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Oberlin College

“Moving honestly”

pangalay performance, national identity, and practice-as-research

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Dance Honors

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Abstract

Previous research analyzes the legacies of various Philippine dances in the United States. This project seeks to describe the growing impact of the dance form pangalay, given its rising popularity among Philippine performing arts groups and among individual artists in the diaspora. Pangalay's sustained, curvilinear style supports Filipino American dancers' needs for physical well-being, relationship to colonized land, and expression of diasporic culture. Yet when pangalay is framed as a unifying dance aesthetic of Filipino identity, it obscures ongoing internal oppression within the Philippines as Christianized upper classes embrace the dance form yet cohere wealth by displacing Muslim groups. To explore these tensions, this paper draws on the method of practice as research. Through a six-week creative process, my collaborators and I used choreographic tools to engage Philippine regional dances. We sought not to reproduce a unified cultural aesthetic, but rather to cultivate a practice of embodied "honesty". We found that juxtaposition, off-rhythm from a Western musical standpoint, and improvisation, among other methods, helped us balance the values of cultural and technical specificity with concerns about displacement and the performance of national or diasporic identity. This process also required written and spoken acknowledgment of the ways we have borrowed and adapted movement for our own understanding as artists of Asian descent residing in the United States.

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Introduction

Pangalay is a dance form increasing in popularity among Philippine performing arts groups and individual artists in the Filipino diaspora. Pangalay's sustained, curvilinear form supports non-Suluk dancers' needs for physical well-being, relationship to land, and cultural expression. However, when non-Suluk dancers frame pangalay as a unifying aesthetic for Filipino identity, it obscures the history of internal oppression within the archipelago, particularly as upper classes deny minority groups the right to land. To explore these tensions, this paper draws on textual and somatic sources, including practice as research.

Through a six-week collaboration, I used choreographic tools to engage Philippine regional dances not from a desire to reproduce a unified cultural aesthetic, but rather to cultivate a practice of embodied "honesty". With my collaborators, I found that juxtaposition, off-rhythm, and improvisation, among other methods, helped us balance values of cultural and technical specificity with concerns about displacement and the performance of national or diasporic identity. Through

our process we strove to acknowledge the ways we borrow and adapt movement for our own understanding as people of Asian descent in the United States.

As I write, I make distinctions between the terms “Philippine”, “Filipino American” and “Filipinx”. I describe dances as Philippine folk dance for geographic and historical accuracy - the folk dances which come from the Philippines archipelago (Delmundo). For brevity, I refer to folks of Philippine descent in the United States as Filipino American. However, I also recognize Filipinx and Pilipinx as emerging identifiers created to acknowledge queer, trans and non-binary folks in the diaspora. I also acknowledge the dynamic meanings to the terms Suluk and Tausug. While they are often used interchangeably, this may not reflect the ways some individuals identify (Quintero). For clarity, I use Suluk here to specify groups based in Malaysia who immigrated from the Sulu Archipelago. I use Tausug to specify the groups residing in the Sulu Archipelago and the Philippines. While I intend these terms reflect the changing ways that individuals and communities refer to themselves. However, it is important to note how their meanings continue to shift and change.

Learning pangalay in San Diego, California

As a high school student, I wanted to explore dance traditions that I thought would affirm my identity as a Filipina American. I began taking weekly dance classes and rehearsing as a summer apprentice for the Samahan Filipino-American Performing Arts and Education Center in San Diego, CA. This center, dedicated to teaching and providing performances in Philippine dance and music, is based in my hometown of San Diego, California.

After seeing many different dances from various parts of the Philippines, in the summer of 2018 I gravitated towards pangalay, a dance from the Sulu Archipelago -- a chain of islands in the

southwestern part of the country. However, having parents who grew up in Manila and Angeles, Philippines, I assumed I could perform anything from the archipelago. Teacher Nico Delmundo instructed our small group in the movements of linggisan, the seagull, which he described as a particular style of pangalay. He bent his knees and looked towards his wrists as he curled his hands, one over the other, fanning his fingers through the air. With a toe-heel motion he turned in place, as if propelled by a rotor beneath the floor. Copying, I bent forward and raised my arms to shoulder height.

As a slow, but constantly moving dance, the practice made me feel deeply connected to my breath, my internal sensations and my imagination. In ballet, I had trained to hold my arms at my sides in a prescribed, curved line. Yet in pangalay, I enjoyed stretching my arms to their fullest length. As I practiced, I became aware of my arms and hands curving through the air, imagining the flowers and birds of the archipelago as I moved. Bending my knees, I saw myself dancing before a wide horizon of sand and water, or along the bow of a fishing boat. I felt connected both to the San Diego shoreline, as well as to the place where I imagined pangalay was born.

In these classes, individual virtuosity was secondary to the aim of moving together, and learning and sharing cultural knowledge through dance. I felt these classes and the dances themselves undid Western ideals of beauty and virtuosity that have been perpetuated by ballet aesthetics. I had felt isolated from dance spaces which were predominantly slim, white, or East Asian, while at Samahan, bodies of different ages and sizes were welcome. I found students shared a desire to connect with the Philippines through dance, beyond the pleasure of exercise or entertainment. Postures and movement provided insight into the history and context of the archipelago - in this way, students understood dance as a form of cultural knowledge (Sklar). As I

sought an expressive space to “fit in”, the slow and deliberate motion renewed my sense of confidence. This aligned with my romantic imagination of empowered Filipino personhood, prior to Spanish colonization.

