

**Debutante Splendor:  
An Instrument of Cultural Resistance and Empowerment for Filipinos in America**

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**Introduction**

Among first- and second-generation Filipino Americans, debutantes (or “debut”)—coming-of-age celebrations for girls turning eighteen—almost always elicit an opinion. For some, the mere mention of one ignites an instant spark of nostalgia or wistfulness; for others, it incites annoyance or exasperation. For the latter, their reaction often derives from sheer incomprehension. They cannot understand why a middle-class Filipino American family would finance a debut when they could get their daughter a car or a year of college instead. They are troubled by the fact that working-class Filipino Americans would toil at second and third jobs, max out their credit cards, and take out loans— all in order to throw a birthday party that costs in excess of three months of their household income. For them and many other Americans, the incredible investments of time, energy, and financial resources required by debuts seem lavish, frivolous, and just don’t make sense. But for those who plan and coordinate them—people like those I study—*not* having one, when you have the means, is more unfathomable.

The talk I’m sharing today, “**Debutante Splendor: An Instrument of Cultural Resistance and Empowerment for Filipinos in America**” will describe one slice of my larger work on Filipino and Mexican American female coming-of-age rituals. While my

research asks the broader, comparative question, *What is the sociological significance of Filipino debutantes and Mexican quinceañeras for their respective organizers, participants, and communities?*, this talk will focus on the smaller question of, *In contrast to any unfavorable impressions, how do Filipina debutantes actually serve as spaces for “correcting” and re-claiming power to craft self-representations of Filipinos in the United States?*

Before I begin discussing these questions, I will give a little background, briefly describing debutantes and my research method. Afterward, I will summarize the major criticisms of debuts; then I will describe what these criticisms conceal about how debutantes can and do provide the rare and indispensable opportunity to gracefully and *publicly* challenge a history of degradation by and in America. In doing so, I hope to put forward the idea that, while the processes and outcomes of producing a Filipina debut can be problematic, this does not preclude the fact that they can serve as effective contestatory vehicles for Filipinos who desire to provide themselves and the public with more accurate representations of ourselves, our families, and our communities.

## **Background**

Before I get into my findings, a description of the events I am studying, and how I am studying them, is called for.

Filipina debutantes (or “debuts”) are usually formal, elaborately planned, and expensive coming-of-age celebrations that mark a girl’s entry into life as a young “lady.” While

they are “the province of the upper crust” in the Philippines, “the custom has gained favor with middle-class Filipino Americans [and has] become a part of the Filipino American experience for many families” (Kim 2001: A-1).

Traditional Filipino debuts “present” up to two-dozen “debutantes,” each accompanied by a male peer “escort,” at the same event, the year of their eighteenth birthdays. In the past, they were often annual cotillions organized by local community organizations; of late, debuts for only one girl, organized by the celebrant and/ or her family, have become more common. Debutantes usually consist of a special reception with a meal, and some kind of choreographed group dance (often a waltz) to showcase the debutante(s), their male escort(s), and an entourage of peers (if it is an individual celebration). Recently, the Filipino American-written, -directed, and -produced independent film, “The Debut,” featured a recreation-center debutante for one daughter, which incorporated traditional Filipino dancing and cuisine with American choreography and other elements. This demonstrates both growing popular recognition of debutantes as part of Filipino American life, and the constant transformation of this cultural ritual in the United States.

My study of Pinoy debutantes combines in-depth interviews and field observations with past and current celebrants, participants, and service providers between 2003 and 2005, and represents over 875 California debutantes and *quinceañeras*. Specific to debutantes, I conducted 18 “primary interviews” with individuals in families who had already had a debutante for at least one daughter. Of these, I “shadowed” the planning, execution, and post-celebration of three families’ events. In addition, I conducted nine “secondary

interviews,” representing over 300 debuts, with selected planning or event participants (including clergy, dressmakers, photographers, shop owners, and other service providers), five group discussions about coming-of-age, with a total of 82 Filipino and Mexican second-generation individuals, between ages 14-20; and various informal interviews with escorts, other “court” members, other immediate and extended family members, and invited guests, which I have not “officially” counted, but whose insights have also helped my analysis.

### **Criticisms**

As I alluded in the beginning, debutantes have been subject to just as much, if not more, criticism as praise, especially among Filipinos themselves. The foremost criticisms of debutantes are that they are “wastes of money” (rather than wise “investments” in the future), promote frivolity and an injudicious attention to fostering an “appearance” of success (rather than industriousness and the genuine attainment of success), and contribute to the persistence of highly managed and constricting “traditional” femininities for young Filipinas (rather than encouraging the development of more “modern,” self-determined ways of being female for these youth).

