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The Othering of the Igorots by the Imperial Archive: *Bontoc Eulogy's* Reversal

A multidisciplinary assessment of how *Bontoc Eulogy* resists the caricaturing of the Philippine Igorot, both in the context of the 1904 World's Fair and the modern-day.

I opted for a solution that implicated the viewer more in the bi-directionality of the act of observing.

- Marlon Fuentes, "Bontoc Eulogy, History, and the Craft of Memory: An Extended Conversation with Marlon E. Fuentes," *Amerasia Journal*

Creator and consumer. Artist and spectator. Filmmaker and audience. It is the binary relationship of industry. And in the entertainment, *education* sector, it is one that has been exploited to advance social, cultural, and political agendas, a way to mass produce propaganda and ensure that public sentiments align with, support, and fuel the coordinated efforts of a nation. This utility of film rendered it a powerful tool for the growing American empire of the late 19th to early 20th Century. The proliferation of images and video footage depicting immortalized demonstrations of primordality and subservience from America's colonized subjects allowed for "the legitimization of the American colonial enterprise" (Vergara 4). The ethnographic material produced from this period, which I will be referring to throughout this paper as the U.S. imperial archives, asserted the paternalistic narrative of an inevitable Western imperative to intervene and deliver progress and salvation to the world's *lessers*.

For the Philippines, the United States' latest colonial acquisition in 1899, exotic intrigue was not hindered by a general lack of public knowledge across the Pacific; rather, it bolstered well-established racist sentiments of Western superiority. It is these attitudes, Benito Vergara contends, that needed to be stoked and fed in order to set into motion the “the script for colonialism.....already [written] by politicians ... and, indirectly, by other colonizing countries as well” (3). The particular reproducibility and mass circulation of photography and film in various modes of media provided for the “standardized representations of Filipinos predicated on inferiority, an unmanageable heterogeneity of people, and the presumed incapacity for self-rule” (Vergara 4). As such, to cultivate the *colonial narrative* would be to maximize the social, cognitive potential of ethnographic filmmaking: its presumed objective documentation of America's colonized entities and so its effective invocation of the American public's reception of a colonized Philippines. The imperial archives, today stored in museums and other institutions, memorialize this tool for American imperialism.

Marlon Fuentes' 1995 *Bontoc Eulogy* reworks the imperial archives to renounce the especially potent historical caricaturing and animalization of the indigenous Philippine Igorot, both in historical and modern-day contexts, by participating in a narrative that itself removes the agency of its portrayed indigenous subjects and instead places it in the hands of the *ethnographic filmmaker*. But rather than following a strict, traditional mode of ethnography, *Bontoc Eulogy* operates as an autoethnographic essay film, documenting the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair and its dehumanized human exhibits through multiple series of fictitious anecdotes centered on the Philippine Indigenous experience there. Employing imperial archives sourced from institutions like the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian, especially those captured of the fair itself, the film highlights the inherent human damage done through propaganda ethnographic visual media

via a rehumanizing but depersonalizing narrative. While the film was done from the perspective of a Filipino, thereby lacking the imperialist agenda with which the film's archival footage was constructed, Fuentes fully manipulates the audience, particularly through the emotional appeal of claiming direct heritage to a made up Igorot native at the fair. In doing so, he shows just how easily audiences of ethnographic films can be led to believe subjective notions. It is in using similar technical strategies as the dehumanizing spectacle of the U.S. visual regime that *Bontoc Eulogy* is able to partake in a cultural revolution, one outside of its own storyworld boundaries, that urges audience members to ultimately question and doubt the documentaries they consume, regardless of the subject matter and its framing.

