Recasting Our Relatives: Eroding and (E)Merging Filipino Connections

Jeffrey Moniz

What is the future of Filipino in Filipino American? What counts as Filipino in Filipino American? Who counts as Filipino in Filipino American? These are the questions I pose in light of demographic shifts over time and the advent of science and technology, including genetic testing. I launch my inquiry by first exploring indigenous perspectives and methods concerning Filipino identities. Secondly, I engage in storytelling methods that help illustrate the main themes that emerged from this inquiry. Thirdly, I explore some of the implications for self-understanding implied by recent developments in DNA testing. And finally, I focus my analysis on the future utility and continued relevance of what it means to be Filipino and Filipino American.

The Future of Filipino in Filipino American

My inquiry starts with the question, "What is the future of Filipino in Filipino American?" I ask this question as the multiracial[1] descendant of Ilokano great grandparents and grandparents who came to live in Hawai'i from the Philippines. Am I Filipino? What if I don't really understand or speak a Philippine language? What if I am, culturally, more of a Hawai'i "Local" and an American? Can I also be Filipino? Ideas of changing conceptions of racial, ethnic, and cultural identities (Cornell and Hartmann 2007; Gans 1979, 1992; Mornley and Robins 2002; Omi and Winant 2015; Spickard 2007; Spickard and Burroughs 2000) helped provide the impetus for my inquiry into current and future changes in Filipino American identity.

Over the past two decades, scholars have explored these questions, specifically directing their attention to issues of Filipino American identity (Bonus 2000; Espiritu 2003; Halagao 2004; Nadal 2004; Revilla 1997; Root 1997; Strobel 1996; Tavares 2006). Some studies are centered on Filipino identity in Hawai'i (Agbayani 1991; Alegado 1991; Gonsalves and Labrador 2011; Labrador 2002, 2015; Okamura 1997, 1998; Okamura et al. 1991; Okamura and Labrador, 1996; Revilla 1996; Teodoro 1981) and have mainly focused on the immigrants and second generation of the Filipino community. My study, however, is interested in identity construction of the Hawai'i descendants of these first two generations.

To guide me in my exploration, I have relied on the theoretical framework woven together from the threads of theory provided by the other authors in this special issue. These theoretical perspectives, include the works of Jeffrey Acido (2012, 2014), Elena Clariza (2015), Raju Desai (2015), and Julius Soria (2012), have provided me with the interpretive tools to uncover new meanings in my stories, contributing a deeper sense of what it means to be Filipino in Hawai'i.

Clariza's notion of *halungkat,* a Cebuano term for the process of overturning piles of things in search of hidden meanings, is valuable for making sense of the journey in reclaiming one's Filipino identity (2015). Desai contributes the idea of Critical Kapwa Pedagogy, which involves the revival and rearticulation of a fundamental indigenous Filipino value—*kapwa, one*'s deep connection and commitment to community—by employing an approach rooted in the lived experience, ancestral knowledge, and oral history of the Filipino peoples. Soria (2012) and Acido (2014) advance the Ilokano concept of *pakasaritaan,* storytelling as a means of gaining a deeper understanding of how the Ilokano people conceive of themselves as agents of history. Acido explains that *pakasaritaan* "is a mechanism that allows for a re-membering of history and the lessons of the ancestors in the fullest sense of the term—to become, once again, membered to a community that refuses to let go in the face of colonization" (2014, 44).[2]

In particular, Acido's Nakem (Soul Consciousness) Pedagogy, employing what he calls Social Biography, legitimizes the telling of my stories as a form of situated knowledge. Stories from my personal experience are intended to illustrate a heuristic, via allegorical significance, for considering the future of Filipino and Filipino American

identities. In this article, I aim to represent, using examples summoned from my lived experience, the factors that will continue to transform Filipino American identities of my generation and the identities of our children and grandchildren. But I also tell a different story—a scientific one that I use to support my contentions about how modern identities can be shaped. Narratives of lived experiences combined with science enrich our understanding of being a Filipino American.

