

“Splendid Dancing”: Filipino “Exceptionalism” in Taxi Dancehalls

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In the 1920s and early 1930s, Filipino men patronized the popular American social institution of the taxi dancehalls, comprising nearly one quarter of the taxi dancehall patrons in major cities such as Detroit and Los Angeles (see Cressey 1932).¹ Taxi dancehalls were at the height of their popularity during this period, often serving as a key site of sociality amongst and between immigrants. Women were employed as dancers for hire, and men, predominantly immigrants, were their principal patrons. Filipinos, workers and students alike, came dressed in McIntosh suits,² eager to spend their hard-earned wages on taxi dancers. Here, Filipino men made rare social contact with women—taxi dancers who were largely white, occasionally Mexican, and very rarely Filipina (see Meckel 1995 for a detailed study of taxi dancers). Filipinos would purchase their dance tickets, choose their favorite girl within a group of taxi dancers, and move to the music of a live band. For ten cents per dance number, slow or fast, Filipino men could choose to dance with the same dancer until their tickets ran out or opt for the pleasures of another. Like a taxi ride, each dance came with a ticketed price and the expectation of a tip, either in the form of a drink, a sandwich, or perhaps even a marriage proposal.

Filipino patrons' dancing skills drew passionate comments from dancers as well as early scholars of American taxi dancehalls. For example, in “Confessions of a Taxi Dancer,” Jeanne de La Moreau excitedly declares that “Filipinos as a rule are *splendid dancers*,” noting that one Filipino patron was even nicknamed “God’s Gift to the Taxi-Dancers!” (1931, E5). De la Moreau is not alone in her rhapsodic characterizations of the Filipino dancer in the taxi dancehalls as physically “splendid.” For many observers, the Filipino male is arguably the best dancer amongst the patrons of taxi dancehalls at the peak of this social institution’s popularity. In particular, his exceptional kinesthetic abilities (variously described as “splendid,” “spectacular,” “fancy”) are a source of repeated commentary. He is dazzling in his knowledge of the latest American dance steps of the period (such as the lindy hop, the swing, and the shimmy). The Associated Filipino press reports of Filipinos

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at the Hippodrome Dance Palace in Los Angeles further aggrandize the status of the Filipino male dancers, describing them as “fancy dancers in excellent pairs . . . gliding jovially on the floor until the wee hours of the morning” (cited in Maram 2006). “Filipino conduct” in the taxi dancehall is also equally exemplary, as “one which he can point to with pride. He is seldom guilty of sensual dancing, and is much more the pursued than the pursuer in his contacts with taxi dancers” (Cressey 1932, 155).³ So iconic is the Filipino male dancer that American sociologist Paul Cressey goes so far as to say that the Filipino’s exceptional dancing skills demonstrate his knowledge of American ways and his “all too rapid” assimilation into American society.⁴

The discourse of exceptionality framing the perception of the Filipino dancing body draws directly from the production of American empire and its implementation. This representational coupling of exceptionality with the Filipino dancing body coincides with the established metaphors of United States imperialism. Filipino Studies scholars, most notably Oscar Campomanes, have linked “American exceptionalism” to the denial of U.S. imperialism and to the “historical amnesia” surrounding the U.S. invasion of the Philippines (1997).⁵ Epifanio San Juan Jr., a leading scholar of the U.S. invasion in the Philippines, offers this critique: “The United States as a political formation is ‘exceptional,’ according to the Establishment historians, because it did not follow the European path to colonial expansion. The discourse and practice of ‘American exceptionalism’ as part of Cold War strategy has been criticized acutely . . . as an outgrowth of technocratic modernization and developmentalist thought” (1998, 16). Within the context of U.S. empire in the Philippines, exceptionalism emerges as a hegemonic construct that forgets the calculated pursuit of the Philippines by the United States. Furthermore, it erases the violent implementation of American imperial rule in the Philippines.

Of significance here is that the trope of exceptionalism problematically sanctions, even mandates, the violations of U.S. empire.⁶ A related project of sanctioned imperial amnesia, I want to suggest, emerges within the myriad depictions of the Filipino body as exceptional. Routed through the “splendid” discourse of Filipino dancing, the language of exceptionality instead sediments and extends U.S. colonial modes of commodification and racism. Taxi dancehalls, for instance, facilitated one of the few spaces of social interaction between Americans and Filipinos. Within spaces such as the taxi dancehalls, the spectacle of the Filipino dancing body emerges as a vibrant and potentially violating instantiation of the effects of U.S. imperialism. This “brown menace’s” “splendid dancing” is a corporeal testament to one of the key anxieties of American men.⁷ Filipinos competed for jobs in a rapidly shrinking American labor market, even as American men warily regarded Filipinos and their appeal to white women as *the problem* of the decade. Unlike “other Orientals,” whose masculinity was defined as asexual, the Filipino’s supposed hypersexuality fueled the very fire that ignited their eventual exclusion. Part of my contention here is that the persistent reading of Filipino corporeality (as “splendid dancers and passionate lovers of white women”) through the lens of exceptionality equally circulates and corrupts the very languages of U.S. imperialism.

