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“Fast Food for the Filipino Soul”: Consuming Identity at Jollibee in Queens

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Abstract:
On February 13, 2009 in Woodside, Queens an estimated 4,500 Filipino-Americans formed a line outside in thirty five-degree weather. Braving the cold and a nearly four hour wait these Filipino-Americans were desperate for the first east-coast extension of Jollibee to open it’s doors.¹ The media that covered the opening attempted to understand what was behind this Filipino fervor, one New York Times article was titled “Fast Food for the Filipino Soul”. Filipinos told reporters they were desperate for a “taste of home.” ² But what is this “taste of home”? The Filipino owned and operated fast food chain serves hot dogs, hamburgers and fried chicken: American food. So why is it that a Filipino fast food chain that serves American fare is so popular amongst Filipinos? Despite this paradox, Jollibee is nothing short of a cultural and economic success within the Filipino community; my thesis aims to find out why. I address this question through academic research on Filipino food studies, Filipino cultural and historical works, and utilize anthropology projects on space and ethnic identity as a lens for my own ethnography. By way of academic research and ethnography, my thesis will prove that the phenomenon of Jollibee in Woodside, Queens is attributed to Filipino notions of nation and nostalgia.

¹ "Interview with Jollibee VP of East Coast Operations." Personal interview. 4 Oct. 2011.
On February 14, 2009 an estimated 4,500 Filipinos and Filipino Americans formed a line outside on Roosevelt Avenue in Woodside, Queens, in thirty-five degree weather. At 2 a.m, three people camped outside the soon to be opened chain, by 5 a.m. there was a short line, and by noon the line spanned all the way to the block parallel to Roosevelt. Braving the cold and a nearly four hour wait, people came from Connecticut, Massachusetts, Toronto, and Virginia, all desperate for the first-east coast extension of Jollibee to open its doors, they were desperate for a “taste of home.”

The line lasted longer than opening day, as one post on the consumer-generated Facebook fan page (where over one thousand people RSVP-ed to the event) stated “My Sister went there yesterday and survived the four hour line...but hey can’t complain” on February 20, 2009, six days after the opening. While the public excitement for this Filipino owned and operated fast-food chain was nothing short of a phenomenon, it was to be expected. The first to open on the east-coast, Jollibee has twenty-three other chains in the United States (nineteen specifically in California, where the chain has become ubiquitous amongst fast food fare) and the openings are almost always met with Filipino fervor. For many Filipinos, their last taste of Jollibee’s fried chicken, hot dogs, or burgers was , the trip to Jollibee in Woodside was a like a long-awaited reunion.³

Local media caught wind, as The New York Times reported the event as “Fast Food for the Filipino Soul”, New York Daily News wrote “Hungry Filipinos Flock to Jollibee”, New York Magazine posted “Philippines’ Most Popular Food Chain Lands in Queens.” The chain was news even months later in June, when they added breakfast items to their menu, “Jollibee Adds

³ "Interview with Jollibee VP of East Coast Operations." Personal interview, October 4, 2011.
Breakfast, Brings World Peace” wrote Gothamist. Filipinos were making headlines, and it was for their food. I asked Vice President of East Coast operations Maria Lourdes Villamayor, what kind of public relations or promotions Jollibee did to receive such a great number of media impressions on the event, to which she responded, “It was all word of mouth, we did not create that Facebook account, or post any photos, all we had was a banner outside the construction.”

Apparently even writer of the New York Times article, Mark Foggin, heard about the chain from a Filipino friend. The success of Jollibee’s opening in Woodside, Queens had to be more than a marketing miracle, was it the food, the brand, or something else entirely? This thesis will show that while Jollibee does not fully represent the Philippines, sentiments towards Jollibee reflect, at times contradicting, Filipino notions of nation and nostalgia.

My thesis intends to search beyond Jollibee’s east coast extension phenomenon and pinpoint the underlying factors that make Jollibee a truly Filipino corporation, brand, and symbol to Filipinos. Following my driving questions of, what sells Jollibee to Filipinos in Woodside, Queens, I study both corporate intentions of Jollibee, the food and service at Jollibee in Woodside, as well as the lives of Filipinos who frequent the chain. As an interdisciplinary study, I draw upon varying sources. First there are the primary sources of my ethnography, statistics on

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5 “Interview with Jollibee VP of East Coast Operations.” Personal interview, October 4, 2011.
Filipino population, the neighborhood of Woodside, Jollibee menu items and interviews with Filipinos. To set the context for study, I use academic as well as “light” travel guides pertaining to Filipino history, culture, and food as well as American fast-food sources (Kincheloe/Watson). Throughout my ethnography, I utilize anthropologic works on space and ethnic identity as my lens. I work under the assumption set by Arjun Appadurai in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in cultural perspective*, that commodities exchanged across nations are embedded with politics and value. My interviews and observations seek to find what politics and value are embedded in Jollibee, Woodside. I have organized my work on the template used by James L. Watson in *Golden Arches East: McDonald’s in East Asia* an ethnography on the localization of McDonald’s abroad in East Asia. The first part of my work, “Welcome to Woodside”, “A People Divided” “Fast-Food Fairy Tale” and “Filipino Flavor”, lays the groundwork for peeling away the paradox that is Jollibee in Woodside, Queens. Here, I introduce the reader to knowledge imperative to know in understanding my thesis. The latter half of my work, “Defining a Nation, Finding Identity” “What is Filipino?” and “Being Back Home” pay attention to the particulars of my ethnographic findings, both framing and analyzing what exactly about Jollibee relates to Filipino nation and nostalgia, and moreover, why Filipino notions of nation and nostalgia are important issues. I hope this work shows not only a new way of thinking about Filipino fast-food and Jollibee, but a new way of thinking about and understanding Filipino identity.

**Welcome to Woodside**
To travel to the east-coast extension of Jollibee from Manhattan, one must take the seven train. Colloquially dubbed the “International Express” the seven takes you from the underground city subway of Manhattan to an equally industrious above-ground elevated railway in Queens. Six stops away from Times Square, the elevated ride puts you at eye level with mid-rise buildings, tops of trees, and sky. Woodside is like the forest of New York City, in the most urban understanding of the word.