However, unlike other folk dances, this experience with pangalay also activated my own memories of San Diego, helping me to visualize the wide expanse of sand and water that made me feel at home. As I danced, I imagined cultivating a deeper relationship to my environment, expanding my sensory perception from just the palms of my hands to the kinesphere they carved around me. The air had weight, my movements felt more deliberate and even, as if through water. Borders softening between my body and my environment, I exhaled slowly, shoulders dropping, which allowed me to sustain more slow and deliberate movement.

In the beginning, I felt pangalay was an important form of dance that helped affirm my sense of identity as a person with ancestry in the Philippines. As I danced in the specific style I had learned with performing arts groups, I imagined a connection to land and water and I renewed a sense of inner well-being. After learning about its context, however, I was curious about how to engage more critically with the dance. I began to see how my family background offered me support for dancing that other communities have not historically received.

Filipino American youth

Through my teachers in San Diego, I knew that pangalay originated from Tausug groups in the Sulu Archipelago of southern Philippines. Similar yet distinct dance forms originated from Yakan, and Sama groups in Sulu. To learn more about this context, I relied on readings and discussions with scholars who have built research relationships with groups in Sulu. I recognize the

absence of perspectives from Tausug, Yakan, and Sama individuals as I seek to better communicate the context of pangalay in Sulu and the Philippine Archipelago.

Tausug, Sama, and Yakan groups in Sulu have been categorized by Christianized Filipinos as fisherfolk and fighters, warriors who have resisted colonialism. While this holds truth, they cannot be reduced to these perceptions alone. Yet the warlike stereotype continues to shape perceptions of groups from Sulu. These are often perpetuated by predominant groups residing in the nation's capital. Such groups near the capital are predominantly Catholic, following three centuries under Spanish colonial rule -- such as my family members, who have lived in the Angeles and Manila area for several generations. They identify with Tagalog and Kapampangan groups. Dances from Tagalog and Kapampangan regions, characterized as "lowland Christian" dances, reflect the influence of Spanish colonialism.

Like other high school and college-age students, I was interested in pangalay because of its context outside of Spanish-colonial traditions. Pangalay has been perceived as more "Filipino" than other kinds of cultural performance due to origins in the Sulu Archipelago. The history of resistance in Sulu against Spanish and American military forces has led to the perception of pangalay as free from Western influence, a "pre-colonial" form. This makes it attractive to many young people who are seeking to perform a more "authentic" Filipino identity in the US. Their interest develops from a desire to reject Eurocentric ideals embedded in the folkloric dance canon.

Often presented by performing arts groups and college student organizations, the folk canon perpetuates Orientalist visions of non-Catholic groups in the Philippine archipelago. This series of dances, sectioned into "suites", was choreographed by Bayanihan choreographer Lucrezia Reyes Urtula (Matherne). However, many aspects of suites - known as "Maria Clara", "Rural",

“Cordillera”, and “Moro” or “Muslim” - also perpetuate the hierarchies of race, class, and gender enforced by Spanish colonization (Gaerlan). In particular, the singkil, a well-known dance of the “Moro” suite, inserts Orientalist stereotypes about Islamic mysticism and Moro fierceness (Gaerlan). The premise of the dance creates a fictitious “Sultan’s court” not found in Lanao. It forbids dancers from smiling, in order to project a more mysterious, sensuous, and unconquered character (Gaerlan). These choices further perceptions of predominantly Muslim groups as exotic, haughty, and warlike.

In contrast, the “Maria Clara” suite presents upper-middle class and Christianized groups as the national ideal. “Maria Clara” is a well-known section represented in lavish butterfly dresses, and rondalla guitars, both imports of Spanish colonization. In this series of dances about courtship and romance, performers sway, smile, and flirt -- fanning themselves and miming giggling, teasing, and sharing gossip. The suite characterizes the “ideal” Filipino - not only expressive and romantic, but also wealthy, well-educated, Catholic, and land-owning. I identified with this depiction of Filipino identity, reflecting the Christianized Tagalog background of my family. However, it also reflects religious and classed hierarchies under Spanish rule. I began dancing pangalay because I had read it represented a “true” Filipino art. However, following further conversations with teachers and scholars, I learned this perception does not benefit pangalay’s communities of origin, and may in fact obscure their historic struggles in the Philippine archipelago.

Pangalay in Tausug and Suluk communities

While I wanted to learn more about pangalay in its present context in Tausug and Suluk communities of Sulu, Malaysia, and Indonesia, I did not have the resources myself to build relationships with dancers in those regions. Instead, I reached out to my teacher Nico Delmundo

and Desiree Quintero, a Hawaii-based scholar who has traveled and built relationships with dancers and Suluk people.

