

# The Camera as Totality Box: A Tool for Reducing the Other or Opening to the *Kapwa*

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**Abstract:** This paper is a reflection on the works of three photographers who photographed marginalized communities in the Philippines. It examines the works and praxis of Dean Worcester, Tommy Hafalla, and Veejay Villafranca. The paper examines how they used the camera as an instrument of colonization, culture bearing, and journalism to show how the camera can be used both as an instrument that reduces the other to the needs of the totality or as an instrument of opening to the presencing of the neighbor or *kapwa*. We analyze their work to understand how the camera can freeze the moment in an act of reduction and how it serves as an instrument that can capture a moment to make the other present as presencing. In this essay, we will reflect on how the photographer can use the camera as a tool to make the *kapwa* come to presence and call the viewer to be a neighbor.

**Keywords:** camera, *kapwa*, photography, totalization

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## THE CAMERA AND TOTALIZATION

This essay is a reflection on the work of the photographer and the workings of the camera. Here I look at the works of three men who photographed their other. one is a colonial administrator obsessed with the conquest of brown skin; the other, a volunteer from the Westernized population who made himself a neighbor to indigenous people; and, lastly, a photojournalist who made it his mission to tell the stories of the othered in society. They used the same type of instrument to capture lived moments in the life of their subjects which they shared with their audience. Their intentions in using their cameras were different and the works they produced have affected people differently. Reflecting on their works, I want to show how the camera can work as an instrument of totality or reduction vs. as an instrument for *pakikipagkapwa* or becoming neighbor.

As Levinas has shown us,<sup>1</sup> human beings have an orientation toward totality. Because we are beings who exist according to a system of consumption, we tend to engage the other beings that we encounter as objects to consume for our flourishing. We engage the other in order to feed our systems that compose a totality. We ingest the other to reduce them to the same. They literally become part of our body. Levinas proposes that we tend to live our lives as totalities even beyond our physical need for nourishment. We reduce others to feed our egos, our erotic needs, and our intellectual desires. We turn to romantic love because we need to be desired and admired. We have children because we need people obligated to us who will ensure our survival beyond our productive years. We establish our legacies because we want to be remembered, and that way live forever.

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<sup>1</sup> One can explore his conception of reductive totalities in Emmanuel Levinas, "Phenomenon and Enigma," trans. Alphonso Lingis, in *Collected Philosophical Papers* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987), 61–73 and "On the Trail of the Other," trans. David J. Hoy, in *Philosophy Today*, 10:1 (Spring 1966), 34–46.

The camera can be an instrument of our totalities. Whether it captures images on film or sensors, it fixes the play of being that gives life and becoming in a framed image. The camera is like a container that reduces the infinite play that gives the world to being into a limited, exact, and determined picture to be displayed at the pleasure of the photographer. It works exactly like the way the human totalizes through knowing. When we know, we face the presencing world as it is at play. We are faced with the dynamism of attracting and opposing energies, particles, elements, things, emotions, events, phenomena, wills, et cetera at play. And this play makes beings come to be present in their endless dynamism. This play is what we experience to be the real on which we act and which acts upon us. To effectively engage and participate in this world at play, we need to comprehend it. We receive its play upon our senses and the totality of our inner sensors, and we construct this data into a meaningful whole according to our systems of meaning giving. In Kantian terms, we construct the presencing world according to the categories of reason and the workings of the imagination. Western rationality has refined this process of totalization by reducing all things to abstractions that can be systematized into theoretic systems. In this way, the play is reduced to manipulable mechanisms.

Moments are given to consciousness to receive. There is an eternal uncontainable play of givens—of particles, of meanings, of communities, of histories, of universes—that we capture as moments, events, or phenomena. The play presences to us as things, as happenings, and as occurrences. All these are captured instances of the play that is giving. Consciousness receives the giving play—not as the play in its eternal dynamism but as an instant or instance of the play. And we construct these instances as things, events, moments, or phenomena to understand. But consciousness too is at play and events or moments are kept in our memory where they will be present themselves as things at play. We try to keep the manifestation of the moment fixed but it remains at play and can be lost. This is why we love the camera.

The presencing world at infinite play presents itself before the photographer and their metal or plastic container. The camera and its handler faces a world presencing as the infinite play of light upon surface; the pull and push of bodies against each other; the balance of emotions and convictions at work among people; the dissonance and coherence of colors; the resistance and accommodation of movements. It is a world that is present as phenomenon and as event: a world that is eventing and presencing, through the myriad possibilities given by the innumerable elements at play. And so, every moment is a unique, nonrepeatable, and dynamic present presencing the way it is because the eternal play of being has given things to be this way at this time. This moment is not a set and determined thing cut off from the flow of the eternal play that gives. It is a configuration that happens to be a moment, an event, a now because it was caught by human consciousness that will give this caught configuration a meaning, and hold that configuration in memory (a configuration which itself will be kept in and be given to the play of memory as it is shaped by other moments) for as long as it makes sense to hold it. But the moment itself only exists as it is held in memory as it affects our own play through time.

The camera is meant to capture the play as it is given in a moment. It captures the play at a certain fixed configuration as given through the lens to the film or sensor to be fixed as image. The image fixes a moment in the play according to a certain configuration as the camera receives it. The photographer who looks through the lens and presses the trigger button configures the play in the camera so that the moment can be received as closely as possible to their consciousness of the givenness of the play. In whatever way that moment was received by the camera, it becomes a picture taken. It is a freezing of play in a fixed image as it was received by the photographer through a camera and framed into a picture. This is what is captured by the picture. The moment is the play of presencing frozen for consciousness to examine and give meaning to.

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The attraction of the picture for us is that it represents the knowledge we wish to achieve. We hope that in conceptualizing reality, we capture it in its exactness. A photograph makes a phenomenon and event seem completely comprehensible and open to complete examination. It seems like photography completely exposes phenomenon in its freezing of the play. This is the modernist dream of clear and distinct knowledge. The indubitable knowledge we dream of having in order to manipulate the world in which we dwell—albeit as its abstracted masters. The camera was used this way by the American colonizers when they took possession of the Philippines.

