Meeting the Lumpia Filipino: Self-Orientalism in Filipino America

Jamelah Jacob

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Meeting the Lumpia Filipino: Self-Orientalism in Filipino America

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Asian & Pacific Islander American Studies from William & Mary

by

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Acknowledgments

Since I entered William & Mary in 2017, the spaces I call home, experiences I have had, and people I have met have all inspired the making of this thesis. I especially reflect on my first encounter with the Filipino American Student Association (FASA) at the student organizations fair, which I would say started it all before I could even fathom a beginning. I never would have thought that my involvement with this organization would lead me to an insatiable yearning to “meet” myself all over again, this time where I allowed myself to fully recognize my Filipino identity. Nor did I think that it would lead me to a question that I would ponder about for years and ultimately conduct research on—but here we are. This thesis is a love letter to the experiences I owe to FASA. Meeting the lumpia Filipino through this research comes with the realization that this identity is one I encounter everyday, with friends, family, and even myself. This project has been a dialogical and influential process that has informed me about myself as much as it has informed my research questions.

Just as the last four years have taught me, I fully dedicate this thesis to my community in which I have gained eternal friendships, treasured mentors, unforgettable memories, and persisting solidarity. As it has been a common experience, this past year was spent in constant reckoning. In the time of tragedy, hate, and personal and global strife, I learned what it meant to really lean in to my community and what it meant to resiliently organize and mobilize towards ending oppression and all forms of violence. At the end of every exhausting day, I was reminded what my research meant to me and its significance as an extension of not only myself but my community. It is for the community that has welcomed me with open arms that I write, study, research, and share this knowledge.
I would like to express my gratitude to everybody who has supported me in the completion of this thesis. First, I would like to thank my family who, despite never understanding what Asian American studies actually is, have endlessly cheered me on my academic endeavors. Second, I would like to thank my dearest friends, too many to name, who have cared for me throughout this daunting experience. Namely, I want to thank the few who have made my senior year as fulfilling as possible: Calvin, Zoe, Sidney, Izzie, Luigi, Miggy, Mitchel, and Andrew. I also want to thank my FASA big, Patrick, who I have looked up to since the day I met him and has always been an ear for my countless thoughts and ideas about Asian America. I am also grateful for the spaces that I have called home these last four years: FASA, the Asian American Student Initiative, and the Center for Student Diversity. From the CSD, I want to especially thank Shené V. Owens who has given me so much guidance, support, and has never missed a single one of my poetry readings in the last three years.

Finally, I owe this whole journey to the APIA program. First and foremost, I want to thank Professor Francis Tanglao Aquas, who has been my major advisor, thesis advisor, and mentor throughout college. Thank you for endlessly believing in me and being patient with me throughout this process. Whenever I expressed any worries about this project, you always told me, “Jamelah, you have to own it.” I kept those words in mind until I typed the last word of this thesis. Of course, I extend my gratitude to my thesis committee members Professor Deenesh Sohoni and Professor Benédito Ferrão, who I actually met in my first semester at William & Mary and ultimately inspired me to major in APIA. Lastly, I want to thank Professor Chinua Thelwell, Professor Stephen Sheehi, Professor Leah Kuragano, Professor Andrea Wright, and Professor Jon Pineda. You all have completely shaped my utter love for Asian American studies and this community.
In Filipino culture, we uphold community through the idea of *bayanihan*, which stresses communal work, harmony, and collective care for one another. Our kin is not dictated solely by blood, but genuine care for each other and the experiences that bind us our shared experiences. In the last four years I have nurtured my *bayanihan* thanks to the people who have tirelessly believed in me. I hope to keep this in mind as I continue building solidarity and community in the following chapters of my life after my time at William & Mary. So, I want to start this thesis by borrowing the words of the Filipino laborers who stood in solidarity with Mexican laborers during the Delano Grape Strike in the 1960s, with whom they found their own *bayanihan*: “Isang bagsak.”
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Prologue

In the bustling crowd of shy, wide-eyed college freshmen at the William & Mary Kaplan Arena, the Filipino flag waved high above rows of tables representing a myriad of college clubs. I followed the all too familiar mix of red, blue, white, and yellow—and there it was: the booth of the Filipino American Student Association. As I walked up to the two students standing at the booth, I was met with a question that took me by surprise: “Are you by any chance Filipino?” Growing up in predominantly white spaces, my Filipiniality was something that lived in the shadows, something I did not even enjoy thinking about. Therefore, this question, as simple and perhaps trivial, summed up my personal yet privileged moment of reawakening about my Filipino identity. My involvement in the Filipino American Student Association, in tandem with studying APIA studies, have been the pinnacle of my four years in my undergraduate studies. I trudged from classes to FASA meetings and events and ultimately it led me here, with burning questions about Filipino America. This thesis has been a personal (and passion) project from day one.

As I became more involved in FASA, I started to question the events, activities, and initiatives that the organization coordinated for its members and the campus community. We have always been an ambitious group—always wanting to be bigger and better every year. We were fairly successful with this in the last couple of years, doubling and tripling the size of our membership and growing a strong reputation on campus. The student population began to recognize us for our traditions, from our annual Welcome Dinner to Culture Night. Evidently there was a lot to celebrate about our growth, however I also started to assess the nature of our success in the first place. I questioned: as a growingly prominent Asian student organization on campus, what did people know about Filipino culture
beyond the free food that we provide at our events? How were we, as a collective Filipino American community at a predominantly white institution, being understood?

**Research Questions**

This research aims to question the self-orientalization of Filipino Americans through the presentation in the public sphere, and extensively how it informs the definition of the contemporary Filipino American identity. Through my research I hope to meet, and introduce to readers, the “lumpia Filipino,” and what implications it has for Filipino American scholarship. The lumpia Filipino identity essentially describes the self-orientalization that some Filipino Americans partake in. It is the performance of their agency limited to the Western lens as a result of lasting legacies of colonialism and imperialism. They celebrate the representational wins of being Filipino in America with access to cultural imperialism, but fail to grapple with the commodification of that access. Simply, the lumpia Filipino acts to perpetuate capitalism that is reliant on making culture profitable. Therefore, the lumpia Filipino exists as an obstacle to decolonization in the Philippines and, extensively, Filipino diaspora. I am especially interested in how the “lumpia Filipino” manifests for Filipino Americans, specifically how its definition creates a new context of Filipino American culture, one that simultaneously reflects on its past history of colonization and present shaped by migration and capitalism. Ultimately, I hope to explore how and why this commodified and reductionist identity hinders the possibility of a reimagined and decolonized Filipino America and, in many ways, the Philippines.

Asian American scholarship has largely conceptualized the Filipino American identity as a response to historical factors, however the colonial project is not a thing of the past. The Philippines
continues to be a neocolonial state with intricate economic ties to the United States, where labor is the Philippines’ largest export. This is evident in the recent growth of the diaspora, with the emergence of the “Overseas Filipino Worker,” or OFW. The contemporaneity of the colonial project and its breadth is therefore underestimated. Therefore, I argue that Filipino Americans presently engage in self-orientalism where they cast themselves as commodities that are both familiar and exotic just enough for American consumption, producing the “lumpia Filipino” identity. Filipino Americans intentionally “other” themselves to simplify their complex histories and culture to be palatable in American and Filipino spaces. I seek to theorize and define the “lumpia Filipino,” nicknamed after the Filipino snack and a moniker that has very recently emerged in informal discourse about critical race and culture on social media channels like Twitter and Facebook.

Much of Asian American scholarship and popular culture discourse on identity also grapples with representation in media and everyday life to look for insights on questions about the Asian American identity. However, a lot of the discourse on representation fails to make the connections of Asian America to larger sociopolitical issues. Even the concept of representation among Asian Americans has become commodified, where it is celebrated when a film like *Crazy Rich Asians* is a commercial success or when lumpia is highlighted on an American cooking show. At the same time, it is also important to acknowledge that Asian Americans have agency and have long been refuting stereotypes. Asian Americans are not only involved in *representation*, they are also involved in the *presentation* of their own identities, cultures, and histories. Undoubtedly, centuries of colonization has had a great impact on the identity formation of Filipino Americans. What I am interested in, therefore,
is how the Filipino American identity has formed not only in response to their histories but also their current environments.

Filipino Americans are often painted as victims of “colonial mentality,” which typically fails to acknowledge the agency that Filipino Americans have had in resistance to the structural effects of imperialism, as well as the cultural legacies of colonialism. In addition to being acknowledged in scholarship, colonial mentality is also widely known and even arguably internalized among Filipinos. Scholars E.J. David and Sumie Okazaki define it more specifically as “superiority, pleasantness, or desirability are associated with any cultural values, behaviors, physical appearance, and objects that are American or Western.”¹ In addition to this characteristic, another critical aspect of colonial mentality is that it “may operate automatically as a set of associations that cannot be controlled consciously.”² While colonial mentality has been generally accepted within the Filipino community, it is important to note that Filipino Americans still activate their agency to create their identity, largely by community membership and popular culture.

