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Article

Picturing Forgotten Filipinx: Family Photographs and Resisting U.S. Colonial Amnesias

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Abstract: U.S. imperialism in the Philippines has led to the multiple generations of diasporic conditions of colonial amnesia and systematic forgetting of history. Its impact on the Filipinx community has left unrecorded memories and voices of immigrants silenced, and considered lost to history. This study examines the relationship between U.S. colonialism and imperialism in the Philippines and the experiences of Filipinx immigration to the U.S. through a critical Indigenous feminist lens of visual imagery and storytelling. Given that many of the experiences within the Filipinx diaspora in relation to the American Empire have been systematically forgotten and erased, this study utilizes family photographs in framing the challenges and reinscribes harmful hegemonic U.S. colonial and imperial narratives. With a combination of semi-structured interviews and photo analysis as a form of visual storytelling, the family photographs within the Filipinx diaspora may reframe, challenge, and resist hegemonic U.S. colonial and imperial narratives by holding memories of migration, loss, family belonging, and community across spatial and generational boundaries that attempt to erase by the U.S. nation-state. Results shed light on resistance and survivance through bayanihan (community care) spirit.

Keywords: storytelling; family photography; Filipinx diaspora; U.S. imperialism and colonialism; resistance; survivance; bayanihan (community care)

1. Background and Researchers' Stances: A Dance of Two Generations of Scholars

The politics of forgetting and memory within the Filipinx¹ community is a special interest of ours, as first-generation Filipinas in the U.S. One of us is an undergraduate student and the other is a tenured professor at a predominantly White university, and we utilize this study to elevate the voices of our Filipinx communities. Growing up, we knew very little about the history of our Filipino culture, our communities across the diaspora, including our own families who immigrated here from the Philippines. Our lack of knowledge impacted our sense of belonging in our own cultures and peoples. This includes how we navigate being inadvertently labeled as “authentic” Filipina or not. We later realized that our feelings of loss, detachment, and longing for our own culture and community are shared feelings that many Filipinx living in the U.S. experience. We also became aware that our own individual feelings were heavily tied to the collective, and that they are as personal as they are political. Filipino culture has been characterized by Filipinx scholars as a culture “lost to history” (Tiongson et al. 2006). In the process of learning about our herstories, or the lack thereof, we also learned about the affective power family photographs hold in building cultural memory, tracing transnational histories of migration within diasporas, bridging

¹ We use Filipinx, Filipino, Filipina interchangeably. They denote those that self-identify coming from the Philippines.

generational gaps family members, and reinscribing hegemonic U.S. narratives of Asian immigrants. In thinking about our own family photos, we can already see and feel the ways in which these physical images of the past have strengthened our sense of Filipina identity and belonging to our culture, community, and family.

2. Purpose of This Study and the Research Question

The Filipinx culture is a culture known as “lost to history,” whose memories of U.S. colonialism and imperialism, and memories of Filipinx immigrant experiences have been purposely erased and forgotten by the nation-state. This study explores the ways in which family photographs can challenge and resist U.S. imperial narratives. Photos illuminate Filipinx experiences and stories. Additionally, photos can highlight the ways in which Filipinx communities have survived and found joy amidst loss, displacement, and trauma enacted by the U.S. nation-state. Photos can also show Filipinx strength, resiliency, and the rich complexity that make up the Filipinx diaspora. The research question is: Given that many of the experiences of the Filipinx diaspora in relation to the American Empire have been systematically forgotten and erased, how can family photographs of the Filipinx diaspora challenge and reinscribe hegemonic U.S. colonial and imperial narratives of Filipinx folks in America?

3. Literature Review

This study draws upon two bodies of work: U.S. imperialism and colonialism of the Philippines and its impact on systemic forgetting; and the meaning making and process of remembering through the use of photos. This study links the two as a venue and tool to create awareness and a sense of empowerment among the Filipinx community.

