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“Little Brown Brothers” Height and the Philippine–American Colonial Encounter (1898–1946)

This article looks at how scientific racism, biomedicine, public health, sports, and a nascent bureaucracy intersected in the making of height (human stature) as an important attribute of individuals and populations during the Philippine–American colonial encounter. In relation to the “tall” Americans, Filipinos were depicted and problematized as “short,” and the attention to children’s growth, the rise of sports, and the establishment of a bureaucracy all contributed to making height a measure of health and a parameter of inclusion (and exclusion) in various domains of society.

KEYWORDS: HEIGHT · ANTHROPOMETRY · PUBLIC HEALTH · COLONIALISM · PHILIPPINES

In 1936 American writer William Saroyan (1908–1981) published a short story about a six-foot, 250-pound Filipino wrestler named “Ramon Internationale” who fights a Russian opponent (Saroyan 1936). In the story Ramon is instructed by his coach to lose, but he does not want to disappoint his countrymen—“all the little Filipinos, not one of them more than a hundred and ten pounds in weight”—who had bet heavily on him (ibid., 327). In the end he refuses to leave the wrestling ring until declared the victor, fending off “a hundred policemen” in his brave, intransigent stand.

Set in San Francisco at a time when the Philippines was a colony of the United States and when Filipino men had begun to migrate to the US West Coast in search of employment, the work would be appreciated by literary critics for its sense of humor that “bordered on the absurd” and sympathy for the underdog (Balakian 1998). Far more interesting for me, however, were the repeated descriptions of the Filipinos in the story as short of size, starting from the very first sentence. How did being “little” become their defining characteristic? Why could the spectators in the wrestling match not understand “how a Filipino could grow” to be as big as the protagonist when they saw him for the first time? And what led the author to entitle the story, “Our Little Brown Brothers the Filipinos”?

In this article I demonstrate how the American colonial period in the Philippines (1898–1946) became a turning point in the way that height was viewed—and how it materialized—in the country, by presenting different, interrelated domains in which this turn was accomplished. Philippine history has been cast traditionally as a succession of cultural encounters, precolonial and colonial, that ultimately led to the “invention of the Filipino” (Kramer 2006), i.e., the formation of a national identity. My approach is to look at one such encounter—that between Filipinos and Americans—as not just a cultural but also a *bodily* encounter (cf. Ballantyne and Burton 2005). In the language of David Arnold (1993, 8), who calls for a more corporeal account of colonialism, this approach entails looking at the body as “a site of colonizing power.” With Ann Stoler (1995), whose works stress the “relational terms” between colony and metropole, I hold that one underlying logic of these corporeal encounters is a *comparative paradigm*, one which sees Filipino bodies against those of Americans and imposes a normativity against which the former are measured.

This approach is not to presume that height did not matter before the American colonial period. In epics and old dictionaries that Filipino scholars have used to draw inferences about prehispanic culture (Scott 1994), tallness was seen as a mark of distinction, associated with a good, well-proportioned body and heroic beauty (Eugenio 2007). However, the Spanish, who ruled much of the country from 1565 to 1898, never saw or generalized Filipinos as a short people (a description they reserved for indigenous peoples they called “Negritos,” literally, “little blacks”). Up to the late nineteenth century, at the twilight of their empire, Spanish descriptions of Filipinos’ heights were unremarkable—“of average height” or *de estatura regular* (Moya 1883, 9, 289)—and this description prevailed despite the existence of colonial hierarchy based on race and one’s degree of affinity to Spain. Height might have been a mark of distinction of individuals before the American period—the national hero José Rizal was said to have been insecure about his short stature (Guerrero 2010, 34)—but I argue that its significance was *heightened* in the new colonial (bodily) encounter.

A focus on human stature is not intended to deny relevance to other spatial dimensions of the human body, such as breadth and width; to height’s companion parameter, weight; or to other physical attributes. Height, however, was often the first among these dimensions to be described in American and other colonial texts and one that had particular resonances in the various aspects of American rule. As I present these domains and elaborate on these resonances, I hope that the rationales for my particular focus on height would become more compelling.

In various representational practices, from scientific works to popular discourse, height became a marker of difference between Americans and Filipinos, and it served to legitimize the Americans’ vision of a benevolent colonialism that would “civilize” what they termed their “little brown brothers.” Physical anthropology gave quantitative form to these differences, and photography allowed their visual representation to be transported to the West. Together, these representational practices as well as actual height differences between the colonizer and colonized led to the view that Filipinos are “short” and “little.”

The emerging field of public health, informed by new understandings of biomedicine and underpinned by modernist, eugenicist ideas of progress (Petersen and Lupton 1996), problematized shortness and treated height



Fig. 1. Filipinos who were cast in Hollywood films to play “native types” were required to be below a certain height (Montoya 2008).

Photo courtesy of Marc Wanamaker/Bison Archives, with permission

as something that could be improved through scientific approaches, such as better nutrition and physical education. Consequently, height became a measure of individual and population growth. As product and fulfillment of the colonial government’s mission of civilizing the “natives,” these growth measurements and public health programs had at stake the Americans’ legitimacy—and Filipinos’ claims to autonomy and independence.

The rise of physical education and athletics created new *utilities* and advantages for tallness. Informed by “muscular Christianity” (Putney 2009;

Macleod 2004) and pedagogical ideals that saw physical education as just as important as (and required for) academic and mental development, physical education and athletics played a prominent role in the public school system. This move furthered the importance of height in the everyday lives of children, an importance that only grew through the years as sports, initially baseball and later basketball, gained traction both nationally and globally.

Finally, height figured in the establishment of the uniformed services, following the custom of the US and other Western countries of imposing height requirements for uniformed personnel. From the 1930s onward, as the Philippines prepared for the threat of a Japanese invasion, tall soldiers were valorized as ideal Filipinos to gain more support for the military and attract more applicants. Through these processes, tallness became associated with military and state power, job security, prestige, and (masculine) attractiveness.