Quintero accepted my request to talk over lunch in a bustling mall in Honolulu, Hawaii. She shared how she had conducted research in pangalay in Sabah, Malaysia for six years. In her work, she describes pangalay as an improvisational form characterized by curvilinear relationships between the hands, arms, and hips. She notes the deliberate and sustained movement individuals perform at weddings or important social events in Suluk communities.

Opening her laptop, and selecting videos from her fieldwork, she illustrated how soloists often perform to the live rhythms of kulintangan, a gong ensemble instrument, or to the music produced from synthesizers that resemble kulintangan rhythms. The dancers embody the music through the waving pulse of their palms, hyperextension of elbows, or the tempo of their movement. Stepping lightly and carefully in small, close steps, they may bend their knees or turn in a circle around themselves.

Importantly, Quintero's work emphasizes that Suluk people identify what is and what is not Suluk pangalay. Dancers embody Suluk pangalay not through one correct style, but rather through nuanced choices and preferences developed from their embedded experience in Suluk communities. These variations manifest in the bend of their knees, the sway of their hips, the reach of their gaze, and the articulation of their hands. This differs from dance groups formed for the sole purpose of cultural presentation. These groups most often adhere to a shared choreographic style, sometimes described as more "correct", which allows them to dance synchronously during group performances. Seeking to challenge binary frameworks of seeing dance, Quintero writes that her Suluk interlocutors would not describe certain styles as more "correct" or more "beautiful" than

others, but rather that Suluk communities perceive different styles and movement choices on a spectrum of value to their community.

In the Sulu Archipelago, Sama and Yakan groups have also originated dance forms analogous to pangalay, known as igal and pansak. While they share some similarities, these dances are distinct. Samahan teacher Nico Delmundo visited and participated in some of these dance forms with Sama communities. He describes these forms as a “movement vernacular”, a common way of “grooving” - whether to kulintangan or to a synthesizer. While the individual ornamentation differs, the common element among these improvisations is the curving relationship between hips and shoulders, shoulders and wrists, and wrists to the tips of the fingers.

From Quintero’s and Delmundo’s work, I understood more about the variety and diversity of pangalay. Their work demonstrates that while there are many values in pangalay, specific choices and variations in the dancers’ movement embody Suluk pangalay. Suluk dancers consider the value of these aesthetic choices in relationship to their communities, rather than moving from a desire to emulate a national or regional ideal.

Cultural performers in Manila, Philippines

While pangalay originates from a social context, the dance is gaining popularity in Manila and the US as a codified form of cultural performance. In January 2019, I received a Shansi In-Asia Grant to learn more about this form of pangalay with AlunAlun Dance Circle (ADC). ADC - founded by artist, Ligaya Amilbangsa - is a performing arts group located just outside the capital of Manila. ADC provides open workshops to the local community. They also provide workshops at local schools and perform at international conferences highlighting Southeast Asian performing traditions, environmental stewardship, and human rights. At these events, performers

dance usually in a group, in contrast to the solo or duet performance most common in Tausug communities. In most events, performers in ADC reflect the values of the choreographer and the greater themes of the conference or festival in which they perform; their main goal is to draw attention to a social problem and share cultural knowledge.

My first group class with AlunAlun introduced me to the basics of their particular form of pangalay, called the Amilbangsa Instruction Method (AIM). My aunt, herself a former member, introduced me to the group. At AlunAlun Dance Circle studio, I met four artists who danced regularly with AlunAlun, meeting weekly for two to three-hour rehearsals. The group was composed of men and women, ranging from thirty to over seventy years-old.

In the quiet interior of the tiled studio, AlunAlun dancers coached me in bending my knees with every exhale, allowing me to glide, rather than shuffle across the floor. Copying the slow and deliberate improvisations of a senior member, I felt the shared breath of our small group. As another dancer adjusted my arms into a soft, figure-eight position, my shoulders relaxed, feeling strong yet flexible. We spiraled, glided, and sprung to the rhythms of a kulintang, and the rush of the street outside. My soles hurt slightly as we skimmed the stone tiles of the one-room studio.

I continued to learn AIM basics through private lessons at my aunt's house in Ayala Heights. We practiced on the dining room floor. Teacher Joy Ricote gave further context to the AIM basic warm-up, and refined steps in this codified dance form. Like my aunt, she was drawn to the slower pace of the dance. She felt the dance profoundly supported her mental and physical well-being. At the nearby university, she had even begun teaching some workshops to support health for college students. She encouraged me to slow down, travel less, and focus on the effort of flexing my fingers, wrists, and elbows to the sky.

In the following lessons, Joy taught me the AIM version of linggisan, a style of pangalay which mimics a seagull. The dance conjured images of birds flying, talking, pecking, fishing, scratching. Gestures also described blooming flowers, swaying seaweed, praying mantis, and crashing waves. Even as we danced in the cement sprawl of Manila, with the turn of my wrists, I could imagine a deeper connection to the landscape of the Philippines and the shores of my home in San Diego.

