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Sino Kami?: Essentialist and Neocolonial Roots in Pilipino Culture Nights

Pilipino Cultural Nights (PCNs) are the most iconic, mass-based creative outlet and form of cultural participation and reproduction among high school and collegiate Filipinx American organizations. Many participants of these PCNs work tirelessly and use these productions as an opportunity to build community and educate themselves about their Filipinx culture, dichotomizing past and present culture through song, dance, and costume. PCNs, however, are vulnerable to becoming essentialist, creating a hegemonic narrative within Filipinx culture and erasing marginalized experiences. Yet, it is impractical to disregard the role PCNs have played in an individual's identity formation given U.S. cultural imperialism in the Philippines as well. A critical inquiry of both the implied cultural messages that PCNs convey as well as the nature of their construction and popularity rooted in U.S. neocolonialism is required for Filipinx American organizations to move forward in developing a sociopolitical consciousness for the youth.

PCNs are often similar to one another in contents due to two main elements. The first one is Filipinx folkloric dance, music, and costumes, which are the most recognizable trait of PCNs, and the second is a theatrical narration or drama component (Gonzalves 245). Filipinx folkloric dance and music often serve as transition for the play

aspect of the show. And while dance and music usually represent facets of a pre-independence, “traditional” Philippines, the theatrical drama in contrary adopts narratives of Filipinx-American youth, often with themes of identity or some other type of personal struggle.

Examining even just this format, however, raises some questions in regards to the cultural perception consequences a homogenous medium and format elicits. Each PCN production reproduces an implicit but harmful claim that Filipinx folkloric dance, music, and costumes are truly “authentic” representations of Filipinx culture. It suggests that culture is static, that Filipinx culture is limited to this narrow portrayal, and even more problematically, that “true” Filipinx culture can only be accessed through this medium. While many participants may liken the PCN experience to cultural participation, a raised ethnic identity, and resistance to Filipinx colonial mentality, this is perhaps offset by the PCN process, which has historically limited access to individuals on bases of educational attainment, physical/mental disability, geography, etc. From personal observation, there is a tacit, high value tagged on preserving these folk dances and music as much as possible; PCN participants seem hesitant about reinterpreting and reevaluating these dances in particular, which have also been historically sexist, gender binary, and affirmative of oppressive gender norms and roles in society. Ironically, dance and forms of creative expression in general are, arguably, an iterative, continuous interpretation process in themselves. Lastly, choosing which aspects of Filipinx culture to showcase and which to not seems appropriative, especially on a mass production scale like PCN.

The ways hegemonic PCN structures affect in-group perceptions about Filipinx culture, however, externalize to out-group members including Filipinx PACN non-

participants and other outside communities. As mentioned earlier, PCNs reproduce assertions of what is an “authentic” representation of Filipinx culture; this essentialization is harmful in establishing which groups are systematically excluded from this narrative by exhibiting a dominant discourse. Individuals who are queer, trans, or non-gender conforming, who do not fit in with the heteronormative standards of PCN, will thus continue to face marginalization and alienation and a disconnect with Filipinx culture and their ethnic identity. Furthermore, as Gonzalves notes, “There is no such thing as a ‘small’ PCN. Nearly all productions are planned months in advance, are elaborately staged, and enlist hundreds of cast and crew members...the shows have created friendly rivalries between campuses over the staging of all the dances and the complexity of the theatrical narrative.” (11) This mass production process, coupled with the PCN’s implicit emphasis on the elaboration of the end product instead of the cultural expression, removes the PCN from cultural roots and instead fixes it onto a more capitalist, performative basis. As such, this framing invites a layer of voyeurism, fetishization, and appropriation in presenting these productions to outside communities.

This is not to claim, however, that PCNs are completely non-essential to Filipinx culture. An interviewee, for example, claimed that his participation in a PCN deployed him in looking for his roots: “I was never taught any of this before. Never once in the history classes in high school was I taught that there was a war between the Filipinos and the Americans. Never once was that mentioned. And I never knew about that American colonization.” (Espiritu, 149) Qualitatively, Espiritu observes that in particular, second-generation Filipinx Americans feel “strong symbolic loyalty” to the Philippines, but have very little knowledge about it and/or have very little contact to parents or adults who

might educate them due to the influence of U.S. cultural imperialism. They also seem to feel pressured to become “Americans”, but their identities as marginalized bodies may complicate these two cultures. PCNs, as such, can act as a gateway mechanism to introduce Filipinx individuals to their home culture in a comfortable setting amongst peers with shared experiences, rather than through family members or other adults who have internalized a colonial mentality that values American and Western ideals.

In general, an observed trend among motivations for participation in cultural showcases like PCN seems to be identity search and a lack of identity coherence amongst U.S. born Filipinx individuals. Rodriguez points out that this “essentialized Philippine natural culture...acts out the tension of cultural estrangement....The Filipino American performance/production offers relief, on the one hand, from a colonial and imperial political unconscious.” (28) In essence, Rodriguez claims that the “tension of cultural estrangement”, which sheds light on the nature of contemporary Filipinx-American identity politics, is inherently rooted within U.S. neocolonialism. In this case, the PCN seems to be an effective apparatus for mobilizing youth and resolving aspects of their identity search, but does this perhaps bring up a larger issue of a lack of institutional structures, visibility, and resources to learn about Filipinx culture?

In today’s PCN culture, it is important to balance the essentialization of “authentic” Filipinx culture with the cultural identity resolution that PCNs induce. Although a factor of the proliferation of more students pursuing PCN engagement in recent years seems to stem from the lack of identity coherence in U.S. born Filipinx youth, the implications of PCN productions for Filipinx American organizations today point to a lack of institutional education on Filipinx culture. It is imperative that we push

Filipinx studies in order to draw out cultural participation amongst youth without reproducing essentialist or homogenous Filipinx culture on a narrow level. And although it is unrealistic to assume that the now deeply rooted cultural tradition of Pilipino Culture Night will decay after Filipinx studies are established, at the very least we will gain more tools to examine the framework of PCNs under a more critical lens for the future.

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