The 1904 St. Louis World's Fair in Missouri, officially called the Louisiana Purchase Exposition for it had celebrated the famed territorial purchase, served as the ultimate stage for showcasing American economical, technological, cultural, and racial supremacy, as well as the main setting for *Bontoc Eulogy*. The grand scale of its Philippine Reservation- over 1 million USD was invested into this 47-acre development, housing up to 100 buildings, 1,100 Philippine representatives (70 of which were the Bontoc Igorots), and 75,000 catalogued exhibits (Vergara 112)- reflected the equally ostentatious degree of effort to publicize, boast, and legitimize the U.S.' latest colonial exploit in economical, technological, cultural, and racial terms. What may perhaps be the fair's greatest legacy is its generation and circulation of ethnographic footage of its human exhibitions, the cultural reverberations of which show a distinctly dehumanizing representation of the Igorot people. This indigenous ethnic group from the Philippines were deemed to be the lowest and most primitive among the Philippine groups. One such photograph portrays the Igorot Exhibit at the fair (*see fig. 1*). Sold and distributed as part of the photograph

collection in *The World's Fair*, its fate is not unlike that of other photos from the fair. Sale of albums, guidebooks, and other merchandise or memorabilia of the sort provided the American public another way of attending, or perhaps reliving, the event and receiving the same messaging. Here (qtd. In Vergara), the projection of savage brutes is superseded by praises of the Igorots' "[high] moral tone" and "exceptional politeness" to visitors and ethnographers alike, opting for a paternalistic recollection of the "uncivilized peoples'" encounter with "the white people studying them" (143). I chose to examine this particular photograph to emphasize that depictions of subhumanity in ethnographic media can appear benign. While this particular caption did not examine the Igorot practices of dog-eating or head-hunting to directly animalize them- to be certain, many others did narrativize these customs to equate the *dog eaters* to the *dogs*- the same assertion of incivility and deference to U.S. imperial rule was nevertheless achieved. The imperial archives' success, in summation, was as much a product of the cogent stigmata of the the Igorots' heathenism and consumption of dog meat as more trivial factors like physical attributes (e.g. dark skin) and sparse clothing, all of which had rendered them somewhat of a living antithesis to nationalist American society (Maxwell 231). The Igorots, simply put, were depicted as subhuman people for their divergence..

Fuentes' *Bontoc Eulogy* is able to take apart this dehumanizing narrativization of the Igorots through the *after* of the photographic process, just as the ethnographic archives had done, as this is where the socializing effect of photography can truly be maximized. Certainly, there did exist an inherent power among the fair's American photographers, such as the Gerhard Sisters, for their ability to select and determine the *representatives* they photograph, their determination of who will and how to maintain the American representation of the Filipino people (Maxwell 231). And yet it was the captions of these photos that provided the most leeway in specificity as

to what that representation underlied (Vergara 11)- if the caption described the depicted Igorots subjects to be savage-like, then the Igorots were indeed perceived by the American public to be a savage people, and the intention was fulfilled. As such, the archives' penchant for propagating "truths" like the colonial narrative are not the photographs themselves, but rather the malleability of the narrative that is ultimately told through the photograph.

Fuentes' success in reworking the very same archival footage to relay a divergent, anticolonial narrativization is, first and foremost, achieved through the fictional character of Markod, a named, identified Igorot at the St. Louis World's Fair. Voiced and played by Fuentes, the narrator and his alleged familial stake in this long-past event from history- he claims to be Markod's grandson- instantly evoke empathy and sympathy from within the audience. The narrator's voice and image throughout the film serve as a constant reminder that Markod and, by extension, the Igorots shown in the film's black and white footage were once living people with their own stories, histories, families, and ancestries, all of which very much still tied to the lives of ethnic Igorots today. Indeed, Fuentes reflects on his construction of Markod as a *composite* Igorot native, an amalgamation of the nine, nameless Igorots who died at the fair, the tragic deaths of whom contributed to "the emotional momentum generated by the historical gravity of the [fair's] actual story" (Blumentritt 81). On a different but similar regard, Jan Bernabe describes Markod's compositeness to bring a humanizing quality that endangers the integrity of U.S. imperial stereotypes of the Filipino (728). The story of Markod's emotional turmoil and feelings of aimlessness, from having left a pregnant partner in the Bontoc region and while navigating the fairgrounds, paints him as a complex, feeling *human*, thereby troubling the colonial narrative's persistent efforts of othering and animalizing the Igorots. Fittingly, though never specifically pointed to and identified by the narrator to be Markod, the once animalized

