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(RE)CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF FILIPINO/A/X AMERICAN ETHNIC IDENTITIES” (2020). *Master's Projects
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“ANG KAPWA KO, MAHAL KO (I LOVE MY KAPWA)”: RECONCEPTUALIZATIONS
OF FILIPINO/A/X AMERICAN ETHNIC IDENTITIES

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APS 650-02
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May 5, 2020

Abstract

Despite being the fourth-largest immigrant group in the U.S., Filipino Americans are deemed “the forgotten Asians” or “the invisible minority.” Who is our *kapwa* (community) amid this paradox? Given the U.S.’s imperial legacy of settler colonialism, this research attempts to interrogate this “invisibility” and further asks, “What does acculturation entail for Filipino Americans in a settler society?” Using the Indigenous methodology of *kwentuhan* (storytelling), I highlight the breadth of Filipino American experiences vis-a-vis their ethnic identity and, conversely, the hindrance to ethnic identity empowerment in a settler society.

Keywords: kapwa, acculturation, white supremacy, settler colonialism, decolonization, Filipino American, Filipinoness, colonial mentality

What is Filipinoness?

As a young child, I feared women who practiced *kulam* (black magic). My mother would warn me to stay away from them. “Otherwise,” she would say in a stern voice and a steady eye contact, “You will get possessed.” These words reverberated through a Catholic child, born and raised in Manila,¹ who consumed copious amounts of scary movies about exorcism. Only recently did I learn that these women were *babaylans* (priestesses, poets, and shamans) and were highly regarded in pre-colonial society as leaders and healers.² They soon became targets of scrutiny by Western colonial dogma, and subsequently, *babaylans*’ cultural, religious, racial, and gender identities were seen as inferior. The vast majority of Manila city dwellers who follow Western cultural standards, my family included, has adopted these colonial attitudes toward *babaylans*.

In the pre-colonial Philippines, oral traditions were one of the most important ways in which knowledge was sustained through generations.³ However, under four hundred years of Spanish, American, and Japanese colonial surveillance, the cultural landscape of the Philippines changed dramatically. Accordingly, it is unclear which cultures and identities constitute as “Filipino.” In fact, this label presents its own contentions, as the first classified Filipinos were not native, but *insulares* (Spaniards who were born in the Philippines). Eventually, the “Filipino” racial and ethnic marker evolved by way of intermarriages and political reclamation that, now, consists of over 150 Indigenous tribes (i.e., Negritos, Aeta, Ifugao) and mixed Filipinos (i.e., Afro-Filipino, mestizo, Chinese Filipinos).

¹ When I turned 10 years old, my family immigrated to the U.S.

² Mario Limos, “The Fall of the Babaylan,” *Esquire*, March 18, 2019, <https://www.esquiremag.ph/long-reads/features/the-fall-of-the-babaylan-a2017-20190318>.

³ David, E. J. R. *Brown Skin, White Minds* (Charlotte: Information Age Publishing, 2013), 6.

Today, the concept of “Filipinoness” continues to transform as migration remains to be a part of the Philippine economic reality.⁴ As approximately one million Filipinos leave their homeland to work abroad, most will settle in the United States where the largest Filipino diaspora exists.⁵ Historically, Filipinos have come to the U.S. in four major immigration waves: (1) Filipino sailors who escaped Spanish galleons in the 16th century; (2) Filipino sponsored students called the *pensionados* sanctioned by the U.S. government in the early 1900’s as a way to “civilize” Filipinos; (3) Filipino laborers and non-sponsored students in 1910’s-1940’s, most of whom settled in California as grape farm workers, in Alaska as fish cannery workers, or in Hawaii as sugar cane plantation workers; (4) Filipino working professionals with college diplomas such as doctors, nurses, and engineers post-1965.⁶

After five centuries of immigration to the U.S., Filipino Americans are still deemed “the forgotten Asians” or “the invisible minority.”⁷ This (in)visibility paradox is yet another version of Western colonial erasure of Filipino cultures and identities, however, this time in the U.S., a settler society that is foundationally structured around white supremacy. As exhibited in Figure 1, three primary pillars uphold this imperial legacy: “(1) slaveability/anti-black racism, which anchors capitalism; (2) genocide, which anchors colonialism; and (3) orientalism, which anchors war.”⁸

⁴ Almond Aguila, “The Filipino, Diaspora and a Continuing Quest for Identity,” *Social Science Dilliman*, no. 11 (2015): 56.

⁵ For more information, visit <https://www.ilo.org/manila/areasofwork/labour-migration/lang--en/index.htm>.

⁶ Kevin Nadal, *Filipino American Psychology: A Handbook of Theory, Research, and Clinical Practice* (Bloomington: Wiley, 2011), 19.

⁷ E. J. R. David, “Why Are Filipino Americans Still Forgotten and Invisible?” *Psychology Today*, April 16, 2016, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/unseen-and-unheard/201604/why-are-filipino-americans-still-forgotten-and-invisible>.

⁸ Daniel HoSang, Oneka LaBennett, and Laura Polido, *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 68.