Taken together, all these domains made height a visible, *material* aspect of Filipino bodies—both as individuals and as a population: one that located them in a racial hierarchy, classified them as *stunted* or *normal* in public health parlance, and included (or excluded) them in school activities and employment opportunities. Why—and how—did height become a marker of difference during the American period? Making sense of height’s significance contributes to the study of colonialism in the Philippines by further underscoring the centrality of the body in its operation and logic (cf. Anderson 2006) and calls attention to the historical contingency of human stature: a topic that has been overlooked in the social science literature in the country.

Height in American Representations of their New Subjects

Whether in the journalistic coverage of the Philippine–American War; in scientific papers that described Filipinos in taxonomic, anthropometric terms; in official statements from the colonial government; or in works of fiction and nonfiction about the Philippines, shortness figured as one of the identifying marks of Filipinos. Alongside these discursive representations, the identification of Filipinos as short was also made possible by the novel medium of photography and expositions such as the St. Louis World’s Fair (the Louisiana Purchase Exposition) of 1904, where Filipinos belonging to various ethnic groups were exhibited and seen by the millions who visited the fair and the millions more who saw photographs and news stories about it. All these representational practices helped construct a typological Filipino body—one that was diminutive—furnishing the physical basis

for Americans to conceive of Filipinos as their “little brown brothers” and helping Americans assert the legitimacy of their civilizing mission.

Height in Colonial Discourses

As American interest in the Philippines grew in the late 1890s, intrepid journalists traveled to Manila to cover the Spanish–American War (1898) and the ensuing Philippine–American War (1899–1902); the few Americans who happened to have lived in the archipelago became in demand for their privileged insights. Their accounts now serve as a rich material from which we can uncover bodily representations of Filipinos and how height figured in them. For instance, writing about his “yesterdays in the Philippines” in 1894–1895, Joseph Stevens (1899, 33) published an account that described Filipinos in these terms: “The houses, as well as the people, are very low of stature, and as we walked along the narrow, almost cunning streets, our shoulders level with the eaves of many of the shanties, and above the heads of many of the people, we felt indeed like giants.” Journalist Murat Halstead (1898, 124) used a similar trope of “feeling like giants” in describing Filipino soldiers: “The men are of small stature, from 5 feet to 5 feet 6 inches in height, and weigh from 110 to 130 pounds. Compared with them our men from Colorado and California seemed like a race of giants.” Just a few years later, when America’s foothold in the country had been secured, these depictions would be taken up by professional anthropologists who saw the Philippines as a fertile ground for research, their interests coinciding with a nascent colonial bureaucracy eager to know more about its new possessions.

Peter Pels (1997, 165) has reminded us that anthropology in the colonial encounter must be “conceptualized in terms of governmentality” as it was located “at the juncture of . . . technologies of domination and self-control.” Perhaps cognizant of this role, Daniel Brinton (1899, 122), ethnologist, wrote in *American Anthropologist*: “Now that the Philippine islands are definitely ours it behooves us to give them that scientific investigation which alone can afford a true guide to their proper management. . . . [A] thorough acquaintance with the diverse inhabitants of the archipelago should be sought by everyone interested in its development.” Daniel Folkmar (1904), another anthropologist, measured all the inmates in Bilibid Prison in 1903, hoping to come up with a catalog of “Philippine types.” Prisoners were “disrobed,” and plaster casts were made of their heads for purposes of both scientific publication and exhibition,

in what Paul Kramer (2006, 231) has described as “intersections of colonial state, racial knowledge, and exposition culture.”

Bodily descriptions from efforts such as Folkmar’s are revealing of which particular parts of the body the Americans used as bases for comparison, hence rendering them *visible*. This sample passage is illustrative: “Ethnologically, the typical Filipino is described as of small stature, slender frame, brownish-yellow colour, symmetrical skull, prominent cheek-bones, nasal bridge low, nostrils prominent, eyes narrow, mouth large, with lips full but not thick, chin short, and round hair, smooth, straight, and thick” (Robinson 1901, 176). When one compares these passages with similar accounts during the Spanish period, what is notable is how descriptions became even more detailed, with more body parts and features described, and also laden with numbers, in keeping with the rise of “numerical thinking” in scientific and popular discourses from the nineteenth century onwards (Porter 1986; Desrosieres 2002). Arguably, it was also during this time when scientific racism reached its height in the Philippines and in the world, fueling an interest in physical anthropology that was grounded in part in these racialized ideals (cf. Boas 1912).

Another significant point in these discourses is the use of American bodies as reference: *Compared with them our men are like giants*. Relationality, as mentioned earlier, is a key logic in colonial encounters, and these discourses indicate how the body itself—i.e., bodily differences—set the terms for these relations. While this relationality has *some* physical basis—in 1900 the average height of men in the US was 170 centimeters (five feet seven), compared with 160–63 centimeters (five feet three to five feet four) among men in the Philippines (Murray 2002)—the few inches of difference between the average Filipino and the average American would hardly suffice to make one a dwarf and the other a giant.

Alongside wartime accounts and scientific reports, Filipino bodily representations in public discourses were also evident, finding expression in the phrase “little brown brothers.” Attributed to William H. Taft, the first civil governor-general and later US president (Wolff 1961/2006), this phrase encapsulated the dominant American view of the Filipino throughout the colonial encounter—and arguably beyond. The “brother” at the end of the phrase signified familial affinity but one already preceded by asymmetry: More than a description of color, “brown” was a classificatory gesture that located Filipinos in a racial hierarchy that placed “whites” on top and “colored people”

underneath them. “Little,” aside from plotting the Filipino in another axis of evolutionary/racial hierarchy, had an “infantilizing effect” that further justified and shaped the ideology of American colonialism: not just as a civilizing project, but as an act of paternal benevolence (cf. Halili 2003; Gems 2006). As Michael Adas (1989, 307) has noted: “The attribution of childlike qualities to Africans and Asians served to bolster the civilizing-mission ideology” that justified the Western powers’ “dominance over colonized peoples.”