These criticisms are not without merit. With “typical” debutante expenses starting at around \$12,000, while the average price of a car starts at \$12,500 (CNN Money 2004; Reed and DiPietro 2005),<sup>1</sup> the average wedding budget is \$20,000 (The Knot 2005), and the cost of full-time undergraduate attendance at a public university ranges from \$10,000

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<sup>1</sup> Average used car price is \$12,500 and average manufacturer's suggested retail price for cars and light trucks is \$30,481.

to over \$23,000 per year (California Department of Finance 2005), it is no wonder that many grumble that,

I cannot think of a worse way to blow thousands of dollars.... It [the price of a cotillion] could've been a down payment for a nice car. It could've been tuition for college.... What about your college graduation? Your wedding? Your first baby shower? (published response to Pastor 2004)

And since these celebrations are purportedly adaptations of Spanish customs, it is not far-fetched to imagine that they implicitly elevate the patriarchal and self-indulgent culture of previous colonizers since the earliest debutantes are said to have venerated European ideals of femininity and “female sexual purity”.

But while it is true (and I don't want to underplay) that some aspects of what debutantes are criticized for seem like sure paths towards financial failure, racial and ethnic self-loathing, and (continued) secondary status for females, their prominence in the discourse about such events has helped to inhibit serious exploration of the ways debuts are actually experienced and felt by the individuals, families, and communities who organize them. For example, despite criticisms of debuts as potentially ruinous, nearly all of the current and former debutantes in my study cited that one of the most conspicuous outcomes of their extravagant birthday celebrations was “more self-esteem” and increased “pride” in being Filipino. College students and graduates and school and community leaders were prominent among the young females who spoke to me. And many former celebrants I spoke with had unequivocally attained middle and upper-middle class status as adults.

For the remainder of my talk, I aim to demonstrate how these rituals can actually be valuable cultural sites for reclaiming the right to establish and articulate one's own identities, and for building and augmenting important resources for survival and success.

## **Findings**

Debutantes provide Filipino Americans with a public opportunity to correct insulting and erroneous judgments of them and their communities as unrefined, incapable, “low class,” and altogether less successful.

Because of a long history of colonization and degradation by Western powers, Filipinos are highly conscious of the fact that, if they are not “invisible” to most Americans, they are considered “second class citizens.”

One of the longest-standing and most painful Western stereotypes of Filipinos is that we are “uncivilized” and are culturally deficient. A conversation in *Noli Me Tangere* illustrates how both the Spanish *and* the Filipino aristocracy began to characterize Philippine natives as depraved and uncultured early in Filipino history. When a young Spanish emissary challenges a Spanish priest by asking, “Are the natives really *born* lazy?” the priest retorts, “The ignorance and laziness of these fellows cannot be matched.” Then, his Filipino host concurs that, “There is nobody lazier in the whole wide world than the native of these parts... [n]or so ill-bred!” (Rizal 1961). Centuries later, representations of Filipinos as depraved savages still persist. In 1994, journalist

James Fallows characterized Filipino culture as “damaged” (Fallows 1994) and “trashy;” and, as recently as 1998, Filipinos have been charged with

...having no architectural, artistic, or cultural influence [like] the great countries in Asia... [because] these people are actually more closely related to African Americans and Mexican Americans.<sup>2</sup>

My research on debutantes and Filipino immigrant families has shown that these events are used to stylishly contest such wrong and racist stereotypes at two levels: at the internal level between generations and between community members; and on the external level, between the Filipino community and various outsiders who are considered members of the dominant mainstream.

Parents who were concerned about the maintenance/ loss of their “culture” spoke of debuts as a way to help them “preserve” Filipino culture in the United States via their children. For instance, Ramiro Hernandez, a Filipino father, said that one reason he thought it was important for his daughter to have a debutante was because

We [he and his wife] didn’t raise her with the [Filipino] language or the history because we didn’t want them [his children] to have any disadvantages in school. That’s how we thought back then. We thought we just wanted them to be American kids, because they were going to be in American schools, growing up here in America.... But when she turned 18... it was time for her to learn about herself, to learn about her family, and where she came from.