Figure 1: The Pillars of White Supremacy

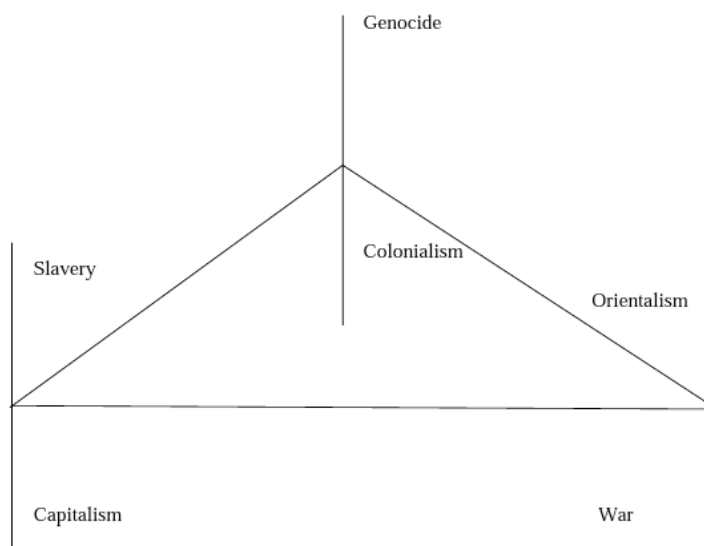


FIGURE 4.2. Three pillars of white supremacy.

Source: Andrea Smith⁹

These complex systems work congruently and function as logics, as opposed to categories of racial groups. As Dr. Smith explains:

This model destabilizes some of the conventional categories by which we often understand either ethnic studies or racial justice organizing—African American, Latino, Asian American, Native American, Arab American. In the case of Latinos, these logics may impact peoples differently depending on whether they are Black, Indigenous, Mestizo, or other. Consequently, we may want to follow the lead of Dylan Rodriguez, who suggests that rather than organize around categories based on presumed cultural similarities or geographical proximities, we might organize around differential impacts of white supremacist logics.¹⁰

All of these factors are crucial in understanding the violence of white supremacy, in that people of color can be vulnerable to these pillars and, depending on one's (multi)racial

⁹ Speculations about Andrea Smith's claim to the Cherokee identity has been a subject of much debate and turmoil. While I do not agree with her stance, I find her study on settler colonialism helpful in understanding the complex networks of white supremacy.

¹⁰ HoSang, LaBennett, & Pulido, *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century*, 70.

classification, can be automatically complicit in this system.¹¹ To dismantle this robust network, racial solidarity across ethnic groups must also include caveats and distinctions. Filipino Americans, in particular, experience white supremacy differently from other Asian Americans, as they have fallen victim to genocide in the Philippines, have been forced to assimilate to Western customs, and have been extracted from their resources and land, which led to the second through fourth waves of Filipino immigration to the U.S. As a result, acculturation for Filipinos in a settler society function in a complicated web of white supremacy, thus warranting further research. Accordingly, my research questions are as follows:

- 1) Against the backdrop of white supremacy, what Indigenous strategies do Filipino Americans use to establish their presence?
- 2) How have Filipino Americans conceptualized their ethnic identity amidst acculturation in a settler society?

Many Filipino American scholars, artists, and *kuyas* (older brother) and *ates* (older sisters) alike have since challenged this institutional erasure by paving the way for decolonization, to equalize power relations, and to reclaim the Filipino ethnic identity. Their work guides this research in elucidating the relationship between ethnic identity, acculturation, white supremacy, and most importantly, decolonization.

What is Filipinoness in a Settler Society?

After finishing his doctoral degree in clinical psychology at Northwestern University, Dr, Virgilio Enriquez moved back to the Philippines in 1971. There, his father insisted that Enriquez explain his dissertation in Tagalog, their native language. Enriquez came to realize that his

¹¹ Ibid. 70.

Western education's white-centric approach was not generalizable to the Filipino community. At this point forward, he started his work indigenizing this field. He pioneered *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* (Filipino Psychology), in which he emphasized the concept of *kapwa*, or the collective identity, as the core Filipino value.

Dr. Enriquez's work on *kapwa* provides a foundational point of reference when conceptualizing Filipinoness in the diaspora.¹² To further elaborate, *kapwa* is the Indigenous philosophical understanding and "awareness of a shared identity," such that the "*ako* (self) and *the iba sa akin* (others) are one and the same in *kapwa*."¹³ In other words, *hindi ako iba sa aking kapwa* (I am no different from others). In short, *kapwa* is the antithesis of individualism. Dr. Francisco-Menchavez expands, "*Kapwa* is an ideal of collectivism and group welfare. In this way, lending an ear of support or emotional reciprocity is a step towards the greater good of the Filipino community."¹⁴

With this in mind, Filipinos, who immigrate into the U.S. where the dominant culture and politics are individualistic, experience a clash between their value of *kapwa* and the settler society's individualistic nature. Therefore, sustaining *kapwa* for second-generation Filipino Americans in the midst of acculturation and ethnic identity formation becomes a challenge.¹⁵ Further, the pressures of subscribing to the dominant culture in order to prevent discrimination are particularly evident in Filipino American adolescents.¹⁶ Consequently, they are likely to choose the acculturative mode of assimilating to the dominant culture, which is associated with

¹² Although the definitions of Filipinoness are vast, this paper will primarily focus on the core value of *kapwa*.

¹³ E. J. R. David, Dinghy Sharma, and Jessica Petalio, "Losing Kapwa," *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 8, no. 1 (2017): 43.

