

Stories Told About the Nineteenth-Century Filipino Settlement at St. Malo, Louisiana

RANDY GONZALES

An 1899 article about Filipinos in Louisiana begins “perhaps there is not a score of geographers or historians in all the United States who even know that Louisiana contains a Filipino colony” (The Queer Home 1899). Even today few know about St. Malo, the first permanent Filipino settlement in the United States. The story of the nineteenth-century village has been difficult to document. The remote village was outside the range of census takers and the postal service and lacked the interaction with government services that leave historical records. We have few written accounts of St. Malo, forcing us to depend on several feature articles that tell us as much about contemporary audiences as they do about the settlement. In these accounts, descriptions of life in the marsh are framed by a contemporary legend that differentiates the Filipino settlers.

Randy Gonzales is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Randy is interested in telling the story of Filipino migration and settlement in Louisiana. He is co-vice-president of the Philippine Louisiana Historical Society, which recently erected Louisiana historical markers to commemorate the Filipino settlements of St. Malo and Manila Village. You can find out more about Filipinos in Louisiana at filipinola.com.

Louisiana Folklore Miscellany 29 (2019): -

A Fishing Village

The village of St. Malo was established by Filipino seamen who left their ships and found in Bayou St. Malo a safe harbor and ready access to seafood.¹ St. Malo was deeper into the wetlands than most were willing to live or work, a location that allowed Filipinos to lay claim to some of the best fishing grounds in the region. A remote outpost accessible only by boat, St. Malo was built to take advantage of the nearby fisheries and meet the demand for seafood in New Orleans. It became the largest fishing camp on Lake Borgne with thirteen cypress buildings and the capacity to house up to 150 people.² Filipino fishermen would catch fish in the spring, shrimp in the summer, and gather oysters in the winter. The village served as a wholesale market for seafood merchants and a port of departure for fishing expeditions further down the southern shore of Lake Borgne and into the Gulf of Mexico. The prosperity of the village made it notable in St. Bernard Parish. Filipinos from St. Malo were regular visitors to Proctorville, the nearest port and the terminus of the Mexican Gulf Railroad line that connected the Parish to New Orleans. Amongst Proctorville residents, the presence of Spanish-speaking “Malays” or “Chinese” wouldn’t have been noteworthy. For visitors, mostly merchants and tourists, their presence deserved a story. Tales about the Filipino settlers made their way into the city and eventually into newsprint.

The City and the “Oriental Settlement”

In the nineteenth century, Manilamen stoked the imagination of New Orleans as tales of murdering “Orientals” circulated through the markets. Sensational descriptions rendered St. Malo as a Caribbean pirate town or smuggler hideout. The swash-buckling narrative included reports of the murder of the “first oblique-eyed beauty from beyond the Yellow Sea” to reside in the all-male village of St. Malo (Hearn St. Malo 1883, 198). The story of the death of the last woman at St. Malo was worth investigating. *The Times-Democrat* chartered a vessel for a week-long “excursion to the swampy regions of Southern Louisiana” (Hearn St. Malo 1883: 198). Lafcadio Hearn questioned the validity of “The Death of the Last Woman at St. Malo.” He had contracted with *Harper’s* to write a series of Southern sketches to accompany the work of the artist J.O. Davidson. The trip would provide Davidson with “a totally novel subject” and add portraits of Asians in the swamp to an already diverse Louisiana

gallery (Hearn St. Malo 1883: 198). The trip resulted in two articles: "Saint Malo: A Lacustrine Village in Louisiana" by Hearn for the national readership of the *Harper's Weekly* and "St. Malo: The Times-Democrat Expedition to that Mysterious Island" by an anonymous *Times-Democrat* reporter.

In 1883, the "reedy swamps south of Lake Borgne" were the Louisiana frontier (Hearn St. Malo: 198). Although less than fifty miles from New Orleans, the wetlands of Lake Borgne were considered remote. A boat trip to St. Malo cut across geographical borders Hearn described as a "wilderness of swamp grass, miles of absolute desolation" and "a shallow and treacherous sea" (Hearn St. Malo 1883: 198). Hearn's description highlights the contrast between New Orleans, "the civilized centre," and St. Malo, "an oriental settlement." His rhetoric foregrounds a contrast between the "civilized" city newspaper readers and the "uncivilized" settlers. In the nineteenth century, ideas about civilization were tied to the technological advances evident in cities. *The Times-Democrat* characterized nineteenth-century civilization as a "splendor of electric lights and gildings, with ringing of telephones and railroad bells, with centers of telegraphic webwork, with broad thoroughfares and palatial warehouses, all over canopied with the artificial clouds of smoke and steam" (Saint-Malo 1883). Without these industrial features, St. Malo was considered uninhabitable. Eurocentric ideas of civilization differentiated the settlers of St. Malo from the residents of New Orleans, with some writers comparing the living conditions of St. Malo to prehistoric European or modern Southeast Asian villages (Saint-Malo 1883). St. Malo lacked features New Orleanians identified with civilized society. The village had "no newspapers or telegraphs, no courts, no laws, no police, no hotels, no barrooms, no spirits, no churches, no missionaries, no women!" (Saint-Malo 1883).

