

# Critical *Kapwa*: Possibilities of Collective Healing from Colonial Trauma

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This paper is based on my own experiences as a student, educator, and Filipina/o. I explore the multiple traumas in the community that I grew up in that impacted my experiences as well as those of my family and the connection of those traumas to colonialism. I also examine the possibilities for healing from those traumas through *kapwa*—the core value of Filipina/o indigenous psychology that emphasizes our interrelatedness with one another. Additionally, I illustrate how Filipina/o educators can and should foster spaces where Filipina/o students can collectively heal through Critical Kapwa pedagogy—an open pedagogical philosophy that came from my experiences working with Filipina/o youth in San Francisco.

My first teaching experience was in a Filipina/o American History class at Balboa High School in San Francisco. The Excelsior District of San Francisco and, in particular, Balboa High School will always have a special place in my heart. This is the community that I grew up in, the high school that many of my cousins attended, and the school that I first taught in. The Excelsior has been home to a large Filipina/o American community since the mid 70s and Balboa has historically had a high percentage of Filipina/o students. Getting to know my students and their lives allowed me to see some of the same issues that my cousins and I faced growing up. Many of the things that I thought just happened in our family were actually more commonplace for our community than I had been taught to believe.

In my own personal experience, I grew up experiencing some of these social toxins but lacked the critical understanding that these issues were not endemic to my family and community, but were a by-product of colonialism. The grand narrative of my family, which reflects a common narrative of education among Filipinas/os, was to get education because that is the only tool to escape from these toxins and this cycle. Fortunately, I was able to continue on to higher education and was the first of my generation to attend a

university in the USA. My mother and my maternal aunt are the only other people besides me to have a four-year degree or higher, but they earned those in the Philippines. Of my generation, including all my cousins, both in the United States and the Philippines, I am the only one who has been able to earn a four-year degree, so far. A significant barrier to my cousins' ability to succeed in college has been a lack of support—financially, academically, and emotionally.

## Social Toxins

Many of these issues and social toxins that my cousins and I grew up with continue to be an everyday presence in the lives of Filipina/o Americans. Our community is still plagued by issues such as domestic violence (Asian Pacific Islander Institute on Domestic Violence [APIIDV] 2010); high dropout rates (Halagao 2010; Tintiangco-Cubales 2007); high suicide rates (Lau 1995); substance abuse (Daus-Magbual and Molina 2009; David 2011; Nadal 2009; Toleran et al. 2012); high risk sex behaviors that lead to teenage pregnancy and HIV infection (Daus-Magbual and Molina, 2009; Nadal 2009; Tintiangco-Cubales 2011); and mental health issues such as depression (Africa 2010; Javier, Huffman, and Mendoza 2007; Levenson 2010; Sanchez and Gaw 2007). According to Mihesuah and Wilson (2004), many of the social issues that colonized communities face, including “poverty, chemical dependence, depression, suicide, family violence, and disease,” are inextricably linked to the colonial process. These processes include displacement from land and other oppressive techniques involving the suppression of native languages and the imposition of foreign epistemologies that devalue indigenous knowledge and belief systems and introduce new spiritual beliefs. language, epistemology, and spirituality.

The trauma of colonialism has had a devastating effect on the lives and identities of Filipina/o Americans. Our community has been plagued by many social problems that

stem from the residual effects of multiple colonizations of the Philippines, in addition to the internal colonialism that all people of color face in the United States (Blauner 1972; David 2011; Halagao 2010; Tejada, Gutierrez, and Espinosa 2003). More than just a historic event, colonialism legacy and its devastating consequences continue to this day in the neocolonial relationship that now exists between the United States and the Philippines and is recapitulated in the hegemonic structures and ideologies that Filipinas/os face as an ethnic minority within the United States. These colonial traumas, though rooted in the past, manifest themselves in the lives of Filipina/o Americans today who may or may not be able to recognize them as such. (Constantino 1992; David 2011; de Guia 2010; Rodriguez 2009; Strobel 2001; Tintiangco-Cubales 2011).

### Colonialism

The Philippines has been colonized for over 380 years—333 years by Spain and 47 years by the United States. This does not include the years since 1946 during which the United States has maintained a neo-colonial relationship with the Philippines (Constantino 1996; Strobel 2001; Rafael 2000; Rimonte 1997; Rodriguez 2009).