The asian haven that isn’t Chinatown, Woodside began as a hub for Irish immigrants. Bordered by two cemeteries, it used to be referred to by residents as “Suicide’s Paradise.” Under the “Woodside 61st Street/Roosevelt Avenue” station stop are mexican food carts, across from it a Dunkin Donuts advertisement “en espanol” and all along Roosevelt Avenue, restaurants line up like mini-embassies: Donovan’s for Ireland, Mojitos for Cuba, Sripraphai for Thai. One subway stop earlier and you’ll find St. Sebastian’s, one of the few New York City churches to hold Simbang Gabi, a night mass consisting of nine masses at dawn, intended for devout Filipino Catholics. On a Sunday afternoon, a hoard of Filipinos crowd outside.  

Like a quasi-diaspora, Filipino families flock from St. Sebastian’s upwards to 63rd street, where Jollibee is. I find myself walking in the same direction as the Filipino families towards Jollibee. It becomes evident that I am not the only Filipino with the bright idea to eat at Jollibee on a Sunday afternoon. Inside Jollibee Filipino families push the small two and four seater tables and chairs to make communal ones, where Lolas (grandmas), Titas (aunts), Titos (uncles), eat


alongside Mom and Dad and little ones. One dad turns to his son, chowing down on Chickenjoy, “Do you like it?” Amidst furious chewing, he nods yes. Filipino women carry from the counter tray-fulls of Halo-Halo (a purple icy dessert), they are sure to balance the heavy treat, while snaking through the long line that reaches the door. I sit at an ad-hoc communal table, between a family and an asian (non-Filipino) couple. We are all eating Chickenjoy. This is my first visit to Jollibee since my last, which was when I was eight years old visiting the Philippines.

While it was easy for me to get disoriented in Woodside without the guidance of skyscrapers, it was certainly not difficult to find Little Manilla. All one has to do is ask “Where is Jollibee?” a question which in Manhattan would seem strange, but here is helpful. No surprise, between ten blocks between St. Sebastian and Jollibee there is a McDonald’s, a Subway and a Nathan’s fast-food chain. Jollibee is located on Roosevelt Avenue, named after the same American president Teddy Roosevelt who infamously coined Filipinos, “little brown brothers.” The big, red bee statue is by the corner of 63rd Street and Roosevelt Avenue. Children stop to have their pictures taken by parents in front of it. From the flashes you would think it was a celebrity event. Just a Sunday at Jollibee, Filipino’s #1 Quick Service Restaurant, except now it’s in Queens.

Little Manilla lies between 63rd and 71st street on Roosevelt Avenue, here you’ll find the home to the Philippine Bank, Philippine Freight Services, Phil-Am Foodmart, Stop n’ Save Filipino, Manila Fil-Am Driving School and perhaps most importantly, the first east-coast extension of Jollibee. While business in Woodside is thriving, it is important to note that the neighborhood is in no way “gentrified.” Any one not a minority would surely not find comfort in
seeing store signs in languages other than their own. In Woodside, Filipinos make up 13% of the population making it host to the largest concentration of Filipinos in New York City.  

Part of the Jollibee corporate strategy here in the United States is to invest in communities with high Filipino concentrations, thus making Woodside, Queens an ideal location. However, Jollibee, Woodside sticks out, its shiny and new the store front looks alien in comparison to the well-lived in mom and pop shops that line up and down Roosevelt Avenue. People had warned Jollibee’s Villamayor not to locate in Woodside, “They said it was a jinx.” Once a dark and run down bar, every business that had set up shop at the corner of 63rd and Roosevelt had since failed. People would ask Villamayor, why Woodside? Placing the first east-coast extension in Woodside, while in New York City, made it miles from Manhattan, but Villamayor explains, “We wanted to be where the Filipinos are. It may be small but it’s a good location.” When first seeing the site in 2007 she remembers how she could just imagine the line outside Jollibee, how it would wrap around 63rd Street and not intrude on the other businesses. She had a premonition of the frenzy Jollibee would bring to the otherwise quiet neighborhood of Woodside.  

The community reception since Jollibee’s opening in 2009 has been positive, as Iyoh says “People come to me and say: finally, there is something that the Filipinos here can be proud about.” Other small businesses on the block welcome their presence, as they bring in more traffic, more customers. Jollibee also means up to fifty new part-time and full-time jobs, offering many employees the opportunity to move-up within the company. The opening of Jollibee meant that Woodside was no longer simply an affordable way to assimilate or an immigrant isolation

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on the outskirts of Manhattan. Jollibee turned Woodside from a neighborhood into a destination. A reason for me and many other Filipinos to hop on the “International Express.”

A People Divided

Filipinos are the fourth-largest Asian category in New York City, but still are considered by the American census as officially part of the “Other Asian” category. Since 2000, the number of Filipinos living in New York City has grown 22%. The number of Filipinos that leave the homeland everyday is an estimated 3,000. The continuous flows of migration from the Philippines make it difficult to separate Filipinos from Filipino-Americans. “Filipino” can refer to someone born, raised, and living in the homeland or a someone who recently immigrated here to the United States. “Filipino-American” can refer to someone with Filipino parents but born in the United States, someone half Filipino, half American, or a Filipino who has become a naturalized U.S. citizen. For the sake of this paper, where I interact with and refer to a multitude of “Filipinos” and “Filipino-Americans”, I use the term Filipino to encompass all of the above.

The growing number of Filipino immigrants here in New York City is part of a larger, older and long persisting movement of diaspora from the Philippines. Eight million Filipinos live outside the Philippines, compare that to the four million Americans living abroad. By 2020, one in three Filipinos will live abroad. By 2020, Jollibee aims to own 4,000 total global chains.

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8 "Interview with Jollibee VP of East Coast Operations." Personal interview, October 4, 2011.
9 “New 2010 Census Data Show Increasing Diversity in New York City’s Asian Community”, Asian American Federation, July 14, 2011

Liaa Francesca Marquez, “Little Manila Rises in Queens”, Dollars Sense: Baruch College Review of Business Society, January 25, 2011,

Jollibee reaps the benefits of this migration flow, following Filipinos wherever they go abroad. While Filipinos may be living abroad and visiting home, Jollibee reverses this course by being a piece of homeland that exports itself to the United States. But as Jollibee makes more money to put back into the homeland, it is important to note that the Filipino diaspora is a consequence of a failing Filipino economy. Many Filipinos with higher education degrees find they can earn more money working menial jobs abroad, than working in their trained profession at home, sending in total an estimated $6 billion dollars back to the homeland each year.\(^{11}\) The Philippine survival depends on sending its people away. Other scholars may argue that by nature, the Filipinos are a diasporic people, as the earliest migrations to California and Louisiana are traced back to as early as the 16th century and migrated to different locations within-borders is highly common. While an optimistic person may read this information and believe it is part of the Filipino nature to travel, I cannot help but see the darker side of diaspora: that Filipinos are being driven out. The forces may not be direct, but they are there. Filipinos move away from homeland, because they seek a better life.\(^{12}\)

