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Memories of US Imperialism Narratives of the Homeland in Filipino and Puerto Rican Homes in the United States

This article examines how institutionalized histories of the US as a benevolent colonial power are reproduced in Filipino and Puerto Rican homes in the United States, facilitated by parents' adherence to these histories. However, US imperialism is justified differently: in the Philippines, through a narrative of rescue from Spain and the brutality of Japan as well as the gifts of democratic institutions; in Puerto Rico, through a narrative of cultural nationalism that foregrounds cultural independence and displaces the question of political independence. The performance poets in this study developed alternative histories and their associated artistic expressions in college rather than at home.

KEYWORDS: US IMPERIALISM · FILIPINO AMERICANS · PUERTO RICANS · COMPARATIVE ETHNIC STUDIES · PERFORMANCE POETRY

*Why I never knew anything about my history or my culture?
Because it's an imposed amnesia. They make us forget where
we come from in the melting pot, you know. And my family
. . . you can't pass on what you don't know yourself. So they
didn't know the facts, the historical facts, or the history
of Puerto Rico and they weren't able to impart that.
– Maria Teresa “Mariposa” Fernandez (2006)*

What are the lasting effects of US colonialism on Filipinos and Puerto Ricans living in the United States today? The Philippines became an independent nation in 1946. Puerto Rico gained sovereignty over domestic affairs when it became a US Commonwealth in 1952. Filipinos and Puerto Ricans born in the United States who are of the second or subsequent generation are temporally removed from the official period of US colonialism by decades and geographically removed from the colonized space by hundreds, if not thousands, of miles. What remnants of colonialism follow Filipinos and Puerto Ricans through time and space?

Education played a significant role in the US colonization of the Philippines and Puerto Rico. After acquiring its empire of islands in 1898, the US distinguished the management of its colonies from previous imperial powers through a policy of benevolent assimilation (Rafael 2000; Miller 1982). Through the discourse of benevolent assimilation, the US fashioned itself as reluctantly taking responsibility for territories in order to establish stable democracies and protect weak former European colonies; in this way it resolved the contradiction of the US, a nation born from an anti-imperialist revolution, becoming an imperial power. The US educated its colonies in the art of democratic self-rule by establishing a colonial government modeled after its own. However, in order for assimilation to appear benevolent, the United States needed to secure and maintain the consent of the native populations to be ruled. To attain this goal, systems of public education were established in the new island colonies to reproduce US history and ideology. These education systems functioned as technologies of forgetting¹ by reproducing a historical narrative that elided the violence of and resistance to the US conquest of these colonized islands.

The children and grandchildren of Filipino and Puerto Rican im/migrants² residing in the United States are the third or fourth generation to be educated by an education system established by the United States, making it more likely for the institutionalized history of the Philippines and Puerto Rico taught in US schools to be reinforced at home. At first glance, this logical hypothesis seems to be disproven by Filipino–American and US–Puerto Rican cultural productions in the United States. Ethnic studies scholars such as Sarita See (2009) and Juan Flores (2000), among many others, demonstrate that Filipino–American and US–Puerto Rican culture are sites that center an otherwise elided history of US imperialism in the Philippines and Puerto Rico.

The most outspoken cultural critics of US imperialism in the Philippines and Puerto Rico I have encountered in my research are the Los Angeles-based Filipino–American and New York City-based Puerto Rican performance poets. Their critiques of US imperialism are explicit and confrontational, in contrast to the implicit critiques found in novels that often can be interpreted as cultural narratives of third-world corruption. For instance, in his poem, “Invisible Ones,” Steven Bonafide Rojas (2004), a US–Puerto Rican performance poet delineates the contradictions that arise from Puerto Rico’s status as a US commonwealth:

we who were
fed images of false equal opportunities
and non-green carded citizenship
capitalism and congressmen
put us in the arms of big brother
the stranglehold of IRS taxes

we who are
cursed by machismo
love salsa and merengue
battled for self respect and our independence
considered second-class citizens . . .

. . . your existence we protested
and you fired your utensils of death
on children, women and men
all dressed in white.

Here Rojas challenges the widespread historical representation of Puerto Rico as welcoming of US rule at the turn of the twentieth century by insisting that Puerto Ricans battled for independence, only to be violently defeated by the United States's superior and deadly technologies of war.³ He also challenges the assertion of equality within the United States by arguing that equality does not apply to the residents of US territories, who may have citizenship but are nonetheless "second-class citizens."

Filipino–American performance poet Cheryl Deptowicz (2001) similarly reveals the history of US imperialism in her poem, "Daughters." She links her biracial identity to the imperialism and war in the Philippines:

**I am the daughter of imperialism and revolution
In these veins fight the two searching for solution
I brought clothes to a naked village
I was the land that was pillaged
I am the gun of that trigger
I am the blood of that fallen nigger.**

Deptowicz recognizes the United States's depiction of its role in the Philippines as one of a benevolent teacher of democracy and civilization in her description of bringing "clothes to a naked village." She clearly names this act as one of "imperialism" and also links it to the act of pillaging and war. In contrast to the image of benevolence, she represents the violence of a racist imperialism that also kills in the name of civilization.

I expected that if any households could demonstrate the limited influence of institutionalized histories of US imperialism on multiple generations of Filipinos and Puerto Ricans it would be the households of performance poets; I expected their critiques to have been learned at least in part in the home. Surprisingly, I did not find this to be the case in my interviews with twenty-six Filipino–American and US–Puerto Rican performance poets whose works feature alternative narratives of US imperialism in the Philippines and Puerto Rico. The Filipino Americans interviewed were 1.5 or second generation in the United States who grew up in the greater Los Angeles area, home to the largest population of Filipino Americans (U.S. Census Bureau 2010). They were a part of the LA Enkanto Kollektive and/or the Balagtasan Kollektive, poet collectives that performed in Los Angeles area museums, university campuses, and

local events for people of color. The US Puerto Ricans interviewed were from New York City and its surrounding boroughs, home to the largest population of US Puerto Ricans (*ibid.*), and were second or third generation in the United States, with the exception of one woman who left Puerto Rico while in college. These poets performed in open-mike events at cafés, community centers, and college campuses in New York City. Most of the Filipino–American and US–Puerto Rican interviewees had gone to college. Rather than at home, it was in college that they became acquainted with their ethnic histories, prompting them often to become active in related cultural and/or political organizations.

