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3. FROM THE “LIVING DOLL” TO THE “BOLO PUNCHER”

Prizefighting, Masculinity, and the Sporting Life

Professional boxing’s an odd sport, an anachronism, a throwback to the days of dogs, pits, and bears. Yet it persists because, at its core, it’s brutal and honest, a contest of courage and skill. . . . Is it any wonder, then, that one of the quickest ways to a Manong’s heart is to talk fight and fighters?

—Peter Bacho, “A Manong’s Heart”

Weighing in at 153¾ pounds, the contender stepped into the ring for his first attempt at the American Middleweight Championship crown. A deafening hodgepodge of cheers, whistles, applause, and disapproval rose from the near-capacity crowd of 12,000 boxing fans gathered in New York’s Madison Square Garden that brisk October evening in 1939. Ceferino Garcia, the Filipino Angeleño community’s favorite son, demonstrated his famous right uppercut for fans and foes alike as his way of greeting. Reigning champ Fred Apostoli, favored at 5 to 8 and weighing in at the maximum limit of 160 pounds, met Garcia in the center of the ring, impatient to defend his title in a scheduled fifteen-round bout.¹

Garcia kept up a volley of powerful blows, including his renowned “bolo punch,” a powerful right uppercut, which rocked Apostoli in the first round. A bolo punch to the chin, quickly followed by a left–right combination, sent

an already-dazed Apostoli to his knees for a count of two. Apostoli got up, but Garcia's swift straight right and left hook knocked him down again, this time for a count of nine. By the fourth round, Garcia had inflicted a bleeding gash under the defending champ's chin, while Apostoli cut Garcia near the right eye with a left hook in the fifth round. By the sixth round, Garcia was leading Apostoli on competition points, winning four of the rounds.

Two minutes and seven seconds into the seventh round, it was all over. After a series of fierce, well-placed bolo punches to Apostoli's jaw and head, the bleeding, badly beaten champion went down for the third time, slowly sinking his forehead onto the canvas. Standing over Apostoli's collapsed body, referee Billy Cavanaugh began the count and then spread both arms to signal the end of Apostoli's reign. Lifting Garcia's arm, Cavanaugh proclaimed the new middleweight champion.² The exuberant crowd hailed its new hero.

With victories garnered by Filipino boxers like the Bolo Puncher, the sporting life, especially prizefighting, played an important role in the formulation of heroes and notions of heterosexual masculinity among Filipino immigrants of the 1920s and 1930s. Boxing matches were arguably the most popular organized recreational activity attended by Filipinos, and, unlike other leisure activities such as gambling in Chinatown and dancing with Euro-American women in taxi dance halls, this passion for prizefighting did not generate rabid disapproval from the small self-appointed elite of the community. In countless ways, the sporting life represented a common ground for both middle- and working-class Filipino boxing aficionados to carve out a cultural space wherein they celebrated the champions who in turn became a part of the stories they told themselves about themselves. They energized the hollows of coliseums, investing meanings to words like "manliness," "fair play," and "courage" that reflected their particular circumstances at the intersection of race and class in their adopted country.

Because Filipino boxers fought against pugilists of other ethnicities, this chapter also examines relations that usually transcended the arena. Looking at the interaction between marginalized populations during recreational periods provides insights on how they established alliances, although temporary, during often intense social movements like unionization drives. The cumulative effect of the success and recognition that many athletes of color achieved in marginalized sports like boxing and segregated leagues arguably influenced the eventual integration of professional teams beginning in the late 1940s.

The ring also represented a contested space between Filipino boxers and

recruiters, trainers, managers, promoters, and athletic association officials from other communities. While the particular meanings associated with the sporting life provided Filipinos with agency in defining their individual and collective selves, a number of elements outside the community determined the course of organized sports. Athletic organizations like the National Boxing Association and the California Boxing Commission regulated the rules and weight categories of the games. Furthermore, the recruiters, trainers, managers, and promoters who made the critical decisions, including the amount and disbursement of the purse, the pairing of pugilists, and the location of fights, were usually white entrepreneurs. The arena also represented a tug-of-war among reformers, particularly assimilationists who argued that sports were mechanisms toward the “Americanization” of working-class immigrants, members of the medical profession who stressed the physical dangers of boxing, and the clergy who questioned the morality of prizefighting.