¹⁴ Valerie Francisco-Menchavez, J.D. Reyes, T. Mendoza, S. Ancheta, and K. Liwanag, "Claiming Kapwa: Filipino Immigrants, Community-Based Organizations, and Community Citizenship in San Francisco," *New Political Science* 40, no. 2 (2018): 413.

¹⁵ David, "Losing Kapwa," 47.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

Dr. David's psychological paradigm of colonial mentality. Hence, it is crucial to consider the legacies of colonialism, the damaging realities of white supremacy, and their oppressive impact on our core value of *kapwa*.

Despite these challenges, Filipino Americans have established solidarity with their in-group, as well as other minority groups, in the face of oppression. As a prominent example, in the late 1960's, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Korean, and Indian activists together protested against racism and neo-imperialism.¹⁷ Further, Dr. Maeda writes:

The movement's founding principle of coalitional politics emphasizes solidarity among Asians of all ethnicities, multiracial solidarity among Asian Americans as well as with African, Latino, and Native Americans in the United States, and transnational solidarity with peoples around the globe impacted by U.S. militarism.¹⁸

Thus, the panethnic term "Asian American" was created.

However, the Asian American panethnicity presents an assimilation model of its own that strips nondominant groups, such as Filipino Americans, of their distinct identities.¹⁹ As Dr.

Smith argues:

Organising by people of colour must be premised on making strategic alliances with one another, based on where we are situated within the larger political economy. Coalition work is based on organising not just around oppression, but also around complicity in the oppression of other peoples as well as our own.²⁰

In other words, the concept of *kapwa* in the U.S. must be examined in a critical lens that not only analyzes how white supremacy interacts with each individual ethnic group but also *within* these groups.

¹⁷ Daryl Maeda, "The Asian American Movement," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, June 2016, <https://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-21>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Leny Strobel, "'Born-Again Filipino': Filipino American Identity and Asian Panethnicity," *Amerasia Journal* 22, no. 2 (1996): 44.

²⁰ HoSang, LaBennett, & Pulido, *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century*, 72.

In this respect, Dr. Ocampo argues that Filipino Americans break the rules of race due to the panethnic moments they share with not only Asian Americans, but also Latin Americans and Pacific Islanders.²¹ Namely, Filipino Americans in Los Angeles share the model minority myth²² with other Asian Americans in high school yet are labeled “at-risk” in universities, leading them to veer away from the “Asian American” identification.²³ Although half of Dr. Ocampo’s participants classified their race as Asian Americans, 45% as Pacific Islanders, and only a few as Latinx, Filipino Americans still emphasized their sense of *kapwa* (kinship) with the Latinx community, given similar colonial contexts and ethnic identity markers (i.e., last names, religion, and language) as well as intermarriages between Filipinos and Latin Americans.²⁴

Although often conflated as in the U.S. Census, the terms race and ethnicity are not entirely synonymous and require further conceptualizations. As follows, race is “riddled with faulty perceptions of superiority,” i.e., based on phenotypes, that has created deep divides between groups of people.²⁵ Hence, many race-related conflicts have existed and continue to exist around the world. Conversely, ethnicity is a sense of belongingness in a social group “as a result of common culture and descent.”²⁶ In this respect, race is ascribed (i.e., Filipino Americans *as* Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders), while ethnicity is chosen (i.e., Filipino Americans identify *with* the Latinx community). Although the concept of race is relevant when discussing

²¹ Anthony Ocampo, *The Latinos of Asia: How Filipinos Break the Rules of Race* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 4.

²² The Model Minority Myth is the assumption that all ethnicities that fall under the “Asian” umbrella are high achievers in academic settings.

²³ Ocampo, *The Latinos of Asia*, 156.

²⁴ *Ibid.*,

²⁵ Pamela Organista, Gerardo Marin, and Kevin Chun, *The Psychology of Ethnic Groups in the United States* (California: Sage Publications, Inc., 2009), 108.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

unequal power relations in the U.S, my primary concern with this research is to examine my participants' sense of belongingness or *kapwa* amid acculturation.²⁷

Much of the scholarship surrounding acculturation centers Dr. Berry's model to exhibit the cultural adoption (assimilation), intersections (i.e., integration), or lack thereof (i.e., separation or marginalization), that immigrants of color experience in a white dominated nation.²⁸ While this study helps illustrate the “push and pull” factors of cultural exchange for immigrants of color, some scholars have challenged this model due to its limiting bidirectionality (i.e., Filipino vs. American), therefore inapplicable to individuals who belong to three or more ethnic groups.²⁹ Furthermore, Dr. Strobel argues that this model overlooks decolonization, which is an imperative part of the Filipino ethnic identity development.³⁰ She expands, “In decolonization, we realize that our sense of history must not begin and end with this colonial history” and what unites our “*kapwa* (collective identity) is our *loob* (soul) through the rediscovering and reclamation of the Indigenous Filipino.”³¹

This rediscovering presents nuances, considering one, the dynamic process of decolonization and two, the multidimensionality of Filipino American intersecting identities. Following the aforementioned scholars, I hope to highlight the many layers to ethnic identity empowerment among Filipino Americans amid acculturation. In addition, there are inescapable racial conflicts that linger as a ramification of settler colonialism, and more broadly, white supremacy. To exhibit both sides of the same coin, I will use the Indigenous methodology of *kwentuhan* (storytelling) with my participants.