Igorot men of the archives provide the stand-in body of the humanized Markod- the men who lived the fair now recreate Markod's experience of it for the modern audience. Accordingly, the film audience's viewing of the Igorots' transpacific travel, the fair, and the Philippine Reservation is positioned from Markod's perspective. The effect is the transferred control of the narrative from the archives' long-standing American representations of the Filipino to the Igorot Markod himself, as well as his narrator grandson who narrates their interconnected, intergenerational story.

Though this rehumanizing aspect of Fuentes' film can be understood, *Bontoc Eulogy* still relies on the power of narration, the historically uncontested authority of ethnography, to grant agency in self-representation to *fictional* figures. It cannot be overlooked- of course, the explicit revelation of this fictional premise does only occur at the end of the film- that Markod, the narrator, and their alleged direct ancestry are all made-up. This, I contend, continues the imperial archives' legacy of denying a *voice* to the marginalized Igorots. The film's initial viewership, despite as well as due to its interlacing of objective facts with subjective truth and history with the present, is as a true documentary. There's much to be said about there really being no objective documentaries, but the historical foundation of *Bontoc Eulogy*, the Igorot experience at the St. Louis World's Fair, is one that's lived and owned by the Igorots. It was the Igorots' ceremonial consumption of dogs that was disfigured by the fair, turning it into an imposed, weekly practice of dog slaughter to form a brutal spectacle of savagery. It was the dances, clothing, religion, and music of the Igorots that made for a commodified culture bound for American consumption. And it was the routine of the everyday, the kindling of fires, the pounding of rice, and the Igorot *existence* that made for an objectifying, entertaining spectacle (Vergara 119). But all of this history is now being retold by the never-having-existed Markod and

narrator, subverting the importance of authentic Igorot input in a documentary about the Igorots, be it through the film's narration, primary figures, or testimonials used.

This is not to say that *Bontoc Eulogy* capitalizes on a lack of transparency to *dupe* the audience into believing that it has unequivocal authority on the Igorot experience. There is a clear, implicit disjointedness to the film's structure: a plethora of undated footage, narrator-translated sound bits of unidentified individuals, and black & white footage of the narrator's own children in modern clothing, just to name a few. Additionally, the audience is shown a multitude of cues throughout the film that also point to Fuentes' goal of an *anti-illusionary* spectacle. One such cue comes up in a particular scene where the narrator identifies a Negrito man of the archives as Visayan, a humorous nudge at mild, "[inter-tribal] dissing" within the Philippines that a Filipino audience could both laugh at and take in as a clue of the film's mendacity (Blumentritt 88). Nevertheless, in setting up this viewing framework, the film produces a unique experience where the audience is induced into building connections between the disjointed frames and entangling the messages that underlie; it's not unlike historical retellings of oral tradition, except it's enclosed in a documentary format- the storyteller's frame of reference, in this case the narrator's, prompts the audience to rethink and reinterpret the imperial archives' written and photographed history. As Bernabe summates this set-up, there's a "viewing praxis that connects filmic surface to the intellectual and political motivations" (734). In that regard, the film's greatest success is in communicating the cross-generational and cross-ethnic pain caused by prejudice, racism, dehumanization, and othering. The inclusive pain caused by the fair is captured by a haunting scene in the film where Markod encounters the fair's grieving Negrito community; a sickly infant born to them had died after being taken to the fair's infirmary, rousing feelings of fear and resentment against an American organization now afraid

of a vengeful riot (*Bontoc Eulogy* 37:02-38:35). The colonial narrative of the St. Louis World's Fair, after all, was widely malignant to the Philippines and other subjugated entities as a whole