The migration of Filipino sports figures to the United States stemmed directly from the colonial relationship that defined U.S. efforts to support its military and political domination of the islands through policies of “benevolent assimilation.” These policies included the regulation and suppression of indigenous cultural production and the promotion of American-style education of Filipinos first by American soldiers and then by American missionaries and teachers. Instruction in American sports, including boxing and baseball, became part of the indoctrination of Filipinos into “good” colonials. The subordination of Filipinos in their homeland, however, was not the only objective of the United States. As an imperial power, it also sought out which of its colony’s citizens could best serve its purposes. This process began with the *pensionado* program, with the U.S. government sponsoring the best Filipino students to study in American universities. Upon the completion of their degrees, these students returned to the Philippines, where colonial administrators placed them in influential positions with expectations that they would support U.S. policies and institutions.³ Later, as the emerging agribusiness in Hawaii and then California needed laborers, recruiters enticed poor, landless Filipinos to work in U.S. fields. When Filipinos demonstrated exceptional abilities in sports, especially boxing, American trainers and managers went to the islands, taking the most promising young athletes to the United States.

Filipinos and Filipino immigrants in the United States found their idols in these pugilists. Boxing enthusiasts celebrated victories, challenged unpopular decisions, and lamented loses in both countries. Commuting between the

United States and the Philippines, fighters became a force that bridged the Filipino and Filipino American experiences. As athletes, they challenged the stereotypes of the "little brown brother" uttered by the colonizers in their homeland and the image of the dirty, lazy "brown monkey" deployed in the racist language of their adopted country.

The earliest Filipino boxer to gain distinction was Francisco "Pancho Villa" Guilledo, the Living Doll, who, at twenty-one years old, knocked out Johnny Buff and captured the 1922 American Flyweight Championship at Ebbets Field, Brooklyn. At 110 pounds, Villa was outweighed by the defending champ, who tipped the scale at 114¼ pounds. The bout was intense, with Villa landing powerful left hooks and right crosses at close quarters that sent Buff staggering for most of the ten rounds of fighting. Twenty-seven seconds into the eleventh round, with Buff suffering from a badly bruised nose and blood flowing from a split lip, gums, and left eye, Buff's second threw in the towel as a sign of defeat. After the grueling title bout, the *New York Times* proclaimed that "the new champion impressed the large crowd with his victory. Popular in the extreme prior to the battle, Villa added many new admirers to his legion of friends through the workmanlike manner in which he attained the title. The Oriental champion was the master throughout."⁴

Villa gained popularity with both Filipino and non-Filipino boxing enthusiasts. Even when Frankie Genaro won the U.S. title from Villa in May 1923, the new champ muttered, "What's the use? You can beat him all you want but he's the guy the fans go for, he's a living doll."⁵ Indeed, three months later, at the World Flyweight Championship bout, Villa, not Genaro, was chosen to defend the U.S. title.⁶ The Living Doll went on to defeat England's Jimmy Wilde for the 1923 World Flyweight Championship before a crowd of 40,000 fans at the Polo Grounds in New York. By the second round, Villa exploded a right to the defending champ's jaw, the likes of which Wilde later confessed he "didn't get over."⁷ One minute and forty-six seconds into the seventh round, with the defending champ's eyes almost closed and blood dripping freely from a broken nose, Villa's short right hook landed squarely on Wilde's jaw, sending him down on the canvas for the count.⁸ Villa successfully defended his world championship title over the English contender Frankie Ash in Brooklyn in 1924.⁹ Villa's extraordinary feats led George L. "Tex" Rickard, the most prominent boxing promoter of the 1920s, to rank Villa as the number-one fighter of 1924, characterizing the year in boxing as one that witnessed "the continued supremacy of Pancho Villa in the flyweight class."¹⁰

