. The exposition also provided a critical baseline by which to gauge evolving discourses of representation at subsequent expositions, particularly the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair.

KEYWORDS: GREATER AMERICA EXPOSITION • OMAHA • EMPIRE • PHILIPPINES • COLONIAL DISCOURSE

The moment of colonial encounter is a fascinating one. It is a moment of overwhelming speculation, a concurrence steeped in theoretical assumptions and often betrayed by the honesty of unrehearsed reactions. It is perhaps when empires, or the idea of empires, are most vulnerable. Lacking sufficient information for self-sustaining ideologies and discourses, as well as developed political and institutional mechanisms of imperial rule, actors are forced to adapt and accommodate, compromise and negotiate their way through the encounter. It is at this moment when the ambivalences and contingencies of imperialism are most apparent. Perhaps one of the best examples of such an encounter was the display of Filipinos at the Greater America Exposition in Omaha during the summer of 1899.

Touted as the “First Colonial Exhibit,” the Greater America Exposition purported to bring the sudden overseas empire of the United States to the heart of the Midwest. Under the direction of Dr. George L. Miller,¹ fair organizers raced to secure as many artifacts and living exhibits as possible from Cuba, Hawai’i, and the Philippines. The Philippine Village was to be the centerpiece of this “authentic” colonial recreation that was designed to “bring the American people into actual contact with the representative types of this remote but interesting” colonial acquisition (*Greater America Exposition* 1899, 2). Unlike colonial fairs that followed, however, the Greater America Exposition was largely devoid of overarching “hegemonic” narratives of sociocultural or biological evolution, the dichotomous relationship of civilization and savagery, or grand attempts to incorporate America’s “Promethean middle class” into a proimperial ethos.² Rather, the Greater America Exposition was an occasion in search of such ideologies.

This is not to say, of course, that the exposition was without profound underlying assumptions of possession or the elevated Orientalist gaze of an American public (Corby 1993, 361). Nor did it entirely resist capitalizing on the “mutual attraction of exoticism and fantasy” to sell the show (Gilbert 1994, 17). However, fair organizers and the local press were quite candid throughout the entire process concerning their utter lack of knowledge about the Philippines or Filipinos and were avid that the exposition was an opportunity for discovery and decision rather than a scientific display of known, transparent facts. In this sense the Greater America Exposition provided a clear example of David Brody’s (2010, 2) arguments concerning “mediums [that] furthered empire while concomitantly

fostering a space where debates about empire could take place.” Without an accessible corpus of knowledge to draw from, organizers and fairgoers approached their exhibit without the preconceived notions and guiding discourses that saturated and structured later colonial exhibitions. At the time of the Greater America Exposition there were no colonial censuses and no published commission reports; neither were ethnological studies, photographic albums, nor museological collections circulated on a grand scale. The United States government had not yet established an official view or produced comprehensive institutional definitions of its Philippine subjects. This paucity left a tremendous amount of latitude for both modes of representation and interpretive views of the exhibit. As Bernard Cohn (1996, 10) has pointed out, in established imperial systems those who “came under the imperial gaze were frequently made to appear in dress and demeanor as players in . . . [a] constructed theater of power, their roles signaled by prescribed dress, their parts authored by varied forms of knowledge codified by rulers Everyone—rulers and ruled—had proper roles to play in the colonial sociological theater.” In the summer of 1899 such proscribed roles had not yet been established. The Philippine–American War and imperial debates within the United States continued to rage amid a shifting landscape of nascent ideologies and discourses of empire.

In this way the circumstances of the Greater America Exposition exemplified Paul Kramer’s (1999, 75, 77) contention that “imperialists found their invention hard to represent,” that “contending forces . . . had highly varied, and sometimes violently opposing, ideas about how and why an empire was to be constructed and maintained.” While “the contingencies and contradictions of colonial rule” (Stoler and Cooper 1997, 18), remained active throughout the imperial project many of these disruptions were eventually medicated and concealed through imperial institutions and actors. Historians rarely have access to historical episodes that so clearly demonstrate “how limited colonial authorities may have been in putting their policies into practice, [and] how vulnerable—and decidedly nonhegemonic—their authority was to those who subverted or pushed it aside” (ibid., 21–22). The heretofore largely unexamined events surrounding the Philippine Village at the Greater America Exposition profoundly demonstrate Ann Laura Stoler’s (2002, 10) contention that “there was no panoptic imperial state but only a partially realized range of efforts.” The stark honesty with which this contention was demonstrated in Omaha provided a critical prequel to

later colonial expositions and a baseline by which to judge the evolving and malleable nature of colonial discourse as empire became a permanent facet of twentieth-century America.

Finally, a word regarding sources and historical actors: It very well may be the case that the Philippine Village at the Greater America Exposition has remained relatively unexamined by historians due to a lack of formal governmental archive or extensive national media coverage. Despite intense efforts to locate these sources, they remain elusive. Consequently much of the historical information about events and actors must be derived from local media reports and promotional materials from the exposition itself, biased and incomplete as they may be. These challenging circumstances have placed limits on the analytical possibilities and narrative comprehensiveness of this study. Nevertheless this historical episode represents a critical link in a much larger chain of events and ideas concerning American empire and colonial representations of the Philippines. To leave it in obscurity would be a mistake. Although the sources deployed here are of a certain kind, they still represent very real and important historical events and provide a picture worthy of examination and analysis. The Greater America Exposition represents the genesis of colonial representation of Filipinos in the United States. The available sources, although incomplete in places, provide adequate substance for important historical inquiry and analysis.

