

Finding the Sun: An Effort in Retracting and Relearning One's Past

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Abstract: Colonization of the Philippines has affected the realities of generations of Filipinos and members of the Filipino diaspora through cultural imperialism and the implementation of colonial hierarchies and institutions. My research analyzes my lived experiences as a Filipino American and passages detailing Filipino American experiences in Elaine Castillo's *America is Not the Heart* and Malaka Gharib's *I Was Their American Dream*. I use the lens provided to me through sources dealing with empire, colonialism, and identity to question how Filipino Americans continuously deal with and are influenced by displacement. I seek to place my location and trace it through a history of colonialism, migration, and forced alliances. I explore ideas such as the erasure of Filipino culture and history, the creation of narratives, and the acceptance of one's identity in hopes of better understanding my heritage and encouraging others to examine their own critically.

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The adage "history is written by the victors" fails to reflect that as the past, present, and future are all entwined, the victors write those too. Throughout history, people behind forces of colonialism and empire have been the victors. Their dominance over the historical narrative means that "the relationship to the inherited past and its cultural legacy has been rendered problematic by the violent interference of colonial and imperial history" (Harlow 1987, 19). The creation and forced dissemination of a dominant narrative that highlights colonial forces require cultures to modify their understanding of truth. And so,

what happens when one's reality does not match the prescribed narrative when the things known to be true by some are forgotten or ignored by others? It becomes necessary to intervene in the dominant narrative; to learn and teach one's history.

The formal beginning of my journey to better understand the context of my place as a Filipino American began during my 8th-grade WWII social studies unit. I remember being extremely upset as my mom picked me up from school because while we learned about the military importance of the Philippines as a location in the Pacific Theater and about how the U.S. freed the Philippines from Japan, no stories were told

that reflected the experiences my Lolo and Lola¹ passed down to me.

I took advantage of a project in which we researched the life of a veteran and made a presentation about their experiences. I chose a woman who served as a translator in the Philippines. I called my Lolo and Lola, and for the first time, I asked in depth about their childhoods during the war. As some stories are difficult to pass down, I had to convince my grandparents that I wanted to hear them. Counteracting, *Oh you don't really want to hear that*, with assurances that I did. Facing clipped answers, I reached out to my mom, aunt, and cousins, piecing together whole stories from the parts we each had heard.

As a product of gathering my family's stories and synthesizing them with my research on WWII, I created a presentation that addressed violence in the Philippines due to the fight between the competing American and Japanese empires. Although my project was not the most well-received within the class, this assignment was a defining moment in my search to understand how imperialism altered my family's history.

Despite beginning this journey many years ago, there is a lot I do not understand about being Filipino: I cannot speak Tagalog or either my Lolo or Lola's dialects, and I do not know the land beyond pictures and stories. Furthermore, my understanding of being Filipino American is different from those of my grandparents, aunts, or uncles because I have half-Filipino and half-European heritage. Finally, I must address the discrepancy between my father's and mother's ancestries because they are from groups traditionally on opposite sides of imperial power struggles.

My first year in college was helpful with my journey of discovery because it allowed me to join a greater Filipino American community, something I was never able to do before. I attended club meetings, cultural presentations, and online conferences. I read books, watched dances, and spoke to many other Filipino Americans. Through these experiences, I have realized that the sense of unknowing I have held for so long is a Filipino trait. How could it not be? I never had a class teach me my history, despite the Philippines being a U.S. colony for almost 50 years (David 2013, 13). I have never stopped asking my teachers if we will cover the Philippines, and I never will because it is so validating to see yourself reflected in what you are learning, to trust that you will be taught, and to know that you have not been forgotten; however, I have also discovered the power in forging your own classrooms and teaching your own stories.

Culture and Colonialism

Each culture has unique traits that influence how its members view themselves and the world. As each culture is a unique section in the larger tapestry of humanity, colonialism and connected processes—such as assimilation—result not just in personal but global losses. Moreover, the erasure of culture is necessary for the institutions and hierarchies of colonialism to hold power: demonizing and demolishing a culture's art, language, systems of rule, and history makes it easier to implant and maintain feelings of inferiority.

