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Q&A with Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns: Studying the Interlocking Genealogies of the Filipino American Performing Body

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# LUCY MAE SAN PABLO BURNS

*Studying the interlocking genealogies of the Filipino American performing body*

Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns, who joined the Department of Asian American Studies at UCLA in 2005, recently received a CSW Faculty Development Grant to support her research for “Puro Arte: On the Filipino Performing Body.” She kindly agreed to talk with us about her current project and activities.

*Can you tell us a bit about “Puro Arte: On the Filipino Performing Body”?*

*“Puro Arte: On the Filipino Performing Body” is a book-length study of the emergence of Filipino American theater and performance. It stresses the Filipino performing body’s interlocking genealogies as it conjoins colonial histories of the Philippines with U.S. race relations and discourses of globalization. In *Puro Arte*, I stage a conversation between colonial constructions of and contempo-*

*rary performance practices by Filipinos and Filipino Americans, such as in U.S. taxi dance halls, anti-martial law theater, and the play *Miss Saigon*. I do so by bringing together a diverse set of materials through an interdisciplinary research method combining performance theory, close textual analysis of plays and other cultural texts, archival research, and oral interviews of performers, playwrights, directors, and other cultural producers.*

*Part of what I am exploring in this book is how certain bodies come to have*

metaphorical and/or analogical value. In other words, I'm interested in the process by which some bodies can easily and unquestionably call up a world and others are reduced to particularity.

*Puro arte*, translated from Spanish into English, simply means "pure art." In Filipino, however, *puro arte* performs a more ironic function, gesturing rather to the labor of overacting, histrionics, playfulness, and purely over-the-top dramatics. *Puro arte lang iyan* is phrase I often heard as a child. I can still hear my aunt's dismissive tone as she brushed aside my complaint as simply a show I was putting on. To be called out as *puro arte* is to call into question one's veracity, genuineness.

My taking of *puro arte* as a descriptive metaphor for the emergence of the Filipino performing body is inspired by the sentiment and creative "flippin'" that poet/performance artist joelbtan makes in his poem "ignacio—in 2 parts" (*seguro* in Spanish means "surely"; *seguro* in Tagalog means "probably"). Like tan, I perform an appropriative act

that considers and highlights the labor and productive possibilities of *puro arte* in the history of the Philippines colonization.

### *What else are you working on?*

I am lucky to be in collaboration with two great scholars in the UC system—Professor Christine Bacareza Balance (Asian American Studies, UC Irvine) and Kevin Fellezs (Music, UC Merced)—as we organize a workshop symposium, titled "California Dreaming: Production and Aesthetics in Asian American Art." This gathering explores artistic processes and the circulation of art objects to understand the place of California in the artistic imaginary. With "California Dreaming," we approach "California" as both a specific locale and an identity marker that circulates, tying the state's artistic imaginary, labor, and economy to Asia Pacific, the Americas, and the world.

Another project I am working is one that considers the intersection of performance and migration. In brief, the main question animating this project is what do performance and migration, as analytical frame-

works and fields of study, offer to our understanding of migrancy as a condition of contemporary late twentieth/early twenty-first century?

I continue to be interested in dramaturgy work, though that has taken a back seat when I began my job here at UCLA. I am fortunate to be working on one of the best projects I've ever been involved in, a play titled *How to Make it to the Dance Floor: A Salsa Guide for Women (Based on Actual Experiences)* by Cindy García (Professor of Dance at the University of Minnesota and a UCLA alum) The play explores many things including social relations amongst Latino migrants, power and gender, and (perceived and actual) battles between different styles of salsa dancing. In the play, which is set in a salsa dance club, a lot happens in one night: Guadalupe and Coatlatlopeuh reunite after more than five hundred years of being separated by colonial violence, Cuban singer diva (and long-dead) La Lupe shows up, and a red-headed Chicana feminist ethnographer

initiates revolutionary rumblings—all because she uses the bathroom stalls to note down her observations. It is action-packed, funny, chaotic—dead icons coming in, lines from another play make it in there, a head is served on a platter, and a skeleton goddess wonders why she is not being asked to dance. Plus the salsa dancing styles and a live DJ! While it is all that, *How to Make it to the Dance Floor* is also heart-breaking and introspective. By the way, we're not finished with it yet!

***What courses are you teaching? Are you planning any new one?***

Some of courses I have taught here at UCLA are Feminist Performance and Race, Introduction to Filipino American Studies, The Art of Protest, and Exploring Asian American Theater. I'm teaching these last two courses in spring quarter and it's really exciting.

There are two new courses that I'm hoping to teach next year—Cultures Of and Against Empire and Dressing the Nation. In Dressing the Nation, I'm putting together a class that builds from an essay

I wrote on the performance of the *terno* (also known as the butterfly dress, the Philippine national costume). The class will cover a range of topics exploring racial formation and embodiment through clothing, costume, fashion, and dressing practices.

***Has the presence CSW on campus been important to you and to your fellow faculty members?***

In my time as an Assistant Professor here at UCLA, CSW has been one of the most supportive units outside of my department. I think it has the most dynamic programming of the many centers on campus. I'm always adding CSW events to my calendar. For example, I attended "Exploring Metaculture with Devil Bunny" (yay Gigi!). And, I recommended it to my students as well!

CSW has been incredibly committed to junior faculty, especially junior faculty of color. I have benefited greatly from that—I've been a part of a faculty-curated reading group, co-organized a year-long series on transnational feminisms

and comparative racialization through the Center, and most recently received a Faculty Development Grant towards the completion of my manuscript. Last year, CSW provided me the tremendous opportunity of receiving feedback on my book-in-progress.

I think CSW is one of the most realized centers on campus. It has such a diversity of programming, and it is clearly an intellectual unit. I also appreciate its feminist approach to achieving it multifaceted programming through opportunities such as curatorial grants for faculty and research scholars.

*Lucy Mae San Pablo Burns is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Asian American Studies at UCLA. Her publications include an anthology titled The Color of Theater (edited with Roberta Uno). She received a CSW Faculty Development Grant to support her research for "Puro Arte: On the Filipino Performing Body."*

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