Claiming the High Ground

The Philippine Village at the Greater America Exposition was billed as a candid exercise in objective colonial discovery. Rather than overtly promoting empire, the exposition sought to promote a robust debate *about* empire and educate the public on the urgent question of overseas colonial acquisitions. According to the official guide, the Greater America Exposition was to be “the last great educational enterprise of the [nineteenth] century” specifically designed to “meet a manifest and appreciable desire of the American public for information on a special and definite question” (*Greater America Exposition* 1899, 2). The urgency of this question became increasingly critical as fighting erupted between American and Filipino troops in February 1899, only six months before the official opening of the Philippine Village. In the run up to the exposition the local press touted the value of the exhibit alongside bloody tales of insurgency, massacres, troop deployments, and somber reports of locals killed in action.³ Nevertheless

Miller and the exposition organizers remained determined to embrace the spirit of this profound ambivalence and market the Philippine Village as a key moment in the ongoing debate. By seizing upon the unresolved and contentious nature of American imperialism, fair organizers were able to maneuver themselves into a position of superior access and thus established a kind of evidentiary supremacy that effectively negated other positions and allowed the exhibit to speak with an unassailable authority.

The fair organizers’ initial marketing tactic was an appeal to the gravity of current historical circumstances. Advertising efforts in the local press carried sober reminders of the unique nature of such a profound historical moment. The United States had moved consciously into uncharted imperial territory with unknown repercussions, and Nebraskans had been active participants. The First Nebraska Volunteer Infantry had distinguished itself in the capture of Manila and subsequent defense of the city. Between the outbreak of fighting in February 1899 and their demobilization in July of the same year, the First Nebraska Volunteers saw extensive action across central Luzon, sustaining higher casualty rates than any other American regiment with 64 dead and 168 wounded. These losses precipitated a profound sense of exhaustion and “loss of innocence” among some soldiers and their families (Thiessen 1989, 51–52).

This sense of exhaustion was apparent even to some national observers. A reporter for the *Chicago Times-Herald* (1899, 5, quoted in Miller 2008, 54, 56), for example, commented sadly on the “tattered and torn” appearance of the volunteers, “cut by the bullets of the treacherous natives whom they originally went abroad to assist, and who later turned against them.” Hence, many articles preceding the exhibit contained a subtle air of concern regarding the nature and ultimate costs of empire. As one writer for the *Omaha Daily Bee* (1899d, 3) cautioned, the “first acquisition of colonial territory by the United States was of such recent occurrence that this first formal manifestation of the chief characteristics of these acquired lands is fraught with an importance not readily conceived.” The suddenness of American empire was a similar concern for the *Columbus Journal* (1899, 4), which spoke of the “stupendous undertaking” of comprehensively understanding such a “mighty empire whose possessions lie on either side of the globe.”

This sense of caution was not limited to the United States alone, however. Fair organizers and journalists expressed occasional unease at the inevitably

profound consequences for colonial subjects. “The destinies of a people may be at stake,” opined a journalist for the *Iowa State Bystander* (1899c, 1), “the fate of a nation may hang in the balance as the result of the stirring events crowded into the brief space of a single year [T]he future of the young [Philippine] nation depends largely upon a proper solution of this question.” Thus, both colonizer and colonized found themselves at a critical crossroads in modern history that either side could scarcely understand.

In their efforts to provoke contemplation and public debate on the value of American empire in the Philippines the local press filled its pages with opinion pieces simultaneously advocating both pro- and anti-imperial positions. Two of the leading local publications in Omaha were staunchly anti-imperial. Edward Rosewater, editor of the *Omaha Daily Bee*, and Gilbert Hitchcock, editor of the *Omaha World-Herald*, made no effort to hide their passionate anti-imperial leanings (Miller 2008, 54). Nevertheless, both men were wholly committed to embracing the debate within the context of the exposition. Hence, impassioned pleas for independence from educated Filipinos and fiery anti-imperial speeches from William Jennings Bryant were found alongside progress reports from the war and animated accounts of economic opportunities in the islands (see, e.g., *Omaha Daily Bee* 1899a, 7; 1899s, 6; 1899t, 6; 1899u, 6; *Omaha World-Herald* 1899d, 4; *Iowa State Bystander* 1899a, 4).