St. Malo remained mostly unknown to residents of New Orleans. A "Malay" village on Lake Borgne was occasionally referenced in the news, but the village was never fully incorporated into general knowledge about the region. The first newsworthy event involving the Manilamen occurred in 1860. Filipino and Spanish fishermen had a violent dispute over access to the market at Proctorville. Spanish fishermen killed two Manilamen as part of a campaign to monopolize the market and control the flow of fish to New Orleans. With the threat of increased prices for seafood, the

newspapers threw their support behind the Filipino fishermen, who outnumbered the Spanish and brought significantly more fish to market (The War of the Fishermen 1860). The increased awareness of St. Malo and the Filipino fishermen was brief. The few proceeding articles had to define the village anew, suggesting the readership knew little about St. Malo. An 1882 article in *The Times-Picayune* described the Manilamen of St. Malo as a “remarkable community” that had grown “quite prosperous” from fishing and working on nearby plantations (The Lake Borgne Railroad 1882). News coverage of St. Malo was so sporadic that in 1883 Hearn claimed “the world in general ignored” the village (Hearn 1883: 198).

Media studies scholar James Carey explains that in the ritual view of communication, news articles reflect the worldview of a publication’s audience. Carey describes reading a newspaper as a ritual act in which the text conforms to readers cultural expectations and helps them construct “an ordered, meaningful cultural world” (Carey 1988: 18-9). Writers and editors frame the news to fit their audience’s worldview, and audiences select and interpret the news to fit their understanding of the world. The ritual view of communication helps explain the city-centric and Eurocentric perspective of New Orleans newspapers. This perspective is evident in various claims of discovering St. Malo. Hearn’s claim that St. Malo was ignored articulates a Eurocentric perspective that people are not known or significant unless “discovered” and “documented” by Western civilization, or national newspapers. An 1883 *The Times-Democrat* article claims that little would be known about the village if not for “a most enterprising Jewish peddler” who a few years earlier “paddled his way” to St. Malo to sell his wares (Saint-Malo 1883). The claim ignores the relationship between the inhabitants of St. Malo and the residents of lower St. Bernard and seems to dismiss them as reliable informants.

With up to two thousand Filipinos in and around New Orleans, their presence was no secret.³ But knowledge of their presence didn’t translate to reader interest or to inclusion into New Orleans narratives about the region. R.H. Tate, a New Orleans railroad executive, summed up this attitude when he reported on the interest in New York about Filipinos in Louisiana. Tate read “a big writeup of that settlement of ‘Manila Men’” because it was in a “foreign paper,” but asserted that he would never read “a half page descriptive article about the Manila men on the Shell Beach

[rail]road” in a New Orleans newspaper (By The By 1898). Tate suggests that the only stories worth reading are Eurocentric and city-centric. It’s likely that newspapers recognized this worldview in their readership and didn’t prioritize articles about the Filipino village on the lake, resulting in St. Malo remaining remote.

Manilamen, Malay, or Chinese

Nineteenth-century New Orleans, a port city in a state that was actively recruiting settlers, was noted for its diversity. Hearn, in an 1877 letter, said the state “thirsted for emigrants as a dry land for water” (Hearn 1877: 47). Immigrants arrived from around the world, creating an environment where labeling people by place of origin, ethnicity, language, and/or race was standard practice. Nineteenth-century newspapers regularly identified a person’s nationality or ethnicity. The crew on *The Times-Democrat* charter were Italian, the St. Malo carpenter French, the one black man in St. Malo “a Portuguese negro, perhaps a Brazilian maroon” (St. Malo: The Times-Democrat Expedition 1883). Filipinos were identified as Manilamen, Malay, or Chinese.

In the late nineteenth century, Malay could refer to ethnicity, language, or race. Malays were either people indigenous to the Malay Archipelago, Austronesian speakers from a region that stretches from Madagascar to the Pacific Islands, or a “brown” race.⁴ The ambiguity was evident in two crime reports published in *The Daily True Delta* in 1857 and 1858. In the first, two Malay apple merchants are described as “strange ethnological nondescripts whose birthplace, maternity and paternity cannot be satisfactorily determined” (A Breach of Trust 1857). In the second, a man who “jabs his fist into a Scotchman’s jar” is described as “a no-nation ‘Malay’ sort of fellow” (A Bad Jab 1858). In both cases “Malay” is a vague, negative label that doesn’t identify ethnicity, ancestry, or place of birth.