The camera gives the play a form that suits our consciousness so that it can be recalled, viewed, and defined. This is how the camera is an instrument of totality: at least it gives the user a sense that it can be so. It seems as if it can capture the play of giving and fix it in a photograph. Photographers point the camera to still the play, to fix things so that we can read them and control them. This way, we can determine the dynamism into a fixity. There was a colonial administrator at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century who used the camera as an instrument of colonization. He did this by attempting to freeze the play of the real lives of non-Hispanized Filipinos in order to sell the necessity of the American colonization of the Philippines.

## **DEAN WORCHESTER'S SNARE**

When the Philippines was acquired by the United States in the 1890s, a University of Michigan ornithologist, turned tour guide, turned colonial bureaucrat, turned anthropologist, turned photographer took it upon himself to convince his compatriots to keep and civilize the Philippines. At this time, the American public was still ambiguous about its new role as colonizer. He used the camera to capture and frame savage Filipino bodies in order to convince his people that it was their duty to develop their new purchase. He did this by portraying non-Westernized Filipinos

in their full- or semi-nudity, posed (at times against a white background) to be studied by the curious and not fully convinced novice colonizers of this territory. Seemingly using his training at collecting and classifying bird specimens, he displayed the images of the Filipinos in a way that he thought would awaken the White desire to own and conquer another new frontier of natives despite the cost. These photographs are primarily collected in the University of Michigan Museum of Art (UMMA) and a few iterations of the collection were sold to private collectors.

These collections are composed of thousands of photographs meant to document the people and customs of the Filipinos as well as the activities of the Americans in this country. However, studies have noted that there is an inordinate number of photographs focused on the non-Westernized Filipinos. Mark Rice says this:

The collection of photographs amassed by Worcester is weighted disproportionately toward images of non-Christian Filipinos. Of the roughly forty-five hundred negatives in the UMMA archive, more than twenty-six hundred are catalogued as being of cultural groups. Of those, fewer than three hundred show “civilized,” Christian Filipinos as defined by Worcester (i.e., Ilocanos, Pangasinans, Pampangans, Tagalogs, Visayans, Zamboanguenos, Spaniards, and Spanish or German Mestizos). The other twenty-three hundred or so are of non-Christian Filipinos. In other words, over half of the total photographs (and nearly 90 percent of the photographs of people) in the UMMA archive are of non-Christian Filipinos.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Rice, *Dean Worcester’s Fantasy Islands: Photography, Film and the Colonial Philippines* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2014), 30.

These pictures were made to show off these people's bodies to expose both their perceived physical inferiority to the White Americans and their supposed low level of civilization. Thus, they were posed sometimes even like modern day detainees showing front and side views. This posing was meant to show how these exotic beings were smaller, darker, and maybe less hygienic than their new masters. Their nakedness seemed to be eroticized as well. From the northern provinces, photographs of "[p]retty topless girls" and "handsome Igorot men in skimpy *bahag*"<sup>3</sup> were sold to show off their attractive bodies. It seems Worcester is presenting them as both something to save/develop and consume so that the American public, who were presented with these pictures in the fledgling National Geographic journal's issues in which Worcester was featured, would not let these islands go.

Mark Rice, among others, argues that Worcester, who by then was the Interior Minister for the Colonial government, had an agenda for showing these people. He was arguing "... for the prolonged retention of the Philippines by the United States, an argument based at least in part on his own commercial interests in the Philippines, such as cattle ranching and coconut growing."<sup>4</sup> Posing the non-Westernized Filipinos like specimens was meant to show their underdevelopment and desirability in order for the Americans to choose to possess and develop them like erotic fantasies and children. This is also probably the reason why Worcester presents them alternately as half-dressed savages with primitive weapons and somewhat civilized persons with ornate jewelry and finely woven clothes. He wanted the Whites to desire to possess noble savages who they were able to condescendingly admire and consequently desire to raise to an acceptable level of civilization.

Before I discuss the actual photographs, I must note that Dean Worcester is not a respected figure among Filipino academics. His work is

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Best, *Philippine Colonial Photography of The Cordilleras: 1860 to 1930* (Quezon City: The Vibal Foundation, 2023), 34.

<sup>4</sup> Rice, *Dean Worcester's Fantasy Islands*, 39.

seen to be opportunistic, manipulative, and violent. Nerissa Balce in her conference paper “Body Parts of Empire”<sup>5</sup> discusses how he presents native nakedness as a “laying the native bare” for study. This implies a presentation of the native people for the purpose of a benevolent or objective dissection by the American public. However, one can say that Worcester’s photographic archive was built with his very clear agenda and that it wanted to cater to some American fantasies. His work built on the American need for the “representations of both domination and desire.”<sup>6</sup> And it is very clear that he was building a fantasy. For instance, Rice points out that Worcester claimed that the native women spent their days without tops and worked practically naked, which was not true. The photographs themselves show that the naked women had tan lines on their arms and legs.<sup>7</sup> These are clear indications that he was building an argument with these bares breasts, which were “markers of savagery, colonial desire, and a justification for Western imperial rule.”<sup>8</sup>

Rice also shows how Worcester deliberately mislabeled and perhaps deliberately shot misleading pictures to sell this desire for imperial rule. There is one famous series of three photographs, what he calls the “Igorot Sequence,” which is telling of Worcester’s practice. He used this sequence in his lectures in the US to illustrate the civilizing power of American imperialism. The way the pictures are labelled describes how the picture looks. The first is called “Evolution of a Bontoc Igorot constabulary soldier—1901, when he was a head-hunting savage,” the second is labelled, “Evolution of a Bontoc Igorot constabulary

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<sup>5</sup> Nerissa S. Balce, “Body Parts of Empire,” in “Picturing Empire: Race & the Lives of the Photographs of Dean C. Worcester in the Philippines Pt.2,” YouTube video, 1:19:13, posted by Center for Southeast Asian Studies University of Michigan (27 March 2013), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GqDRV3D85-A&t=1565s>>.

