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Watsonville is in the Heart: Documenting Histories of Transpacific Filipino Migration in the Pajaro Valley

Abstract

Watsonville is in the Heart (WIITH) is a community-driven, public history initiative to preserve and uplift stories of Filipino transpacific migration and labor in the greater Pajaro Valley—an agricultural region located on central California’s coast. The WIITH team is creating a novel archive documenting the resilience of Filipinos who navigated the intersections of colonialism, migrant labor, and racism during the early twentieth century. The archive includes Filipino experiences documented through oral histories, photographs, personal records, and material culture objects. Significantly, WIITH’s archive reveals transpacific connections between the Philippines, Hawai’i, and the Pajaro Valley that have yet to be examined by scholars. The initiative’s value sits at the intersections of art, oral histories, and histories of Filipino migration. It will culminate in an exhibition at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, Watsonville is in the Heart: Philippine Migrant Labor in the Pajaro Valley, that will bring the WIITH archive and the Bay Area artist community together. This essay provides an overview of WIITH’s archival development, methodology, and historiographical intervention thus far.

Keywords: *labor migration, oral history, photography, archives, Filipinos, exhibition*

Watsonville is in the Heart (WIITH) is a community-driven, public history initiative formed to preserve and uplift stories of Filipino transpacific migration and labor in the greater Pajaro Valley—a region located on central California’s coast. It works in partnership with The Tobera Project, an organization that celebrates Filipino history and culture in the city of Watsonville. Presently, the WIITH team is creating a novel archive documenting the struggles, vitality, and resilience of the manong (older brother) generation of Filipinos who settled in the Pajaro Valley in the early twentieth century. The archive includes Filipino experiences documented through oral histories, photographs, personal records, and material

culture objects. The initiative includes a culminating exhibition that will bring together the WIITH archive and the Bay Area artist community. The project's value sits at the intersection of art, oral history, and the study of Filipino transpacific migration and labor. Our focus on transpacific migration highlights the entangled colonial histories between the Philippines, Hawai'i, and California through the experiences of non-Indigenous migrants who traversed and settled in Pacific spaces.¹

Located approximately ninety miles south of San Francisco and adjacent to Monterey Bay, the Pajaro Valley—which includes the communities of Corralitos, Freedom, La Selva Beach, Pajaro, Royal Oaks, Pajaro Dunes, and Watsonville—is the fifth most agriculturally productive region in California. The beginning of the twentieth century saw an increase in Filipino labor migration to the United States transpacific empire, consisting of the continental territory acquired through westward expansion and overseas territories acquired after 1898—Hawai'i, the Philippines, and Guam as well as Puerto Rico and Cuba. Factors contributing to this influx included: poor conditions in the Philippines (poverty, high taxation, and lack of jobs); US immigration policies that allowed Filipinos to move within the transpacific empire as a result of their status as “nationals”; and recruitment by American agricultural businesses that sought to fill an increased demand for cheap labor. Migration from Hawai'i to the West Coast increased as Filipinos sought more opportunities after laboring in the sugar plantations.² Known as the “manong generation” of migrant workers, thousands of Filipino men and some women traveled to the central coast of California. Despite this, documentation of this history is limited. To date, only a handful of publicly available sources of information about this migration are known to exist, and these focus primarily on the anti-Filipino race riots that erupted in the 1930s and climaxed with the murder of a Filipino farmworker, Fermin Tobera. The race riots have been widely cited and referred to in Asian American history and creative writing, but original documentation has come from the narrowly focused news coverage of the events published in the regional daily newspaper *The Evening Pajaronian*.³ No historical or sociological study or archive focusing on the Filipino community of the Pajaro Valley—beyond the racial violence and anti-miscegenation policies of the early twentieth century—currently exists, despite the fact that Filipino families descended from the manong generation continue to live and work in the Pajaro Valley. These individuals offer invaluable perspectives on the history of Filipino migration and labor in the region.

WIITH's oral history interviews with Pajaro Valley Filipino community members are centered around specific historical topics including agricultural

labor, union organizing, and the 1930s Watsonville race riots. We also prioritize “life histories,” for which narrators discuss in detail their families’ migration journeys and growing up in the Pajaro Valley region. These interviews touch on themes such as identity, racism, belonging, community formation, and leisure activities. Some interviews also reference photographs from various families’ collections. Our oral history methodology draws on the work of scholars in Pacific, Indigenous, and photography studies working to (re)claim or decolonize colonial photography.⁴ Specifically, we conduct “photo-elicitation” interviews in which individual photographs as well as photograph albums are centered in order to jog narrators’ memories and spark reflection on specific historical moments. Photo-elicitation interviews are foundational for WIITH’s process of creating metadata for the digital archive, as well as for the development of exhibitions that feature photographs.