England’s colonial enterprise in the Malay Archipelago set the conditions for the proliferation of stories that demonized the indigenous people of the islands and led to “Malay” being associated with piracy and violence. Stories of Malay pirates were distributed through novels like Catherine Gore’s *Adventures in Borneo*. The negativity made its way into the English language with the word “amok” and the associated expression “like a Malay running a muck” which was used to describe a violent act

committed against random people. An 1852 *Daily Picayune* article used the expression to describe a stabbing rampage: "he became intoxicated, and in the delirium of drunkenness seized a cheese knife in a grocery, and rushed into the street, making an indiscriminate onslaught upon all he met like a Malay running a muck" (Stabbing 1852). The assailant in this story is not Malay, but the violence described in the story is associated with Malays.

Attitudes towards the Chinese were equally negative. An account of a Chinese restaurant told by Hearn provides insight into the anti-Chinese racism of the times. Hearn visited the restaurant at the urging of a Spanish friend but was reluctant because he "had heard so much of the filthiness of the Chinese" (Hearn 1879: 203). Upon entering the restaurant, Hearn was surprised to find the signage "printed half in Spanish and half in English and the room nearly full of Spaniards." Hearn was relieved to find that the owner was not Chinese, but a Filipino, "a Manilian," in which "the Mongolian blood features was scarcely visible" (Hearn 1879: 204). Hearn's description highlights the Spanish language, western fare, and the Filipino's wavy black hair, making clear that his preference for the Filipino restaurateur is based on the degree to which he has adopted the culture of the Spanish colonizer and obscured his Asian-ness.

Filipinos distanced themselves from the negative stereotypes associated with Chinese and Malays by highlighting a Spanish heritage they shared with the majority of the residents of lower St. Bernard Parish. Many early Filipino settlers of Louisiana fled Spanish rule in the Philippines. Despite their disdain for the Spanish colonizers, they highlighted the colonial status of the Philippines. They found it beneficial to define themselves as Manilamen or Hispano Filipino, the combination of which suggested they were Spanish-speaking Catholics from Manila. Harnett Kane in *Deep Delta Country* documents a Filipino's adoption of Spanish heritage as a claim to belonging. Kane recounts the story of Dr. Louis Ducros, who recalls the first time he saw someone from St. Malo: "I stood in the road and gaped and gaped, and in my excitement I told a friend to look at the Chinaman. The man, Marcelino, turned on me and pointed, 'Look here, boy, I'm no Chinaman. I talk Spanish like anybody else, and I'm a Christian!'" (Kane 1944: 113). The anecdote highlights the value of the Spanish language in St. Bernard and the

desire of Filipinos, even those of Chinese descent, to define themselves within a Spanish heritage.

Despite attempts to assimilate into the Spanish population, Filipinos were still a curiosity for many, which was a factor in making St. Malo a good subject for exoteric folklore. The terms esoteric and exoteric define the perspective from which a story is told. Exoteric tales are told from an outside perspective, often to differentiate one group from another. Esoteric tales are those that a group tells about itself. The stories New Orleanians told about the Filipinos of St. Malo are exoteric. In a multicultural state like Louisiana, cultural and ethnic differences alone were not enough to account for the "newsworthy" exoteric folklore told about the Filipinos at St. Malo. The ethnicity of St. Malo's inhabitants was notable, but the coast of Louisiana had a number of Filipino and Chinese villages. The lack of similar exoteric folklore about Manila Village and the other predominantly Filipino and Chinese villages in the Barataria Bay region suggests that ethnicity was just one factor that motivated the gossip about St. Malo.

The village was distinct for other reasons. First, it had an all-male population, a feature that was prominent in the legend that prompted *The Times-Democrat* expedition. In contrast, villages in the Barataria Bay region supported family life, with women and children living with their husbands. Second, St. Malo's remoteness shrouded the village in mystery, and called into question the character of those who chose to live in the swamp. Anyone who resided in the "uninhabitable" marsh came under suspicion, with many suggesting that the settlers chose the location as a hideout. Hearn asked if the settlers could be "desperate refugees from Spanish justice," and an oyster merchant described them as "escaped convicts" and "ticket-of-leave men" (parolees) (St. Malo: An Old-Time Visitor 1883).