Fair organizers were quick to point out, however, that despite the “undoubted patriotic zeal” of some of the “greatest minds,” all arguments either for or against American empire in the Philippines were ill informed and fruitless. These opinions were ultimately baseless due to an utter lack of hard empirical evidence. As an official guide to the exposition pointed out on its opening pages,

[F]ew adherents of either side of this great controversy are adequately equipped with the knowledge best calculated to lead them to a wise solution to the problem. While Americans are heatedly discussing the capacity of the Filipino for self-government, or his adaptability to enlightened citizenship, none of us, with the exception of the few returning and heroic promoters of American arms and valor on far shores, have ever seen a Filipino. Fourteen months ago most of us had never heard the name. (*Greater America Exposition* 1899, 2)

While ignorance of the Philippines and its peoples could produce meaningless arguments, fair organizers cautioned that partial information embellished with rumor and sensationalism could have far more sinister effects. With strong allusions to the archaic forms of Iberian colonialism that Americans had recently displaced in the islands, the guide continued to caution readers:

What enlightenment has since been borne to the American public concerning this remote country, and hitherto unknown people, has come to us something as [it] did to the people of Europe, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the grewsome [sic] tales of weird sea-monsters, and the flowered recitals of the marvelous riches of the new world. The information brought to us of these far-away people, their habits, customs, and characteristics, and of the products, resources, and capacities of their tropical lands, comes savored with the prejudices of war, and obscured by the censorship [sic] of partisan political solicitude. (ibid.)

Unlike Old World colonialisms, ostensibly prompted by greed, lust, and parochial superstitions, American empire was to be predicated upon hyperrational decision making. As the bearers of cultural and political modernity, exposition organizers argued that imperial policies needed to be based upon strong scientific analysis of available evidence. The acquisition, categorization, and exhibition of this evidence provided the critical underpinnings of functional, rational empire.

As such, the “dominant purpose of the Greater America Exposition” (ibid.) was to “bring the American people into actual contact with the representative types of this remote but interesting people . . . and the products and resources of their soil and industries . . . and afford the widest possible information on every phase of the pending question of expansion” (*Omaha Daily Bee* 1899d, 3). Despite the pretense of objective inquiry, however, the exhibition in and of itself was an overtly imperial act that framed the conclusions of the debate before the debate could take place.⁴ The acquisition, display, and scrutiny of living Filipino subjects embodied the starkly asymmetrical dynamics of a one-way imperial gaze. The theoretical objectification of Filipino bodies, habits, and dwellings as subjects of scientific

examination and public spectacle automatically subsumed them within the foregone conclusion of imperial rule. However, this imperial dynamic was not totalizing. Given the fair organizers' vigorous embrace of the imperial debate, the Philippine Village exhibit did provide extraordinary latitude for the objects of scrutiny to "talk back" and thus inform and problematize a burgeoning but yet undefined imperial discourse (Said 1979, 21).

Whose Subjects? Whose Empire?

The most immediate obstacle to exhibiting Filipinos in Omaha was an intricate web of ill-informed and ill-prepared jurisdictions and bureaucracies. American government, both in the Islands and at home, was profoundly unprepared for dealing with the technical bureaucratic mechanics of imperial rule. Legal definitions and rights, jurisdiction, and governmental policies were asserted and countermanded with alarming rapidity. As fair organizers began to compete with military and civilian sectors of American government for the right to define, and therefore control, a yet ambiguous imperial discourse, they uncovered a series of profound ambivalences that laid bare the contested, contingent, and often haphazard nature of the imperial encounter.

Miller's original plan called for fifty to seventy-five live Filipino exhibits and hundreds of accompanying items to properly contextualize and frame the subjects. He and other fair organizers acquired the services of Col. Enoch H. Crowder of the Law Department under the Military Governor's Office to facilitate an initial search for participants and manage contractual details on the ground. However, Maj. Gen. Elwell Stephen Otis, second-in-command and soon to be military governor of the Islands, immediately blunted their efforts. Otis unilaterally forbade exhibit activities and "entered a practical protest with the war department, saying such action would be an annoyance to the army in the Philippines" (*Omaha World-Herald* 1899a, 3). Miller responded with a trip to Washington and a direct appeal to Assistant Secretary of War George Meiklejohn. As a former Nebraska lieutenant governor and congressman, Meiklejohn agreed to present Miller's petition directly to the president. With additional urging from Sen. John Thurston of Nebraska and Cong. David Mercer, Pres. William McKinley quickly conceded, instructing General Otis by presidential order "to permit a collection of a number of representative Filipinos for the Omaha and Philadelphia expositions and

to allow transportation of exhibits free of cost on government transports." In addition to live exhibits, the War Department agreed to loan a large amount of "captured war material, trophies . . . [and] the negatives of a large number of [the] most interesting photos taken by the signal service officers in the Philippines" (ibid.). Given the president's endorsement of the exhibit, Sec. John Davis Long and Asst. Sec. Charles Herbert Allen of the Navy similarly pledged their efforts, instructing vessels in the Pacific to lend assistance (*Omaha Daily Bee* 1899c, 1).

The outpouring of support from McKinley's administration received effusive praise and implicit promises of reciprocation from executive committee members of the Greater America Exposition. "I am delighted," J. B. Kitchen told reporters (*Omaha World-Herald* 1899a, 3).

While the exposition outlook has never looked blue to me, our stock has gone up several hundred percent tonight. That is better than congressional recognition, and we will have the greatest exposition ever seen . . . All thanks to President McKinley, Secretary Meiklejohn and others. We appreciate this, and will show our appreciation if we get a chance. (ibid.)

