



**JOMEK Journal**

Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies

Published by Cardiff University Press

## Reclaiming Filipino America through Performance and Film

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### Keywords

Filipino-American history, film, migration

Decolonization

US-Philippines relations

## Abstract

Filipino Americans are the fourth largest migrant group in America and the second largest Asian population in the United States. Migration from the Philippines is constant and has increased dramatically in the last sixty years. Filipino Americans participate as the 'Asian American' identity/race but the specificity of Philippine-U.S. relations and migration pathways make this inclusion a misfit. As a former territory and with complex shifting migration policies, Filipinos have been considered by the U.S. government an ambiguous population, falling just out of reach of national visibility. As the population has continued to grow, Filipino Americans have shared narratives and begun conversation to address the constant cultural negotiation and struggles within the social and racial structures of America. Since the 1980s, a Filipino American cultural and artistic movement or 'moment', has emerged with artists, dancers, performers, and filmmakers. These artists make critical interventions that disavow the American empire. The works make comment upon the ramifications of being an unrecognized Asian colony and the systemic challenges of immigration assimilation. An example of a work from this cultural moment is Jose Antonio Vargas' autobiographical documentary *Documented* (2013). The film, intended as an up close and personal account of an undocumented migrant in the United States, also serves as an example of current Filipino American cultural productivity and visibilization. By studying this artistic movement, one can approach deeper understandings of citizenship and national belonging(s) in the current transnational climate and the border crossings that circumscribe the Filipino American diaspora.

## Contributor Note

Marlo J. De Lara is currently pursuing a doctorate in Cultural Studies at the department of Fine Arts, History of Art, and Cultural Studies at the University of Leeds. She received her Masters in Psychosocial Studies from the University of Essex. Her current research concerns the study of subjectivities within Filipino American cultural texts. Her work focuses on personal/social histories, migration and transnational narratives, postcolonial and critical race theory, and psychoanalysis.

## Citation

De Lara, Marlo J. (2017), 'Reclaiming Filipino America through Performance and Film', *JOMEK Journal* 11, 'Diaspora beyond Nationalism', ed. Idil Osman. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18573/j.2017.10142>

Accepted for publication 1 June 2017

## Setting the Scene: Introduction

Since the 1980s, a Filipino American cultural and artistic movement has emerged with artists, dancers, performers, and filmmakers. These artists and performers who claim a mutual heritage of the Philippine islands have carved out a specific niche for their works from the broader Asian American cultural heritage. Sarita See (2009: xxxi) has referred to this as the 'Filipino American cultural moment' where artists make critical interventions that disavow the American empire and bring attention to the ramifications of being an unrecognized Asian colony. Current studies of American imperialism benefits from creative challenges to the understanding of being 'foreign in a domestic sense', and serve to 'reverse dominant American narratives of immigrant assimilation... In short, the Filipino American cultural moment calls for a fundamental rethinking of the workings of empire and the workings of the nation' (See 2009: xv). For the purposes of this paper, after providing a necessary foundation on the socio-political and historical complexities of the Filipino American diaspora, I will examine the Jose Antonio Vargas' autobiographical documentary *Documented* (2013). The film, intended as an up close and personal account of an undocumented migrant in the United States, also serves as an example of current Filipino American cultural productivity and visibilization.

## Filipino America

In 2010, the US Census reported there were approximately four million Filipino Americans, making them the second largest Asian population in the United

States.<sup>1</sup> Migration continues to increase, with the Filipino community having grown seventeen times its size since 1960, when an estimated 104,800 Filipino immigrants resided in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Being second only to the Chinese in size, Filipino Americans have a unique history within the nation. As the population has continued to grow, Filipino Americans have shared narratives and begun conversation to address the constant cultural negotiation and struggles within the social and racial structures of America. The population numbers and varied experiences justify more complicated study on four levels: 1) as a contemporary diaspora due to its integral identification with the real and imagined homeland, 2) as a postcolonial people enduring and still carrying histories of multiple colonization by the host country, the United States, and formerly Spain, 3) as a migration phenomenon with a mirroring of complex immigration policies, and 4) as a racially marginalized population within the categories of American racial logics.