²⁷ I use the ambiguous term community to let my participants define for themselves who is part of their community.

²⁸ Organista, Marin, & Chun, *The Psychology of Ethnic Groups in the United States*, 110.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

³⁰ Strobel, “Born Again Filipino,” 44.

³¹ Leny Strobel, “A New Twist to Filipino American Decolonization: Eileen Tabios's Poetry,” accessed May 5, 2020, <http://home.jps.net/~nada/strobel.htm>

Decolonizing Methodology

A *kwento* (story) bridges “the past from the future, one generation with the other, the land with the people, and the people with the story.”³² This form of oral tradition is significant to Indigenous cultures across the globe and classifies under decolonizing methodologies, a critical counterpoint to the ways in which research has been weaponized against people of color.³³ In the case of the Philippines and Latin America, Dr. Daus-Magbual details:

Colonialism, in the form of education, has been used as a critical medium in the creation and sustainment of empires. In the Philippines and in Latin America, Spain and the United States instituted benevolent narratives of Christianity, democracy, and education to control the minds, bodies, and souls of many Filipinos and Latinos.³⁴

While research and education are inextricably linked to imperialism, Dr. Strobel uses narratives to protest against the silencing of Indigenous Filipino’s cultures and identities:

Narratives are a re-telling of the Filipino story. The retelling is, therefore, a process of imagining and creating a new story, so to speak, in order for the story to become a source of empowerment through a new way of looking at history. Re-telling, therefore, sets free the over-determined aspects of Filipino colonial history.³⁵

Similarly, Dr. Steele uses talk story, a culturally significant method, among Hawaiian participants:

I wanted to avoid becoming an outside “expert” with a claim to authority over knowledge, silencing the voices of participants, treating them like subjects under scrutiny. Research should not be something that is done *on* people, but rather *with* people.³⁶

³² Linda Tuhiwai Smith. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 2012), 146.

³³ *Ibid.*, 146.

³⁴ Rodrick Daus-Magbual, “Political, Emotional, Powerful: The Transformative Influence of the Pin@y Educational Partnerships (PEP),” (Doctoral Dissertations, University of San Francisco, 2010), 1, <https://repository.usfca.edu/diss/393>.

³⁵ Leny Strobel, *Coming Full Circle* (Santa Rosa: The Center for Babaylan Studies, 2015), 82.

³⁶ Jamie Simpson-Steele, “Talk-Story: A Quest for New Research Methodology in Neocolonial Hawai‘i,” *Youth Theatre Journal* 26, no. 1 (2012): 41.

In this spirit, I along with participants shared short vignettes with each other in response to the following questions:

- 1) Have you ever had an internal or external conflict related to your ethnic (or intersecting) identity/ies? Please share your story.
- 2) How did you confront these conflicts?
- 3) Reflect on an experience that shows your pride in your ethnic identity. Please detail this moment and answer these questions: How would you describe your community?

These questions aim to uncover the complex layers of acculturation in a settler society by first prompting a discussion about race-related struggles, possible breakthroughs, and rediscoveries.

Initially, I intended to interview students from a local high school, dedicated for new immigrants, to incorporate their unique perspectives on this topic. However, the COVID-19 pandemic presented unforeseen challenges as schools began to close down due to the state-wide quarantine orders. As a result, my initial plan of having fifty participants, from which I anticipated a wide range of demographic information, has dwindled into twenty. In any event, I am still grateful to the co-founder of this high school for her willingness to support this research and to my participants for their honesty, vulnerability, and unwavering support amid this pandemic. Overall, I conducted 10 oral and 10 written *kwentuhan* sessions from February to April of 2019.³⁷ As portrayed below in Tables 1-3, I tried to capture intergenerational perspectives from various backgrounds, including age, gender, religion, and so forth.³⁸

³⁷ Participants had two options: a *kwentuhan* session with me over the phone or a Google Form to fill out remotely. In the case of the latter, participants are still able to read stories to simulate *kwentuhan*.

³⁸ For more info about participant demographics, please refer to the Appendix. I acknowledge the lack of non-binary, trans representation as a limitation of this research.

Age	Gender	Age of Immigration	Year of Immigration	City of Origin	City of Immigration	Years in the U.S.
85+	Female	50	1982	Rizal Province	Santa Rosa, CA	10+
65-74	Male	48	2002	Pasig City	San Francisco, CA	7-9
55-64	Female	25	1981	Makati City	Los Angeles, CA	10+
25-34	Male	14	2002	Manila	Santa Rosa, CA	10+
55-64	Female	40	2002	San Juan	New York, NY	10+
55-64	Female	48	2004	Marikina City	Los Angeles, CA	10+
55-64	Female	46	2002	Metro Manila	Santa Rosa, CA	10+
25-34	Male	14	2007	Tarlac City	Santa Rosa, CA	10+

Current Age	Gender	Age of Immigration	Year of Immigration	City of Origin	City of Immigration	Years in the U.S.
35-44	Male	5	1984	N/A	Woodbridge	10+
18-24	Female	6	2002	Angeles	Daly City	10+
35-44	Female	2	1977	Dagupan City	San Diego	10+
18-24	Female	7	2003	San Jacinto, Pangasinan	San Francisco	10+
18-24	Male	1	1998	Manila	Portland	10+