Continued oppression and degradation provoke a colonial mentality (CM) among the colonized. The Filipino American community defines this mentality

¹ Grandfather and Grandmother in Tagalog, a language of the Philippines

as an "automatic preference for anything American and automatic rejection of anything Filipino" (David & Okazaki 2010, 850). Of course, the onset of CM is only one response to colonialism, and the degree of CM varies among individuals. In the Philippines, colonization is felt and responded to differently across islands and communities. For example, Muslim communities in Mindanao and Indigenous groups have actively resisted colonial influence throughout time and, as such, have not developed CM like other groups (David & Nadal 2013, 300). Still, CM is an important issue as colonial forces continue to affect social hierarchies such as colorism. Colorism and the resulting belief in the superiority of fairer skin may lead not only to a preference of those with lighter skin, such as those with mixed heritage, but to the use of skin lightening products to chemically lighten skin color (Adbi et al. 2021, 178; Castillo 2019, 7-8). Colorism demonstrates how colonial forces can have an insidious effect on individuals' mental and physical health.

CM is concerning because internalizing one's oppression may have long-term effects on a person's psyche. This degrading mental state could lead to one viewing their heritage through a lens "characterized by automatic negative cognitions and perceptions" and mental health problems like "identity confusion and even self-hate" (David 2013, 12; David & Okazaki 2010, 879). This is where decolonization comes into play. Decolonization is the process of dismantling colonial hierarchies and the resulting mental schemes, which can help one, specifically relating to the Filipino American community, "develop an accurate and realistic understanding of the Filipino and the American histories, cultures, and societies" (David 2013, 156). Decolonization does not

seek to exchange Euro/American-centrism with Filipino-centric thought. Instead, the goal is to see without prejudice and bias, to accept faults along with beauty, and to feel pride in each part of oneself.

Researching and writing this paper has helped me begin decolonizing my attitudes and experiences. Learning Filipino history has helped me feel greater pride in my heritage as I better understand the context of my reality and the struggles and accomplishments which have led to my place in the world today. The two novels I read for this project, *America is Not the Heart* by Elaine Castillo and *I Was Their American Dream* by Malaka Gharib, were my first experiences reading narratives centered on the Filipino American story. It was rewarding to read these books as I felt reflected in the characters' experiences and learned more about my heritage. It is inspiring to see this representation of Filipino American culture entering the mainstream.

An Imperial Education

I believe the sense of loss and confusion I and other Filipino Americans hold comes from a lack of knowledge about our heritage. I felt like I was searching for threads rather than staring at a tapestry. *America is Not the Heart* reflects this feeling when Hero, the main character, drops out of school to join the New People's Army (NPA), a communist group that fought against the Marcos administration. In the NPA, Hero gains new knowledge regarding Filipino history, "[i]t was Teresa, not a schoolteacher, who told Hero about the genocides that had expunged a sixth of the population from Luzon alone, six hundred thousand souls. The total number killed in the archipelago, including the genocides on Samar, was generally accepted to be around one and a half million" (Castillo 2019, 126). Like Hero, I

was unaware of the violence committed by Americans against Filipinos until my research for this project. These stories were not told to me by my family, school, or the media. Learning about the genocides, the slurs, and the exotification and dehumanization experienced by Filipinos was a shocking experience, especially as I was undergoing this journey and processing this information mainly on my own. Of course, I knew the experiences of my Lolo, Lola, and other family members were vastly different from my own; however, the aforementioned atrocities were not even on my radar, and it was troubling to suddenly see a canyon where I had believed there to be a crack.

The issue is not simply that information is left out of textbooks; I do not expect nor think it possible that teachers could cover every aspect of every country's past, and I recognize schools are not the only place to gain education. The problem is that there were aspects of my ignorance I did not think to question. For example, until this project, neither I nor my mother nor sister knew that the Philippines had an indigenous writing system called Baybayin (David 2013, 7). I simply accepted the writing of Tagalog in the Latin alphabet as natural and infinite, as though before Spanish arrival, Filipinos did not write. In this, I believe education must represent diverse peoples and cultures in increasing amounts and that governments must acknowledge and take responsibility for their actions and the long-standing effects of those actions on other nations, especially regarding colonies, territories, etc.