Beyond diaspora, migration, and cultural identity, the Filipino community encounters structural politics and the role of foreigner. Filipino Americans participate as the 'Asian American' identity/race but the specificity of

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth M. Hoeffel, Sonya Rastogi, Myoung O. Kim, and Shahid Hasan, (2012) *The Asian Population: 2010*, US Census Bureau, p.14 <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-11.pdf> [Accessed 15 April 2015].

<sup>2</sup> Sierra Stoney and Jeanne Batalova, (2013) 'Filipino Immigrants in the United States', *Migration Information Source*, 15 June, <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/filipino-immigrants-united-states> [Accessed 31 April 2015].

Philippine-U.S. relations and migration pathways make the inclusion a misfit. How has this complex interplay of elements been registered culturally? How do cultural productions make visible the multiplicities lived by Filipino Americans? Using contemporary and performing arts as a site where Filipinos locate themselves in America, one can explore the specificities within Filipino American histories. This process of locating and articulating 'thus entails recognizing them as members of an ethnic group who are dialectically historically positioned by others, and who position themselves in locations that allow them to critique U.S. society' (Bonus 2000: 169).

### **Diaspora**

Filipinos have been scattered throughout the global economy as labour migrants. Filipinos are still deeply connected to the Philippines. Sharing a mutual understanding of the homeland based on memories and shared cultural values, the imagined homeland is kept intact. By *balikbayan* culture, meaning 'return to the country', Filipinos have created pathways to send goods and money home to assist financially from abroad as well as maintain family contact. Various Filipino migrant communities have also been created due to legal and social self-segregation and exclusion. Filipinos in America inscribed social ties by creating economically thriving safe spaces, free from racial discrimination such as Little Manila in Stockton, California. In the World War II, military accommodations and working on sugar plantations in Hawaii, communities were forcibly created, separating Filipinos from other ethnicities.

### **Colonization**

Philippine history is shadowed by a repeated claiming of the island by conquests that were rationalized by 'civilizing' missions for the inhabitants of the island. The Philippines has provided labour and resources for several occupations/empires, such as Spain (from 1521 to 1898); Japan (from 1942 to 1945), in response to the U.S. bombing of Pearl Harbor; and America (1898 to 1946). The pre-colonial Filipino indigenous culture, known as the Taos, fought off the Spanish colonizers for fifty years. The country was named *Las Islas Filipinas* after Felipe II of Spain and then was Anglicized to 'Philippines' by the Americans, calling native born 'Filipinos' (Pido 1997: 37). The Spanish, once defeating the Filipino armies, used the concept of colonial debt, implanting notions of 'The Golden Legend' where Filipinos via Catholicism could bring civilization to a previously savage land (David 2011: 42). In 1898, the Filipinos worked alongside Americans to push out the Spanish, only to be sold later as a territory to the US in the Treaty of Paris. This purchase also included Cuba, Puerto Rico, and Hawaii, which were desired for their islands' rich resources. On July 4th, 1946, the Philippines officially gained independence from America with a provision that the country would still assist in military operations. Having said that, the economic dependency of the Philippines continues to fix the country into a neo-colonial relationship with America (San Juan, Jr. 2013). The processes of American colonization and the continued neo-colonial relationship between the countries will be discussed in a later section.

## Migration

To explain migration as merely motivated by labour is short sighted. Migration is complex and requires an understanding of the multitude of factors, such as government participation, economic actors, media coverage, and overall attitudes of the peoples involved. The Philippine culture of migration has evolved in response to global events, such as international conflicts, such as World War II, and continues to develop in response to globalization technologies. The repeated colonisation of the Philippines has not assisted the archipelago in developing itself as a nation. U.S. colonial policies encouraged economic dependency. Because America emphasized agricultural export as opposed to industrialization, the Philippines was more vulnerable, having difficulties in forming a self-reliant economy. Thusly, the archipelago was reliant on opportunities abroad as urban centres became increasingly more populated and competitive. America needed to fill agricultural, fishing, and military support roles on the mainland. Immigration policies exploited the ease of recruiting from a US territory. The processes of Americanization suppressed indigenous Filipino values and valorised the American logic of the meritocracy myth. This myth perpetuated the idea that success was solely based on an individual's work, regardless of social position. It was promoted in the Americanized classrooms of the Philippines. Educational priming and the popularity of American products internationally situated the Philippines to seek solutions that depended on external aid. Finally, the constant national struggles, such as President Marcos' dictatorial rule, provided more obstacles.