3.1. *U.S. Colonialism in the Philippines and the Systematic Forgetting*

Due to the systematic amnesias of the United States and the erasure of the Philippine–American War, Filipino scholars have struggled with an invisible archive of their communities and experiences. In the book *Positively No Filipinos Allowed*, American Studies professor and interdisciplinary scholar Lisa Lowe, along with Filipinx scholars of the book, emphasizes the problem of invisibility, stating that Filipinx are considered a people “lost to history” (Tiongson et al. 2006). The forgetting and erasure of Filipino histories vis-a-vis U.S. colonialism and imperialism have contributed to a problematic archive of the Filipinx community, one composed, if any, of misrepresentations of Filipinx subjects and experiences (Bolton 2013; Constantino 2000; Espiritu 2003; San Juan 2006; Nguyen 2012). When Filipinx people are seen, they are portrayed as savages, threats to White labor, sexual deviants, and ungrateful recipients of U.S. benevolence (Tiongson et al. 2006; San Juan 2005; Vergara 1995). With Filipinx experiences unrecorded and silenced, Filipinx cultural memory, if not lost, remains subject to these racialized narratives inscribed by the American Empire.

3.2. *Building Cultural Memory through Family Photography*

To tackle the issue of U.S. colonial erasure and the invisible archive of Filipinx, family photography is used to collect Filipinx stories and build up a cultural archive of Filipinx families. Hirsch (1997) intertwines feminist and memory studies and argues that family photos are technologies of memory. Past studies that focus on the history of the Holocaust explore the significance of family photos for children of Holocaust survivors (Hirsch 1997). Family photographs, as technologies of memory are significant in building and contributing to cultural memory and meaning making (Hirsch 1997; Hirsch and Smith 2002; Smith 2017). When memories are restored, values can be re-evaluated and re-visited. Past studies also emphasize the significance of family photographs in that they can be “an index of mixed feelings, which is to say, an emotionally charged medium for tracing transnational histories of migration and diaspora” (Phu and Brown 2018, p. 153) and see family in diverse ways (Orpana and Parsons 2017). They also enable us to imagine futures outside of White supremacy and heteronormativity (Phu and Brown 2018). When families move across the globe, pushed by war and

swayed by sociopolitical economic forces, how do families discern being a family? [Phu et al. \(2017\)](#) find that the use of family photographs of Vietnamese refugee families in Canada *and* their family histories can interrupt the norming and legitimizing process. Both family photography and oral history invite an active role in documenting themselves, their herstories, and how they would like to remember them. They are “technologies that counter repressive social constructs” ([Phu and Brown 2018](#), p. 156).

[Hirsch and Smith \(2002\)](#) argue that feminist theory is a valuable lens to study cultural memory, because “What a culture remembers and what it chooses to forget are intricately bound up with issues of power and hegemony, and thus with gender” (p. 6). The way memory gets transmitted, and even the way it does not, is intricately tied to what knowledge and values are deemed worthy. The emphasis on the importance of using a critical feminist lens to study and build cultural memory informs the feminist lens that was employed throughout this study. We hence integrate and aim to embody a critical emancipatory, anti-colonial Filipinx lens of examining family photographs and stories.

4. Design and Methodology

With this research, we position ourselves among women of color and transnational feminists who have already been exploring the intersections of race, class, nationality, and gender within the context of imperialism and colonialism both in the U.S. and globally. We are also positioning ourselves among Filipina feminists within the Philippines and the U.S. diaspora who have already been fighting for anti-patriarchal and anti-imperial liberation for the Filipinx community in the Philippines and abroad. The subjugated knowledge of marginalized groups, such as communities of color and immigrant communities, has often been silenced or deemed not credible or worthy in academia. Their lived knowledge has been overlooked and invalidated, because they are not objective, quantifiable, or are too filled with emotion. As an act of resistance against these traditional, and sometimes oppressive, standards of academic research that have silenced and controlled marginalized populations, we aim to uplift the voices and stories of communities of color within the Filipinx diaspora, specifically in the U.S.