The trope of the “little brown brother” gained traction in American popular discourse. On 10 August 1905, the *New York Times* (1905b, 4) carried a news story, titled “Little Brown Brother Accuses Mrs. Taggart,” that referred to the Filipino valet of an army officer as such. One short story for children in 1917 told of the visit of a young American to the Philippines. Written as a first-person narrative, the story had a young protagonist say:

I found also my new and kind young friends: Fil; his sister Filippa; Fil's boy playmate named Moro, who came from the large southern island; their parents and friends; and the good Padre. Each one of them was shorter and darker than I. Yet they said to me: “The Stars and Stripes, now our flag also, makes us all American brothers, which we will be always.” (Thomson 1917, 1)

Note the necessity of stipulating the “shortness” and “darkness” before acknowledging the “brother”—the disclaimers of difference before the recognition of unity. Although Americans readily agreed to view Filipinos as “little” and “brown,” the brotherhood was faced with reluctance, if not outright disavowal, as shown in this 1900s US Army song:

I'm only a common soldier man in the blasted Philippines,
They say I've got brown brothers here but I don't know what it means,
I like the word fraternity, but still I draw the line—
He may be a brother of William Howard Taft, but he ain't no brother of mine. (Hurley 2011, 35)

Photography and Height Representations

Filipinos were depicted not just in text, but also, apart from and alongside these texts, in the newly influential genre of photography. Photographs

that were circulated in magazines, newspapers, and scientific reports in the US presented Filipinos as short, and this depiction was dramatized by the selective use of indigenous peoples and their juxtaposition with much taller Americans. By privileging certain bodies to represent the “Filipino,” photography flattened the diversity of bodies in the Philippines, reinforcing the idea of Filipinos as “little.”

Photography has always been ascribed a representational power that was of particular importance in mediating colonial encounters. As Betty Jo Scroggins (2010, 3–4) writes, “[T]hrough photography, stereotypical beliefs influenced the representation of subjects within the photographs; photography enabled the transformation of a subject into what was perceived by Europeans as an object; an object to be categorized, defined and in essence dominated by the European powers.”

Chief among the early photographers was Dean Worcester, the zoologist and amateur ethnologist who, serving as Secretary of the Interior from 1901 to 1913, would become a prominent figure in the American colonial government in the Philippines. In his ethnologic surveys around the Philippines, Worcester gave disproportionate attention to the shorter indigenous peoples, much more than the urban, educated—and relatively taller—Christian Filipinos he encountered in Manila and in the lowlands (Rice 2012). Moreover, his technique of juxtaposition—using himself as a measuring stick alongside these Filipinos “to show relative size”—further dramatized the physical characteristics of Filipinos and how different they were from the Americans—even though Worcester himself, at over six feet tall, was hardly representative of the average American (Rice 2014, 40–48). By serving as a visual representation that preserved and transported bodily differences, photography played an important role in the (mis)representation of Filipino bodies in the Western imaginary.

The 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis

A pivotal moment in representation was the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, Missouri, where actual Filipinos were “presented” to the American public in a “Philippine Exhibition” that became the most popular part of the entire fair (Fermin 2004). Although it was seen as an unintended consequence of what was ostensibly an attempt to portray the potential of the Filipinos for civilization and self-government, the deliberate choice of colonial officials (incidentally upon the advice of Dean Worcester) to bring the shorter, more



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Facing page:

Fig. 2. Dean Worcester poses with a Negrito man in Dolores, Pampanga. He justified his presence in such photos “to show relative size.”

Source: University of Michigan Library Digital Collection (1900)

“primitive” Negritos, Ifugao, and Badjao to represent the Philippines had the effect of reaffirming American notions of an uncivilized archipelago, which were detrimental to the image and reputation of Filipinos. As Jose Fermin (*ibid.*, xiii) writes: “Filipino tribes, passed on as representatives of the whole Filipino people, were exhibited as savages, headhunters, and dog eaters, a name that has stuck even today.” Visited by almost 20 million people (Gilbert 2009), the fair’s cultural impact cannot be overstated.

Moreover, both through the “living exhibits” of the villages and in an anthropological exhibition in which Folkmar and Worcester’s photographs, among others, were exhibited, a certain kind of Filipino body identity was presented: one that dramatized the physical differences between Americans and Filipinos and objectified the latter. As Beverly Grindstaff (1999, 256–57) has noted, “the filtering mechanism of this mediating somatology introduced the Philippine people solely as scientific objects, items to be measured, quantified and compared to the normative body of the Fairgoer.”

Anthropologists themselves participated in this objectification, and their findings were widely publicized, as evidenced by this report in the *New York Times* (1905a):

Fifteen members of this tribe [the Cagayan] were measured, and the average height reached was 163 centimeters, or about five feet five inches. The Visayans were the second tallest group, averaging 161.9 centimeters [five feet four]. The Filipinos proper, Tagalogs, Pampangas, Bicol and Moros ranged in height from 161 [five feet four], in the case of the last, to 161.6 [five feet four] in that of the first named groups. Forty-one Pampasinans averaged 160.3 [five feet three], and seventy-two Ilocanos, 160.6 [five feet three] centimetres. The Tinguians dropped to 155 [five feet], just below the Bogobos, at 156.7 [five feet one], and the Igorotes to 154 centimeters [five feet].

The Negritos were by far the smallest of the tribesmen. Thirteen specimens averaged scarcely 143.8 centimeters, or approximately four feet ten inches . . .

On the whole, the Philippine race which most nearly approached the standard set by the Americans in physical development were the Filipinos proper. Although this does not hold true in stature and quickness.

Note, in the presentation of the data, the objectification accomplished by words like “specimens” and the taxonomic register with which the data were presented—as well as the exoticization accomplished by words like ‘tribesman.’ Moreover, as with other discursive and representational practices, the writers presented the summary of the findings in relation to “the standard set by the Americans.”

Mirroring the responses of Filipino *ilustrados* in Spain upon seeing the “natives” in the Madrid Exposition of 1887 (Sánchez Gómez 2002; Aguilar 2005), Filipino nationalists protested the Philippine Exhibition in St. Louis. Vicente Nepomuceno, a member of the Philippine Honorary Commission, was quoted in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (1904, 1) as saying that “the Moros, Negritos and Igorrotes no more represent the people of the Philippines than the dying Indian represents the American people, and the Americans would resent such an exhibition for [sic] more vigorously than we have.” Over a decade later, pro-independence writer Maximo Kalaw (1916, 159) recognized the political implication of the exhibit, saying that it “created in the minds of hundreds of thousands of Americans the indelible impression that the Filipinos have not yet emerged from savagery.” By distancing themselves from the “savages,” however, these writers were participating in the same racial vocabulary of the Americans, rather than challenging the idea of hierarchy of racial differences itself.¹

Moreover, these protests notwithstanding, it was the dominant narrative of exotic, primitive tribes that generated media attention. Indeed, St. Louis was another site where Filipino bodies were decontextualized and objectified; in this intersection of science and colonialism, height again emerged as a key measure of difference between them and the normative bodies of the colonizers.