AIM Founder Ligaya F. Amilbangsa

Learning about the founder of the Amilbangsa Instruction Method helped me better contextualize the impact of the form in Manila and the United States. AIM Founder Ligaya F. Amilbangsa was raised near the urban center of Manila. Following her marriage to a community leader, she lived in Tawi-Tawi, Sulu for some time. She observed dance at social events and weddings and deconstructed the movements. Her practice became the Amilbangsa Instruction Method, which she teaches to professionals and students through the structure of AlunAlun.

Known to AlunAlun dancers as Tita Ligaya, Amilbangsa shared her perspective with me throughout my final two lessons with AlunAlun. She emphasized there was no “correct” way to dance, however, some techniques were more “beautiful” than others. The group makes choices to dance with larger arm movements, when performing on a stage rather than a smaller space. As a choreographer she has incorporated props such as fans, masks, hats, and other objects into AlunAlun’s performances at diplomatic and cultural events around Manila. During my visit, AlunAlun members echoed the sentiment that pangalay was a truly “Filipino” dance, a link between the archipelago and other nations of Southeast Asia. Thus, the Amilbangsa Instruction Method acknowledges the improvisational origins of the dance in Sulu. At the same time, it curates

a highly specific style to represent national Filipino identity and to align itself with classical dances in other parts of Southeast Asia.

Land-owning classes in Manila, Philippines

Following my brief lessons with AlunAlun, I returned to Oberlin for spring term. As I continued to practice the Amilbangsa Instruction Method, I began seeing emails and messages from relatives about our family's inherited land. It is a few hundred acres in Angeles, Pampanga, a city in northern Philippines, where residents are predominantly Catholic. Over group chat, my relatives wrote that over 400 families have been living there, building hollow block homes on the rocky dirt. Some families have lived there for over twenty years - yet all the land remains in my family's name. My aunt wrote that she wants to sell the land to a developer. She directed relatives to build a fence around the property, and cut off the tenants' utilities. I read that some informal settlers on the property resisted through dismantling new structures that were built as boundaries. However, one month later, family pressure on the barangay captain and local officials succeeded in removing the street vendors from selling goods on the front of the property.

As notifications rolled in, I read that the vendors were "Moro" - a term for groups of Filipinos who practice Islam in Sulu, Mindanao, and Palawan. Historically, the term "Moro" has been used by Christianized Filipinos to oppress predominantly Muslim groups, flattening many non-Christian ethnic groups into one name. While some individuals embrace the term, "Moro" recalls that history of oppression by Christianized groups. I use it here to reflect my relatives' statements, as I could not hear from the vendors themselves. Later I read the vendors were Maranao -- a predominantly Muslim group of Mindanao. While this is just one interaction, the

language reveals how Christianized Filipinos continue to flatten the personhood and livelihood of predominantly Muslim groups.

Predominantly Muslim groups have long struggled against the predominantly Catholic Philippine state. Spanish colonization laid the foundation for present-day religious and political conflicts. This began when Spanish colonizers ordered Christianized soldiers in Luzon and the Visayas to fight Muslim groups in the Philippine archipelago, in order to extend Christianity and Spanish colonial rule (Majul). Furthermore, different groups in Sulu, Cotabato, and Lanao have alternately fought not only against Spanish colonization but also against US militarism, forced labor, slavery, tax extraction, and abuses from the Filipino government (Abinales). Far from monolithic, such regions and groups carry nuanced histories of resistance - of which I have provided only a glimpse.

This history gave me pause, as I considered my ancestral relationship to colonization within the Philippines. Christianized groups such as Tagalogs and Kapampangans participate in the displacement of Muslim groups in the Philippines. Furthermore, upper-middle class Christianized groups continue to accumulate intergenerational wealth and political power through land ownership. Their legal titles, based in the settler-colonial concept of land as property, took precedence over decades of residence by other groups. Upper-middle class, Christianized groups perpetuate a cycle of poverty and displacement, made clear when I learned that many families on the land in question could trace their lineage to workers hired by my elders three or four generations ago.

My family relatives raised donations and made plans for the development of low-cost housing and resettlement of the residents. However, their charity only accounted for four

households, a small portion of the hundreds of informal settlers who were living there. As they evicted informal settlers and “Moro” vendors, I saw that family members still showed encouragement and support for pangalay -- dance that comes from Muslim communities in southern Philippines. While it is important to note that Maranao groups are based in Mindanao and hold distinct identities from Suluk and Tausug communities, this particular event reflects the ongoing displacement and widespread exploitation of predominantly Muslim groups in the Philippine archipelago. I knew I needed to learn more about the context for pangalay’s growing popularity in Manila and the United States.

Larasati and cultural reconstruction

As I tried to grasp the situation, I also met weekly in a private reading with Professor Ann Cooper Albright. She introduced me to the work of scholar Rachmi Diyah Larasati. Discussing her work on cultural reconstruction helped me to better understand how a codified aesthetic can reconstruct national identity and gloss over the exclusion of minority groups.