Current Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Parent's City of Origin	Parent's City of Immigration
18-24	Male	Asian, Hispanic/Latinx, Filipinx/a/o	Manila	Glendora, CA then Bay Area
25-34	Male	Asian, Pacific Islander, Filipinx/a/o	Illocos Norte/Pangasinan and Pampanga/ Manila	Guam
25-34	Male	Black/ African American, Filipinx/a/o	Manila	Washington D.C.
18-24	Male	Global Citizen, Filipinx/a/o, White/ Caucasian	Manila, Taguig	Vancouver Canada then San Francisco
18-24	Male	Asian, Filipinx/a/o	N/A	N/A
35-44	Female	Filipinx/a/o	N/A	Los Angeles
25-34	Female	Asian, Filipinx/a/o	Cebu	San Francisco

³⁹ 1.5 generation immigrants refer to those who immigrated at the age of 13 or below.

In accordance with my interview questions, I categorized their stories into three different sections: first, their conflicts titled “Losing *Kapwa*;” second, their conflict resolution titled “Finding *Kapwa*;” and third, their ethnic identity pride in “Reimagining *Kapwa*.”⁴⁰ The next section will reveal the researcher and participants’ stories relating to their internal or external dilemmas vis-a-vis their ethnic identity.

Losing *Kapwa*

“As a queer Filipina, I have to work tirelessly to be accepted by my Catholic family. That is, so long as I am successful in academia, I am given a pass for being gay.”

Before graduate school, I knew little about being Filipina. I often heard compliments about my great grandmother's appearance, a *mestiza*; my *lola* (grandmother), who took after her fair-skinned mother; and my mother who is often mistaken as Japanese due to her light skin tone. Beyond this limiting marker, I thought that my Filipinanness depended on my Catholic religion, yet I actively avoided conservative churches and cultural centers, ashamed that my masculine appearance would be a subject of gossip and embarrassment to my mother. This sense of isolation is echoed by other participants, who felt removed from the ideal “Filipino/a” prototype, thus pushing them away from their *kapwa* Filipinos. A Filipino American participant (25-34 years old, 1st generation) empathizes:

Before I came out to them, my dad would always make homophobic remarks around me. There was a point where he's mentioned that he wouldn't want any of his kids to turn out gay. Experiencing that kind of environment, especially the first 14 years of my life, made me deny myself of my real identity. I tried so hard to convince myself that I'm not gay. I would just be an embarrassment to my whole family if I came out to them.

In these two instances, the pressures of subscribing to a conservative Catholic religion are

⁴⁰ The title “Losing *Kapwa*” is a nod to Dr. David’s journal article “Losing *Kapwa*: Colonial Legacies and the Filipino American Family.”

internally connected to their concept of Filipinoness. Consequently, they carry the expectations from the Catholic church, their Filipino American communities, and their families.⁴¹

In other cases, four participants felt insecure about their Filipinoness due to their limited Tagalog skills. Within a matter of seconds, a Filipina American (18-24 years old, 1.5 generation), identifies her conflict. She shares:

I think internal conflict shows up most when I come home [to the Philippines] because my Tagalog is at most third-grade level. When I first immigrated, my mother encouraged me to speak exclusively in English for the first few years to assimilate more easily. Now, when I come home, my Filipino identity is very much Americanized.

Although the Tagalog language is a cultural marker that played a critical role in forming a national identity and resisting Western colonialism in the Philippines, this monolithic perception of Filipinoness overlooks the diversity in multiculturalism and multiracialism. In other words, Filipino cultures and races are placed in rigid parameters, a dichotomy (i.e., “black and white” issue, Filipino vs. American) where multiracial individuals are vulnerable to discrimination as their “racial purity” is put into question. One of my participants (25-34 years old, 2nd generation Filipino, African American) experiences this racial invalidation:

In terms of internal conflict, it was definitely an insecurity of mine that I didn’t feel Filipino enough, nor did I feel Black enough. There was always a clash. I didn’t know my biological father until the age of 22, so my mom raised me. Albeit nurturing, when it came down to family gatherings, there was a [Filipina] great aunt who looked at me like I wasn’t really one of them. That’s definitely something I struggled with.

Thus, perceiving the concepts of race and culture as binary constructs reinforces hierarchies that are undoubtedly linked to white supremacy.⁴² Much like the Asian American panethnicity, in-groups resort to tactics akin to “assimilation,” or a homogeneous classification, in order to fight against white supremacy. However, this perceived Filipino homogeneity and in-

⁴¹ For more information about the intersection between sexuality, race and religion, refer to this study:

⁴² Ibid., 31.

group divide ought to be premised within the context of settler colonialism. The following section will further contextualize this conviction.

Finding *Kapwa*

In my quest to dive deeper into understanding the impact of these conflicts and the context in which they operate, I asked each participant if they've confronted their internal issues and most didn't, at least not immediately. For instance, a Filipina American (35-44 years old, 1.5 generation) experienced blatant racism as a child in her predominantly white neighborhood in San Diego. After leaving her hometown, she was able to move away into a more culturally diverse city where she now volunteers in the local Filipino cultural center. "For years," she says, "I didn't confront [my conflict]. I didn't at all. I wish I did. Instead, I grew up quiet and shy." The majority of participants felt similarly, as their conflicts have taken months, if not years to resolve. She continues:

I remember going to Filipino parties outside of my county. I would see groups of Filipino Americans. I didn't have that. I wish I was part of that. I yearned for a sense of belonging. That's why psychologically, as an adult, I am now part of a community. It warms me.