The distinctiveness of St. Malo made it a viable subject for exoteric folklore. The 1883 articles that resulted from *The Times-Democrat* expedition highlighted two exoteric tales, "The Death of the Last Woman at St. Malo" and "The Man Tied to a Stake in the Marsh." Unlike most exoteric folklore, these stories were shared in the newspaper and retold again more than 25 years later, leaving us with several variations. The tales tell us little about St. Malo and its Filipino settlers, but they help us place them in the imagination of these storytellers and their audiences.

The Death of the Last Woman at St. Malo

The Times-Democrat expedition was partially motivated by the "The Death of the Last Woman at St. Malo." Hearn and *The Times-Democrat* address the story. Hearn questions the validity of it and clearly indicates that his perspective differs from the perspective of the storytellers who repeat the legend. Hearn recounts "The Death of the Last Woman at St. Malo" in the first paragraph of "Saint Malo: A Lacustrine Village in Louisiana" as partial justification for *The Times-Democrat* expedition.

"The Death of the Last Woman at St. Malo" explains why no women live at St. Malo. It tells us that a woman once lived there, but that she so disrupted the community of men that she was killed. Of the story's variations, Hearn's account is the simplest. It includes the basic plot points— woman arrives, conflict ensues, the men decide the woman is at fault, the woman is killed—, but few details beyond what we can assume he heard before he arrived at St. Malo.

For many years the inhabitants of the Oriental settlement had lived in peace and harmony without the presence of a single woman, but finally had managed to import an oblique-eyed beauty from beyond the Yellow Sea. Thereupon arose the first dissensions, provoking much shedding of blood. And at last the elders of the people had restored calm and fraternal feeling by sentencing the woman to be hewn in pieces and flung to the alligators of the bayou (Hearn St. Malo 1883: 198).

Hearn recounts the legend as if it were being told by the "voluble Italian luggermen" who brought the story to the attention of the reporters. The village is described as an "Oriental settlement" and the woman arrives "from beyond the Yellow Sea;" in other words, China. The emphasis on the Yellow Sea aligns the retelling with the story told by the luggerman, who thought St. Malo was a "'Chinese' colony." Hearn's use of quotation marks around "Chinese" differentiates the luggerman's story from his account of St. Malo as a "Malay settlement" inhabited by "Tagalas from the Philippine Islands" (Hearn St. Malo 1883, 198).

Hearn's ethnographic sensibility is evident in his article, as he clearly delineates the exoteric stories about St. Malo from his own observations of the village. *The Times-Democrat* reporter struggles to separate the exoteric view represented by "The Death of the Last Woman at St. Malo" and his observations. The New Orleans reporter privileges the exoteric view when he describes the inhabitants of St.

Malo as descendants of “eaters of human flesh” who don’t pay taxes and don’t know about elections or newspapers (The Times-Democrat Expedition 1883). *The Times-Democrat* article doesn’t directly call the Filipino settlers savages but describes them in terms that suggest they are unable or unwilling to accept the requirements of living in a civilized society.

At first, *The Times-Democrat* account is sympathetic to the male settlers, describing the inhabitants of St. Malo as no different than “the average American citizen.” The writer describes the Filipino settlers in terms the newspaper’s audience would understand as “normal,” highlighting their desire to marry and the difficulties they had with marriage. The main characters in their retelling are a husband and wife. The husband in an attempt to adopt assimilative qualities follows “the example of the average American citizen” and marries and brings his spouse to St. Malo to tend to “his little household” (The Times-Democrat Expedition 1883). This domestic drama is told from a male perspective, with the story’s conflict explained by the trope of the gossiping wife: “within a few months afterward unpleasant reports began to spread in the village... Gossip with her idle tongue invoked private enmity where brotherly love existed before, and old friends found themselves separated by some maligning slanderer.” The resolution is explained by the trope of the logical male. The men meet to discuss the cause of the conflict and quickly conclude through “the logic of facts” that the woman is the problem (The Times-Democrat Expedition 1883). If the tale ended at this point, audiences could conclude that the takeaway message is that women don’t live at St. Malo because the fishermen don’t want them there, as they would disrupt the male community with gossip.

While this shortened version of the story explains the absence of women, it doesn’t serve to differentiate the settlers, which is one of the primary purposes of exoteric tales. A sympathetic tale of the Filipino settlers as “average Americans” would not have disseminated as widely as the “The Death of the Last Woman at St. Malo,” which concludes with the settlers resolving the conflict by brutally killing the woman. *The Times-Democrat* offers two possibilities for her death: she was either tied to a stake to die slowly, or stabbed and beheaded. The brutality of each death serves to differentiate the “civilized” reader from the “savage” settler. Both options have an element of unnecessary brutality and provide

extreme endings for a problem with a simpler solution. Both options, whether true or not, once stated are associated with the inhabitants of St. Malo. From the full story, audiences can conclude that women don't live at St. Malo because they're scared that the Filipino men will kill them.