Rachmi Diyah Larasati’s work illustrates how framing regional dances as a tool for national unification enacts harm. In *The Dance that Makes You Vanish*, she recounts her own memories of learning “forbidden” dances as a child, as the Indonesian government under dictator Suharto forbade the practice of jejer dance in Indonesia (Larasati). As an adult, studying at the state’s center for cultural arts, she learned versions of these once forbidden dances had become part of the court dance repertoire. The Suharto regime had developed a strict aesthetic of Javanese court dance, most famous among them bedayah, to express narratives which affirmed the power of a central male leader (Larasati). Those who performed non-court dances were “disappeared”, due to their perceived alignment with progressive women’s groups, which were seen as threats to the

dictatorship (Larasati). Drawing on her experiences, Larasati shows how living traditions have been “cleaned up” into state-sanctioned aesthetics which support a narrative of authoritarian power. Ultimately, she connects this aesthetic change to the physical and cultural displacement, in fact, the disappearance, of minority groups.

Larasati’s work illustrates parallels between the history of jejer dance and the codification of pangalay in Manila and the United States. The deconstruction of pangalay into the Amilbangsa Instruction Method finds similarities with jejer’s codification into state-approved dance. Pangalay develops in the communities of Tausug and Suluk groups who are ethnic minorities in the nations of Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines. In Suluk communities of Sabah, Malaysia, pangalay develops from improvisational creativity; local practitioners do not separate the dance into discrete “steps” or movements (Quintero). In contrast, the Amilbangsa Instruction Method presents and teaches particular “steps” and transitional movements in pangalay, such as rolling the fingers and wrists slowly in a fanlike pattern, known as kolek-kolek (AlunAlun). Another movement presses the index and thumb together as the middle, ring, and little fingers fan into the crest of a bird (AlunAlun). Many of these gestures originate in the styles Amilbangsa observed during her time living in Tawi-Tawi, and differ from emerging variations of performance in the present-day. Performers would not construct a dance from “steps” but rather from more internal logics - their own preferences, responding to the choices of audiences and musicians (Quintero). AIM’s framework of discrete steps, or gestures, codifies pangalay by breaking movement down for participants who are new to the dance form.

Videos of performances by Tausug and Suluk groups also reveal other contrasts. While variations depend on the individual, some Suluk dancers remain much more upright - they do not

bend as low in their hips as those who are trained in AIM (Ammak). They may shift weight from one foot to another to produce slight changes in their hips, rather than mincing their feet frequently. One might also see differences in the “aliveness” of hands - Tausug and Suluk individuals embody Suluk values in pangalay through many nuanced aesthetic choices, including ways of flickering, pulsing, and curling their hands. Finally, unlike AIM, Tausug and Suluk dancers often but do not always look down or away from the audience - some even smile and react to the musicians and audience. Based on these observations, many of the movements in the Amilbangsa Instructional Method, echoed in performances in the US, do not reflect current dance performance in Suluk or Tausug communities. The codified style, a standard repertoire of gestures and movements, eases transmission to new students - particularly those in the diaspora who are not immersed in Tausug or Suluk communities. It creates a standard aesthetic from which large groups can learn and move in sync, even without first building a relationship with communities of origin.

Furthermore, while it has received support in Manila, pangalay has become a symbol of cultural unification which belies the displacement of minority groups in the Philippines. This is supported by Amilbangsa Instruction Method materials. Following my visit, Amilbangsa gifted me a copy of her recent technique manual containing illustrations and descriptions of many gestures in the Amilbangsa Instruction Method. The guidebook’s dedication reads, “To all who believe in keeping pangalay alive for future generations of Filipinos and as a national unifying symbol for the Philippines” (Amilbangsa). I recognize the spirit of this dedication is to honor the dance by ensuring it is accessible for future dancers, and acknowledge I also found an internal sense of calm and serenity by learning in this style. AIM teachers acknowledge the “steps” are constructed by non-Tausug practitioners. While they modify the form for cultural performance, using props such

as fans and hats to extend the visibility of their gestures, they also speak openly of their mission to preserve the pangalay movement styles from several decades ago (AlunAlun). Notably, the description of pangalay as a “national unifying symbol for the Philippines” parallels Larasati’s connection between codified dance and nationalist power. This is an interesting dedication given the history of conflict and displacement imposed by the Philippine state on peoples of the Sulu archipelago (Chew). As the Philippines military escalates conflict and imprisonment of urban poor, informal settlers, and ethnic minorities, it is important to remain critical of Philippine nationalism in the performing arts. As Larasati reveals, the aesthetic power of codified dance can obscure a history of violence and authoritarian rule.

As I read Larasati’s work, her insight into the ways codified dance supports state power helped me better understand events in my own life. Supported by the law of the Philippine state, Christianized, upper class groups not only perform pangalay but also control land, actively displacing Maranao and informal settlers. This dynamic continues in the United States as Filipino Americans seek to perform cultural identity without acknowledging the displacement of predominantly Muslim groups due to labor exploitation, religious and cultural discrimination, and land grabbing.