Although her conflict lingered for years, moving into a more multicultural city gave her access to a sense of belongingness in *kapwa*.

However, close proximity to one's ethnic group is not the sole remedy to these racial conflicts. In fact, a Filipina American (18-24 years old, 1.5 generation) from Daly City, known for its large Filipino American population, still encountered internalizations in the absence of a

decolonization movement in the community, as the immigrant versus US-born divide prevented the nurturing of *kapwa* relations.⁴³ She shares:

I felt outcast when I moved from the Philippines to the US. I was made fun of for having a Filipino accent, people assumed I was poor... As a kid and adolescent, I tried really hard to fit into the Filipino American standard of "normal." I tried listening to the same songs, dressing how they dressed. I learned how to talk with an American accent. I started making fun of "fob" Filipinos too to fit in.

Eventually, as an adult, she reaches a turning point:

I started to become more respectful of my culture. Whenever I would visit the Philippines, I would show special gratitude for things I was given, food I was offered, places I was taken, even if I was accustomed to a "higher" standard of living. I tried learning the language as much as I could and showed special interest in Filipino/Kapampangan folk songs.

(Non)inclusive environments aside, these two stories exemplify the participants' inherent desire to learn more about their cultures, which eventually comes to fruition in two significant ways: representation and enculturation, respectively.⁴⁴ In both contexts, the pressure to assimilate remains a significant barrier to ethnic identity empowerment, though as aforementioned, their conflicts and resolutions must be situated in a broader scope of settler colonialism.

From this perspective, a settler society maintains an institutional gate-keeping strategy that unfairly limits people of color access to different institutional sectors like the media, housing, and education.⁴⁵ These institutions present whiteness as a norm and ideal, which is systematically embedded in the culture's history and status quo.⁴⁶ Even though the U.S. is an increasingly diverse society, immigrants of color are still expected to assimilate to this dominant

⁴³ Internalizations refer to the psychological ramification of colonialism, in that whiteness is perceived as superior to one's heritage culture and identities.

⁴⁴ Enculturation is as defined by Drs. Organista, Marin, and Chun as a process in which "individuals who endeavor to learn or affirm their culture of origin."

⁴⁵ Keith Lawrence and Terry Keleher, "Structural Racism," (paper presented at National Conference on Race and Public Policy, Berkley, California, 2004), 1.

⁴⁶ Strobel, *Coming Full Circle*, 82.

racial representation and narrative. As a result, participants have experienced conflicts in two considerable ways: either they are met with blatant racism at work, in school or even in their own neighborhoods or have internalized this oppression and perceive whiteness as superior.⁴⁷ In cases where participants have expressed interest in decolonization, some are “othered” against intra-group members as being “too American.”

Assimilation is, therefore, made possible, insofar as inevitable, by the settler society’s institutional racism and underrepresentation. Examining one facet like assimilation and labeling Filipino Americans as people with colonial mentality unrightfully places the blame on immigrants of color, as opposed to the covert forces that sustain white supremacy and fracture in-group solidarity. In a similar vein, looking solely at underrepresentation and characterizing Filipinos as a “homogenous” group causes intragroup conflict that I, and numerous participants, have experienced as demonstrated in “Losing *Kapwa*.” Ultimately, Filipino Americans not only deal with the dominant culture’s pressures to assimilate but also with the in-group’s pressure to separate and preserve their cultural heritage in the face of institutional erasure.

As a Filipina American (18-24 years old, 1.5 generation) encapsulates:

As I expressed interest in learning about my culture as an adult, I felt more isolated from my Filipino American friends. And reversely, when I visited the Philippines, I felt different as well. Some people would put me on a pedestal, others would think I was a snob for not speaking the language. It was as if I wasn't as Filipino as they wanted me to be.

Additionally, internal and external conflicts take time to resolve, considering the insidious nature of white supremacy. A fourth-generation Japanese, Filipino American (18-24 years old) explains:

[Internal conflict] is something that I imagine I will be working through my whole life. But I’m trying not to feel pressured to be a certain way and define what connecting to my heritage means to me.

⁴⁷ David, *Brown Skins, White Minds*, 76.

Moving forward, he frees himself of these assimilationist burdens by coming to terms with this life-long process. Similarly, participants as a collective have since educated themselves of their cultures, sought therapy, or found humor in light of these struggles. They are able to name these conflicts and are able to move past their respective external and internal pressures.⁴⁸ In the words of a Navy veteran participant (25-34 years old, 1st generation): “I conquered my insecurity by seeing other people be proud of their cultural background. Through reading books, I was able to see parallels across ethnic groups in trying to assimilate to whiteness.” As participants find resolutions to their conflicts, they forge unique paths to decolonization by increasing representation and creating nuance to our core value of *kapwa*.

Reimagining *Kapwa*

“What does *kapwa* mean to you?” I ask a Filipina American (55-64 years old, 1st generation) in a follow-up interview, to which she responds:

There was a TV program in the Philippines in the '80s or '90s called "Kapwa ko, Mahal ko," meaning, "I love my fellow men." It's a program where they help people who need medical assistance. I am a fan of this TV show. For me, *kapwa* is an endearing word. You feel a connection to your *kapwa*. You feel a sense of belonging, a union.