Height and the “Birth of the Clinic”

The turn of the twentieth century was a revolutionary period in biomedical thinking. Germ theory had nullified long-held beliefs in pathophysiology, such as the humoral medicine that dated back to Galen (Anderson 2006). As medicine became more specialized, pediatrics began to be conceptualized as a distinct branch of medicine, starting in Europe and later taken up by American physicians (cf. Brodie 1998). Informed by new scientific understandings and underpinned by a modernist, eugenicist view of progress (Bashford and Levine 2010), governments involved themselves in health interventions, measuring health outcomes at the level of populations, abetted by the emergence of techniques of quantification and statistics, in what came to be known as public health (Rosen 2015).

Height figured in this “birth of the clinic” by serving as a visible, quantifiable measure of children’s health. Their heights were regularly measured, and those falling short of the norm were labelled as “stunted.” Underpinning this categorization was an idea that there was such a thing as a “normal” body—one of the notions espoused by the new scientific paradigm. As Patricia Vertinsky (2002, 96) explains: “The idea of an average or normal size and shape of person . . . is less a condition of human nature than a feature of modernizing society. In many respects it is a nineteenth-century concept that, through statistical revisions, became conflated with historical notions of the ideal body.”

Held against this bodily normativity, the short stature of Filipinos—while *naturalized* in racial discourses, was *problematized* as a medical pathology—one that the Americans could improve on using their public health knowledge. Consequently, Filipinos’ claims for autonomy and independence found articulation in their own public health efforts, adding further importance to the growth of children.

Height in Understanding Children’s Growth

The Belgian mathematician Adolphe Quetelet (1796–1874) was perhaps the first to systematically measure the heights of children, and his methods were quickly taken up throughout Europe. Quetelet’s main contribution was the idea that a pattern of distribution existed for human stature in a given population, and consequently there was an “average man” (*homme moyen*) who could represent the image of a population based on all their average values (Tanner 1981).

But what constitutes a “population”? Succeeding studies, with increasingly larger and more diverse samples and geographic range, would challenge Quetelet’s assertion of a fixed distribution by finding growth differences between the working class and the rich, rural and urban children, and those with poor and better nutrition (*ibid.*). By the late nineteenth century, the idea that children’s growth must be monitored had taken hold, finding in the schools a venue for monitoring and surveillance (Spencer 1981). Various theories informed and surrounded this practice, including the view that height was linked with mental ability (*cf.* Porter 1893).

In the Philippines the first study on children’s anthropometry took place within the first decade of American rule. In 1909 educator John Bobbit (1909) published an article, called “The Growth of Filipino Children,” responding to the dearth of anthropometric data on children other than those who belonged to “white races.” In this work one can read a comparative paradigm that informs global public health to this day: “Besides determining growth-stages, a further aim of the study was to make a comparison of Philippine children with those of Europe or America in size and efficiency” (*ibid.*, 4).

Moreover, like many scientists of this age, Bobbit’s (*ibid.*) notions of “race” affected his methodology: he excluded “mestizos” in his population in an attempt to study the “pure” Filipinos:

One cannot say that the students measured were all of pure Malay blood, so widespread is the infusion of Spanish and Chinese blood in the archipelago. The most that can be said is that they were typical Filipinos, fair representatives of the Christian population of the archipelago. Measurements made on students that admitted themselves to be mestizos, or that gave unmistakable evidence in their appearance of the possession of Spanish or Chinese blood were discarded.

By excluding people who did not appear to have “pure Malay blood,” Bobbit’s study created a paradox: he wanted to measure the average height of Filipino students, even as the students were selected, at least in part, on the basis of their heights—if we take these children to have been chosen because of their “typical” Filipino characteristics.

The newly established Philippine General Hospital in Manila took up Bobbit’s study, with three medical doctors publishing a text on the “physico-mental development of Filipino children” in 1916 (Albert and Arvisu 1916). Subsequently, Edward Ruth (1918, 320), an anatomist affiliated with the University of the Philippines, studied the growth of infants and gave the following report:

The weight of Filipino children is invariably greater than in American children of the corresponding age after the sixth month. After the tenth month the difference in size between American and Filipino children at once becomes apparent. Whether this difference is due to an environmental cause or a hereditary influence has not yet been determined.

He goes on to relate these findings to the Filipino body: “That the Filipino is shorter in stature is a well-known fact, but the explanation for this has not yet been satisfactorily determined” (*ibid.*, 320). Like Bobbit’s study, Ruth’s study reveals a tendency to relate the height of Filipinos with that of the Americans and to assume a priori that Filipinos are short.

Pediatric Anthropometry during the American Period

Although the Americans’ initial concerns centered around the health of their soldiers and the hygiene and sanitary conditions in the cities where they were stationed, they soon turned their attention to children’s health, mirroring the practices and rationales of growth monitoring that had been done in the West. For instance, as in the US, public schools became the venue for public health efforts, starting in the 1910s and reaching its zenith in the next decade (Spencer 1981). As Mercedes Planta (2008, 118–19) noted, the colonial leadership supported this initiative:

[Governor-General] Taft, for instance, believed that “the Filipino should be developed physically.” In his letter to Worcester, Taft stated that the physical development of the Filipinos could be achieved through good water supply, good food, and proper hygiene. Taft, who believed that the public schools carried a more sanitary rather than an educational function, also wrote of the vital role of the school system in promoting healthful living through the example of its students.