Data collection and analyses include the utilization of a mix of semi-structured interviews and submission of family photo archive analyses of Filipinos living in America. This method of visual storytelling is inspired by queer feminist, and Indigenous and decolonizing methodologies. It is helpful in examining the ways in which family photos are significant political tools of resistance against U.S. colonialism and imperialism ([Bolton 2013](#); [Cardinal 2001](#); [Chilisa 2012](#); [Drawson et al. 2017](#); [Denzin et al. 2008](#); [Tucker 2006](#)). The use of visual storytelling to reinscribe narratives of Filipinx histories, communities and experiences is significant in creating new Filipinx subjectivities by Filipinx and for Filipinx; rejecting the U.S. narratives and U.S. colonial attempts to silence, erase, and ultimately forget Filipinx people; and showing Filipinx joy, acts of reclaiming, and resistance amidst racialized and gendered violence. In examining the past, we can not only create a new cultural archive but we, as a greater Filipinx community, can also continue to envision and create a better future that exists beyond the limitations of White supremacy and U.S. imperialism.

4.1. Participants

To recruit Filipinx participants, a convenience sampling method was employed. Our research team reached out to Filipina organizations based in Portland, Oregon. We also reached out to our own self-identified Filipinx friends and family who are based in Honolulu, Hawai'i and others nationally. We then used a snowball sampling method to reach more participants. We aimed to gather a diverse set of voices and experiences, thus I did not limit my participants to a particular generation of Filipino Americans. A total of ten participants were part of this study and we collected 24 family photographs.

4.2. Procedure

A combination of semi-structured oral history interviews and photography analyses as a form of visual storytelling was conducted. Oral history as a method of storytelling and knowledge building was inspired by the work of Indigenous communities who have already been practicing storytelling

to document, collect, and share knowledge across generations. Through the work of Indigenous communities, feminist scholars have also been utilizing oral history methods in research. Utilizing oral history as the method provides the participants with the agency to control their own narrative and meaning making of their experiences. It is also an act of decolonizing research methodologies that have previously deemed this form of knowledge building as invalid. For the method, I also collected and analyzed each photograph, specifically those that included family members, in conjunction with oral history interviewing as a form of visual storytelling. The photographs within the Filipinx community are cultural artifacts that serve as valuable evidence and data.

Originally, the plan was to conduct the interviews in person. However, due to the unprecedented circumstance of COVID-19, interviews had to occur virtually for the safety of every person involved. Prior to the interviews, participants gathered 1–3 family photographs that held significance to them and shared virtual copies with the research team. The semi-structured oral history interviews were approximately 30–60 min long and took place virtually via Zoom or phone call. Topics covering identity, contextualizing the photo(s), storytelling, significance of the photos, and ties to the Filipino community were part of the interviews. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and stored in secured Google Document files along with their photos. The photos were also blurred to maintain confidentiality.

In conjunction with collecting participants' family photographs and stories, archival historical analyses were conducted on sociopolitical events and policies that occurred both in the Philippines and in the United States relating to issues of migration, immigration, and employment that were captured or alluded to in the photos. Specifically, historical events that occurred from the late 1800s—such as the 1898 Treaty of Paris that sold the Philippines to the United States for \$20 million, the Philippine–American War that occurred between 1899 and 1902, and the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act that increased the quota for Filipinos into the United States—up until the present year of 2020. Individual Filipino families and experiences are heavily influenced by the immigration and employment policies that shape them, thus placing participants' family photographs and stories within the larger sociopolitical context of that time are essential in understanding the Filipinx diasporic experience in the U.S.

5. Results

Data indicate two emerging themes: (1) resistance of systematic forgetting, reclaiming, and raising awareness; and (2) survival and overcoming through the bayanihan spirit (community care). These themes shed light on the process of storytelling, and its impact on community empowerment and voice.