When looking for a new home in the United States, Little Manila is proof that Filipinos seek a similar space to home and not simply American assimilation, which often requires a “total recall” of all things foreign. While the Filipino diaspora has resulted in a people that is divided and diluted by conflicting cultural and border separations, the concentration of Filipinos in Woodside and the expansion of Filipino fast-food store Jollibee, is actualized proof that Filipinos are a diasporic people with demands for home. The Little Manila they have created in Woodside provides the homeland resources they need (a bank, a community center, a shipping service) and Jollibee gives them the food, experience, and taste that they desire. Though scattered across the

\(^{11}\) Ibid, 162-4

\(^{12}\) Ibid, 162
globe, Filipinos are not deteriorating but in fact creating, new spaces in which they can connect to home. Consider Jollibee the Filipino embassy on Roosevelt Avenue’s restaurant row of United Nations.

**A Fast-Food Fairy Tale**

McDonald’s is known as the “all-american success story” one so culturally steeped in the American and global imagination that it possesses the power of symbolism, the power to evoke emotion and the power to “transmit knowledge, shape values, influence identity, construct consciousness.” McDonald’s holds the title to of the number one quick service restaurant worldwide. Number one, except for two locations, the Philippines and Bernai, the two countries where Jollibee is number one. Villamayor tells me when McDonald’s came to the Phillipines 1981 Jollibee saw it as “…a challenge, a time to invest. We know our market. That strength gave us courage to go overseas.”

What is now over 2,316 franchises, branches, and subsidiaries globally spanning from Saudi Arabia to Vietnam to Washington, United States, started as a singular ice cream shop, Magnolia House, founded by Filipino Tony Tan. The son of an immigrant Chinese father who owned a restaurant, Tan was to follow the family trade but as a chemical engineering major in college found the restaurant kitchen system frustrating as he explained in one *Forbes* profile “Bee Bites Clown”: “The kitchen side is too complicated…you cannot standardize the operation and start branching.” Perhaps this was the reason Tan opted to enter the quick-service realm of ice cream and perhaps was the reason Tan decided to capitalize on the American fast-food trend and add burgers to the Mangolia House menu in 1978. It was when the burgers began to outsell

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14 Andrew Tanzer, “Bee Bites Clown”, *Forbes*, October 20, 1997
the ice cream that Tan dubbed his new venture: Jollibee. The name was inspired by his employees, always smiling (Jolly) hardworking and always together (like bees). Tan’s official company vision was “To serve great tasting food, bringing the joy of eating to everyone.” Jollibee corporation was named by the Wall Street Journal Asia in 2008 as one of the top ten most admired companies in the Philippines and ranked number one in the innovation award category. Jollibee owner Tony Tan received global recognition as well, when named Ernst and Young’s entrepreneur of the year in 2010. The aspirations are ambitious for what started out as a small ice cream shop opened, one that was opened in a third-world country no less:

VISION

We are the best QSR...
The most endearing brand...that has ever been...
We will lead in product taste at all times...
We will provide FSC excellence in every encounter
Happiness in every moment...
By year 2020, with over 4,000 stores worldwide,
Jollibee is truly a GLOBAL BRAND.

-excerpt from Jollibee corporation “Mission, Vision, Values” official statement

In 2011, Jollibee is less than 2,000 stores away from achieving this vision. However, the global growth of this Filipino corporation is some what of a stand alone story of success in the Philippines, a nation where 40% of the population lives below the poverty line. Stained by dependence on foreign corporations, indebted to foreign banks, and the corruption of

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authoritarian ruler, President Ferdinand Marcos (1965-1986), the Philippines has struggled to set up a sustainable economy since the departure of its colonial rulers. Political Scientist Paul D. Hutchcroft describes this struggle as “third world capitalism” in his book *Booty Capitalism: The Politics of Banking in the Philippines* explaining that despite factors unique to the Philippines: entrepreneurial talents, a well-educated workforce, natural resources and a community of economists and development specialists, the Filipinos have been unable “to combine enough positive factors” to become an “Asian Tiger,” like China and Japan.\(^\text{18}\) Could Jollibee provide a stepping stone for the Filipino way out of poverty and way in to the Asian Tiger club?

While priding itself on efficiency and standardization, much like McDonald’s or any other fast-food restaurant, Jollibee aims to provide Filipino hospitality. In my interviews with Filipinos, many describe Filipinos as a “hospitable race” and always welcoming. Jollibee always urges its employees to go above and beyond to cater to the customer. At the Jollibee in Queens, after ordering the cashier person will encourage you to take a seat and they will bring the food to you. When heading with your tray towards the trash, it is not uncommon for a janitor to take it from your hands and throw it away for you. This reflects the Filipino value of putting the guest at priority, “guests are giving the best food and best accommodations, even if it means deprivation for family.”\(^\text{19}\) Villamayor describes this as “Alagang Pinoy”, Filipino-Care.

Maria Villamayor, known as Iyoh, first heard of Jollibee when she was a college student. She heard other Filipinos rave about the chicken and burgers, Iyoh was curious. Upon graduation when she was looking for a career in the food service industry, she thought to herself that Jollibee would be a good organization to join. Iyoh has worked for Jollibee in the Philippines

since 1985. Twenty-four years later Iyoh was sent to the United States to spearhead Jollibee’s east-coast operations. She now lives in Jersey City, New Jersey with her family of two songs, one in high school and the other studying architecture in college. Iyoh says plans for a Jollibee, Jersey City are well on their way. When I meet Iyoh for an interview in Woodside, she introduces me to one of the store managers, Rizza, and says “Mam Rizza has been with us for twenty-six years, she migrated here from the Philippines to open up the Jollibee in Queens” and June, the janitor, “He has been with us from the start.” 20 Jollibee has carried over the traditional Filipino cultural surnames of “Mom” and “Sir” all the way to Woodside, Queens. Other more obvious Filipino cultural traits can be witnessed at the Jollibee in Woodside, Queens, such as the Filipino language of Tagalog. Jollibee workers, who are usually young Filipinos, such as the workers behind the counter who switch back and forth between speaking Tagalog and English. Filipino music plays in the background inside the store and the walls are lined with murals of Filipino faces, while the television above the counter plays video reels of Jollibee ads aired in the Philippines. “Langhap Sarap!” the official slogan of Jollibee, comes on the screen, which means “delicious aroma” or more literally “deliciousness inhaled.”