School inspections started in 1911, complemented by the teachers themselves who were “required to compile a health-index for every child in class” (ibid., 123). As the monthly bulletin of the country’s health bureau reported in 1926:

There was also started among all the schools in Manila, especially in the elementary schools, the weighing and measuring of the school children, with a view to a study of the relation of their weight and height to their progress in physical and mental development. Other studies connected with health of the school children and its relation with the physical and mental development will be started. (Department of Public Instruction 1926, 369)

Warwick Anderson (2006, 117), writing about how public health became an important part of colonial governance and surveillance, elaborated on the inspections that were done in schools:

The public schools became a major sanitary venue. Teachers compiled a “health index” for every child in their class. The Bureau of Education’s idealized “healthy child” had a “well-formed body,” “clean and shining hair,” “a clear skin of good color,” “ears free from discharge,” “a voice of pleasing quality,” “an amiable disposition,” and so on. A premium was thus placed on the Filipino child’s formal, expressive qualities. Furthermore, every child was to be weighed once a month, and the height measured at least twice a year.

Aside from the schools, another site for anthropometrics were the puericulture (child care) centers, the origins of which I elaborate below. In these centers, health was turned into a form of competition. Parents aspired to have an “A-1 child” — one that was “free from all correctable defects, who increased in weight and practices and health rules of cleanliness” (McElhinny 2009, 247). That these contests were copied from the eugenics-inspired “Better Baby” contests in the US (Dorey 1999; Pernick 2002) speaks of how American ideals easily diffused from metropole to colony.

As mentioned earlier, there was a prevailing notion that children could be “civilized” through their bodies and could thus be markers of successful

governance and more broadly of the colonial project itself (McElhinny 2009). Thus, at stake in the efforts to make children healthier was the colonial government’s ability to govern properly and fulfill the “civilizing mission” on which they staked their legitimacy.

However, it was not just the colonial government that had a stake in public health; the Filipinos who held aspirations for autonomy and independence did so too. Bonnie McElhinny (ibid., 227) writes: “the question of who should be responsible for public health in the Philippines was often a fraught issue, and the state of public health work was used to assess the readiness of Filipinos for self-government.” Filipino physicians and political leaders pushed for initiatives such as the provision of adequate milk supply for infants and the establishment of puericulture centers. Through their lobbying, Act 2633 saw passage in 1916, directing health officials to organize puericulture centers all over the country. From 1921 to 1926 alone, 329 such centers were established.

As in many instances of colonial medicine, the American public health system “made Filipino bodies ever more visible to the colonial, commonwealth, and national state, in ways which made them available for political and economic disciplining” (ibid., 252). In the emerging forms of biomedical and public health knowledge and the ever-expanding practices of measuring and comparing, height figured as an indicator of individual and population health and of national progress.

Physical Education and Sports

McElhinny (ibid., 245) notes that, for the US colonial regime, “schoolchildren were the hope of the future; they were the ones who were educable and reachable, while adults were seen as more recalcitrant to change.” In the previous section I already highlighted the significance of the school as the venue for public health interventions. In addition, the incorporation of physical education and sports in the curriculum and in the students’ life in general likewise opened up another domain in which the body (and height in particular) materialized in the school setting.

A number of antecedents that led to the integration of physical education and sports in the curriculum can be speculated on. First, an ethos of “muscular Christianity,” which gained traction in America in the late nineteenth century (Putney 2009; Applin 1982), spurred a lot of interest in physical education. Second, the idea that physical education

was a vehicle for physical development—which, in turn, as mentioned in the previous section, was associated with mental development—invested a public health significance to this undertaking. Third, the widespread belief in physiognomy, the notion that a person’s character can be interpreted from his or her physical appearance (see Lombroso-Ferrero 1911), further heightened what was perceived to be at stake in the physical training of children. These and various other rationales all contributed to the centrality of physical education in the curriculum.

Finally, and particularly for the Philippines, physical education and sports fitted in the colonial government’s goals of pacification and channeling the Filipinos’ nationalism toward benign activities (Gems 2006), and it was encouraged by its leaders, including William Taft (Planta 2008).

The Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA)—credited for the invention of basketball and volleyball (Myerscough 1995)—was an early driving force for the introduction of team sports, with positive results (Gems 2006, 55):

By 1905 both boys and girls engaged in required physical education. A principal reported that “each boys’ class has a team in baseball, indoor baseball, volley ball [sic] and basket ball [sic]. Each girls’ class has a team in indoor baseball and volleyball.” Within five years, tennis courts and tracks were added to school facilities to instill competitive spirit, discipline, work ethic, and community pride. Formal interscholastic competition began in 1905 and included district leagues and interprovincial championships.

In 1922 it was reported that “[w]ithin the last few years interest in physical education has grown so rapidly in Philippine schools that statistics show that at the present time about 95 per cent of the Philippine public school children obtain physical exercise at school in some form” (England 1922, 3).

Height mattered both in physical education classes and in sports teams. In physical education height was an organizing principle in marches and formations, as this 1922 physical education manual indicated (ibid., 88):

Fall in line! On this command, the pupils take their places in line according to height, the shorter pupils falling in to the right of the

taller pupils. Each pupil moves by short side steps to the right until he touches the elbow of his neighbor or moves to the left until there is no crowding. The arms should hang straight and naturally at the sides.

In athletic teams, height became part of the selection criteria. Frank Spencer (1997, 91) wrote that, in American schools in the early twentieth century, “Anthropometry was used to classify students for physical activity and sport, primarily on the basis of age, stature, and weight.” Given that the Philippines was part of the American polity and demonstrably adopted many American educational policies, it was very likely that the same could be said of the Philippines, and thus the students’ height became one of the determinants of their inclusion in these teams.

The significance of these endeavors went beyond the confines of the school. Referencing a 1905 game between the Philippines and a visiting baseball team from Japan, Gerald Gems (2006, 55) wrote that it was a way for the Americans “to channel the Filipinos’ nationalism to athletic rivalries.” As early as 1913, a “First Oriental Olympic Games” was held in Manila with the participation of Japan, China, the British East Indies, the Kingdom of Thailand, and Hong Kong (ibid.)—in what would be the precursor of the Asian Games. By being able to participate as a nation, Filipinos became invested in the games as a point of national identity and pride, contributing to the growth of baseball, basketball, and other sports.