The Living Doll's explosive rise in the U.S. boxing circuit was part of a process started in the Philippines. Born in 1901 to a landless family in the sugarcane-producing province of Iloilo, the young Guilledo traveled to the capital city of Manila to find a better job. In the city, he made contact with Frank Churchill, who managed the stadium and ran the Olympic Club, a training gym for Filipino amateur boxers. Watching the young man train during those early days, Bill Miller, who eventually became Villa's publicity manager in the United States, recalled that "even then [Villa] was the star of the *novatos* (the beginners)."¹¹ By 1919, in his first professional fight in Manila, Villa knocked out his opponent, Australian flyweight champion George Mendres, in three rounds. Villa's fighting record in the Philippines was already outstanding when Churchill brought him to the United States in 1922.¹²

When Villa died unexpectedly in July 1925, American sportswriters vied to name the next Filipino champion. Within months of Villa's death, Norris C. Mills anticipated the advent of a "Filipino boxing invasion," naming Filipino fighters such as Angel de la Cruz, "Battling" Candelosa, Varias Milling, and Kid Moro as future champions in the lighter weight divisions. Mills urged American promoters to quickly recruit these boxers, forecasting that they "will find their gate receipts mounting with these men fighting in American rings, for most of them possess knock-out punches and have their share of cleverness and, what is more important, are game to the core."¹³

In the meantime, Bill Van, writing for the *Knockout*, a weekly newspaper dedicated to boxing, dubbed Diosdado "Speedy Dado" Posadas as Villa's most likely successor when Dado wrested the Pacific Coast Bantamweight and Flyweight Championships from the Jewish fighter David "Newsboy Brown" Montrose at Los Angeles's Olympic Auditorium in 1931. Van declared that "Dado's win over Brown was decisive. He fairly outclassed Brown and when little Dado, the Brown Doll, goes back to Madison Square Garden he will be hailed as the new Pancho Villa. Dado has class—he has color—he will do more to create interest in the boxing game than any man we know of."¹⁴ Still other sportswriters made projections. *Ring* magazine's Harry B. Smith announced that no one rates with Little Dado, California's bantamweight champion, who is "the best Filipino fighter seen in this country since the days of Villa. . . . [Little] Dado is a shrewd boxer and can stand a punch."¹⁵ The 1930s and 1940s represented an era of substantial successes by Filipino boxers and champions, notably Pablo Dano, "the wild and rugged Filipino bull of the Pampas," and Benjamin "Small Montana" Gan, the Filipino Flash, who became the 1935 American

flyweight champion when he beat Italian American Joseph "Midget Wolgast" Loscatzo in ten rounds.¹⁶

In spite of the victories garnered by these Filipino pugilists and the prophecies of the *Knockout* and the *Ring* as to whom Villa's crown belonged, countless Filipino immigrants of the 1930s believed that Ceferino Garcia, the Bolo Puncher, was the Living Doll's long-awaited successor as champion. Garcia's manager in the Philippines, Jess Cortes, had brought the nineteen-year-old amateur fighter to the United States around 1930. Two years later, Cortes ended the relationship, leaving the still-unknown Garcia in the hands of a new manager, George Parnassus.¹⁷ Under Parnassus's charge, the welterweight Garcia steadily improved his craft and, by 1934, showed promise, knocking out opponents like Andy DiVodi in the first round, Peter Jackson in three rounds, and Joe Glick in two.¹⁸ By 1938, Garcia had fought and, more often than not, knocked out most fighters in his class division, forcing his manager and several fight promoters on a desperate countrywide search for suitable opponents. One Filipino sportswriter delightedly proclaimed that "very few fighters dare risk their chins against Garcia's bolo punch, which is usually deadly."¹⁹