## Race

One must understand how integral race categorization is in America's logic, as well as how damaging these static definitions are for complex cultural identities and national consciousness. Psychoanalysis has been helpful in seeing that the social world is not separate from the way we internally make meanings. The works of Ann Anlin Cheng and Jane Flax use psychoanalysis to discuss the on-going gender and race discourse within the United States. Within the psychoanalytical space, the complexity of gender and race cannot be flattened to a singular dimension of social fact or a social constructivist argument. Gender and race can be 'a possible site of intensely subjective fantasy, emotion, and meaning construction; and an effect of power with differential and asymmetric consequences inherent in varying positions within its grid' (Flax 2004: 908) This requires a thinking of race in America in relation to history, systems of power, and positionality. Flax contends that race/gender domination persists within the nation due to the lack of proper acknowledgement and mourning of the losses of enslavement and its consequences (Flax 2010: 25). Like reconciliation, mourning is only possible when the need is visible. The inability to mourn leaves a state of melancholia without possibility of change. Melancholic subjects are challenged in identification processes, where the 'double malady of melancholia for the racial-ethnic subject *is* the condition of having to incorporate and encrypt both an impossible ideal and a denigrated self' (Cheng 2001: 72). Filipino Americans have histories of facing an ideal to be 'civilized' and/or Americanized. Not part



of white dominant America, they must also continually face this impossibility.

Social policy and frameworks that rely on a black and white binary paradigm further complicate these perceptions. Poorly suited to talk about the diversity of the American population, the continued use of the paradigm can result in an omission of marginalized groups. One could argue that with growing populations and increasing globalization that scholars and critics have shifted away from this paradigm. This improvement, though, is not reflected in mainstream media. Diasporic communities outside the binary are often discriminated against as apart from racism. In the case of Filipinos in the U.S., 'a black-white model fails to account for the discrimination against Filipinos who are perceived as foreigners and who, despite their length of presence in the United States, continue to fall outside accepted definitions of "American" (Ancheta 2006: Location 1370). Foreigner discrimination is becoming increasingly more volatile, with immigration policies being forged with prejudice and fear.

Within Asian America, Filipinos are further marginalized through different migratory pathways and being the only Asian colony of the United States. Filipinos in America are victims of different historical racisms based on the early, mostly male, migrants mixing with non-Filipino women. They were strategically placed in competition with other labourers (Chinese, Japanese, and Mexican) by plantation owners looking to avoid the forming of unions. In contemporary Asian American studies, the specificity of the discrimination faced by Filipinos is less of a priority than other Asian groups. Filipino Americans have continued feelings of racial invisibility

due to multiple levels of marginalization, from in-group Asian America as well as mainstream national racial discourse, and from their often-observed colonial history.

### **The Philippines as an American colony**

What was referred to as an 'insurrection' in American documents is a major event in Philippine history. Sometimes referred to as the 'first Vietnam', the Philippine-American War was a bloodbath that concluded with President General Aguinaldo, the head of the republic's forces, captured by American forces in 1901 (see Cabusao 2011; Lumbera 2011). What followed the war was a series of American policies to discourage further insurrection and dangerous Filipino patriotism. From outlawing the use of the Philippine flag to relocation of whole villages with promises of rewards for discovering potential insurgents, America systematically quashed Filipino nationalist feelings. It is said that this marked the beginning of America being recognized as a global superpower (see De Ojeda).

These acts were part of the 'three-fold' U.S. occupation agenda: 'the pacification of the rebellious populace through military force, the establishment of a civil government to administer the colony, and the institutionalization of a mandatory public educational system' (Bonus 2000: 169). Americans were on a 'civilising' mission that would suitably Americanize the population and degrade the Filipino. The restructuring of the educational system was essential to this project. Despite one's economic status, new American public education promised social mobility based on American-defined success/merit. Using

English as the medium of instruction completed the erasure of the memories of the Republic. A country that had previously been rich with a multitude of languages now dwindled down to the use of only several acknowledged dialects. Once the languages were demoted, the culture and history associated with the tribes were obliterated. The colonial project was complete in that the further one progressed through schooling, the fewer Filipino ideologies and histories a student encountered. As a result of the educational process, Filipinos came to consider themselves American.