Mama Old's Moth

I'll begin my exploration into my ancestral connections to the Philippines by sharing a story that involves my Filipino grandparents and the death of my great grandmother. This story happened forty years ago and took place in the towns of Wahiawā and Mililani, on Oʻahu. I was six years old when my great-grandmother, Maria Carmen Bumanlag Nacino Paulo, known to us as "Mama Old," passed away. My great-grandparents and grandparents came from the Philippines in 1928 when my great-grandfather was stationed in Hawaiʻi as a Philippine Scout in the segregated U.S. Army. With the intent to assimilate to their new home, the family chose to abandon the use of Ilokano kinship terms for parents and grandparents and used "Mama" and "Papa" instead. In order for the children to distinguish between their parents and grandparents, they attached the term "Old" to their grandparents. Hence, my mother, her siblings, and her cousins referred to their grandmother, my great-grandmother, as Mama Old. This seemingly innocuous act of replacing kinship terms speaks to the power of assimilation and its resulting erosion of traditional relationships associated with the language and culture of our ancestors. Our family consciously chose to embrace their American identity. Yet, while they celebrated being American, they remained, relative to others in our setting, Filipino.

The event of Mama Old's death was my first exposure to a funeral and the rituals practiced by my Ilokano ancestors that had settled in Hawaiʻi. I could go into all of the rituals I remember, but I don't have the space in this article. Instead, I want to focus on the prayer sessions offered after the funeral. These were the nights when our large extended family would gather around a home altar praying the rosary. An image that is burned into my memory, in the mind of a six-year-old, was the constant presence of a large dark moth in the house, usually on the white wall near the altar. I recall the matter-of-fact explanation from my elders that the moth was visiting because Mama Old had died. Amongst her great-grandchildren, we all accepted this explanation, especially because the moth's continued presence at those prayer parties and the "anniversary of death" prayer parties fits this belief. We considered the moth to be an embodiment of Mama Old. My older brother brought this up to me in a recent conversation. I had not thought of this childhood memory in years.

While I had matter-of-factly accepted the details of this story at face value, at first, I later repressed it when I realized how fantastic it sounded from mainstream perspectives. In the course my scientific education, I had unconsciously suppressed this memory. As I seek to understand its significance for me, now, I am able to view it as an important source for personal growth. What might have been construed as idle fancy or superstition has become, in light of this inquiry into identity, an important part in understanding my Filipino heritage and its role in shaping my identity. This is an act of commitment that represents more than an insightful appreciation of and connection with my cultural past. Making sense of this memory also represents a way of making sense of my identity in my context.

In this story, an ancestor had changed form into a moth but still existed, though temporally, in the environment. The folk beliefs of my ancestors traveled across geography and through time. On further reflection, I considered how the settler ancestor had struggled and labored to rise, much like a moth struggling to emerge from its chrysalis. Symbolically, I interpret this as the struggle of the immigrant settler resulting in a rebirth after transforming herself. The successive generations inherit the freedom to rise and soar. With origins from another set of islands, the Filipino American constructs a life in the new island setting and each successive generation reconstructs their identities to fit their environment.

In the next story, the same weaving of threads from a past in another place, into the fabric of this place[3], materializes in a different way. While the form of an ancestor is actually invisible, the effects of his presence is just as tangible as Mama Old's moth.

Papa Old's Ghost

The next story relates an event that happened a few years later, around thirty-five years ago, on St. Patrick's Day. I have a very vivid memory of this. My Grandma, Elena Pagarigan, was in the kitchen preparing a big pot of *tombong-tombong,* the dessert made from coconut milk, tapioca, mochi balls, sweet potatoes, and langka[4]. I was fortunate to grow up in the same house in Waipahu where my Filipino grandparents lived. I was an eleven-year-old kid, seated at our dining room table, after school, doing my homework. While preparing the *tombong-tombong,* my Grandma explained that she was making it in honor of the birthday of her father, my great grandfather, whom we referred to as "Papa Old." She told me how my deceased great grandfather, Patricio Bautista Paulo, was named Patricio because he was born on St. Patrick's Day. He had loved *tombong-tombong,* so she was making it in his honor. Suddenly, as if it was on cue, the front door to our house slowly opened and closed as if some invisible person had just walked in. Without any hint of surprise—almost as if she expected it, my Grandma matter-of-factly said, "See, Papa Old is visiting us now." I had accepted it as my reality, because it was so real to me, at the time, that the ghost of Papa Old had come to visit us, in Waipahu, on his birthday.

Trying to make sense of this memory now, like the previous memory, adds to the sense-making of my identity in context. The ancestor was invisible, but I was assured by my grandmother that he was really there. The return of my dead great grandfather may symbolize a revival of my ties to my ancestors, a revival initiated by his ghost and reinforced by my Grandma Elena. In effect, Papa Old's ghost and my grandmother provided me with a source of my Filipino identity, which, like a ghost, is often invisible but occasionally reemerges. I received a valuable lesson in my family history that has now become a treasured tie to my ancestors.

The same weaving of threads from another place, into the fabric of this place, materializes in yet a different way in my next story. While my ancestors have served as clear sources of connection, members of my community are additional sources that reinforce and build on those connections.