The long legacy of colonialism in the Philippines has resulted in the internalization of white supremacy, immense poverty, unfair land distribution, and an overwhelming sense, among Filipinas/os, of inability to change conditions in their homeland due to a sense of hopelessness (Constantino 1992; Rafael 2000). From the beginning of the colonial period in the Philippines, a social system has been installed that privileges whiteness and the colonizers right to dominate the indigenous people (*indios*) and the masses (*masa*), who are placed at the bottom of the racial hierarchy. To this day there is an elevation of whiteness and all things associated with the West to the denigration of what is native. This love of the West and a deeply ingrained sense of hopelessness has been instilled by a colonial education system that was implemented by the American colonial government in the Philippines from 1901 to 1946 and is still upheld today in some institutions. Historian Renato Constantino (1982) states that “the most effective means of subjugating a people is to capture their minds. Military victory does not necessarily signify conquest...the molding of men’s minds is the best means of conquest. Education, therefore, serves as a weapon in wars of colonial conquest” (2). The educational system

that was instituted in the Philippines by the Americans during the colonial period was intentionally created to subdue the desire for independence of the Filipina/o people and to implant American myths into the Filipino consciousness (Constantino 1982; David 2011; Halagao 2010; Rafael 2000; Tintiangco-Cubales 2011). The internalization, normalization, and perpetuation of these myths by Filipinos are what is known as colonial mentality.

Some of these myths include the belief in meritocracy; the belief that America is a land of opportunity with an egalitarian society; and the belief that America’s relationship to the Philippines was that of kind benefactor to beneficiary and not one of colonial oppressor/exploiter of the land and people (Constantino 1992). The acceptance of these hegemonic misconceptions along with the model minority myth has produced a lack of awareness of the multiple issues that plague the Filipina/o American community. The model minority myth also masks the long history of colonial oppression that has plagued Filipinos.

By ignoring the history of colonialism and the truth behind our history of exploitation by the United States, we ignore the trauma that has affected us and our community (Strobel 2001). We internalize these Americanized notions of what it means to be a Filipina/o or Filipina/o American to the detriment of our spiritual selves and our efforts to cope with the past and the trauma of colonization (Apostol 2010; Enriquez 2004; Herbito 2010; Rimonte 1997). What makes this even more hurtful to our community is that we then ignore the relationship between our current problems and the devastation caused by colonialism.

### *Kapwa*

*“Kapwa is a recognition of shared identity, an inner self shared with others.” Enriquez (2004, 5)*

*Kapwa*, according to Virgilio Enriquez (2004), is the core value of *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* or the field Indigenous Philippine Psychology. It is the value that pervades every ethno-linguistic group within the Philippines whether Animist, Muslim, Catholic/Christian, or otherwise. *Kapwa* has been used and invoked in a number of Filipino American spaces recently. However, merely being together in a space does not mean that we are in *kapwa* with one another. While *kapwa* is a concept of shared or collective identity, it is also about the way interpersonal relationships function and are maintained within this collective identity. It is about empha-

sizing the community over the individual. Shawn Ginwright (2010) argues that community is all about the “consciousness of the interrelatedness one has with others...rooted in political, cultural, and economic histories as well as contemporary struggles in which people collectively act to make meaning of their social condition” (78). In other words, community is more than just connections and relationships, but also about moving collectively towards goals. For me, *kapwa* is more than just a folk notion of community, but rather a deep connection and commitment to that community much like the concept expressed by Ginwright.

I liken this conceptualization of *kapwa* to a *balangay*<sup>1</sup> or boat. In looking at the maritime communities of the Badjao and Samal Laut peoples of the Southern Philippines who spend most of their lives on the open sea, we can see that their culture and language are determined by the environment in which they live—the boat that is their home. Having to co-exist within close quarters on a small ocean vessel, the community members have to maintain smooth interpersonal relationships in order literally to make things sail smoothly. This does not mean always getting along or liking everyone all the time, but it does imply constantly maintaining a commitment to one another and to the collective. There is no option of separating from one another because that would mean death by drowning. Closeness is so tight that words need often not be spoken and members of the community are able to sense each other’s emotions and thoughts by feeling and by reading non-verbal cues. This is *kapwa* at its fullest—a community so connected and committed to one another that they function as one.