P. E. Iler offered similar praise: "It is glorious news. It makes me feel good all over. . . . We will have a great show, and if President McKinley will only come out we will show him and Mrs. McKinley the greatest time they ever had" (ibid.). "[W]e will give him a welcome," added William Hayden, "beside which the welcome given last year will pale away into nothing" (ibid.).

However, even greater bureaucratic obstacles soon blunted their enthusiasm. Fair organizers encountered conflicts and negotiations with immigration and labor agencies that would significantly alter the scope of the exhibition, ultimately dictating the definitional parameters of its subjects.

The exposition board sent Henry F. Daily to the Philippines to finalize contracts with a total of thirty-five Filipinos, including a number of women and children. Although the particular ethnolinguistic identities of the subjects were not indicated, it might be assumed that they were Tagalog. The difficulty of wartime logistics and the exposition's explicit objective to reproduce Philippine life "found in Manila" suggested that the live exhibits were likely acquired in the Tagalog regions. Given the ethnic diversity of

Manila, however, their ethnicity could not be categorically confirmed.⁵ Nevertheless, once the terms were concluded, Charles Sherman and Pony Moore⁶ escorted the group of living and nonliving exhibits across the Pacific aboard the *USS Indiana*.

Upon landing in San Francisco, however, a bureaucratic storm erupted. A Board of Inquiry for the Federal Immigration Bureau in San Francisco flatly refused entry to all members of the exhibit. The board members unanimously concluded that the subjects fell under a category of excluded Asiatic contract labor.⁷ Sherman and Moore had hoped to exploit a legal loophole by classifying their passengers as performers, although they were certainly advertised to the contrary as authentic, average samples of the Philippine population. Given the ambiguous nature of the Filipinos' impending contractual obligations, the board opted for a highly technical and litigious interpretation. Immigration officials made a careful inspection of each member of the party to determine acting or musical ability. Despite the fact that most of them "could play some musical instrument," at least eleven of the party were found without entertaining abilities in any "sense of the word," and "none appear[ed] to be Thespians" (*Omaha Daily Bee* 1899g, 5). Given these findings, the board conclusively determined that "the Filipinos were contract laborers and not actors within the meaning of the regulations of the Treasury Department."

Considering the profound endorsements received from the highest level of government and absolute cooperation from the most powerful agencies of the federal system, bureaucratic technicalities regarding immigration status seemed particularly absurd. Nevertheless, local reporters watched with great interest as different government agencies battled for supremacy over an issue they scarcely understood. One reporter for *Omaha Daily Bee* (ibid.) wryly observed, "As the Filipinos were brought over on a government transport with the consent of the War Department, it looks as though a very nice point will now arise between the War and Treasury departments."

The stalemate continued for several days with Moore and Sherman "doing all kinds of wire pulling and telegraphing to get them landed" (*Evening World-Herald* 1899, 7). The Filipino exhibits meanwhile languished on board the ship. At one point the Filipinos themselves demanded release, "alleging that they are from American possessions, and thereby entitled to land as American citizens" (ibid.). This attempt, however, only "stirred up" other "complications," causing immigration agents to harden their position

(ibid.). Exasperated, on 29 July Moore and Sherman decided to take a "new tack." Finding a legal loophole, the men simply decided to exchange the living exhibits on board the *USS Indiana* for the ship's crew. "The crew of the Indiana was largely a Filipino aggregation," explained the *Evening World-Herald* (ibid.), "and crazy to go to Omaha. They were already here, so today Sherman got the release of eighteen of them who were willing to hire out for the summer." Moore immediately escorted the eighteen men to Omaha, leaving Sherman and Daily in San Francisco to secure the release of the "original village," along with the rest of the material exhibits.

Despite desperate maneuvers by the exposition committee, all thirty-five Filipino exhibits, including many women and children, continued their captivity aboard the *USS Indiana* for ten days after landing. The exposition board sent out concerned parties to inspect the exhibits' health and general well being. Aside from frustration and boredom, "all seem[ed] healthy and [were] not affected by the change in weather" (*Omaha Sunday Bee* 1899a, 1).

By 31 July Moore decided to compromise, at least outwardly, and cede authority to immigration officials to define the nature and purpose of his exhibits. Although it was certainly a blow to the much-advertised quotidian authenticity of the Filipino subjects, Moore finally cabled the following from San Francisco:

We have thirty-five people and they include among their numbers all kinds of actors. We have a Filipino woman who does a magical act . . . She is a beauty. One of the men is a great acrobat. Another is a harp soloist. Two are expert Spanish dancers. They do this dance with the wild abandon that marks its genuineness. . . . Almost the entire lot are musicians and play beautifully on mandolins, bandolins, guitars, and other instruments. (*Omaha Daily Bee* 1899i, 8)

Moore made certain also to emphasize that the "natives are handsome specimens of their race," although the Filipinos' marketable authenticity had been unavoidably compromised by Moore's concession to the immigration board (ibid.). Actors, magicians, and entertainers were not renowned for demonstrating the mundane rituals of daily life. Rather, they were typically associated with deception, art, and carefully managed performances—all characteristics the exposition committee wanted to smother with blunt,

raw authenticity. The Filipinos' status as performers was meant to be a silent formality, not a centerpiece of their official admittance to the United States.