The *Aswang*

Finally, I'll tell just one more story—though I have many to tell. This happened one summer night, about twenty-five years ago. I was home on a visit from college in Wisconsin, living and working on O'ahu during my summer break. A couple of childhood friends and I had spent the day cruising on the North Shore. That night, we stopped at the 7-11 near the intersection known as Weed Circle, between Waialua and Haleiwa. We stopped there to engage in some typical college-aged behavior—to pick up more beer and "have a few" as we put it. We were drinking our beer in the parking lot, having some laughs, when suddenly a short dark figure seemed in an unusual way to simultaneously waddle and glide past us. It quickly breezed past us and crossed the road into the cane fields, disappearing in the direction of the Wai'anae mountains. We looked at each other in silent astonishment. Then, as we recovered our speech, the word *aswang* came to our lips in unison. Was that what we had all seen cross in front of us? And, what did it mean? We all agreed that we had just seen an *aswang.* An *aswang* is a feared shapeshifting vampire creature that has human features along with a very long proboscis, beak, or tongue, and is often depicted with wings. In my family, my grandmother would tell stories about *aswangs* as a way to caution us with fear. *"Hala,* you better watch out. The *aswang* going get you!"

I reunited with one of these friends, recently, and he brought up the encounter. Again, I had not really thought about it in years. At the time when this story took place, the occasion of my return from Wisconsin provided an opportunity to, once again, reconnect in person with my family and friends in Hawai'i. When I reflect on my life history, the periods of time where I seemed to suppress the fantastic stories of my youth were most often when I was away from Hawai'i for my education. My educational journey and my professional career identity had curbed my memory of the *aswang* encounter for many years. As in my previous stories, making sense of this memory represents a way of making sense of my identity, particularly in my context.

Seeing the *aswang* had served to help build my Filipino American identity in several ways. First, it reminded me, at the time, to attend to the folk beliefs shared with me by my grandmother. Next, I had happened to see the aswang with two other friends. We agreed on what we witnessed, which speaks to the power of the community values we share. Finally, I am able to interpret the symbolism of the *aswang* in relation to the development of my cultural identity. The shapeshifting nature of the *aswang* symbolizes a protean identity, encompassing multiple identities, that can be in-

formed by the surrounding politico-historical environment.

In spite of the deleterious effect of assimilation on our Filipino identity, family and community serve as resources to maintain our relationship to the beliefs of our ancestors. Folk beliefs that had once served the purpose of social control now also serve the purpose of social coherence. The wonder of the phenomena I observed in each story reminds me that my Filipinoness can exist in Hawai'i, and that my Filipinoness can coexist with my Americanness. The allegorical significance of these stories provides a way to view the paradox inherent in constructing Filipino American identity, particularly in Hawai'i. Like how my parents, grandparents, and great grandparents adopted the use of "Mama and Papa," their descendants continue to find ways to conform to their environment. And yet, despite their assimilation, the descendants are able to retain their stories.

Two challenges emerged in the process of this inquiry. In my exploration of Filipino American identity construction I realized the following:

> First, I lament the **loss of ancestral connection,** including the loss of our connections to the Philippines with the passing of older generations.
>
> Second, I acknowledge the enormity of the **rise of science and technology.**

The following sections describe two factors that that have played major roles influencing transformations in identity.

Choose Your Illusion

In the process of reflecting on these stories I engaged in a transformation that Acido described as affirming and reclaiming myself, "not as a pathology of oppression, but an agent capable of changing and being conscious of one's life context" (2014, 34). I may be American and Local, but, through this process, I rediscovered and reconnected with folk beliefs of my family, including my ancestors. These were experiences that I shared with family members and friends from my community. I choose not to deny their existence.

I tell these stories to illustrate how these things had been so real to me. A common characteristic, however, is that all three of these experiences took place before my transformation into a "scientific man"—before my doctoral education and academic training, before earning my PhD, before becoming a professor and vice chancellor.

When I look back on these events, I can see them differently, as I now possess the lens of science to provide logical explanations for what I experienced. Humans are vulnerable to what scientists call confirmation bias—the tendency to look for and see only evidence that confirms what people already believe. I originally interpreted the phenomena that I witnessed through the lens of my belief system, which came, in large part, from my family and my community beliefs.