It should be noted that "The Death of the Last Woman at St. Malo" assumes that the absence of women at St. Malo meant that the men were not married, which is not accurate. We know that at least some of the men living at St. Malo were married. Hearn provides the example of Thomas De Los Santos, who had a wife and two children living in New Orleans. The owners of the large houses and the boat captains would have made enough money to keep other residences, while the migrant fishermen would have treated St. Malo as a work camp and wouldn't have brought their spouses with them. The Filipino settlers at St. Malo are like *The Times-Democrat's* "average American citizen." They are interested in marriage. Many were married, and like most in New Orleans, saw the wetlands of Lake Borgne as no place to raise a family.

The Man Tied to a Stake in the Marsh

Both Hearn and *The Times-Democrat* reporter retell the tale of "The Man Tied to a Stake in the Marsh." The story, as told amongst the inhabitants of St. Malo, is esoteric. El Maestro, a French carpenter who lives in the village, tells Hearn and *The Times-Democrat* reporter the story tells of the death of an assailant, or would-be assailant, who is tied to a stake in the marsh by his intended victim. When community leaders are brought to the location, they discover that the man has died, having been killed by the "mosquitoes and tapanoes (green head flies)" (St. Malo: *The Times-Democrat Expedition 1883*). Despite both reporters being told the tale by the same informant, presumably at the same time, Hearn and *The Times-Democrat* reporter recount two different versions, with Hearn's version more closely resembling an esoteric tale. Hearn describes a family is able to prevail against a violent attack: "In the dead of night the man was unexpectedly assailed; his wife and little boy helped to defend him." The assailant is restrained to protect the family: "tied hand and foot with fish-lines, and fastened to a stake deep driven into the swamp" (Hearn *St. Malo 1883*: 198). The man dies. His death is not the result of some malicious intent, but a consequence of living in the marsh.

In *The Times-Democrat* version, the man who is tied to a stake didn't commit a crime, but was said to be planning one: "A Manila man living a short distance from St. Malo was informed that a compadre had sworn to burn his house and murder him" (*The Times-Democrat Expedition* 1883). Unlike Hearn's account, in which the assailant is restrained in an act of self-defense, *The Times-Democrat* describes an extrajudicial act: "Some days passed when the man Gallejo met his would-be assassins [sic]... With assistance he tied the dangerous character with a strong rope so that he could move neither hand nor foot" (*The Times-Democrat Expedition* 1883). The man is restrained by several men on a rumor that he planned to commit a crime. The variation suggests that Gallejo either premeditated the killing of the man or acts without thinking through the consequences of leaving him tied in the swamp. *The Times-Democrat* interprets "The Man Tied to a Stake in the Marsh" as a "story of a crime" (*The Times-Democrat Expedition* 1883).

How do we explain the two variations? Hearn was not your average reporter. His ethnographic sensibility made him more critical of exoteric folklore and more receptive of non-normative perspectives. Hearn reports on "The Man Tied to a Stake in the Marsh" from the perspective of the villagers. The tale explains why the married men don't bring their families to live at St. Malo. It is an example of how vulnerable women would be when their husbands were out fishing. Hearn writes that "it would seem cruel to ask any woman to dwell in such a desolation, without comfort and without protection, during the long absence of the fishing-boats" (Hearn *St. Malo* 1883: 198). It's unlikely the woman in the story would have been able to fight off the intruder if her husband were not at home. The family seems to draw this same conclusion, as the woman leaves St. Malo after the attack.

While Hearn appears to recount the esoteric version of "The Man Tied to a Stake in the Marsh," *The Times-Democrat* retells the tale in a manner that aligns it with other exoteric folklore being told about the inhabitants of St. Malo. *The Times-Democrat's* version calls into question both the ethics and intellect of the settlers. When the community found the body "there was a discussion as to what should be done." The community agrees that Gallejo is not at fault because the man's "death had not been produced by human hand, the insects having killed him" (*The Times-Democrat Expedition* 1883). *The Times-Democrat* dismissively attributes the conclusion to

"Manila logic," a comment that differentiates the settlers from the newspaper's readership by implying that the villagers are letting Gallejo get away with a crime because of an inability to identify indirect causal relationships. In Hearn's version the villagers don't discuss the dead assailant. When the man was found dead, Hearn reports that "no excitement was manifested," the men "dug a grave deep in the soft gray mud" (Hearn St. Malo 1883: 198). His version ends with a Christian burial, including a grave marked with "a rude wooden cross." By attributing Christian practices to the Filipino settlers, Hearn is connecting them to the dominant culture and attesting to their place within civilized society. *The Times-Democrat* version denies the Filipino settlers this connection by describing a primitive scene in which the man is buried "in a sitting position," his "naked body" put in a "hole," and in an allusion to the manner of death, the burial site marked with a "stake" (*The Times-Democrat Expedition* 1883).