In what follows, I explore the following questions: What do we make of the charac-

terization of the Filipino dancing body as exceptional within the context of heightened anti-Filipino U.S. politics? How do we understand the complimentary descriptions of the Filipino on the dance floor, when *outside* the dancehalls these “beloved” patrons were being hunted by white mobs? Was the dancehall a haven from the violence of anti-Filipino sentiments, and did dancing in fact transcend the battles between anti-immigrant nativists and their “problem”?⁸ In this essay I propose an understanding of the exceptional Filipino dancing body through a set of overlapping readings that can be differentiated in political, historical, and performative terms. The first section introduces the Filipino dancing body as an “archival embodiment” of the anti-Filipino sentiments of the 1920s and 1930s. Here, I engage with the existing scholarship on Filipino dancing in taxi dancehalls, specifically the perception of dancing within and against various social forces. The next section examines what I term the geopolitics of the taxi dancehalls and details the racial workings of the taxi dancehalls that fueled anti-Filipino sentiments. The analytic of geopolitics shifts the understanding of taxi dancehalls as solely an urban sociocultural formation, as characterized by early taxi dancehall scholars, to being a complex social institution shaped by foreign policy, immigrant communities, and race politics. The last section returns to the Filipino dancing body in the taxi dancehalls as a figure of what Catherine Ceniza Choy (2003) calls “corporeal colonization.” Framed within the concept of corporeal colonization, the Filipino’s “dazzling steps” and “splendid dancing” are thus situated alongside the American empire’s spectacularization of the Filipino body as inferior, infectious, and ultimately savage.

Taxi Dancehalls, Immigrants, and Social Relations

The Filipino dancing body in the taxi dancehalls presents “an archival embodiment” of a crucial moment in Filipino American history.⁹ As has been previously noted, the taxi dancehalls and their Filipino patrons played critical roles in the landmark Tydings-McDuffie Act. The Tydings-McDuffie Act, paradoxically also called the Philippine Independence Act and the Filipino Exclusion Act, was passed in 1934. It declared the Philippines independent, thereby changing the legal designation of Filipinos from nationals to aliens and, consequently, limiting Filipino immigration to the United States to fifty persons per year.¹⁰ Nativist sentiments in the form of violence against Filipinos marked a distinct shift in the racial and social status of Filipinos both within and outside the United States. The Filipinos’ exceptional dancing thus gathers its representational significance within the fraught historical context of U.S.-Philippine relations. What is key here is that many anti-Filipino attacks occurred in social settings such as taxi dancehalls rather than in work places. Scholars of Filipino American history, immigrant labor, and racial violence have noted the prominence of taxi dancehalls in the increased and marked violence against Filipinos.¹¹ My particular focus is on the Filipino dancing body as “an archival embodiment” of the link between immigration, foreign policy, social institutions, and Filipino corporeal colonization. More precisely, archival embodiment gestures to the corpus of Filipino American history and records, choreographed by and onto the Filipino body.

Early sociological scholarship on the taxi dancehalls, specifically by scholars from the emerging American School of Sociology in Chicago at that time and eventually in other American universities, situates its emergence within a period of transition. The development of an urban culture and commercialized mass entertainment ushered in new forms of sociality. Growth of urban spaces also meant increased crime, delinquency amongst youth, and tension between new bodies of people interacting. The American School of Sociology in Chicago produced scholarly assessments of the role of taxi dancehalls in the changing social landscape of burgeoning urban spaces. In a republished version of Cressey's *Taxi-Dance Hall* in 1969, Ronald Vanderkooi refers to the taxi dancehall as a "transitory social institution, developed to meet certain needs in an American era of rapid urbanization and dramatic cultural exchange" (xi). Taxi dancehalls thrived in cities because urban life, as sociologists such as Cressey and Ernest Burgess (an instrumental figure in the formation of the American School of Sociology in Chicago) concluded, prioritized the individual and did not facilitate social integration. Taxi dancehalls were commercialized recreation and fostered "casual association" versus wholesome expression. The taxi dancehall was constructed as an institutional testament to the disappearance of a collective way of life.

Early scholars of taxi dancehalls characterized their methodological approach to social processes as systemic, objective, and empirical. However, their analyses were clearly marked by anti-immigrant bias, framed as reform or a period of social transition. Cressey's study, with a preface written by Burgess (1932), repeatedly laments the new social relations fostered by the taxi dancehalls, pointing to "the loss of community-oriented recreations to large scale commercial forms" (Vanderkooi 1969, xiii). This bemoaning of a "collective way of life" reads as a cautionary tale for the immigrant communities' invasion of the public sphere.¹² It is significant that these studies circulated beyond conventional academic readership. For example, Cressey served as a caseworker and special investigator for the Juvenile Protective Association while he was conducting his research on taxi dancehalls.

Despite such early moral leanings, scholarship on Filipinos in the taxi dancehalls has by and large been productive and generative in analyzing the ways in which a racialized immigrant community negotiated its presence in a dynamic public social space. For example, in his 1934 M.A. thesis at the University of Southern California (USC), Benicio Catapusan Jr., under the aegis of the eminent sociologist-scholar Emory Bogardus, researched the social activities of Filipinos in Los Angeles. Catapusan specifically examined taxi dancehalls and pool halls to describe Filipino immigrants' social adjustment. More recently, scholars have turned to feminist theory and theories of racial and gender formation to extend and thicken our understanding of Filipino patrons' participation in the taxi dancehall economy. In her essay "'White Trash' Meets the 'Brown Monkeys,'" Rhacel Parreñas (1998) proposes a relational understanding of the Filipino patrons' and the white taxi dancers' social formation in the taxi dancehalls, concluding that an alliance emerged between these two based on their immigrant worker status as well as their deviant sexuality. Linda Maram, in *Creating Masculinity in Los Angeles's Little Manila* (2006), discusses Filipinos in taxi dancehalls within the context of policing youth immigrants of

color. Both Parreñas and Maram comment on the meaning of dance for Filipino patrons within histories of gender, race, immigration, and the taxi dancehall. For Parreñas, dancing counters the subjectification and disciplining of Filipino men “through the maximization of their bodies as machines” (1998, 120).¹³ For Maram, Filipino dressing and dancing in the taxi dancehalls are alternative ways of being, beyond being workers subjected to harsh labor conditions. Such an approach regards the Filipino dancing body as contrary to the much-maligned Filipino masculinity. Other scholars contend that the Filipino dancing body in taxi dancehalls is crucial evidence of the presence and contributions of Filipinos in the American cultural fabric.¹⁴