Following this introduction, I attempt to theorize the lumpia Filipino by first framing the idea through other scholarship that has been done on the Filipino American identity. The first chapter aims to “introduce” the lumpia Filipino by contextualizing the roots of the term and explaining orientalism. I also assess how Filipinos have approached community membership to understand their identity. This section hopes to contextualize the relationship between the Philippines and the United States, with a special emphasis on how colonization has molded Filipino culture into commodity and the Filipino

² David, Okazaki.
identity into capital. Then, I illustrate how the lumpia Filipino has contemporarily manifested in Filipino Americans. Here, I analyze Filipino student organizations at universities, with a specific focus on the Pilipino Cultural Night, also known as PCN, which is a traditional performance event that Filipino student organizations at universities coordinate annually. Finally, I connect the past and present to the future by reimagining the Filipino American identity. The last chapter of this thesis discusses the critical ways in which this complex formation of the Filipino identity adds layers and obstacles to decolonizing the Filipino identity. In this section I also identify ways to ameliorate the lumpia Filipino for the future of the Filipino American identity.

Methodology

In order to consider the impacts of American imperialism in tandem with the acknowledgment of Filipino agency to create and present their own identities, I turn to Filipino American student organizations at universities. I consider this space as one where identity is continuously being questioned, challenged, as well as reinforcing colonial legacies. I employ these cultural living texts and spaces in order to look at my questions not only through a historical context but also a contemporary perspective. I approach my research through a cultural studies and ethnic studies lens, drawing from textual analyses to look for clues as to how Filipino student organizations perpetuate the lumpia Filipino identity. Because I am concerned with the presentation of Filipino culture activated by agency, I analyze Filipino student organizations as a case study to look at how the presentations of culture with an identified audience can contribute to the formation of the Filipino American identity. Filipino American student organizations constantly engage with the campus
community, so their audience includes everybody who is not a part of the organization and is consuming the events and initiatives they open to the rest of the campus.

When assessing Filipino student organizations, I looked for trends; one, I was interested in what sorts of traditions student organizations were cultivating across campuses, and second, I wanted to examine what ideas they were presenting to the larger student population. My goal was to ultimately connect these trends to illustrate what the lumpia Filipino identity looks like. Filipino student organizations are entities where Filipino Americans continuously carve out space for themselves. In these spaces, they get to decide what parts of Filipino culture to engage with, what to highlight, and what to share with a wider and often non-Filipino audience. My case study raises the questions: given that Filipino Americans have the agency to present their own identities, how do colonial legacies continue to impact that agency? In turn, how does the lumpia Filipino identity manifest specifically in these spaces? These questions challenge and extend the discourse on the concept of colonial mentality. Filipino student organizations have been tremendously significant because they provide spaces for building community and solidarity among Filipino Americans. At the same time, however, it opens the potential for self-orientalism to continue because these subjects inherently engage with an audience who are invited to consume and react to cultural presentations.

In order to successfully analyze the Filipino American identity, I found it necessary to extend my analysis beyond representational politics in media and spaces. I wanted to purposefully avoid approaching this research “through imperial eyes,” as Indigenous scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith calls it. Smith describes this idea as “an approach which assumes that Western ideas about the most

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fundamental things are the only ideas possible to hold... and the only ideas which can make sense of the world, of reality, of social life and of human beings.” While the Philippines and extensively the Filipino diaspora has been undoubtedly impacted (and continues to be) by the United States, the Filipino people have continuously shown resistance at the face of American imperialism. The case study I analyze, Filipino student organizations, are Filipino-made entities that carry sociopolitical weight but are still inherently connected to the larger institution university. Therefore, this case study offers a unique look at the crossroads wherein Western ideas can clash and influence what is constituted as “authentic” Filipino culture by the way it is presented. This research hopes to not only challenge existing ideas of the Filipino American identity, tainted by a perpetual “colonial mentality” narrative, but also to acknowledge the instrumentality Filipinos have invested into building their communities worldwide. It aims to uplift and empower the Filipino people as a whole, following the continuous efforts of Filipino activists towards decolonization and liberation from American imperialism.

\footnote{Smith.}
Chapter One: Introducing the Lumpia Filipino

The lumpia Filipino identity gives a name to the internalized self-orientalization of Filipino Americans. Like other historically colonized peoples, Filipinos have been defined as the Other which has marginally impacted their experience living in the United States and navigating their ethnic and cultural identities. Their self-orientalization is a reaction to past and present factors, including the colonization and the continuing neocolonialism in the Philippines, the growth of the diaspora through migration, discrimination, and the colonial mentality. The lumpia Filipino recognizes these factors and understands their place as people who have been painted as the Other while their colonizer counterparts are regarded as the “not” Other. They also understand the role commodification plays in their experiences as Asian Americans, and they know that they are perceived through cultural consumable exports like food. Other identifiable commodities include media, art, and clothing. Filipinos have been significantly been identified by popularized Filipino dishes, such as adobo, ube, and lumpia - hence, the term lumpia Filipino. These dishes have popularized Filipino culture to the extent that the dish is instantly associated with Filipino people. It is not uncommon for Filipinos to use these dishes to find common ground with white people, since they understand that it is what they will most likely immediately recognize about Filipino culture.

The lumpia Filipino understands that in the United States they are living among their own colonizers, which has awakened the intergenerational desire for their validation. They seek to gain recognition and acceptance in the land that they immediately associate with their colonizers, which also prevents them from ever claiming a sense of belonging in the United States. Instead, they defer to orientalist notions through commodities to reach a skewed level of sameness. Filipino Americans
engage with non-Filipinos by presenting orientalist images at the forefront because it is identifiable and recognizable, therefore making it easier for non-Filipinos to consume.

Ultimately, the lumpia Filipino seeks a reciprocal relationship with their colonizers where they are recognized for making their Filipino identity exactly how the colonizer pictures it to be. In this established relationship, the colonizer defines the Filipino identity before the Filipino even has the chance to introduce themselves. The lumpia Filipino celebrates their sustained diplomatic relationship with white people, typically through encounters where white people are “appreciating” Filipino culture by consuming it.

Through self-orientalism the lumpia Filipino reduces their identities to consumable things, whether that be food or a student-organized show about Filipino culture. These interactions are two-sided where Filipino culture is being presented on one side and being received on the other. This identity personifies the exchanges between Filipinos and predominantly white people, in which the agency of Filipino Americans is contested. While Filipino Americans get to choose what to show and tell about Filipino culture, their choice is influenced by the relationship they have with their colonizers.

**Roots of “Lumpia Filipino”**

The term “lumpia Filipino” has ambiguous roots, as it has only recently gained popularity among young Filipino Americans on social media channels, such as Twitter and Facebook. It has been used largely to describe and critique Filipino Americans that engage in the hyper-commodification of Filipino culture. The lumpia Filipino highlights cultural commodities, such as karaoke, global figures like Manny Pacquiao, and the term’s namesake lumpia. The term has gained notoriety specifically among Filipino college students who, through Asian American studies classes, cultural organizations,
and naturally meeting other Filipinos at college, have been thinking more critically about the Filipino diaspora and its intricate connections to ideas of labor, capitalism, and imperialism. I also personally identify with this same group, and being in a like-minded community that encouraged such discourse over the last four years has very much inspired this thesis topic. For example, in February 2021, the Filipino cultural organization at the Claremont colleges in Southern California, Kasama, marketed a discussion event they facilitated with the caption: “Praxis Alert! Looking to critique Lumpia Filipinos in a space inspired by Filipino Twitter discourse?” While Filipino student organizations at colleges often hold the mission to educate and promote Filipino culture, this specific event at Claremont Kasama shows that these community spaces are also becoming spaces of critique, where young Filipino Americans are pushing conversions past Filipino food, dances, and relatable jokes, and are fundamentally learning more about themselves.

“Lumpia Filipino” may also be comparable to another term: “boba liberal” or “boba liberalism.” This term is also making its way around informal discourse on Asian American scholarship emerging mainly on social media. This term was first coined by @diaspora_is_red on Twitter to describe the modern Asian American identity that primarily presents Asian cultures as commodities.\(^5\) The account user argues that this monolithic look at Asian culture simplifies the Asian American identity to commodities, like boba, and ultimately depoliticizes the group. What comes to the forefront, then, are aspects of culture like food that are consumed by an American audience. Thus, a “boba liberal” reduces the political Asian American identity to commodities and perpetuates the

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erasure of the complexity of the Asian American identity. The rapid popularity of boba can also
arguably be rooted into the fact that it is a foreign snack, much like lumpia, which American society
has historically taken interest in, from merchants’ products in the 1800s to Chinese American cuisine.
This aspect of identity formation is where Asian America meets forces of racial capitalism and
imperialism. These same forces have also pushed and pulled Asian migration into the U.S. and spurred
the growth of various diaspora countries, including the Philippines.