Two Audiences

The contrast in these two versions suggests the two writers had very different relationships with their subject. *The Times-Democrat* version is consistent with other attempts in the article to differentiate the settlers and align the tale with the legend that initiated the expedition. New Orleans both embraced and rejected its ethnic diversity. Stories that othered the Filipinos at St. Malo are balanced by stories that describe them fairly and positively. *The Times-Democrat* article seems to oscillate between these perspectives, at times describing the Manilamen as observed by the reporter before making claims that confirm the reader's expectation that the fishermen are uncivilized. This tension is notable when the article abruptly switches from an objective to a subjective tone. We see this shift clearly in the following section:

When the fishing is good, the speaker said sometimes he is the only person left on the "Island," as the half covered reach of the bayou bank is sometimes called. Oh, yes. These Manila men knew their fathers were eaters of human flesh (*The Times-Democrat Expedition* 1883).

The shift from a descriptive style to a question and answer format signals the change in perspective. The writer seems to transform from a sympathetic interviewer interested in learning about the village to a biased interviewer seeking to assert his

worldview. The shift makes it clear that the article shares the reader's exoteric perspective and that the inhabitants of St. Malo are not like *The Times-Democrat's* readership. The exoteric perspective nullifies humanizing descriptions and differentiates the Manilamen. In one example, the writer dismisses the comparison of the settlers to the "average American citizen" by stating that they "never acknowledge any country or pay any taxes" (*The Times-Democrat Expedition* 1883). The article makes it clear that Filipinos are not its audience; they couldn't be, since "they don't know what... a newspaper is."

Hearn wrote for a different audience. In 1883, a national audience would have no need to differentiate the Filipino settlers. The *Harper's Weekly* article was the first they heard of St. Malo or Filipinos in Louisiana. With no other Filipinos in the United States, a national audience would recognize the settlers as another unique feature of Louisiana. They wouldn't be threatened by their presence or feel a need to differentiate themselves from the Filipino settlers. In other words, they would be more receptive to the esoteric version of "The Man Tied to a Stake in the Marsh."

In Support of Annexation

In 1898, the United States had a new relationship with the Philippines and a renewed interest in Filipinos in Louisiana. Fifteen years after *The Times-Democrat* expedition, a number of national articles described Filipino communities in Louisiana. The topicality stemmed from the Battle of Manila and the United States Navy's defeat of the Spanish fleet in the Philippines. A few 1898 articles featured St. Malo and retold "The Death of the Last Woman at St. Malo" or "The Man Tied to a Stake in the Marsh." Later articles on Filipinos in Baratavia Bay, where the dried shrimp industry was booming, and did not include the tales.⁵

Two nearly identical articles about St. Malo appeared in 1898, "Louisiana's Manila Men: Savage Colonies in the Swamps Near New Orleans" published in *The Sun* and "Malays of Louisiana: Strange Colony in the Swamps of Which Little is Known" in *The Buffalo Sunday Morning News*. Both articles draw from *The Times-Democrat's* versions of "The Death of the Last Woman at St. Malo" and "The Man Tied to a Stake in the Marsh," and retell them as evidence to support assertions that the St. Malo inhabitants and Filipinos in general are savages.

The 1898 account of "The Death of the Last Woman at St. Malo" follows the same basic plot but connects the conflict to the young wife's physical appearance. Adultery, or its suggestion, complicates this version of the domestic drama:

The chief of the island had a young and very handsome wife... The woman proved false, and soon St. Malo was in the midst of a bitter quarrel which threatened to destroy the settlement. There were several men killed, and peace was not restored until the woman had disappeared (Louisiana's Manila Men 1898).

The woman's death follows the script of *The Times-Democrat* account. She was either tied to a stake or "beheaded by the outraged husband" (Louisiana's Manila Men 1898). *The Sun* states directly that the woman was decapitated, a statement that appears to derive from the suggestion of beheading in *The Times-Democrat's* description of the "severing of the bloody limbs from the headless trunk" (The Times-Democrat Expedition 1883). *The Sun* through circular logic uses the story to support an opinion that the Manilamen are savages, and then uses the purported savagery as evidence for the tale's validity. *The Sun* states that there is "little reason to doubt" the story and the brutality of the crimes, as "the character of the Manila men" is enough evidence to conclude that the woman was murdered (Louisiana's Manila Men 1898).