And Josie Espalda said that elevating Filipino culture for Filipino participants was a central aim of the Pilipina Ladies’ Association of Southern California’s (“Ladies’ Association) annual debutante balls:

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<sup>2</sup> This accusation is included in a widely circulated e-mail titled, “Hate Letter Against Filipinos.” The creators of this e-mail have tried to credit radio personality, Art Bell, with authoring it; but it has been traced as originating from an account at the University of California, San Diego in 1998.

We tell them what it entails to be a debutante. We tell them, and the girls are made aware that this is a cultural thing. So that gets them into thinking about where they came from. At least they can know that we are also civilized people [laughing], and culturally-gearred people.... Most kids don't understand the Philippines.... They don't know about their culture, about how elegant the Filipinos are....

Thus, at an internal level, the debutantes in my study helped immigrants to “maintain” and uplift their culture in the United States by providing them with a venue for imparting what they feel are definitive cultural beliefs, values, and practices to members of the second generation.

Consequently, they also operated to aid in the retention and/ or restoration of parents' generational authority over their American-born offspring, by allowing immigrants to assert a seemingly indisputable cultural expertise over the second-generation. Debutantes allow some immigrant parents to establish themselves as “experts” on what is “authentically” “Filipino,” gaining them respect for “alone” holding the knowledge the second-generation requires to form meaningful cultural identities to understand what is, and how they are and/ or can become “truly” “Filipino” (Espiritu 2003).

At the external level, Filipinos who were concerned about the invisibility and/ or degradation of their “culture” in the United States by people *outside* of their respective communities also viewed debuts as ways to promote a positive image in the larger, mainstream community. For example, several debutante organizers said that they felt that having non-Filipinos hear about and/or experience a grand cotillion can help communicate “how elegant Filipinos are” to the larger public. Eli Dizon remarked that,

It's [the debutante tradition] impressive, especially if you expose non-Filipinos to it. They comment on how graceful and organized the balls are; and it makes you proud to be Filipino.

And Helen Martines said that uplifting Filipino culture in public is central to the Leonor Rivera Pilipina Society (LRPS) mission. She said,

All LRPS wants to do is show only the good side of ordinary Filipinos; and maybe that's why the *City Tribune*<sup>3</sup> presents us all the time.... We do not want to hurt anybody, only to promote the good of our people through education and through social activities, ... to show that we have a history here.

Immigrants communicate that their cultures are “elegant” and “beautiful” by using their daughters’ coming-of-age rituals to demonstrate that, in contrast to images of them as “low-class” and even “savage,” they are familiar with aristocratic manners and conventions. Beautiful, lavish debutantes in the United States are events that call to mind nobility and sophistication. Their costumes—tiaras, magnificent dresses, and tuxedos; their casts-of-characters—entourages of young pages and ladies-in-waiting; their choreographed pageantry—a formal entrance, an invocation, a stately ballroom cotillion; and their setting—a grand hall (or at least something meant to resemble one), all evoke impressions of royal courts and nobility.

Furthermore, debutantes also suggest material wealth, which in turn suggests that immigrants are morally, as well as financially, successful. In modern capitalist societies, wealth is conflated with success, and connotes virtue, decency, and “being good” (De Botton 2004). The attainment of financial success has come to represent God-given talent, drive, and usefulness, while poverty is seen as an indication of ineptitude, idleness,

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<sup>3</sup> Pseudonym for local city newspaper

and even moral depravity. Although immigrant organizers of debutantes do not imagine that anyone is convinced that they regularly participate in the upper-class lifestyle emulated in their grand celebrations, they do feel that their ability to organize such events does reflect well on them. This is because, at minimum, it reflects an earnest aspiration to achieve such success; and at utmost, it suggests that these families actually are accustomed to a superior standard of living, but are experiencing a temporary, generational “blip” due to immigration.

Much of the internal and external power of debutantes is due to the suggestion that these are “homeland traditions,” dating back to a very distant past. Characterizing debutantes as “traditions” creates the impression that their association with Filipinos, and with wealth and noble refinement is something deeply—perhaps even, naturally—entrenched. This is an exceptional way to contend degrading notions of Filipinos as “uncivilized” and “ill-bred,” because it enables Filipinos to demonstrate that they have been all the things that debutantes are meant to portray them as—proper, honorable, dignified, and, above all, worthy of enormous respect—*throughout history*.