5.1. Resisting U.S. Systematic Forgetting, Reclaiming, and Raising Awareness

Consistent with previous literature, family photographs within diasporic communities are more than just banal records of a family's life. Family photographs within the Filipinx diaspora are sites of remembrance that push against the U.S. erasures of the impact of neocolonialism, imperialism, and globalization on Filipino migration and Filipino family formation. While sharing their family photographs, participants often jumped around, sharing multiple events and familial histories while examining just a single family photograph. Many of the stories that participants shared while examining their photos related to themes of immigration and migration of family members, specifically the ways in which U.S. immigration policies impacted the flow of migrant Filipino workers into the United States. Simultaneously, these photographs carried stories of loss, family separation, and displacement.

In sharing the significance of this photo (Figure 1), Lance explains:

"This photo was taken in the Philippines, in the home I grew up in. I was about 5–6 years old, so this was taken around 2002 maybe. I chose this photo because it's one of the few pictures I keep with both my grandma and aunt in one picture with my sister and I. This photo is significant because they were both our 'second moms'. My mother worked overseas in Hawai'i, while my dad took care of my sister and I. For about 6 years, my mother was absent until we moved to Hawai'i."



Figure 1. Lance's photo.

Another participant, Elizabeth, shares a similar story of her mother leaving the Philippines to work overseas:

"My mom went to London when I was 10 years. From the Philippines, she went to work in London as a contract worker, a housekeeper, in 1977. She stayed there for almost 20 years. So I grew up with my grandma."

Both participants' recollection of their photos speaks to the ways in which family photographs, although capturing a snapshot of a singular moment, are attached to much larger social and economic factors that shape the ways in which individual Filipinx families are formed. Lance and Elizabeth's stories share a common experience of their mothers as migrant workers overseas and their grandmothers as primary caretakers. These are examples of how transnational families have become and can still function as a family unit. Their stories are not singular incidents either. As shared desire emerged as a common theme amongst many Filipinos in the Philippines to achieve better economic opportunities and lifestyles, such as those promised in the concept of the 'American Dream.' This has resulted in increased migration from the Philippines to the United States in search of economic opportunities.

Such critical awareness of family migration stories in the context of global capitalism by some participants provided an opportunity for them to reclaim and reposition their family narratives. For example, Viva learns of her mother's story later in life of being an overseas Filipino worker and being trafficked:

... my mom had gone to college and when she graduated she had decided that she was going to leave. She was going to be an OFW, an overseas Filipino worker. She had signed up through this program, and it ended up being that ... and it ended up being that she was actually trafficked to Germany.

Viva's account helped her unpack a past traumatic incident, and rediscover her family matrilineal act of "sacrifice to give family better economic opportunities." Becoming more politicalized, Viva joined a women's organization, and participated in activities to raise awareness in the community of women migrant workers' rights:

"I'm doing this work. I am fighting to know and understand and learn what it happening in the Philippines. What does it mean to look at the world with eyes wide open. What does it mean to be truly awake, to not limit myself in how I take a bit out of the world. ... It's almost, like, because I've

been starved my whole life of Filipino culture, it's like looking at what is Filipino culture? And so, I've allowed myself to understand Filipino culture through learning our history, through going there and tasting the food, of hearing the stories . . . talking to migrants, talking to our parents, and asking those slightly uncomfortable questions, expressing curiosity, and not just having curiosity but also seeking it out."

Some participants demonstrate clear critical awareness of the social and historical context as they share their family photos. For example, Ana indicates:

We [Filipinos] are a face-saving culture. A very assimilating culture, and that's not necessarily bad or good. I know there's a lot of decolonial work that happens with that. I think when I was first introduced to the feminist praxis, it was this big thing where, like, 'We're not Filipino enough, because our family wasn't very Filipino!' But we have to understand that, like, the intricacies of how that manifests. We have a culture of people that were displaced, colonized, and then moved to survive. So we learned to survive! And . . . and maybe to our disadvantage, we learned how to assimilate quickly. Like, we were considered brown Americans by MacArthur, way back in the 70s or 80s. Brown American Brothers. There was a very imperial impact on who we were. So it makes sense that our people, our parents, feel American. Cause they were already American in the Philippines! They were taught American shit in the Philippines before they even moved to America. So the imperialist culture was already embedded in the Philippines and the Filipino culture because of colonization. And, so, to have grace and . . . not even forgiveness, but just, like, the reality that if your family grew up in some type of education system and outside of the province, like they didn't leave the province, that's one thing. But if your parents went to Manila and then came to the U.S., like, they, our families, were not unfamiliar with American culture. American culture was in the Philippines way before they came here.