The 1936 Berlin Olympics—the first time basketball was played in an Olympics—can perhaps be considered as the high point of Philippine sports, particularly basketball, during the American period (Antolihao 2015). Despite their short stature—which observers found very remarkable—the Philippine team put up a strong showing, compensating for their lack of height with speed and losing only one game: to the US. Dr. James Naismith, the inventor of basketball, wrote in his diary that the US team would have lost against the Philippines if not for their height (Rains 2011, 161). The narrative in Berlin—coming as underdogs because of a height disadvantage, managing to beat the odds, ultimately losing, but taking pride in the heroism of the defeat—would serve as template in future international competitions (Antolihao 2015).

Gems (2006, 46) reminds us that “sports are not value-free entities; nor are their producers.” He points out how sports and physical education became means of cultural assimilation during the American colonial

period, fostering values such as discipline, teamwork, fair play, and competitiveness.

On top of these values, however, was how sports—and physical education—privileged certain bodies. By virtue of the architecture of the basketball court or the volleyball field, height materialized as an advantage for students who could avail themselves of the travel opportunities financed by the state in the form of interscholastic competitions, not to mention the recognition they gained in their schools.

Yet, as in the case of public health, which not only valorized certain “achievers” but also punished those who fell short of its standard, physical education also became a way to exclude children from the school system. As Gems (*ibid.*, 62) noted: “[S]tudents who failed physical education were not promoted to the next grade level. The Bureau of Education maintained that exercise was necessary to make Filipinos taller and bigger and ‘that the stock of the race can be improved considerably.’” We can take two things from this passage. First, we can read in it a connection between physical education and the above-mentioned public health efforts for children’s growth, alongside their eugenic rationales. Secondly, it was revelatory of the prevailing view that physical education not only privileged, but also *produced*, bigger and taller youths. As the *New York Times* reported, “It is a fact that in the physique of the young people of the islands, speaking generally, a marked improvement is already visible as a direct result of the introduction of healthful outdoor sports” (Marshall 1912, 7).

Indeed, through physical education and sports, as with public health interventions, the schools were a venue that figured prominently in the making of the ideal Filipino child. As sports took a life of its own through local, national, and international competitions, it eventually became an institution too, where much was at stake, from national identity and pride to individual aspirations. With its attention to physical bodies, selection criteria, and architectures that structured the game (i.e., the basketball ring being ten feet high), sports was an institution that privileged tall bodies.

Height Requirements in the Uniformed Services

The Philippine Scouts was established in 1901 (Coffman 2014, 67–78), marking the beginnings of a Filipino presence within the US military institution, one that would ultimately expand as the Philippines braced for the threat of a Japanese invasion in the 1930s. In the same year other civil

Salaries and physical requirements of selected civil service positions

| POSITION | SALARY PER ANNUM(US\$) | HEIGHT AND WEIGHT REQUIREMENT |
|---|------------------------|---|
| First-class patrolman | 900 | 5 feet 8 inches (173 cm), 145 lbs (66 kg) |
| Third-class patrolman | 300 | 5 feet 4 inches (163 cm), 110 lbs (50 kg) |
| First-class fireman | 900 | 5 feet 4 inches (163 cm), 125 lbs (57 kg) |
| Second-class fireman | 240 | 5 feet 2 inches (157 cm), 110 lbs (50 kg) |
| First class engineer, fire service | 1200 | 5 feet 4 inches (163 cm), 125 lbs (57 kg) |
| Second-class engineer, fire service | 240 | 5 feet 2 inches (157 cm), 110 lbs (50 kg) |
| Prison guard, first class (English speaking) | 900 | 5 feet 6 inches (168 cm), 110 lbs (50 kg) |
| Prison guard, second class (non-English speaking) | 180–240 | 5 feet 2 inches (157 cm), 110 lbs (50 kg) |

Source: Bureau of Civil Service 1906, 48–49

uniformed services (police, prison guards, firemen) were also organized (Bureau of Civil Service 1906). Height figured in the uniformed services as a requirement for admission. As military service was valorized, it also figured in the formation of an idealized male aesthetic.

Height Requirements in Uniformed Civil Services

Height requirements were imposed for uniformed positions within a few years of the start of US occupation of the Philippines. A 1906 manual from the Philippine Bureau of Civil Service had the following requirements for various civil service positions (table on p. 395):

Note how salaries increased as heights increased: Those who were five feet, two inches tall (157 centimeters) could only earn up to US\$240 annually, while those who were five feet six (168 centimeters) and taller earned up to US\$900. Of course, there were other qualifications (including weight), and those with other credentials (i.e., the first-class engineer) did not need to be taller than five feet four (163 centimeters) to earn the highest starting salary of US\$1,200. Nonetheless, evident in these stipulations was how height was an undeniable determinant of employment chances.

Various rationales for these requirements can be inferred. Anthropologist Sylvia Kirchengast (2011, 52), surveying height requirements for police officers around the world, writes that:

[Historically] body height and especially tallness symbolized strength, status and power, essential characteristics for a policeman who represented the State. . . . height was also a very useful instrument to diagnose effectively malnutrition and some other somatic deficiencies. . . . During the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, police work was extremely demanding physically. . . . It was supposed that large men were better able to do this kind of work.

These rationales might not have been directly involved in the determination of height requirements in the Philippines, which could have been copied simply from the American institutions that served as template for the new Philippine government.² However, these requirements would have had a different impact in the Philippines, where the average male would barely make it to five feet four (163 centimeters).

Height Requirements in the Military

Although height requirements had been imposed in Western armies since the eighteenth century (Tanner 1981; Gordon and Friedl 1994), they were not immediately applied in the Philippines. Because the Americans needed local help in fighting the war, the first inductees had no requirements save for their “loyalty and reliability” (Laurie 1989). This lack of height requirement is perhaps reflected in a 1916 *Surgeon General of the US Army Report* (1916, 229), which stated that “of all recruits accepted, 45.61 per cent were below the minimum standard for American soldiers, 5 feet 4 inches, while only 6.95 percent were above the average height of American recruits, 5 feet 7 inches.” These figures are notable at a time when being under height or underweight was a leading cause of army rejection in the US itself (Hoffman 1918). Hence, there was a pragmatic acceptance of Filipino men as short; the standard of five feet four (163 cm) did not apply. The Americans had to work with this short stature of their Philippine recruits and even adapted their guns for them: the 1898 Krag-Jorgensen rifle had to be specifically designed for the Scouts, because they were of “short stature” (Whelen 1960).

