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# Colonialism and Resistance: The Filipino American and Pacific Islander Women Professorship Experience

Ingrid Mariano Gonzales

## Abstract

Racist stereotypes such as the Asian American model-minority myth falsely depict the Asian American community as homogenous and devoid of any educational equity problems. Consequently not many scholars consider the lack of representation of Asian American women faculty members in higher education. Pilipina American and Hawaiian female professors are the minority within the minority in institutions of higher education. Pilipina American and Hawaiian women professors are leading the struggle through academic and nonacademic fronts to advance the equity and social-justice movement in the United States and the world. Pilipina American and Hawaiian women professors use the process of decolonization as a tool for liberatory education and creating change; they begin this process by (a) deconstructing their history of colonial experience and (b) identifying modes of colonial resistance for their classrooms and their consciousness.

Musings from a Filipina

By Dr. Leny Strobel

Journal Entry 1994—an email correspondence

I am a Filipina in the United States	Of many different worlds.
But sometimes I am a Filipino American Sometimes I am Asian or Asian American Sometimes a woman with no affixes.	To be a Filipina is to struggle to define my identity and space Amidst the confusion arising from being colonized
I endure many labels I have not chosen for myself	And being split into pieces
I live in many spaces, but mostly in the in-between	To be a Filipina is to speak with my own voice even when

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I am afraid there is no one else  
who will hear it

It is to allow myself to be angry  
over the injustice of the past

And the tyranny of the present

It is to mourn with others who  
have awakened

To grieve for the past that I have  
never known

To call back the memories of my  
ancestors And beg them to im-  
pact their soul

In this barren landscape where my  
self is constantly stripped away.

I resist the myths and categories

I reject boundaries

I invade spaces where before I  
was excluded The margins do  
not hold me captive.

To be a Filipina is to remember  
The other Filipino women scat-  
tered around the world

Caring for other people's babies,  
cleaning other people's houses

But not their own

Displaced, disheartened

But full of courage, holding on to  
shreds of dignity left

If any

To be Filipina is to recreate myself

To dream of a space where I am  
not alone To imagine healing  
not only of myself But of the

culture that has been ravished  
By centuries of othering

It is to gather the pieces and weave  
them into a beautiful tapestry

Glued together by the song I have  
always heard in the

Silence, in the remote corner of  
my heart Where the ancient  
never died.

To be a Filipina is to rejoice that  
I am a woman

And I have many sisters and broth-  
ers They who also remember  
their roots Traditions, the values  
from the old world The secrets of  
their mothers and their ancestors

Holding things together.

To be a Filipina is to be on a jour-  
ney That never arrives, never  
ends

A fork in the road divides and splits  
Always aching to be made whole

I live by forgiving even as I fight  
daily

I live by claiming power, reclaim-  
ing the lost voice

By calling the wandering soul  
home

To the bosom of those I love and  
those who love me

Because of my color, in spite of  
my color Because of my gender,  
in spite of my gender Because of  
my creed, in spite of my creed  
Because of who I am, in spite  
of who I am

## **Introduction**

The Asian American model-minority myth has been used as a tool to perpetuate a false image of classless, color blind, and gender-blind American institutions of higher education (Escueta & O'Brien, 1991; Wang, 1988). The Asian American model-minority myth depicts Asian Americans as a high-achieving, heterogeneous, middle-class community. This misleading social construct fails to consider the diversity of the Asian American experience, leading many civic leaders, educators, and scholars to assume that the Asian American community does not need academic support or social services (Lau, 2003; President's Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, 2001; Suzuki, 1990; Yang, 2002). The truth, however, is that Asian Americans have encountered educational-equity issues, including the need to improve reading, writing, and speaking skills in English; underrepresentation in the fields of humanities and education; racial bias and discrimination on campus; and the underrepresentation of American-born Asian American college faculty (Suzuki, 1990). Another pertinent educational equity issue that is neglected and swept under the model-minority-myth rug is the lack of Asian American women professors in higher education (Suzuki, 1990).