As seen in Ana's case, some participants indicate how Filipinos were already assimilating to American culture prior to migration. Such awareness within their family migration story is in itself an act of resistance and reclaiming Filipino survivance. It is this "grace" of being critically aware of "the reality" of miseducation that moves some participants to shed light on suppression and oppression.

5.2. Survival and Overcoming through the Bayanihan Spirit (Community Care)

Although family photographs carry stories of loss and family separation due to U.S. imperialism and globalization, they also simultaneously carry stories of the Filipino bayanihan spirit, or the practice of community care. Family photographs highlight the ways in which Filipinx communities, despite being severed by the U.S. nation-state, continue to build a community, a sense of belonging, and ultimate joy.

These two photos (Figures 2 and 3) are of Sarah and her cousins, who she describes as "not just cousins, but more like family, really!" The photo (Figure 2) dates back to her and her family in the Philippines in 1978 and the other photo (Figure 3) is in the United States in 2019. Sarah explains:

"We all planned a reunion in San Francisco. All of those who were able to come abroad— because it's outside of the Philippines— came from London, from Canada, from all parts of the world to this San Francisco reunion. And we cousins were able to come together! I'm still waiting for my second, the last one, the last sister that we left in the Philippines, to come over. 'Cause having her there in the Philippines is kind of depressing for us, especially now that we're all here. So we're able to get her to come travel to the U.S. every now and then just so she doesn't feel left out, you know."

Despite being physically separated from the family, Sarah's family photographs hold family members together in one physical space. Her story also exemplifies one of the many ways Filipinx families continue to preserve relationships and hold the bayanihan spirit of community care even across national boundaries.



Figure 2. Sarah's photo 1978, "not just cousins, but more like family, really!".



Figure 3. Sarah's photo 2019, "not just cousins, but more like family, really!".

In comparison to Sarah's photographs and family stories, this photograph (Figure 4) does not capture family members that have been separated across borders. This photo dates back to the mid-1980s and captures Ana's home in Alaska. Ana is the baby in the photo who is being held by her

dad. Her mother is the woman sitting next to her dad. To Ana, this photo is significant explicitly for the ways in which it encompasses the bayanihan spirit. Ana explains:

“They were able to bring a bunch of people together, which I think is very stunning and very, you know, the bayanihan of being Filipino. It was a part of our culture... just being surrounded by a lot of people all the time. I’m very proud of it because, you know, it’s family. There’s just something inherent about my parents’ ability to bring people together. And my dad has barely been in the United States for more than two years, so, you know, it’s something!”



Figure 4. Ana’s photo.

Another participant, Crising, describes this family photo (Figure 5) with such deep appreciation of her ancestors:

“The main feeling that I get from this photo is pride and gratitude. I am proud to have come from strong, humble people. My people had big dreams and lots of motivation. I believe in cellular memory—that the experiences, trauma, memories, and life force of your ancestors are passed down through every cell of your body. I feel very connected to them through their unwavering resilience. I like to say that my mom’s side of the family does not suffer from self-esteem issues, especially the women, who are very outspoken and often questioned authority. There’s a common thread that binds us: strong self-awareness. It helped me get through the toughest times in my life.”

Although time, space, and distance cross global boundaries of the Filipino family’s diaspora, participants such as Crising are able to feel a strong sense of connection and belonging through ancestral binds. Having family in Canada and the U.K., she concludes:

“We are all very close, but so far away from each other. We all have common goals as Filipinos and as contributing citizens—to provide the best for our families and to continue to expand our horizons in knowledge and life experience. This was all possible in the countries where my family members settled

... . . . I have always felt connected to my Filipino roots and to the Filipino community. My mom made sure that I knew her culture and language. I grew up in a time when educators were advising my mom to refrain from teaching Ilokano to me, as to prevent delays in my English language proficiency."