<sup>6</sup> Nerissa S. Balce, “The Abject Archive of the Philippine-American War,” in *Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> See Rice, *Dean Worcester’s Fantasy Islands*.

<sup>8</sup> Nerissa S. Balce, “The Filipina’s Breast: Savagery, Docility, and the Erotics of the American Empire,” in *Social Text*, 24:2 (Summer 2006), 89–110.

soldier—1902, after he had been for a year in contact with Americans,” and the third is “Evolution of a Bontoc Igorot constabulary soldier—1903, when he was a well-disciplined and competent sergeant of a company of Philippine constabulary made up of his fellow tribesmen.”<sup>9</sup> When he uses these pictures, he shows how American military discipline can appropriate or rescue a native from his culture. It is as if, according to additional captions in the UMMA archive, the man was transformed after spending a year in jail and then after 2 years in the constabulary.<sup>10</sup> It seems that this mislabeling was done as a deliberate deception because, according to Worcester’s journals, the man is a Bontoc (mountain province) leader known as Don Francisco Muro, who came to Worcester to complain about corruption. Rice notes that Don Muro “comes across as a respected Bontoc leader who had traveled to Europe and who was savvy enough to know how to seek redress for the problems in Bontoc.”<sup>11</sup> The first photograph in the sequence was taken when Muro visited Manila to meet with the American Commission in 1901 and the second was probably taken four months later when Worcester visited Bondoc. In both meetings when the photographs were taken, it seems that Muro was dressed in Western fashion. Probably in a coat similar to that in the second picture which had nothing to do with the constabulary. The third picture of a man seated in a similar pose to those of the first two is probably not even Muro.<sup>12</sup> This famous sequence, referenced by artists and scholars, is a blatant lie about the Filipino indigenous person to fulfill some false understanding of reality. This is not the only time he seems to have rendered such fictions. His photographs of women in various stages of uncover were staged according to his directions, according to his conceptions of how they should be presented by him and not by themselves.

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<sup>9</sup> Rice, *Dean Worcester’s Fantasy Islands*, 64-65.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 67-69.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-75.

I talk about these manipulations to show how Worcester's photographic practice used the camera's capacity for totalizing. The people whom he photographed were people whose lives were at play. Although they were being enframed by the American imperial enterprise, as their lives and worlds were being undone by the incursions of Worcester's people, they were dynamically living the play of their lives adopting to the American incursion. Worcester used his box to stop the play and fix it in a picture and in that way frame them in a concept of what and who they should be for the Americans—particularly for him. At least this was his intention as a photographer. However, it seems that the play that gives photographs and gives things to be in their dynamism are greater than can be framed or frozen in a picture. Or perhaps, the picture itself does not freeze despite our best intentions. It is not frozen because as the photograph exists in its seeming fixedness, it is at play as the memory of the event it evokes is at play. The photograph and its meaning, the events, memories, and emotions it evokes, are caught in the play of our lives, the eternal moments at play of our lives, and is given as much as it participates in the giving and given flow of life.

I have ambiguous feelings toward the American colonial photographs. On one hand, I understand how much violence all these pictures represent. After all, they exist because the Americans came to inflict disaster upon the people of the Philippines—particularly of the Cordilleras who, before they came, were effectively autonomous from the Spanish colonial government. When the Americans came, the world of the people of these mountains would experience the loss of their ancestral domain, the onset of malnutrition, marginalization and poverty. Americans like to believe that they brought development to this region and its people but in fact they delivered the beginning of their capability deprivation. The coming of the Americans signaled the loss of their indigenous health, government, and economic systems which was the

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source of their original affluence.<sup>13</sup> The arrival of the US in the Philippines was a disaster for these people. It blew their societies apart and turned an independent people into mendicants. These photographs record the beginning of the end for people who had their own life and never needed the help of the Americans. Certainly, the colonized Filipinos would have committed this same violence eventually if left to it, however, I am talking about the photographs that Worcester took or collected. His photographs facilitated and recorded the violence inflicted on a people. In fact, his photographs are the fruit of an act of violence. And so, when I see them, the violence is made manifest to me.

On the other hand, these pictures make people presence. They demonstrate how the camera's enframing can capture and preserve the play of presencing. I will discuss pictures from Jonathan Best's book that collects images from the Cordilleras because it is the most available book that gathers and reproduces colonial pictures clearly. It is not the most balanced book that represents what colonial photography does. Best himself admits that he excluded the pictures that are overtly exploitative, racist, sexualized, cruel, and violent. The pictures he presents are benign. But, even considering what he excludes, they still show how the play of presencing can come through colonial enframing.

The cover picture is worth noting. It is a colorized photograph of two girls in what seems to be their full regalia, or their best clothes. We can guess that they are between 9 to 12 years old and are, at least at that captured moment, happy. They are smiling with clear light from their eyes. The older child has her arms around the younger's shoulders, and the younger is leaning into the taller girl with a look of mischief in her eyes. These children are the picture of a happy innocence. They are probably proud to be wearing their fine clothes. Their clothes are a combination of woven vests and skirts with traditional patterns, worn

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<sup>13</sup> Dorothea Hilhorst has an important discussion on American interventions in the Cordilleras, in *The Real World of NGOs: Discourses, Diversity and Development* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2003).

over what looks like colonial American style long sleeved shirts. These children are clearly immersed in the play of life. They might actually be happy to be showing themselves as the indigenous people who are able to participate in the new world created by the colonizers. Looking at this captured moment, cut-off from the disastrous play that surrounds them where war, death, disease, and starvation were brought to the land by those who shaped their new world; not thinking of the future of their people designed for exploitation, land grabbing, and capability deprivation; this moment captures the happy play of childhood. Whatever will happen to these two girls, this moment frozen from the flow of time exudes happiness. However, photographs are never really cut-off from the play that gives life and time.

