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“**F**ilipino Love Stories: San Luis Obispo and Northern Santa Barbara Counties, 1920–1970” is an online and traveling exhibit that developed from a community-based digital-only archive of stories and story materials.¹ Emerging from a collaboration between California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo and local Filipino community members and organizations, this archive focuses on the affective bonds forged when Filipino migrants came to the region as agricultural labor during the Great Depression. The stories offer nuanced and intimate perspectives on US empire building, California agribusiness, and the communities that emerged in those contexts. While this digital archiving project encountered institutional hurdles, it also drew on campus and community resources to co-create access to an archive, filling a gap in understanding the embeddedness of race in our region’s social landscape and narratives. The project team worked with community organizations in sharing their history in the region but without the resources to create a traditional archive.

The digital archive was conceived as a solution to creating access to stories and story materials not found in any institutional repositories but dispersed in the lived memories and private homes of community members. Rather than focus on physical materials or collections as in a typical archive, the project creates digital surrogates of originals and obtains a license for their use from their owners.² Until recently, Cal Poly’s Special Collections only accessioned items if it owned them outright. While the shift in research in new media forms accelerates, university policies can be slow to adapt. Other disincentives to pursue such projects with undergraduate students include the intensity of time and effort and a lack of clarity for counting such work toward tenure and promotion. Digital humanities projects also require support from information technology and programmers to ensure their functionality. One challenge is whether staff time can be allocated to such teaching-research projects. Administration looked for measurable value—for example, potential funding sources, grants won, or users served—to decide what services and material support to provide.

At the same time, many benefits became evident for both students and community members. With careful planning, undergraduate general education (GE) students were effective in collecting and digitizing stories and story materials for use by the community. While the “back end” of the digital archive requires academic and IT personnel (i.e., to install and develop the website and archive database, to connect students to community members, to quality check collected data), students were responsible for the “front end”—for creating the digital primary sources. Part of the content was created in these ten-week GE courses that focused on ethnic studies (e.g., Filipino American Experience). Students provided and researched contexts for understanding the significance of digital assets collected. Community histories that incorporated interviews served as models and textbooks.³ Community collaborators, particularly from the local chapter of the Filipino American National Historical Society, identified and helped solicit contributors, provided venues for mass digitization days, and advised on interview questions and topics.

To prepare these students for data collection, I led workshop days on digital scanning standards and oral history methods, adapting how the Los Angeles Public Library’s “Shades of L.A.” project trained its volunteers.⁴ I followed the Oral History Association (OHA) interview methods and guidelines though despite their recommendations, some interviews were conducted as group interviews or at community events, compromising sound quality. Some of these interviews served as project outreach sometimes leading to formal interviews later. Students conducted metadata interviews to contextualize digitized materials. Metadata, or descriptive information (e.g., title, description, location, dates, names of individuals represented) about contributed items, were later embedded in digital files. The project adopted Dublin Core metadata standards (dublincore.org/) used by many archives including Cal Poly’s Special Collections and built into the project’s installation of Omeka, the open-source content management and web publishing system developed by the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University. I referred to the Federal Agencies Digitization Guidelines Initiative for digitizing cultural heritage materials.⁵ For the more intensive work of processing digital assets, transcribing interviews, creating more extensive interviews and digital collections, and creating the exhibits, paid student assistants (through small grants) were instrumental.

The project’s focus on love stories worked well for several reasons. As I discovered during my earlier work codirecting a local Filipina/o American history exhibit, every community member who traces his or her roots to pre-World War II Filipino migrants has a story about how marriage prospects were shaped by social, economic, and legal inequities. Contributors were among the

surviving wives and children of these migrants whose compatriots more likely remained bachelors. Since few kinship-based families existed, their stories were not typical but nevertheless telling. Though few in number, women, as the historian Dawn Bohulano Mabalon argues, played a critical yet understudied role in the community.⁶ Moreover, “love stories”—describing intimate, social, and romantic bonds, both joyful and painful—exist in the same constrained social, economic, and legal contexts that shape Filipino American lives. To learn about the conditions for marriage for the US-born children is to better understand how a maligned community put pressure on young women to rehabilitate the public image of Filipinos. Or, to learn, through their digitized love letters, about how Jimmy and Mary eloped in 1935 is also to learn about how two young people—a Filipino migrant and a Mexican American—found each other because California’s booming agricultural economy relied heavily on Filipino and Mexican laborers in an era of restrictive immigration laws. Or, how they had to go to Arizona to elude legal and social bans against their race mixing. Or, how despite larger legal and economic circumstances, the couple had agency and made their own lives.

For students, centering their interviews on how community members forged intimate relationships—asking an elder about courtship, falling in love, or how their parents met—helped bridge the cultural and generational gap. They discovered the subtler ways that one experiences and responds to inequity. Rather than asking broad questions (e.g., “What was World War II like?” or “What kinds of discrimination against Filipinos did you witness?”), their questions solicited more detailed, often animated, answers. In my past experience with oral history projects, students bluntly ask for accounts of bigotry, and narrators, for various reasons, seldom divulge them. Narrators, with deep roots in the region, tend to focus on positive experiences, refraining from calling out their neighbors.

The kinds of stories and story materials that community members provide reflect, too, their reasons for participating in this kind of public memory project. While the project offers students an opportunity to understand the politics of the archive and historiography as they create digital primary source materials, community members gain a platform to intervene in historical narratives. Whereas the “pioneers,” as community members call their elders in their counternarratives, have been historically sidelined or delegitimized, collaborating with the university provided a sense of validation. Telling their stories means that they are not mere pawns of history but individuals who made choices and navigated a larger world of uneven terrain. The project connects to the historical pedagogy of Asian American studies and ethnic

studies, privileging learning and knowledge production not at the university but with marginalized community members who provide critical perspectives on regional, racial, and social formations.

Notes

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1. reco.calpoly.edu/exhibits/show/filipino-love-stories.
2. These story materials include photographs, documents, and letters accompanied by an audio/video recording of the contributor describing what the item means as well as oral histories and interviews.
3. See Yen Le Espiritu, *Home Bound: Filipino American Lives across Cultures, Communities, and Countries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).
4. In 1991 the Los Angeles Public Library launched its Shades of L.A. visual history project, copying thousands of family photographs from ethnic communities in the city.
5. www.digitizationguidelines.gov/.
6. Dawn Bohulano Mabalon, "Writing Angeles Monrayo into the Pages of Pinay History," in *Tomorrow's Memories: A Diary, 1924–1928* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003).