For the purpose of this essay, I am interested in quite a different problematic, one that explores the exceptionality of the Filipino body without recourse *only* to its resistant potentiality. I want to be clear here that my aim is not to facilely elide early readings; rather, I am committed to expanding the scholarship to include questions of aesthetics, performance, and culture—to suggest, in other words, that the trope of exceptionalism in the form of aesthetic accolade can also work to contain and domesticate the unwieldy colonized Filipino body. Dancing in taxi dancehalls clearly worked as a profound spectacle of colonial mimicry. On the one hand, mimicry here is the strictest form of ideological disciplining; after all, dancing bodies are *not* overtly being prompted to dance splendidly for the master. On the other hand, it is also the ultimate corporeal evidence of the “success” of the American imperial project: in just two decades, Filipinos have progressed from savage to civilized, shimmying their way into American society. Yet, the Filipino’s mastery of “Occidental ways” equally enacts the worst nightmare of those who had foreseen the effects of the conquest of the Philippines.¹⁵

Filipino patrons’ “splendid dancing” and “dazzling performance” clearly require complex historical analysis that is mindful of the dangers of hypostatizing their kinesthetic abilities. In other words, what is the material history of the Filipino dancing body? How did the Filipino gain this infamous kinesthetic knowledge that garnered such attention and caused much tension in the taxi dancehall? Dancing as a kinesthetic practice performs sociality and facilitates corporeal relation, often rendered as liberatory because of the fantasy of a shared space.¹⁶ Dancehall dancing is viewed as an unregulated, unmediated, and uninhibited movement. Yet, dance cannot be totally uninhibited or unregulated. Sociality in the dancehall, through dancing, is also about the negotiation of power. Dance moves are measured and calculated, structuring a relation or exchange that is about power. The “splendid dancing” of Filipinos in the taxi dancehall gained attention, yet it did not necessarily gain the Filipinos a sense of belonging outside the dancehall. In fact, this very performance of bodily knowledge and ability further enhanced Filipino difference and contributed to the hostility toward Filipinos.

The Geopolitics of Taxi Dancehalls

I view the taxi dancehalls as a differentiated space of consolation and condemnation for Filipinos. As noted, the taxi dancehall was a prominent space of anti-Filipino sentiments that led up to the Philippine Independence Act. Immigration, foreign policy, and race

relations substantially impacted the functioning of this social public space. Filipino immigrant social interaction within these public spaces was thus highly regulated, and they were not simply a safe haven for dancing and leisure.¹⁷ Forms of control included surveillance by the police as well as white patrons who hung out in these social establishments waiting for “something” to happen.¹⁸ Euphemistically involved in “waiting” processes, white men regularly harassed and intimidated Filipinos.

An analysis of the location of the dancehalls provides a clearer insight into the geopolitics of these spaces in the 1920s and 1930s. Cressey coins the term “interstitial areas” to describe the location of the taxi dancehalls. He notes that they were “in the central business district and the rooming house area, near the residence of a majority of its regular patrons,” or at least easily accessible to potential patrons through public transportation (1932, 224, 226). Aptly termed “interstitial,” these areas fell outside the moral radar of the “community conscious” and were thus not predisposed to protest or policing. Many taxi dancehalls were concentrated in Los Angeles’s downtown area. Shifting boundaries and increasing ethnic and racial communities characterized the city’s growth as the “downtown and central district . . . housed more than half the population” in 1919. But by 1929, “less than a third of the population lived in the downtown, East Los Angeles, Hollywood, and Wilshire districts” (Tygiel 2001, 2).¹⁹ One of the taxi dancehalls frequented by Filipino patrons was the Hippodrome Dance Palace in South Main Street. Once known as the Adolphous, the Hippodrome was a site of various forms of nightlife activities. It opened as the largest vaudeville house in 1911, with a capacity of 2,100 people. The Hippodrome routinely competed as one of the most popular vaudeville and movie houses in Los Angeles until the decline of vaudeville as popular entertainment in the early 1930s. It appears that the Hippodrome was simultaneously a vaudeville theater (which also showed pictures) with a taxi dancehall on the second floor.²⁰ In this instance, this social space was already identifiable as an establishment of commercial entertainment, frequented by a variety of patrons. Filipinos also patronized other Main Street dancehalls, such as the One Eleven Dance Hall and Danceland, and the Rizal Cabaret on Spring Street (Catapusan 1934, 45).

During this period of transition, new residents of Los Angeles were developing a proprioceptive awareness of the city and one another. Jules Tygiel’s introductory summary in *Metropolis in the Making* describes the interaction between the “overwhelmingly Caucasian and Protestant” Angelenos and the migrants displaced in Los Angeles:

The Ku Klux Klan found a ready following in the 1920s Southern California. Employers in many industries, especially the expanding white-collar sector, as Clark Davis illustrates, sought to hire only “red-blooded Americans.” According to Hise, the “imaginative geographies” envisioned by local leaders and planners stressed whites-only policies, and zoning in towns like Torrance specifically barred non-Caucasians. Restrictive housing covenants in most sections of the region prevented nonwhites from moving in. The Legal Committee of the NAACP, writes Flammig, found ample work warding off police brutality against minorities and segregation in housing and public swimming pools. Exclusion persisted even in death. At Forest Lawn, notes Sloane, “only people of Caucasian descent were welcome to purchase lots.” (2001, 8)²¹

Filipino Americans were also subjected to the racism already plaguing Los Angeles. In his memoir, Manuel Buaken records the racist practices against Filipinos in Los Angeles by way of segregation in the 1920s. He writes of the repeated rejection in his search for a place to live. An excerpt of *I Have Lived with the American People* reads:

These flats around Pico Boulevard were also built to cater to the discriminating public, yet the rents ranged from \$25 to \$50 monthly. . . . Since my friends and I were also financially able to rent a similarly priced flat, I tried one of these. But the lady said, "I am sorry, Orientals are not allowed here."