Moore's conceit was not enough, however. Upon appealing their case to the highest levels of the immigration bureaucracy, the exposition committee once again reached out to Secretary of War, and stalwart Nebraskan, George Meiklejohn for intervention. After some discussion, immigration officials demanded that "the War Department . . . guarantee that the Filipinos would not become a charge on the immigration bureau." Meiklejohn agreed, and "this closed the matter." All thirty-five Filipinos were released on 1 August 1899, but not before Meiklejohn secured a "personal pledge" from Miller that the exhibits would not become a burden on the state and particularly the immigration bureau (*Omaha Daily Bee* 1899j, 1).

The Filipinos' troublesome and contentious journey to the Greater America Exposition indicated the United States' profound lack of preparation for empire. A debate fueled by litigious and theoretical disputations over what a "Filipino" was, and would be, within the elaborately layered bureaucracies and national consciousness of Americans was only beginning in 1899. Significant efforts to remedy this confusion would characterize the next half-century of American rule, and colonial expositions would play a profound part in these determinations.

The Paradox of an Authentic Unknown

Of all the characterizations deployed to hype and market the Philippine Village, "authenticity" undoubtedly took primacy. Journalists and fair promoters churned out an endless drumbeat of bold claims regarding the unaltered authenticity of their exhibits. "The village will be an accurate and exhaustive representation," wrote a reporter for *Omaha Daily Bee* (1899b, 7). "The village life of the natives will be a faithful portrayal," proclaimed another reporter from *Columbus Journal* (1899, 1). Periodicals in neighboring Iowa were no less adamant in their claims of genuineness: "In the native village he [the Filipino] will live as in his island home. His dress, customs, manners, ceremonies, and religious observances will not be added to nor detracted from, and the daily occupation by which he lives when at home will be faithfully adhered to" (*Iowa State Bystander* 1899b, 3). Exposition officials similarly proclaimed their exhibits to be "exact reproductions" of Philippine life (*Greater America Exposition* 1899, 22).

Authenticity, however, was and is an elusive concept. It requires an unassailable, pure ideal; an article, real or imagined, so indisputably genuine that all other samples are measured by their adherence to it. Such articles are almost always socially constructed mythologies born out of the muddled and dialectical processes of imperial discourse. In 1899 Americans did not possess even the faintest notion of what an ideal, authentic standard of "Filipino" might be, to assume that such an entity even existed. Like their cumbersome and tone-deaf bureaucracies, the American public in 1899 was fundamentally unprepared to contextualize Filipino subjects properly within the yet-to-be-determined discourse and politics of empire. As such, exhibition organizers were faced with a difficult dilemma. As Steven Lavine (1991, 152) has observed, exhibited objects derive their "significance as corroborative evidence." Colonial exhibits served a purpose only inasmuch as they corroborated and supported established truths and narratives. Without these preexisting backdrops, colonial artifacts, both living and nonliving, risked floating freely in an ocean of vague interpretation.

Although fair organizers largely embraced this ambiguity and even predicated the value of their exposition on the spirit of discovery, the immediacy of constructing a comprehensible and meaningful exhibit loomed large. In response Moore, Sherman, and other planners pursued a three-pronged approach to creating an intelligible and structured representation of this new imperial possession. The first prong centered on material context. The Filipino subjects were complex, varied, and to some degree unpredictable; as a result, fair organizers sought to control the static circumstances of their display. The exposition setting was "to be distinctly colonial and tropical" above all else, both in terms of the natural environment and manufactured residences (*Omaha World-Herald* 1899b, 3). To give the fairgrounds a distinctly tropical feel organizers imported thousands of tropical plants and flowers from temperate zones across North America and several Caribbean islands. "The floral adornments, in keeping with the colonial features of the exposition, will be distinctively tropical," explained the exposition's official guide, "and thousands of the rarest treasures of the tropics have been and are being brought from afar" (*Greater America Exposition* 1899, 4). The odd fact that the "flora of the Philippines" was shipped in "several carloads . . . from California, Florida, Louisiana, and Hawaii" did not seem to compromise the fundamental authenticity of the exhibit in the minds of its organizers (*ibid.*, 6, 16). Environmental context

in the broadest sense was all that was required for adequate representation in an era of universals, where exploration and conquest were accomplished “through translation . . . [to] make the unknown and strange knowable” (Cohn 1996, 4). The conveyance of ideas, rather than meticulous facts, took primacy. Nevertheless, fair organizers did make a tremendous effort to acquire as many authentic material articles as possible as the exposition’s gaze narrowed toward the focal point of living exhibits.