I would like to look at other photographs from this book. Page 43 shows the picture labelled “a rich Kalinga woman wearing heirloom agate beads, braided bracelets, and earrings, 1900s.”<sup>14</sup> It’s hard to read her face. From my perspective as viewer, she seems to be projecting a kind of haughty pride. It could be a stance of resistance before the photographer who could have put her in a situation where she had to display her higher status before an instrument and a man who did not appreciate that status? Or perhaps it is simply her stance as a woman of high stature presenting her dignity to be preserved by the camera. It’s hard to tell. Whatever she is feeling, there is that dignity, defiant or displaying, captured for us to appreciate. On page 47 is a picture of a young topless girl wearing a headband, necklaces, and bracelets decorated with beads. She is identified as a “Tinguian girl from Abra with an extensive bead collection.” Below her photograph is another mechanically colored photographs labeled “a Kalinga man in bahag carries a small pipe in his rattan cap, 1900s.” Of course, Best notices the adornment. But what ties these two photographs together are the faces and postures of their subjects. There is a quiet dignity present in the young woman and the grown man. His is a full body photograph while squatting on the ground

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<sup>14</sup> Best, *Philippine Colonial Photography of The Cordilleras*, 43.

looking at the camera with head slightly tilted. Hers is a half body shot with her decorated arms crossed beneath her bare breasts, her head slightly tilted, facing the camera. Both have possibly curious or stony looks. They are either standing with silent dignity defending themselves against the camera's intrusive stare or looking back with equal curiosity. The frozen moment shows us two people whose self-valuation comes across time.

The spread of pages 54-55 shows a clan standing in front of a thatched roof house. There are about 20 people standing in front of the house. This is a mixed group of men and women, all half-naked—the women in skirts and the men in *bahags*. One of the men stands at the front as if an authority figure. The leader and some of the men are standing welcomingly, as if they are familiar with the photographer or his cohorts. However, most of the women and some of the men are looking off toward the right side of the camera in seeming alarm or concern. One wonders what moment this picture is capturing. It is as if the women are sensing the undesirable changes coming to their world. There is a similar picture in page 61 where six people, presumably members of a single family, stand in front of their house. It is a beautiful and well-built home on stilts. One can see the craftsmanship that went into cutting the planks. The people who stand before the home are fully dressed in their good clothes. The oldest man is wearing his full regalia. Best describes this tableau as “an Isneg group in festive costumes in the subprovince of Apayao, ca. 1920.” He elaborates that the man is “wearing a *sipattal* shell necklace, and a flower headdress.” This is indeed interesting however that would not be the most notable aspect of the photograph. All the people in it are scowling or frowning. Although dressed festively, they do not look festive. Were their festivities interrupted by white people imposing a photo-op on them? What is bothering them? Are they just being shy? And why is Jonathan Best so focused on their festive wear that he misses the non-festive faces? He labels the other picture as a large group of Kalinga, with no awareness of their alarm or concern.

The reason why Jonathan Best chose these pictures and labels them in a way that is overly focused on material culture is because he is grateful that these American photographers, whatever their intentions and however their photography facilitated the disaster the Cordilleran people faced, preserved for our time the lifeworld and the people lost in time and colonization. Best sees that photographs as images taken from the play of life, can be seen as fixed and static remnants separated from the dynamism of the play. Thus, it is possible to see them separated from the violence of that time. I would like to see these photographs with this level of naivete. However, I cannot look at these pictures, especially the ones of happy children, without feeling like I am watching Disney's "Pocahontas." I want to be drawn into the romance of it all and believe in the happy ending, but I know that Pocahontas will be dragged to London to become a prostitute and die destitute. I also know that her efforts to save her people will end in disaster because their friendship with John Smith will deliver generations of them to alienation in reservations where they will take their own lives with alcohol or other, quicker, means.

I don't know what these people experienced and what these photographs are capturing, but I know that these are moments that are part of a dynamic play of history. And this history, like I said above, will deprive them of their capability to realize a good human life as they understood it and were able to sustain for generations before the intrusion of these photographers' people. And this is why it is hard to look at Jonathan Best's book without mixed feelings, or even a sense of sorrow for what was destroyed. And the feelings are made even more complicated by how these photographs facilitated that disaster. These photographs were used to sell the Cordilleras as an object of desire. They were used to stir the White man's desire to save the savage and save the land for commerce and profit. The camera was an instrument of totality because it was used to reduce the play to a meaning imposed by the colonizer. By composing the picture with the camera, it reduced the dynamism of life into an object to look at and interpret in a way that feeds the viewers

totality. And yet, here are my people, made present by pictures. Are they merely objects totalized by the camera? Or could the camera also be an instrument of infinity? Could it also take part in the play that gives and makes present?

Although the intention of the photographers could have been to objectify their subjects for their White fantasies, the people of the Cordillera presence in these photographs. Even if these photos were used to reduce their otherness to the American totality, they were still part of the play of presencing through these pictures. I spoke of the pictures above because the people whose presencing was captured there are still presencing to me. Certainly, they were enframed and in a sense fixed in a moment, yet the knowledge of their people's story, the realities of their people today, and my lived engagement with their progeny, filled the areas which were cut from the photograph.<sup>15</sup> And because similar photographs and the stories I have learned about their people have drawn me to open to their land and culture, these pictures were brought to a dynamic play of giving which allowed me to see those photographed as people who presenced beyond the frame. I was not looking at specimens (so and so adorned with such and such) but this person or these people, who did not give me details to fill into my conception of them but invited me to meet them coming to presence in that picture. Because I know some aspects of the play of their being given in these photographs, although that is extremely spare, it is enough to make me want to open to their presence as who they are. Even if they will never be present at play as themselves, they call me to open to their being present as people who were present and are still presencing in this way. And the more I look at them as people who I will never know in person, they are present to me in my own play of presencing. They are here in the flow of my history shaping me and they are here in my present disturbing my own totality inviting me to open to the tragedy of my people and to appreciate the

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<sup>15</sup> See how John Berger discusses this in John Berger and Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling: A Possible Theory of Photography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 91.

eternal value of their being persons who were and are given by the play that gives. In this way, the camera in an instrument of opening because in its capturing moments from the play of their lives, it becomes an instrument of the play that gives in continuously giving those who have moved on to another form of the play of life. The camera, despite its being used for totality's sake can escape the control of the hungry White desire to allow people to present themselves as presented. When used creatively, people are not presented but presence in pictures.