Upon my second visit to Jollibee, I met another janitor, Willie. In his seventies, Willie is of prime age to retire, his niece Kathleen tells me he doesn’t need to work but was looking for something to do during the day and applied to Jollibee upon its opening. Willie takes pride in that he works for Jollibee, when hearing I was writing about the chain for school, he was eager to exchange information and add me on Facebook. Willie’s Facebook profile picture is of him in Jollibee uniform, posing in front of a mural -ed wall of Filipino faces inside the Woodside Jollibee. This kind of pride and dedication to Jollibee corporation is not unusual. Jollibee boasts

20 “Interview with Jollibee VP of East Coast Operations.” Personal interview, October 4, 2011.
a high employee retention rate and a reputation for offering higher salaries and better benefits that the industry standards. For this reason, Jollibee was named the number one place to work in the Philippines and among the top twenty in Asia overall.  

Treating fellow employees like family reflects the importance of family in Filipino culture as a whole. For Filipinos, family is the “strongest unity of society, demanding the deepest loyalties.” Filipino society operates upon a “we-they” framework, unlike the Western “I-it” pattern. In the earliest studies of the Philippines in 1589, anthropologists observed that the Filipino family was the strongest political unit, consisting not only of children and parents but slaves and acquaintances as well. Years later in 2011, the family remains the one Filipino institution untouched by colonial influence.

Upon our first meeting, Iyoh comes bearing gifts: a Jollibee t-shirt, a Jollibee calendar, and a Jolli Nation doll, with optional accessories of traditional Filipino costume a rice hat and a Barong Tagalog. Iyoh insists I try Jollibee food, since I haven’t since my last visit as an eight-year old to the Philippines. I eat everything she orders for me, which is one an Aloha Burger, one Chickenjoy combination with Jolly Spaghetti, one Pearl Cooler (ube smoothie with tapioca pearls) and two pies: jack fruit and peach-mango. The pie is a delicious ending note, “The mango in the pie you’re eating is Filipino”, imported all the way from the Philippines, Iyoh says. I am delighted that I am literally getting a taste of home, but at the same time want to point out that the pie’s rectangular shape and packaging looks a lot like McDonald’s apple pie. Iyoh expresses

22 David Joel Steinberg, The Philippines: A Singular and A Plural Place, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1982), 4
23 Woods, The Philippines, 151
the corporations eagerness to connect with patrons, “Our number one expectation is to delight our customers, to appeal to Filipino palate and transport the customer back in time...we want to be part of everyone’s lives.” Iyoh sends me on my way back to Manhattan with what else, but *more* food (Figure 2): a hefty bucket of fried chicken and platter of spaghetti to bring home, to share the taste of Jollibee with my non-Filipino roommates. On the outside packaging of the Jolly Nation doll is a globe upon which several Jollibee(s) stand on, dressed in different local costumes, a Saudi Arabian turban and an American Uncle Sam. Inside the packaging of the Jollibee doll is a summary of the Jollibee story that reads like a comforting bedtime story.

“So in 1978, the neighborhood store began serving a burger that made everyone say “yuum.”...Today, life isn’t complete without Jollibee’s signature dishes and the loveable ever smiling friend, Jollibee. [On the Jollibee doll characters] “Soon, they may very well be loved by the world, just like Jollibee.” - (from Figure 1.)
The food and icon of Jollibee has been a Filipino export to the world, letting the world have a taste of Filipino flavor, but what is Filipino flavor anyways?

**Filipino Flavor**

The Filipino cuisine is a gastronomic enigma. Whether it’s the cuisine’s uncommon flavor pairings (think sour and salty or bitter and fishy) or the fact that despite large rates of Filipino migration, Filipino food has yet to surface as a blip on the radar of foodie-culture; Filipino food is a mystery to most. Describing the taste and convincing conservative eaters of its delicious qualities is a feat in and of itself. Questions beg to be answered, why does it taste the way that it tastes? Or more importantly, why aren’t we tasting more of it?

Contributing *Esquire U.K.* writer (and stepson to Prince Charles) Tom Parker Bowles addressed these inquiries in a recent August 2011 article entitled “Anyone for Filipino?” Bowles points out, “You love Indian. You kill for Chinese. You dig Thai. You go out for Korean, stay in for Japanese. And there’s a great little Vietnamese place round the corner. Ever had Filipino? Us
neither.\textsuperscript{24} The lack of Filipino flavor in the Western culinary scene is an issue also pointed out by food writer and television host Travel Channel’s Anthony Bourdain, as said one \textit{No Reservations} episode, “There were a lot of Filipino fans of the show and many of them were getting mightily pissed after having done shows all over Southeast asia, I had yet to visit their country, it was getting to be pretty embarrassing.”\textsuperscript{25} So why the lack of desire and demand for Filipino fare? The issue cannot be attributed to lack of audience (Filipinos are the 15th most populous country with a large presence in Western countries) or lack of appetite (the Filipino diet consists of a hearty fourth-meal \textit{merienda}). The rise of Jollibee chains worldwide may be putting Filipinos on the map, but is it exposing and expanding global palate’s to true Filipino taste?

Filipino taste as recorded by academics (Posadas/Lott/Woods) describe traditional, exotic dishes; these sources also make disclaimers about Filipino taste, such as, “Filipino restaurants do not rival Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese”\textsuperscript{26} and “Philippine cuisine seems out of place”.\textsuperscript{27} Staples include savory Adobo (any variation of meat made with soy sauce, vinegar and garlic), sour Sinigang (tamarind broth with pork, tomatoes and chiles) to more “daring” dishes like Dinugaun (intestines stewed in pork blood), Kare-Kare (oxtail and ox-tripe in peanut and banana-heart curry stew) and the infamous Balut (half-born duck eggs.) As a young girl, my favorite Filipino dish was Adobong Pusit. That was until I got old enough to realize it was squid and ink-sauce. I thought it to be delicious until then. Though not hard evidence, I find it fair to say, Filipino food, strange it may be, does not taste \textit{bad} - but rather the taste of flavor combinations of ingredients.

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{No Reservations}, Travel Channel, Season 5, Episode 7: Philippines, aired February 16, 2009.
\textsuperscript{26} Barbara M. Posadas, \textit{The Filipino-Americans}, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 50-2.
\textsuperscript{27} Woods, \textit{The Philippines}, 225-233.
and flavors fail to be tasted, not by our tongues, but with our minds. Much of the enjoyment of eating, comes from understanding what it is your eating.

