

Refocusing the Lens: A Case for Recognizing the Autonomy of Those on Display in the Philippine Exposition at the 1904 World's Fair



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WRITER'S COMMENT: As I searched for a paper topic in Professor Riley's Cultural History of Museums class, I found myself drawn to the Philippine Exposition at the 1904 World's Fair because of my own Filipino heritage. I was eager to learn more about a subject to which I had a personal connection, but when I delved deeper into my research, I realized that much of the scholarship lacked a more in-depth account of the people on display. My observation of this deficit led me to highlight the lesser-known anecdotes I had come across in my research, which show how the people on display were not passive but rather actively responding and adapting to their environment. I hope my paper prompts a different approach to analyzing people on display in other World Fairs, which could encourage future examination of these people as autonomous individuals rather than helpless victims.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Tracy Williams's "Refocusing the Lens" examines the agency of the marginalized Filipino (specifically Igorot) people historicized and racialized in the Philippine Exposition at the 1904 World's Fair. Tracy explored the topic as part of my Cultural History of Museums course in which students probed the intersection of display and cultural nationalism. Scholars tend to dismiss World's Fairs as heightened entertainment and pseudo-patriotic acts. Yet, since 1754, hundreds of World's Fairs in more than twenty countries have been sites of emerging nationalism and global discourse, especially between 1870 and 1940. Due to their complicated display practices, World's Fairs require an interdisciplinary approach to discern the display of culture from the fetishizing and alienation

of other individuals and social groups. As part of my course, Tracy discussed her interest in the Igorot people and how to use photography and performances to revive Filipino autonomy. Not only did Tracy conduct strong archival research, but she also recognized the value of “informed looking” to retrieve the Igorots’ viewpoint—a viewpoint purposely obfuscated by the formidable exhibition organizers’ colonialist agendas. Her paper makes clear the influential role of the art historian in reviving the humanity of individuals subjugated by the powerful.

—Caroline M. Riley, *Art History Program*

Constructing a display involves not only discriminatory selection but also narrative production, and the human displays of the Philippine Exposition at the 1904 World’s Fair¹ offer a prolific case study for investigating the consequences of this process. While the display of Filipinos was not unique to this World’s Fair,² the Philippine Exposition had an exceptionally high attendance rate³ and remains a popular aspect of the 1904 World’s Fair for scholars looking back over a hundred years later. For instance, Beverly K. Grindstaff explains how the layout of the Philippine Exposition “collapsed proto-nationalist Philippine claims to self-rule into issues of biological race” to portray Filipino natives as incapable of self-rule and in need of American guidance.⁴ In a similar vein, Robert W. Rydell articulates how fair officials created anthropological categories that made America’s recent acquisition

1 Also known as the Louisiana Purchase Exposition or the St. Louis World’s Fair.

2 Jose D. Fermin, *1904 World’s Fair: The Filipino Experience* (West Conshohocken, PA: Infinity Publishing, 2004), 52-56.

3 Robert W. Rydell, “The Louisiana Purchase Exposition, Saint Louis, 1904: ‘The Coronation of Civilization,’” *All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 170. David R. Francis, President of the St. Louis Fair, noted that about ninety-nine percent of fairgoers visited the Philippine Exposition.

4 Beverly K. Grindstaff, “Creating Identity: Exhibiting the Philippines at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition,” *National Identities* 1, no. 3 (1999): 247.

of the Philippines seem like manifest destiny.⁵ While much scholarly discourse has focused on how the Filipino people were objectified, my research will offer another perspective by acknowledging the humanity of those on display in a different way.

The arrangement of the Philippine Exposition as well as the media that advertised and immortalized it were designed to legitimize this political agenda. Therefore, much of the scholarship focusing on these materials tends to dwell on the objectification of the Filipino people. While articulating the social injustice of this curatorial narrative is both a necessary and rewarding endeavor, continuing to focus on how these individuals were objectified ignores other implications of their personhood. By discussing moments in which the Filipino people on display resisted the categories placed on them, this paper will illustrate how the spatial layout of the Philippine Exposition and official media output ultimately propagated an unstable curatorial narrative. Foregrounding these instances of autonomy recognizes the humanity of these individuals not by lamenting their objectification but by highlighting their capacity to undermine colonialist agendas.