## THE CAMERA AND THE PLAY OF MAKING PRESENT

The progeny of these same people, those enframed by the colonizing camera, were also photographed by another man with another desire. Tommy Hafalla is a photographer who discovered the indigenous people of the Cordillera through his work as a medical mission volunteer. In his many decades engaging the people of the Cordilleras, both as a volunteer and later as a photographer, he has become nationally recognized as a culture bearer of these people he has come to love. His works can be seen in the book *Ili* published by Mapa Books.<sup>16</sup> He also presented some of the photographs in the book in the exhibit *Gongs. Smoke. Blood. Earth.*, curated by Kawayan de Guia and Nona Garcia for the Ateneo Art Gallery, Areté, Ateneo de Manila University.<sup>17</sup> In one work in the exhibit, he installs a belt of 4x6 photographs along the gallery wall. The series looks like an analogue contact print or a sequence of cinematic shots. More accurately, it looks like family pictures taped to the wall. These are actually pictures he uses in his book, but the size and the way they are placed on the wall gives the impression that he is sharing with the viewer pictures of his community or barangay or extended family. These are not

<sup>16</sup> Tommy Hafalla, *Ili* (London: Mapa Books, 2017), 160.

<sup>17</sup> *Gongs. Smoke. Blood. Earth.* was curated by Kawayan de Guia and Nona Garcia and exhibited at the Ateneo Art Gallery, Areté, Ateneo de Manila University, Quezon City, 6 April to 20 July 2025. The exhibit was presented in collaboration with the Victor Oteyza Community Art Space (VOCAS) Foundation and Baguio Kunst Book Publishing.

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constructed moments captured in a picture. These are moments captured from the life of a community at play by one who belongs to the community. He is not fixing moments in an image to sell to anyone as a matter of interest. He is capturing the presence of people who have made themselves present to him because he has made himself present to them. This is the work of a person sharing the life of his family.

The sequence of the photographs are fixed images of a life at play. It is still a life at play in the photographer's memory, in the people's lives, in their customs, in his character, in his vocation, in their continuing efforts to build a life worth living in the contemporary world. This is a memory of the living story that will help them continue to build a good life for themselves. Hafalla is their partner in this work, and he succeeds in this work by letting them presence to his camera and through his pictures. And so, this strip of pictures, is not presented as fine art as it is an album of memories for us to be able to engage the community. The arrangement makes us realize that these are not pictures of separate moments but moments at play in a communal life. The pictures are at play with each other making present a lived life. The fine art portraits are on the walls across from these pictures.

There are five portraits of different elders: Ina Bag-iw of Patay, Sagada, Mountain Province, 1986; Ama Tambiac of Demang Sagada, Mountain Province, 1986; Lakay Pat-tol of Plantsa, Kabayan, Benguet, 1978; Ama Pecdasen of Demang, Sagada, Mountain Province, 1988; Nen Pabbey of Demang, Sagada, Mountain Province, 2005 and "Ina Arimpay" of Paraceles Mt. Province, 2006. Each photograph is about half a person in size. Unlike the diminutive sized pictures on the photographic series, each person is presented in such a way that the viewer cannot ignore their presence and will be made aware that some care went into making these photographs. The works are clearly signaled as fine art in their curatorial labels. (Platinum palladium prints on Hahnemüle Platinum Rag with hand-carved frame) The note indicates that they are carefully and deliberately prepared with materials that are not usual for most

photographic prints. The effect is almost metallic bronze for the monochrome photographs. And the handmade frames give a sense of antiquity, a sense of respect for the photographed, a sense of gravity for their social stature and historicity, and a manifestation of the care placed in the presentation of their images. The material and processes used in making these portraits were made with the deliberation and care to ensure that they are present to the viewer with the presencing of their persons.

Actually, the photographic processes of Worcester and company were quite complex and required much determination to successfully take a picture.<sup>18</sup> They would have to carry heavy cameras and tripods, as well as delicate and light sensitive photographic plates up mountains on journeys that took days to accomplish. However, all that hard work bore with it a spirit of conquest. Their effort was very totalitarian. It was a determination to bring an instrument of totality to aid in the conquest of a land and a people. Thus, despite the clear and sharp and sometimes beautiful rendering of people from the Cordilleras in these thousands of photographs, the images are disturbing to a person aware of the play from which these pictures were drawn. Hafalla's pictures do not have that disturbing quality because the deliberation in making his images aim to make people respectfully pay attention to the person made present. And he makes sure that we know that these are persons we must respect because we know their names and we know their titles as beloved elders: Ama Tambiac, Lakay Pat-tol, Ama Pecdasen, Nen Pabbey, and Ina Arimpay. These are not natives decorated for examination. They are people, the elders, to which a man is paying homage.

One technique he uses to frame the portraits is to segment them. Perhaps it is not a premeditated segmentation. It seems that with the materials he uses or the techniques he employs, he can only print a certain sized image. (Something like 11 x 14 inches) and so if he wants to print larger scaled pictures, he needs to print them in fragments and bring

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<sup>18</sup> Best, *Philippine Colonial Photography of The Cordilleras*, 30.

them together in a large frame. Five of the images are made up of four rectangular prints. Three portraits, those of Ina Bag-iw, Lakay Pat-tol, and Ama Pacdasen look like they are made of one piece until one comes closer to the photo. The divisions are visible, but they are not made obvious. However, in the portrait of Ama Tamblac, Haffalla calls attention to the fact that it is made of separate segments. This he does by outlining each segment with thick black lines and keeping them about four inches away from each other as they are laid on white matting. In a way, this is a clever artistic trick that makes the separations deliberate and potentially meaningful. But potentially, these images could also be seen as cheap trickery precisely to make something look like a deliberate artistic intention versus the result of a poverty of machinery capable of producing large photographs.