If Asian American women professors are the minorities of the faculty members in higher education, then Pilipina American (U.S. citizens or immigrants who trace their ancestry to the Philippines) and Hawaiian (people who trace their ancestry to the Hawaiian islands) women professors are the minorities within a minority. Pilipina Americans and the Pacific Islander community have been "relegated to a footnote or asterisk in discussion regarding Asian Americans" (President's Advisory Commission, 2001). Few studies and narratives have been written on the Pilipina American and Hawaiian women-professor experience. The analysis of the intersections of race, class, and gender dynamics in American institutions of higher education must be regarded as incomplete without the inclusion of these marginalized voices.

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Pilipina American and Hawaiian women professors, as women-of-color professors, are seen as the “other.” They are constantly being compared to the status quo’s definition of the “normal” professor—a definition of authority and power based on the historical privileges of Whiteness, heterosexuality, maleness, and higher social class (Vargas, 1999). Pilipina American and Hawaiian women professors, like all women professors of color, must navigate through hostile working environments and deconstruct the systemic power relations based on race, class, and gender in their classrooms, schools, and communities (Akindes, 2002; Avalos-C’deBaca, 2002; Luthra, 2002; Vargas, 2002).

To resist hegemony and inequities in higher education and the greater society, Pilipina American and Hawaiian women professors use their colonial consciousness as a tool for liberatory education and self-determination (Akindes, 2002; Meyer, 2004b; Strobel, 2000; Trask, 2002). Pilipina American and Hawaiian women professors hold the key to unlocking the answers to improving the dire conditions of their students and other marginalized students and their respective communities. By (a) deconstructing their history of colonial experience and (b) identifying modes of colonial resistance for their classrooms and their consciousness, Pilipina American and Hawaiian women professors are advancing the equity and social-justice movement in the United States and throughout the globe.

### **The Colonial Experience: Miseducation and Oppression**

The Pilipino colonial experience has vastly shaped the language and culture of the Pilipino people. The Pilipino colonial experience has been described as spending 400 years in a convent and 50 years in Hollywood, alluding to the 400 years of Spanish occupation and 50 years of American occupation of the Philippines. During Spanish colonization, the Catholic religion was the primary tool of colonization and occupation. During the American occupation, education was the tool used to subjugate the minds of Pilipino people. This is the beginning of what Constantino (1982) called the “miseducation” of the Pilipino. The Pilipino had to “be educated as a good colonial” (p.

3) and the indigenous cultures and languages in the Philippines were threatened to extinction.

In the book *Philippines*, Elliott described the militancy and great scope of the American-imposed educational system in the Philippines at that time (as cited in Constantino, 1982):

The immediate adoption of English in the Philippine schools subjected America to the charge of forcing the language of the conquerors upon a defenseless people. ... Of course such a system of education could only be successful under the direction of American teachers. ... Arrangements were promptly made for enlisting a small army of teachers in the United States. At first they came in battalions. The transport Thomas was fitted up for their accommodations and in July, 1901, it sailed from San Francisco with six hundred teachers—a second army of occupation—surely the most remarkable cargo ever carried to an Oriental colony. (p. 3)

The teachers were not in the Philippines to educate; they were there as weapons of mental and cultural mass destruction. The American-based educational system in the Philippines taught the Pilipinos that they were subservient and unequal to their Western colonial master. An American-based education meant the suppression of the nationalist fervor in the Philippines. English was the only language used for instruction and Pilipinos were exposed to Western literature and Western thought. Constantino (1982) explained that the miseducation of the Pilipinos caused the people to have distorted views of themselves. According to Constantino, it is the role of education to “correct this distortion” (p. 19), reverse this internal oppression and reclaim people’s consciousness.

The “miseducated” Pilipino, according to Strobel (2000), was the post-1965 Pilipino American immigrant. The post-1965 Pilipino American immigrant was part of the third wave of Pilipino American immigration to the United States—they were a part of the *brain-drain* diaspora in which professionals, such as nurses and engineers

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from Asian countries became the largest American exports of their respective countries. Strobel (2000), like many post-1965 Pilipino American immigrants, brought suitcases and a colonial-based education to the United States. She was conscious that this colonial training and education has reappeared at different times in her academic, professional, and personal life. The majority of Strobel's students, the children of the brain-drain generation, are now, in her classroom, largely unconscious of their colonial histories and internalized oppressions. Pilipino American students were blinded by the Asian American model-minority myth.