Notwithstanding, any material generated on painful experiences of ethnic minorities warrant their due participation and say; otherwise, there's a real risk of spectacularizing the grotesque. This, I contend, was a legitimate effect of *Bontoc Eulogy* in its portrayal of the Igorots' dog meat consumption. Though the practice was stated to have occurred weekly, no archival footage, photograph or film, was actually generated on it (Martinez-Juan 123). While the shock value of the affair had nonetheless attracted the masses and spread word on the Igorots' alleged savagery, the ever dominant stigma of consuming *man's best friend* in American society impeded its memorialization within the imperial archives. Not the same can be said for *Bontoc Eulogy*. According to Tommy Hafalla (qtd. in Martinez-Juan), a cinematographer in the film, *Bontoc Eulogy* commissioned footage of dog meat butcher to be recorded in Baguio, Philippines (123); the resulting close up-shots of canine slaughter, with no focus placed on the handlers doing the killing, were then interspersed with footage from the actual archives of the Philippine Cordillera Region (*Bontoc Eulogy* 34:02-34:31). Evidently, the tradition that served as Americans' primary rationale for the Igorots' animalization is again put on display for an audience, this time by non-Igorot ethnographers as well. Martinez-Juan reflects on the cultural implications of this decision:

Does the director implicate himself with the spectacle-hungry audience at the World's Fair? Or is his commission an attempt to satisfy this irrepressible desire to return to the origin—to the place where ritual dog-killing has 'naturally' occurring localized cultural and ritual contexts that are alien and inaccessible to a foreign spectator? (123)

The answers to these questions are entirely dependent on the Igorots, for it is their ethnic practice in question. Whether or not the film's representation is equally as harmful as the fair or a reasonable form of Philippine retaliation, that is up to them. How *their* culture is portrayed and represented is always theirs to determine.

This 39-second scene of canine slaughter arrests the audience's ability to mentally assess the footage's authenticity and identify it as not archival- watching it, there occurs a sort of mental stupefaction that mirrors the superficial, dehumanizing effect of the St. Louis World's Fair. Like the brutal spectacle of dog meat consumption in the 1904 fair, the film's uncensored depiction of it confounds and shocks the audience. Still, whereas the fair had upheld the notion of Igorot savagery, *Bontoc Eulogy* emphasizes the meticulous purposefulness of the fair's recurring showings of this spectacle. The film is able to humanize the Igorots in this way, implicating the fair and its American audience for having devoured the Igorot custom in reaffirming the colonial narrative. But a valid problematic is present in the unrestrained depiction of this practice, for there is seemingly little, if any, input from the Igorot community itself. Again, the film mirrors the fair in that the resultant focus of the cultural performance is on the spectacle it makes, rather than substantial accounts of the cultural nuances surrounding the practice. As Martinez-Juan puts it, "There are no auto-ethnographic caveats [in *Bontoc Eulogy*] that attempt to show how the Igorots might have viewed dog-eating as a spiritual exercise in appropriating animal power. It is simply laid bare, unapologetic in all its grainy, gory self" (123). The scene doesn't provide any educational or instructive information on Igorot culture, and perhaps this had been the intention of *Bontoc Eulogy*: spectacularize the Igorots' consumption of dogs just as the fair did, thus demonstrating the humanistic failures of ethnographic media. Like its archival footage, *Bontoc Eulogy*'s ethnography inherently disallows for Igorot agency in self-representation. Just as how

the imperial archives should never have been so easily accepted as true by their contemporary audience, *Bontoc Eulogy* should have also never been so easily perceived by audiences as an objective, strictly factual, and comprehensive documentary of Markod's time at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. Such a sound, comprehensive account may only be possible given true Igorot perspective.

There is an unequivocal preservation of integrity when one's human corporeality is acknowledged and preserved on a physical medium such as that of photography, a sense that one's humanity in the present moment is perceived and immortalized. Conversely, this was denied to the Igorots when an image of animality, which had already often been historically equated to indigenouness, was projected onto the human subject. This seemingly simple binary relationship between *humanity* and *animality* necessitated precision and premeditation before, during, and after the ethnographic process.