During the American colonial period and the post-World War II era, the absorption of anything American and non-Filipino had become commonplace. The 'New Filipino' was actually not Filipino at all. Along with other American territories Cuba and Puerto Rico, America aimed to bring their 'little brown brothers' into line with Western ideals and standards (Wolff 2011: back cover).

In the Philippines today, Filipinos continue to emulate American values. One could argue that all of these symptoms of colonialism could be the effects of globalization, with economies suffering and Western popular culture available in most countries. The specificity of Philippine histories and relations requires a less simplistic explanation and complicates generalizations of postcolonial nation rebuilding.

### **Decolonization of the Filipino American**

I have demonstrated the ways that the strength of the United States government's colonial presence has

been central to Philippine history and continues to have a hold on its former territory. This is played out in the Philippines' economic reliance on overseas workers (mostly in America) and on potential contracts with other countries. These problematic events and resulting post/colonial beliefs, including the continued valorisation of American ideals, are being contested within the diaspora. Since the 1970s, the project of decolonization has been evolving:

complicating the notions of ethnic and cultural and racial identity in the US and implicat[ing] the colonial and imperial ideologies within the context of a re-framed Philippine and Filipino American history and a recovered ethnic memory (Strobel 2001: v-vii).

These scholars come from various backgrounds. In the early 2000s, ethnographies of Filipino American diasporas began to surface. In 2011, Kevin Nadal and E.J.R. David launched the new discipline of Filipino-American Psychology, which speaks about the theory and practice of healing transgenerational internalised colonial trauma and the difficulties of marginalization in the individual. In everyday conversation, Filipinos and Filipino Americans speak of colonial mentality, using the phrase '*ang Pilipinong nawawala sa sarili*', meaning 'the Filipino lost within himself'.

### **Cultural productions as decolonization**

Historical and cultural analytical explorations of dance, art, and performance have been useful in examining the narratives of decolonization. Several works by

Theodore S. Gonzalves, Sarita Echavez See, and Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns are providing frameworks that help to highlight how deeply the histories of marginalization as well as the colonial past are presently being articulated in the cultural space.

Cultural practices are part of the decolonization project:

We should consider cultural practices by subaltern groups, such as Filipino Americans, as social processes that locate that group in relation to some dominant or hegemonic power. As such, these cultural practices hold a potential to challenge and change that relationship to of power (Reyes 2010:122).

For the past 45 years, Filipino America has been contributing works that add to the discussion and examination of past and current processes of decolonization. Filipino America is part of a burgeoning cultural moment that:

evidences all the creativity and anomalies of a minority, post/colonial entity like Filipino America, and therefore indicates a culture of *presence* and strategies of *indirection* that counter the invisibility surrounding Filipino America's history of racial subjugation and colonization (See 2009: xii-iii).

This growing archive of creative works shows the voice(s) within the diaspora via creative expression and simultaneously brings us into to this significant cultural moment.

## **A Case Study: *Documented* (2013) – Introduction**

*Documented* (2013) was written, produced, and directed by Jose Antonio Vargas, who is also the main subject of the film. Its main purpose is to make the case for the large migrant population living in the United States who do not have legal status. The production is a depiction of an undocumented person's experience but it also tells a more specific story of Filipinos in America, both illegal and legal. The film consists of intertwining personal and political elements, an evolution of the protagonist's internal conflicts over his belonging in America and desire for citizenship. His sense of personal history has been split between his prior life in the Philippines and his life in America.

There are two main narratives in the film. One is the story of how a journalist uses his own experiences as an undocumented American to connect with others and spread awareness about the DREAM Act. The second is the story of how a son learned to accept the mother from whom he has been separated by country and by time. I propose another reading of how more general stories from the diaspora relate to the specificities of Filipino American experience(s). A close reading of *Documented* makes the case for further study of the multiplicities and specificity of Filipino American narratives.

## **Fundamentals of the Film**

At the age of twelve, Vargas' mother woke him up to get in a taxi and board a plane with a stranger. A montage of news clips interrupts the nostalgic mood. We see him reporting for CNN and other



respectable news outlets. Vargas is lauded as a well-respected Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist. But to Vargas, this is part of a lifelong deception. Confessing to the viewer in a voiceover, he considers his career and life in America a complete falsehood due to his illegal residency status. Jose has been living 'a lie'. He has to 'come out' about his legal status.