Despite, or more likely because of, Garcia's slow start and spotty boxing record until 1934, he captured the imagination and admiration of his countrymen. Through his consistent show of strength and skill in the ring and his sheer determination in his difficult ascent to a world championship title, Garcia also earned the respect of others in the boxing world. In his first venture for the World Welterweight Championship, Garcia lost by decision to the defending champion Barney Ross in a gruesome fifteen-round bout. Bill Henry, the *Los Angeles Times's* sports editor, covered this 1937 "Carnival of Champions" boxing tournament in New York's Polo Grounds, where Ross was the 4 to 1 favorite. Regardless of Garcia's loss, Henry proclaimed that "the hero of the four and a half hours of slugging was Ceferino Garcia of California . . . [who] wore the carmine badge of courage and stole the show." Henry continued: "The bolo punching Filipino, hitting one punch to the champion's two but carrying more real murder in one of his lethal wallop than Ross had in a dozen, came from behind in the last four rounds with an exhibition of gameness that forced a highly partisan audience to forget their prejudice in appreciation of the Filipino's courageous comeback."²⁰

In subsequent bouts, Garcia gained fame for this bolo punch, a deadly combination of right uppercuts and half hooks. The development of this boxing technique exemplified Garcia's drawing on his experiences from the

Philippines and applying them to his life in the United States. The delivery, a series of sharp, fast punches, grew out of a skill he first learned as a boy, working in the sugarcane fields with his family in the Philippines. To harvest the sugarcane, the laborer holds up a handful of stalks, bends down, and, with quick strokes of the sharp bolo knife, cuts the canes swiftly and as close to the ground as possible. Transferring and perfecting this technique in the boxing ring, Garcia, at 5 feet, 6 inches, and weighing 154 pounds, eventually became the twenty-fourth middleweight champion in 1939 when he knocked out the Italian American defender Fred Apostoli in seven rounds.²¹ Nat Fleischer, publisher of the *Ring* and the foremost boxing commentator of the day, rated this championship bout as the “most thrilling fight” of 1939, ranking it among the ten outstanding fights of the year.²²

That boxing matches were widely attended by Filipino laborers is an understatement. Full-capacity crowds typically showed up in Los Angeles’s Olympic Auditorium, San Francisco’s Dreamland Arena, and Stockton’s Civic Auditorium when Filipino fighters were scheduled. In Los Angeles, Toribio Castillo remembered how the Filipino community looked forward to Tuesday evenings when boxing matches usually took place downtown. “On those nights,” he recalled, “even washing dishes for ten hours didn’t matter. We went. Some of the workers, they tried to make sure their work was done quickly, especially if they had no tickets. When the big boys [champions] are in town, you can’t even see the end of the [ticket] line. Sometimes the fights start right there [between ticket buyers], everybody scrambling for tickets and all. You could call it a pre-game show.”²³

Filipinos filled local boxing venues and traveled for hundreds of miles to attend a bout that featured not only titleholders like the Bolo Puncher, Small Montana, and Speedy Dado, but also up-and-coming pugilists like Ralph Mano and Varias Milling. The automobile, central to the migratory employment pattern of the vast majority of Filipino laborers, took on an alternative significance in their lives during these trips. It became the vehicle that transported them from exploitative, mundane jobs for which they earned marginal wages and obtained little gratification to the places where they experienced some compensation, in terms of solidarity and excitement, for their efforts. As an observer noted, for Filipinos, a Garcia fight scheduled anywhere on the Pacific Coast “is a signal for a cavalcade of motor cars of various vintages to converge on the scene of action.”²⁴ Robert Hilado, who fought in the boxing circuit as Little Dempsey, appreciated how some of his fans “would drive

all night just to see the fight."²⁵ This routine was typical for many Filipinos. Sammy Escalona recalled how he and his friends drove overnight for more than 300 miles from their camp to attend a boxing match featuring Filipino pugilist Pablo Dano "because he's our boy. In those days, you do what you have to do to see your favorites."²⁶