I went to the next house. Striding to the door again and beginning in the usual manner, I greeted another dignified lady. "What do you want here?" was her question, fired at me before I had a chance to speak. I replied, "I wanted to rent a place to live." She snapped at me, "Only whites, in this neighborhood." I tried the other six vacant flats on this street, and I got the bitter and more tumultuous reply "no," in all of them. (1948, 68)

Segregation and exclusionary practices based on racism operated in taxi dancehalls as well. Few Filipinos were to be found in taxi dancehalls such as the Liberty (later reopened under the name Tiffany Dance Hall), Olympic, and Royal Palais. Some dancehalls unapologetically refused entrance to Filipinos and Chinese.²² Such exclusionary practice was rendered as a way to manage the possible violence that might (and did) ensue between the Filipino and white patrons. This preventive logic sought to protect the interests of the business owners, their clients, and their workers. An alternative cause of segregation was the alleged "preyed upon by every leech" Filipino men, who would "give anything to get the attention and date from the 'white' taxi dancer." In an ironic twist, "popular dance halls were closed to protect naïve *Filipino men* from predatory *white women*" (Park 2004, 115). On this occasion, however, the taxi dancers, mostly Eastern European immigrants and Mexican Americans, were rendered the aggressors, and the Filipino patrons were infantilized as "naïve," subject to trickery and fleeing by gold-digging taxi dancers. Here, barring Filipinos and other racialized patrons was justified through a discourse of protection and security. The figure of the antagonist and the injured party may have been reversed, but the racism motivating this system of segregation clearly continued.

Relatedly, taxi dancehall development in the 1920s and 1930s accommodated growth and expansion largely due to migrant and immigrant communities. Immigrant destinations were not simply concentrated in cities. They were in rural towns such as Palm Beach (Salinas Valley), Watsonville (Salinas Valley), Stockton (Delta Region), and El Centro (Imperial Valley). Such activity is writ large in the many headlines of the day: "Recent Filipino riots at *Watsonville* and *Exeter* began with fisticuffs over 'taxi dance hall' girls"; "*El Centro*: Dancers Held in Shooting: Shot through the back and stabbed through the stomach." The following details the historic anti-Filipino riot in Watsonville: "a mob (of white men and boys) attempted to storm the Palm Beach premises. . . . The boys were aware that several white girls were living on the premises and working in the dance hall there."²³ These descriptions disrupt the dominant reading of Filipino patrons in taxi dancehalls as primarily an urban cultural phenomenon. As is evident from the headlines,

the characterization of Filipino patrons as disruptive does not change, even as one shifts from city centers to rural outposts of the U.S. landscape.

The emergence of taxi dancehalls in the rural towns can be attributed to the migrants working in these arterial agricultural towns. As Brett Melendy, a noted scholar of early twentieth-century immigrant labor in the United States, writes: “The state’s farming regions—The Imperial Valley, San Joaquin Valley, Delta Region, and Salinas Valley—relied upon cheap migratory labor to produce a variety of crops. During the 1920s most Filipinos in the Delta area, near Stockton, worked in the asparagus fields. The Salinas Valley, another major Filipino center, has over the years provided seasonal work in the lettuce fields and packing sheds” (1974, 527). In the 1920s El Centro was also becoming the central town of Imperial Valley, rapidly increasing in size. At this time, Watsonville underwent severe changes as it shifted from a largely apple-producing town to a lettuce-producing area. By 1930 lettuce interests had transformed the economy as corporations took over the agricultural industry, reducing wages and creating deplorable labor conditions (Dewitt 1976, 42). Of interest to my argument, taxi dancehalls in nonurban towns such as El Centro, Stockton, Exeter, Watsonville, and Palm Beach were the seat of anti-Filipino sentiments and movements that would come to a head in the 1930s. Howard Dewitt’s writings on anti-Filipino movements astutely recognize the *centrality* of taxi dancehalls: “Taxi dance halls brought the first organized resistance to Filipinos in the labor market” (1976, 18). He concludes that the “rise of an anti-Filipino movement was a complex phenomena, and it was related to social, economic, and political tension” (38).

The volatility of taxi dancehalls is apparent in most histories of the region. In January 1930 a mob of white men attacked Filipinos in Watsonville. This riot, which lasted for days, fomented in a newly opened taxi dancehall in nearby Palm Beach. Anti-Filipino sentiments had been building, but the Watsonville riot became a focal point in the deliberations for the legislation that would become the Tydings-McDuffie Act.²⁴ The Watsonville riot was an often-cited incident in arguments for Filipino exclusion by way of Philippine independence.²⁵ Influential local, state, and national aldermen who proposed anti-Filipino/exclusion resolutions, such as Judge Rohrbach, Representative Richard Welch, V. S. McClatchy, and Senator Samuel Shortridge, used the catalytic incident in the Palm Beach taxi dancehall to support their cause.²⁶

It is worth noting here that the actions that led up to the declaration of Philippine independence were centrally motivated by racism against Filipinos. By declaring Philippine independence, the legal status of Filipinos would shift from national to alien. Whereas their standing as nationals afforded Filipinos mobility, they would no longer have such privileges once they became “aliens.” As nationals, they were able to migrate up and the down the Pacific coast and to and from Hawaii, following the trails of seasonal labor. Those who most benefited from the status of Filipinos as nationals were large corporations who had control of agri-business and other businesses booming at this time. Once declared aliens, Filipinos forfeited their mobility, even as they had ironically been granted “independence” from U.S. control. Just as the Filipino migrant workers were afforded mobility in urban and rural California, across the continental United States, and in Hawaii and Alaska, Filipino patrons also performed an adept mobility in the

taxi dancehalls. Both instances of Filipino corporeal mobility, however, are examples of sanctioned and detrimental itinerancy. Movement is granted, and celebrated, only at the expense of the laboring Filipino body. I will now elaborate further on the connections between the Filipino dancing body and corporeal colonization.