This article examines how institutionalized histories are reproduced in Filipino and Puerto Rican families in the United States. I focus on individuals who articulate narratives other than institutionalized historical narratives because their learning and articulation of alternative narratives provide them insights on how institutionalized narratives are reproduced in the home. Based on my findings, I argue that Filipino and Puerto Rican parents' adherence to accepted narratives of US imperialism in their islands and immigrant narratives in the United States both contribute to the reproduction of institutionalized narratives of Philippine and Puerto Rican history. In doing so, I illustrate the disciplinary role that US institutionalized narratives play in Filipino–American and US–Puerto Rican homes and the enduring impact of US imperialism in Filipino and Puerto Rican lives.

Whereas other ethnic groups in the United States are disciplined by the immigrant assimilation narrative, Filipinos and Puerto Ricans in the United States are subject to discipline by both the assimilation narrative and the institutionalized narratives of US imperialism.⁴ Given the different histories and trajectories of US imperialism in the Philippines and Puerto Rico, examining these groups together reveals the different narrative strategies deployed to justify US imperialism on these islands and how these strategies influence family stories told in Filipino–American and US–Puerto Rican households.⁵

In comparing Filipino Americans and US Puerto Ricans, I follow the work of scholars of comparative ethnic studies who are piecing together a more comprehensive understanding of US imperial power. Literary scholar Allan Isaac (2006) locates Filipino–American culture alongside a history of other islands colonized by the United States in the Pacific and Caribbean, characterizing the construction of these islands in the American popular

imagination as the “American Tropics.” Isaac argues that this imagining has shaped the meaning of nation in Filipino–American novels. Building on this argument, I demonstrate in this article that the institutionalized histories at the foundation of the American tropics also shape national meanings in Filipino–American and US–Puerto Rican homes. I begin with a discussion of how institutionalized narratives of US imperialism impact what knowledge of the Philippines and Puerto Rico is reproduced in the home, and then discuss how narratives about US immigrants affect what is and what is not taught in Filipino–American and US–Puerto Rican homes.

Constructing Consent: Filipino Colonial Mentality and Puerto Rican Cultural Nationalism

US imperialism took two divergent paths in the Philippines and Puerto Rico. The United States established similar plans for the Philippines and Puerto Rico after the Spanish–American War, but within twenty years the US Congress granted citizenship to Puerto Ricans but not to Filipinos, and by the middle of the twentieth century the United States granted the Philippines complete political sovereignty while Puerto Rico remained a commonwealth of the United States with authority only over local matters (Go 2008). Race, economics, and military strategy all played a role in differentiating colonial policies for the Philippines and Puerto Rico.⁶ These divergent colonial paths also resulted in different narratives of US imperialism to manufacture the consent of Filipinos and Puerto Ricans to continuing US hegemony on the islands.

In the Philippines, securing consent to US imperialism resulted in a historical narrative of benevolent assimilation. This narrative emphasized that Filipinos as a people did not yet understand democracy at the turn of the century. Therefore they could not establish an independent nation alone and needed the help of the United States, an established democracy.⁷ This narrative stressed that unlike other imperial powers the United States selflessly provided democratic institutions and training, with only the uplift of the colonized in mind. According to this logic, Philippine independence in 1946 represented the success of the US benevolent colonial mission. After half a century of tutelage, the Philippines successfully learned democracy and could become independent. As a narrative, benevolent assimilation relied on the racist assumption about the inferiority of Filipinos that rendered them incapable of self-government without aid of the racially superior white Americans (Rafael 2000). The acceptance of this rhetoric

as justification for the US colonization of the Philippines is manifested as Filipino colonial mentality, an internalized belief that Filipino culture and society are inherently inferior to white culture and white societies (David and Okazaki 2006).

The ongoing unequal political relationship between the United States and Puerto Rico required a different historical narrative to secure consent to US rule. Instead of legitimating the aims of US imperialism by demonstrating the successful goal of political independence, consent to US rule in Puerto Rico was accomplished by cultivating a cultural nationalism separate from political nationalism in order to emphasize that US political control cannot conquer a fiercely independent Puerto Rican culture (Duany 2002). In the middle of the twentieth century the United States showed no sign of relinquishing its control of Puerto Rico. Luis Muñoz Marín, the first elected Puerto Rican governor who established Puerto Rico as a US Commonwealth, desired greater Puerto Rican sovereignty over domestic issues but recognized the importance of the United States to a successful Puerto Rican economy. To channel Puerto Rican nationalism in support of a continuing political relationship with the United States, Muñoz Marín launched two programs, Operation Bootstrap and Operation Serenity. While Operation Bootstrap industrialized the island and further incorporated Puerto Rico into the US economy by incentivizing the establishment of US companies on the island, Operation Serenity constructed a Puerto Rican cultural identity independent of US influence by cultivating Puerto Rican folk arts (*ibid.*). By developing a cultural nationalism apart from a nationalism that advocated political sovereignty, Muñoz Marín refocused popular nationalist sentiment away from the notion of political status. Thus, Puerto Rico has retained the semblance of independence through culture while remaining ultimately under the United States’ political authority.

Social theorist Michel Foucault (2003) argues that the institutionalization of knowledge legitimizes some forms of knowledge while delegitimizing its other forms. He dubs the delegitimate knowledge “subjugated knowledges” (*ibid.*, 7–9). In this article I argue that the institutionalized history of US imperialism disciplines familial narratives in Filipino–American and US–Puerto Rican homes into conformity. A colonial mentality pervades Filipino–American homes, resulting in stories framed by US benevolent help. The Japanese occupation of the Philippines is the part of Philippine history most likely to be told in Filipino–American homes. Institutionalized histories of the Second World War in the Philippines emphasize the brutality

of the Japanese occupation, the resilience of the Filipinos and US soldiers who endured the brutality, and the selfless determination of the US military to help their Filipino friends. Many Filipino Americans share family stories pertaining to the Japanese occupation of the Philippines that echo this narrative. The family stories of this time period that several of the Filipino–American performance poets shared with me follow a similar narrative: Japanese soldiers approached their family homes; through ingenuity, the grace of God, luck, their own determination, or a combination of these factors, their parents’ and/or grandparents’ lives were spared. I provide the following excerpts to illustrate these similarities:

In World War II, my grandfather was a guerilla fighter. He and his group . . . were hiding at my grandmother’s house. The Japanese soldiers were coming down the street or whatever, so they went and hid in the backyard, in the field. The soldiers came into the house and they were in the backyard and they were, I guess, 10 feet away from where my *lolo* (grandfather) and his friends were; and she picked up a broom and was like “Get out of my garden” and was acting crazy. So they just kind of laughed at her and walked away . . . you know, if they had walked 5 more feet, everyone there would have been dead. (De la Cruz 2004)

While my grandma was pregnant with my father . . . she thought [my grandfather] was going to die and she would never see him again. [Japanese soldiers] took him out and they held him at gunpoint and they were almost going to kill him. Then he said, “Oh wait, wait, wait. I have to go back in and get my jacket.” And so they said okay. They let him get a jacket. He went in and got a jacket, and he put on his one good military stripes. And so when he went out and they saw his military stripes, that kind of spared his life. (Merina 2004)

The Japanese were going from farm to farm trying to find American spies or whatever. It was pretty much to just beat down on them, the farmers . . . [They asked my grandfather] “Are you an American sympathizer?” And my grandfather didn’t want to say, he said, “No!” [They called him a] liar. So they took him by the leg, they wrapped him with a rope and they put him upside down. They started beating

him with ripe bamboo . . . And my grandma who was pregnant with my mother ran up to them and started begging them to not kill him. You know what I mean, and there’s something about the exchange that my grandma did . . . But for some reason the exchange that my grandma and one of the soldiers had, they let them both go . . . [On my father’s side] . . . my grandfather said to him, “If the . . . Japanese come, I want you to run into the fields and stay there until someone gets you, and take your brother with you . . . and don’t come out until someone gets him.” So . . . the Japanese are coming and my grandpa’s like, “Okay, go!” So my grandfather stayed on the farm, I guess, to distract . . . My dad at 7 years old took my uncle who is 4 into the fields. . . Anyway, after a week, one of the neighbors went to go get him. And when they came back my grandfather had like three missing fingers. (Sumagaysay 2005)

My dad remembers that one time they were hiding from the Japanese and [my grandparents] took him in the river and they covered his mouth and he thought he was going to die. (Baroma 2004)

These stories represent the random violence of the Japanese occupying force in the Philippines during the war. Although none of these narratives references the US, they all conform to the institutionalized narrative of US colonial benevolence in the Philippines. The representation of the brutal Japanese occupation not only enhances the savior image of the US military returning to fight the Japanese, but it also contrasts the Japanese occupation with the benefits of the benevolent US occupation. By emphasizing the luck and persistence required to merely survive, these stories also enable a narrative of US benevolence in intervening in the Japanese occupation to save the Philippines. These stories are easily circulated in part because institutionalized histories validate and provide a vocabulary with which to articulate their experiences (Edkins 2003). That these poets all share this family narrative in common emphasizes that there is a community where these stories can be recognized. US popular culture also validates this history through the films *Back to Bataan* (1945) and *The Great Raid* (2005), and through the novel *When the Elephants Dance* (2002) by Filipina American Tess Uriza Holthe, which all represent the narrative of Japanese colonial violence and US benevolence. The overdetermined representation of the

Second World War in the Philippines ensures its continued reproduction and circulation and fixes its meaning into a linear narrative of Philippine progression to independent nationhood and US benevolence.

Among the US–Puerto Rican performance poets I interviewed, there were no family stories that repeated a similar narrative of a single historical event in Puerto Rico. Two poets, Nancy Mercado and Maegan Ortiz, recalled their elders praising Luis Muñoz Marín. Ortiz recalls that framed pictures of Muñoz Marín hung on the walls of her grandparents’ home and that her grandmother told her that he had saved Puerto Rico. Equating the further integration of Puerto Rico into the US economy as saving Puerto Rico supports a narrative of continued Puerto Rican consent to US imperialism and of US imperialism as benevolent.

The absence of a narrative of a single historical event in Puerto Rico in these families is not surprising given that consent to US imperialism there depends on emphasizing cultural nationalism. Puerto Rican identity is constructed as a mixture of indigenous Taino, African, and Spanish influences that are free from the influence of US culture, and Puerto Rican history is constructed along these same lines. Nicole Delgado (2006), a Puerto Rican poet who moved to the US to pursue a graduate degree, describes that in both private and public schools in Puerto Rico her history courses dwelled more on indigenous history and the Spanish colonial period, but afterward

History becomes a blur. This usually happens toward the end of the semester, so teachers are left with no time to go into the details of the processes that took place during the twentieth century. . . They teach about the Foraker and Jones Acts, which granted us a civil government and US citizenship. Then they talk about Operation Bootstrap and the process of industrialization. And they talk about 1952, Luis Muñoz Marín, and the blessings of the Estado Libre Asociado. . . They do not tell us that industrialization meant the displacement and dismantling of [the] Puerto Rican agricultural base, that our basic food staples were substituted by imported goods from then on, that part of the industrialization efforts was sending people away to work overseas.

By emphasizing native Puerto Rican history and the Spanish colonial period, Puerto Rican history conforms to the construction of a Puerto Rican cultural identity that is free of US cultural influence. Scant coverage of the

twentieth century conveniently minimizes US colonialism in Puerto Rico in this construction of Puerto Rican history, mentioning only events that validate US benevolence in the form of a civil government, citizenship, and industrialization. Delgado uses the word “blessings” in her description of 1952, the year that Puerto Rico became a US Commonwealth, to emphasize that this ideal representation of Gov. Muñoz Marín and Operation Bootstrap leaves out the negative consequences commonwealth status and industrialization had for Puerto Rico.

Thus in lieu of family stories reinforced by institutionalized historical narratives found in Filipino–American homes, in US–Puerto Rican homes the focus on the reproduction of traditional Puerto Rican culture reinforces institutionalized narratives of US imperialism. Poet Sandra María Esteves (2006) did not learn about Puerto Rican history in the home but she learned about traditional Puerto Rican culture and gender roles:

[T]here were other things I knew culturally from my Titi Julia, who was a very traditional Puerto Rican woman, who was, you know, one of those women who stayed home and cooked all day long because she had to feed four kids. And, um, I used to sit in the kitchen with her, spend hours in the kitchen. . . I learned how to make *pasteles* [meat pastries] with her and *sorullitos* [corn fritters] and a lot of traditional type foods just from being in the kitchen watching her, and I was the taste tester. And she’d feed me rice and beans everyday. To this day I love rice and beans; I could eat them everyday, you know. So that was a, that was a different learning, but I couldn’t name it.