But the thrills of the matches were transitory, which in part explains why Filipinos attended bouts again and again. At daybreak after the Dano fight, Escalona and his friends were back at work in the fields of the San Fernando Valley. In efforts to sustain the intense experiences of the battle, Filipino workers sought to relive the action in the boxing arena through other ways. The avid reporting of bouts in their ethnic newspapers vividly delineates the community's desire to *read* about them. An examination of extant copies of the *Philippines Review* shows how faithfully Filipino journalists covered boxing matches. The exploits of Filipino pugilists like Ceferino Garcia, Small Montana, and Speedy Dado frequently made front-page news, alongside reports about the future of the Philippines. News about the financial negotiations between representatives of American banks and Miguel Cuaderno, vice president of the Philippine National Bank, shared front-page honors with the announcement of a grudge match between "Baby Face" Casanova, the featherweight champion of Mexico, and Speedy Dado, the Brown Doll of Manila. The news about the fight not only shared the front page, but also garnered more space than any other item. Apparently, Dado was the reigning champion until Cassanova knocked him out in Mexico City. The paper reported that the rematch was to take place on July 16 at the Olympic Stadium, where a "capacity crowd" was expected.²⁷

In a similar vein, announcements about the fight between Garcia, "the knockout artist from across the Pacific," and welterweight champion Barney Ross shared the front page with news about Filipino repatriation.²⁸ The paper reported that two Filipinos had filed for repatriation, and it gave instructions on how to apply to the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) for this process. The front page also included a notice that tickets were still available for the upcoming bout between Robert "Little Dempsey" Hilado, "the rugged Filipino," and Wally Hally at the Olympic Boxing Arena. The article about the procedures for repatriation was continued on page 3, but complete on the front page was a step-by-step analysis of Garcia's "serious training siege," because "victory for Garcia will virtually clinch a championship fight with Ross later in the year. Chicago and New York promoters would be glad to

stage a battle between the pair, if the knockout artist from across the Pacific can slash out a win over the Jewish boy." In addition, readers learned that "in the last 2 main events at Hollywood, Garcia easily outclassed the cagey Al Manfredo in ten rounds and gave Al Romero, the local Mexican puncher, a sound licking to capture a popular decision."²⁹

For the Filipinos, reading about the fight was not a passive activity. They interpreted these events, and it formed part of a network wherein workers created meaning for their lives.³⁰ For laborers absent from the fight, the coverage served as more than a vicarious experience; it allowed them to participate in the stories of their compatriots who witnessed the event. For participants, reading about an experience once-removed became a tool for the remembering and reordering of that experience. Antonio Cabanag, who worked at the Thrifty Drug Store in Pasadena in the 1930s, went to every Garcia fight held in Los Angeles. Cabanag expressed his sentiments about the importance of these events and sports figures in the lives and narratives of many Filipino workers like himself, exclaiming, "Garcia! You know, that's all we Filipinos [had]. That's why when Filipino boxers fight, you see all the Filipinos come and see them."³¹

The fight directed their conversation; it became a collective experience and, win or lose, the potential of the brown body symbolized by the pugilists became part of the stories Filipinos told themselves about themselves and their experiences. Through the art of storytelling, Filipino workers produced tales and living heroes like Ceferino Garcia. They recalled that "when the going was rough for the [Filipinos], Ceferino was always there. There was a time when close to 50 armed men swooped down on him, gangland fashion, and you know what? He came out of it unscathed and triumphant."³² Through these narratives, Filipino workers codified their ideals of Filipino masculinity: Garcia, outnumbered fifty to one, relying only on his wits and raw muscle, fought undaunted, and emerged victorious.

The theme of underdog heroes prevailing despite overwhelming odds is a universal pattern in myths, legends, and various forms of expressive cultures, notably in African American animal tales of B'rer Rabbit and B'rer Fox, in Filipino folk epics such as those of Agyu and Sandayo, in Mexican *corridos*, and in border ballads like "El Corrido de Gregorio Cortéz."³³ Because these stories are designed to be memorized and disseminated through oral communication, the narratives blend, as the historian Américo Paredes notes in his analysis of the border conflicts embedded in the ballad of Cortéz, "three kinds of ingredients: of straight fact, of fact exaggerated into fiction, and of pure folklore, found in

easily recognizable motifs.”³⁴ Fashioned from readily familiar texts and canted especially during stressful periods like warfare, mass migration, or invasion in a people’s history, legends highlight the hero’s journey toward spiritual and physical transformations. In Filipino folk epics, warriors like Agyu, Lam-ang, Banna, and Labaw Donggon embarked on voyages, endured strenuous tests to prove their courage and ability, and eventually conquered their enemies.³⁵