Despite being away from the Philippines for more than ten years, she keeps this sentiment alive by forming a community with fellow churchgoers:

I always look forward to going to church on Sundays. I sing in church and belong to the 7:30am all Filipino mass choir. Church attendance is majority Filipinos at 90% and 10% mixed race. After the mass a large group of Filipinos will linger in the parking lot just chatting merrily. It has this barrio fiesta atmosphere where groups of people are waiting for the town's banda and their majorettes.

Likewise, a Filipina American (18-24 years old, 1.5 generation) feels a sense of kinship

⁴⁸ Strobel, *Coming Full Circle*, 103.

with other Filipinos wherever she goes, regardless of how long she's known them. Her interpretation of *kapwa* is "a feeling of instant comfort with other Filipinos because of a shared identity." She shares a serendipitous moment that exemplifies this instantaneous connection:

When I was in London last year, I couldn't really find a Filipino community, but I did come across an opening of a Jollibee. It was all over the news. On its opening day, the line spanned for four blocks and I ended up waiting for four hours with other Filipinos. I wasn't surprised [by the turn out]. It made me giggle to eat Jollibee for the first time with them.

In these two stories, location and time are not of great significance when experiencing *kapwa*, but the immediate and lasting bonds that they form with other Filipinos based on a shared unity, togetherness, and identity that makes them feel at home with *kapwa* Filipinos.

Moreover, this shared belongingness extends beyond ethnic boundaries. As an example, a participant (25-34 years old, 2nd generation Filipino, African American) tells a story of the first time he opened his home to his friends: "At one point, I felt comfortable enough to invite my friends, who are predominantly Black, to come over, to taste the food, hang out and show them how we Filipinos get down, how we party." He does admit to an initial apprehension about this cultural intersection: "It was a big deal for me up to this point since prior to this, I never felt comfortable sharing my culture to outsiders and it was also their first time around Filipinos."

Fortunately, he gives both parties the benefit of the doubt:

It turned out great. My family taught them Tagalog. They mentioned, "These egg rolls are good!" I said, "No, man, that's lumpia." They also sang karaoke, Boyz II Men in particular. They weren't sitting trying to be cool. In fact, they were active participants. That was a moment that turned the tide. I realized they were not my friends; they were family.

While many participants mention family, celebration, and community as a significant part of their pride in their ethnic identity, an overwhelming amount also mentions the resilience, hard

work, and humility of the Filipino American community in the face of adversity.⁴⁹ For instance, a Filipina American (55-64 years old, 1st generation) recalls a specific moment that illustrates this resilience against oppression:

When I started working, I noticed a Caucasian male, who was a veteran and served during the Vietnam war, was treating me differently from my other colleagues. I tried to let it pass, hoping he would change his attitudes toward me. I thought, “Maybe, I was just a new employee.” But it came to a point where I could no longer tolerate his abrasive attitude and his racial slurs.

With the support of her friends and co-workers, she stands against this injustice:

I approached our supervisor who later enjoined the HR team. I, as well as my coworkers, went through questioning. I asked their opinion about this situation and they assured me that I was doing the right thing.

At the very end of this story, she highlights that her *kapwa*, whose ethnicities (Caucasians and Filipino Americans) vary, has supported her throughout this difficult yet empowering time:

After the investigation, my supervisors asked, “What do you expect to happen after this?” They even gave me the option to get him terminated. I answered, “No, I just wanted him to change and stop that behavior.” In the back of my mind I wanted him to know he could not treat someone like me, who isn’t white like him, differently.

Interestingly, her definition of *kapwa* is “a family in a society where you care for one another.”

As Filipino American participants rediscover *kapwa* in various times and locations, some define *kapwa* as a shared unity and an instant connection, while others, as a societal commitment that crosses ethnic boundaries. Collectively, these stories reveal the connections between the participants' pride in their *kapwa* and their ability to come together in times of triumphs and hardships.

⁴⁹ 18 out of 20 participants mention the traits hard work, resilience, and humility to describe their Filipino community.

Reconceptualizing Filipinx/a/o American Ethnic Identities

This research highlights the settler society's attempts to erase Filipino American culture and identities, yet Filipino Americans have still reinvented *kapwa* despite these glaring challenges. So, who is our *kapwa* (community) amid acculturation in a settler society? As journalist Frankie Concepcion argues, "*Kapwa* may imply a shared identity, but where progress is concerned, it is clear that the distribution has not been shared. It has not been even."⁵⁰ Thus, moving forward, our communities must be mindful of these inequities and combat the many forms of oppressions that exists today.⁵¹ By drawing from Indigenous philosophies, as Dr. Strobel best describes, we move toward decolonization:

Trinh Minh-ha writes that there need not be conflict in our differences that, in fact, we do not own anything, not even what we create. How would this Buddhist-like way of thinking help us in creating a panethnic consciousness? This is also the indigenous Filipino way of seeing the interdependence and interrelatedness of human beings and all of creation. The inclusive 'we' (*tayo* in Tagalog) replaces the exclusive 'we' (*kami*) in recognition of this interconnectedness; there is no inside/outside duality in *tayo*."