Figure 1. Agricultural workers picnicking in a field, ca. 1930s. The man in a white shirt on the left is Mamerto “Max” Sulay and the woman crouching above him is Betty Labor. Courtesy of Juanita Sulay Wilson

WIITH’s archive is also being built from local Filipino families’ collections—including lovingly crafted objects such as clothing, textiles, flags, woven baskets, and barber tools; photograph albums; unpublished memoirs; and scrapbooks—that have been passed down intergenerationally and augmented over the years.

They document both overt resistance and the less-obvious subversive tactics that Filipino communities utilized as they navigated transpacific US colonialism, racial hierarchies and violence, and back-breaking agricultural labor. For example, many photographs and material culture objects collected thus far highlight Pajaro Valley manongs' participation in well-known agricultural labor unions; fraternal lodges, including the Caballeros de Dimas-Alang; and the US military's First Filipino Infantry. These social groups confronted prevailing racist ideologies by celebrating their cultural pride. Other photographs and objects that represent leisure activities and community cultural celebrations illuminate everyday acts of place-making and opposition to colonial and racial regimes. For example, in Juanita Sulay Wilson's collection is a photograph of her father, Mamerto "Max" Sulay, an Ilokano (an ethnolinguistic group originating from the northwestern seaboard of the island of Luzon) agricultural worker and labor contractor, picnicking with other workers, families, and friends in a field in the 1930s (Fig. 1). This collection also has photographs of pageantry and fundraising events that directly supported the development and cultural vitality of the community. As such, they can be read as "hidden transcripts"—concealed acts of resistance that critique public transcripts of domination.⁵

Significantly, photographs in the WIITH archive also depict women's central contributions to community formation through migration histories, participation in social clubs, and cultural activities—all of which are understudied topics in Filipino American studies.⁶ For example, the Filipino Women's Club of Watsonville, founded by Rosario "Nena" Nieva Alminiana in 1951, organized cultural and social events to help integrate newly arrived Filipino migrants into the Watsonville Filipino community (Fig. 2). Because histories of Filipino migration, community formation, overt resistance, and everyday tactics in Pajaro Valley are often marginalized in mainstream narratives of American, Asian American, Pacific, and even Filipino American history, these family collections function as "alternative archives"—collections constructed outside of institutional or state archives that document and reveal hidden or alternative histories and challenge dominant narratives.⁷ Filipino families' photography and intergenerational archiving practices can also be understood as "alternative" because they undertook their own image-making and collecting in a way that undermined colonial and racialized representations appearing in popular media and legal-bureaucratic documentation.⁸



Second year of club

Figure 2. The second annual meeting of the officers and members of the Filipino Women's Club of Watsonville that took place at the Veteran's Hall in Watsonville, California, 1951. Courtesy of Eva Alminiana Monroe

Filipino studies scholars focusing on twentieth-century labor migration have yet to deeply interrogate the transpacific ties between communities in Hawai'i and California. WIITH's archive provides new insight into this history. For example, the Sulay family has documented Max Sulay's migration journey by steamship from Hawai'i to California. The family's oral histories also reveal that hula was (and continues to be) practiced as early as the 1950s by Filipina individuals in the Pajaro Valley who trace their family histories to labor migration from Hawai'i. According to Juanita Sulay, Max's eldest daughter, one of her first hula instructors was a Hawai'i-born Filipina, who migrated to Watsonville and informally taught other Filipinas once in California.