Independent artists in the United States

When the semester ended, I took on an internship near New York City and began to learn more about how other individuals in the United States are engaging with pangalay as a codified form. Dancers learning codified pangalay often grapple with appropriation, struggling to balance expectations of cultural dance with the desire for “creative innovation”. The artists of Walang Hiya, an artists’ collective based in New York City, perform pangalay as a decolonizing practice. Their

goal is to indigenize their performing arts practices in order to show solidarity with native sovereignty. I related to the group's desire to acknowledge the displacement of indigenous nations in the Americas. However, while their work succeeds in producing individual well-being, it cannot enact the decolonization necessary for the sovereignty of indigenous nations. The decolonization described by artists such as Walang Hiya refers to the effects of colonization in their own bodies, as colonial subjects. While pangalay may counteract the bodily impact of settler colonialism, it cannot fulfill Walang Hiya's goal of decolonization, which refers specifically to the dismantling of settler colonial structures (Tuck and Yang). It is important to recognize that pangalay performance does not achieve the structural change needed for indigenous sovereignty in the United States nor the Philippines (Tuck and Yang). Thus, while the codified aesthetic of AIM's sustained, curvilinear style supports individual needs for physical well-being, relationship to land, and cultural and diasporic expression, its framing as decolonial practice can undermine indigenous sovereignty.

Another New York-based group called Sining Kapuluan, founded by Jacob Walse Dominguez, is a Philippine arts group committed to accompanying their performances with information on the history and significance of the dance. They recognize that what audiences see is a form of creative expression rather than an authentic representation of pangalay in Tausug and Suluk communities. Their acknowledgements include lineage, often referring to specific artists or teachers who have taught their group (Sining Kapuluan). Nonetheless, these differences reveal how Filipinx Americans draw meaning from pangalay in ways that differ from its origins in Tausug and Suluk communities - pangalay has become for some a medium for countering colonialism, healing relationships between oneself and one's body, or oneself and the environment. Recognizing both the value of pangalay practice and the harm embedded in current models of

cultural performance or decolonial practice, I seek to engage with these emerging meanings through dance practice as research.

Collaborative Structure

Inspired by dance artists and the work of my teachers and other scholars in pangalay, I designed what became a six-week collaboration in practice-as-research with three peers at Oberlin College - Neko Cortez, Elise Hardebeck, and Madeleine Gefke. Recalling my experience with Samahan, I wanted to create a space where our understanding of culture and identity formation was not only included in the creative process, but also changed by our collective work. I aimed to build a creative process relevant to each artist's experiences and relationship with Asian American identity.

Among my questions were how to engage with the value of dancing pangalay without replicating the harmful aspects of its codification. I was interested in the generative potential of working with and acknowledging gaps in pangalay performance. Among the values I observed were intimate connections to the environment, to history, and to my own body. Part of my interest in ballet and Philippine folk dance had been participation in a narrative, and the rich, fantastical images produced by gesture. Through our collaboration and exploration of codified pangalay, I wanted to retain the feeling of close relationship with environmental symbols of my home, expressed through deliberate, slow, sustained movement which echo the movement of palm fronds, ocean waves, seabirds, and other elements. Interested in meaningful imagery yet wary of reproducing harmful narratives, I wanted to explore what specific somatic relationships supported these feelings of close relationship - committing to extension, the way my bones arc through space,

or the unison of exhale and bend. I was curious about how we could explore these relationships yet acknowledge that we are defamiliarizing the movement from its communities of origin.

I recognize this investigation is most useful to other Asian Americans seeking culturally-specific expression in the diaspora, yet who do not have the means to travel and to engage sustainably with communities in Asia. Given my limited knowledge of the form, and my lack of relationship with its communities of origin, I had considered leaving pangalay absent from this project. At the same time, I feel my engagement with it reflects the path of many others in the diaspora, particularly those who may only be able to see pangalay in a cultural performance or classroom setting. In sharing my brief experience with AIM and showing videos of Tausug and Suluk performances with my collaborators, I sought not to recreate an “authentic” or “real” dance but to propose thoughtful possibilities for future engagement, specific to the context of people of Asian descent in the United States.

My six meetings with Elise, Maddie, and Neko aimed to build a structure in which collaborators would feel purposeful and agential in future creative projects. To that end I followed the OPEN structure, a protocol for improvisational inquiry created by Andrew Suseno. Our meetings followed a structure of check-in, discussion, orientation, and choreography or improvisation. Each meeting focused on a different reading or theme to help us more closely investigate our questions. Readings included articles on pangalay in the Philippines, the Philippine folk dance canon, and Philippine cultural performance in the United States, as well as community-based dance practices and the role of music in contemporary performance. We discussed the ways these themes inform our concepts of self, nation, and identity in our communities, as well as how they shape our artistic choices.

Moving from discussion to dance, I led a warm-up to orient the group to specific research questions, physical sensations, or dance steps relevant to discussion. Among these steps were pangalay movements from the Amilbangsa Instruction Method and traveling steps from Tinikling, Payung, and Silung, drawn from Philippine folk choreographies at Samahan Performing Arts. We then played with these steps through improvisation, creating embodied responses to the questions at hand. Finally, we shared our short phrases or improvisations with each other. In our final meetings, we made a structure for the movement we had made. We performed this in-progress draft at an audition for *Spring Back*, a departmental dance showing at Oberlin College.