In adding a second, dominating layer of narrative surrounding Markod on the images of Filipino Igorots, *Bontoc Eulogy* conducts a reversal of the cultural work done by and immortalized in the U.S. imperial archives. The film, through the smooth albeit aseamless construction of an emotionally compelling story from disjointed archival footage as well as the insertion of gripping personal context into an already turgid history, is able to revoke control over representation of the Filipino from American ethnographic media. Thus, the story conveyed by the archives is converted from *the subjugation of inferiors* to *the pain of the Othered*. With these efforts, including but not limited to that of *Bontoc Eulogy*, the modern audience today can recognize the U.S. imperial archives to have underscored a mechanical objectification of their

human subjects, stripping their humanity by reducing them to a mere, severe social argument of a racial, cultural hierarchy.

But this reversal is incomplete. *Bontoc Eulogy*'s almost singular reliance on the imperial archives to convey the Igorot perspective does not make meaningful provisions for the Bontoc Igorots, from those gracing the archival footage to all who live today; it emulates the archives in that respect. The complete rehumanization of the Igorots necessitate the employment of strategies that extend the control of the narrative to ethnic Igorots, such as consultation with ethnic Igorots in the film's making and the use of primary and/or secondary sources that specifically recount the fair from the Igorot viewpoint. The absence of these strategies produces a documentary that can only be *for* the Igorots, but never *of*. Consequently, *Bontoc Eulogy* asserts a very particular position towards how ethnographic documentaries must be seen, understood, and consumed. Its rehumanization of the imperial archives' Igorots, along with their other *othered* human subjects, does not attempt to absolve ethnography of its historically racist cultural work and capabilities. The overt racism and othering, preserved in the spectacle of the footage, are very much shown and kept intact. But the narrativizing work done by *Bontoc Eulogy*, in terms of its reversal of the initial colonial narrative as well as its shortcomings in amplifying the Igorot voice, calls audiences to question how they perceive and comprehend the validity of ethnographic film, the conditions surrounding which and how time and peoples are suspended in film. Just as how notions of animality and humanity were perverted to dehumanize the Igorots and endorse the Philippines' colonization, fiction/nonfiction distinctions are not nearly as clean and distinct as society conditions audiences to believe. As *Bontoc Eulogy* so ardently shows, purposefully and not, ethnographic media is just as impartial as the innately subjective humans that create them.

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Appendix



Figure 20. "The Igorot as an Exhibit.—The communities of uncivilized peoples at the Universal Exposition served purposes other than the satisfaction of random curiosity. They were measured and photographed and cross questioned by scientists and studied by many visitors interested in ethnology. They furnished the live object lessons for lecture courses. The Igorot in their turn faced a class in Ethnology, while the professor dwelt upon their customs, vocations, religion and ceremonies. They took kindly to this service in the study of man. They answered questions, pertinent and impertinent, about themselves without asking return information respecting the white people who were studying them. It was told of these Igorot, especially of the Bontoc branch, that the moral tone of the people is high, that they lead strictly moral lives until they come in contact or association with modern civilization. Ethnologists pay strong tribute to the worth of the Bontoc Igorot. The members of this clan or brance of the Igorot tribe maintain, apart from the village, a house in which the maidens are kept under the close supervision of the older women of the tribe until such time as they shall enter the married state. Hundreds of thousands of women visited the village of these warriors of the Archipelago at the Universal Exposition. Not only was no insult ever offered but the testimony to exceptional politeness was unanimous." (Source: *The World's Fair*, p. 149.)

Fig. 1. Igorot Exhibit. Circa 1904. *The World's Fair: Comprising the Official Photographic Views of the Universal Exposition Held in St. Louis, 1904, Commemorating the Acquisition of the Louisiana Territory*. St. Louis: The N. D. Thompson Pub. Co., 1903.