What Esteves dubs a “different learning” is the process of cultural reproduction. These everyday domestic rituals served as implicit lessons not only on Puerto Rican cuisine but also patriarchal privilege within Puerto Rican culture, which dictates that Puerto Rican women are responsible for tending to home and children. The maintenance of traditional Puerto Rican culture free from American cultural influence hinges on the intergenerational reproduction of cultural practices. Second generation US–Puerto Rican poet Maegan Ortiz (2006) likewise describes how Puerto Rican cultural traditions were imparted to her through annual trips to Puerto Rico:

We'd go [to Puerto Rico] every Christmas and then at Christmas . . . It was like super Puerto Rican time. I had to learn all the Christmas songs in Puerto Rican [Spanish], all the *aguinaldos*, the *parrandas*, the Christmas caroling in Puerto Rico . . . We danced at parties and we had the big roast pig at the big party and we celebrated Three Kings day.

During these visits, Ortiz participated in Puerto Rican Christmas traditions. She names the equivalent US practices to convey a sense of these cultural practices, but the fact that she does not simply translate the practices but instead provides the Puerto Rican cultural terms for Christmas songs (*aguinaldos*) and caroling (*parrandas*) emphasizes that these practices are perceived as culturally unique. However similar the practices might be, they cannot be translated into English or else that unique sense of traditional Puerto Rican culture is lost.

Exposing children to culture in the form of food does not necessarily equate to teaching history, and a parent's willingness to talk about their lives or teach their language does not necessarily translate to imparting histories of these islands to their children. Just as Puerto Rican cultural nationalism is detached from any movement for political independence on the islands, Puerto Rican culture in the diaspora can likewise be constructed as separate from Puerto Rican history and politics, thus rendering it unthreatening to US control of Puerto Rico. Sandra Garcia Rivera (2006) describes how Puerto Rico was a backdrop for many of her parents' stories: "What I learned about Puerto Rico was related to them, more to my parents than about Puerto Rico, right? It was Puerto Rico through my parents living, through their lives . . . [and] family stories. It wasn't politics. It wasn't political." Nancy Mercado (2006) describes how her parents only spoke Spanish at home, talked about family in Puerto Rico, and took her to visit Puerto Rico every year, but it was only in college that she learned the political history of the island. The narrative of Puerto Rican cultural nationalism justifies continuing US imperialism on the islands and institutional recognition of this narrative enables discussions about culture in US–Puerto Rican homes.

The gendered expectations of cultural nationalism affect the discourse on Puerto Rico in US–Puerto Rican homes. For US-born Puerto Ricans, like many other ethnic groups, the responsibility of reproducing traditional culture in the home more often falls back on women rather than men.

Scholarship on the gendered nature of nationalism argues that, whereas men are encouraged to become modern subjects and help the nation progress, women are expected to reproduce the nation's culture and traditions.⁸ Thus, the institutionalized narrative that recognizes Puerto Rican cultural nationalism while displacing political nationalism influences what types of knowledge are passed on and to whom in Puerto Rican homes. In contrast to Estevez and Ortiz's experiences are those of Anthony Morales (2006), a third-generation Puerto Rican poet in the US who was not exposed to much Puerto Rican history or culture growing up:

I didn't get any of those idyllic stories about how beautiful things were and [exclamations of] "My God, I wish we could go back," or any of that stuff. I never got that. And I think that speaks heavily to a colonial experience of wanting, or forgetting. . . I discovered and learned on my own in terms of studying my history.

The complete absence of Puerto Rican culture and history in Morales's home and the regular participation in Puerto Rican cultural traditions in the homes of Ortiz and Estevez not only convey the diversity among Puerto Rican families in the United States, but also signify how gender affects assimilation. Ortiz and Estevez's regular exposure to Puerto Rican culture can be understood as preparation for the reproduction of cultural traditions, a responsibility that would not necessarily fall on Morales. Cultural nationalism both reinforces the institutionalized narrative that enables continued US control of Puerto Rico and Puerto Rican patriarchal culture.

Thus far I have discussed how institutionalized narratives of US imperialism affects what information about the Philippines and Puerto Rico circulates in Filipino and Puerto Rican homes in the United States, respectively. Institutionalized narratives of US imperialism facilitate the articulation of some knowledge over others and in the process actively hinder the articulation of alternative narratives. The historical amnesia resulting from US imperialism in the Philippines is well established. Political scientist Jenny Edkins (2003, 7) argues that "[s]urvivors of political abuse in the contemporary West have something compelling to say, but it is something that is unsayable in the vocabulary of the powerful, and it is dangerous to the political institutions in place." The absence of a vocabulary to articulate such trauma and of a community to create and acknowledge such a vocabulary

results in a silence that facilitates forgetting. So although silence may be interpreted as a conscious choice to not pass on stories of the Philippines and Puerto Rico to their US-born children and grandchildren, some traumatic memories may remain unspeakable without an institutionalized narrative that recognizes these memories.

For Filipinos, the Philippine–American war is one such trauma. When Filipinos continued to fight for their independence from colonial occupation after the United States took control of the islands from Spain as part of the 1898 Treaty of Paris, the United States dubbed them insurrectionists, thereby delegitimizing their cause. In the US this conflict’s name remained “the Philippine Insurrection” until 1998 (Zwick 1999). For one century, Filipino nationalists were officially known as insurrectionists and their anticolonial resistance remained unrecognized as such. For one century, any violence that the United States military used to subdue resistance to their occupation—slash-and-burn techniques, the massacre of civilians—were all justified as restoration of order. No vocabulary existed to acknowledge these atrocities, thus discouraging the development of a historical narrative of cruel US wartime tactics and Filipino resistance. This lies in stark contrast to the vocabulary and narrative that allows atrocities during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines to be readily articulated.