The people from Hawaii and parts of the Pacific Basin share similar colonial experience and educational struggles with Pilipino Americans. Trask, a professor from the University of Hawaii, has been one of the most controversial and vocal female professors working for the Hawaiian sovereignty movement. According to Trask (2002), Hawaii remains a colony of the United States ever since the forced annexation of the islands in 1898. With its overthrow, all things *haole* (the Hawaiian term for White, Western, and foreign) were imposed and all things indigenously Hawaiian were suppressed. In a speech written for an ethnic Hawaiian political rally, Trask (2002) passionately declared,

If we go back in time of contact with the syphilitic Captain Cook, what we realize is that the first thing that was a gill of Western civilization was disease. The second thing that was a gift of Western civilization was violence. ... In 1848 the missionaries ... they came here to colonize us because we didn't have the right gods. Who were they to say we didn't have the right gods? ... The foreigners came. They conquered. They took our lands. They imprisoned our queen. And THEY divided us by blood quantum. (Trask, 2002, para. 4)

Because of the Hawaiian Islands' key geographic importance as a military stronghold, native Hawaiians are being displaced from their homeland and have the least access to higher education and social

mobility. The majority of students attending the University of Hawaii are *haole*, or Asian Americans from the Pacific Rim. Trask and other academics supporting the Hawaiian-sovereignty movement have to navigate through a hostile college environment. When they speak against the status quo and threaten to disrupt the hegemonic structures of society or their schools, *haole* professors and *haole* students deem Hawaiian women professors as racists with “anti-American and anti-white attitudes” (Trask, 2002).

The Hawaiian education movement, in relation to the Hawaiian-sovereignty movement has many barriers to overcome as well (Meyer, 2004a). According to Meyer (2004a), most academic research done on Hawaiian students has been framed under the cultural-deficit theory (i.e., that it is the deficiency of the Hawaiian language and culture that leads to the poor academic achievement of Hawaiian students). In the literature, Hawaiians are depicted as disempowered involuntary minorities, who are incapable of self-determination and resisting the colonial pressures of the Western world. Meyer (2004a) also stated that their learned colonial mentality and internalized oppression has direct real-world implications for the Hawaiian people:

Post-colonial is not a physical place, it is a mental one. ... We have learned to eat poorly. We die early. We are un-healed in our own families. ... We are the most in prisons. We kill ourselves with self-doubt, nihilism, and our hands. Half of us don't even live here anymore. (p. 1)

The narratives and writings of Pilipina American and Hawaiian women professors illustrate the depth and severity of the pangs felt from the miseducation and the oppression that faces them and their people due to their colonial histories and experiences with American imperialism. Although the institutions of higher education have historically been used as a tool to perpetuate the colonial masters' agenda, today's Pilipina American and Hawaiian women professors have used their classrooms as an alternative space to resist and deconstruct their colonial consciousness. Pilipina American and Hawaiian

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women professors study and teach about the past to find answers for a liberated future.

### **The Colonial Resistance: Voice, Spirit, and Activism**

In the Filipino American and Hawaiian scholarship, the struggle lies in creating a new discourse, an alternative discourse that will better align with their indigenous ways of knowing and living. Pilipina American and Hawaiian women professors are taking on the social responsibility to resist colonial pressures for the sake of their community's educational experiences and transformation. The struggle for liberation for Pilipina American and Hawaiian women professors lies in the classrooms, the land, the written word, the body, the mind, and the spirit.