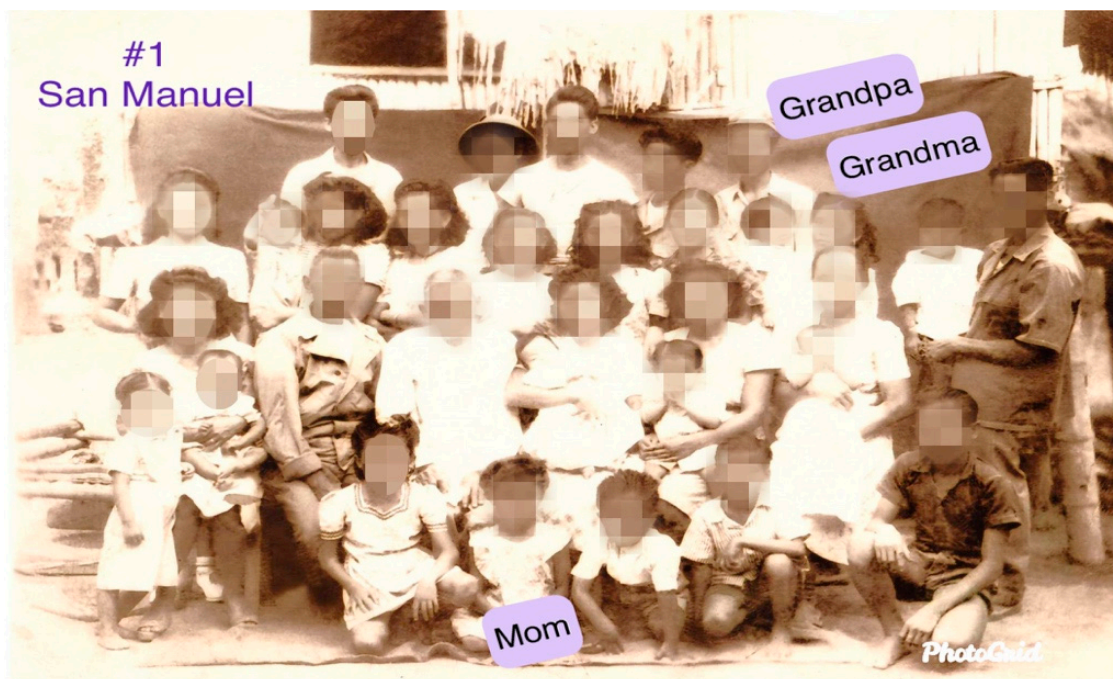


Figure 5. Crising's maternal grandfather's family, taken in approximately 1947, in San Manuel, Pangasinan.

The bayanihan spirit is very important in the Filipino community. Family photographs, in their quiet physicality, hold immense power in bridging and preserving family relationships across geographic space and time. The stories that are elicited from these photos also capture the ways in which Filipino communities continue to find joy, belonging, strength in upholding language and culture, and community.

Findings of this study indicate that family photographs hold stories of migration, loss, family, overcoming, and belonging. The photos and stories carry evidence of Filipino community building in America, in a country that did not entirely welcome Filipinos or value them as whole people. In holding stories of loss and sacrifice, family photographs of the Filipinx diaspora reinscribe Filipinx bodies, not as victims, but instead as witnesses and survivors to racialized, gendered, and sexualized violence of the American Empire.

6. Researcher Team's Reflections

6.1. As the Undergraduate Student Researcher

In listening to the participants' stories and viewing their family photographs, it was important for me to build a respectful relationship and a bond of trust between myself and the participant. Establishing trust was a crucial component of my interviews. As a 22-year-old Filipina American, I wanted to create a sense of respect for the participants who were older than me. The common saying in Filipino culture, as well as other Asian cultures, is: "Honor your elders". The value of honoring my elders has been deeply ingrained in me by my own Filipina mother and grandmother. When it came to interviewing Filipina elders, I often referred to them as "aunty" to establish a sense of respect, even though they were not related to me. In return, they would often address me as "naneng", a Filipino term of endearment for a young Filipina.