For some Puerto Rican migrants to the US, the Ponce Massacre is one example of an unspeakable tragedy. What began as a peaceful protest on 21 March 1937 ended in violence. The Nationalist Party organized a march to commemorate the end of slavery in Puerto Rico and demand the release of Puerto Rican political prisoners, including Nationalist Party leader Pedro Albizu Campos. Despite securing the necessary permits, the colonial government intervened to void the permit and authorized police to fire on those participating in the march, killing twenty-one people and wounding another 150 people (Paralatici 2006). Puerto Rican poet Maria Teresa Fernandez (2006) states that “I’m sure my grandmother knew about the Ponce Massacre, but something as horrible as that, that’s something you want to forget. You know, some things are too painful to remember.” The violence used to suppress resistance to US colonial rule during the Ponce Massacre disrupts the institutionalized narrative of US colonial benevolence and the consensual nature of the US–Puerto Rican colonial relationship, and remains unspeakable for some who witnessed it.

Finding a vocabulary with which to share experiences unrecognized by institutional history and a community that could recognize and understand this experience helps stories make historical sense or fit into a larger narrative. During the colonial period, public education established by the United States in their colonies reproduced institutional narratives of Philippine and Puerto Rican history that attempted to naturalize US imperialism and promote US neocolonial interests. While these pro-US historical narratives have been challenged, especially among academics, the continuing influence of these narratives often marginalizes alternative narratives.⁹ Supportive communities will work to further challenge institutionalized narratives and lend credence to alternative narratives by creating events commemorating experiences frequently unarticulated by history. Since the centennial of the US colonization of the Philippines, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Guam in 1998, commemorations in the US have reexamined this history to center the consequences of US overseas empire building. Filipino–American communities have rearticulated the Filipino insurrection as the Philippine–American War through community events, films, art exhibits, and books.¹⁰ These commemorations and collaborations have been possible only with the widespread participation and support of communities of color, reflecting feminist sociologist Avery Gordon’s (1997, 66) observation that “[i]t takes some effort to recognize the ghost and to reconstruct the world it conjures up.” In this case, the ghost is made up of the lingering alternative narratives unrecognized by institutional histories. Community-based commemorations open up a space for alternative memories and demonstrate how Filipino and Puerto Rican communities in the United States are haunted by the physical and narrative violence of US imperialism and are fighting to find the vocabulary to articulate this history.

Assimilation by Amnesia: Fitting into US Immigrant Narratives

Institutionalized narratives of US imperialism in the Philippines and Puerto Rico are influential in determining how these islands and their histories are and are not represented within Filipino and Puerto Rican homes in the United States. Narratives about immigrants in the United States form another major factor affecting what knowledge about the Philippines and Puerto Rico circulates in these households. In her study of second-generation Chinese and Korean Americans, sociologist Lisa Sun-Hee Park (2008) found

that Asian immigrant entrepreneurs convey to their children the difficulty of their lives in their home countries but without any detail. Park argues that these generic stories of leaving harsh lives behind for better lives in the United States reinforces the Asian American model minority myth that challenges progressive social change by equating individual hard work with success. She posits that immigrant parents construct their pre-immigration lives to conform to the model minority myth in order to demonstrate their assimilation as “good” immigrants who work hard and do not become a burden to US society. Here I will be extending Park’s analysis to argue that selective remembering in Filipino and Puerto Rican im/migrant homes demonstrates their efforts to adhere to the construction of the good, and therefore deserving, immigrant.

The United States constructs itself as a land of opportunity that attracts immigrants from around the world.¹¹ Frequently represented in popular culture, the celebrated immigrant narrative depicts determined individuals who leave their impoverished homelands and find success in the United States through hard work.¹² Their children culturally assimilate and build on their parents’ success. Immigrants who do not fit this narrative are constructed as undeserving individuals who unfairly abuse the generous public resources in the United States.¹³ Taken together these narratives of good and bad immigrants discipline immigrants by praising individual work ethic and self-reliance and demonizing any political activism for social equality. In addition to the disciplinary function of constructions of good and bad immigrants, ethnic studies scholar Yen Le Espiritu (2003) argues that, by focusing on immigration only from the point of arrival in the United States, the universal immigrant narrative erases the role that the United States plays in creating circumstances encouraging, or even necessitating, emigration.

Alongside this narrative of the “land of opportunity” is the narrative of the United States as a cultural “melting pot” that celebrates and values all of its different cultural ingredients. The narrative of a colorblind, multicultural United States encourages the celebration of cultural difference. However, these articulations of cultural difference do not include the alternative histories of im/migrants. In his book on the construction of Filipino–American identity, Dylan Rodríguez (2010) argues that US multiculturalism facilitates white supremacy by encouraging Filipino Americans to reproduce decontextualized, essentialized cultural practices to assert their place in multicultural America. The absence of the meaning of these cultural

practices or a discussion of how US imperialism changed or influenced which practices comprise the canon of traditional Filipino culture renders these performances harmless entertainment for an American audience.¹⁴ This narrative of US multiculturalism functions like Puerto Rican cultural nationalism. Cultural practices are divorced from their original historical and social context and then consumed by an American society seeking diverse experiences and the economic benefits associated with large-scale multicultural performances and festivals.

The remainder of this article focuses on how adhering to the narratives of the good immigrant and US multiculturalism affects what knowledge about the homeland is reproduced in Filipino and Puerto Rican households. I argue that adherence to the narratives of immigrant work ethic and multicultural celebration influences what parents pass on to children in Filipino and Puerto Rican households in the United States, ultimately closing off opportunities for reproducing alternative narratives of US imperialism in the home.

The narrative of the good immigrant complements the assimilation narrative in that good immigrants work tirelessly to enable the success and assimilation of their children. The Chicago school of sociology imagined the assimilation of immigrants to the US as a linear process, beginning with the immigrant generation who clung to the customs and cultures of their homeland and ending with their grandchildren who would be completely cut off from their homeland and adopt US customs and culture.¹⁵ Implicit in the assimilation paradigm is the racist assumption that immigrants of color and their children need to abandon the past in order to become successful in the United States.¹⁶ The impulse to forget and move on characterizes the communication between Filipino–American poet Cheryl Samson (2004) and her mother:

My mom is actually the silent one. I hear bits and pieces of it but a huge chunk of her life I'm not aware of. . . She's just like, "Why do you want to know so much about the Philippines? You know, we've left that behind and we're here now" . . . Like my mom's very "The Philippines is worse so why do we need to talk about it? We came here for a better life."

Samson’s mother views her immigration experience through a lens of racial progress that places the United States as the “better” present, and the

Philippines as a “worse” place best left behind and unspoken. Samson’s mother’s reluctance to speak about the past may reflect a personal trauma. However, it may also be understood as an attempt to conform to the good immigrant stereotype and as symptomatic of a colonial mentality born of benevolent assimilation. Assimilation links the good immigrant narrative and Filipino colonial mentality because the good immigrant narrative rests on the assumption that immigrants must assimilate to become successful. Thus, the racist assumptions of progress that premise manufactured consent to colonialism and the model minority myth create the desire to move on and forget the past.