Transpacific families maintained cultural ties between California and the Philippines through the circulation of material culture objects, correspondence, and photographs. For example, the collection of Eva Alminiana Monroe—a descendent of Amando Ocampo Alminiana, who owned and operated a barber shop in Watsonville from 1934 to 1994—includes photographs of family members

taken in studios in Manila that were either carried or sent by mail to the Pajaro Valley. Other items included in the WIITH archive reveal the ways that the Pajaro Valley Filipino community engaged in place-making and coastal leisure activities. For example, WIITH uncovered a photograph of Rosario Alminiana fishing at Sunset State Beach in the Pajaro Valley (Fig. 3). As a result, WIITH contributes to shifts in Asian American and Filipino American studies scholarship toward Pacific-centered spatial frameworks that highlight the entangled transpacific histories of overseas empire and settler colonialism and emphasize the “oceanic-ness” of Filipino labor migration and diaspora.⁹



Figure 3. Rosario “Nena” Nieva Alminiana fishing on Sunset State Beach in the Pajaro Valley, California, ca. 1930s. Courtesy of Eva Alminiana Monroe

The WIITH research initiative will culminate in an art and history exhibition titled *Watsonville is in the Heart: Philippine Migrant Labor in the Pajaro Valley*, to be held at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History in April 2024.¹⁰ Objects from

the novel archive including family photographs and heirlooms, historical objects, and oral history interviews will be displayed with contemporary works of art in order to reclaim the history of Filipino migration and labor found in the city of Watsonville.

Narratives from individuals descended from the manongs and manangs will guide the exhibition in the form of oral history interviews highlighting the way objects elicit memories of home and belonging.¹¹ These will include community members discussing the origins and provenance of their family heirlooms, culled through our photo-elicitation, to reveal histories of dis-positionings.¹² By overlaying their voices in the exhibition space, we recognize the importance of having the community shape and share their stories.¹³ Their memories offer critical perspectives to the way historical events are remembered, shared, and represented.¹⁴ *Watsonville is in the Heart* will feature the perspectives of community members, scholars, and artists to offer multivocal understandings of the processes and impacts of US imperialism.



Figure 4. Johanna Poethig, *Placesetting (Manong Freddy)*, 2011. Plate with historic image. Courtesy of Johanna Poethig

In addition to the photographs, historical objects, and oral history interviews in the exhibition, contemporary art will also be displayed. We will invite two students from the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC) and a mid-career Bay Area artist to conduct research in the oral history archive and create new works of art inspired by their findings. These commissioned artworks will be displayed alongside other non-commissioned artwork related to Filipino labor history in Watsonville, including the installation *Placesetting* by Oakland-based contemporary artist Johanna Poethig. Reminiscent of some of the family heirlooms on display, Poethig's installation will include plates, teapots, and bowls that feature images of manongs who lived in the International Hotel—a low-income single-room-occupancy residential hotel in San Francisco's Manilatown that housed many Filipino agricultural workers, some of whom worked and lived in Watsonville—from the 1920s through the 1970s (Fig. 4).¹⁵ In the artist's words, *Placesetting* "combines the utilitarian objects of a table setting with the art, necessity, emotion and politics of creating home and community."¹⁶

Through their works, the contemporary artists in the exhibition will provoke questions related to identity, belonging, systemic racism, and place-making. In her discussion of the role of contemporary artists in the expanded field of the Pacific, art historian Stacy Kamehiro writes, "Art and visual culture have the capacity to impactfully intervene in dominant social and cultural understandings and can therefore play a critical role in the processes of transformation."¹⁷ We are inviting artists to the space to challenge visitors to bridge this history of systemic racism to contemporary anti-Asian hate crimes.¹⁸ We hope the exhibition will showcase the "hard truths" of history in an attempt to grapple with these present-day truths.¹⁹ The WIITH archive and exhibition intervenes in histories of labor resistance by uplifting the voices and everyday experiences of Filipino families in the Pajaro Valley.

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Meleia Simon-Reynolds is a PhD candidate in the History Department at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her dissertation project examines transpacific Filipino migration, specifically the ways Filipinos engaged with photography to document migrant imaginaries and resist racialized, colonial hierarchies. Her work

with WIITH includes building an online archive and developing educational resources for K-12 teachers.