Whatever the reason, the picture works. It elevates the photograph because it gives a sense of artistic intention which then calls us to attention. We become more involved in the picture. We don't just look at it casually but actively take in the pieces and bring them together with our imaginations. The picture strip does this in a way. The pictures are small and are part of a group and so we tend to overlook them. However, because they are positioned this way, they invite us to look closer at what these pictures are about and how they might be interesting and meaningful, and also how they play off each other. These larger pictures aim to do the same but with more gravitas. The portrait of Ama Tamblac is opened up and invites us to be active in constructing it. We are called to see Ama Tamblac actively. And the white places between the frames brings light and air to the picture as well as a dynamic energy. This way the picture comes alive. His face on the first quadrant can be seen in its nobility because we can look at it separate from the other elements of his person.

There is another work in which Haffalla uses the same technique. The portrait of Ina Arimpay, a considerably larger work, is composed of nine sections clearly divided by a thin wooden grid. It is a monochrome

photograph in blue of a majestic woman. Sitting almost in the form of a right triangle: her body straight upward and her arm held out to her left. Ina Arimpay's face and body is composed of nine rectangles held together by one frame. This composition makes her body very firm because it is held by sturdy rectangles. At the same time, the frames encourage us to contemplate her face, her clothing, and her ornaments separately because these are framed as if in quotation marks. Perhaps this framing shows us what photographs do: they frame a part of a greater whole so we can contemplate the part more deeply but we are able to appreciate its meaning more when we see the play that it is a part of. And this play of rectangles presents a woman of humble strength.

The other portraits also allow the other elders to make themselves present. Ina Bag-iw is looking forward smoking her pipe. Positioned at the left of the frame, her face is in repose at the moment but her hand holding her pipe projects capability and strength. Ama Tambiac is cocky, dressed in a *bahag*, donned with the traditional headgear and necklace, pipe in his mouth, sitting in the dark like a man of authority. His haughty upward look tells us that he is a proud man who is allowing Hafalla to photograph him. Lakay Pat-tal is more relaxed. He is dressed in Western style clothes. His face is held as if he wants to say something or is caught in a thought. He sits on the ground by a tree stump, arms holding his knees, hands gently locked in front of his knees. He seems like a humble man who is in a conversation with the photographer. Ama Pacdasen sits in his proud traditional headgear and necklace, amongst his bolo and backpacks, not posturing but very comfortable in his authority.

In each picture that Tommy Hafalla takes, we see people. Even in the study prints, where there are too many individuals to name, we are given persons caught in a moment, and the captured moment makes them present. There are the men engaged in an activity involving smoke and grass (most probably an invocation), who we are allowed to see as confident, capable people immersed in the gravity of their work. There are the *apos* and *inas* who are in repose, looking at the photographer as

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someone they know and are comfortable to be present to. And there is the community, going about their days, being in front of Tommy Hafalla and not just his camera. Unlike the stance their ancestors took posing before their possessors and their machineries of possession, here they are sharing the moments of their lives to be presented by someone they trust to present them.

These are some pictures of people too that are worth talking about among these test prints. There is the photograph of an old man in a Western style rain jacket, in front of his traditional home made with some contemporary materials. *Apo* is speaking intently to someone with an affectionate hand on his dog. It shows off a *lolo* who loves his dog. There is another picture of a couple in mixed traditional and Western clothing, standing formally for a picture but with a relaxation of people giving themselves to the camera and the man behind it. It is a portrait of a couple from whose smile a good day emanates. And there are the portraits of three *inas*. One is sitting side viewed with her face on her hand. We don't see her face fully but we see that it is weathered. She is looking at the camera, sharing her worries. There is the portrait of the very old *lola*, comfortably squatting, taking in the day, framed by the darkness but her face bathed in gentle light. She is sitting at peace with time, having learned to dwell in moments. Another *lola* is similarly presenting herself to the photographer with her cigar held with a subtle smile, the sunlit day illuminating her face. I will never know these people in the fullness of their being present, but Tommy Hafalla does know them and they know him. Their mutual trust and knowing each other, trust and knowledge born from being neighbors, made his camera an instrument for capturing the play of their presencing. Hafalla uses his camera to give us the trace of the play of their presencing as present. These works of art are now part of the play of our becoming because having been made present to us, we live with being touched by their presence.

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## THE CAMERA OF A PHOTOJOURNALIST

We have spoken of the camera as a possible instrument of totalizing and of making present. When it was the instrument of men whose souls are defined by their desire for conquest, accumulation, and consumption, the camera was a perfect instrument to fix the dynamic play of presencing in an image—a fixed image—giving the meaning and serving the intention of the photographer. The people in the photographs are given by the play to the camera and the camera digests them into something that the photographer can sell as an item to realize their agenda. Most colonial photography and pornography of all time is exactly this—the use of the camera as an instrument of totality. We understand this more clearly when we see how Tommy Hafalla, the caring visitor turned neighbor, shares the presencing of the Cordillerans he lived with. He captures their lived presence, the play of their being there with him as people who have taken him in. Through his work, the camera becomes an instrument of receiving and giving. It receives the presencing of the living other and gives them in their living otherness to the viewer to meet. The camera as the instrument given-to-gives to us and enriches our being neighbor to the other. This is his success as a culture bearer. There is another kind of photographer—the photojournalist.

The photojournalist at their best works to make present our neighbor (in the biblical sense) to us. The great photojournalists have delivered to our homes the presence of our fellow human beings in the most remarkable moments of their lives. Usually, these remarkable moments are moments of tragedy. They present to us people caught in existential moments which test the limits of our existence and challenge our being human. But even when they photograph us in seemingly mundane moments, they are able to make us present as beings who face moments where our authenticity is challenged. Thus, photojournalists can show us our neighbors at the moments when the limits and possibilities of

their being human can be most exposed. They make present the neighbor is their struggle to be human.