Before discussing instances in which the Filipino people on display challenged the ideological integrity of the Philippine Exposition, it is necessary to discuss the motivations that influenced how the Filipino people on display were presented and perceived at the fair. The diplomatic history between the United States and the Philippines in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century largely influenced the organizational plan for the Philippine Exposition. The Treaty of Paris of 1898 concluded the Spanish-American War and allowed the United States to buy the Philippine Islands from Spain, after which American colonialism essentially replaced Spanish colonial rule in the Philippines.⁶ Disenchanted by this act of American self-interest, Filipino nationalists led by Emilio Aguinaldo revolted against the United States.⁷ The ensuing guerilla warfare led to the Philippine-American War, which began in

5 Rydell, 157.

6 Nancy J. Parezo and Don D. Fowler, *Anthropology Goes to the Fair: The 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 164.

7 Ibid.

1899 and ended only two years before the 1904 World's Fair.⁸ Even after the war, the implications of American colonialism divided American sympathies, as Democrats were in favor of granting independence to the Philippines while Republicans felt that the Filipinos should be "civilized" before having independence.⁹ In this way, the American government felt pressure to justify its colonial reign over the Philippines not just to Filipino nationalists but to Americans as well. President McKinley used the notion of "benevolent assimilation" to suggest that the United States was colonizing the Philippines for the benefit of the Filipino people.¹⁰ By simultaneously portraying the Filipino people as incapable of self-rule but also gesturing at their potential to be refined by American ideals, the Philippine Exposition reinforced this notion of "benevolent assimilation" as well as cultural progress. William H. Taft, who became governor of the Philippine Islands after the Philippine-American War, highly supported the Philippine Exposition as a way to enhance political relations between the United States and the Philippines.¹¹ Therefore, the political motivations behind the Philippine Exposition stemmed from an interest in justifying American rule in the Philippines to both Filipinos and Americans.

The arrangement of the Philippine Exposition (and the fair as a whole) became largely influenced by the recent development of anthropology, which was not only used as an organizational guide for the fair but also as a scientific endorsement for the American government's colonial agenda. William J. McGee, the Chair of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition's Department of Anthropology, believed that anthropology should track the trajectory of human progress and classify different groups of people in order to identify the destiny of human civilization.¹² Complimenting both colonial justification and pre-existing ideas of white superiority, McGee's ideas became the governing organizational method

8 Grindstaff, 248.

9 Parezo and Fowler, 165.

10 Fermin, 39.

11 Paul A. Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 203.

12 Parezo and Fowler, 49.

for the fair overall.¹³ Expeditions were sent throughout the Philippines to find appropriate representatives of the islands to put on display at the fair. In his instructions for the preparation of the Philippine Exposition, Taft claims, “We wish to have tribal and racial exhibits in every detail, with full description, photographs, casts, measurements, regarding the physical structure of races.”¹⁴ Terms like “detail,” “description,” and “measurements” all evoke the rhetoric of scientific discipline and project a desire for objectivity. However, the individuals chosen to be featured in the Philippine Exposition only represented less than one-seventh of the Philippine population.¹⁵ The Igorot, Negritos, Moros, and Visayans were the main groups chosen for the exposition, and the Visayans were the only ones out of the selected groups that practiced Christianity.¹⁶ Because most of the Filipino people on display did not practice Christianity, fairgoers unaware of the actual demographic in the Philippines would likely assume that most Filipinos were “uncivilized” and in need of American intervention. Thus, it becomes apparent that fair officials were not interested in accurately representing the actual demographic in the Philippines but, rather, wanted to choose ethnic groups that would make the Filipino people seem incapable of governing themselves.