Notes

¹ Our project draws on scholarship from Asian American and Filipino American studies scholars who seek to analyze the shared histories of US imperialism in Hawai'i, Philippines, and California. With the migration of Filipino agricultural laborers to Hawai'i and California in the early twentieth century, many Filipinos settled in these spaces. Although these workers experienced racialized violence and discrimination because of US imperialism, their positionality as settlers in the Pacific also necessitates an understanding of the way Filipinos adopt, appropriate, consume, impact, and colonize Pacific culture and spaces. However, we acknowledge that the inclusion of Filipino studies in Pacific studies is an ongoing debate, see Amy K. Stillman, "Pacific-ing Asian Pacific American History," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 7, no. 3 (2004): 241–70; J. Kēhaulani Kauanui, "Asian American Studies and the 'Pacific Question,'" in *Asian American Studies after Critical Mass*, ed. Kent Ono (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005); Dean Itsuji Saranillio, "Colonial Amnesia: Rethinking Filipino 'American' Settler Empowerment in the U.S. Colony of Hawai'i," in *Asian Settler Colonialism: From Local Governance to the Habits of Everyday Life in Hawai'i* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2008), 256–78, <https://nyuscholars.nyu.edu/en/publications/colonial-amnesia-rethinking-filipino-american-settler-empowerment>; and Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez, *Securing Paradise: Tourism and Militarism in Hawai'i and the Philippines* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

² See Patricio Abinales and Donna Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005); Filomeno Aguilar Jr., *Clash of Spirits: The History of Power and Sugar Planter Hegemony on a Visayan Island* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998); Rick Baldoz, *The Third Asiatic Invasion: Empire and Migration in Filipino America, 1898–1946* (New York: NYU Press, 2011).

³ For scholarship that mentions the 1930s anti-Filipino race riots, see Rick Baldoz, *The Third Asiatic Invasion: Empire and Migration in Filipino America, 1898–1946* (New York: NYU Press, 2011); and Dawn B. Mabalon, *Little Manila is in the Heart: The Making of Filipina/o American Community in Stockton* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013). Notably, the children's book *Journey for Justice: The Life of Larry Itliong* (Stockton: Bridge and Delta Publishing, 2018) by Dawn B. Mabalon and Gayle Romasanta also makes reference to the events of the 1930s.

⁴ Our project's "photo-elicitation" methodology is inspired by the work of scholars in Pacific, Indigenous, and photography studies including: Gaynor MacDonald, "Photos in in Wiradjuri Biscuit Tins: Negotiating Relatedness and Validating Colonial Histories," *Oceania* 73, no. 4 (2003): 225–42; Allison Brown and Laura

Peers, *Pictures Bring Us Messages/Sinaakssiiksi Aohtsimaahpihkookiyaawa: Photographs and Histories from the Kainai Nation* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006); Bruce M. White, *We Are at Home: Pictures of the Ojibwe People* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007); Jane Lydon, "Return: The Photographic Archive and Technologies of Indigenous Memory," *Photographies* 3, no. 2 (2010): 173–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17540763.2010.499610>; Tom Jones, Michael Schmudlach, Matthew Daniel Mason, Amy Lonetree, and George A. Greendeer, *People of the Big Voice: Photographs of Ho-Chunk Families by Charles Van Shaick, 1879–1942* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 2011); and Karen Hughes and Auntie Ellen Trevorow, "'It's that Reflection': Photography as Recuperative Practice, A Ngarrindjeri Perspective," in *Calling the Shots: Aboriginal Photographies*, ed. Jane Lydon (Canberra Australian Capital Territory: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2014), 175–206.

⁵ See James C. Scott, *Domination and The Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

⁶ For more information on community Filipino community formation, see Mabalon, *Little Manila is in the Heart*, and Dorothy B. Fujita-Rony, *American Workers, Colonial Power: Philippine Seattle and the Transpacific West, 1919–1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

⁷ Our understanding of "alternative archives" draws on Adria Imada's methodology in her study of transnational hula circuit performers. She constructed alternative archives that were outside of institutional collections built from oral histories, personal memorabilia, films, and live hula performances. Adria Imada, *Aloha America: Hula Circuits throughout the US Empire* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 22. Our conception of WIITH's alternative archive is also influenced by Allan Sekula's "shadow archive" which he theorizes as images that situate subjects in specific locations, provide multiple narratives simultaneously, and destabilize dominant representations of Indigenous peoples that are found in institutional or state archives. Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (1986): 10.

⁸ Our use of "alternative" to describe family archiving practices also draws on Imada, specifically her discussion of the self-representations and collecting practices of hula circuit performers. See Imada, *Aloha America*, 81.