The Sun recounts *The Times-Democrat's* version of "The Man Tied to a Stake in the Marsh" almost verbatim, using the story as evidence of the savagery of the Manilamen and to question whether Filipinos are capable of self-government. Annexation of the Philippines was being debated throughout the United States and was a recurring topic in New York newspapers. *The Sun* thrust Filipinos of St. Malo into this conversation, describing them as "desperate gamblers" who like "the wildest Indians on the plain" don't "show the slightest disposition towards civilization" (Louisiana's Manila Men 1898).

Despite the low regard, *The Sun* maintains that because they live in the United States, Manilamen have "at least a chance of knowing what civilization is" (Louisiana's Manila Men 1898). The suggestion is that Filipinos in the Philippines, without US guidance, are "centuries removed from the possibilities of self-government." This argument would be a primary justification for the colonization of the Philippines by the United States. President William McKinley asserted clearly that the United States mission in the Philippines was to civilize Filipinos:

The truth is I didn't want the Philippines, and when they came to us, as a gift from the gods, I did not know what to do with them... there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them. (quoted in Rusling 1903)

Supporters of annexation and colonization justified their claim that Filipinos were too uneducated and uncivilized to govern themselves with scores of exoteric tales, including tales of Filipino fishermen in Louisiana.

Killer Mosquitoes

In 1906, the tale of the "The Man Tied to a Stake in the Marsh" is repeated by a New Orleans judge who visits St. Bernard. The judge's experience at St. Malo is retold in "Strange Story of Malays on Lake Borgne: They Have Trained Poisonous Mosquitoes Which Act as Executioners of Enemies." The article is nothing more than an extended quote attributed to the judge, who describes the tying of a man to the stake as standard judicial practice at St. Malo.

It is said that they take all laws in their hands. If one of their tribe commits an offense, the offender is taken in the dead of night, stripped of all his habiliment, brought to the remotest end of the island, where these terrible mosquitoes are the thickest and fiercest, tied to a tree and there he is left to die (Strange Story 1906).

The judge's attitude reflects his preference for the judicial system he represents. Like Hearn and *The Times-Democrat* reporter, he questions how the inhabitants of St. Malo were able to maintain law and order outside the purview of parish or state government. Hearn describes St. Malo justice as "a curiously primitive kind," because "there are neither magistrates nor sheriffs, neither prisons nor police" (Hearn St. Malo 1883: 198). Despite questioning how law and order are maintained, the 1883 articles provide civil examples of mediation and punishment. *The Times-Democrat* describes a process of arbitration in which the aggrieved can appoint a mediator to decide property disputes, while Hearn points out that the eldest Manilaman is considered the final judge when a "grave quarrel arises" and "his decisions are usually accepted without a murmur" (Hearn St. Malo 1883: 198). Neither points to "The Death of the Last Woman at St. Malo" and "The Man Tied to a Stake in the Marsh" as evidence of St. Malo justice.

The judge declares that the Filipino settlers “do not recognize the authority of the United States” and “don’t care about the law” (Strange Story 1906). He links “The Man Tied to a Stake in the Marsh” to his narrative of St. Malo as a lawless independent state protected by “thick swamps and mosquitoes” (Strange Story 1906). He goes so far as to assert that the settlers have bred a poisonous mosquito to defend the village from outsiders. Manilamen “to protect themselves from any intrusion, have raised in abundance a certain mosquito which is poisonous” (Strange Story 1906). The mosquitoes serve the Manilamen, working as executioner and defender, allowing them to remain isolated. A month after the judge’s story was published a storm ripped through St. Malo. *The St. Bernard Voice* reported that the hundred inhabitants of St. Malo perished, and poked fun at the judge by adding that there wasn’t a report on “what happened to their special breed of poisonous mosquitoes” (Sad Fate 1906).

Conclusion

St. Malo is historically significant as the first permanent Filipino settlement in the United States, but we know little about the village. Two articles published in 1883 provide rare descriptions of St. Malo and document esoteric and exoteric tales about its Filipino settlers. The various interpretations of “The Death of the Last Woman at St. Malo” and “The Man Tied to a Stake in the Marsh” help us understand how the settlers were perceived, locally and nationally, and how their presence challenged Louisiana and United States immigrant narratives. The interpretations of these tales demonstrate how an exoteric perspective transforms a story to accommodate one’s worldview and can shape it to fit arguments for monitoring or controlling groups of people.