Westerners, so they choose to go to Jollibee, would be able to feed their familiarity through popular menu items such as “Chickenjoy”, “Yum Burger” (which are exactly as they sound, fried chicken and hamburger, if perhaps a bit juicier and saltier.) It seems as if America and the Philippines are waving the same food flag, as American as fried chicken or apple pie, is easily translated to as Filipino as Chickenjoy and peach-mango pie. More “Filipino” flavored items are on the menu though, the highly popular, signature Jolly Spaghetti includes cut-up hot dogs, a sweet tomato sauce, and melted cheddar cheese while the similarly inspired Jolly Dog is topped with grated cheddar cheese and “special sauce” (which from my understanding is Mayonnaise-based). While the ingredients for Jollibee foods are imported directly from the Philippines, some menu items were tweaked to appeal to American audiences. For instance the spaghetti sauce was made less sweet and more savory. Contrast, especially Filipino items were actually added to the menu that are not found in the Philippine chains, such as Halo-Halo, a dessert literally meaning mix-mix has jackfruit, mung beans, sweet palm fruit, shredded coconut and chunks of ube (purple yam) and ube flavored ice cream soaked in condensed milk and shaved ice. Other seemingly anomalous menu items are milkfish belly, spam (both served with rice and a slice of tomato), a side of corn, burger steak with gravy and the aloha burger (topped with a slice of pineapple.)

While many of the Filipinos I interviewed proclaimed it was the available sides of rice that made Jollibee uniquely Filipino, it should be noted that McDonald’s in the Philippines also serves rice, as well as a Jolly Spaghetti doppleganger, the “Chicken McDo with Spaghetti”, fried

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chicken and spaghetti with cheddar cheese. To claim that rice is the reason for Jollibee’s Filipino success also discounts the fact that many Filipinos don’t even order rice when going to Jollibee. Some studies laud the importance of rice in Filipino diet, that no meal is complete without its presence, that it is considered “a symbol of life”. But even to say this is to fail to recognize that with varying eating situations, whether it be a solitary breakfast or family meal (the latter being more common), rice and all food items in the Filipino diet are highly interchangeable, as Barbara M. Posadas points out in *The Filipino Americans*, that in the everyday, “boiled rice, fish, stew and noodles compete with hamburgers, french fries and fried chicken...” or as Juanita Tamayo Lott describes in *Common Destiny: Filipino American Generations* with an anecdote of a modern-day Filipino family party, where “…children bring in french fries and milkshakes from the neighborhood fast-food restaurants.” Neither author notes what happens when these hamburgers, french fries and fried chicken are the “Filipino taste” of Jollibee. While Filipino food sources and studying Jollibee point out the tension between authentic Filipino food versus the claimed “Filipino flavor” of Jollibee, but both cannot deny the importance of food, no matter the influence, in Filipino culture, as Doreen Fernandez wrote in *Food & the Filipino*, “Food punctuates his [a Filipino’s] life, is a touchstone to his memories, is a measure of his relationships with nature, his fellowmen, with the world.”

Shaped by Malay settlers, Chinese spice trades, Spanish colonization and American occupation, scholars engage in a never-ending discourse on Filipino food origins. Once looking at the affected history of the Philippines, it then becomes more understandable why

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spaghetti would be served with hot-dogs and why Halo-Halo is served after a Chickenjoy meal. Younger Filipino generations, are even further swayed by outer tastes, “They’ve learned to be open and receptive to all kinds of cuisines and forms of hospitality...” This adaptability and variety in their cuisine no doubt hints to the forced sense of adaptability Filipinos have fostered as a result of their history.  

As Filipino food finally made its way onto Travel Chanel’s No Reservations, Anthony Bourdain prefaces his food tour with some history, “The history of the Philippines is long, complicated, extraordinarily violent and hard to quantify or describe in a neat little paragraph.” First “founded” and controlled by Ferdinand Magellan and the Spanish in the sixteenth century, the Philippines has been ruled under three empires in the last 156 years. Under the rule of Spain came intermarriage and missionaries, leaving the Philippines a predominantly Roman Catholic Southeast Asian nation. The Philippines was then to be handed over to the United States at the end of the Spanish-American war, under The Treaty of Paris in 1898. The Philippines would become so much a part of America, that in 1935 the U.S. government named the islands a self-governing commonwealth, only to gain full independence nine years later in 1946. U.S. involvement did not cease with the Philippine Revolution, as Filipinos fought alongside American soldiers during Japanese occupation in World War II. Yet, Filipino soldiers do not receive veteran benefits from the United States. Leaving the land distraught from battle, the United States continued its connection via military bases, a treaty still exists today which allows U.S. ships and troops to freely occupy the islands. Most recently at a Secretary of State press conference with Hillary Clinton, one student held up a sign that read “Junk U.S. Imperialism” in

35 No Reservations.
The relationship is complex and at its core, a patronizing one. The Philippines was conquered for and in many ways still exists for the benefit of the United States. While some Filipinos may fantasize about the Western Way, many despise the legacy that was left behind.

Even when it comes to historical knowledge of the two nations, the unequal relationship between the Philippines and the United States is apparent. Theodore Gochenour in *Considering Filipinos* tends to sound ethnocentric in his 1990 observations of Filipino history and culture. Limited they are, they serve to prove a point that his thoughts, are what a majority of people think, “Americans may hardly be embarrassed at their lack of knowledge” [of Filipino history] and yet Filipinos “…feel chagrined at their lack of knowledge, of English and the United States.”

Even Filipino education is taught with a United States lens. Years after the nation’s independence, Filipino students were still learning the American Pledge of Allegiance. A humorous yet telling story is recounted by my Filipino mother’s school experience in the Philippines, “When learning the alphabet, we were taught “S is for snow” My mother did not see snow until she visited the United States in her late twenties. While taken advantage of by United States imperialism and current policy, the Philippines is inherently Westward-bound, always in some way attempting to align itself to the nation across the Pacific, the nation of “power, glamour, wealth and opportunity.” Gochenour assures visitors to the tropical nation, that they will feel a “pleasant sensation of familiarity” from the American product advertisements, the English signs and spoken word. Filipino food may not be suited to the American palate, but the transformations the nation has undergone from years of U.S. involvement, from language to culture, is most certainly suited to the American way of life. This patronizing partnership is a

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threat to any sort of Filipino pride, as Gochenour writes “The American influence is often overpowering and may cause Filipinos at times to exhibit a sense of inadequacy vis-a-vis Americans.” 39

**Defining a Nation, Finding Identity**

“The Philippines is in a strategic position - it is both East & West, right and left, rich and poor...we are neither here nor there.”