Unfortunately, this central core value has been compromised by the infliction of colonial values that have been imposed by the multiple colonizers of the Philippines (Enriquez 2004). Filipinas/os have been taught, instead, to view the colonially imposed value of shame, or *hiya*, as the primary value that is central to Filipina/o identity. This proved very useful in subjugating and maintaining control over the people during the American period.

According to bell hooks (1994), “one of the primary reasons we have not experienced a revolution of values is that a culture of domination necessarily promotes addiction to lying and denial” (28). As Filipina/o Americans, much of our colonial identities are shaped by deceptions—by lies and denials. In order to believe in the colonial values that we have been fed, Filipinas/os have had to accept and internalize this racial

hierarchy that places them in a subordinate position. Such beliefs affect family dynamics and, in America, manifest themselves in the perpetuation of colonial mentality—a mindset in which Filipinas/os internalize the values and imposed identities of their colonizers. The results of all this are identities that are in conflict with one another (i.e., Filipina/o vs. Filipina/o American, FOBs, and the “whitewashed”). We end up believing so strongly in these identity categories that we deny the fact that we have, as Filipinas/os, many more similarities than differences, and we become blinded to the history of our exploitation. The result is that we perpetuate these oppressive stereotypes that continue to afflict us. Instead of uniting to combat the daily manifestation of oppressive forces in our lives, we end up divided and often become sub-oppressors within our own families and communities. This can be seen in the way Filipina/o Americans perpetuate ideologies like colonial mentality, hetero-patriarchy, and racial/ethnic stereotypes.

Many Filipina/o American scholars have commented on how the Filipina/o American community is divided on multiple levels and there is really no central cohesive sense of Filipina/o community (David 2011; Nadal 2009; Rodriguez 2009; San Juan 1996; Strobel 2001). This lack of unity affects what the community is able to struggle to achieve and why they are struggling to achieve it. While there is this vague notion of what it means to be Filipina/o, the construction of this identity is built upon colonial ideals and lacks a critical understanding of the causes of oppression.

Critical *Kapwa* is a pedagogy that has the power to heal on both the individual and collective levels. It is a revolution in ideology, epistemology, and spirituality that has the power to affect all aspects of Filipina/o life. This pedagogy seeks to uncover the many layers and aspects of the value of *kapwa* and its application for Filipina/o Americans as well as for all people.

*Pakikipagkapwa* is much deeper and profound in its implications. It also means accepting and dealing with the other person as an equal. The company president and the office clerk may not have an equivalent role, status, or income but the Filipino way demands and implements the idea that they treat one another as fellow human beings (*Kapwatao*). This means a regard for the dignity and being of others. (Enriquez 2004, 47)

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Aside from being a form of collective familial identity, *kapwa* connects the individual to community, culture, place, environment, and history. The sense of *kapwa* that I develop here looks at relationships between people, plants, animals, spirits, myths, spirituality, knowledge, epistemology, and theory. *Kapwa* can be a tool to address how much loss a community has experienced and how much healing there remains to be done. According to an activist whom I interviewed, “[*kapwa*] is a way of deepening our connections with each other and kind of essential to the process of really healing from the traumas in our lives and in our history that we’re carrying.” Critical *Kapwa* consists of three pillars: Humanization, On Becoming *Diwa*(ta), and Decolonizing Epistemologies.

### Critical *Kapwa* Pedagogy

Critical *Kapwa* pedagogy is about individuals and communities coming together to heal themselves. It is about reviving and rearticulating the most fundamental indigenous Filipina/o value of *kapwa*—a deep connection with and commitment to community. Critical *Kapwa* is about revolutionizing ideology, epistemology, and spirituality in order to combat the daily manifestations of the residual hegemonic trauma in our lives, families, and communities caused by colonization. It is also about seeing and building connections between people, cultures, places, environments, history, and spirituality. The three pillars—Humanization, On Becoming *Diwa*(ta), and Decolonizing Epistemologies—intersect with one another to destroy hegemonic ideological structures that perpetuate colonial domination while they also empower the individual to operate outside of those hegemonic ideological structures.