Corporeal Colonization: Disciplining through Movement

The Filipino dancing body, as a physical metaphor of Filipinos' ambivalent status as an American colonial subject, is an archival embodiment of Filipino corporeal colonization through dance. The disciplining of the Filipino immigrant body dates to prior to his arrival in the United States. His "knowledge of American ways" began in the colonizing of the Philippines in the late nineteenth century. Two decades into U.S. rule in the Philippines, Filipinos were already dancing, singing, and performing American popular culture brilliantly.²⁷ This brief article in the *New York Times* in 1922 captures the threat and panic setting into the American psyche as it encountered the effects of U.S. colonial rule in the Philippines:

FILIPINOS APT ON STAGE, SOON WILL BE EXPORTING STARS,
SAYS MANILA THEATRICAL MAN

Stage stars soon will be coming here from the Philippines, according to F. S. Churchill, a theatrical producer of Manila . . . "For the past twenty years American vaudeville has been exceedingly popular in the Philippines," said Mr. Churchill, "but the distance we are from the United States has made it an expensive proposition for us to offer Occidental amusement. Therefore, of necessity, we have had to train the local talent and I must say they have proved able entertainers. They are most apt in singing and dancing acts. Each year they grow more clever and American and European stages will be invaded by the Philippine artists before long."

This news article predicts, or rather warns of, the impending face-off between the colonizers and their colonial subjects. By the end of the decade, the confrontation had moved into the taxi dancehalls. There, patrons engaged with the visible and live effects of "forgotten" American imperialism in the form of the kinesthetically "gifted" Filipino on the dance floor. The touted invasion of Philippine artists arrives in full force in taxi dancehalls. Joseph Roach's meditations on the linkages between mimicry, performance, and identity speak directly to the colonial panic surrounding the arrival of the "gifted" Filipinos. Roach argues that "performances propose possible candidates for succession" whereby "the anxiety generated by the process of substitution justifies the complicity of memory and forgetting" (1996, 6). In true Calibanesque fashion, even as the Filipino dancing body excels in the "gift" of the master language, its arrival and success exposes the limits and dangers of such exchanges.

Catherine Ceniza Choy's concept of "corporeal colonization" further elaborates on the process through which the American colonial project was enacted on its Filipino subjects, more specifically on the Filipino body (2003).²⁸ Prior to the 1920s the spectacle

of Filipino corporeal colonization was disparately present within the U.S. cultural imaginary. Choy cites the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair to elaborate on her idea of "corporeal colonization." Over one thousand Filipinos from various regions were displayed; most popular were the "Dog-eating and head-hunting tribal savages." In the context of the taxi dancehalls, Choy's concept of "corporeal colonization" must necessarily be expanded to include the workings of American popular dance and music, fashion, and social mores as part of ideological state apparatus that extend U.S. cultural hegemony. Unlike violent reinforcement through repressive state apparatus such as the police or military, American popular dance and music operated more ideologically and thus insidiously.²⁹ American imperial ideology became (and continues to be) naturalized through seemingly benign technologies of cultural expressions. Racial and cultural superiority of American ways was imposed through ideological state apparatus, creating a hierarchical system that displaced already existing Filipino cultural practices. That is, just as the Filipino becomes exceptional through his exuberant translation of American modes of dance and performance, no mention is ever made of how and if Filipino performance traditions permeate such renditions of colonial mimicry.

In focusing here on U.S. colonial implementation through culture, specifically dance and performance, I am not suggesting that American colonialism was primarily responsible for the transmission of Western dance and cultural practices. After all, Spain had colonized the Philippines for more than three hundred years before the arrival of the Americans. Spanish cultural practices have been so thoroughly incorporated within the daily life of Filipinos that they are often read as indigenously Filipino. The history of Filipino corporeal colonization thus clearly extends beyond the American imperial invasion. Such longer histories of colonialism are even evident in the American characterizations of the Filipino dancers. For example, taxi dancer Jeanne de la Moureau (1931) and sociologist Paul Cressey (1932) both take note of the "Filipino's Passion" and his gentlemanly ways, which they both credit to the Filipino's "latin blood."³⁰ Within such formulations, the Filipino's "splendid dancing" must necessarily be read as both an effect of, and a response to, multiple and variegated genealogies of colonialism and performance.

The language of corporeal colonization also allows us to complicate existing interpretations of Filipino "splendid dancing." As argued earlier, previous scholarship on the taxi dancehalls cast dance as liberatory within a restrictive and exclusionary system. Scholars contrast the vibrant Filipino dancing body to the mute Filipino worker's body that is contained, exhausted, and made to perform monotonous physical labor. Thus, dance and the dancing body become the enduring corporeal evidence of Filipino resilience, agency, and perseverance despite all odds. The Filipino dancing body (in all its privileged exceptionality) becomes a rousing avatar of "kinesthesia's pull against other representational frames" (Desmond 1997, 18). My turn to the concept of corporeal colonization emphasizes the conditions of possibility that create "splendid dancing" and monotonous physical labor. Corporeal colonization allows me to connect two seemingly competing sites through the leveling practices and ideology of U.S. empire. In both cases, the labor of the Filipino body becomes the representational playing field for the enactment of violent forms of social and political control.

Such forms of control are enacted visibly within taxi dancehalls. Each taxi dancehall had its own codes of “citizenship” or belonging, with the Filipino patron’s “reputation” about his kinesthetic ability securing him access to some of the taxi dancers. Indeed, the rules of conduct on the taxi hall dance floor, although not disconnected from the outside world, had different criteria. Filipino patrons gained recognition because of their “splendid dancing,” “their dazzling suits,” and their gentlemanly (nonsensual) behavior in the hall. Their visibility and acceptability on the taxi dance floor was based on their ability to perform and to dazzle with their skills of mimicry as good colonial (albeit unacknowledged) subjects. Yet, these markers of recognition highlight the Filipino performing body as excess. That is, the very markers that make Filipinos visible are also the very signs that make impossible their acceptability in and belonging to American political, social, and cultural fabric. Kinesthetic ability, although a marker of skill and popularity, does not guarantee national belonging or national citizenship. The Filipino patron’s knowledge of and ease with American ways—including the latest dance steps—strays from the script set for racialized, immigrant, worker bodies.