(Self)-Orientalism

In 1978, Edward Said published the book *Orientalism*, which popularized the idea of
orientalism among scholars and more generally the public. In it, Said defines orientalism and explains
the ways imperial power stems from the West and is continuously perpetuated beyond colonial times.
Said narrows down the definition in three different ways: first, orientalism is an academic discipline to
analyze and build upon; second, orientalism is a way to advance political domination; and third,
orientalism represents the widely accepted perception of the Orient and the Occident. Said positions
orientalism to be understood as a relationship of power and domination, where the distinction
between the Orient and the Occident exists because systems allowed for the Oriental to be named and
defined as such. Therefore, orientalism indirectly reproduces through a continuing neocolonial
project. In addition to power being affirmed by governmental establishments which Said calls the
“power political”, it is also reaffirmed in ways such as the sciences or “power intellectual,” our societal
ideas regarding morality or “power moral,” and our perceptions of taste, texts, and values or “power
Orientalism acts as a pivotal idea to understand the power dynamics rooted in Western exceptionalism that have ultimately shaped the way societies continue to evolve.

Orientalism establishes the epistemology of understanding the West, or the “Occident,” in relation to what Said calls the “Orient.” On one hand, the Orient is classified as primitive, ancient, and even evil, while the “Occident” symbolizes opposite ideas of progress, cleanliness, and modernity. Together, these representations create cultural perceptions of how a people should be understood and are even further perpetuated when told from the Occident’s perspective, which is already an often occurrence in the distribution and consumption of texts in the mainstream. Orientalism also describes the hierarchy and power dynamics between different groups of people, and most importantly specifically identifies the “Other” through representation and narrative. This act of othering sets the foundations for exclusion and alienation towards a specific people and works to preserve the power within who is considered not “Other.” Therefore, orientalism pinpoints much of why and how oppression continues and where it specifically stems from in the context of power.

Orientalism is understood specifically between the Orient and the Occident, but this idea of power imbalance can be understood in adjacent binaries, such as the oppressed and the oppressor, the colonized and the colonizer, and even people of color and white people. This relationship situates different groups in a hierarchy that serves the Occident and robustly preserves power in the West. Emerging literature is also starting to analyze orientalism from a new perspective: orientalism that is self-inflicted by the identified Oriental. Self-orientalism extends Said’s original idea of orientalism, asserting that orientalism “is not simply the autonomous creation of the West, but rather that the

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Orient itself participates in its construction, reinforcement and circulation. This temporarily detaches the Orient from the place and acknowledges its agency to move transnationally and create spaces outside of the Orient, however it still continues to bolster and immortalizes the hierarchy and systems of oppression that occurs because of orientalism.

The act of self-orientalization grapples with the dialogical nature between people and societies, and it recognizes the audience that is affected by the way a culture is presented and the way the person doing the self-orientalizing is perceived. Considering that one of the narratives that orientalism creates is that the Orient is archaic, self-orientalization can be seen as an attempt at achieving modernity. Therefore, this can be connected to a pillar of modern society: capitalism, where societies are constantly consuming culture through commodities such as food, art, and media. Even the commodification of such cultural aspects and objects can be seen as a response to capitalism that demands it for consumption. Because of Said’s original idea of orientalism modernity is automatically associated and validated by white authority. So if modernity is a vessel for capitalism, then the act of self-orientalization is the tool that the colonized uses to pursue recognition by the Occident.

Furthermore, self-orientalization allows the Oriental to insert themself in a discourse that typically renders them invisible. Orientalism sets boundaries between the Orient and the Occident, and these boundaries are what emphasize the hierarchies that inflate orientalism as a dangerous agent for violence and oppression. However, self-orientalization on the other hand recognizes the agency of the Oriental to respond to their different environments and present themselves how they want. In this

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context, that presentation is reliant on becoming palatable for the Occidental audience that they interact with, but it brings them out of the aforementioned boundaries nonetheless. Self-orientalism portrays how the Oriental is neither stagnant nor silent, but rather is able to understand and respond to the effects of their histories and current environments. Through self-orientalization, the Oriental moves towards a self-affirmed identity wherein they understand their position in the power hierarchy that has been placed upon them. They fully realize where they are situated in the binary of the Oriental versus the Occidental, and so they present themselves differently in order to be perceived differently. While this presentation inherently simplifies their identities, it is done through their own agency and reinserts them in a hierarchy that did not initially consider them adept. The Oriental identity becomes visible, and even desirable, at the expense of becoming easily accessible for Occidental consumption.

**Orientalist Aesthetics**

The desirability of the Oriental cultural identity leads to the idea of oriental aesthetics, and how it is utilized in the production of essentially anything. Orientalist aesthetics have evolved into something to reach for and when attained, an accomplishment to be celebrated. The set of ideas that guide and create oriental aesthetics construct the definition of Oriental and makes it easily identifiable. These ideas are canonized into culture, and therefore are able to be widely accepted by a society. Orientalist aesthetics can be found in all types of consumable objects, such as literature, clothing, and media. Ultimately, they direct how the Oriental is introduced and perceived by an audience, whether that be just one person or a whole society. Both the Oriental and the Occidental, or the colonizer, can engage with orientalist aesthetics. On one hand, the colonizer perpetuates orientalist aesthetics through its interactions with the people it is colonizing both directly and indirectly. On the other hand, the
Oriental can perform orientalist aesthetics in order to be accepted in a colonized space - both unwillingly and as an act of agency. The presentation of cultures through orientalist aesthetics narrate the ways in which colonized people continuously experience being othered.

One approach to orientalist aesthetics is the way it allows for the Oriental to reach validation from its colonizer. This desire roots from the Oriental’s attempt to finally be recognized by the colonizer as a means of acknowledging their humanity. Once the Oriental achieves this recognition, the Oriental is given a voice and worth. Since the Occident represents modernity as the antithesis of the Orient, the validation from the colonizer symbolizes reaching modernity. Therefore, when the colonized internalizes orientalist aesthetics and engages in self-orientalism it is attempting to reach modernity by purposely presenting their culture in that way. Colonization forces the colonized to lose grasp of their own space and land, therefore internalizing orientalist aesthetics acts as a coping mechanism to achieve validation in a space they are unable to claim back.

During the American colonization of the Philippines, the Americans that arrived aestheticized the Filipino people, the land, and the culture. In one account, Helen Taft, the wife of former President William Howard Taft, arrived in the Philippines and recalled, “The wonderful sunsets and the moonlit nights have tied more American hearts to Manila and the Philippines than all other charms combined. And they are both indescribable.”9 What Taft was calling indescribable specifically is the coveted Filipino space of the American empire. The imperial aesthetics in which she confided in “allows Taft to feel at home while she is away from home.”10 Taft’s accounts of her experiences further justified the

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10 Rafael.
colonial investment of the American government in the Philippines because it asserted that while the
Philippines was foreign, it was beautiful, charming, and not excessively unfamiliar. It was the perfect
balance just enough to make the colonizer comfortable in the alien land that it had claimed.
Furthermore, it sets the tone for how their colonization is remembered: American colonization is
painted as not only benevolent but also harmless and necessary.

In addition to advancing colonialism during the colonial period, such orientalist aesthetics
perpetuated neocolonialism even after the Philippines gained independence. These orientalist
aesthetics advanced colonization at the time, and continued to perpetuate neocolonialism after the
Philippines gained independence. One avenue this has played out is in the education programs led by
Americans in the Philippines. After the Philippine-American War in 1902, the United States
government implemented public schooling focusing on childhood English literacy across the country
reaching about 150,000 schoolchildren. This was one way the United States asserted educational
biopolitics beyond colonization, creating the “educative US colonial state.”11 The goals of these literacy
programs was to spread the knowledge of the English language to the Filipino people, as proficiency in
English represents participation in the global order that the American empire was in the process of
building. The English language is used as a “colonial technology [that] would be used both to develop
individual Filipino self-realization and preserve the life of Filipino customs and culture.”12 Many
American teachers in the Philippines at the time wrote English educational primers to use in the
classroom. Most of these used orientalist notions and images of Filipino culture to tailor the

12 Manalansan, Espiritu, Alidio.
curriculum to their Filipino students. For example, the *Philippine Beginner’s Book*, published in 1904, included English anecdotes on Filipino life such as family relationships, the natural landscape, and the new American public schools. It also included Filipino mythology and folktales as a way to connect the English language to Filipino children’s “local” heritage. This started the intergenerational indoctrination of Filipinos at a young age, where young children were being taught to understand their culture through the colonial technology of the English language.