The Philippines became a U.S. territory at the end of the Spanish-American War. The Philippines, along with other Spanish colonies, was purchased by the U.S. from Spain through the Paris Treaty signed on December 10, 1898 (Aboitiz 2020, 104). This purchase occurred despite leaders of the

Philippine Revolution declaring independence on June 12 of that same year, and setting up the First Philippine Republic, or the Malolos Republic (Aboitiz 2020, 13). The U.S. controlled the Philippines under the guise of benevolent assimilation until July 4, 1946, often referring to Filipinos as America's little brown brothers, as though Filipinos were children in need of guidance and correction (Aboitiz 2020, 153). The policy of benevolent assimilation said that "[b]ecause Filipinos and Filipinas were unfit for self-government, the United States would fulfill its duty to the islands by educating America's little brown brothers" (Cruz 2015, 141). The policy places Filipinos in a relationship of dependency on the U.S., categorizing them as children needing guidance.

The imposition of "an entirely English language school system in the Philippines" demonstrates the style of U.S. education policies (Amorao 2018, 1). Social welfare projects such as this system served to prove the U.S.'s generosity and benevolent nature compared to other colonial powers and to enforce the view that the U.S.'s position on the islands was necessary (Amorao 2018, 1; Mendoza 2012, 105). English became not only "the new lingua franca on the islands," but a tool to perpetuate Western ideals onto Filipinos as "the teaching of English was a powerful ideological and normalizing technology of colonial governance" by instituting Western culture and values into everyday Filipino life (Mendoza 2012, 104). These policies were effective, in fact "[a]t the end of 333 years of Spanish rule in the islands, only 2% of the Filipino population could claim the ability to speak Spanish. In contrast, 47% of the population claimed to be able to speak English and 55.6% claimed to be able to read and write in it by 1918" (Amorao 2018, 1). However, the policy's

efficacy and the benefits of knowing English and Western culture in an increasingly globalized world do not excuse U.S. interference in the Philippines or lessen the importance of accurately teaching this history.

The U.S. must not only teach more diverse narratives but take responsibility for their actions of interference and domination of other peoples, lands, and cultures. For example, the Philippines did not ask for colonization but independence, and violence and oppression answered their call for autonomy. This history can no longer be hidden. I believe learning these stories is essential to Filipino Americans and all members of American society, especially those of the dominant white majority. A comprehensive understanding is important in critically examining present and past systems, making informed decisions, and being confident in one's pride, values, and heritage.

A deeper understanding of the past also helps correct beliefs regarding the generosity and benevolence of colonizers, as though Filipinos owe everything to colonization. Phrases like "300 hundred years in the convent and 50 years in Hollywood" demonstrate this myth and limit the history of the Philippines to the era of colonial power, erasing Indigenous culture and achievements along with the tragedies of colonization (David 2013, 13). In *America is Not the Heart*, when Hero learns about the Filipino genocides, it says that "President McKinley . . . called it extermination. Hero didn't learn any of those words at school" (Castillo 2019, 126). Without fully knowing history, one can never understand the consequences of actions, leading to growth and reparations.

California's efforts regarding K-12 social studies in 2016 show the implementation of more comprehensive curriculums. An important part of California's history is the presence and effect of Spanish missions in and on indigenous communities. The 2016 framework writes that "[b]uilding missions from sugar cubes or popsicle sticks does not help students understand the period and is offensive to many" calling instead that "[s]tudents should consider cultural differences, such as gender roles and religious beliefs, in order to better understand the dynamics of Native and Spanish interaction" (California Leg. Assembly 2016, 76 - 77). This framework demonstrates how excluding diverse perspectives from education systems is harmful and shows a way to address these issues moving forward.

Effects of the Colonial Machine

As colonial forces, like the social pressure to assimilate, continued in the Philippines, assimilation was marketed positively as though "the loss of autonomy [was] compensated for by identification with U.S. ego ideals" (San Juan 1998, 83). The New Deal era also saw this type of coercive assimilation as "[i]mmigrants were exhorted to join the 'melting pot,' to become full Americans by erasing their pasts" (Tsing 2015, 101). Assimilation means losing part of yourself and ascribing to new ways to fit into a different culture. This may be seen as beneficial, as people believe assimilation may help them shed their otherness and achieve the higher status of being a member of the desired group.