Humanization requires an analysis of non-western social systems and structures in order to destroy the hierarchies and false binaries that perpetuate the realities of subordination and oppression. Humanization through *kapwa* aims to reinforce an examination of and understanding of human interactions through multiple lenses to see how people are affected by these various oppressive ideologies. Humanization must not only be practiced on other people, but also, more importantly on the self. It is about seeing one another as human being as opposed to human doing. For instance, as a teacher, it is about seeing your students as more than their assignments, grades, and/or behaviors, but as multifaceted beings with storied bodies and lived experiences. Human-

ization is the most direct and immediate means of combating oppression.

The second pillar, which I refer to as “On Becoming *Diwa*(ta),” is a combination of two words that are found in many Philippine languages – *diwa* or spirit and *diwata* or deity. In order to heal the disconnects between mind, spirit, and body, *diwa*(ta) is a return to seeing the self as a spiritual being that is connected to different realms. A denial of the Western concept of individualism that is perpetuated through capitalist structures, *diwa*(ta) is about what hooks (1994) calls “wholeness, a union of mind, body, and spirit” (14). Embracing *diwa*(ta) does not require one to partake in exotic, ancient rituals practiced in remote indigenous communities. Filipina/o Americans, to truly be relevant and connected to their own daily lives, should instead strive to create their own spiritual practices that are based on indigenous practices, and that share a direct connection with their own lived experiences. Simply choosing and mimicking the practices of a random ethnic group is cultural misappropriation, and that act of misappropriation adds to the cultural distance between the Filipina/o American and the indigenous Filipina/o.

While *diwa*(ta) is about striving to actualize a deeper understanding of humanity through embracing the divinity of the self, of others, and of the environment; the intersection of the pillars of *diwa*(ta) and of Decolonizing Epistemologies requires us to take aspects of indigenous spirituality and ideology and rearticulate them in order to serve as a counter-hegemonic narrative for survival. The purpose of Decolonizing Epistemologies is to give voice to the colonized/oppressed who have been silenced in society and in the classroom. If we are to assist students and the community in redefining themselves, they first need access to new tools to help articulate a renewed sense of being and self-worth.

### Application of Critical *Kapwa* in California

As I was developing Critical *Kapwa* as a pedagogy I was able to implement it where I was teaching Philippine Studies: Pin@y Educational Partnerships (PEP) at Balboa High School and Kilusan for Kids, a bilingual Tagalog K–2 curriculum. PEP is an ethnic studies pipeline that is a partnership between Filipina/o American Studies at San Francisco State University and five public schools with high Filipina/o populations within San Francisco Unified School District. Through PEP, I was able to co-teach a course on

Filipina/o American History and Community as a high school elective at Balboa High School—a course that would have been extremely beneficial to my cousins had it been available back then. In the 2012–13 school year, we worked with twenty-eight seniors and had a really amazing year. We intentionally tried to build community with our students, the community, and each other. We tried to incorporate a sense of community into the many projects that we undertook. Our Performing Resistance Project brought the community into the classroom and we had our students perform individual and collective pieces that were centered around issues of oppression based on race, class, gender, and sexuality. We brought the students out into the community through our joint South of Market (SOMA) field trip with Burton High School where we did a walking tour of the neighborhood and examined its historical and current relevance to the Filipina/o community. Through both projects students were able to build a new sense of identity with one another and begin to see themselves as connected to a larger community. They also examined how oppression, as well as facets of identity, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, affect all of us at individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels. For our final project, the students completed a Youth Participatory Action Project on how violence affects students differently based on race, class, and gender. In doing this project, students came together and the sense of solidarity produced powerful learnings about the multiple forms of violence that they are exposed to on a daily basis in their communities and how these occurrences have become normalized for them. The students then taught their findings to middle school students at Denman middle school to exemplify the type of community engagement that Critical Kapwa aims to achieve.

The work on *Kilusan for Kids* was a partnership between my mentor, Dr. Tintiangco-Cubales, PEP teachers, and teachers in San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) where we co-created curriculum that would teach students the Tagalog language, but also to love themselves, their families, and their community and to love being Filipina/o. We were intentional in our efforts to teach language in a way that is more critical of colonially constructed narratives and hierarchies of power. For instance, we developed an entire unit that revolved around the deconstruction of gender roles by examining the non-gendered pronoun of *siya* (he/she/it) and exploring what that means for a culture not to define gender in gendered terms. In that unit, we also

look at caring and how that looks different in many different families and contexts. We wanted our curriculum to be open to the students' multiple narratives of being Filipina/o as opposed to perpetuating the post-colonial meta-narrative of how Filipinas/os should be. Additionally, in the unit on exploring Philippine and Filipina/o American heroes, we ask the students to examine who their personal heroes are and what makes them heroic.