Unfortunately, the scientific, logical explanations also serve to erode my connection to my ancestors' belief systems in the Philippines. Like when the older generations from the Philippines in our families pass away, we lose that lifeline to the old country. Ancestral beliefs and knowledge simply become superstitions. I see that take place in my own home when I try to pass on ancestral beliefs to my children. My non-Filipino spouse cannot believe that a professor can be so superstitious. This contradictory existence, always present and never really reconciled, epitomizes the paradox of my Filipino American identity, which, I suspect, is typical of many others of my and subsequent generations. In many ways, for those who are far removed from the immigrant generation, embracing multiplicity[5] may be a feature that persists from what may be the Filipino archetype. Filipinos are diverse and their identities are multiple and fluid, depending on context. While my exploration has yielded, for me, a deeper, more complex understanding of my self and the world I live in, it has also revealed undeniable challenges and ways to view those challenges, particularly for the descendants of the first two generations.

The Primacy of Science and Technology

Our daily lives are permeated with the ideas of science and technology as never before. We see how science and technology are often pitted in conflict against culture. Consider, for example, the current debate and impasse in Hawai'i involving those who wish to build the Thirty Meter Telescope and those who aim to preserve the sanctity of Mauna Kea.

Science has provided us with many advances in our understanding of ourselves, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse. One of the recent breakthroughs has been the mapping of the human genome. We now have

the ability to possess a greater understanding of our deep ancestry—who we are at the genetic level.

My recent work with National Geographic has brought me into close contact with the *Genographic Project* [6]. I participated in the project, which required that I submit a DNA sample by swabbing the inside of my cheek and sending it for analysis to National Geographic. They analyzed my DNA sample and were able to provide me with the results of their analysis. In addition to providing me with genetic data in the form of my personal DNA sequence, the Genographic Project was able to provide their interpretation of my results from an anthropological perspective. For the purposes of this piece, I will share the segment of my results that pertains to my Filipino ancestry.

The scientists at the Genographic Project were able to trace the ancestry of my maternal line, though my mitochondrial DNA, to a particular haplogroup known as F1A3A and its branch on the human family tree. By tracing the genetic markers in my DNA, the results trace my maternal lineage out of East Africa 67,000 years ago, through East Africa or Asia about 60,000 years ago, on through West Asia 55,000 years ago, Southeast Asia 47,200 ± 12,350 years ago, and Central Asia 42,290 ± 3,400 years ago.

So here is an instance of science and technology providing me with a greater understanding of who I am, down to the genetic level—this is what's encoded in my DNA. I've discovered that my Filipino ancestry, according to today's best science, extends well beyond the confines of the Philippines. Geneticists link the spread of my haplogroup line throughout Asia and the Pacific. This has tremendous implications for how I can now construct my identity. Genetic technology and the science of the genome can now provide new ways to think about who we are and how we are connected with others.

This has implications, today, in the context of thinking about Filipinos in Hawai'i. Take, for example, Filipinos' connection to the recently embarked worldwide voyage of the Polynesian sailing canoes *Hōkūle'a* and *Hikianalia.* The Mālama Honua (Care for Our Earth) voyage aims to promote care for our oceans and island earth by learning more about them, by creating global relationships, and by exploring and journeying around the world. While the vessels on the journey are Hawaiian voyaging canoes—a clear source of pride for Native Hawaiians— Polynesian sailing canoes have their roots in the long canoes with sails and outriggers that Austronesians from Asia brought to Near Oceania. Filipinos share these seafaring roots.

The first time that I learned this lesson was when I taught fourth grade on Moloka'i. During the 1995 voyage of the Hōkūle'a, educators from the Moanalua Garden Foundation, including 1976 Hōkūle'a crew member Penny Martin, shared a fourth grade lesson from their 'Ōhi'a Project curriculum called "Visions of Voyaging." The thing that stood out for many of us who attended that session was a chart that showed how similar some common words from Polynesian and the Philippine Languages of the Austronesian Family were. I noticed how students from immigrant families—mulitingual learners and English language learners, suddenly became more interested in the lesson when they learned how the Polynesian voyaging that they were studying was connected to their home languages. We learned, as depicted in that chart, that Samoans, Marquesans, Tahitians, Hawaiians, and Maori—all classified as Polynesians, are also related to those who are Ilocano, Tagalog, Visayan, Mindanaoan, and Pampangan. Take, for example, the word for the number five in these Polynesian and Philippine languages.
The language commonalities across groups, particularly in counting, are clearly evident in this example[7]. And now, genetic technology is also able to corroborate the notion that we really are related, and this has ramifications for how we are able construct our identities. The greatest lesson that

English:	Five
Samoan:	Lima
Marquesan:	Ima
Tahitian:	Rima
Hawaiian:	Lima
Maori:	Rima
Pampangan:	Lima
Visayan:	Lima
Tagalog:	Lima
Ilokano:	Lima

has emerged from advances in genetic technology is that the farther back you trace your ancestry, the more clear it becomes that we are all related to each other—indeed, to the whole of humanity. This lesson confounds notions of our roots as products of distinct, separate origins.