It was also important that I ensured participants that they had the power to control their own story, that they could share or not share with me whatever they pleased, and that they could choose to stop participating at any point in the research. In looking at their photos, it was also important that I reminded participants that I would be sharing these photos in my paper, reminding them that if at any time they wished to revoke the photos they could do so at any point. Historically, Filipinos, as well as other communities of color, have been subjected to research that served to oppress and paint harmful racialized and gendered narratives of Black and Brown bodies for the sole purpose of benefiting White folks. As a researcher and a Filipina American, I hold a precarious insider-outsider position of power. It was important that I be aware of my own positionality in relation to my research and my participants so as to not reinforce harmful research practices that have historically been enacted onto my community.

6.2. As the Tenured Professor Mentoring and Overseeing the Work

Bearing witness to such growth in implementing this study was extremely heartwarming and empowering on multiple levels. Each meeting to provide updates on the progress of this study was filled with deep appreciation for the participants' stories. Some of the participants were mutual people we knew, some of which are people I knew in different times of my life. I was also reaffirmed by the fact that our Filipinx community is small, locally and nationally. The diaspora is wide, and collective in many ways. To also sift through the emerging themes of study with my fellow researcher, at different spaces and developmental academic trajectories, added such strength and level of insight that brought clarity and inspiration on the importance of generational transmission of herstories. Re-reading the transcripts, knowing some of the participants across time, space, and place, forced me to analyze the data from a life course development lens. I am deeply grateful for the opportunities to capture developmental awareness and change. It was also healing to hear the diverse narratives of overcoming, resilience, contemplation, and hope. The voices of the community that emerged may not only provide space for validation and a sense of empowerment, but healing for all of us involved in this study. It is our hope that this study touches those that read this.

7. Discussion and Implications

U.S. colonialism and imperialism operates to erase, forget, and ignore its influence in the Philippines and the formation of Filipinx subjectivities. It erases the history of the Philippine–American War by historically excluding it from formal K-12 educational curriculum. Its infiltration of American culture and values in the Philippines through colonization and miseducation of the Filipino people contribute to active erasure. The severing of Filipinx families through strict immigration policies, and the exploitation of Filipinx overseas workers through the bribing of economic opportunity and advancement in America are explicit suppressive forces. As indicated in this study, family photographs of the Filipinx diaspora in the U.S., however, uncover these memories and stories. Participants, at various levels of critical awareness, presume a sense of agency in shedding light on the impact of the U.S. Empire on their Filipinx experiences. In gathering and analyzing these photos, participants utilize their family photographs to reclaim their affective power of bridging generational and spatial divides within their families. In capturing the everyday-ness of Filipinx people—across family members—participants, with their family photos as tools, actively provide evidence of rejecting American colonial forgetting that attempts to erase and forget the lives of Filipinos, Filipino experiences, and the relationship between the Philippines and the U.S. They hold stories of loss, trauma, migration, reclaiming of Filipino culture, resistance, and familial love and community belonging that transcend across generations and spaces.

[Espiritu \(2003\)](#) explores the commonality of tension and resistance, linking the shared desire to U.S. colonial miseducation in the Philippines. [Espiritu \(2003\)](#) states, “The glorification of the United States through the colonial educational system; the historical specific recruitment of Filipino nationals to serve in the U.S. armed forces as health practitioners and as low-wage laborers; and the differentials