There are two important turning points in the film. The most important scene in the first act is his realization of his undocumented status. When Jose became aware that his legal documents had been faked and that he had never been a legal resident, his world radically changed. Confused, Vargas sought out his grandfather, and learned he was not allowed to live in America. This very abrupt wakeup call was a critical moment in his life. Interviews with his *lola* (grandmother in Tagalog) and aunt explain further that Jose's immigration to this country was orchestrated solely by his *lolo* (grandfather). Assuming adult Jose would get a menial job and send money back home to his mother, his family was unprepared for how talented he was. Vargas' uncertain future troubled him and to make matters worse, his mother was not going to be able to come to America. Vargas felt isolated, unable to tell his friends nor able to trust his family whom he felt had deceived him. He wanted to escape his family whom he blamed for his circumstances. Feeling increasingly distant from his mother, he felt a lack of connection to the Philippines. Angry with his family, he then broke from their emotional ties. His trust had been broken and he associated all his grief with his Filipino family. The structural implication of this is a surge of events, such as the repeated explicit lying about his legal status. This discomfort of 'living a lie' motivated him

to out himself as undocumented and create the Define America campaign.

The second essential scene is President Obama's announcement of the launch of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals where temporary conditional residency as well as work permits is given on a case-by-case basis, provided the applicants fit the eligibility requirements. The requirements are very similar to the DREAM Act but the age cap is 30. Before this scene, we feel the momentum for the DREAMers at its highest with Vargas and thirty undocumented students posing on the cover of Time magazine. The cover is a culmination of Vargas' efforts to connect with others. In this scene, he is finally rooted in a community in which his presence has been highly valued. His continued efforts to improve immigration reform fail to directly ameliorate his own status. We watch his upset and rage erupt in his quiet apartment, followed by his constant support of his colleagues with tears in his eyes. Putting his efforts into supporting immigration reform has failed for him. He must continue to fight for himself and others who have not found solutions. He must confront that he is alone and that he must reconnect and become rooted again. This event is the impetus for Jose to face his mother.

This personal event echoes the overt and covert methods of ethnic exclusion in Filipino American history, from the signs posted on Californian hotels and swimming pools stating 'Positively No Filipinos Allowed', to one way immigration acts to deport all Filipinos back to the archipelago (see Mabalon and Reyes 2008). This ambiguous state of national acceptance has left the diaspora in a place of occasional and conditional permissions. One could say

that the efforts of (re)presentation of the diaspora to enhance the accent and the specificity of the Filipino American narrative are a way to reconnect with the mother(land).

The use of footage and montages of Vargas in taxis, trains, and airplanes is often accompanied by a voiceover. Throughout the film, these travel sequences are utilized, possibly representing the journey we are taking or perhaps that Vargas himself exists only between destinations with no place. Hamid Naficy recognized the use of trains and buses in films as not only a way to link to locations and the movement between social groups, but also to 'metaphoric reworkings of notions of traveling, homing, and identity' (Naficy 2001: 257). The use of these montages can then be read as emergence from claustrophobic spaces such as automobiles and train cars (imposed identities and expectations) into a new space of nations and possibility. In *Documented*, Vargas is travelling and coming up and out of a confined sense of self that lacks possibility and haunted by his familial ghosts. Naficy also notes that these travelling spaces provide a place for the filmmaker to reflect and sort through their experiences (Naficy 2001: 261). In the film, the inner monologue of Vargas is given space in these moments to make sense of the events that had previously unfolded and absorb the impact of emotional upheaval of his filmmaking process.

As described in previous sections on Filipino history, it is helpful to point out the scenes that exemplify the Americanization process of Jose's life. Listening to Vargas' voice describing his naiveté about America, the screen is

filled with segments of television shows, such as *Baywatch* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, as well as images of celebrities like Michael Jackson and Oprah Winfrey. Old photographs of his grandparents in America, his grandmother working in food service and his *lolo* dressed in uniform for his job as a security guard, juxtapose Vargas' voice. His *lolo's* admiration for America and its values is also described in the film. One sees old photos of this 'man's man', while listening to *lolo's* favorite song, "My Way" by Frank Sinatra. Vargas shares that his grandfather 'over-enunciated his words to show you that he spoke very good English'. His grandparents were barely scraping by or as they say in Filipino, *kapit sa patalim*, which means 'holding on to the knife', or holding on as best you can. Vargas explains his realization that his grandparents struggled to support the family back in the Philippines. The reality of the American Dream fails and succeeds at the same time.