Located on the outskirts of the fairgrounds and isolated from the rest of the fair by Arrowhead Lake, the Philippine Exposition was physically removed from the exhibits and buildings of the more “civilized” countries (Figure 1). Upon entering the space, visitors would have encountered the Walled City, a replica of the fortifications in Manila that recalled American military victories in the Philippines.¹⁷ The central plaza was modeled after the city of Manila itself, which represented the more European (and thus,

13 Ibid., 48.

14 William H. Taft, *Circular letter of Governor Taft and information and instructions for the preparation of the Philippine exhibit for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition to be held at St. Louis, MO., U.S.A., 1904: a preliminary exposition to be held in Manila in 1903 and a permanent museum of Philippine products in the capital of the archipelago* (Manila: Bureau of Public Printing, 1902), 33.

15 Fermin, 57.

16 Parezo and Fowler, 170.

17 Rydell, 170.

more American) portion of the Philippines.¹⁸ As visitors travelled outward beyond the central plaza, however, the exhibits became increasingly more “primitive.”¹⁹ The outermost exhibits in the Philippine Exposition contained the villages of the Igorot and Negritos, as they were considered the least “civilized” of the Filipino people.²⁰ By dividing the Filipino people into different groups and organizing

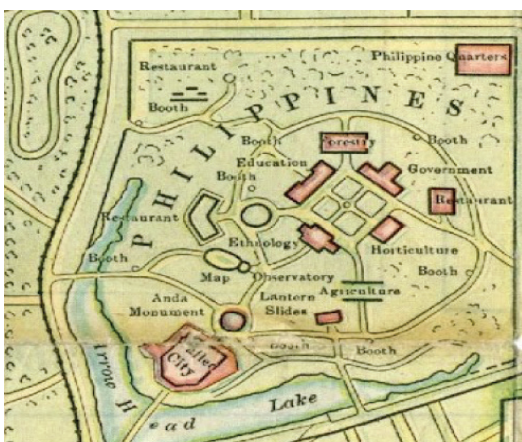


Figure 1. Map of the St. Louis Fair, detail, 1904, photograph, 39 cm. x 25 cm., Washington University Archives Edna Gellhorn Papers, Series 3, Box 11.

them according to cultural progress, the exhibition attempted to frame the Philippines as a country that needed American assistance. In other words, the Philippine Exposition created a curatorial narrative that justified American colonial rule through its organizational scheme.

Despite efforts to categorize them in the layout of the Philippine Exposition, the Filipino people, specifically the Igorot, managed to transgress the artificial boundaries of the exposition. Fair officials intentionally placed the Igorot and Negrito villages near the Philippine Scouts, a military organization of Filipinos that was formed during the Philippine-American War to support the U.S. Army.²¹ In this way, the benefits of “benevolent assimilation” embodied in the Philippine Scouts became juxtaposed with the presumed backwards nature of those without it (i.e. the Igorots).²² The first sentence in a *St. Louis Republic* article headlined “Philippine Scouts Arouse Admiration”

18 Grindstaff, 254.

19 Ibid.

20 Grindstaff, 254.

21 Clayton D. Laurie, “The Philippine Scouts: America’s Colonial Army, 1899-1913,” *Philippine Studies* 37, no. 2 (1989), 175.

22 Rydell, 171.

thoroughly articulates this staged dichotomy: “The Philippine Scout is none of your dog-eating, head-hunting, half-naked Igorrote.”²³ As both American military personnel and converted Christians, the Philippine Scouts (along with the Philippine Constabulary) were given the privilege of escorting, guarding, and preventing intergroup strife on the fairgrounds.²⁴ Leaving the grounds of the Philippine Exposition, however, was a privilege not granted to the Igorots (or any other Filipino group on display, except the Visayans).²⁵ When the Igorots discovered that the Scouts were able to leave their encampment, they started beating their drums disruptively during Scout drills.²⁶ As the sound of the drums prevented the Scouts from hearing voice commands, the Scouts threatened to leave if the Igorots continued, but the fact that the Scouts ultimately stayed suggests that some compromise was made.²⁷ Although the details of how this conflict was resolved remain unclear, it stands to reason that the Igorots engaged in an act of protest. The sound of their drums literally transgressed the boundaries of their designated camps, ultimately challenging and disrupting the distinctions fair officials drew between the Scouts and Igorots. In this way, the Igorots were able to destabilize the conditions of display at the Philippine Exposition through independent action, an aspect of their experience that has often been overlooked in previous scholarship.