Strobel (2000) used the method of journaling and reflection to deconstruct her internal oppression. Armed with Freire's (1970) problem-posing education, she began to read texts critically. Strobel never felt alone as she read empowering texts from other "third world" writers and women of color in academe. In this process of what she calls "coming full circle," her decolonization work is based on regaining her voice and silencing the "subversive voice that undermines [her]" knowledge. In the journal entry below, Strobel struggled to understand how she could better grasp her historical consciousness:

[Journal entry, June 12, 1995]: Yesterday I may have finally resolved the meaning of my recurring dream about divorce. I have been reading bell hook's *Black Looks* where she talks about decolonization and dealing with "white terror." Of course, I thought, my dream is about divorcing "white terror" and its control of my life. The dream is about learning to rise above the fear, to think beyond fear, to leave it behind. Leave the system behind. The "voice" said to me yesterday: in order to decolonize, you must recognize the white terror, examine how your life revolves around this terror. How can you remove its fangs? (Strobel, 2000, p. 7)

As a Pilipina American woman in higher education, Strobel (2000) realized that her culture and her people's indigenous imaginations can bring her the answers books and politics cannot provide. She is a whole being in the classroom with a soul, not just a series of credentials. Reclaiming her voice and her native tongue while seeing herself as a holistic, spiritual, and indigenous being was the process she used to remove the fangs of internalized oppression and colonized mentality.

Strobel (2000) promoted the mobilization and the organization of Pilipino American students to learn more about their language and culture and to actively seek avenues to increase their voice and participation in the larger American society. Strobel also recognized her responsibility as an important mentor figure to foster the consciousness building of her Pilipino American students. Unfortunately, for the children of post-1965 Pilipino American immigrants, their first exposure to Pilipino history and culture is in college.

A study performed by Maldonado, Rhoads, and Buenavista (2004) on student-initiated retention projects supported Strobel's (2000) findings. The authors found that belonging to a student-run organization can be a vehicle for decolonization and student empowerment. According to a Pilipino American student participant in the Maldonado et al. study,

I think PASS [the Pilipino American student-initiated retention project] kind of allows students to explore what it means to be a Filipino student here on campus, whether you're Filipino-American, a recent immigrant, or someone who is Filipino, but has never grown up around Filipinos. As part of our retention efforts, we always try to put on programs, events, or workshops that allow students to explore for themselves and kind of define for themselves what it means to be Filipino. (p. 28)

Another study of Pilipino American student retention in higher education also supported Strobel's (2000) advocacy for having Pilipino American professor mentors for Pilipino American students in higher education. Gonzales (2004) found that the lack of academic

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support from peers, the lack of relevant classes, and the lack of academic support from college staff all contributed to Pilipino American college students' dropout and academic difficulty. To combat this negative influence, Gonzales also found that access to academic mentors was one of the factors that contributed to the successful retention of Pilipino American college students. Pilipina American women professors sharing their narratives and their scholarship is a boon, enriching Pilipino American students' college experiences and improving their retention rates of in higher education.

For Meyer (2004b), the process of decolonization is a matter of promoting Hawaiian epistemology or ways of knowing that will provide new possibilities and positive transformations in her students. To Meyer, Hawaiian epistemology is "an idea that holds up all others. ... It questions what [people] value with regard to intelligence, and it shapes how we view teaching and learning" (p. 1). Central to the Hawaiian epistemology is putting the Hawaiians at the center of the discourse and out of their marginalized colonial position. Hawaiian epistemology is not easily distinguished from the fabric of Hawaiian culture because it is "sewn into" it (Meyer, 2004b, p. 3).

With guidance from Meyer's (2004b) 20 mentors, the factors that comprise the Hawaiian experience of knowing include using spirituality as a source for a cultural context of knowing; having physical space as a cultural context of knowing; expanding the idea of empiricism to include the cultural nature of sense; seeing the self through the other; addressing utility as knowledge; seeing the causality of language and thought; and having no separation of mind, body, and spirit. These seven epistemological categories are critical to her profession in teacher education and advancing the Hawaiian education movement. These seven categories can "serve as a way to critique the current colonial system in Hawaiian language immersion, spotlight the oppression embedded in well-meaning content and performance standards, and highlight the hidden curriculum of assimilation and acultural assumptions in pedagogy" (Meyer, 2004b, p. 20).