In a settler society where racial injustice is prevalent, the term *kapwa* sets a moral standard, an ideal for inclusivity to better serve our dynamic Filipino/a/x American communities and ethnic identities. In the words of Barbara Jane Reyes on the liminality of binaries (i.e., biculturalism):

Diasporic Filipino and Filipino American cultures, and by that logic, Bay Area Filipino American and Bay Area Filipinx cultures are markedly different from Manila-based Filipino cultures (I also suspect that non-Manila Philippine Filipinos would mark their cultures as distinct from Manila cultures).⁵²

She continues, "There is plenty I will not get 'right,' [as a Filipina American] and then, I consider that 'right' is also problematic and colonially informed."

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Strobel, "Born Again Filipino," 49.

⁵² Barbara Jane Reyes, "Interview: On Being Filipinx in Diaspora, For the City That Nearly Broke Me, For the City That Nearly Saved Me," December 8, 2019, <http://www.barbarajanereyes.com/2019/12/08/interview-on-being-filipinx-in-diaspora-for-the-city-that-nearly-broke-me-for-the-city-that-nearly-saved-me/>.

Like many of my participants, I, too, am undergoing decolonization and there is no one or “right” way to this process. I am reading Dr. Strobel’s research on *babaylans*. Here, Dr. Strobel tells a gruesome moment that transpired during Spanish colonization:

A story is told that when the Spaniards (who colonized the Philippine islands beginning in the 16th century) began to understand the power and potency of the *babaylan*, they so feared the latter’s spiritual prowess that they not only killed many of them but in some instances, fed them to crocodile to ensure their total annihilation.⁵³

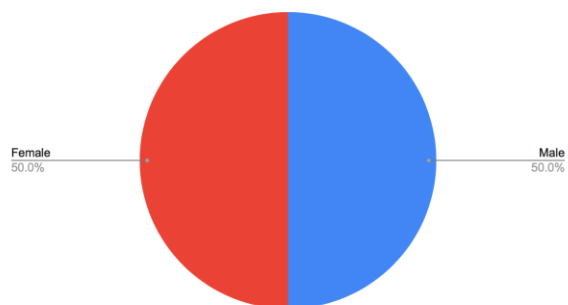
Spanish colonists were threatened by *babaylans*, so much so they attempted to not only silence them but erase traces of their existence from history. However, as Dr. Strobel underscores, “The *babaylan* tradition never really died; it remained alive inside the colonial infrastructure.” Her books *Back from the Crocodile’s Belly* and *Babaylan: A Call to the Indigenous* celebrate the many ways in which we can embody these powerful leaders today. Through storytelling, this research also aspires to aim the spotlight on *babaylans* of today’s generation. Ate Leny and Poeta Barbara Jane Reyes, with whom I feel a sense of *kapwa*, write with much conviction. Their work has been foundational to my personal and academic endeavors. They are my *babaylans*. Who are yours?

⁵³ Leny Strobel and Lily Mendoza, *Back from the Crocodile’s Belly* (Philippines: UST Publishing House, 2015), 398.

Appendix

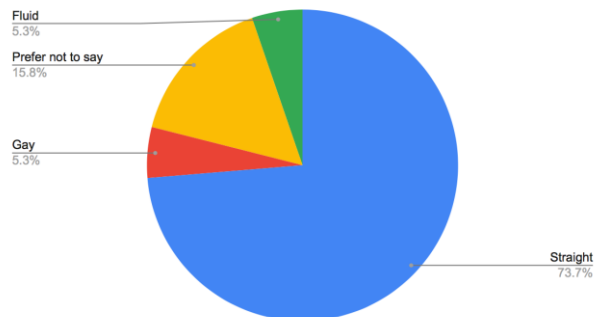
Participant Demographics: Gender (A), Sexual Orientation (B), Religion (C), Education (D)

Gender



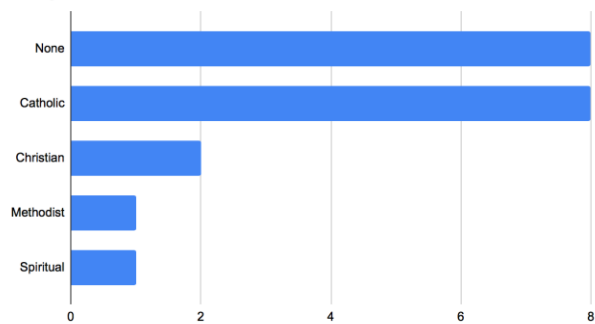
A

Sexual Orientation



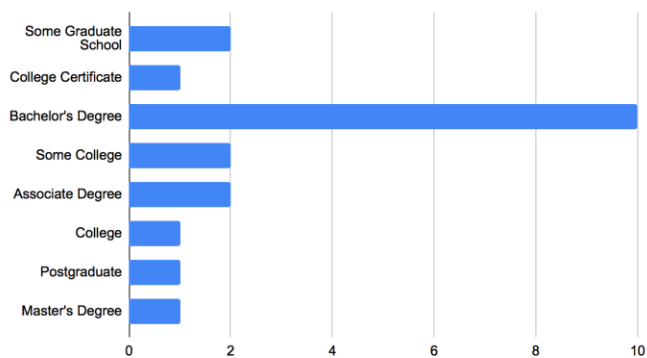
B

Religion



C

Highest Level of Education



D

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