Puerto Rican poet Anthony Morales (2006) also reports an absence of discussions about Puerto Rico in his home:

Being a lot removed from my grandparents’ experiences and those historical experiences makes me have to remember all the things that they forgot. And not to say that they forgot, it ain’t like that, but forgot in the sense of like not actively passing that on . . . because their duty now is to make it in the United States, make it in New York City.

Morales underscores the agency his parents took in deciding not to pass on Puerto Rican culture, language, or history by specifying that forgetting can entail a conscious decision, suggesting that Puerto Rican migrants actively select what knowledge is passed on. Labeling im/migrant success in the United States a “duty” emphasizes the pressure im/migrants feel to assimilate and “make it” to be productive members of their new society and fit the “good immigrant” narrative.

Whereas there was a repetition of Second World War stories in Filipino–American households, the family stories that US–Puerto Rican performance poets do share in common were stories of migration and economic hardship in the United States. As US citizens, Puerto Rican migrants to the US are not limited by the restrictions placed on politically sovereign nations like the Philippines. Most Puerto Rican migrants in New York arrived as part of the largest wave of migration that took place after the Second World War during Operation Bootstrap. Most came as low-wage laborers and endured meager living conditions. Sandra Maria Esteves (2006) recalls that her mother worked at a quilt factory “and she stayed with that job for 45 years. And they

sold the job twice and she went with the equipment, like she was part of the equipment.” Anthony Morales’s grandmother began working at an industrial laundromat shortly after migrating to New York City, remaining there until her retirement in the 1990s. Nancy Mercado’s (2006) parents first settled in Atlantic City, where her father worked as a migrant farm worker until he found work as a dishwasher in an Italian restaurant. He worked there for twenty-five years, eventually becoming and ending his career there as a chef. These employment stories of the postwar migration cohort all emphasize worker loyalty, complying with the narrative of the good immigrant diligently working toward success in the United States. Their loyalty is emphasized by their passiveness and willingness to settle for undesirable jobs. Only one of these stories specifies job advancement, indicating the lack of better alternative employment. The analogy comparing Esteves’s mother to “part of the equipment” captures factory workers’ invisibility. Her mother was not regarded as a human being, but as part of the machinery. The factory owned her labor. Such stories show the US as offering job security but in low-wage jobs with limited opportunities for advancement.

Focused on finding economic stability and success in the United States, im/migrants often lack the opportunity to talk about the past with their children. Many Filipino and Puerto Rican im/migrants move to the United States seeking better employment opportunities than those available in their home islands. Puerto Rican migrants to the US usually lack higher education degrees and occupational skills, restricting them to low-skilled jobs in urban areas (Ortiz 1986). For Filipino Americans the 1965 Immigration Act allowed Filipinos lacking higher education to be reunited with family members already living in the United States or to enter as highly educated professionals to fill labor needs in the US (Espiritu 2003). Regardless of their class and educational background Filipino immigrants earn less than their white counterparts in the same profession (Hing 1994). As a result, many Filipino and Puerto Rican parents in the United States work long hours to support their families and do not have time to tell their children about the Philippines or Puerto Rico. US–Puerto Rican poet Lenina Nadal was born into an activist family that participated in the Civil Rights Movement and the Puerto Rican independence movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Her grandfather helped organize the 1937 march that led to the Ponce Massacre. However, for much of her childhood, her parents’ busy schedules and her isolation in the suburbs kept this history from her:

When I was around 8 years old, my parents decided to move out to Long Island because my aunt was going back to Puerto Rico and gave them the house or whatever. So I think from that point until like 17 or 18 or something I was completely not connected, you know what I mean, to knowing about a lot of issues in the Puerto Rican community and all of that because my parents were always doing work. (Nadal 2006)

Likewise, Filipino–American poet John Eric Concordia (2005) states that his parents were too busy working to tell him about the Philippines:

While the parents are working we're raised by our grandparents. So I was able to get an understanding, learn Tagalog, and practice my Tagalog with my grandparents. And then, I would ask questions about where we are in the Philippines. What are we dealing with? But many times your parents didn't have any time to really explain that because they're working.

Concordia's exposure to the Philippines through his grandparents led him to ask his parents about the Philippines directly, but they did not have the opportunity to answer his questions. Thus silence on the topic of Puerto Rico or the Philippines in these im/migrant families results from the overexploitation of im/migrant labor that leaves little time for parents to spend time with their children.

Even im/migrant parents who do have time may choose not to pass on Filipino and Puerto Rican culture and history to their children because they believe assimilation is necessary to secure their children's success in the United States. Filipino American Alan Aquino (2005) relates how his parents regarded exposing him to Filipino culture as detrimental under certain circumstances:

My parents . . . deliberately didn't teach me Tagalog or Filipino or tell me about history because they wanted me to fit in, you know, they were minority immigrants in a white suburb of Chicago. Uh, by the time I was 6 years old and we moved to California, they offered to teach me Tagalog but by that time I already made it clear, "No.

I don't want to learn that. That's not a part of my culture" . . . you know, the ultimate youthful denial, I would declare to my parents I was white.

Aquino's parents chose to withhold Filipino language and history to enable his successful assimilation when they lived in a predominantly white Midwestern suburb. However, after moving to Southern California, where there is a larger population of Filipinos and other people of color, his parents thought that knowing a Philippine language would no longer cause any problems. Taking into consideration the local population in deciding whether or not to assimilate illustrates that Aquino's parents did not believe that assimilation was generally beneficial but instead regarded assimilation as a strategy for success. Such actions demonstrate that Aquino's parents understood that to be perceived as good immigrants in a predominantly white society they needed to culturally assimilate and blend in.

In US–Puerto Rican households, the narrative of Puerto Rican cultural nationalism and assimilation to United States society are reconciled in the narrative of US multiculturalism. Puerto Ricans can be proud of their culture so long as they are successful members of US society. Maegan Ortiz (2006), whose exposure to Puerto Rican culture I discussed in the first half of the article, was also raised to fit in:

How the hell do you think I got stuck with a name like Megan Elizabeth? . . . It's like all their assimilationist dreams are wrapped up right there. . . My parents really immersed me in American culture. I was sent to private schools, and not just any private school, Montessori, you know, all super smart, independent thinker type schools. It ended up freaking backfiring on them, but whatever . . . They took me to the opera, ballet, you know. I went to ballet lessons. I went to classical piano lessons . . . I learned how to ice skate.