In the 1920s height requirements appeared in the military as well. The 1922 *Manual for the Philippine Constabulary*, for instance, specified 165 centimeters (five feet five) as the minimum height for cadets, which must correspond with “54 kilos weight” and “81 centimeters chest measurement at rest” (Philippine Constabulary 1922, 211). For enlisted men, the same manual specified a minimum of 160 centimeters, which must correspond with “47 1/2 kilos” weight and “75 centimetres chest measurement, normal” (ibid., 36).

In response to fears of Japanese expansionism in the Asia Pacific, the Philippine Constabulary Academy was upgraded to the Philippine Military Academy (PMA) alongside the establishment of an autonomous “Philippine Commonwealth” in 1935. According to Alfred McCoy (2000), to shore up support for the PMA, its cadets were raised up as exemplars of Filipino masculinity. Moreover, “[t]o ensure that its cadets would be archetypes of masculine beauty, the academy barred applicants with ‘any deformity which is repulsive’ or any who suffered from ‘extreme ugliness.’ Medical examiners had to insure, moreover, that a cadet was free from any ‘lack of symmetrical development’ or ‘unsightly deformities’” (ibid., 329). These requirements produced a military force of men who the colonial authorities regarded as having good physiques and, by virtue of the height requirement, were relatively tall by Philippine standards at the time. An even more elite group—the Malacañang Guard established in 1938 by Commonwealth Pres. Manuel Quezon—had a more stringent height requirement of five feet six (167 centimeters) (Jose 1992). As in the above-mentioned civilian services, a higher height meant better opportunities.

The rationale for these requirements was not included in the manual, but army scholars in the US at the time invoked the need for the “adaptation of the human machine to the always more or less highly complex requirements of modern social and economic life” (Hoffman 1918, 11). “Diminished stature” was also seen as part of a “stigmata of degeneracy” (ibid., 20–21). Karl Friedl (1990, 35) suggested that there were many reasons for this view, which ranged from the symbolic to the practical, including the sheer pride in having tall soldiers; the exclusion of unwanted personnel, given that some eugenicists claimed that criminals tended to be shorter; and the pragmatic purpose of limiting “the range of sizes for uniforms, protective ensembles, and workspace dimensions.” He added that, on top of these rationales, there was institutional knowledge that saw short soldiers as less capable in various tasks.

Friedl (ibid.,) stressed, however, that “some physical characteristics have changed easily with the need for soldiers, which suggests that what may be portrayed as a soldierly characteristic may not be solidly rooted in combat necessity.” This is an important point: regardless of the actual usefulness of height in the military, its being a “soldierly characteristic” helped perpetuate its importance, and for young Filipino men it became an attribute that could include or exclude them in institutions that offered employment, career advancement, and prestige.

Height in Filipino Discourses during the American Period

The Americans did not monopolize public discourses nor, as the public health example demonstrates, did they monopolize interventions. The presence (or absence) of height in Filipinos’ own discourses is revelatory of their attitudes toward their characterization as “little brown brothers.” Height does not figure at all in political writing, for instance, implying a nonrecognition of the political implications of bodily difference. Meanwhile, height figures in literary texts in ways that are largely consistent with American ideals, likewise suggesting that the Filipino writers did not find it problematic.

As the Americans contemplated an invasion of the Philippines, New York-based Ramon Lala (1899, 91), a Manila-born naturalized American, wrote a country profile that was sympathetic to the Philippines, a sympathy reflected in the way he described his fellow “natives”: “The men are usually of medium height, lithe, and of a rich brown color, with large cheek-bones, bright eyes, and immobile countenances.” Describing women, he added: “Many of the women are pretty, and all are good-natured and smiling. Their complexion, of light brown, is usually clear and smooth; their eyes are large and lustrous, full of the sleeping passion of the Orient. The figures of the women are usually erect and stately, and many are models of grace and beauty” (ibid., 93). In his preface Lala (ibid., 25) stated that his motivation to write *The Philippine Islands* was that there was “no good book” in English about the subject, and it was “mortifying” to him that the “glories of my native land were no better known.” His publication, however, could not counter the negative portrayals of the Filipino body. By the time American occupation was established in the Philippines, Filipino nationalists were concerned that these representations were defining Filipinos in terms unfavorable to them, as polemicist Sofronio Calderon (1908, 9) opined in an essay:

Ipalagay nga nating di natin talós ang ating kasaysayan, at tayo'y magkátaóng mungkahiin ng mga taga-ibang lupa na sabihing tayo'y *masamang lahi ó mga taong hamak ó mga ungoy* ; makapagmamatuod ba kaya tayo ng hindi?—Datapua't kung tayo'y mayroóng Istorya ay siyang magpapatotoo ng ano man nating ibig sabihin at ipagmamatuod dahil sa ang Istorya ang nagpapakilala kung mayroon ó walang saysay ang isang bayan; kaya,t ang bayan lamang walang saysay ó kabuluhan ang walang kasaysayan ó Istorya.

Granting that we do not grasp our history, and it so happens that people of foreign lands suggest by saying that we are *a bad race, a wretched people or monkeys*, will we perhaps be able to argue that we are not?—therefore, History, if we have it, would validate whatever we mean to say, and justify us because History is that which reveals whether or not a nation has a significance; hence a nation is without significance only if it has no History.

As mentioned earlier, the protests of Filipinos over the exhibition of “natives” in the 1904 St. Louis World’s Fair also spoke of a concern, even among the Filipino elites who cooperated with the Americans and joined the government, over the ways in which the Filipino *qua* body was represented on the global stage. But these protests were largely aimed at dissociating the “Filipinos” from the so-called “primitive tribes” and did not contest nor problematize the fact that Filipinos were being literally “belittled” (see Fermin 2004).