Trask (2002) also used student and community activism as a tool to decolonize and further the Hawaiian sovereignty movement. As an outspoken activist, she has advocated against environmental colonialism, racism, sexism, American imperialism, and Asian imperialism. She has written letters to the editors, spoken in various arenas, and used her position of privilege as a professor to increase the visibility of the Hawaiian sovereignty movement. Her tool for liberation and decolonization is speaking truth and acting based on that truth. She explained,

We need to have an analysis of the current situation and understand that. And once we understand that we will not be afraid to speak the truth. Malcolm X used to always say “Speak the truth brother, speak the truth.” What’s wrong with the truth? It’s the truth. That’s why nobody wants us to speak the truth. And that’s what we need to do. And that’s what the purpose of this rally today. To speak the truth. (Trask, 2002, para. 26)

The truth according to Maori scholar Smith (2002) is that American, Canadian, Australian, and New Zealand academics, regardless of their marginalized backgrounds, have privileges and contradictions based on their first-world education. Smith wrote,

Despite the very powerful *issues* which locate many First World indigenous peoples in Third World social conditions, we still ... occupy a place of privilege within the world of indigenous peoples. That does not mean that indigenous peoples from the First World have better ideas or know anything more. ... One of the many criticisms that get leveled at indigenous intellectuals or activists is that our Western education precludes us from writing or speaking from a “real” and authentic indigenous position. (p. 14)

By acknowledging her positionality as a first-world indigenous woman scholar, Smith is a humanized researcher who is able to con-

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tinue her decolonizing efforts by serving her community. Founded on her work with indigenous communities in the Pacific Basin, Smith has proposed a decolonizing methodology for research based on respect for people, humility, face-to-face presentation, listening, generosity, being cautious, and not trampling over the *mana* (Maori for their standing in their own eyes) of the people.

Smith's first-world educational background and the research done in indigenous research methodology illustrated that the decolonization process cannot be essentialized. The decolonization process is continuous and part of a dynamic, sweeping, and larger global indigenous movement—a movement courageously continued by Pilipina American and Hawaiian women professors.

### **Conclusion and Summary**

It is an act of courage by Pilipina American and Hawaiian women professors to use the process of decolonization to debunk the Asian American model-minority myth and the deficit model of education imposed by the status quo and Eurocentric research. There is real emotional pain not solely from interactions with their students' internalized oppression, but also from the interactions with their colleagues (Akindes, 2002). Pilipina American and Hawaiian women professors working on the process of decolonization must also distinguish themselves from other women-of-color professors who perpetuate colonial mentality-based scholarship and Eurocentric paradigms.

It is important to critically understand the cultural lens and framework of the research problem being posed by women of color. In an article written by Pilipina American professor Fulgado (1991) about the conditions being faced by Pilipino Americans in higher education, for example, the author perpetuated the deficit model by arguing,

It is almost a common knowledge that Filipinos tend to be followers of American standards and ideology. If it is "US made" it must be good! Furthermore, some may follow the saying "when in Rome, do as the Romans do." Is it possible that the Filipino youth's non-pursuance of higher education

is American influenced? Is it possible that our Filipino youths are not pursuing higher education because there is no motivation coming from the parents? (p. 17)

Colonial mentality manifests itself in numerous ways and in higher education the liberation of the mind is central to students' learning and academic scholarship. To combat miseducation and colonial oppression, Pilipina American and Hawaiian women professors are working diligently to diversify the discourse and present an empowering educational model and way of life for all marginalized and indigenous students and their respective communities. By (a) deconstructing their history of colonial experience and (b) identifying modes of colonial resistance for their classrooms and their consciousness, Pilipina American and Hawaiian women professors are leading the struggle in various fronts (in and out of the American institutions of higher education) for the liberation of our collective minds, bodies, and spirits.

#### Editor's Note

The subtle distinction between Pilipino/a and Filipino/a stems from the complex influences of Spanish, English and Tagalog and the evolution of the sounds and spellings available in those languages. Pilipino/a is often the term used by people when referring to their own ethnicity and tracing their ancestry to the Philippines. Filipino is the common global term used by some individuals to identify the ethnicity of the peoples of the Philippines.

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