A closer look at the exceptional Filipino dancing body reveals that it was never too far away from the American empire’s disciplining of the colonial subject. The Filipino body’s smooth gliding across the dance floor was inseparable from the growing threat of miscegenation and contagion. Nativists’ paranoia about miscegenation and contagion (in the form of moral and physical concerns) converged repeatedly on the errant Filipino dancing body. Filipinos in taxi dancehalls are routinely narrated as the corporeal icon for miscegenation between Filipinos and white women, even as those narrations continue to be challenged and negated. Fears of the Filipino’s “hypersexuality” gathered force through “conclusive” observations by “area” experts such as David Barrows.³¹ Barrows, a University of California at Berkeley professor, a University of California president, and secretary of education for the Philippine government, testified at the United States House of Representatives Committee on Immigration and Naturalization on the “cause” of Filipino “problems”: “an aroused sexual passion and natural tendency for vice and crime” (qtd. in Dewitt 1976, 46). Barrows, of course, is not the only one to make such incendiary claims. “Contagion,” the other staple of moral concern, is an established motif in colonial rule. The works of Choy, Nayan Shah (*Contagious Divide* [2001]), and Warwick Anderson (*Colonial Pathologies* [2006]) specifically explore contagion by linking U.S. empire, Asians/Filipinos, health, and bodily reform. Barbara Browning’s *Infectious Rhythm* is particularly useful because it provides a connecting conversation between “metaphors of contagion,” race, pathogen, and culture. “Metaphors of contagion,” she notes, “often take seemingly benign forms (‘infectious rhythm’ as a dispersal of joy), but can also often lead to hostile, even violent, reactions to cultural expressions” (1998, 7). Browning’s observation is useful in looking at the collapsing of physical and moral discourse regarding Filipinos in the taxi dancehalls. Popular and scholarly discourse on Filipinos and the taxi dancehalls did not make a distinction between the new immigrants’ *conditions* of living and *ways* of living. The infamous resolution passed by the Northern Monterey Chamber of Commerce specifically charged Filipinos of “living unhealthily . . . sometimes fifteen or more sleep in one or two rooms” (Dewitt 1976, 92). The taxi dancehalls, with all their promise of

intimacy and mobility, were a perfect target for the fear of infection as Filipino dancing bodies collapsed sanctified distances of race and gender.

Headlines such as “Taxi Dancers Start Filipinos on the Wrong Foot” (1920) illustrate the possible infections exchanged in such an establishment. The taxi dancers are accused of being lascivious and predatory, and they are the ones who will corrupt and infect gullible and defenseless Filipino migrants. Once again, the trope of the infantilized colonial subject is invoked. Combating such infantilization of Filipinos are equally problematic declarations of Filipino moral superiority. In 1931 Amado Dino, the editor of a U.S. publication entitled *The Filipino Youth*, wrote a statement against the taxi dancehalls and Filipinos in the *Seattle Review*: “these young men are dragged down by such degenerate and low association, the result of which is an utter detriment to the manhood of Filipino youths.” He goes on to say “Therefore, we Filipinos are to blame. . . . One remedy for this is our government to RESTRICT the coming of Filipinos to America and Hawaii, but most emphatically to America” (1931, 8). Dino critiques the U.S. racist perception that Filipinos fawn over white women just because they are white. For Dino, Filipinos are emphatically morally superior, and their association with the taxi dancers is a mere social necessity, open to condemnation and refusal.

The physical benefits of dancing were equally a subject of these moral debates. In a telling example, a taxi dancer responds strongly to the denouncements of dancing in taxi dancehalls as a reproachable activity for Filipinos. Writing in the *Philippine Advocate*, Emily Angelo (1930) proposes dancing as a healthy and enjoyable form of physical release:

Since the boys have come back from Alaska, it's all for one and one for all. Who is to gain and who is to lose? Gambling houses or taxi dancers? Arroyo, in his last article of this paper encouraged gambling and discouraged taxi dancing. I, a taxi dancer, encourage neither, but can honestly state that a man in gambling can certainly lose more in fifteen minutes of gambling than in six hours of dancing provided he doesn't meet some of these vicious gold-diggers, so to speak. All of us know that gambling is a detriment to proper sanitation whereas in the proper form of dancing we can derive relaxation of mind and a source of exercise and poise.

Angelo favors the activity of dancing as a healthy physical and mental outlet. Her comment carefully disentangles dancing from the vice of gambling and from related terrains of criminality. As an activity in itself, dancing, we are told, is not morally reprehensible, unlike gambling, which involves a loss and danger to one's life and property. What is key here are Angelo's careful efforts to evacuate any and all discussions of “morality” from dancing. She minimizes the connotation of dance as an inherently sensual activity and focuses instead on a safer mythos of relaxation and exercise. Taxihall dancers were certainly not “vicious gold-diggers.” Despite such careful semantic moves, it remains indisputable that social dance involved social exchange (a different mode of gambling), and, as I have argued, power relations clearly choreographed the “relaxing” effects of dancing in taxi dancehalls in the 1920s and 1930s.

There were other less flattering accounts of taxi dancehall dancing that dismissed Angelo's call for such healthy habits. An early study of Filipino immigrant life in Los Angeles in the 1930s contends that taxi dancehalls were in fact detrimental to one's health and "fostered a lifestyle that required late nights" (Catapusan 1934, 50). Such a practice, Catapusan argues, diminishes worker productivity and morale as workers endure sleepless nights in search of pleasure at the taxi dancehalls. Catapusan ends his study by unequivocally declaring dancing in taxi dancehalls as noxious and detrimental to Filipino prosperity and progress.