The effectiveness of debuts and *quinces* as tools for challenging undesirable cultural stereotypes and engendering a sense of respect for Filipino culture can be seen in the post-celebration reflections of many former participants and guests. For example, Annabel Currabeg, a former LRPS debutante, described her debutante experience as “one of the best experiences I’ve ever had in my life,” and said that this was partially because,

They [LRPS] make you think and really re-evaluate who you are as a Filipina American and your family background, so you know the cultural experience here as a Fil-Am in America. That [during her

debutante] is when I started asking my dad questions [about being Filipino American]..... That is when I realized that, “I did not know about this and that.” ...I only learned a portion of like my Fil-Am exploration thing; but it definitely did open the door to learning more about my culture and myself.

Several former debutantes commented on how it was “cool” to “open the eyes” of their “white friends” by exposing them to a “different tradition.” And guests of different race and ethnic backgrounds often commented on how much they enjoyed witnessing and sharing in such “gorgeous,” “remarkable,” and “classy” events. I overheard more than a few white female guests exclaim that, “I wish we had something like this!” at various celebrations I observed.

All this verifies that, contrary to notions of debutantes as entirely inconsequential and “worthless,” these events actually serve as valuable instruments of cultural resistance. This does not invalidate concerns that debuts can mislead participants into *over*-valuing appearances and/ or being over-concerned with status, both of which can divert valuable time, energy, and resources from the pursuit of endeavors, like a college education, which have been proven to improve one’s status beyond surface-levels. But it is indicative of the fact that, notwithstanding, these rituals can still serve as effective sites of cultural contestation.

### **Implications**

The inconsistencies between prevailing criticisms of debutantes and my data call attention to how, paradoxically, criticisms of debuts as culturally degrading, anti-feminist, and economically impractical are, in part, based on chauvinistic ways of

thinking which define aesthetic, female-, and/ or family-focused activities as “feminine.” Such outlooks privilege economic rationality, males, and the public sphere; and they define what is feminine as frivolous, “and that which is frivolous as... feminine” (Best 2000). They present females with an atrocious Catch-22: Women and girls must publicly assert their identities to obtain respect, but when they do, they are derided since females and the spaces they have access to have already been deemed inferior. This suggests that, even if debuts were uniformly inexpensive *and* invented by indigenous Filipinos, they would still be considered trivial and irresponsible because they are forms of artistic expression, organized by families, *for girls*. I find this ironic, considering that, according to our pre-colonial creation legend, woman and man, beauty (*maganda*) and strength (*malakas*), were brought into being simultaneously, denoting equivalence, and the idea that neither should be esteemed more than the other.

The contrast between concerns over debutantes and the positive experiences of all of my current and former celebrants also help reveal that these events disturb people because they violate capitalist society’s unwritten “consumption rules for different social classes” (Otnes and Pleck 2003). These conventions maintain that the wealthy can justify spending on non-essential luxuries, but people of more modest means should only spend their money on what society approves of (e.g., a wedding) or believes they “need” (e.g., college). This overlooks what psychologists and behavioral scientists take for granted: that “play” is an essential “need” for everybody; and that rather than being diametrically opposed to work, play supplements it. “Play is fundamentally important,” because without creative and recreational outlets, we deplete our abilities to efficiently problem-

solve, communicate, and be productive (i.e., “work!”) (Institute for Play September 2003).

While many Americans have fulfilling occupations where they find constant “renewal,” immigrants often find themselves in positions which make them feel degraded, powerless, and/ or invisible. Through beautiful and extraordinary debuts, some of them are able to fashion themselves “domains of creativity” where, under the pretext of “following cultural tradition,” they are able to freely experience and enjoy the various benefits of play. Many of the immigrants and children who spoke to me for this study would still say that such activity, although expensive, is well-worth the *necessary* (and rare) replenishment of the imagination, body, and soul it gives them, which, in turn, helps them better deal with the frequently disinterested (if not hostile) environments they face in the United States.

## **Conclusion**

In short, my data suggest that debuts are not (as some critics might imply) *inevitably* petty and foolish. On the contrary, they demonstrate that participation in debuts can actually promote the development of a sense of race and ethnic dignity, female empowerment, and/or upward mobility for participants. Criticisms of grand debuts as “worthless” and nothing but “overpriced dances” are defensible, but they fail to recognize the existence of many happy, confident, high achieving, and successful former participants for whom these events generate real meaning. These rituals can actually be

valuable cultural sites for reclaiming the right to establish and articulate one's own identities, and for building and augmenting important resources for survival and success.

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