The use of educational biopolitics through these texts invited young Filipinos to situate themselves and their physical places in relation to the world outside of the Philippines. Scholar Kimberly Alidio called this the “global imaginary.” The global imaginary created the epistemology of the world outside of the Philippines for Filipinos. In school, students would practice drawing their surroundings and learning English words for them, as well as descriptions of other countries. Through these exercises, Filipino children practiced identifying the differences between themselves and the world outside of the Philippines, resulting in foundational understanding of what is considered “other.” Therefore, the “schoolchild [finds] herself and her local place within the time-space coordinates of American colonial modernity: a panoramic, multicultural global space and a temporal mode of human civilizational, industrial, and democratic development.” Young Filipinos were growing up through this educational system, where they were taught that they are the “other,” a sentiment that as a result they internalize. Their engagement with the colonizer, while at times self-orientalizing, was an attempt to reach the presupposed modernity that they only saw through the lens of American colonial indoctrination. They understood modernity as it was defined by American colonial powers, which inherently made their cultural evolution rooted in self-orientalism.
The global imaginary has significantly played a contemporary role in the transformation of migration patterns for the Filipino diaspora. It planted the seeds for a Filipino society that would be trained to serve the United States through labor. The global imaginary situated the Filipino people as the periphery with a primary goal to support and strengthen the American empire. This is embodied in recent decades by the emergence of the Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW). Similarly to the lumpia Filipino, the OFW identity also has important sociopolitical weight. The OFW symbolizes a bridge between the Orient and the Occident, where Filipino laborers constantly engage with a capitalist and globalized world under the guise of reaching modernity. As Alidio explains it:

“Throughout the twentieth century to the present, the Philippines has been considered a viable nation and economy if it is part of the US-dominated global political economy. To maintain nation, family, and selfhood, the Filipino subject must reengineer herself into a global worker, accept training, and repackage her capacities and culture for the marketplace.”

Orientalist aesthetics can also be found in diaspora literature, which is more directly consumable. Villaescusa Illán analyzes the work of Hispano-Filipino author Jesús Balmori from the 20th century as a case study. He connects Balmori’s poetry to the idea of Filipino modernism as an extension of Hispanic modernist aesthetics, which “features abundant oriental motifs and represents ‘the orient’ as a trope that provides a stimulus for the poetic imagination.” for orientalist aesthetics in diaspora literature. Balmori writes about landscapes that indirectly refer to the Philippines, scattering Filipino words throughout his poems. For example, in his poem “Rima Malaya,” he uses Filipino words like “sampagas” and “Kundimans” and even starts the poem with a line that translates to “It was

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13 Manalansan, Espiritu, Alidio.
the tropical night of the orient.” By doing this, Balmori participates in transculturation as a way to achieve two goals: to make sense of his Hispanic-Filipino identity and to affirm his national Filipino identity as it interacts with the growingly global canon of literature at the time. His poetry exemplifies what Illán calls Filipino orientalist transculturation. Balmori’s poems portray Filipino modernism that creates a peripheral orientalism that is aesthetic and political, where “the exoticization of the Philippines responds not only to an attitude of literary escapism but also to a desire of national affirmation.”

Such orientalist aesthetics illustrate a dialogue between the Orient and the Occident in the present, taking the Orient out of being “stuck” in the past. In Balmori’s poems, he inserts indigenous Filipino elements and metaphors in his Spanish poems written for an international audience. Now, the Orientalist is no longer seen as archaic because it interacts with the modern world, albeit artificially through orientalist aesthetics. Literature that mixes two or more cultures together, like Balmori’s, also plays a role in the national affirmation of a new Filipino identity, one that grapples with its colonial histories. Works like these acknowledge its colonized past and affirms that the Filipino identity can exist and evolve alongside it. It recognizes that the colonizer has influenced the landscape and culture of the colonized. Rather than staying stagnant like the way the Orientalist is largely portrayed, Balmori acts on his agency to claim his art and write as he pleases. Although neocolonialism persists beyond colonial eras, the colonized is not perpetually silent nor powerless.

Orientalist aesthetics contribute to a landscape that is continuously being cultivated by both the colonized and the colonizer where both counterparts’ agency is recognized. These aesthetics make

\[15\] Ilan.
the Orient desirable for both the Occidental and the Oriental, and work to make the act of self-orientalization attractive for both parties. This works efficiently in a capitalist world, where consumption happens constantly and cultures are presented on a global scale through exported commodities and bodies for labor. The education system in the Philippines and Balmori’s poems are two examples of how both the global imaginary and peripheral orientalism consider the nature of transnationalism in a growingly globalized world. Situating the act of self-orientalization in the last century also considers the impacts of transnationalism due to evolving migration patterns and newer ways to connect through technology. Societies today are connected through various means, and for the Filipino diaspora that includes physical spaces, the Internet, diaspora art, or even a balikbayan box that travels from a Filipino American family to their relatives in the Philippines with all the highly coveted American goodies and snacks. These create exchanges between people where orientalist aesthetics paint the scene and ultimately impact the evolving dialogue that inform our perceptions of the Orient.

Community Membership

New generations of Filipino Americans are relying on other things than physical space to identify their heritage. Especially in the age of social media and technology, not only is information available on the web for members of the Filipino diaspora to learn about their culture, it also creates spaces for transnational Filipino communities to connect. As sociologist Emily Ignacio states, “Cultures, nations, races, and identities are constantly being redefined in both real and virtual life, actively constructed and maintained through various media and the sciences.”¹⁶ This also invites the

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ideas of Benedict Anderson, who analyzed the formation of nations as one born out of imagination. Like nations, communities are created when the people in them identify and acknowledge their existence. Therefore, “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.”

Much of the discourse on Filipino American identity grapples with this question of falsity versus genuineness, where there is disagreement among Filipinos and Filipino Americans about what it means to be “truly” Filipino. However, as Anderson would argue, such conversations fail to consider that this dichotomy is unproductive because genuineness is largely subjective. Rather, communities are created by the people who claim membership in them, which also inherently contain differing opinions and experiences. This is especially relevant for diaspora communities, like Asian America, and nations with colonized histories, like the Philippines. Because the Filipino American experience cannot be perceived as a monolith, the Filipino American identity is, therefore, layered and multi-faceted. The Filipino American identity changes circumstantially by how, who, and where Filipino Americans are finding a sense of community. They turn to community membership to define who they are and what markers of culture they identify as their own.

Filipinos are a largely transnational community especially with the growth of the diaspora in the last century. What constitutes Filipino/American culture is less about space and more so about aspects of culture in media, the arts, food, and other cultural artifacts. These assist in forming culture, which then brings people in different spaces to a formed community. Therefore, debating whether the

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presentation of culture is “authentic” or not is unconducive because the diaspora experiences authenticity in different contexts that cannot and should not be compared to one another. This also fails to consider the role that politics and power play in the creation of culture, which includes the Philippines as a continuing colonial project. As sociologist Emily Ignacio states, “By emphasizing the authenticity of a culture, proponents of the politics of difference ignore the diversity within cultural groups and write scripts that marginalize individuals who choose not to follow the scripts.”

Especially among the Filipino diaspora, the authenticity of Filipino culture is a gray area. Many universities do not have scholarly resources easily accessible for young members of the Filipino diaspora to learn about Filipino history. Furthermore, one cannot solely rely on books and artifacts to learn about their heritage. So, many turn to the Internet, media, or their communities to “look” for what is authentic which in every case is contextual and circumstantial.

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18 Ignacio.
Chapter Two: “Meeting” the Lumpia Filipino

Considering that Filipino Americans constantly engage with non-Filipinos in the spaces they create and are a part of to find community, it raises the questions about the role orientalism plays in these everyday interactions. In their search to find their place or “home,” Filipino Americans self-orientalize themselves to affirm their diaspora identities that are a direct result of neocolonialism. Filipino Americans take on various identities in addition to their hyphenated identity including the OFW and the Global Filipino, and now the lumpia Filipino identity. These identities are multidimensional on their own, but they all connect back to the global imaginary and peripheral orientalism that works to serve the American empire.

I chose to focus on Filipino student organizations because these clubs create spaces where an audience can “meet” the self-orientalizing lumpia Filipino. Specifically, I examine the traditional event that many Filipino student organizations host called the Pilipino Cultural Night which is a full student-led production that aims to present Filipino culture to the audience. This case study engages with “another side,” a person or a group of people who are consuming Filipino culture in some way. In these interactions, Filipino Americans choose how to present their Filipino culture, strategically grappling with the production of culture and identity as reactionary tailored to different environments. In this section, I hope to explain what the lumpia Filipino identity looks like in the contemporary world, and how this identity is not one-dimensional but rather an entity that is continuously responding not only to the Philippines’ colonized histories but also contemporary forces of neocolonialism, capitalism, and being a part of the American empire.
Student Cultural Organizations

Student cultural organizations play an important role on college campuses as spaces for community building, learning, and action. They have also historically played a significant role in activism on campuses. In 1968, various student cultural organizations mobilized together in the Third World Liberation Front at San Francisco State University for demands including an ethnic studies department and more diversity in the student body. The movement was led by the Black Student Union, and was joined by organizations like the Pilipino American Collegiate Endeavor, the Latin American Student Organization, El Renacimiento, and the Asian American Political Alliance. Student organizations have always been inherently political, therefore what I am interested in is what comes at the forefront of these organizations through their events and activities. Organizations, like the Pilipino American Collegiate Endeavor at San Francisco State, are spaces where students can activate their agency and engage with their cultural identities. Scholar Xavier J. Hernandez states that “college students have created their own Pilipino American cultural institution within a larger American cultural institution where they are largely without systemic power and privilege.”19 Therefore, the existence of student cultural organizations comes with the understanding that students are carving out a space for themselves to be seen, to be heard, and to fill the gaps wherein the larger American cultural institution that they are a part of by enrollment fails to provide.