Ortiz construes her parents' choice of non-Hispanic names for her as symbolic of their hopes that she be more fully American. Her parents carefully chose the type of US American culture to which she was exposed, investing in immersing her in "high culture" by enrolling her in private schools, and introducing her to classical music, operas, and ballet dance.

Such an education was meant to assimilate her in acceptable cultural forms associated with a successful class of US Americans. Ensuring her familiarity with these cultural forms was a means to accrue cultural capital to aid in her own economic success while, at the same time, ensuring her familiarity with Puerto Rican culture adhered to Puerto Rican cultural nationalism.

As pointed out earlier, US multiculturalism fosters decontextualized cultural practices. The rationale of Cheryl Samson's father, Frank, for exposing his children to culture succinctly demonstrates the successful separation of Filipino culture from Filipino history. He introduced his children to Filipino culture but did not discuss Filipino history with his children because he feared political repercussions. As a professor of electrical technology at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines in the 1960s, he was arrested and imprisoned on false murder charges during martial law in the Philippines for escorting his students to protest against then President Marcos's imposition of martial law. He managed to be released and escaped to the United States. Samson (2005) feared that initiating discussions about living conditions in the Philippines might encourage his children to be activists:

I saw nothing positive about what's happening in the Philippines. And I was apprehensive if they get too fervent in their participation on being activists for Filipino groups they might be getting involved with those activists out there whose main purpose is to sow discord and probably to overthrow the government. And I didn't want that to happen. And as far as I was thinking I wanted to prevent, to distance them from that. I don't want to prevent them from enjoying their cultural heritage in terms of going into dances and forums there about Filipino culture but I don't want them to get involved any deeper into really hard core activism.

Samson's negative experience as an activist motivated him to insure his children's well-being by discouraging their politicization. Like his wife, who I discussed previously, he represents the Philippines as inferior to the United States. However, unlike his wife, he does not stay silent on the Philippines in general. Rather, he makes a distinction between culture and politics, defining culture as "dances and forums" with no political connection. This

conscious decision to distance his children from the history of martial law in the Philippines actually works to reinforce narratives of the United States as a haven from political repression. Without an understanding of how US imperialism in the Philippines created the conditions that led to martial law, Frank Samson's experience becomes another story of US benevolence that reinforces US narratives of multiculturalism.

The separation of history from culture reflects the way that mainstream understandings of culture have been depoliticized. Multiculturalism commodifies cultural difference, encouraging Americans to celebrate cultural difference by trying ethnic foods and attending traditional ethnic performances. The consumption of Puerto Rican *bomba* dances elides the origins of the dance in the exploitative slave trade. Likewise, the performance of Muslim suite dances at university Pilipino Cultural Nights, dances born from resistance to colonial rule, is disconnected from continuing struggles of the Muslim population in the southern Philippines (Gonzalves 2009). Such depoliticized expressions of culture facilitate the exposure that Frank Samson hoped for his children. They learned their "traditional" culture without an understanding of the politics and history attached to those forms.

The competing rationales between language learning in the home expressed by Filipino American Alison de la Cruz's parents illustrate how both Filipino colonial mentality and US multicultural discourses contribute to the marginalization of alternative narratives of the Philippines. The widespread acceptance of the imposition of English as an official language in the Philippines leads Filipino immigrants to value linguistic assimilation for their children. Within the post-1965 cohort of Filipino immigrant families, most of the second generation cannot speak a Philippine language fluently. Filipino immigrants often chose to speak only English with their children, although they would still use a Philippine language among themselves. As a result, the children of Filipino immigrants at most can only partly understand their parents' tongue. Being a monolingual English speaker is often conflated with US patriotism (Pavlenko 2002). Manny de la Cruz (2005) decided not to teach his children Tagalog or anything about the Philippines despite his white American wife's view to the contrary:

I said, "You know you should be teaching Tagalog as one way for them, your kids, to connect to your roots." And plus it's really great to be bilingual. I think there's a different flavor, I guess, of life when

you speak a different language. But he was reluctant to do that and I think partly because he wanted to be American. (N. de la Cruz 2005)

Although Manny de la Cruz's wife supported their children to be raised bilingual, she conceptualizes bilingualism through a lens of multiculturalism. Tagalog here becomes one of many different languages to choose from. Imagining languages other than English as different "flavors of life" underscores multiculturalism's exoticization of culture and does not address the different hierarchies of languages that exist in the United States or why English became a dominant language in the Philippines. In this manner, the colonial mentality that devalues the Filipino language and the multicultural valuing of bilingualism both naturalize power differentials resulting from US imperialism. By conforming one's actions to fit the narrative of multiculturalism and the good immigrant, Filipino and Puerto Rican parents limit the possible narratives of the Philippines and Puerto Rico reproduced in the home, whether knowingly or unknowingly.

Conclusion

Institutional narratives of US history are not only reproduced in public spaces like the schoolroom but also in private ones. In this article, I argue that institutional narratives influence the familial narratives shared in Filipino–American and US–Puerto Rican households so that they too emphasize colonial benevolence taught in Philippine, Puerto Rican, and US schools and reinforced through popular culture. The Filipino–American and US–Puerto Rican performance poets I interviewed are representative of young Filipinos and Puerto Ricans in the United States. While they do articulate alternative narratives of Philippine and Puerto Rican history that center the violence of US colonialism and the continuing effects of US neocolonialism, they, like their peers, did not learn these histories in their homes.¹⁷ The institutionalized historical narrative that justifies US imperialism in the Philippines and Puerto Rico differs according to these islands' present neocolonial relationship to the United States. In the Philippines US imperialism is justified through the rescue of the Philippines from the mismanagement of Spain and from the brutality of Japan as well as through the gifts of democratic institutions culminating in the gift of political independence in 1946. The narrative of US colonial benevolence encourages the Philippines to continue accepting the "gift" of unequal military, economic, and political agreements with the

United States. In Puerto Rico early–twentieth-century US imperialism is justified also through colonial benevolence, and continuing US control of the island is justified through a narrative of cultural nationalism that foregrounds cultural independence and displaces the question of political independence. Although these institutionalized narratives have been deconstructed and questioned in the US, the narratives are still widely circulated and influential. This is especially true for Filipino and Puerto Rican im/migrant parents who were raised with these narratives and go on to reproduce these narratives in the homes they establish in the United States. Simultaneously these im/migrants also subscribe to US narratives about good immigrants who work hard to succeed and contribute their authentic cultural practices to the US multicultural landscape. Taken together, these institutionalized narratives of the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and the United States all contribute to the naturalization of US imperialism past and present by limiting the reproduction of alternative narratives critical of US power in the home.

