



HISTORICAL PRESENCE IN VISUAL CULTURE

Contemporaneity

Vol 10, No 1 (2025) | ISSN 2153-5914 (online) | DOI 10.5195/contemp/2025.345
<http://contemporaneity.pitt.edu>

In averting my eyes, I see what lies ahead

alejandro t. acierto

About the Author

alejandro t. acierto is Assistant Professor of Digital Arts at Wayne State University. acierto produces creative projects, exhibitions, and performances that highlight the impact of colonial legacies across technologies, material culture, and the environment.

In averting my eyes, I see what lies ahead

alejandro t. acierto

As part of an ongoing set of performances, I worked with eight postcards housed in the *Archive of Constraint*, a critical, evolving collection of colonial-era visual culture from the U.S. occupation of the Philippines. These postcards depicted a public execution by hanging inside a prison yard in the southern Philippines. Handwritten captions at the bottom read, "Execution of Moros." The sequential images sensationalized the death of three incarcerated men, who remained hooded and anonymized across each image. They were not

referred to by name in the captions and were only identified as Moros. The photos, dated 1911, were slightly silvered and weathered by age. They were likely destined for photobooks intended for US service members and their families.

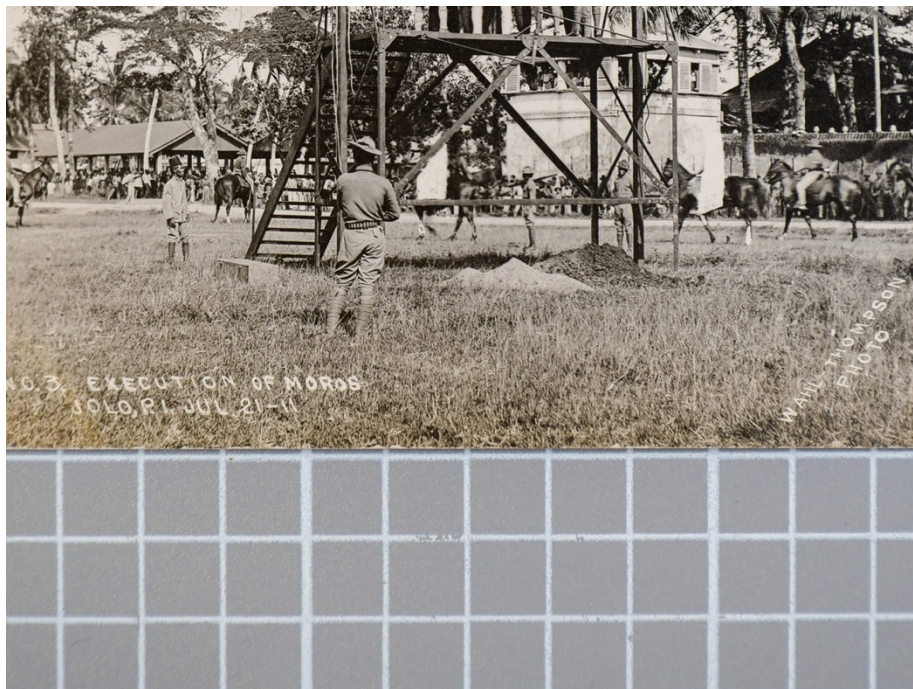


Figure 1

No. 3 Execution of Moros. Photograph by Wahl-Thompson, July 21, 1911. Item [2020.1.3] from *The Archive of Constraint*, <https://archiveofconstraint.com>. Cropped photograph courtesy of the author.

In several frames of this eight-postcard sequence, entire figures had been cut out of the photographs from the event. These figures had likely directed photographers to remove them from the scene before their images could be monetized. Mounted on horses and framed by the gallows they are positioned behind, they now appear only as body-shaped empty spaces. Their imprecise occlusions grapple with tensions of visibility and the evidentiary documentation that would allow for further study. Sitting with these images, I was curious to understand how this intentional erasure established an imperial opacity—one that begged the question: who has the power to *not* be seen?

At a time when panoptic surveillance measures were integral to the colonial project, partially due to the panoptical architecture of the Bilibid Prison in the northern region of the Philippines, the rapid pace of new image-making technologies and methods exacerbated who

and what could (and needed) to be seen. An abundance of images of Indigenous people from the Philippines appeared in publications like Daniel Folkmar's *Album of Philippine Types (Found in Bilibid Prison in 1903): Christians and Moros (Including a Few Non-Christians)*,¹ which was printed in the Philippines in 1904 and distributed in the United States for the public debut of the Philippine Village during the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. Dean Conant Worcester's articles for *National Geographic* between 1898 and 1913 established additional images. Embedded within these photographs were imperial commitments to shaping narratives of power. Intended for US and global consumption, they shaped how "savagery" and US policies of benevolent assimilation were felt and expressed among the broader public.²

No other institutional repositories with materials from the same era could provide any further context for these public executions, which distinguishes the *Archive of Constraint* from other collections. Though the *Archive's* holdings contained additional sets of photographs that presented that event from three to four different angles (marking its significance), the same figures that were cut out of the postcards had been erased from every image. Visits to the Smithsonian, University of Michigan Special Collections, and Library of Congress provided inconclusive results. Other searches, and conversations with scholars of this time and geography, led to unavailable newspapers or nonexistent sources. Occasionally, hints about similar occurrences were buried in secondary writings by travel authors, who alluded to routine suppression of insurgent outbursts through carceral tactics. Were these evidentiary obscurities also functions of an imperial opacity? How might a long-term engagement through performance relieve these images from their colonial legacy?


Ken Gonzalez-Day's photographs from his *Erased Lynchings* series, made between 2002 and 2006, focus on the spectators of racialized aggression to "invite a rethinking of American history and Western history in particular."³ His *Erased Lynchings* deploy erasure as a gesture of repair; by inverting America's racial legacy, they invite viewers to question the punctum of racial violence. By contrast, Wahl-Thompson's photo series from 1911 illustrates the construction of history through intentional erasures. While Gonzalez-Day's source materials are well documented without his intervention—opening numerous alternatives to repair beyond his conceptual deployment of erasure—the Wahl-Thompson photographs disabled any future in which the photograph's invisible characters could be known. That inability to know articulates a declaration of power, portrayed through intentional destruction of the photograph's negatives. It provides a materialization of imperial opacity that prohibits accountability. These are histories that cannot be repaired.

But if visual erasure operates to shape the conditions of history's expressions, I want to provoke a kind of radical visibility that contributes to strategies of anti-colonial reparation. Performing indexicality—whether through writing or imaging—allows for recognition without glorification. Rather, by embracing erasure's legacy, I open the possibilities *to move on, to let go, to no longer look*.

¹ Daniel Folkmar, *Album of Philippine Types (Found in Bilibid Prison in 1903): Christians and Moros (Including a Few Non-Christians)* (Manila: Bureau of Public Printing, 1904).

² Nerrisa Balce, *Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive* (University of Michigan Press, 2016), 173.

³ Ken Gonzalez-Day, "Erased Lynchings," *Ken Gonzales-Day* (blog), November 12, 2016, <https://kengonzalesday.com/projects/erased-lynchings/>.

 New articles in this journal are licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 United States License.



This journal is published by [Pitt Open Library Publishing](http://pittopenlibrarypublishing.com).