Creative Investigation

Though our process was cut short, I feel that I was able to provide an agential process for collaborators to explore their own creative disciplines and relationships to performance of identity. We structured our in-progress showing based on free-writes from each collaborator on themes they wished to emphasize in our performance. Our movement drew on steps from pangalay, Philippine folk choreographies, and contemporary traditions to explore how we might retain these movements, even as we acknowledge the way their narratives or histories have undermined struggles for equity. While I used movements based in modern dance, I drew on the aesthetic values of codified pangalay such as slow, sustained movements, attention to curving motion of arms and hands, and playful relationship to rhythm.

Interacting with time

We drew inspiration from the ways different Philippine dances interact with music. In tinikling, a Philippine folk dance from the “Rural” suite, one must step “on the beat”, exactly in time with the 3-count music, to avoid colliding with the bamboo sticks. In contrast, pangalay

dancers slow down or speed up inverse to the tempo of the music - as the music grows faster, the dancer slows down. These discussions of beat and rhythm were based on our experiences in Western music traditions. Reflecting on our discussion of Ana Deumert's piece, "Let's Shuffle: an epistemology of dance, disruption, and decoloniality", Maddie wrote that dancing on the "off-rhythms are a medium in dance through which to reclaim history, break out of 'correctness' and experience life as a series of exciting surprises". Staying "in time" and traveling "on-time" as a metaphor for the nationalist structures of the folk canon, we moved at different tempos and on different "beats". Switching our "beat" shifted us back and forth between locomotive and sensory modes: moving directly on the beat to travel quickly across the stage, and slowing down to focus on internal sensation. This switch between staying "in time" and "out of time" produced a contrast between compact, driving steps created by the lower body, and expansive, luxurious arcs carved by the upper body.

In this way, we modified prescribed steps from the folk canon to find moments of freedom and expression within them. In exaggerating and performing these steps out of context - juxtaposing steps from different suites - we sought to defamiliarize them from their meanings as national symbols, and recognize how audiences often see these steps out of context. In this process Neko emphasized exploration in "moving honestly ... in how our bodies feel ... not doing things simply for the aesthetic". The changes in our relationship to tempo reflect our relationship to history - it is about "how we feel that history still impacts us today, and honesty about what we want in the future for others like us." Neko emphasized curiosity about the ways music incites movement, as well as how movement changes our experience of music. Our movement converses with the "groove," or a "certain feeling or flow that connects the parts that branch out of it." As

Neko continues to study jazz trombone and kulintang, a gong ensemble instrument which traditionally accompanies pangalay, this play between dance and music inspires his practice. Honoring the ways our bodies feel and move through time, we not only express our own experiences but also propose more “honest” futures.

Investigating gaps

Investigating our experiences of pangalay in the Amilbangsa Instruction Method, we were motivated by absence and by gaps - both in our ability to perform the subtle, articulate movements and in our experiences with the movement in context. Developing from creative prompts from Parcon Resilience founder, Andrew Suseno, we explored the dance through several prompts. For example, as we explored the characteristic curling and unfurling action of the hands - would it still be recognizable if the body was absent? We varied different aspects of the technique, such as the distance between the hands and the chest, the visibility of the rest of the body versus the hands, and the focus of the eyes on the hands and wrists.

Through this practice, I better understood how the method of curving, folding and unfolding, bending, and exhaling, creates strong energetic relationships between myself and my environment. I found this feeling could not be achieved by merely swaying in place, along one plane. It could not be achieved by dancing with hands relaxed, or dancing with fists closed. When I stretch my elbows and fingers - so far that they curve backwards - I imagine air cycling from my nose through to my lungs, through my chest, arms, palms, and fingers, and as my fingers curve in front of me, they cycle back again. When I attempt the same movements behind my back, or away from my chest, this cycle breaks. Through this investigation I discovered a close relationship between my breath and the proximity of my arms, palms, and fingers to my chest.

Elise began connecting our process to her experiences as a potter. Inspired by the ways we were “stretching” certain gestures by performing them without the rest of the body, she thought of potters throwing clay. She imagined how she could perform potters’ movements at the throwing wheel, with the clay absent, to produce fantastical objects in space. She felt inspired to create her own dances from this seed, using gestures to conjure clay objects in the imagination that might not be possible in reality. Based on this feedback, I feel that our process helped me not only to try “practice as research” but also provided some inspiration for future creative inquiry.

Emphasizing variation

In our sixth week, we performed our in-progress draft. Our collaboration resulted in a performance that switched between the *form* of pangalay, in the Amilbangsa Instruction Method, to the *spirit* of improvisation it produces - ornamenting the body, conversing with the music and building connections with each other through movement. We achieved this through a balance of choreography and improvisation. Switching between these modes allowed us to share the same performative space, while being true to our individual movement styles and exploring our personal relationships to our themes. For example, while I used steps from the Philippine folk dance suite, “Maria Clara”, to explore the meanings of dancing “in time”, Maddie, Elise, and Neko each made personal choices in their performance to reflect their personal style. Neko closed his fists and dug his heels into the floor, emphasizing the downbeat, while Maddie left her palms open and let her shoulders sway slightly. When we explored the off-rhythm, dancing “out” of time, we all slowed into a sustained figure-eight motion similar to motion described in the Amilbangsa Instruction Method, arms luxuriating in space in front and behind our bodies. Through our collaboration, I

sensed resonances between the flowing, curvilinear values of pangalay and the spiraling, full-bodied, sustained motion that I enjoyed in my experiences of contemporary dance.