These different curricula and projects are examples of Critical Kapwa pedagogy because they all, at their core, aim to counter colonially constructed hierarchies of power such as high and low culture, civilized and savage cultures, and gender and racial hierarchies. Additionally, these examples allowed students to pull examples from their own experiences and share their voices. In my experience of taking Filipina/o classes growing up, we were always told what it means to be Filipina/o, rather than constructing the meaning for ourselves. It was always defined for us, and we had to determine if and how we fit into that definition. We were never allowed to define things for ourselves, nor to challenge some of those definitions given to us. Critical Kapwa pedagogy allows for a broader, more inclusive way of teaching Philippine and Filipina/o American Studies that includes all perspectives. It is about connecting to one another, to our families, to our history and our ancestors.

### **Critical Kapwa in Hawai'i through Tinalak**

In 2013, I moved to Hawai'i to work on a doctoral degree in education. While at the College of Education, I became involved with Tinalak. In that first semester, in the fall 2013, I co-taught a class on multicultural education focusing on Filipinas/os with the other members of Tinalak. This gave me an opportunity to implement some aspects of Critical Kapwa pedagogy in a new setting. We had students collaboratively create lesson plans and then teach them at different public schools with high Filipina/o populations on O'ahu. In addition, we organized a Filipina/o American Book & Curriculum Fair in collaboration with our students and community partners. The purpose of the book fair was to counter arguments made by many teachers that it was difficult to incorporate Filipina/o material into the curriculum due to a lack of resources—we showed them the wealth of resources readily available. The students and community members were pleasantly surprised to see how much material there actually is on Filipina/os that can be used in classrooms.

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The following spring semester, I worked with a handful of college students on a course where they collectively developed and taught lesson plans in the Fresh Off the Boat (FOB) Project class at Farrington High School. One of these lesson plans was on the concepts of *balangay* (boat) and *barangay* (the smallest political unit in the Philippines). Students had to work together to sail boats around the classroom to get a prize. We then debriefed about the activity and what type of culture it took to sail on the boat. From there, one of the college students asked what the culture of their community was like and whether or not their community functioned as well as they did in their groups on their boats. The dialogue sparked a lot of conversation about the issues within the community that the students come from. They shared personal narratives about their experiences in Kalihi and dialogues with some of the college students who also grew up in the same area. It got them thinking about what is going on in their community and how to help make changes for the better on both individual and collective levels. Additionally, the games we played helped encourage a strong classroom community.

Coming from Northern California, I have seen stark differences between the community there and the community here in Hawai'i. Both communities confront many of the same issues that Critical Kapwa seeks to remedy. However, there are certain issues that are specific to Hawai'i. For instance, it seems that the community here is more divided on such matters as region, language, and immigration status—for example, on being FOB versus local-born, Visayan versus Ilokano versus Tagalog, Kalihi versus Waipahu. Considering how large the Filipina/o population is here, I am surprised by all the disparaging remarks about Filipinas/os or about being Filipina/o that I hear on a regular basis. I hear these statements coming from both Filipinas/os and non-Filipinas/os alike. Considering Hawai'i has such a large Filipina/o population, we need to work on being stronger and more cohesive as a community. I find hope in the educational spaces created through our collective participation in Tinalak where we work with students to help heal some of the deep-seated divisions that they have grown up with. We do this through collaboration among faculty, college students, public school youth, and community partners.

## Conclusion

Philippine Studies and Filipina/o American Studies have an important role to play in our communities. Aside from teaching students about their past and their heritage, we have a choice of either perpetuating the divisions in our community or attempting to repair those relationships and bring about a collective healing from historical trauma. Critical Kapwa pedagogy is a very open pedagogy that helps create a space that allows for that healing to take place. It is, however, just one of many possibilities for overcoming the trauma of our colonial past and present. The most important thing is that we create spaces where our students can learn about their interconnectedness with one another as Filipinas/os, and come to an increased sense of the value of their families, their community, the land, and their history. They need the opportunity to share their own narratives and experiences so that they can find where they fit within the framework of Filipina/o America.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Traditional hulled sailing vessel that brought people from island to island.
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