Despite the perceived rewards, assimilation may tie to feelings of fear and anxiety, resulting from the messaging that not only is the dominant culture superior, but other cultures are dangerous. Thus, one

perceives assimilation as necessary for one's safety and livelihood. Tsing, the author of *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, speaks to this idea by sharing that "[t]hrough the 1950s and early 1960s, our family, like other Chinese Americans, was under FBI surveillance as possible enemy aliens" (Tsing 2015, 100). The belief that it was unsafe to be foreign led Tsing's mother to heavily ascribe to American culture.

Many scenes in *America is Not the Heart* demonstrate the effects of assimilation. For example, one scene follows the character of Rosalyn, who emigrated from the Philippines to the United States at a young age. Rosalyn finds some of her childhood memorabilia, forcing her to reckon with how much she has changed. "Tagalog, the first language you'd ever spoken, and now you could barely read a sentence. It wasn't just reading; for years you'd replied in English when your grandma talked to you. . . Not for the first time, your own mind terrified you: the careless black-hole greediness of it, that you could leave things there thinking they were safe, and then turn around and find that they'd been eaten away . . . You could forget an entire world, the person you'd been there. It scared the shit out of you" (Castillo 2019, 285). By knowing Tagalog, Rosalyn could communicate with other Filipinos. This knowledge was one of her ties to her culture, family, and past. Her fear of losing this connection is entirely understandable, especially as her loss was not voluntary. While not as explicitly coercive as Tsing's story, Rosalyn's loss of language is not consensual and most likely stems from a desire to conform to English-speaking American culture.

Both Tsing and Rosalyn's examples illustrate how assimilation affects multiple generations in a growing capacity. By

ascribing to American culture, Tsing's mother ensured her children's position as Americans at the expense of their understanding of Chinese culture. Similarly, Rosalyn's loss of Tagalog shows a generational divide between her and her grandmother and implies that subsequent generations will also not speak Tagalog. The discrepancy between those who hold knowledge and those who do not grows with time, leading one to seek information and experiences in the hope of exploring its expanse.

Regardless of the cost and perceived benefits, assimilation does not preclude discrimination as those that assimilate are further separated. The use of English as a "mechanism of social hierarchy" demonstrates this additional ranking as the quality of one's English determines the segmentation of the minority from "each other in class or experiential terms" (Campomanes 2007, 65). For example, accents influence the perceptions of immigrants. Filipino immigrants with an accent may be made fun of as being fresh off the boat or FOBs. This further categorization creates a sense of "exilic suspension"; one does not fully belong to the U.S. or the Philippines (Campomanes 2007, 65).

The fear of imperfect English and speaking one's native language drove my Lolo and Lola to not pass down Tagalog or their dialects: my grandparents did not want society to discriminate against their children for not having the "correct" manners of speech. Additionally, my Lolo told me he could not teach us Tagalog even if he wanted to, as he has lost skill with the language; he thinks in English and must translate to Tagalog. I hope to learn the language in the future, but I cannot help but feel it will not have the same power as if I had known it from birth. My experience with Tagalog is one shared by many Filipino Americans and

other members of immigrant communities. It is even an experience in the Philippines, as "it is evident that even Filipinos in the Philippines may devalue the use of indigenous languages in their homeland" (David & Nadal 2013, 302). This devaluation creates a perception that American culture is inherently superior to Filipino culture, a belief that can feed into CM regardless of immigration status.

U.S. culture remains influential in the Philippines despite Filipino independence because the U.S. continues to hold neocolonial power. This was evident relatively soon after Filipino independence in 1946, as "[t]hroughout the Cold war epoch, the Philippines remained a virtual possession, a neocolony if you will, with over a dozen U.S. military installations, dependent militarily, economically, and culturally on the rulers in Washington" (San Juan 1998, 19). The withdrawal of formal power could not remove the cultural effects long-standing colonization had on the Philippines, and Filipino beauty standards, immigration to the U.S., and the use of English on the islands show the continued importance of Western culture. These forces of "colonialism and the accompanying cultural imposition, cultural disintegration, and cultural recreation have contributed to the ever-present Filipino *ethnic/cultural identity crisis* – confusion as to what constitutes an authentic Filipino culture and identity" (David 2013, 64). However, it must be acknowledged that "there are some positive influences of Spanish and American colonialism" as there are "many Filipinos and Filipino Americans today who value many things about the Western or American culture" (David 2013, 156). This is especially true for Filipino Americans like me who are mixed race as "many bicultural individuals possess two internalized cultures that take turns in guiding their thoughts, feelings, and

behaviors" (David & Okazaki 2010, 854). My American heritage is as integral to me as my Filipino heritage. I do not seek to erase one in favor of the other; instead, I work to appreciate both fully. This, however, means wading through the preconceptions I am socialized to accept.