**Pilipino Cultural Night**

Filipino student organizations operate similarly by their traditions and annual events, the most recognizable one being Pilipino Cultural Night, or PCN. This event traces its earliest roots back to the 1970s, when it started to emerge in popularity among universities in California. In 1973 the Pilipino American Collegiate Endeavor at San Francisco State University, the same organization involved with the Third World Liberation Front just a couple of years prior, premiered the very first PCN. The emergence of the PCN only a few years after the Third World Liberation Front strikes cannot be looked at as merely coincidental. Students of color were coming to a reckoning with their identities at the time, and were yearning for a space to explore their heritage. Additionally, given the timeline, these students were also attending college just at the turn of the Civil Rights Era, which encouraged a critical and introspective reflection on race and ethnicity. Universities, then, played a larger role than just educating students who belonged to the post-1965 generation who were trying to “find themselves on college campuses with the help of hundreds of student organizations.” Non-Black communities of color were following the lead of the Black community in challenging their roles in American society and the narratives that had been presented about their culture prior. Thus, this paved the way for the cultivation of spaces for mobilization and solidarity, like the Third World Liberation Front, cultural student organizations, and PCN.

The establishment of PCN in the 1970s extended the politicization of Filipino American student organizations, wherein the show accomplishes various keystones of cultural knowledge and

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awareness. First, it offers a space for community building. Young Filipino Americans, as well as non-Filipino Americans, come to Filipino American student organizations to socialize, build friendships, and grow networks. Second, as Filipino/American studies are generally sparse or nonexistent in college curriculum offerings, PCNs become a space for learning. PCN scripts and performances are carefully written through meticulous and extensive research, and often makes up for the lack of scholarship or resources available about Filipino culture. Lastly, PCNs can also be analyzed as cultural capital that engages with a wider audience and a larger discussion on commodification. These different factors point us to answering the question of how PCNs ultimately allow for the commodification and ultimately the self-Orientalism of Filipino Americans. While PCNs undoubtedly encourage young Filipino Americans to instrumentalize their identities through these shows, the other side of that analysis is how it opens the potential for the shows to be problematic.

The beginnings of the PCN can also be connected to migration patterns from the Philippines to the United States after 1965. The Immigration Act of 1965 prioritized family-based reunification and skills-based immigration, which boosted the number of Filipinos immigrating to the United States in the next couple of decades. From 1970 to 1980, the Filipino population in the United States jumped 125%. Filipinos in the United States were creating the “dual-chain migration” pattern, which has significantly curated the generations of Filipinos residing in the country. On one hand, Filipino families would petition their relatives from the Philippines to immigrate to the United States. On the other hand, also moving to the country was a new wave of workers in the medical, business, engineering, and technological fields. These families were building their lives across the country, and by the establishment of the PCN in the 1970s the “children of the generation of post-1965 immigrants
were also coming of age, attending colleges and universities in large numbers as well.”

Therefore, the emergence of the PCN mirrored the growth of a new generation of young Filipino Americans trying to understand their identities. The PCN allowed these young Filipino Americans to reflect on their histories and make sense of their present surroundings.

PCNs are generally large-scale productions completely coordinated by student membership, and are recognizable by three factors: traditional Filipino dances, instrumental and vocal music performances, and a play that conveys Filipino/American identity, culture, and issues. They are typically directed by a few students who take the lead on writing the script and coordinating the logistics of the event, and the general body members participate in the dances, performances, and acting. Preparing PCNs lasts several months, often the entire school year, and the show’s budgets can peak at thousands of dollars. For example, a show in 1998 with a cast of 315 students totaled production costs at $32,000 including staging, costumes, and professional musicians. The scale of each production differs by school and capacity, but nonetheless PCNs are high-stakes events that Filipino student organizations coordinate every year.

The work that goes into creating PCNs holds a lot of sentimental value, and its participants recognize the importance of the time and effort that they put into the production. Participants see it as a way to connect with their Filipino heritage and a chance for them to learn more about their culture in a way that they had never had the chance to or done before. It is common for young Filipino Americans to feel as if their Filipino heritage is repressed, therefore when they come to college and

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21 Gonzalves, 70.
22 Hernandez, 3.
participate in a PCN it invites them to embrace their heritage because of the connections they build through the experience. In one account, Alyanna Estanislao, a PCN performer at California State University, Northridge recalls: “Seeing PCN come together slowly, bit by bit, is kind of motivating. I love practice even though sometimes I forget to eat and it conflicts with my homework. I don’t go to sleep until 5 AM sometimes to be honest, but I wouldn’t trade this experience for anything.”

PCNs act as an occasion for the reproduction of Filipino culture where Filipino Americans are given the platform to practice their cultures, all while creating friends and expanding their networks.

While PCN is one out of many events that a typical Filipino student organization hosts, it is often the most significant activity for the organization in the whole year. Its importance is further established as it is typically included in the constitution of the organization. The journey to a PCN begins at the end of the spring semester, where the organization holds officer board elections. Many schools opt to elect one or a few people as the “Cultural Coordinator,” “Culture Night Chair” or “Culture Chair,” all of which are the same role in charge of leading PCN. The planning for the PCN chair(s) ensues over the summer with early logistics and brainstorming sessions about what the show might be about. Then starting in the fall, the organization begins to prepare for the show. Timelines for each organization can look differently, but the show’s writers typically finalize the script, performances, and logistics in the fall before presenting it to the members of the organization. Finally, in the spring the organization rehearses multiple times over the week, sometimes for hours per day, practicing dances, acting scenes, and other performances. The almost year long preparation for PCN

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25 Gonzalves.
26 Gonzalves, 70.
leads up to the event sometime held in the spring semester, and the event is open to all. Many participants’ families and friends attend PCN, along with other students at the university, professors, and Filipinos who live locally in the area. At some universities, the show is followed by a celebration feast where they serve staple Filipino food like chicken *adobo, pancit, puto, bibingka*, and a full-sized *lechon*.

The PCN is a logistics-heavy event that has various moving parts. In addition to rehearsals and writing the script, some other tasks include the following: choreographing performances, marketing the event, contacting caterers for the post-show feast, creating programs, and scheduling and reserving spaces for the event and rehearsals. The PCN invites students to literally participate in Filipino culture, but it also provides opportunities to gain experience in logistics, event planning, and leadership. It is an effort that takes almost an entire year and is repeated annually, with each iteration aiming to be bigger and better than the last.

PCNs garner large audiences, ranging from the hundreds to thousands depending on different factors like the size of the school and the scale of the show. The audiences at PCNs have largely different degrees of closeness or knowledge about Filipino culture. For some audience members, they are consuming culture that they are already familiar with. For many others, it is their first encounter with Filipino culture. Regardless, the audience fully engages with Filipino culture in a way that is produced to be consumed. On one hand, Filipinos who are in the audience are more likely to relate to the stories presented or understand the Filipino words or jokes included in the script. Elemental humor like Filipino jokes support the community membership that the show tries to achieve, and they act as
“an active articulation and enfolding of issues that pertain to ourselves and others in the diaspora.”

These strongly contribute to an ethnic solidarity established at the venue, directly opposing the “otherness” that outside of the show defines Filipino culture. In this way, PCNs are instrumental in cultivating a perception of Filipino culture for Filipino people that highlights it rather than subjugate and silence it.

On the other hand, the PCN audience also consists of non-Filipinos who most often have little to no knowledge about Filipino culture. This is where the PCN borders on being potentially problematic. For audience members who are largely or completely unfamiliar with Filipino culture, PCNs can act as first impressions. They craft the way these people will understand and perceive the Philippines and extensively Filipino people, Filipino culture, and overall the Filipino experience. Therefore, we start to grapple with the PCN as more than just a space for shared learning and community building but also as a full-scale production harnessing capital. Because a lot of research, preparation, time, and money go towards the production of the PCN, it raises questions about what is being highlighted and presented about Filipino culture and what is being left out. The audience is consuming as much of Filipino culture as is being presented to them, therefore they impose limits on how Filipino culture will be understood and remembered after the show ends.

The PCN Genre

Like mentioned before, the PCN consists of a skit, dance performances, and musical performances. Each of these parts all allow the PCN to explore different aspects of Filipino culture,

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many of which utilize elements that are local or sometimes even Indigenous in the Philippines. Filipino American choreographer Joel Jacinto calls the elements portrayed in the PCN as the “Filipino Cultural Night genre.”