Notes

¹ There has been some debate about when St. Malo was established. Hearn dates the establishment of the village in the 1830s. Without supporting documentation, Marina Espina in *Filipinos in Louisiana* claimed an earlier date that was repeated in a number of publications and dominated the narrative about Filipinos in the state. Espina’s claims have been credibly refuted by a number of scholars, including Abraham Ignacio in “1763: A historical fiction: Revisiting Early Filipino presence in Louisiana and Examining the

Sources." It should be noted that before Filipinos built a village on Bayou St. Malo Native Americans and Maroons settled the area.

² *The Times-Democrat* estimates that when all the fishermen are in St. Malo it houses "about 150 inhabitants, all males" (The Times-Democrat Expedition 1883). Some Filipino fishermen stayed in camps or small villages scattered around the Island of St. Malo, which was described as the stretch of marsh bordered by Bayou St. Malo, Lake Borgne, and the Gulf. In all "several hundred" Filipinos were said to live on the island (The Lake Borgne Railroad 1882).

³ In 1866 the Filipino population was estimated to be "as high as two thousand" (Our Present Asiatic Population, 1866).

⁴ In the third edition of *On the Natural Variety of Manning* (1795), Johann Friedrich Blumenbach categorized humans by their physical features into five racial categories: Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, American, and Malay. The Malay was described as a brown race.

⁵ National articles about Filipinos in Barataria Bay include "The Queer Home of a Philippine Colony: An Odd People Inhabiting the Gulf Islands Along the Coast of the State of Louisiana" published in 1899 by Louisville's *The Courier-Journal* and "The Story of the Philippine Colony in the South" published in 1899 by *The Atlanta Constitution*.

Sources

A Bad Jab. 1858. *The Daily True Delta* [New Orleans] 10 January 10:1.
A Breach of Trust Case. 1857. *The Daily True Delta* [New Orleans],
November 21:3.

By the By. 1898. *The Times-Democrat* [New Orleans] July 14:3.

Hearn, Lafcadio. 1883. Saint Malo: A Lacustrine Village in Louisiana.
Harper's Weekly March 31:198-199.

Hearn, Lafcadio. 1879. Lafcadio Hearn to H.E. Krehbiel, 1879. In *The Life and Letters of Lafcadio Hearn*, 1906, ed. Elizabeth Bisland, pp. 207-218. Vol. 1. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Hearn, Lafcadio. 1877. Lafcadio Hearn to Henry Watkins, 1877. In *Letters from the Raven: Being the Correspondence of Lafcadio Hearn with Henry Watkin*, 1907. Ed, Milton Bronner. New York: Brentano's.

Ignacio, Abraham. 2014. 1763: A historical fiction: Revisiting Early Filipino presence in Louisiana and Examining the Sources. *The Filipino American Center of SFPL*. November 9.

<https://filipinoamericancenter.blogspot.com/2014/11/1763-historical-fiction-revisiting.html>

Kane, Harnett T. 1944. *Deep Delta Country*. New York:Duell, Sloan and Pearce.

The Lake Borgne Railroad: The Petition Therefor to be Considered by the Committee of the Whole of the City Council. 1882. *The Times-Picayune* [New Orleans] September 12:2.

Louisiana's Manila Men: Savage Colonies in the Swamps Near New Orleans. 1898. *The Sun* [New York], May 22:25.

Malays of Louisiana: Strange Colony in the Swamps of Which Little is Known. 1898. *The Buffalo Sunday Morning News* June 19:14.

Our Present Asiatic Population. 1866. *The New Orleans Crescent* October 23:1.

The Queer Home of a Philippine Colony: An Odd People Inhabiting the Gulf Islands Along the Coast of the State of Louisiana. *The Courier-Journal* [Louisville] October 14:24.

Rusling, James. 1903. Interview with President William McKinley. *The Christian Advocate* [New York] January 22:17.

Sad Fate of San Malo Malays. 1906. *The St. Bernard Voice* [Arabi] 6 October 6:2.

Saint-Malo. 1883. *The Times-Democrat* [New Orleans] March 18:4.

St. Malo: An Old-Time Visitor Relates His Experience with the Louisiana Malays. 1883. *The Times-Democrat* [New Orleans] March 21:7.

St. Malo: The Times-Democrat Expedition to that Mysterious Island. 1883. *The Times-Democrat* [New Orleans] March 14:3.

Stabbing. 1852. *The Daily Picayune* [New Orleans] June 10:2.

Strange Story of Malays on Lake Borgne: They Have Trained Poisonous Mosquitoes Which Act as Executioners of Enemies. 1906. *Daily Enterprise-Leader* [New Iberia] September 14:1.

The War of the Fishermen. 1860. *The Daily Delta* [New Orleans] July 18:2.