in wage and job opportunities between the two countries: all provide pressure to migrate to the United States” (p. 44). As Espiritu states, there is a shared desire for Filipinx people to move out of the Philippines and migrate to the U.S. Often, what this results in, however, is the separation of families across national borders. Mothers are often separated from their children in order to pursue better economic opportunities in the United States, which is the result of neocolonial coercion and exploitation of Filipinx migrants. In carrying these stories of migration, loss, and family separation, family photographs push against U.S. forgetting of its neocolonial and imperial impact on Filipinx families. In doing so, they also push against narratives of U.S. exceptionalism and benevolence. The findings from our study align with past literature, and paint an ongoing and active process of remembering. Similar to findings of [de Guzman \(2014\)](#) and [Francisco-Menchavez \(2018\)](#) on Filipina domestic workers and migrants, findings from this study suggest that the families are transnational, possess heavy sacrifice and burden, and have transformative parenting strategies that involve others. Family photos can be a tool to solicit and uncover the oppressive forces that play out in one’s family migration stories. Additionally, findings suggest that through time and opportunities for family members to further engage with their family stories, participants’ analyses of their own family’s purpose of leaving may deepen and demonstrate complexities. They can become, as [Tinh Trinh \(2020, p. 78\)](#) finds in their study on their Vietnamese families, “agents of awakening” with the inspiration to witness history with a humbled stance and the struggles experienced in order to reposition power.

Filipinx survivance was an emerging theme in this study. It adds to the growing work of [Sharpe \(2016\)](#) “wake work” in reference to the ways family photographs are aspirational fictions for “living and breathing in the aftermath,” and certainly reclaiming and resisting cultural amnesia of a significant event or moment in which Filipinx people were not meant to survive ([Phu and Brown 2018](#)). Specifically, [Sharpe \(2016\)](#) speaks to this experience within the African American diaspora, describing it as a form of “wake work,” breathing and existing despite immense trauma and turmoil. Findings of this study strongly suggest that family photos also constitute “wake work” for participants as survival against the American Imperial violence imposed on Filipinx communities. Such work or acts of survival and resistance are fueled by the participant’s critical consciousness process and active engagement in reinterpretation and retelling moments that stem from family photos. The photos also show the historical and ongoing relationship between the Philippines and the U.S.—a dance of control, violence, modernity, and assimilation. Based on the findings, the legacy of such a dance still lives.

Above all, findings also suggest the process of reclaiming the gaze through survivance. In taking a look at the photo (Figure 6: The Empire’s Eyes: Colonial Stereographs of the Philippines) taken by and for the U.S. in the period 1898–1930, this photo depicts, in conjunction with its caption, negatively portrayed Filipinos, the racialized “Other,” in the U.S. In this photo, “Sweet Repose, How the Filipinos Sleep,” two Filipino men are presented lying on wooden make-shift beds. This image and its caption was intended to portray Filipinos as lazy in relation to the hard-working middle-class American man. Photos capturing the intimate, domestic lives of Filipinos in the Philippines taken by the United States were used, not just to show evidence of Filipino existence, but to fulfill a racially charged agenda of portraying Filipinos as “savages” in need of “civilizing”, thus legitimizing the annexation of the Philippines and Filipino subjects.

In understanding the significance of photography as a U.S. colonial tool against the Filipinx community, and photos presented by Filipinx community members, we can begin to see the ways in which family photographs, taken by themselves, are significant in challenging U.S. narratives. Their voices criticize and even resist erasing Filipinx past and contemporary histories and the peoples’ narratives. This is an active act of reclaiming the colonial gaze.



Figure 6. Sweet Repose, How the Filipinos Sleep (1898–1930).

8. Conclusions: Returning the Gaze of Survivance and Strength

This study was part of an undergraduate research program with a mentoring component. Presented in this article were the preliminary findings of this study, with hopes of building the infrastructure of Filipinx research, along with other efforts in building up the work of pan-Asian Pacific Islander scholars in a predominantly White institute of higher education. Located in the epicenter of multiple pandemics (e.g., COVID-19, racial inequities and police brutalities, and climate change), this study yields hope and a sense of empowerment for our growing diverse communities. To return the gaze of survivance and strength brings deep healing to our Filipinx communities. It is worth noting that more than a decade ago, a Filipinx tenured professor who focuses on utilizing research as a tool to elevate one's community was non-existent in the university. Filipinx students continuously advocate to create curriculum and scholarship relevant to them. The tides are changing, and this study adds to the growth in this area. It is our hope that such work of telling our stories will not only bring validation, but healing to break the cycle of trauma.

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