Part of what made the categories of the Philippine Exposition so ideologically unstable was their reliance on notions of authenticity. The director of Exhibits for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition Board, Frederick J. V. Skiff, used his scientific and intellectual background to frame American colonial intentions as an objectively positive endeavor.²⁸ Thus, authenticity in the context of the Philippine Exposition came to be understood as something that was scientifically verifiable. However, the concept of “authenticity” itself is largely contingent, although its definition, “the fact or quality of being true of in accordance with fact,”²⁹

23 “Philippine Scouts Arouse Admiration,” (*St. Louis Republic*), Apr. 18, 1904.

24 Parezo and Fowler, 172.

25 *Ibid.*, 180.

26 Fermin, 150.

27 Parezo and Fowler, 180.

28 Grindstaff, 249.

29 “Authenticity, n.” OED Online. March 2018. Oxford University Press.

seems objective. In other words, what is “authentic” depends on the criteria of the evaluation. Changing the original context of the object on display inevitably affects how it is seen and understood. Because the objects on display in the Philippine Exposition were human beings, these changes in perception and understanding go both ways; the human being on display has the capacity to see and understand the viewer.

In an interview conducted over ninety years after the 1904 World’s Fair, a woman named Inang Kinalang, who was on display at the Igorot village, recalls, “We made extra money by weaving bamboo rings.” She continues, “We fooled the Americans, telling them they were ethnic wedding rings. They bought a lot.”³⁰ This brief anecdote illuminates both careful observation and ingenuity on the part of the Igorot people, who, after noticing the fairgoers’ interest in authenticity, took the opportunity to exploit the situation. To the ignorant American public, the villages in the Philippine Exposition were not merely reconstructions but rather authentic embodiments of Philippine culture. As such, the objects sold in these villages became imbued with authenticity as well. In fact, the front cover of a brochure for the Philippine Exposition claims that visiting the exposition is “better than a trip through the Philippine.”³¹ Authenticity is implied by the phrase “better than,” which suggests that this reconstruction of the Philippines will provide a more than adequate representation of the Filipino people. With such rhetoric circulating at the World’s Fair, it would be nearly impossible for the people on display to remain passive and oblivious to their new environment. Another important aspect of the aforementioned anecdote that I would like to point out is the fact that the individual in the interview has a name. Much of the objectification process relates to the mislabeling or a complete lack of a label for the photographs of these individuals.³² More significantly, as Jose D. Fermin notes, “Hardly any written record survived to tell how they felt about living in a totally foreign environment under almost constant surveillance for seven months.”³³

Accessed May 29, 2018.

30 Fermin, 153.

31 Eric Breitbart, *A World on Display: Photographs from the St. Louis World’s Fair 1904* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 25.

32 Ibid., 21.

33 Fermin, 162.

Thus, the process of objectification perseveres even today, as the individual perspectives of those on display have become largely overshadowed by the official media output of the fair officials.

Perhaps the most significant form of documentation for the 1904 World's Fair is the photographs, which provided a visual counterpart to the curatorial narrative of the overall fair. In the nineteenth century, Dr. Cesare Lombroso theorized that the moral disposition of a person could be revealed in his or her physical traits.³⁴ Thus, when looking at a photograph of a Negrito by the Gerhard sisters, it is significant that the individual in the photograph faces sideways because this angle evokes the form of a mugshot (Figure 2). By incorporating a form used to identify criminals, this photograph implicates the degeneracy of its subject. The category of the "savage" then becomes validated by the supposedly objective lens of a camera. In fact, the title of this photograph, *Missing Link*, would have perpetuated the notion that cultural progress is related to certain types of physiology. Due to their shorter stature and darker skin, the Negritos were considered the "less uncivilized than pre-civilization."³⁵ Moreover, the individual in the photograph is denied the power of returning the camera's gaze. The background is blank so as not to detract from the subject, who has clearly been posed for the photograph. The subject becomes stripped of humanity as the composition turns him into an object of study. The advent of photography coincided with the development of anthropology, and as such, came to be used as a tool for scientific