Being neighbor could better be understood in a deeper sense as being *kapwa*. The *kapwa* is our fellow being. The *kapwa* is the person who is a self-realizing being like me, seeking an state of being where one is capable of realizing the creative possibilities of one's existence, also known as the state of *kaginhawaan*, and with whom one is in communion. When the other is your *kapwa* you are able to feel with them such that their pain is your pain, their joy is your joy, and their well-being is what you seek. This is because the interiority of ourselves, our individual *loob*, are able to interpenetrate, or are able to mirror each other's interior states. This is the way the Filipino is neighbor.<sup>19</sup> We are one with our *kapwa* because we feel with them, for them, with them with a communion of the *loob*. Photographs when successful, allow us to intuit that the person in the photograph is a person who has a *loob* seeking *kaginhawaan* like me. And the intuition awakens this communion. Hafalla's work makes present the other as another who is a *loob* like me and is my *kapwa*. This is why they do not come across as objects. The successful photojournalists also awaken the awareness that the person in the photograph is my neighbor, my *kapwa*.

I would like to focus here on the work of the photojournalist Veejay Villafranca.<sup>20</sup> I first encountered his work in his coverage of the Casiguran farmers' march which I used for a couple of art works and a book cover.<sup>21</sup> This encounters led me to view his photo essays in his

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<sup>19</sup> A deeper reflection could be found in Albert Alejo, "Loob ng Tao," in *Social Transformations: Journal of the Global South*, 6:1 (2018), 5-28 and in Chapter 4 of Virgilio Enriquez, *From Colonial to Liberation Psychology: The Philippine Experience* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> See the About page of Veejay Villafranca's website, <<http://www.veejayvillafranca.com/about.html>>. He has a book entitled *Signos* (Manila: Mapa Books, 2018).

<sup>21</sup> For a sample see Kimberly Jane Tan, "Sen. Osmeña, Aurora Residents Call for Zero Budget for APECO," in *GMA News Online* (27 November 2012),

website and, it was actually the engagement with his photo essays that prompted this reflection on photography. Villafranca's work made me want to understand what defined the art of the photojournalist, who uses his craft for both liberal and servile purposes, i.e. the *artes serviles* and *artes liberales*. The liberal arts are those who serve no purpose but to present the artist's insight into the play that gives. The servile arts serve the need of the artist to produce useful things for their survival and which others can consume for theirs. The photojournalist's craft can be seen as a servile art. Not only do they serve the public's need for information, but they also need to sell their work to the public. Photojournalists are in fact dependent on the purchase of their photos. And because they sell these to commercial publications which also dependent on sales, the most successful photographers are those who pander to the general public's taste for entertainment. Thus, these photographers can be seduced to use their cameras for entertainment reducing this tool to an instrument of totality. Worcester clearly used his camera for servile ends. Hafalla's work is clearly liberal in its nature. Villafranca's work seems to straddle both *artes liberales* and *serviles*. And although it has the aspects of the servile arts, it contrasts drastically with the colonial photographer's, and I was drawn to articulate this difference. And it seems Villafranca's camera is the tool of the neighbor, the *kapwa*.

The photojournalist is a *socius* in Paul Ricoeur's sense.<sup>22</sup> To be a *socius* is to be in relation with the other according to one's societal role. A *socius* is one who engages others and the world according to their institutional role. Thus, a photojournalist comes to a place as a person on assignment: whether they are self-assigned, assigned by a publication, on commission or a grant. The photojournalist comes to record the happenings in a place and construct a meaningful narrative or concept

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<<https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/money/economy/283979/sen-osmena-aurora-residents-call-for-zero-budget-for-apeco/story/>>.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Ricoeur, "The Socius and the Neighbor," in *History and Truth*, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 105–122.

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they can sell to the publication which will sell this to the public. In general, they record the event or moment to make it consumable for the paying public. On the whole, the public is looking for a way to understand their world and humanity better. And so, the photojournalist has an important role to play. But even with this intention, they are the *socious* coming to the event or community to construct it according to their way of understanding with a background sense of wanting to convince the viewer of their truth. And so, unlike a neighbor, they are not just sharing their shared life-experience but making something of it to sell. We should never begrudge the journalist their living. Because selling the story or the picture itself is not reductive, but the desire that goes into making the stories we sell could be.

Veejay Villafranca's stories are told because he wants to make us neighbors (in Jesus' sense) to the marginalized others in our world. He has five projects, or what we can call photo essays, in his webpage. "Signos" is his documentation of those who were displaced by disaster and suffer from government inaction, "Against the Dying of the Light" is his photo essay on mortality, "A Race Divided" is about the Chin refugees from Myanmar seeking to find a life in Mizoram, India, "Marked: The Gangs of Baseco" is about tattooed former gangs members trying to realize a better life in a place defined by its poverty, "Barrio Sagrado" is his essay on the role of faith in building a meaningful reality in the midst of the marginalization and exploitation of the contemporary world order. The last project has different sub-sections devoted to different aspects of the manifestation of faith in the construction of a meaningful world for the marginalized.

He has a section in his website called Portraits which demonstrates Villarica's ability to make people presence in captured moments. His portraits are never formal, posed shots but moments caught in the studio or in the midst of the dynamic flow of life. The first two photos are those of members of the Agta tribe in the march against the expropriation of their ancestral domain. The first picture is a line of

men rendered waist up, half naked with hats, clearly rural men with a purpose. They are straining to see something before them, and one can see the hope in their weathered faces. The next picture shows them in a hall, seated on the floor in rows, with very earnest faces as they raise their straw hats in salute or cheer. A child sits at the center of the foreground. He sits leaning back, facing his left. He is looking at something with a curiosity that emanates as a gentle light from his innocent face. He doesn't fully understand why they are here in this protest march, but he too is sitting in anticipation.