During an in-camera interview, his mother, Emelie, explains in Tagalog how she came to meet Jose's father and marry him, all by the age of 19. Her husband was not around when Jose was born. Even after, he did not keep in touch, leaving her alone with the new baby. His mother returned to her parents' home with three-month-old Jose. When Jose was four years old, his grandparents left for America. As he cried at the airport, his *lola* promised, 'I will get you, my grandchild [All dialogue self-transcribed directly from film *Documented*].

In one scene, Vargas' mother sits in the dark house fondly remembering how close she was to Jose, together all the time. In an interview setting, she

describes how a smuggler was sent by her father to retrieve Jose. It was a dangerous risk to send Jose abroad. The smuggler gave her directions to prepare paperwork and keep a suitcase ready. Jose would have to leave at a moment's notice. Before six o'clock in the morning, the smuggler came to retrieve Jose. Young Jose asked his mother if she was going to follow him to the States. She replied, 'Of course, I will follow. I don't want to be left behind'. She wasn't able to follow and was in fact left in the Philippines. Their bond dissolved by distance, his mother softens and shares:

I really didn't want for us to be apart. I wanted for us to stay together. I sent you to America because nothing was going to happen for you here. You would have a better future there (*Documented* 2013).

Almost as if she had been holding in these words for a time, she exhales slowly with her eyes full of tears and looks to the floor.

Resolution follows the Senate Judiciary hearing where Vargas' testimony was integral to organized migration reform efforts. After the hearing, he hugs and greets friends and family. He shakes hands and stands in front of cameras. His voice is heard again to focus on the personal dimensions of the film. He discusses his fantasy to get a Green Card and fly to the Philippines to see his mother standing there alone, waiting for him. With tears streaming down her face, his mother in an interview across the ocean speaks to us, 'More than anything, I want to be able to like any mother embrace my child, even without words'. This last scene we go from Emelie to Jose, listening to how they long to be

together and how they both realize that there will be difficulties in strengthening and rebuilding their mother-son connection. Jose expresses gratitude for his mother's decision to send him abroad. He wants her to know that he loves her. Emelie explains that she did all of it for him. '*Mahal mahal kita, anak* (I love you very much, my child). She rises from her interview chair, still sniffing as she exits from the screen. The epilogue informs us that they have become 'friends' on Facebook.

### **Americanization and Ambivalence**

As described in Part I, one strategic imperative of the American colonial powers was to obliterate Filipino nationalism and supplant American ideals into the youth. Within America, the migrant narrative is still one closely aligned with the American Dream. The earlier generations of migrants equated the American Dream with freedoms to pursue monetary success. In the film, Vargas' family shows generational difference in their American values. His aunt and uncle's entry through connections to military service is an American Dream associated with a moral belief in fighting against evils. This is clearly illustrated when Uncle Conrad dresses for the hearing in his decorated U.S. military uniform. They both prepare for the hearing while his uncle speaks to the camera:

Who's really the Americans? I would say it's supposed to be the people who are willing to come here and contribute and do good for this country. Not just because they were born here, in this place. Define America. It's a country of freedom. Democracy. After all

history-wise, everybody here is an immigrant actually (*Documented* 2013).

His family in the film has stayed mostly quiet when speaking about immigration issues but in this scene we see that Jose is not so different from his uncle. Despite his efforts to distance himself from his blood relatives, they have been living in the same America.

Yet this America, this dream, is based on citizenship gained through a sworn allegiance that in effect makes migrants vulnerable. His grandparents entered with the American Dream of financial freedom, enough to sustain their family home and a lower-middle class lifestyle. Vargas' American Dream is more similar to his aunt and uncle's generation. The Define American campaign is based on undocumented migrants justifying their non-threatening and compliant practice of being an American who works hard. The American Dream becomes possible only by the efforts of those migrants who insist on its existence. In the face of the abundance of contradictions in a freer and unstratified booming economy, the American Dream cannot exist. Through this lens, one can see the destructive ideals deeply embedded in the processes of Filipino American assimilation. Vargas' pursuit of being American is not untouched by colonial histories.