The Philippine Village was located on the west end of the Midway or the main thoroughfare through the exposition grounds. It occupied 2.02 hectares in total and 60.96 meters of frontage along the main thoroughfare. Organizers made every effort to keep the village a “separate and distinct feature” from the other displays. Patrons entered the village through a massive tower gate that was flanked on each side by large buildings of “native architecture” that served as a restaurant and a store respectively. Inside, the village contained approximately one dozen “native” huts, “low, rangy affairs, covered in grass, cane, or bamboo and thatched with grass.” The huts served as domiciles for the living exhibits, display cases for various artifacts, rest houses for patrons, and other administrative functions. The largest building in the interior of the Philippine village was a theater modeled after the “Filipino playhouses in Manila.” The rest of the village was carefully staged with tropical plants, flowers, birds, ponies, water buffalo, and a large manufactured cement lake measuring 60 feet (18.29 meters) wide, 150 feet (45.72 meters) long, and 3 feet (0.91 meter) deep (*Omaha Daily Bee* 1899h, 5). Designers and organizers felt that these “characteristic habitations” would accurately “portray the social and domestic routine, the industries, amusements and general customs and habits of [the Filipinos’] home lives.” Further, the “exhibits [were] calculated to disclose the commercial, agricultural and social possibilities of the respective islands” (*Omaha World-Herald* 1899b, 3).

The main attraction, however, was certainly the Filipinos themselves. Displaying human beings was and is a difficult and inherently contradictory undertaking, filled with paradoxes and openly divergent objectives. On the one hand, exhibitioners needed to offer the public something exceptional, rare, new, valuable, or educational. However, if such themes were taken too far, the exhibits risked devolving into spectacles of prestidigitation or freak shows, thus losing any legitimate scientific or social credibility. On the other hand, exposition organizers could not simply offer mundane or banal displays and expect to attract viewers or obtain the same scientific

credibility referenced above. The real task was to harmonize the “principle of representativeness” with “that of rarity” (Bennett 1995, 39).

This quandary had often been resolved in two ways. The first involved a construction of the “other” or the “savage,” which was meant to create a cultural or biological gulf capable of extinguishing commonalities between observer and observed that could threaten the exoticism or rarity of the display. The second depended on the highly complex process of “producing the quotidian as spectacle.” As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1991, 409) explains,

The everyday lives of others are perceptible precisely because what they take for granted is not what we take for granted, and the more different we are from each other, the more intense the effect, for the exotic is the place where nothing is utterly ordinary. Such encounters force us to make comparisons that pierce the membrane of our own quotidian world, allowing us for a brief moment to be spectators of ourselves, an effect that is also experienced by those on display.

The “drama of the quotidian” (ibid., 407) encompasses simple acts such as “nursing a baby, cooking, smoking, spitting, tending a fire, washing, carving, weaving” (ibid., 405). Such “performances . . . create the illusion that the activities one watches are being done rather than represented, a practice that creates the illusion of authenticity, or realness” (ibid., 415).

Of course, there must also be actual performances, staged events designed to demonstrate cultural ritual and learned skills meant to suggest tutelary possibilities. Fair organizers designed the Philippine Village at the Greater America Exposition to provoke all the comparative cultural reflexes that would solidify the idea of an imperial United States in the Philippines. The only remaining question was whether the living exhibits and fair patrons would participate.

When the two groups of Filipinos arrived in Omaha in early August 1899, the local press and citizenry observed them with a kind of quiet detachment. Omaha residents were certainly accustomed to the sight of outsiders, as the city had been awash in European and African American immigrant labor for most of the latter half of the nineteenth century. Meat-packing plants and travel along the Missouri River made Omaha an important migration hub to the American West.⁸ Filipinos, however, were supposed to be different. They represented a new phase of American expansion into the “exotic East.”

Nevertheless news articles offered only mild impressions, simple statements of fact rather than loaded commentary buoyed by widely accepted assumptions. As if gazing at inanimate objects, the press commented mostly on their size, color, hair, clothing, and general appearance. Comparisons were made to other, better known, Asian populations such as the Japanese (see *Omaha Daily Bee* 1899l, 5; 1899k, 5; *North Platte Tribune* 1899, 4).

In the end, however, Omahans found their Filipino visitors to be profoundly unremarkable in their exoticism.⁹ Journalists and fairgoers described them as “intelligent looking,” “well built and attractive,” and “graceful” (*North Platte Tribune* 1899, 4; *Omaha Daily Bee* 1899f, 12; 1899l, 5; 1899m, 5). In other words they failed to see the Filipinos as fundamentally different from themselves. As one journalist remarked: “People who expected to find the Filipinos representatives of a race of savages are disappointed. Instead of belonging to that class, they come nearer resembling a lot of dudes. They are stylish dressers, wear good clothes, derby hats, carry canes and clothe themselves in coats and trousers that are as white as snow” (*Omaha Daily Bee* 1899l, 5). Even the apparent racial divide between colonizer and colonized was lost on observers, who persisted in seeing similarities rather than differences. Filipino women, for example, appeared to be nothing more than “pronounced [American] brunettes of about 15 years of age” (ibid.). A group of male performers singing American patriotic songs reminded observers of “a party of eighth grade school boys” (*Omaha Daily Bee* 1899m, 5). Despite their having darker complexion journalists seemed quite sure that there was “no negro blood in their veins” (*Omaha Daily Bee* 1899k, 5).¹⁰