Conclusion

In the process of reexamining my identity, two factors have come to light that I believe have the most impact on Filipino American identity construction, today, and into the future: (1) the erosion of connections to our ancestors in the Philippines, and (2) the emergence and primacy of science and technology.

In spite of the loss of these ancestral connections, descendants are now able to reconstruct their Filipino identities by engaging in indigenous methodologies that revive a deep connection with and commitment to Filipino family and community. At the same time, genetic technologies are providing us with ways to better understand our human genetic roots, based on historical patterns in DNA. Our ancient ancestors' movements around the world are recorded in the genetic footprints within us today. The farther back you trace, the more you become related to the whole of humanity. Herein lies a paradox of Filipino American identity today. Despite our growing understanding of our points of connection, a deep understanding of our differences remains vitally important, especially in regard to the social, political, economic, and historical contexts that shape our identities.

The implications for identity (re)constructions grounded in *halungkat*, Critical Kapwa Pedagogy, *pakasaritaan*, Nakem Pedagogy, and Social Biography hold tremendous promise for Filipino educational praxis. Consider this example. A study by Libarios (2013) calls for addressing the underachievement of Filipinos in Hawai'i in higher education by supporting their desires and capacity to succeed. Bachini (2011) shows that the development of an achieved ethnic identity is critical for coping with the challenges presented in higher education and that students look for opportunities that provide a sense of belonging and connectedness with other Filipina/o students. Forming Filipino American identities through indigenous perspectives and culturally responsive methods may contribute to the promise of better fulfilling the educational potential of future generations of Filipino Americans.

Also, consider the possibilities that are afforded through science and technology. We are now connected, electronically, as never before. We possess the potential to virtually construct and re-construct knowledge, our identities, and our communities. By telling our stories, in the context of newly emerging networks, made possible by advances in technology, we can realize our socio-historical selfhood for ourselves and our communities on our own terms.

This is the heuristic: reality isn't only defined through singular membership categories. It can be rationally experienced through syncretic, hybrid, and plural identities—viewed through multiple lenses. A consistent way for Filipino Americans to appreciate everyday phenomenon is with an approach that embraces their multiplicity. The multiplicity heuristic allows a person to defy the reductionist illusion of singular membership categories. As Nobel laureate Amartya Sen put it, "the importance of one identity need not obliterate the importance of others" (2006, 19). Even when views from lenses of plural identities dramatically contrast, they can be held together in a useful framework that considers phenomenon through an approach that fundamentally embraces ambiguity, whether intentionally or not. In reference to the metaphorical theme of this special issue, the woven Tinalak cloth, when we are able to successfully weave the various threads of our multiple identities into a personally meaningful pattern, this is when we know who we are.

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ENDNOTES

[1] I acknowledge that I am also descended from Portuguese ancestors who came to live in Hawai'i from the Azores and Madeira. For the purposes of this article, I focus only on my Ilokano ancestry. An exploration of my Portuguese ancestry would be more appropriate for an issue devoted to Portuguese identity in Hawai'i.

[2] Both Soria (2012) and Acido (2014) recognize Aurelio Agcaoili's contributions to their respective uses of pakasaritaan. Acido also acknowledges Agcaoili's and Soria's contributions in his use of Nakem.

[3] These constructions and reconstructions in a new place are not intended to supplant the rights of indigenous Hawaiians to their land. These stories exist to enable understanding of, or knowledge concerning, a settler's and her descendants positions in relation to the place.

[4] The English term for *langka* is jackfruit.

[5] See Amartya Sen's *plural identities* in Identity and *Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (2006), as well as Moniz and Spickard's (2006, 2015) midaltern for ideas about reconciling multiple identities and their diverse implications.

[6] The Genographic Project is a genetic research initiative led by National Geographic Explorer in Residence Dr. Spencer Wells. I opted to join this real-time scientific project aimed at better understanding our genetic roots following Dr. Wells' lecture titled *Deep Ancestry: Inside the Genographic Project* delivered at National Geographic's headquarters in Washington, DC, on April 19, 2012.

[7] This example was drawn from the table in the Moanalua Gardens Foundation curriculum "Visions of Voyaging" (2003, p. 8). The original source was Edward Tregear's *The Maori-Polynesian Comparative Dictionary* (1891).