Notes

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- 1 Here I build on Marita Sturken's (1997) "technologies of memory," a term she coined to describe how events are given cultural meaning through commemoration. "Technologies of memory" enable a specific narrative of events to be institutionalized. I use "technologies of forgetting" to emphasize what gets lost in the institutionalizing of one specific narrative, here the narrative of US colonial benevolence at the turn of the century.
- 2 Following Rachel Buff (2001), I use the term im/migrants when discussing both Filipinos and Puerto Ricans who move to the United States to emphasize that, whereas Filipinos are immigrants, Puerto Ricans are not. When referring only to Filipinos, I use the term immigrants and when referring only to Puerto Ricans I use the term migrants.
- 3 Kelvin Santiago-Valles (1999) analyzes turn-of-the-twentieth-century representations of Puerto Rico as a young woman who had been successfully wooed by a masculine United States. These images depict Puerto Rico willingly ceding its sovereignty to the United States, in contrast to the unruly Cuba and Philippines.
- 4 Lisa Sun-Hee Park (2008) demonstrates how the immigrant assimilation narrative disciplines the children of Korean and Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs. Their parents tell vague stories of hardship about their lives in the homeland, which encourage conformity to American rags-

to-riches stories. Trying to have their life stories fit this narrative discourages political activism while emphasizing individual work ethic.

- 5 There is a growing number of works done on the different policies put in place in different US colonies acquired at the turn of the twentieth century. Julian Go (2008) argues that, although the US initially enacted similar policies in the Philippines and Puerto Rico, within a decade the US began to differentiate policies for the colonies. He also shows that different responses by the Filipino and Puerto Rican elites also influenced the implementation of different policies on these islands. Arnold Leibowitz (1989) provides a more comprehensive look at US laws and colonial policies by examining the different political statuses given to US island territories and the consequences these different statuses had in terms of the rights guaranteed to island residents. Another study on the legal justifications of US colonial policy is Bartholomew Sparrow's (2006) investigation of the Insular Cases of 1901–1922. These cases established that the new island territories were unlike states, and thus constitutional rights did not necessarily apply to the territories' residents.
- 6 José Cabranes (1979) argues that the US congress granted US citizenship to Puerto Ricans and denied it to Filipinos because of the widely held racial assumptions in the early twentieth century. On the one hand, Puerto Ricans were constructed as descending from a European race and speaking a civilized European language and thus could be assimilated as Americans. On the other hand, Filipinos were constructed as much lower on the racial hierarchy either as savage natives or uncivilized Orientals. At the time, Asians were classified as ineligible for citizenship. Thus, Filipinos could not be assimilated as Americans. On the complexity of the citizenship question, see Aguilar 2010.
- 7 Stuart Creighton Miller (1982), Vicente Rafael (2000), Stanley Karnow (1989), and Renato Constantino (2002) all discuss the US efforts to Americanize the Filipino people and shape the Philippine nation through the establishment of American institutions. The result of this imperial assimilation was the erasure of turn-of-the-twentieth-century Filipino nationalism and the future that the nationalism imagined, which was replaced with the institutionalized narrative of the necessity of US aid in the establishment of a modern, independent, democratic Philippine nation.
- 8 Anne McClintock (1995) discusses how women are constructed as embodying national tradition. Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis (1994) also make this point when they discuss the contradictions between women in the nation-state as both subjects and objects of national interest.
- 9 Constantino (2002) demonstrates the teaching of history in the Philippines as justifying US imperialism there and the consequences of these institutional narratives for the country economically and politically. Although the pro-US historical narrative has been relentlessly questioned in the Philippines since the 1970s, many immigrant parents of second-generation Filipino Americans were educated in the Philippines prior to serious challenges to pro-US historical narratives.
- 10 *Memories of a Forgotten War* (Griggers et al. 2001) is an experimental documentary that attempts to retrieve some of the unarticulated violence of the Philippine–American War through archival documents and reenactments. Angel Shaw and Luis Francia (2002) likewise retrieve narratives of the Philippine–American War and emphasize its importance for understanding US imperialism.

- 11 The myth of equal opportunity for all in the United States is captured in the poem by Emma Lazarus, "The New Colossus," engraved on the Statue of Liberty in New York City. The Statue of Liberty itself is constructed as a beacon of hope attracting unfortunate immigrants to the United States.
- 12 Examples of the immigration and assimilation narrative in American popular culture include the films *The Namesake* (2007) and *Joy Luck Club* (1993), as well as the TV series *American Family* (2002) and *All-American Girl* (1994).
- 13 Bonnie Honig (1998) demonstrates that the figures of the good immigrant and of the bad immigrant are two sides of the same coin. Good immigrants are praised for their commitment to family and community, at the same time that their culture and communities are demonized for being too backward and insular. Good immigrants are praised for their resourcefulness in material acquisition; but, if that resourcefulness is used to acquire or work for political rights, they become bad immigrants.
- 14 Theo Gonzalves (2009) demonstrates how American-trained Filipino anthropologists documented tribal Philippine dances. Like their American counterparts, these anthropologists were concerned with saving dying cultural practices. Ultimately a handful of these dances became representative of native Filipino national dances and are performed as such worldwide.
- 15 Henry Yu (2001) points out how students in the sociology department at the University of Chicago created the assimilation paradigm to describe immigrant experiences based on their own experiences of marginality as newcomers to big city life.
- 16 Despite the numerous critiques brought up against this assimilation paradigm—that it does not take into account the obstacles that racism presents, that it presupposes a complete break from the homeland, that it does not take into consideration transnational processes—the model is still influential today. See Lowe 1996 and Espiritu 2002.
- 17 The counternarratives expressed by the poets and their related activist and pedagogical activities are subjects I touch upon in a book manuscript currently in preparation.

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