⁹ Recently, scholarly calls for Pacific-centered research in Asian American and Filipino American studies have become more common. Some scholars argue that Pacific-centered spatial frameworks will de-center the US nation-state and narratives of exceptionalism, facilitate comparative colonialism research, highlight the ways that the histories of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are entangled without obscuring the distinctions between each group, and interrogate Asian Americans' positionality as settlers. For more discussion, see Dorothy Fujita-Rony, "Water and Land: Asian Americans and the US West," *Pacific Historical Review* 76, no. 4 (2007): 563–74; and Y n L  Espiritu, Lisa Lowe, and Lisa Yoneyama, "Transpacific Entanglements," in *Flashpoints for Asian American Studies*, ed. Cathy J. Schlund-Vials (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018),

175–89. Additionally, our project draws on Kale Bantigue Fajardo’s “Filipino crosscurrents” framework, which centers the Pacific as an important place to examine transnational phenomenon and emphasizes the “oceanic-ness” of Filipino history, culture, and diaspora which has often been overlooked. See Kale Bantigue Fajardo, *Filipino Crosscurrents: Oceanographies of Seafaring, Masculinities, and Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 21.

¹⁰ Due to the nature of our research project, the art and history exhibition is still in development, and will most likely change based on the information and objects we collect from the oral histories and family collections. In addition, logistics for the exhibition are still in development. This is, in part, due to changing COVID-19 regulations and necessary rescheduling.

¹¹ The practice of migrant communities recovering their histories through photographs has been a research and curatorial method used by other scholars in several recent projects. For example, the book *Unseen Samoa 1908–1915: The Karl Hanssen Photo Album* by Tony Brunt recovers the history of German immigration to Sāmoa; Hawai’i-based archivist Miki Bulos worked with the Lyman Museum in Hilo to recover photographs of Japanese immigrants in Hawai’i; and the Australia High Commission created a Facebook exhibition featuring the history of Tongans in Australia.

¹² In her book *Museum Pieces*, Ruth B. Phillips argues for the use of art historical methods of visual analysis on material culture objects as a way to read for the multiple places of displacement that are inscribed onto objects as they are brought along these routes. See Ruth B. Phillips, *Museum Pieces: Toward the Indigenization of Canadian Museums*, first edition (Montréal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2011).

¹³ Smith argues that a decolonizing method of working with community members involves having Native American people, culture, and theories drive the research project, including its topic and methodology. Many museum studies scholars have applied this method in their curatorial practices including scholars Michael Ames, Evan Maurer, and Ruth B. Phillips. They argue that exhibitions displaying cultural objects should be shaped by and for that particular community. For more information, see Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, second edition (London: Zed Books, 2012); Michael M. Ames, *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums*, second revised edition (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992); Evan M. Maurer, “Presenting the American Indian: From Europe to America,” in *The Changing Presentation of the American Indian: Museums and Native Culture* (Washington D.C.: National Museum of the American Indian, 2000), 15–28; and Phillips, *Museum Pieces*.

¹⁴ Cameron Vanderscoff underscores that while the oral history archive may contain historically inaccurate information, the ways individuals remember events can illuminate more about them and their relationship to these events. Cameron Vanderscoff, “Memory Work: Oral History as Toolkit for Creating a Living & Making an Impact” (PhD+ Workshop, online Zoom presentation), April 9, 2021.

¹⁵ For more information on the International Hotel, see Estella Habal, *San Francisco's International Hotel: Mobilizing the Filipino American Community in the Anti-Eviction Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2007), and Karen Tei Yamashita, *I Hotel* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Coffee House Press, 2010).

¹⁶ Johanna Poethig, "Placesetting," *Johanna Poethig: visual, public, and performance artist* (website), accessed May 3, 2021, <https://johannapoethig.com/exhibitions-installations/placesetting/>.

¹⁷ Stacy L. Kamehiro, "Empire and US Art History from an Oceanic Visual Studies Perspective," *Bully Pulpit, Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 6, no. 1 (Spring 2020), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.10072>.

¹⁸ Weiyi Cai, Audra D.S. Burch, and Jugal K. Patel, "Swelling Anti-Asian Violence: Who Is Being Attacked Where," *New York Times*, April 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/04/03/us/anti-asian-attacks.html>.

¹⁹ Amy Lonetree uses the phrase "hard truths" to refer to the violent histories of settler colonialism in the US. Specifically, she analyzes the genocide of Native American cultures, history, and communities. We use the phrase to indicate the interweaving histories of many colonialisms that impact and stratify Indigenous, immigrant, settler, and refugee communities. For more information, see Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).