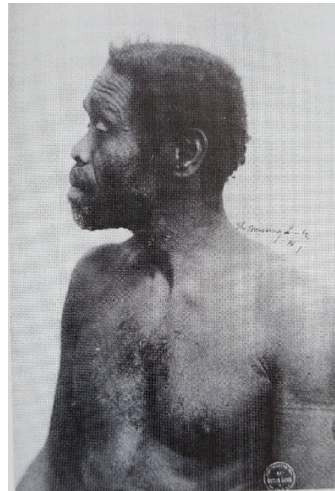


Figure 2. Gerhard sisters, The Missing Link, 1904, photograph, 21 in. x 16 in., Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

34 Breitbart, 25.

35 Grindstaff, 254.

documentation.³⁶ Thus, photography was understood as an objective record of reality. Images like this, used to justify American colonialism, started to be consumed as objective truths about these native peoples.

Not all photographs, however, are the same. While most of the photographs taken of the Philippine Exposition continue this curatorial narrative of anthropological categories and colonial justification, there are certain photographs that lend themselves to an alternative reading. In a photograph by Jessie Tarbox Beals called *Igorrotes Killing a Dog to Eat*, the individuals in the image are, as the title states, preparing to consume a dog (Figure 3). The Igorots became the most popular exhibit not just in the Philippine Exposition but in the whole fair for their notorious practice of eating dogs.³⁷ Fairgoers started believing that the Igorots were sneaking out to eat stray dogs or even dogs with owners, and such rumors earned them the nicknames “dog-eaters,” which was previously



Figure 3. Jessie Tarbox Beals, *Igorrotes Killing a Dog to Eat*, 1904, photograph, n/a, Missouri History Museum Library and Research Center, St. Louis.

referenced in the *St. Louis Republic* newspaper article.³⁸ Most of the publicity vastly exaggerated actual Igorot tradition concerning dog consumption since the Igorots only ate dog meat on special occasions, such as funerals or weddings.³⁹ Nevertheless, the popularity of the Igorot dog feast prompted fair officials to demand that the Igorots prepare dog on a daily basis for the entertainment of the

36 Breitbart, 7.

37 Philippine Exposition Board, *Report of the Philippine Exposition Board in the United States for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition* (Washington: Bureau of Insular Affairs, War Department, 1905), 30. The first sentence of the section on the Igorot village states: “This village has proved to be the most interesting of the groups to visitors, if gate receipts are an indication, as it has been the greatest source of revenue to the Exposition Board.”

38 Fermin, 17-20.

39 *Ibid.*, 20.

fairgoers.⁴⁰ Therefore, the three individuals looking at the camera in Beals' photograph can be interpreted as a gesture of mutual knowledge between the subjects in the photograph and the person behind the camera lens. While this relationship was forged at a particular moment in 1904, its relevance continues today with each new viewer of the photograph. The grin on the face of the individual on the far left indicates amusement towards the artifice of a special tradition that has now become routine. Unlike the subject featured in the Gerhard sisters' photograph, the gaze of the Filipino native confronts the camera and becomes more visually captivating than the dog carcass towards the center of the composition.

Even with the few direct records we have of the people on display in the Philippine Exposition, it is clear that they were attentive and innovative in their new environment. I should note that finding visual or textual material with moments of Filipino autonomy proved to be a challenging endeavor since most of the materials related to the 1904 World's Fair tend to reinforce anthropological categories or American colonialism. Therefore, the lack of visual material to compliment some of the anecdotes in this paper simply stems from the nature of the materials that have survived. The examples of Filipino peoples used here mainly consist of the Igorot group because they were the most popular exhibit within the Philippine Exposition, and as such, there is more surviving material about them compared to the other groups. However, this paper aims to prompt further research into the perspectives of any individuals on display at the 1904 World's Fair, whether they were in the Philippine Exposition or not. It is precisely because the objects on display at this fair were people that we should recognize their capacity to change their context. As the curatorial venture of the people in charge of the 1904 World's Fair created their narrative, this paper has curated another narrative, one that highlights the individuality of the people on display and emphasizes their autonomy.

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⁴⁰ Parezo and Fowler, 181.

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