- *Imelda Marcos, 1982*

Filipinos are known by some as the “invisible” asians, a nation without a culture, without an identity  Peter Jamero accounts for some of the earliest Filipino immigrants in the United States and the consequences for the preceding generations in his book *Vanishing Filipino Americans: the bridge generation*, “It has been a miracle that Filipino Americans...retained a sense of ethnic pride. Too many factors abounded to destroy the Pinoy spirit: the lack of role models, parental conflicts, insensitive community leadership, white ethnocentric teachers, institutional racism, poverty, among them.” 41 I speak with a second generation Filipino student living in Woodside, Queens Kathleen who is quite conscious of the factors her Pinoy spirit must face, “Filipinos have adopted so much of Western culture that it’s almost hard to distinguish what’s Filipino and what’s Western. To be Filipino is to be American, look at the music, the movies, everything about the culture.” To this I tell her the joke my American born dad likes to tell my Filipino mother, “The national Filipino costume is: blue jeans.” To which Katie responds,

40  Pinoy: a slang term for Filipino, once derogatory, aimed at Filipino immigrants in the U.S. pre World War II, is now used to show Filipino pride.
“It’s the Filipino national costume that we won’t admit too.” Kathleen’s first experience with Jollibee was in the Philippines as a young five year old and she recalls “I thought it was similar to McDonald’s, it’s just fast food. Fast food is fast food. But I remember it blew my mind that they had rice items, Filipino spaghetti with the sugar. I would get the menu items that were distinctively Filipino. I thought it was really cool that the Philippines had something of their own.”

Kathleen, not a fan of fast-food says her family orders Jollibee when having large family dinners. She also notes that going to Jollibee is a social experience, “People go to McDonald’s because they want something quick to eat. They go in, they come out...when I go to Jollibee I see the customers interact with the people that work there. It’s more festive. It goes beyond fast-food.” Despite the fact she said before, “fast food is fast food.” I asked her what sells Jollibee: the food or the brand? She likens Jollibee to other corporations, “It’s the same kind of marketing that Apple uses...the genius is that they are trying to connect to the community with a common goal. For Apple it’s non-conformism...it’s about the general idea as opposed to the quality of the product.” Kathleen surmises that the Filipino need for community must be linked to the stresses history has left on the Philippines over time,

“Filipinos are used to having to assimilate to different cultures, whether it’s different cultures coming in and invading our land or it’s the diaspora. When you have a culture like that, one main value that develops is trying to hold on to ties to your homeland.”

Jollibee may be, like Apple and other companies, marketing an overall idea, something abstract, something other than just a product. But if we look at Jollibees as actual sites of consumption, it is evident that Jollibees all over the globe are spaces in which Filipinos can in a very real way,
non-abstract way, hold on to their homeland. While Jollibee reflects the Filipino importance of connection and community, Kathleen points out that those Filipino values are changing. Older generations first coming to America were primarily concerned with strengthening their own Filipino communities, but the newer generations are the “first to say Filipino pride.” Jollibee in turn, is changing with this Filipino sentiment, still a community but also acting as an outlet for Filipino youth looking to reconnect with their culture and publicize their ethnic pride. During our Jollibee talk, I noticed Kathleen at first felt responsible, as some one who grew up in America, to point out the obvious Western influences Jollibee draws from. Her rational, that Jollibee was fast food and fast food was Western, was at war with her reality, that she experienced Jollibee to have Filipino factors. While Kathleen negotiates whether Jollibee is Western or not, she is in turn negotiating the parameters of her homeland, the nation of the Philippines.

“What is Filipino?”

Kathleen is also a member for FUPAC (Fordham University’s Philippine American Club) and suggest I present my topic to the club. My presentation was last on the agenda, first was the congratulations of one member’s participation in the Mr. Philippines competition and dance schedule practice for the national dance “Tinikling” at the upcoming FUPAC christmas performance. I opened the floor to the groups opinions on Jollibee. We of course, first talked about the food, the chicken and the spaghetti. But mostly members of FUPAC were interested in talking about Jollibee as a corporation. FUPAC members who had spent a lot of time both living in the Philippines and here in New York, recalled Jollibee as positive symbol, one that aimed to

42 “Interview with Kathleen V.” Personal Interview, October 13, 2011.
be affordable and sponsored local community initiatives in all the provinces, that when a mother or father would get off work late and ask a child what they wanted to eat, that child would say “I want Jollibee.” One student attributed Jollibee’s success to capitalizing on the Filipino desire to connect with their culture, stating that the Jollibee in Queens “...is exactly like same as the Jollibee there, you’re trying to replicate that experience. When you walk in the store, that’s the advertisement.” Others said Jollibee was simply “Filipino branding of something primarily American, fast-food.” Jollibee may be connecting with Filipinos and reminding them of the Philippines, but was in no way a representation of the real Philippines. This question of authenticity, whether Jollibee was authentic enough, whether it was authentic at all, was brought up especially so by one student who recently immigrated here from the Philippines, Miguel:

“Filipinos have such a great sense to adapt, we’ve been colonized by Japanese, Americans, Spanish and influenced by different trades of China, and it you strip all of that away...then what exactly is Filipino cuisine and what is Filipino? My answer is, I don’t know what Filipino is...even our numeric system is mixed...I just don’t know what pure Filipino is. Is that our fault? I don’t know.”

The room was quiet, it was difficult to gauge whether the other members refrained from talking because they agreed with him, disagreed or if they were just thinking about the question for the first time: what is Filipino? Miguel went on to say that Filipinos and Jollibee, tend to gloss over the real Philippines, the “darker side.”: “When I give a presentation on mountains in the Philippines literally made out of garbage, that’s a whole aspect of culture that people don’t understand, the deeper darker side of our history.”