To many Filipino immigrants of the 1920s and 1930s, Ceferino Garcia’s rise to the middleweight crown exemplified these themes of heroic quest, validation, and metamorphosis. Garcia’s conversion began when, as a novice boxer, he left the Philippines and migrated to the United States. In California, he faced numerous defeats in the ring, but he worked hard to perfect his skills and increase his strength. His sheer physical presence was significant in this transformation. While the vast majority of Filipino boxers competed in the lighter weight classes, Garcia was the exception, the only Filipino pugilist who fought, and won a championship title, in the middleweight division (up to 160 pounds). Garcia initially fought in the lighter weight ranks but qualified for the middleweight by undergoing a strict regimen that included building up bulk and muscle definition. His big athletic brown physique was a transgression against the dominant culture’s perception of Filipinos as small agricultural workers whose bodies were especially suitable for the short hoe or meek domestics and service workers. Garcia’s hard body represented the tenacity and potency of Filipinos, and he ultimately claimed his destined place as a champion in the boxing world and among his *kababayan* (countrymen).

Like other hero narratives, including the blossoming of “El Corrido de Gregorio Cortéz” during the Mexican–U.S. border conflicts, the story of Garcia besting fifty armed men developed as Filipino laborers faced brutalities from unemployed Anglo workers who claimed that Filipinos lowered the wage scales, and from the henchmen of business owners who routinely beat and shot Filipino union leaders and workers striking for equitable wages and safer working conditions. The Filipino American novelist Peter Bacho later captured the immigrants’ pride and the importance of boxing idols and potential heroes during these turbulent times when he wrote that “from the champions to the obscure pugs perpetually scrapping for peanuts on undercards, the old men knew them. They knew their moves, shared their hopes, and basked in their bravado—from the glories of Garcia and Montana to the graceless, futile courage of fighters like Young Dempsey.”³⁶

This passion for boxing among Filipino immigrants in the United States

can be traced to their experiences in the Philippines, where boxing had enjoyed widespread popularity since its introduction by the invading American armed forces during the Spanish-American War of 1898. A Filipino boxing trainer claimed that the sport found a home in the islands almost as soon as Commodore George Dewey's battleships landed in Manila Bay. A number of the ships' personnel were fans and former students of the legendary bare-knuckle prizefighter Boston Strongboy, the "Great John L." Sullivan. Initially, the soldiers held exhibition bouts only among themselves for their Filipino audience or gave private informal lessons to young Filipinos, until 1910 when boxing became legal in the colony. When several Filipino boxers began earning distinction in Manila and other Asian countries, American recruiters and trainers, including Frank Churchill, Joe Waterman, and Bill and Eddie Tate, went to the islands to coach the Filipino pugilists and to prepare them for export to the United States.³⁷

While Filipinos first learned of prizefighting through soldiers, instruction in American sports, including boxing and baseball, became part of the U.S. policies of colonization and de-Filipinoization through education. In addition to the brutal repression of Filipino nationalist movements through military campaigns, the U.S. government established a public school system based on the American model and implemented English as the medium of instruction.³⁸ American teachers and missionaries went to the Philippines determined to eradicate what they considered the Filipinos' "reprehensible vices," especially gambling and cockfighting, through American institutions that they believed inculcated the "character building" values of democracy, industry, honesty, thrift, good sportsmanship, and patriotism.³⁹

Protestant missionaries joined American teachers and officials in this venture. Some denominations, including Episcopalians and Baptists, established religious schools and dormitories for their Filipino students, despite vigorous protests from some parents. One U.S. official concluded that "once the dormitories were in operation, it soon became obvious that they offered an excellent *milieu* for the cultivation of behavior, attitudes and manners incorporating the values that the Americans, official and private, were seeking to inculcate. In the environment of the dormitory, a home away from home, it was possible to promote the dormitory managers' concepts of democracy, honesty, industry, responsibility, and punctuality."⁴⁰