Jacinto argues that “the PCN genre, unique to the United States and developed by Filipina/o Americans, should be understood as a performance in the modern, Western sense of separating audiences from performers.” Contrary to ritualized forms of Filipino folkloric performances that invite the audience to join in dances, the PCN engages with the modern audience that is required to simply sit and watch. While much of Filipino traditional performances stress the participation of the audience, the PCN inserts the same native Filipino elements onto an American stage with an American audience.

The PCN genre puts a barrier between the presenters on stage and the audience members. Similarly, the exchange between the Filipino and non-Filipino regarding the presentation of Filipino culture operates similarly. PCNs use native Filipino elements in the dances, the script, and other performances, and it raises the question about what purpose such native elements in the show serve. On one hand, it invites the performers in the show to experience aspects of Filipino culture first hand. However, it also highlights parts of the culture that is easy to be perceived as extremely foreign, and therefore orientalized. These elements successfully distinguish the Other where it is being displayed onstage for everybody else to observe. PCN participants make their performances as grandiose as possible because they recognize that non-Filipino audience members enjoy such unfamiliar elements and come to watch the show for that reason.

29 Gonzalves, 72.
Through the PCN’s theatrical narrative aspect, we return to the idea of orientalist aesthetics. Many PCNs follow a similar theme in their script: a young Filipino American goes on a journey to learn more about their Filipino culture and by the end, they not only have learned more about their culture but they have reconciled any issues they had regarding their Filipino American identity. A typical ending to a PCN show portrays the young Filipino American attaining a happy ending by embracing their Filipino heritage. This typical narrative falls under a widely used PCN genre device, called the reverse telos. The reverse telos opposes the expectation of Filipino Americans to fully assimilate and blend into white American culture. This device exhibits how the PCN genre is an “imminent critique of the assimilation paradigm, an oblique and complicated answer to, as much as it is the symptom of, the possible ways we would talk about the state of ethnic relations in the United States.”

Young Filipino Americans overarchingly experience assimilationist expectations that they should and will lose their Filipino culture in order to fit in or be accepted in American society. This loss or refusal of knowledge has majorly acted as a catalyst in the growth of the PCN, and it is still commonly referred to in the theatrical narrative of a PCN annually.

To portray the reverse telos, PCNs typically use the quest motif, where the characters encounter guides on their journey that progressively show and tell them about Filipino culture in order to teach them the lesson of embracing one’s heritage. These characters are sometimes elders, mythological spirits, or use other devices like time travel or other science fictional elements. Regardless of the approach, the quest motif invites the main character, typically a young Filipino American, to engage with their Filipino heritage in an unprecedented way. Gonzalves explains:

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30 Gonzalves, 73.
“During their journey, the characters come in contact with a host of sounds and visions in the form of the dance suites. They marvel at what they have missed or taken for granted for so long, unexplained by their parents, or written as out of bounds in any of their school books. They have gone native, having gone to the source itself (the Philippines). The bird dances, the courtship waltzes, the warrior chants—all confirm for the characters to what they should refer when thinking of the Filipina/o. No text contains what they seek. All previous texts have been ruled invalid. They rely on the visceral engagement with bodies for their authentication—costumed, armored, dancing, playing.”

For example, in 2008 the Filipino American Student Association at William & Mary hosted “Bayani: A Filipino Journey,” which told the story of a young half Black half Filipino man who goes on a journey exploring different parts of his Filipino culture through native Filipino dances and performances to better understand his own identity. The show uses the quest motif to emphasize that although the journey to learn about one’s culture might be difficult, it is rewarding at the end. Many PCNs also use the reverse exile, where “something’ is missing, that which is replaced by an imagined return to the Philippines where the ‘crisis’ of Filipino American identity is solved.”

Through this recycled motif in the PCN, Filipino Americans instrumentalize the show to discuss their unique experiences of being young Filipinos growing up in America. It contradicts the telos of American assimilation that would argue that children of immigrants do not think about their ethnic identities because they are already fully assimilated into American society. The frequent use of this motif also demonstrates that Filipino Americans are continuing to think critically about their

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31 Gonzalves, 74.
33 Gonzalves, 74.
identities and that they actively look for ways to express how they feel about their Filipino identity. Therefore, the PCN stands as a call by young Filipino Americans for affirmation about their identity, where they vulnerably use the show to tell their experiences through their own words and performances. Like Balmori’s poetry, the PCN also demonstrates a form of Filipino modernism where the show partakes in a transculturation that connects the past and present. They perform traditional Filipino dances while telling a contemporary story about the Filipino American experience. In addition to the show itself, the preparation that goes into the show also further affirms their identities by the number of hours they put in learning Filipino words and phrases, traditional dances, and more.

**Self-Orientalism in PCN**

When done carefully, the theatrical narration in a PCN is a genuine reflection of the experiences of young Filipino Americans. Along that same idea, it is also a reflection of the transactional relationship Filipino America has with the American empire, which has prompted Filipino Americans to partake in self-orientalism. The PCN confronts the notioned Other; it recognizes that at the event the Filipino is a sight to see, and people come to watch the show to see dances and performances about a culture they are not familiar with. The distinction between who is in the audience, which consists of largely non-Filipino people, and who is on stage, which is almost completely Filipino, articulates the Other versus the “not” Other. The different elements that make up the PCN activate orientalist aesthetics that make the show desirable for a non-Filipino, and largely white, audience. Therefore, the PCN becomes a medium for Filipino Americans to self-orientalize themselves, and jumpstarts the production of the lumpia Filipino in Filipino student organizations at universities. It is self-orientalizing because the use of traditional aspects and the quest motif in PCNs
attract audience members and highlight the Other onstage as a sight to see. It transforms Filipino
culture and the bodies on stage as things to consume. This idea of consumption is pushed at the
forefront, rather than seeing the PCN as an immersive experience in which its participants truly
learned about Filipino culture for the sake of shared learning with other Filipino Americans.

Moreover, the PCN also tends to problematically use the aforementioned theatrical tactics to
narrow the Filipino American experience to the surface level plight of not fitting in an American
society. In the theatrical narrative of PCNs, the main character encounters traditional Filipino cultural
elements that ultimately leads them to embracing their Filipino identity by the end. It utilizes
traditional cultural elements, which otherwise should be regarded as delicate and meaningful, as a ploy
to catalyze the transformation of a young Filipino American. It fails to consider the histories and
significance of these traditional elements and are simply used to move the story along. PCN
participants may spend hours learning how to dance the *tinikling* or to perform a song in Tagalog, but
they fail to learn about the connotations of their performances. For example, a former PCN dance
coordinator shared that he believes that “the normalization of Filipino dance has erased its meaning.”
This is especially problematic when PCNs use dances that are traditionally performed by Indigenous
groups or Muslims in the Philippines, like the *bangga* or the *singkil*. These groups are already
marginalized in the Philippines, so without recognizing privilege or power and using it in the PCN
dangerously appropriates these delicate cultural forms. It becomes a box to check off when putting the

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show together, where they immediately celebrate including such delicate cultural traditions without learning about its significance or meaning.

The orientalist aesthetics in PCN also fail to confront significant issues that Filipinos in the Philippines face, like poverty or government corruption. It erases the Philippines from the Filipino American story by narrowing the challenges of the Filipino diaspora to merely finding a sense of belonging in the United States. While sense of belonging is an extremely important issue to explore, it also makes other pressing issues invisible. The PCN urges that the young Filipino American embrace their identity and encourages them to participate in their culture. However, not everything can be solved by eating Filipino food or learning how to dance the tinikling.

It is also important to consider how the PCN tackles class and power, which it often does not at all. Like mentioned before, the PCN emerged in the 1970s just as the children of the post-1965 Immigration Act immigrants were starting college, many of whom were middle-class Filipino immigrants who came to the United States on skills-based qualifications. And if the PCN mirrors the experiences of young Filipino Americans, it is likely that the PCN story is told from a middle-class perspective. Therefore, the PCN fails to consider the experiences of lower class Filipino Americans, whose stories also deserve to be told and explored.

On the other hand, it is also interesting that the PCN uses the quest motif so often. The main character goes on what is close to a “hero’s journey,” where in the end they solve everything by embracing their Filipino heritage. The recycled use of this motif from year to year shows that many plot lines in PCNs are just being regurgitated and nothing new is being put forth. Although the show is different every year, the audience do not learn anything new or come to different conclusions about
Filipino culture. While this motif is useful to highlight Filipino traditional dances and performances throughout the theatrical narrative, it offers no new or complex takeaways for the audience watching. Filipino student organizations modernly interpret the Filipino American identity through the PCN, but that interpretation should be evolving from year to year. Lastly, given that PCNs also generate revenue for the student organization, the fact that the PCN is organized every year may be deterring the organizations to come up with anything new for the show when they know what already succeeds in garnering large audiences. Instead of challenging their past work to encompass more complexity and nuance about the Filipino American experience, it is easier and less risky to just show something along the lines of what has been proven that their audiences enjoyed seeing in the past. The portrayal of Filipino culture should not be stagnant, and while the plot changes annually the frequent use of the quest motif still achieves the same things. It simply presents Filipino culture as simple two minute dance performances or a similar plot story every year, rather than inviting the audience to grapple with larger issues that pertain to Filipino America and the Philippines.

