

Virtual Reunification: Bits and Pieces Put Together to Form a Semblance of a Whole

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Abstract: Virtual reunification offers possibilities to create and assemble digital versions of rare and special collections that have been geographically dispersed for various reasons. Institutional plans for digitization, priorities, and strategies to navigate this complex endeavor remain largely unexamined. What needs to be considered for multi-institutional, cooperative digital initiatives like virtual reunification to proceed? My research addresses this question by focusing on the challenges of reunifying Dean C. Worcester's ethnographic photographs of the U.S. colonial Philippines. Worcester served as a U.S. administrator in the Philippines from 1899 to 1913. The images are currently dispersed among ten North American and European institutions. I use this photographic collection to explore issues that arise when groups of institutions consider virtual reunification as a strategy to provide integrated access to dispersed ethnographic archival images. Using a qualitative approach, this investigation draws on archival research and semi-structured interviews with archivists, curators, collections managers, researchers, and funding administrators.

My research answers the question: *What are the challenges and barriers to virtual reunification as a strategy to represent the dispersed ethnographic photographs of Dean C. Worcester?*

The overall goal of the research is to:

- Understand the context and significance of institutional barriers to reunification
- Identify issues confronting key decision-makers as they consider reunification as an option
- Describe how certain barriers impact the dynamics and politics of pre-unification decision-making

The project contributes to the ongoing discussion on how digitization and online access inspire new ways of representing heritage collections and how digital media are reshaping contemporary institutional responsibilities.

About the author:

Ricardo L. Punzalan is a doctoral candidate in archives and museum studies at the University of Michigan School of Information. In addition to an MLIS from the University of the Philippines, he has completed two certificates of graduate studies at Michigan, one in Science, Technology, and Society (STS) and another in Museum Studies. He is currently working on his dissertation, which examines virtual reunification as a strategy to provide integrated access to dispersed ethnographic archival images online. He has been active internationally in developing community archives. In May and June 2009, he worked in Techiman, Ghana, to establish the archives of the

traditional council and studied the impact of placing this archival unit within a proposed community heritage center. From 2005 to 2006, he organized the archives of Culion, a former leprosarium in the Philippines, and curated a museum exhibit for the centennial of the community's founding as a segregation facility. Prior to his doctoral work at Michigan, he taught on the faculty of the University of the Philippines School of Library and Information Studies, where he served as assistant professor of archives and library science and as museum archivist for the Vargas Museum. His articles have been published in *Archives and Manuscripts*, *Archivaria*, and *Archival Science*. In January 2013, he will join the University of Maryland's College of Information Studies as an assistant professor.