Politics of Identity

Identity issues surrounding colonization are communal as well as individual. *America is Not the Heart* demonstrates this through the character of Roni. Roni is a young Filipino American girl raised in an immigrant community. One day, soon after returning from a trip to the Philippines, Roni asks Hero: "Are Filipinos not real Asians? . . . She said we're more like Mexicans . . . Does that mean we're not Asian?" due to a disparaging remark made by an Asian classmate (Castillo 2019, 392). I relate to this quote as, growing up, I often had the same question, although the fact I am half-Filipino and white-passing influences my perception. Still, I never felt I was Asian enough, and that I had to prove myself, often sneaking my ancestry into conversations such as by talking about the foods I ate at home. Even though I was more comfortable among other Filipino Americans, I felt like my ignorance about Filipino culture limited my position in the community, an insecurity on which I continue to work.

I believe this way of thinking partly stems from perceptions that Filipinos are separated from the Pan-Asian community, whether by geography, the color of Filipino skin, or the long-standing history of Filipino colonization. While many Asian countries experienced colonization, "the Philippines holds the sole distinction of being drawn into a truly colonial and neocolonial relation with the United States, and for this reason it has been absorbed almost totally into the vacuum

of American innocence" (Campomanes 2007, 53). The heavy Spanish influence on Filipino culture, such as the prevalence of Catholicism in the Philippines, further shows the long history of Filipino westernization. However, Filipino Catholicism holds Indigenous animistic beliefs without creating demonic connotations, proving the lasting power of Indigenous faith and customs (Aboitiz 2020, 38).

Despite the confusion surrounding the Filipino identity, Asians, along with other minority communities, should not allow specificities between histories and experiences to draw boundaries as "[p]eople of color cannot accede to the divide-and-conquer policy of the hegemonic bloc . . . [Rather, w]e need a principled critique of the system and organized united front resistance" (San Juan 1998, 31). Colonialism is not over. It only wears a new face. Behind polished nuances, the same systems perpetuate themselves using tactics that initially divided the world. Working in solidarity among groups separated by colonialism and empire, rather than individually, will help gain worldwide respect and support. Isolation can, at best, limit success within groups and, at worst, limit others' success. However, infighting must first end for this cross-border solidarity to be possible.

Gatekeeping is one way minority communities work against their interests. Gatekeepers "police ethnic allegiances through markers that designate those inside and outside the group" (Román 2018, 23). This toxic philosophy exhibits itself in covert and overt ways. *America is Not the Heart* touches on gatekeeping through an exchange between Hero and Roni:

"Who doesn't like adobo? Hero joked. Pilipina ka ba? ²

. . . It looked like she'd heard that question before, been teased and asked to prove herself in just this way before" (Castillo 2019, 43).

While this quote may be relatively lighthearted, it is implied Roni has experienced more direct aggression. Still, the off-handed nature of Hero's joke demonstrates the degree to which gatekeeping has become normalized. Gatekeeping harms a community's strength by diminishing or denying members, which may impair an individual's confidence. I believe the best remedy for the insecurities caused by gatekeeping is to find a different source of support within one's community. I increased my confidence in the Filipino American community by attending conferences and speaking to other Filipino Americans. Through these interactions, I have learned the shared nature of my experiences. As mentioned before, I always felt that not knowing Tagalog was a big pitfall in being Filipino enough. However, I have learned many of my peers do not know Tagalog for similar reasons. I have also learned that many Filipino Americans have feelings of being "'familiar strangers' to both the Philippines and the United States, knowing both places but not wholly of either place" because of how both countries treat them and their families (San Juan 1998, 32). In this, I have learned my insecurities are not the failures I believed them to be. Although gatekeeping is a real and harmful philosophy, there is something to be said for projecting one's insecurities onto the actions of others.