Jollibee may be exporting a Filipino experience, but certainly not the entire Filipino experience, one that is heavily tainted by corruption, poverty and struggle. Why has it taken a fast-food
phenomenon, like Jollibee, to until now, in some small way, put Filipinos on the map? I asked FUPAC, why they thought Filipinos to the outside world were “invisible”: “What we’re (Jollibee) trying to export isn’t exactly clear as an identity, like other nationalities, that’s why it’s hard to get a greater global market for Jollibee, or Filipino identity.” Here, as the student uses Jollibee and Filipino interchangeably, we see that Jollibee is selling Filipino identity—although what exactly that identity is may be very unclear. In order for Jollibee to grow, Filipinos have to further strengthen and solidify their identities and establish themselves against other ethnicities, who unlike Filipinos are on the Asian map:

“For better or for worse, they (Filipinos) tend to diffuse more into American culture, compared to Chinese or Vietnamese immigrants, while we do at home practice elements of our culture, I don’t think we broadcast that in the same way other minorities do...they have cultural events, Chinese New Year, it’s broadcast to the rest of the world- Filipinos don’t really do that.”

The tension between practicing Filipino identity and assimilating, hiding it from the outer American world was one brought out by another student, who said that his parents always encouraged him to be a good representation of the Philippines. A good representation of the Philippines though, to their understanding, was to show the least Filipino traits as possible, to be American, a responsibility “That may require sacrificing certain cultures I would practice at home but not openly practice with every one else.”

Benito M. Vergara Jr. speaks of this tension among Filipino immigrants living in America in his ethnographic book Pinoy Capital:

43 “Interview with FUPAC” Personal Interview, November 16, 2011.
The Filipino Nation in Daly City, how filipinos are faced with a “longing to remain filipino” but that longing is inherently “at odds with american citizenship.” 44

**Being Back Home**

“I missed the Philippines” is the reason Neil waited from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. on line outside Jollibee on opening day. Neil is a twenty-two year old medical assistant who moved from the Philippines to rejoin his mother in Astoria, Queens when he was five years old. He spent a total of $75 on Jollibee food and says he split it with his mom, brother and grandma the bucket of chicken, side orders, burgers and spaghetti. For a time, Neil says he went to Jollibee three to four times a week. I asked Neil if he was a fast-food fanatic, to which he defends, “I am one of those health freaks, I played soccer in college. During that time, I had to limit myself to Jollibee.” Neil also admits he does not feel particularly connected to his Filipino culture, as he went to a predominately black and asian school, and as a “jock” on the soccer team spent time with europeans. Neil would take some of his non-Filipino friends to Jollibee, telling them “Don’t knock it until you try it” because he’s used to people saying, “Spaghetti and hot dogs, that’s weird!” He goes to Jollibee when he is craving Filipino food and says when looking for a “taste of home” he would rather have Jollibee than any other “authentic” Filipino restaurant. When he went home to the Philippines after high school graduation, his first stop from the airport was Jollibee. Neil’s memories of the Jollibee, Queens are recent as of its opening in 2009, but Neil and almost all customers can remember their first Jollibee experience somewhere else, usually in the Philippines. Neil remembers his cousin worked at a Jollibee in the Philippines and used to bring home leftovers and a toy and “for some reason, the taste just stuck with me.” He would stay connected to Jollibee even away from the Phillipines, as when his mom visited, she came

back with a red napsack that said Jollibee on it, inside was a stuffed animal. Neil even remembers learning childhood lessons at Jollibee,

“I remember I went with my family, my mom, my cousin and my aunt in the Philippines. I ordered so much food and I couldn’t finish it. My mom at that time just became a nurse, so she was able to come to America. The value of money was very important to her, because she grew up poor. She said a lot of people out there have no food and you’re wasting it. She said we are not going to leave until you finish it. I was three or four years old, falling asleep. I actually took a nap! I woke up later and I started eating as much as I can”

For Filipinos living in New York with intense longing to go back home, Jollibee is less a place to publicly express their pride or negotiate their Filipino identity, but rather it is a place that literally reminds them of home. The memories of the Philippines and of family were shared under the Jollibee roof. Both the happiness of gifts and the hard lessons Neil has learned as a child have happened around the site of consumption. Neil relives that familiarity here in Woodside, Queens whenever he visits Jollibee. 45 In Locating Filipino Americans: Ethnicity and the Cultural Politics of Space author Rick Bonus speaks of the importance of nostalgia, how it is a story we tell back to ourselves, a narrative: “(nostalgia) calls into action a kind of language and practice that make possible a common frame of meaning.”46 While nostalgia can serve as a tool for understanding both the past and present, it also can present itself as simply “manifestations of homesickness” what Vergara calls “uncontrollable remembrance or a rosy fabrication...” Either way it is integral in an immigrants life. 47 An “uncontrollable remembrance” is what I experience while talking to Sally, middle aged nurse at a New York City hospital has lived in Manhattan for

45 “Interview with Neil D.” Personal Interview, October 18, 2011.
46 Rick Bonus, Locating Filipino Americans: Ethnicity and the Cultural Politics of Space, (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2000), 4-6 and 67.
47 Vergara, Pinoy Capital, 4-6.
twenty years, originally from Cebu, Philippines, “home of the Mango.” Later, we would discover we lived only one block from each other in the city and yet it took a trip out to Jollibee in Queens for us to meet. She has no immediate Filipino community in the city, but visits them yearly and keeps in regular contact online and over the phone. She made the half hour trip to Woodside Queens on her day off from work to pick up some Filipino ingredients and treats. She says she stopped at Jollibee because it was convenient. Fast food, in the area. She says she doesn’t come to this location a lot. In fact, she used to pass Jollibee often but decided to never go in (the crowds were too big and the lines were too long). However, she does note that back home she went to Jollibee a lot with her sisters (she has six of them.) Sally does love McDonald’s, but says Filipinos like Jollibee more because they offer rice. I ask her if the “Yum Burger” is a taste of home, she laughs and says no. But does point out that, people in the Philippines are incorporating burgers more in the everyday, “It’s less strange to go out and seek American food, but they still cook every day over there. Ten years ago, I would have never seen a burger in my (Filipino) home, but now when I go back, I wouldn’t be surprised.” In the Philippines, Jollibee is very affordable “you can feed a family of five with $10” but at the Queens location? “I paid $10 for one meal combo, it’s expensive here.” Not cheaper nor more convenient than McDonald’s (which is down the block) Sally still decided (if unconsciously) to eat at Jollibee and invest.

“My Filipino friend at the hospital and I work long hard hours, after a long shift she’ll turn to me and say “Sally, want to go to Jollibee right now?” And she’s all the way from Jersey City! I look at her like, “Are you crazy? No!” I’ll go to Jollibee, but would never go that far! She drives her whole family up to Jollibee sometimes, from Jersey City.”
Sally says she thinks Jollibee is Filipino because they serve rice, but also recognizes that McDonald’s in the Philippines serves rice as well. I wonder if Sally sees the contradiction here, that she goes to Jollibee for their rice, but says McD’s serves the same thing, that she goes to Jollibee because it’s convenient, but points out that their food is overpriced and location is far away from her home. She says other people may come here because of a “familiarity thing” but doesn’t think that’s why she is here. Why is she here? Sally says “She loves rice” smiles when she says it. Sally was eating the Chickenjoy and spaghetti combo.