The annual reiterations of the PCN further perpetuate the production of the lumpia Filipino in Filipino student organizations because it sets the perfect stage for young Filipino Americans to engage with their heritage only through self-orientalizing means. While the PCN offers a successful space for learning about different aspects of Filipino culture, the PCN also poses limits on how Filipino culture is understood. When preparing a PCN, the participants learn the dances, performances, and scenes as separate parts where each rehearsal is dedicated to practicing one or a couple of things rather than understanding the dialogical moving parts that make a culture. Because of this, young Filipino Americans who are learning about these cultural elements for the first time only
know how to identify what each element is by name or by dance step and so much cultural context is lost and sometimes not even addressed at all. For example, “some point to the orientalizing function of the Muslim dance suites in several PCNs, particularly how students have undertheorized their importation of folkloric forms from the southern Philippines.”35 The critique falls on the aesthetics that are presented in the PCN, which have been increasingly prioritized over learning about the significance and histories of the cultural elements that the show utilizes. It misses the opportunity to use the PCN as a platform to connect with its participants to educate them about both Filipino culture and Filipino issues and to encourage them to critically think about the implications of their identities connecting to their race, class, and gender. Rather, the PCN has “become an epic - a grand and bloated restatement of Filipina/o American ‘culture.’”36

Ultimately, I believe the PCN produces the lumpia Filipino in the preparation phase of the show and then presents the lumpia Filipino on stage to a non-Filipino audience on show day. The self-orientalism in the PCN allows for the audience to have a superficial and incomplete understanding of Filipino culture. However, the lumpia Filipino does it for reasonable and convenient purposes. For one, when organizing the PCN young Filipino Americans do all the research on their own. Filipino/American studies are also largely unavailable for students in universities, therefore they are “left with the ultimatum to represent their cultures and identities to the best of their ability with their often disjointed and self-taught knowledge, or risk having another entity with even less expertise attempt the same - or even worse yet, no one at all.”37 Many of the organizers of PCN come to college

35 Gonzalves, 76.
36 Gonzalves, 76.
37 Hernandez, 2.
also trying to navigate their Filipino identity for the first time or unprecedentedly, so they do not have the already established knowledge to know how to teach everything about Filipino culture to PCN participants. Second, young Filipino Americans still face the intergenerational experience of seeking colonial validation. The lumpia Filipino at universities seek to connect with their non-Filipino peers, which they only know to do by presenting what is already familiar to them through food, dance, or other elements that are shown in PCN. Young Filipino Americans’ self-orientalization in the PCN is a continuous response to their surroundings. They internalize being defined as the Other as a result of understanding their positionality as non-white students in a higher education institution where they simply are trying to earn a degree, but along the way are attempting to get to know themselves better. The PCN provides an avenue for that learning, but as discussed it can pose dangerous limits on how Filipino culture is perceived and how Filipino students on campus are understood.
Chapter Three: Knowing the Lumpia Filipino

The lumpia Filipino identity poses concerns about the future of Filipino America because it pushes the community the other direction of decolonization. It perpetuates the formation of the neoliberal Filipino, which counters the centuries of resistance against further decolonization and imperialism on the Filipino people. Spaces like Filipino student organizations, however, are spaces that have the potential to contest this by bringing young Filipino Americans together to an ongoing conversation about their Filipino identity. It is a space for them that has various functions: to learn, practice, and embrace their heritage. Filipino student organizations serve as vehicles for cultural familiarity, cultural expression and advocacy, and venues for cultural validation. 38 However, outside of the organization they still face the challenge of obstacles like a potentially predominantly white body or an unsupportive administration. Therefore, they find refuge in student organizations where they build coalitions and friendships with other Filipino students. When engaging with the community outside of their organizations Filipino Americans are left to choose how to present Filipino culture, which is where the lumpia Filipino comes to life.

If the lumpia Filipino increasingly becomes more prominent in the future, it can lead to a significant divide between Filipino Americans. On one hand, the lumpia Filipino significantly settles for representational wins of Filipino culture being accepted in the mainstream by consumption. On the other hand, in the last few decades there has been a rise in largely youth-led anti-imperialist movements both in the Philippines and the United States. This has also emerged another identity for

young Filipinos, one that participates in activism and challenges institutional oppression. For example, Anakbayan USA was founded in 1998 and is a youth-led left-wing organization that ascribes to the national democracy movement in the Philippines, and has chapters all over the country and regularly recruits new members to join the organization. The organization vehemently opposes imperialism and monopolistic capitalism, and focusing their efforts and initiatives around these issues.

These two groups are almost complete opposites of one another, where one settles for silence while the other loudly mobilizes for the decolonization of the Philippines. Both embody Filipino identities that young Filipinos can make their own, but they have starkly different intentions and approaches. The lumpia Filipino achieves nothing but to perpetuate the decolonization of the Filipino people and the subjugation of contemporary Filipino America under American imperial power. Therefore, it is critical that future generations of Filipino Americans become aware of the dangers of upholding a commodified identity as the lumpia Filipino because it is counterproductive to the efforts for decolonization and anti-imperialism, a fight that has lasted the Filipino people for centuries.

**Capital in PCNs**

The PCN is a tradition that Filipino student organizations at universities will most likely continue in the years to come. While it has played a significant role in producing the lumpia Filipino identity by commodifying Filipino traditional culture into a grandiose annual show, it still offers a platform where students can gain various types of capital. Xavier Hernandez pinpoints that the primary type is the PCN as cultural capital, holding long-term value in the experience of preparing the show for months and performing it for a large audience. The show “markets itself as a crucial coming-of-age experience for young Filipino Americans - one that students year for but often lack the
critical language to describe the source of this hunger. The PCN is unique because it presents a rare opportunity for young Filipino Americans to participate in their culture as a part of a collective effort. It addresses the generational silence that many Filipino Americans grow up experiencing, which is the unwillingness of their elders to talk about and teach them Filipino culture. The PCN also stands for what the university lacks in accessible knowledge about Filipino culture and the Filipino American experience. Filipino/American studies are largely absent from universities’ curricula, so instead they find intrinsic value in investing huge sums of money to budget the PCN. The PCN is not just a show that lasts a couple of hours, but an experience that for its participants lasts months and has impacts that can stay with them for years. Scholar Antonio Tiongson explains:

“I guess in the absence of a political movement or a moment, it feels like the closest thing possible, the next best thing. It’s like attending a rock concert. You’re there for a collective purpose. There’s an energy and spirit behind it. There’s a sense that even though you’re all crammed into one place, you could be freed by the music and experience something at a very visceral and sometimes transcendent level. Culture has a lot to do with that. It allows us to be able to think that way. The PCN was such an interesting experience because it relies on hundreds of folks to make it happen. It requires a lot of time. You celebrate the labor of that. You celebrate the friendship of that.”

The cultural capital in PCNs is one that I foresee lasting for generations because it is an experience that young Filipino Americans encounter during a very specific period in their life. It recognizes the many identities that they hold: being a college student, being in their early twenties, and of course being Filipino. The PCN empowers all of these identities through a collective experience that

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39 Hernandez, 6.
41 Tiongson, 116.
invites other similar people to partake in the same. Participants in PCN create a show out of nothing but precedents set by previous years’ shows, some cultural knowledge, and teamwork; more importantly, they repeat it every year. For this reason I believe that PCNs can reverse the production of the lumpia Filipino and return to the politicized roots of cultural student organizations to use it as a vehicle for political mobilization through art and theatre. It is apparent that the PCN is a highly treasured experience for young Filipino Americans, and the next step is to recognize what more they can achieve with this show politically. What keeps them from exploring further in this endeavor can be traced back to the PCN’s audience, specifically white audience members, for whom Filipino student organizations still feel like they have to self-orientalize themselves in order to be celebrated. But recognizing the importance of the PCN as a unique experience and vehicle for community mobilization is a feat to be celebrated in and of itself.

The other forms of capital that PCNs offer include resistant capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, aspirational capital, navigational capital. All of these can be tools to move young Filipino Americans towards more radicalized politics that grapple with issues pertaining to the Filipino experience beyond just representation, but for my argument I focus on resistant capital and linguistic capital. First, resistant capital offers skills and knowledge that are developed through resistance. The act of putting on a PCN every year is an example of the agency of Filipino student organizations to fill the cultural gaps that their institution has failed to support them with. Without anywhere else to turn to, they take it upon themselves to highlight their culture for the campus community; the PCN allows them to create their own representation. The resistant capital in PCN also allows Filipino Americans

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42 Hernandez, 9.
to contest dominant perceptions that the general student body might have about Filipino culture. Filipino culture is generally seen as homogenous, which is a false and dangerous perception. The PCN succeeds in challenging that by showcasing the heterogeneity of Filipino culture through a comprehensive script and set of performances.