Another common way oppression is perpetuated, both internally and externally,

² Are you Filipino?

is with racial microaggressions or "subtle daily insults that . . . support a racial and cultural hierarchy of minority inferiority" (Kholi & Solórzano 2012, 441). The constant diminishing and othering of microaggressions may lead some to chase invisibility through assimilation. Malaka Gharib's graphic memoir, *I Was Their American Dream*, gives many examples of microaggressions experienced by Gharib. Some of these include: "You don't look Asian," "Do you speak Filipino," and "I don't see color" (Gharib 2019, 111). These statements devalue Gharib's identity and experiences through ignorant and dismissive comments disguised as usual, innocent, and curious. Of course, it is impossible to be knowledgeable about every culture. However, aspects of people's identities should be approached with respect and compassion even when one lacks specific knowledge.

The Evolution of Acceptance

Although the extent of oppression in society is daunting, it is not impossible to overcome. As time goes on, the invisible nature often said to characterize the Filipino American community is being shed, perhaps resulting from the fact that "[a]ccording to the U.S. census, in 2009, Filipinos (3.2 million) are now the second-largest Asian group in the United States, after Chinese Americans. Instead of remaining exilic and invisible, there are now thriving Filipino diasporic communities in the United States and around the world, with members who have desires (in varying degrees) to maintain a collective identity and who share feelings of nostalgia and loyalty to the homeland (Ty 2015, 372). This is certainly true within my own family and community. Although the effects of assimilation are present, my family members are trying to reclaim aspects of Filipino culture through learning Tagalog,

interacting with traditional Filipino culture, and joining Filipino organizations.

In *I Was Their American Dream*, Gharib's actions show similar themes of cultural and personal acceptance when she begins to wonder, "What's so wrong with being brown?! Why can't I just be myself? Aren't I American, too? Shouldn't being multicultural make me special? Why do I have to pretend to be someone I'm not?" (Gharib 2019, 112). This new mentality empowers Gharib to stop acting white. In addition, Gharib begins to stand up for herself when faced with microaggressions, such as making people pronounce her name correctly and not hiding her Filipino accent when speaking English (Gharib 2019, 112). I truly appreciated reading about these milestones of identity acceptance, as this level of self-assurance is something I strive to encompass.

Conclusion

Despite the work I have put in, my quest for personal realization is a journey I am on for the long haul. I will continue to explore the discrepancies between how I and others view my identity as Filipino American. So far, seeking out diverse perspectives regarding Filipino history and diving into the lives of Filipino Americans within and outside of my family has helped me retrace my history and better place my experiences into the greater Filipino story. Additionally, the time and effort I have put into my research have allowed me to learn about Filipino history, such as how centuries of Western colonization led to the erasure and alteration of Indigenous cultures and how this continues to impact the identity of Filipinos both in the Philippines and within the diaspora (Aboitiz 2020, 38; David 2013, 64). I have also learned about the importance and power of critically examining and

intervening in dominant narratives, as without this initiative, I may not have learned that the Philippines declared independence from Spain and set up the First Philippine Republic before Spain sold the Philippines to the U.S., or about the genocides and coercive nature of benevolent assimilation experienced by Filipinos under U.S. rule (Aboitiz 2020, 104; Castillo 2019, 285). I now have firsthand experience in how relearning and reclaiming cultural narratives can help dismantle CM, as it teaches critical analysis of edited histories. This has increased my belief in the necessity to recognize and respect all stories, not just those of the dominant majority, to combat the sense of loss and discrepancy created by the erasure of specific histories. Most importantly, I have learned that only through having an inclusive understanding of the past can one actively shape the future, as forces of the past, such as colonialism and empire, continue to hold power over the present.

Although I am concluding this project, I will continue forging my narrative; working to harmonize identities traditionally kept in opposition. Through this work, I am coming to accept my duality as a balance rather than as forces I must choose between. And although my progress as an individual may not seem to amount to much, as more significant and systemic changes are needed to ensure everyone has the resources to learn comprehensive accounts of their history, this project has demonstrated to me the individual power stories hold as they spread and inspire others to analyze their own experiences and enact their own changes.

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