Conclusion

The Filipino dancing body performs multiple functions: it is a corporeal metaphor for the ambivalent status of Filipinos as U.S. colonial subjects; it provides an archival embodiment of anti-Filipino movement through dance; and, finally, it serves as material evidence of the "success" of the American imperial project. While this essay challenges romanticized readings of Filipino dancing as a figuration of resilience and resistance, it is equally clear that the disciplining of colonial subjects through dance (or any other bodily expression) does not foreclose the possibility of enjoyment or subversion. I have instead attempted to link the exceptionality of U.S. empire to the exceptionality of "splendid dancing" by Filipinos in the taxi dancehalls. Terms such as the geopolitics of the taxi dancehalls have further illustrated the spatial continuity of the racist workings of the U.S. empire in the domestic sphere. Through an elaboration on the concept of corporeal colonization, I have labored to situate this icon of Filipino corporeality within the machinations of U.S. cultural hegemony. There is perhaps some risk involved in foregrounding the contradictory role Filipino dancehall patrons had within the project of U.S. empire. My attempt here has been to extend the field of historical signification within which such iconic figures are placed. "Splendid dancing," ultimately, must make way for more enduring analysis. If not, we bypass the knowledge afforded to us by such figures of historical possibility.

Notes

I would like to thank Paul Scolieri for his encouragement and feedback upon hearing a version of this essay. Priya Srinivasan and Sansan Kwan deserve much acknowledgement for working with me on the different stages of this essay. Conversations with Cindy Garcia during the early conceptualization of this work were generative and helpful. I also benefited from comments shared by Viet Nguyen and David Román, who generously invited me to be part of the USC Center for Women's and Gender Studies and UCLA's Center for the Study of Women Junior Faculty Exchange. Lastly, I extend my gratitude to Anjali Arondekar for her careful reading and her challenging questions, as always.

1. Cressey (1932) dedicates an entire chapter to the Filipino patron, while one chapter focuses on several "types" of patrons. Cressey's typological study also included types of dancers and dancehalls. Varied spellings of "taxi dancehalls" are used in the scholarship. Throughout this essay, I use the term "dancehall" as one word. When I cite other's usage, I maintain their spelling of the word.

2. The McIntosh suit was the most fashionable and expensive American men's suit in the early decades of the twentieth century. Linda Maram, in her study of Filipino American masculinity in Los Angeles, notes: "Dressing up in the latest style was always important to Filipinos, in part because a snazzy ensemble transformed brown bodies from overworked, exploited laborers to symbols of sensuality, style, and pleasure" (2006, 138). Maram proposes that Filipinos challenged the customized ready-to-wear, mass-manufactured clothing because it had to be "tailored and refashioned to fit the shorter brown body" (2006, 139–40).

3. There are accounts that compete with this rendition of the Filipinos as perfect gentlemen in the taxi dancehalls. Clyde Vedder, in his 1947 dissertation, records an observation of "dancing that was thoroughly immoral": "Couples dance or whirl about the floor with their bodies pressed tightly together, shaking, moving, and rotating their lower portions to rouse their sex impulses. Some even engage in 'biting' one another on the lobes of the ears and upon the neck" (183). These competing narratives could be attributed to the different historical periods of the projects. Although they may only be a difference of a few years, the years leading up to and following the passing of the Tydings-McDuffie Act may provide some insights to these competing narratives.

4. In his formative study of the American taxi dancehalls, Cressey comments on the Filipino patrons' dexterity on the dance floor and their familiarity with the music and the latest dance steps. Such are the "Filipinos Occidental ways," more specifically American ways, Cressey says, that have "contributed" to Filipino life in the Philippines. He adds, however, that unlike his fellow "Orientals," "the Filipinos . . . assimilated all too rapidly" (1932, 149).

5. Numerous scholars have continually challenged the notion of "American exceptionality," including Stephen Shalom and Daniel Boone Schirmer (1987).

6. There is, of course, a related but slightly different genealogy of the term "exception," explored most notably in the work of scholars such as Giorgio Agamben. I am more interested here in the relation between performance, state apparatuses, and structures of imperialism.

7. "The brown menace" was used to describe Filipino men during the time of the anti-Filipino movement.

8. An editorial published in the *Watsonville Evening Parajonian* on October 30, 1929, was titled "The Filipino Is This State's Next Problem."

9. I draw from David Roman's (2003) excellent formulation of "archival embodiment"; he argues for the constitutive role of dance in pre- and post-Stonewall queer life.

10. Filipino immigration was largely facilitated by labor demands from the agricultural, canning, and fishery industries, who wanted to replace other "Oriental" laboring bodies—specifically Japanese and Chinese workers. Many scholars have argued for the link between Chinese and Japanese exclusion and the recruitment of Filipino labor. See Bruno Lasker (1969), Carey McWilliams (1964), and Dorothy Fujita-Rony (2003). See also Asian American history books such as Sucheng Chan's *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (1991) and Ronald Takaki's *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (1989). There is an exception to the restricted number of Filipino immigrants allowed into the United States in the case of Filipino workers who were allowed to enter Hawaii to work on the Hawaiian plantations. The Hawaiian Sugar Planters lobbied for additional numbers of Filipinos as plantation workers whenever they needed more workers. However, Filipinos in Hawaii were not permitted to proceed to the continental United States, except for "limited circumstances." It was not until 1946 that the quota was increased to one hundred individuals per year and Filipinos were eligible for citizenship status.

