

***“Much the Same Object”*: Trans-Pacific Women’s Suffrage and Filipino Nationalism**

Laura R. Prieto, Simmons University

Panel 70: *Women in the World*

Email: Laura.Prieto@simmons.edu

Twitter: @Laura_R_Prieto

I plan to live-tweet my paper on the day that the conference website opens, and I welcome hearing from others with related research interests.

Abstract:

Racial exclusions kept many women on the U.S. mainland from exercising their right to vote for decades after 1920. As that history becomes better known, it is equally important to trace the racialized limits of the Nineteenth Amendment and its “uneven outcomes” throughout U.S. empire. The Constitution and its Amendments did not apply in the unorganized territory of the Philippines; the U.S. government defined Filipinos as American subjects, not citizens. Building on scholarship by Roslyn Terborg-Penn, Kristin Hoganson, Mina Roces, Alison Sneider, and Katherine Marino, this paper reconsiders American women’s suffrage in the context of U.S. empire, with a focus on the Philippines.

This paper analyzes the strategies and alignments of Filipina suffragists, especially their trans-Pacific relationship to the mainland movement. Mainland U.S. suffragists liked to represent themselves as a vanguard, awakening other women’s activism around the world. Most prominently, Carrie Chapman Catt conducted a world tour in 1911-1912, with the aim of inspiring Asian and African women to form suffrage organizations. But women in the Philippines had wrestled with their double disenfranchisement—as women and as colonial subjects – long before Catt’s visit. For them, the goals of national sovereignty and equal suffrage were entwined. When Clemencia López of Balayan addressed the New England Woman Suffrage Association in 1902, for instance, she boldly declared, “I believe that we are both striving for much the same object—you for the right to take part in national life; we for the right to have a national life to take part in. And I am sure that, if we understood each other better, the differences which now exist between your country and mine would soon disappear.” The hope of such mutual understanding remained present, if elusive, both before and after mainland suffragists achieved their goal of a federal amendment in 1920.

A number of Filipina women ably created a public platform for themselves on the mainland as authorities on their own culture. Sofía Reyes de Veyra, for example, wrote about the Philippines for metropolitan newspapers and fostered cross-cultural awareness in women’s clubs in Washington, D.C. Filipina suffragists like López and de Veyra effectively argued that they were not unenfranchised like mainland women, but rather disenfranchised; that is, they associated their lack of rights with American colonialism and harkened back to a pre-colonial golden age in which Filipina women had equal status and shared authority with Filipino men. They held that gaining the right to vote would restore their historic place, rather than emulate Western progress. The Filipina suffrage narrative thus actively resisted imperialist feminism. Its appeal to tradition

also aligned Filipina suffragists with Filipino nationalist men – the very people they had to persuade to give them the vote, as the Philippines came ever closer to independence. Filipina suffragists' approach enabled them to forge rhetorical and organizational alliances with mainland American suffragists, while at the same time championing anti-imperialism and Filipino sovereignty. Even so, it took until 1937 for Filipina women to win equal suffrage, through a mass plebiscite that affirmed their desire to vote.