Still, narratives like Vargas' are deeply important to understanding the boundary crossings that challenge current notions of American pride. Gathering migrant narratives complicates current notions of what becoming American means. A single assimilation process that fits all does not exist.

## Pathos of the Film

The emotional connection one makes to a film is made through appealing to viewers' sympathies and imagination by creating story from 'abstractions of logic into something palpable and present' (Ramage and Bean 1998: 81-82). This association, or pathos, was difficult for Vargas to tend to as a producer and director. Vargas shares in the behind the scenes 'extras':

When you watch people go through a journey, you have to see yourself in them, right? There has to be a level of empathy... For a person who wasn't even fully myself when I was living this life, that was a really hard thing to control (Vargas, *Documented: Extras*).

It is compelling to watch how he attempts to navigate around his own suffering in order to produce the film. Within the first few minutes of the film, one is led to believe that this is a story about how he has recovered from the traumatic break with his mother and found a voice in journalism. The viewers soon learn that the making of the film served as a catalyst for that recovery. The coming out of his undocumented status was only to be used introduce the stories from the movement.

As production of the film began to take off, Vargas felt that the story moved from his intentions to the domain of his personal world. What captivates the viewer is Vargas' internal struggle with accepting his past and hurt. His ambivalence is what draws us in.

Viewers attempt to make sense of his actions. They are drawn into Vargas' story out of a desire to understand and get

closer to his inner turmoil, creating intimacy with his audience.

Regarding the power of creating intimacy and the telling of personal story, bell hooks finds power as well:

I think that's why there's such an emphasis in my work on the confessional, because I know that in a way we're never going to end the forms of domination if we're not willing to challenge the notion of public and private ... if we're not willing to break down the walls that say, 'There should always be this separation between domestic space/intimate space and the world outside'. Because, in fact, why shouldn't we have intimacy in the world outside as well? (Hooks 2012: Location 265)

Hooks explains the transgressive power of telling one's own narrative. By becoming less hesitant about appropriate spheres of knowledge, one can become more aware of privileges one has via their group identifications and combat damaging neo-colonialist mindsets. In other words, by confessing one's pain, one is taking a social action to undermine hierarchies of power. The heart of Hook's argument is similar to the main theme of See's Filipino American 'cultural moment': that the making of Filipino American cultural productions, in this case *Documented*, creates a text that challenges the Westernized histories previously accepted. Filmmaking in this sense has a potency to make social change. Inspired by the LGBT movement, Vargas asserts:

You cannot change the politics of the issue unless you change the culture in which you talk about the

issue. That's why films matter. That's why culture matters (Vargas, *Documented: Extras*).

## Conclusion

In *Documented*, Vargas speaks in obscured ways about his Filipino heritage. In the ways he corrects the repeated misidentifications of his ethnicity and in his explanation of Filipino customs and language, his voice becomes located within the narratives of Filipino America. In interviews, he refers to the film in autobiographical ways, never to declare his space as a Filipino but rather adamantly as an 'undocumented American'. In this declaration, Vargas accents his self-identification on his American-ness, in turn reinforcing the myths of the American Dream and a rootlessness that continues to plague Filipino American lived experience. *Documented* is a film about belonging but does not show the evolution of his American identification within the context of Filipino American histories. Despite minuets with his Filipino-identified relatives, he avoids planting his feet firmly within the identification himself.

Sarita See describes three ways that artists of 'the cultural moment' intervene into contemporary American discourses: 1) by making themselves known and seen by telling and (re)presenting the US Philippines histories, 2) by differentiating the study of the diaspora from postcolonial studies that is primarily concerned with European and British discourses, bringing to light the specificity of being a former American territory, and 3) by challenging immigration narratives based on assimilation that strengthens the colonial



powers whereas 'Filipino American integrationist desire for America paradoxically leads to the disintegration of the empire' (See 2009: xiv-v). Therefore, this artistic momentum is a contemporary form of protest, a contestation of the colonial frameworks that previously were defined by Western

authorities and perhaps also obscured under a pan-ethnic Asian American art. An investigation of cultural productions is instrumental to an interrogation of postcolonial Filipino America. The moment provides a useful framework in examining the multiple voices and narratives of productions.

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**This article was first published in *JOMEC Journal***

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ISSN: ISSN 2049-2340

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