With this collection are three portraits of the last tattooed women of a town in Kalinga. The stark white background allows the lines on their bodies, tattoos and faces, to stand out. The way they are photographed, the lines on their faces are more distinct than their tattoos. They illustrate how much time and how much experience they have gone through. The play of life has written on their faces, it has etched the weight of their worries and the strength of their accepting souls. Two portraits of construction workers in the collection allow us to meet two young men who are facing life with as much acceptance and strength of character as the tattooed women have. Both are standing in front of corrugated iron sheet fences, holding tools of their trade, wearing their work clothes, and facing us with their dignity as working men. Their clothes are worn, their background rusted, but their faces present with dignity.

There are 24 pictures in this collection. Each taken with a caring gaze. That is the artistry in Villafranca's technique. Joe of Manila sits at the backseat of a car at night. We can mainly see their face framed by the car's interior and the night outside. We feel their exhaustion and perhaps disenchantment. There is the child who is a Karen tribe refugee framed by the darkness and a makeshift wall of wooden planks. We see the child's small face as a tiny appearance in the darkness peering from a gap of the wall, making poignant his being displaced. There is the aswang cosplayer, their costume all bloodied with tattered black make-shift wings, and a face whitened with an expression of hunger and pain. We can feel their

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exuberance at having successfully been transformed into an aswang for that night. There is the boy on the train posed before the barred windows, his face marked by deep thoughts of sadness or pain, and he seems as old as those construction workers. There is the rape survivor standing before a window with her pervasive thoughts. We see her behind a lace curtain making clear her separation from us and the difficulty of reaching her. But the light and air from the window may still fill her. And there is the supplicant, their face twisted by sickness or desperation, staring at the skimpy candles burning bright. They are crowded by people but their faith brings them to the fore.

Against the “Dying of the Light” is another photo essay worth reflecting on for how respectfully and reverentially Villafranca looks at the dying and the suffering. There is a series of five photographs of people lying down. One shows only of the hands of a loved one assuring the patient lying on the bed. We see only their hands laid on sheets and blankets. The folds on the hands and the sheets signal sickness and comfort. There is one of a man laying on the bed in a dark room receiving oxygen from a tank through his nose. There is another person accompanying him at the end of the bed and, in that darkness, one can feel the silence and loneliness. There is another picture of a body completely wrapped, placed on a gurney beside the embalming table. The light in the dark room falls on the table and the dead person. Everything is still. And there is also a photo of a woman lying in a state of quiet suffering, while a baby sleeps peacefully off to her left. The contrast of the child at peace and her suffering, and her being with a loved one and alone in her sickness, is present but muted with the silence and peace of the gentle light and shadows. And finally, there is the child in a mask, lying down on what looks like a hospital bed with the hands of a caregiver on him. Everything is blurred except the strongest element in the photograph which is the child’s face looking with trust and confidence at those who love him. These photographs as much, or even more, than the portraits show us how Villafranca feels for his subjects.

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This photographer has a deep feeling for and with his subjects. They are his *kapwa*. Certainly, he is a photojournalist whose primary tool of trade is his camera. Hence, the camera can immediately be seen as a tool of extraction. It is meant to extract images from the play that gives their lived lives and the presencing of persons. The photographer uses this tool to frame and freeze images from that play to sell to people who can consume these images for their own entertainment. And there are many examples of photographers who do just that. Paparazzi, for instance, who take images out from the play of giving to rouse emotions such as indignation, revulsion, or desire just to sell something for the public to consume. Villafranca shows us how the camera can be an instrument for a different kind of livelihood or, more properly, vocation.

Photojournalism is a vocation in the sense that these photographers are called to present to the general public the goings on of the world which belong to the public sphere and which they should know to be able to make informed decisions for the common good. Photography becomes journalistic when it involves the telling of stories that we should know to be able to think as people who belong to a collective which needs to have a shared opinion and will about the well-being of all persons and their communities. Sometimes the stories directly affect our public lives and should be told. For instance, Villafranca's pieces on the Myanmar refugees and the internally displaced climate refugees of the Philippines tell stories that should affect our public policy. However, the other photographs of a more personally existential nature may not seem to be matters for journalistic investigation. And here is the deeper calling of the photographer. They are called by their *kapwa* to witness and share with us the struggles of being human in order for us to remember what it is that human existence is about. This, more than just mere questions of public opinion and will formation, is the primary vocation of the photojournalist. This is when the camera becomes more than an instrument for capturing something consumable. To realize this vocation, the camera must be an instrument for making present.

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This is what Villafranca does with his camera. He is able to take moments from the play of giving which represent or make present people at their most human. In their struggle to be human, in their triumph, in their rest, in their suffering, in their shining forth, in their sickness, and in their death: he makes people present through his photographs. The images may be framed from the play of giving but they are not frozen. The photographs make present as presencing the persons given in them such that they become part of the play of my self as *kapwa*. These people who are made present to us become our neighbors who call us to respond to their presence as human selves in responsibility, in care, in sympathy, in action, and even in remembrance. Sometimes we only need to remember or to know that they were present, and at play in the play of this world, and they become part of the play of our selves. I wonder how much the pictures of W. Eugene Smith have shaped my life because they have had such an impact on me in my childhood. I wonder how much those photographs have affected my engagement in the play of life because they have shaped the play of my self. Because of Smith's photographic work, I taught philosophy, I wrote books, I worked as a development worker, and I am an advocated for human rights and authentic human becoming. Veejay Villarica's work is now part of the play of my self. It will strengthen the play of my authentic becoming.

Photographers like Tomy Hafalla and Veejay Villafranca use their cameras as instruments that capture moments in the lives of people in order to make my *kapwa* presence. Maybe this is their vocation as culture bearer and photojournalist, they are supposed to open our eyes to who our neighbor is by making our neighbor present. They have a tool that can easily be used as a tool for consumption, but, used with compassion and openness, with the eyes and *loob* of the *kapwa*, theirs is an instrument that makes the other my neighbor for whom I should care in my human becoming. The great gift of these photographers, and the great lack of Worcester, is their capacity to make present to us the play of the *loob* of

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the *kapwa*. In that making present we make ourselves neighbor and find the truth of our humanity.

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