11. See the works of Bruno Lasker (1969), Emory Bogardus ([1930] 1976), Howard Dewitt (1976), Brett Melendy (1972), Mae Ngai (2004), John Park (2004), Ronald Takaki (1989). See also Geoffrey Dunn and Mark Schwartz's *A Dollar a Day, Ten Cents a Dance: An Historic Portrait of Filipino Farmworkers in America* (1984), a documentary film of early Filipino immigration in the United States. Numerous creative works have been inspired by the narrative of Filipinos in American taxi dancehalls of the early twentieth century. Some of the works include plays/performances by Theo

Gonzalves (1993), Chay Yew (2002), Alleluia Panis (2003), and Marina Feleo Gonzales (1987); poems by Al Robles (1993) and Catalina Cariaga (1993); and a short story by Veronica Montes (2005). In a chapter in progress, I discuss this critical turn in Filipino American Studies. I argue that the Filipino dancing body in taxi dancehalls has been a productive inspiration, mobilized in Filipino and Asian American historical narratives. I complicate this recuperation of the abjected Filipino body that finds consolation in performance and performative sites, such as the taxi dancehall spaces, where pathologies of race and gender appear to be transcended. In these narratives that mobilize Filipinos in taxi dancehalls, Filipino bodies are granted the centrality denied elsewhere.

12. Randy McBee's *Dance Hall Days* (2000) is a study of European working-class immigrant communities' heterosocial and homosocial practices in taxi dancehalls. McBee argues that the dancehall was a site for negotiations of shifting gender identities between immigrant European men and women. This work makes central the role of dancehalls in working-class immigrant communities' leisure time but underplays issues of race and racism.

13. It is important to note, however, that Parreñas mindfully differentiates the signification of dance and dancing for the taxi dancers.

14. See also an essay on Filipinos and hip-hop by Victor Viesca, "With Style: Filipino Americans and the Making of Urban Culture" (2003), and hip-hop artist apl de ap's *Bebot* Generation I music video.

15. For more on the project of colonial mimicry, see Homi Bhabha's often-cited essay, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" (1994).

16. Paraphrased from Roman (2003).

17. Maram (2006) similarly argues that taxi dancehalls were a site through which state authorities policed youth of color.

18. McBee notes: "The use of violence or intimidation often produced the results for which these men [white men] may have been looking. A week after the gang fight at the Plaza Dancing School, no Filipino men were present, while the controversy attracted an unusually large number of 'American' men either fascinated by the prospect of seeing Filipino men dance with the 'white' women or eager to take part in the possible melee and help defend white 'American manhood'" (2000, 146).

19. Jules Tygiel comments that most of what is now Los Angeles took its form in the 1920s (2001, 2).

20. The second floor eventually becomes the Main Street Gym. A rich resource for historical cinemas in Los Angeles is the Cinema Treasures Web site: <http://www.cinematreasures.org>. It is devoted to movie theater preservation and awareness.

21. *Metropolis in the Making* (Sitton and Deverall 2001) is an impressive collection of essays that provides a varied, insightful glimpse at Los Angeles in its most formative years. The collection is attentive to the majority of migrants in those early years—Mexicans who were dislocated from the Mexican Revolution and African Americans from the South.

22. Cressey's discussion of segregation is based on "types": establishments that cater primarily to Filipino clients; establishments that "serve those who are antagonized by the presence of Orientals"; and establishments that permit sensual dancing (1932, 220).

23. These excerpts from January 1930 are cited from the *Evening Pajaronian* and the *Los Angeles Times*.

24. For an excellent account of the riots and critique of the popular and scholarly interpretations of the riot and its possible causes, see Howard Dewitt's *Anti-Filipino Movements* (1976) and Manuel Bauken's *I Have Lived with the American People* (1948). See also Emory Bogardus's "Anti-Filipino Race Riots" ([1930] 1976) for another report of the events leading up to and the riot.

25. This riot gained international attention when Fermin Tobera, a young farm worker, was killed. The Philippine government held a national funeral for Tobera. Filipino state officials criticized the killing and violence as racist attacks against Filipinos.

26. An observation gathered from the writings of Dewitt (1976).
27. In addition to establishing a colonial government, or a repressive state apparatus, through which the United States could enact its formal and material rule over Filipinos, the United States also set in motion ideological state apparatus through education, culture, and health care. See the collection *American Colonial State in the Philippines: Global Perspectives*, edited by Julian Go and Anne Foster (2003). On U.S. cultural imperialism in the Philippines, see *Vestiges of War* (2002), an anthology edited by Luis Francia and Angel Shaw, and *Brown River, White Ocean: An Anthology of Twentieth-Century Philippine Literature in English* (also edited by Francia, 1993).
28. Other works have specifically linked the American colonial project in the Philippines and the Filipino body. These works include Choy's *Empire of Care* and *Colonial Pathologies* by Warwick Anderson. Both works engage the body through discussion of health care, regulation, and U.S. empire. Related discussions of imperialism and U.S. colonial subject's embodiment include Vicente Rafael's *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History* (2000) on the implementation of the census during American colonial period; Michael Salman's *Embarrassment of Slavery* (2001) on Filipinos, slavery, and U.S. expansion; and Benito Vergara, Jr.'s *Displaying Filipinos* (1995) on photography as surveillance during the U.S. acquisition of the Philippines.
29. Of course, repressive state apparatus (RSAs) and ideological state apparatus (ISAs) are not mutually exclusive. See Althusser (1994).
30. I wish to thank the *DRJ* reviewer for encouraging me to address this aspect of the Philippines' multiple colonial histories.
31. Popular and scholarly references that represented Filipino men as "oversexed" at this time abound. Sociological and anthropological journals were littered with articles such as "Intermarriage in Los Angeles, 1924–1933" (Panunzio 1942), "Intermarriage and Cultural Change: A Study of Philippine-American Marriages" (Hunt and Collier 1957), "Marriage: Miscegenation" (W. I. C. 1933), and "Social Factors in Oriental Crime" (Hayner 1938).

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