Second, the PCN provides linguistic capital through the communication in the show in Tagalog and sometimes other Filipino languages and dialects. However, the linguistic capital in PCN fares beyond just language proficiency but includes “the ways that people are able to code switch, affect tone, or create vernaculars that reflect shared understandings in particular settings.” Hernandez points to one word specifically that has raised contentions among PCN participants: “political.” The writers of the show consider the politics that their script addresses, and they carefully think about the show’s political content and how political the content will lean. Hernandez recalls an account by a former PCN scriptwriter who shared, “We wanted to make sure it was nice and short, nothing serious. People didn’t want anything too political.” The fact that politics is heavily considered and that PCNs try to keep it at a minimum is interesting, given that cultural student organizations have an inherently politicized history. Despite this, PCNs prioritize the audience’s comfortability because they recognize that the PCN is the biggest way they reach a singular, large audience. Therefore, they act carefully as to what messages they offer to the audience to make sure it is representative of the organization’s values.

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43 Hernandez, 10.
44 Hernandez, 11.
These forms of capital in the PCN have the potential to transform the experiences of young Filipino Americans while they are in college, as well as how they will interpret their identity moving forward even beyond college. We can see how the lumpia Filipino fits in the attainment of these forms of capital, but more importantly we see why the PCN is an important aspect of contemporary Filipino American culture. It has the potential to shape and form the Filipino American identity, and Filipino Americans find intellectual and emotional value in the experience. There are two sides to the relationship between the PCN and the lumpia Filipino. On one hand, the PCN perpetuates the lumpia Filipino identity, which can pose negative impacts for young Filipino Americans specifically in how they come to understand their Filipino culture. On the other hand, recognizing the dangers of the lumpia Filipino identity can reimagine the PCN genre to move towards more radical forms of mobilization through the platform. As the PCN tradition continues, a powerful aspect of Filipino student organizations lies in what stories they will tell in future iterations.

**Ameliorating the Lumpia Filipino**

Upon finishing this study on Filipino student organizations and PCN, I sought to find ways to ameliorate the lumpia Filipino identity and its implications. One of the biggest takeaways that I have gotten from studying the lumpia Filipino identity is the way that it exists largely because of external factors that Filipinos have experienced, namely the persisting legacies of colonization. The Filipino American plight to find belonging and create community can be traced back to the way Filipinos have been defined as the Other by their colonizers, which has ultimately shaped the way they perceive their own Filipino heritage. It has led them to find it shameful and something they aspire to keep as invisible as possible. The same can be observed about their plight to understand themselves. So, young Filipino
Americans join Filipino student organizations when they arrive at college to make sense of their cultural identity as they reach their early twenties and approach a critical time for gaining self-awareness. Spaces like Filipino student organizations encourage them to reckon with their identities, therefore the space becomes highly valued and an overall treasured experience. The lumpia Filipino identity comes to fruition during this period of growth, where they fall back on self-orientalism while they learn about their Filipino culture. They simplify their complex identities for two reasons: one, because it is easier to be perceived by others through orientalist and commodified ideas and two, because culture is easier to understand for themselves this way. The lumpia Filipino does not need saving, however it does need to reconfigure how to use its agency towards radical political change.

First, further research needs to be done on the various defined identities that have been imprinted on Filipino Americans. Lumpia Filipino is just one out of many, others being the Overseas Filipino Worker or OFW, the Global Filipino, and even the Asian American umbrella identity “boba liberal.” Some of these identities have been defined by Filipino Americans or Asian Americans themselves, which goes to show that these groups are thinking critically about their role and position in American society already. However, there is little scholarship that support these identities and just how useful they are to assess the Filipino American experience. Literature on these topics weigh in on analyzing what factors play a role in identity formation; it helps to understand different historical contexts that have marginalized these groups and can answer questions about the future of the Filipino and Asian American experience.
Second, the case study of Filipino student organizations shows that students are looking for spaces where they can fully embrace their identities. Therefore, it is critical that these spaces are supported by the institution. One, student organizations should be supported financially by the school. I think there is also a point about how students lead mobilization efforts on campus through these student organizations with their labor going completely unpaid. They coordinate events, fundraisers, and other initiatives and ultimately boost the reputation of the school without getting the recognition or support from the administration, much less getting paid for it. In some ways, students also take up the burden to cultivate their communities sometimes at the expense of emotional toll or prioritizing it over their schoolwork. However, students deserve to simply just be students, but more and more young people are taking it upon themselves to lead activist or community efforts on campus.

The tradition of PCN proves that young Filipino Americans are actively yearning to learn more about their culture, however their access to such knowledge is often limited because there is little to no institutional support for Asian American or Filipino/American studies. The call for ethnic studies is not new, however it is overdue and continues to be struck down by administration often for bigger stadiums or an alumni house. Personally, I have also experienced this during my time in the last four years. I majored in Asian & Pacific Islander American (APIA) studies because I was yearning to learn more about myself and I found the work fulfilling. However, the program was always insufficiently supported by the administration and professors had to either teach more classes in one semester or there was a lack of APIA classes offered. However, this case study goes to show that ethnic studies is critical for identity formation because learning and practicing culture can transform the experience of young students. Therefore, higher education institutions need to invest more in ethnic
studies programs like APIA, Filipino/American studies, Black studies, Native studies, and Latinx studies. Students come to college to find the knowledge they seek, and it is the administration’s responsibility to fully support that by nurturing these programs.

Ameliorating the lumpia Filipino identity can inform the Filipino American community how to engage more critically with their identity. It can also lead to a necessary reversal of the self-orientalism of Filipino Americans, as it detaches them from the “not” Other and returns the agency to themselves. These steps are just a few, however the cultivation of community involves work like this that invites members of the community to lean further into each other.
Filipino America: *Still An Imagined Community*

After identifying the lumpia Filipino, the question that remains is: who will the Filipino American become? Filipino America is left reckoning with what their identity will look like in the future, as neocolonialism, capitalism, and imperialism continue to interfere with the Philippines and the Filipino diaspora. The lumpia Filipino is merely one lens to analyze the formation and future of Filipino America. It must be seen as an ever-changing realm where the Filipino identity can still be contested and challenged towards radical politicization. So, we return to Benedict Anderson’s idea on the imagined community where “regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.”

Although external factors persist, Filipino Americans are also just as much continuously contributing to the definition of the Filipino American identity. Therefore, we must imagine new communities for the future of Filipino America to release it of orientalist notions that currently dictate definitions and perceptions of the Filipino people.

Scholar Neferti Tadiar argues that hegemonic categories like nationhood, regionality, race, gender, and ethnicity do not fully encompass the breadth of the imagined community. She calls this idea infra-sociality, which asserts that communities are created beyond classifications and that communities are created anywhere, at any time, under any circumstances. Therefore, it is critical to “locate and extend [] spaces of creativity and freedom, and to extricate the cultural practices that have made such spaces as well as their political potential from those cultural spaces that contribute to the containment, expropriation, and alienation of people’s labor, processes which operate everywhere,

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45 Anderson, 7.
even in the most politically radical sectors.”

This signals a need for the reimagination of the Filipino American community where Filipino Americans collectively grapple with their colonized histories, recognize the role they have played in perpetuating orientalism, and redirects the community towards decolonization. This is critical not only for the Filipino American community, but Filipinos in the Philippines and other marginalized groups that we must stand in solidarity with.

As an instrumental space for community building, the future of Filipino America can be foreseen in Filipino student organizations. They will continue traditions, like PCN, that will ultimately build new contexts for Filipino America, which will then instantaneously shape the Filipino American identity. The value in PCNs traces back to the celebrated feat of creating community. These student organizations are already reimagining the future of Filipino America, and PCNs are just one out of the many ways they portray it. The space they create on college campuses is multifaceted, and no one side should be remembered over the other. Although the PCN instrumentalizes the production of the lumpia Filipino, this relationship is not irreversible nor is it perpetual. Filipino student organizations show that Filipino Americans evolve their identities every year through the PCN, which they create from the ground up annually. Historically they also created PCN out of nothing, a unique tradition that has created an entire subculture for the Filipino American community. Similarly, Filipinos will continue to build communities and transform the Filipino identity further.

The lumpia Filipino is still fundamentally Filipino, capable of resistance and unlearning colonialist thinking. The agency of Filipinos should not be undermined because the Filipino has never

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been idle nor silent. Filipino America is still an imagined community, and its formation continues to resiliently persist in the communities and spaces it cultivates for itself.

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Two years after my first encounter with the Filipino American Student Association, the organization hosted a kamayan for Homecoming, which is a communal-style Filipino feast where attendees are invited to partake in the Filipino custom of eating without utensils and where traditional Filipino food is served along huge banana leaves. With my bare hands, I dug into the mound of food in front of me and immediately recognized the dishes on my banana leaf: adobo, white rice, fried fish, and of course, lumpia. My first bite was savory, harmonious, and complex. It reminded me of the Filipino America I know and love.
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