Neither were the Filipinos considered essential links in a biological evolutionary chain of humanity. Both discourses of racism and evolution were prominently displayed at the Greater America Exposition; the Filipinos just did not seem to have a part in them. African Americans were exhibited on “the Old Plantation” complete with “negro huts,” “old aunties,” “hoecakes,” and nostalgic stories of “southern life,” where the “darkeys” would relate their “old time slave experiences” (*Omaha Daily Bee* 1899n, 5; 1899e, 5). An “educated orang-outang” also delighted crowds and excited scholars as “Darwin’s missing link.” “Bright as a silver dollar,” the primate demonstrated an uncanny aptitude “to follow the ways of his more civilized neighbors” (*Omaha Daily Bee* 1899r, 5; *Omaha World-Herald* 1899c, 3).

Yet, in all the available discourse, the views on Filipinos never intersected with any of these themes. No comparisons. No allegorical parallels. No metaphorical allusions.

This trend continued throughout the official performances offered daily in the Philippine Village. Despite Moore’s exhaustive efforts to keep his “actors” “playing, singing, and dancing” for the “greater portion of the morning and all of the afternoon,” “lest they be afflicted with stage fright,” observers saw very little to suggest the exotic “otherization” of the Filipinos. The Philippine band played rousing renditions of “Hot Time,” “America,” and “dozens of other familiar tunes,” but nothing foreign and nothing “native” (*Omaha Daily Bee* 1899m, 5). Choirs and quartets, brass bands, and orchestras all sounded with a striking familiarity. Even the dance troupes, which were supposedly the centerpiece of native performances, for the most part resembled “the style of the American waltzes.” “[T]here are some national dances that are altogether different,” observed one reporter (ibid.). “Still,” he added with perhaps a twinge of disappointment, “none of them are in anywise sensational or vulgar” (ibid.). In other words nothing marked them as exotic, “Oriental,” or sensationally foreign (*Omaha Daily Bee* 1899o, 5).

The “drama of the quotidian” fared no better (Kirshenblatt Gimblett 1991, 415). Fair organizers had hoped that the simple spectacle of Filipino lives would reveal deep lessons on the nature and scope of American empire. “The Colonial features of the Greater America Exposition are real life,” boasted a columnist for the *Custer County Republican* (1899, 4). “You can see the people, men, women and children and hear them speak to each other, sing their native songs and play their instruments of music. Can anyone afford to miss this opportunity?” (ibid.). The exposition’s official guide similarly promoted the “habits, ceremonies, and every-day life of the [Filipino] people” as a worthy exhibit unto itself (*Greater America Exposition* 1899, 22). To facilitate a particularly intimate view of Filipino lives, fair organizers constructed a series of specially built “native huts” designed “so that people may pass through the apartment and observe [the interior].” One such hut was inhabited by “six women, a man and some children,” who were expected to simply act out their daily routines while patrons observed their “real life” (*Omaha Daily Bee* 1899q, 5).

Despite these extensive efforts, fair patrons and journalists again found very little to remark upon concerning the Filipinos’ quotidian world. In

fact the documents I acquired for this study made no mention at all of the Filipinos' daily habits, actions, or customs, aside from an initial observation about bathing.

This is not to say, however, that American observers did not fixate on certain exotic aspects of the Philippine Village. Patrons and the local press, for example, acquired a deep and abiding obsession with the water buffalo. Article after article raved about the curious creatures, their function, and their affinity for water. "One of the features of the Philippine Village that is attracting a great deal of attention are [sic] the excellent specimens of water buffalo," observed one reporter for the *Omaha World-Herald* (1899c, 5). "These animals are great curiosities, as it is almost an impossibility to bring them to this country alive. Out of six that left the Philippines only two of them arrived alive" (*Omaha Daily Bee* 1899q, 5). Another reporter confirmed that one "of the odd sights of the village is that of the water buffaloes being used as beasts of burden, hitched to two-wheeled carts" (ibid.). In a column recounting the events of opening night one reporter spent fully half the article describing fair patrons riding these island vehicles and the water buffalo that pulled them, yet finishing with only a short factual account of Filipino performances. Even the simple sight of a water buffalo taking a rider into the water thrilled one journalist, causing him to report on the tedious act (*Omaha Daily Bee* 1899p, 5; 1899o, 5; *Omaha World-Herald* 1899c, 3; *Iowa State Bystander* 1899a, 1).

In all such instances Filipinos remained mere ancillary characters with very little to offer in the way of exotic thrills. Fair crowds simply would not cooperate with the exhibit's intended purpose to portray Filipinos as "exotic others." Authenticity, exoticism, and "otherization" were notions without reference or meaning.

Conclusion

By late Fall 1899 the Philippine Village at the Greater America Exposition had passed into history and would soon be forgotten. The grand lessons it purported to teach on the "special and definite question" of empire proved hollow and unremarkable (*Greater America Exposition* 1899, 2). Fair patrons and participants quickly faded from the records. The spectacle of the Philippine Village at the Greater America Exposition was rarely, if ever, mentioned again despite a massive boom in colonial expositions over the

next five years.¹¹ The question, of course, is why. Why did the Philippine Exhibit in Omaha fail to elicit the same kinds of responses and historical scrutiny as other subsequent expositions, such as the Louisiana Purchase display at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, Missouri? While scale certainly played a part, the answer lay much deeper.