Maddie saw our mix of improvisation and choreography as a reflection of our commitment to difference, variation, and surprise throughout our project. Maddie's experience in contact improvisation, as well as biology and environmental studies, informed her understanding of natural variation in our performance of the same movement. She wished to emphasize the "idea that there is no 'correct' way to dance." She wrote, "We can have choreography and structured dance methods, but to each their own and dance becomes such an interesting form when people bring their own styles". This manifested in the different choices we all made in our informal performance - while we started with the same core phrase, we each chose different ways to accentuate and stretch the movement.

Through our project, Elise Hardebeck also sought to resist "correctness" and "work on freedom from expectation of dance" - from her own expectations and those of the audience. While working towards research in neuroscience, she had experience in classical ballet. As I recalled my own experiences in ballet I found resonances with her desire for "freedom from [Western] beauty and aesthetic". Having a parent who is Japanese and a parent who is white, Elise reflected on the ways her identities shape her engagement with different dance traditions. She wanted to explore "where [her] voice fits into the general practice of cross-cultural art, and how [she] should present [her] voice among this group." Elise's inquiry led us to emphasize our individual styles to better communicate the ways our backgrounds shape our engagement with dance traditions.

Results

Shortly after this informal showing, we began sheltering-in-place due to the Covid-19 outbreak. I decided to conclude our collaboration by meeting with my collaborators through video chat, and recording vignettes generated from our collaboration. I organized these short videos into a website portfolio, alongside brief summaries of our process. On my own, I was able to learn strategies for writing and dancing in tandem. I found that by practicing the Amilbangsa Instruction Method in between writing, the expansive sensation of curving and stretching through space helped me sustainably engage with ideas that were difficult for me to acknowledge. This was especially useful as I consider the ways I am implicated in pangalay performance as a person from a land-owning, Christianized and upper class family. Attending not only to ideas, but the sensations these ideas produce, I find writing and dance together to be powerful tools for learning.

Reflecting on working with Elise, Maddie, and Neko, I also learned about how to create creative spaces. I strived to generate an environment of mutual respect and play through a creative process that centered improvisation first, and later developed a performance through a balance of improvisation and choreography. Musical play, identifying absences, and juxtaposing prescribed steps helped defamiliarize my relationship to specific movements and locate its value beyond the representation of national identity. Using different elements of folk dance canon, while being transparent about what I borrow, helped me to explore my relationship with these steps while avoiding the stereotypes they often perpetuate as singular representations of culture.

This collaboration taught me that a rigorous dance practice does not have to mean a strict commitment to reproduction, evoking the same feelings and meanings in each practice and performance. A rigorous practice can be a commitment to the values of the group and a

commitment to the ways a dance changes and develops over time, as the dancers themselves continue to change and renegotiate their relationship to each other, to history, to their environment.

Conclusion

This research has revealed both cultural, creative, and somatic knowledge. I have described how the codification of pangalay has increased access for Filipinx Americans, creating meaningful experiences related to healing and environmental relationships. The construction of “steps” allows outside audiences to better access the movement; discrete movements with names and imagery, tied to waves, palm fronds, birds, and flowers. Codification allows Filipino Americans to learn cultural knowledge through movement and perform a uniform aesthetic. However, in Tausug and Suluk communities, pangalay develops from shared cultural knowledge and emphasizes the distinct values of their communities.

I have drawn on my experiences to explore the impact of pangalay codification. In visiting Manila and learning about my family, I learned more about the displacement of predominantly Muslim groups by Christianized, land-owning Filipinos, even as they embrace dances from predominantly Muslim groups. Thus when pangalay is framed as a “unifying” dance aesthetic for Filipino identity, it obscures the ways land-owning classes perpetuate cycles of poverty and displacement in the Philippines.

Knowing that I have not developed relationships with Tausug and Suluk communities, other scholars and artists have helped me understand the harm of presenting the dance as a unifying symbol of Philippine heritage. The work of other scholars such as Desiree Quintero and Rachmi Larasati engages me in the responsibilities of those in the diaspora to pangalay’s communities of origin, who continue to modify and adapt pangalay in the present day. In creative collaboration, I

and a team of three artists explored aspects of time, absence, and variation within steps from pangalay, Philippine folk dance, and contemporary tradition. Collectively we valued the process of exploration and play, finding value in the juxtaposition of dancing “in time” and off-beat (from a Western musical standpoint), traveling quickly and slowing in place, and moving from unison to individual improvisation. Through our creative process of reading, discussion, orientation, and movement, we acknowledged our contextual gaps and stylistic differences to reveal more “honest” bodies.

Our emphasis on moving “honestly” has provided me with strategies for moving into a global transition. I draw strength from the movement I have learned - slowing down, listening to those around me and relying on the rhythm of my breath - as I adjust to realities of sheltering in place for the following months. Curving my arms through space, I feel alert to the small sensations of air on my fingers, of energy stretching through my limbs. As the day filters through my body, I feel better prepared for sustained engagement with change.

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