Meanwhile, in the works of the exemplary writers at the time, one could see tallness as figuring in the positive descriptions of protagonists and shortness a handicap and characteristic of “typical” Filipinos. For instance, in “Dead Stars” (1925), perhaps the most famous short story in English written by a Filipino during the American period, Paz Marquez Benitez describes the main character, a Filipino man who belonged to the elite as “tall and slender,” moving “with an indolent ease that verged on grace.” In Loreto Paras’s “The Bolo” a female protagonist was seized by a “feeling of panic” when a customer, described as “young, tall, and well-built,” approached her. In Manuel Arguilla’s “How My Brother Leon Brought Home a Wife,” the protagonist was enraptured by the loveliness and stature of his brother’s wife. And in N. V. M. Gonzalez’s “Far Horizons” (1935) women gathered

around a young man in admiration: “What a tall man he has become! How handsome with his curly mop of hair! How like a hero!”³

Writers in Tagalog likewise included tallness as an attractive feature. In a romance entitled *Nang Bata Pa Kami* (“When We Were Young”) Pura Medrano (1913, 64) describes a handsome youth as possessing a “well-proportioned body, tall, with flowing hair, pointed nose, and beautiful brown color” (balingkinitan ang katawan, mataas, malago ang buhok, matangos ang ilong at matingkad pa sa kayumangging kaligatan kulay), attributes that were typical of literary protagonists at the time.

While tallness was ascribed to exemplary characters, shortness was presumed for typical Filipinos. In *The Filipino Rebel: The Romance of the American Occupation*, a Filipino was described as “tall for his race” (Kalaw 1930). In Arturo Rotor’s “Dahong Palay,” the opening paragraph introduces the main character, Sebio, as “above the height of the ordinary native.” In these texts can be read an acknowledgment that the typical Filipino was short, although certain characters could be “taller than the average” (Rotor 1937, 109).

These height differences must, of course, be seen in relational terms. In Carlos Bulosan’s (1993, 40, 34) “The Romance of Magno Rubio,” a Filipino youth in California described as “Four-foot six inches tall, dark as a coconut. Head small on a body like a turtle” is lovestruck with Clarabelle, an American girl from Arkansas who was “Five-foot eleven inches tall . . . A girl twice his size sideward and upward.” As in Saroyan’s story, height differences—imagined and real, typological and individual—set conditions of possibility for plots to be constructed as such.

There is much more that can be analyzed from these texts. For instance, was the desire for tall women in fact a desire for taller progeny and thus a way of negotiating the value of height? And what were the differences in the ways height was used between the more bourgeois genre of Philippine literature in English and the Tagalog works that may have had a broader audience? A more thorough review of textual material can attend to these questions, but my readings are sufficient for us to suspect that forms of resistance against American representations of Filipinos were not palpable. Besides, what was there to “resist”? In the realm of the colony the Filipino writers themselves must have seen tallness as an attractive quality and shortness a negative one. Moreover, they must have struggled to escape, or even realize, the inequalities brought about by the physical reality of different bodies and

the discursive practices that made these differences visible and material in various domains.

Conclusion

In 1931 Robert Ginsburgh (1931) reported in the *New York Times*: “Philippine Scouts Now an Efficient Little Army.” Although the article heaped glowing praise on the colonial administration for the progress made by the 8,000-strong force, the use of the term “little army” is revelatory of how the “smallness” of Filipinos would be an enduring trope in American colonial discourses. Even as the Second World War drew to a close, a *Life Magazine* feature spoke of Philippine soldiers as “fervently loyal to the nation that treated them as “little brown, brothers” (Mydans 1945, 27).

More than a patronizing or derogatory act, the use of the phrase “little brown brothers”—that is, affixing shortness to their identity—was a classificatory gesture that established inequality between colonizer and colonized on the basis of bodily difference. The meanings and materialities of height at the time—as a marker of health and good character, as an employment requirement—gave particular resonance to this corporeal framework, even as the various domains further led to height’s importance.

The materialities of height affected women and men, although it seemed to have affected the latter more, since the uniformed services were largely a masculine profession, as they remain today. Height was thus associated with masculinity, even as it created a hierarchy within it: taller men had access to more opportunities and privileges, while those who literally fell short did not have access to all of these masculine professions. Although beyond the scope of this article, the intersectionality between height and gender in the Philippines (cf. Butera 2008) is one direction for further research.

I offer one final anecdote that illustrates, with no small irony, how these materialities came together. As referenced in the introductory story of the giant Filipino boxer, Filipinos migrated to the West Coast in search of jobs in the 1920s, and one of the available jobs in Los Angeles was to play “native types” in Hollywood movies (cf. fig. 1). In one movie, *The Pagan* (1929), the producers looked for a “native” type, and they actually set a *maximum* height requirement of five feet (152 centimeters) for the one who would be cast in this role (Montoya 2008). In this instance, we see once more how racial ideology, physical reality, and selective representation participated in the literal “casting” of Filipinos as “little brown brothers.”

As in the Spanish colonial period, under American rule there were voices that articulated resentment and protest particularly against the representational practices of physical anthropology. However, there was no record of protests against height requirements in the civil service positions, nor against the rules of basketball that specified the vertical dimensions of the court, nor in the measuring and categorizing of children, likely because the problematics brought about by normative bodies eluded recognition as a vector of inequality or difference. Largely unchallenged, all these practices generated, in different registers, a value for tallness that hitherto did not exist—and a physical framework that underwrote the terms by which colonizer and colonized saw each other, the same terms by which latter-day Filipinos would see their own selves.

Notes

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- 1 Ramon Lala (1899, 94) himself described the Aetas in these terms: “They are very dark, some being as black as negroes. They are doubtless of African descent and are said to resemble the natives of New Guinea. Their hair is black, curly, and matted. They go almost naked, and have but little self-respect. They are also puny, stupid, and ugly, and of a low order of intellect.” Notably, height does not figure prominently in Lala’s descriptions.
- 2 As early as 1809, for instance, the New York police and fire departments had set height minima of five feet nine (175 centimeters) and five feet seven (170 centimeters), respectively, in language and tone similar to the requirements in the Philippines (New York Civil Service Commission 1809, 251, 388).
- 3 The short stories cited here were taken from Yabes 1946/1997.

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