The Philippine Village at the Greater America Exposition demonstrates the sobering fact that discourse trumps evidence. Exhibited colonial artifacts, be they living or inanimate, are inherently meaningless to historical actors and perhaps to modern historians as well, without the elaborate scaffolding of a preexisting imperial narrative. As Lavine (1991, 152) observed, the purpose of exhibited objects is not to provide new information but rather to simply serve as "corroborative evidence" for concepts and facts already known. In 1899 there was very little imperial knowledge to corroborate. The exoticism, savagery, and/or primitiveness of Filipinos were not established notions at that time. Neither were these tropes apparent to those who observed them. These characteristics were applied only after US colonial policies and objectives were brought into sharper focus. Without the highly structured buttresses of a pervasive colonial discourse, neither government agencies nor American citizens were able to effectively otherize, classify, or interpret their colonial subjects in decidedly imperial ways. This is not to say, of course, that the Philippine exhibit in Omaha was not a grossly overt imperial act. It does suggest, however, that such imperial undertakings were inherently fragile and explicitly contestable by both observer and observed. In this way the Philippine Village at the Greater America Exposition provided a critical reference point for the history of colonial display and the construction of imperial ideas about the Philippines through metropolitan expositions.

Notes

- 1 By 1899 Dr. George L. Miller was a respected pillar of Omaha society. After arriving in the Nebraska Territory in 1854, Miller rose to become an established physician, politician, entrepreneur, and newspaper owner. Perhaps his most lasting legacy was founding the *Omaha Daily Herald* (later *Omaha World-Herald*), which actively promoted his personal causes, both political and social, under his editorial guidance. Miller's reputation was somewhat marred a year following the Greater America Exposition when he "became a raving maniac" and was "placed under restraint." The episode was attributed to a long struggle with "paresis" (*New York Times* 1900). Brief biographical sketches of Miller are provided by the Nebraska State Historical Society (2007).

- 2 For a discussion of the hegemonic discourses of international exhibitions, see Robert W. Rydell's (1984, 3) landmark work. Regarding fairs as mediums for middle-class identity formation, see Benedict 1983; Corbey 1993, 338–69. Cf. Vergara 1995; Fermin 2004; Rydell and Gwinn 1994; Brownell 2008; Vostral 1993; and others for fruitful examinations of discourses on civilization and savagery as well as the proimperial propaganda of such events.
- 3 For a thorough account of the Philippine–American War and the involvement of state volunteer units, see Linn 2002 and Miller 1984.
- 4 Fair organizers were surely aware of their subtle, and not so subtle, proimperial leanings. The cover of the exposition guide, for example, features a thoughtfully bespectacled Uncle Sam embracing the globe while pointing to the United States' newly acquired colonies. The globe bears a white sash with the slogan "The White Man's Burden" in bold capital letters. In the background an American flag pops in the wind above a tropical landscape.
- 5 Although the Filipinos in the exhibit were referred to simply as "Filipinos" or "Natives" without reference to their ethnicity, a telegram from T. V. Powderly to W. H. North reprinted in the *Omaha Sunday Bee* 1899 presented a list of fourteen names (only four of whom were apparently female): Jose Mirando, Poteselano Costodio, Maximo San Juan, Cinco Manalitt, Yrimeo Raymos, Augustin Mariano, Gregoris Espiritu, Franciso Morales, Benito Melig, Cuspolo de Lasis, Esteben Abion, Enquacia Villanuba, Paula Miranda, and Maria Penda.
- 6 Pony Moore, a former navy man, became deeply involved in exhibitionary activities at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, both as a newspaper man and a theatrical press agent. In addition to managing the Philippine Village at the Greater America Exposition, Moore organized a contingent of 100 Filipinos for display at the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York, in 1901. His particular modes of representation for Filipinos set a standard for subsequent expositions. See Fermin 2004, 42–43.
- 7 For an excellent historical source on Filipinos and the exclusion acts, see US Congress 1916. Cf. Baldoz 2011.
- 8 For a comprehensive history of Omaha, see Larsen 1997.
- 9 There were no Igorot individuals or loincloths at the Greater America Exposition unlike in other expositions in the United States, such as the Louisiana Purchase Exposition. See the photo of a "high-caste Filipino belle" who was part of the exhibit at Omaha (*Book of Views* 1899).
- 10 It is interesting to note the perceived ages observers assigned to the Filipino performers. Notions of traditional intellectual or moral infantilism, indicative of colonial discourses of race, are conspicuously absent. Nevertheless, by identifying the Filipinos as adolescents Omahans were indulging a particular temporal construction of the performers. This temporal construction certainly invites further research.
- 11 There were, however, very brief references to the Philippine Village at the Greater America Exposition, according to Fermin 2004, 42; Bennitt 1976, 465.

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