While I started to talk to her to ask about Jollibee, a majority of our conversation revolves around family back home, she talks about her sisters and how they connect. I wonder if she remembers she said her and her sisters used to come to Jollibee. While Jollibee may not be a preference for Sally, it certainly was a choice.48

The stories of Sally and Neil remind me of the balakbayan boxes my Filipino mother frequently sends home to our family (eight uncles and aunts and a multitude of cousins) in the Philippines. Balakbayan means “homecoming” a “term used to describe a Filipino returning to the Philippines for a visit.” 49 These boxes are filled with gifts, ranging from chocolates, to old magazines, to clothing, my mother tells me that the boxes aren’t really about the gifts at all, “It’s to let them know you are thinking of them.” Neil explains to me that in the Philippines, “the only people you can trust are your family, in a situation where you’re fighting for betterment, you need that camaraderie.” Yet here in the United States, where usually there is betterment for Filipino immigrants, that camaraderie fails to fade. It is, as it was in the 1500s, a truly Filipino institution. Jollibee is not part of that truly Filipino institution, but it is a factor that fosters family ties. Whether its Filipino families eating together at Jollibee or the family created by employees

48 “Interview with Sally” Personal Interview, September 2011.
at the company, Jollibee reminds us of those ties to our lolas, fellow pinoy, and kababayan (fellow countrymen) in the homeland. Jollibee captures the sense, experience, and memories of families in the Philippines and exports it to the new spaces that Filipinos occupy abroad, in Saudi Arabia, California and Woodside, Queens. In this sense, Jollibee is like a balakbayan box in reverse, not a reminder from those abroad, but a reminder from home.

The biggest obstacle in researching and writing about this project on Jollibee and Filipino sentiments has been the limiting parameters of what one perceives as identity and nation. As difficult as it was for me to articulate this on paper, it was even more a challenge for the Filipinos I interviewed to express their opinion on Jollibee without referring to their identity and nation and finding themselves facing a whole new set of contradictions. As Miguel asked, “What is Filipino?” Filipinos question and negotiate what about their culture makes them intrinsically Filipino, or not. Jollibee is a contradiction: it is a Filipino fast food chain that serves American fare. This paradox was one of the reasons I chose it. Because I knew that despite the hot dogs and hamburgers, I found myself, like many other Filipinos craved this food because it made them think of home. But one cannot speak nor understand Jollibee unless they dissect the politics of Filipino identity. Under what circumstances does one define themselves as Filipino and what characteristics make qualify them as Filipino? Posadas writes that how a Filipino defines his/herself is all dependent on the question being asked, “Are you from the Philippines? Are you Filipino? Are you a Fil-Am? Are you Asian-American? Are you a minority? Are you American?” It is from these “mental positionings” that we find our identity. While Jollibee, a set space with set locations, is an actualized position, encountering it sets off a mental frenzy. One member of FUPAC described the plague of Filipino identity and the definition of identity itself:
“We think of it as: you have a piece of paper and you draw a dot on it: that dot is your identity. Because it’s so specific, can our identity be defined like that? No, our identity is what the dot isn’t.”

Like Posadas’ point, this member sees that Filipinos, because they are in so many abstract positions and many actualized places, are then easier to perceive as what they aren’t than what they are. Even the Filipino family cannot be fully defined, it goes beyond blood to include friends of friends, neighbors and non-Filipinos. One of the FUPAC leaders is a caucasian girl, if she is part of the Filipino community, then who isn’t? Filipino identity, like the Filipino diaspora, is fluid, ever changing and ever expanding. In order to “understand” Filipinos, as so many books attempt to do so (Gochenour) we must first change our very definition of identity.

David Joel Steinberg’s *The Philippines: A Singular and A Plural Place* most accurately describes the complexities of Filipino culture, “To understand the Philippines, one must understand the two conflicting forces, the centripetal force of consensus and national identity and the centrifugal force of division and instability.” While Jollibee is a national symbol, a space in which Filipinos reconnect to culture, community and family, Jollibee and its expansion overseas, highlights the division of the Filipino people, their distance from the homeland, as it also points to Filipino instability, a menu balanced (or imbalanced) by fried chicken, hamburgers, and Halo-Halo. Steinberg attributes this limited perception of nation and nationalism to a hierarchy of homogenous ideas; that to be a nation, all peoples must be “single folk” with “common priorities.” But the Philippines, a plural place divided by imperialism and diaspora, as divided as the waters that run between its 7,000 plus islands, is incapable of being singularly defined. It is this “abstract dream of a single folk” that is the powerful force that blockades us from fully

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50 “Interview with FUPAC” Personal Interview, November 16, 2011.
understanding Jollibee, Filipino identity, Filipinos, and the Philippines. The reality of Jollibee and the latter is a plural one, with commonality but without consensus. 51 This is not to say that Filipinos should start working to glue together their pieces, re-construct their historical narrative to a coherent theme, nor exclude people from their all-encompassing kababayan. As one FUPAC member said in defense of her Filipino pride, “Is it necessary to throw away the historical context of it all? It’s the way that Filipino culture became a culture. That’s kind of what the Filipino culture is - it’s all the influence we’ve had, that is our culture and it’s something we should be proud of.” Similarly, must we attribute Jollibee to a Western or Filipino dichotomy? To place Jollibee under either category would be to dismiss either the very real history of Filipino-U.S. relations or to dismiss the very real Filipino effort and ambition that has gone into the operations of Jollibee for more than thirty years. No, Jollibee is not like McDonalds, a national symbol like the flag, one that calls upon power. Jollibee is however a space for discourse, where Filipinos negotiate their ideas about the homeland, their nation and nostalgia. Rather than trace the literal ties Jollibee has to the Philippines through its food and brand, we should acknowledge the emotional ties Jollibee holds for the thousands of Filipinos who stood on line opening day. Jollibee provides to Filipinos abroad and especially in Woodside, Queens “...not necessarily a physical return but rather a re-turn, a repeated turning to the concept and or reality of the homeland and other diasporan kin...”52

51 Steinberg, The Philippines: A Singular and A Plural Place, 31.
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