

**Capstone Assignment: My Parents' Immigration Stories as a Microcosm of American
Colonialism**

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to outline the prevalence of American colonialism present within the values of Philippine culture and the Philippine identity. Aspects of colonialism and assimilation into American culture are highlighted through my parents' immigration story. Many Pilipinos/Pilipino-Americans struggle with a sense of identity, especially growing up or being exposed to a bicultural environment. I utilize the idea of identity conflict to examine how aspects of identity are represented through Philippine cultural values. The value of historical texts regarding American colonization, assimilation, and topics confined under the complexities of the Pilipino-American identity are investigated and evaluated. My parents' stories and their conformity to American culture/ideals as an exemplar for how this social phenomena manifests itself in those who identify with an identity related to the Philippine culture. Primary texts and secondary texts are evaluated to describe the impacts of colonialism on Philippine culture. It is also important to note my identity as a second-generation Pilipina-American. I was not raised in the Philippines, but raised *with* Philippine culture through my parents. I tie in my parents' immigration story and the values they had imposed on me growing up. I was raised with these values; many of them are a part of my identity, which I argue, are rooted in American colonialism. My parents' identity is rooted in American colonialism, therefore my identity is also rooted in American colonialism.

keywords: assimilation, colonial, colonialism, imperialism, American colonialism, Filipino, Filipino identity, Pilipino, Pilipino identity, identity, immigration, ethnic identity, ethnic studies, assimilation

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My parents are both immigrants from the Philippines whose stories date back to their young adult years in the 1980s and 1990s. As I have grown older, I have also realized that their stories are a smaller part of a larger narrative that is a subset of the neocolonial relationship between the Philippines and the United States. As Linda M. Pierce said in her essay, "Thinking about how my personal or family history relates to my cultural history begs questions of nationalism, imperialism, global capitalism, patriarchy, militarism, colonization, and white supremacy" (De Jesus, 2013). Resonating strongly with this quote, I have come to understand that my parents' immigration stories are a microcosm of the effects of American colonization. The historically widespread phenomena of American colonialism and imperialism inflicted on the Philippines drastically affected what it meant to be an immigrant, running deeply in the roots of the unseemly complex Pilipino-American identity.

My father and his parents moved from Manila, Philippines to the U.S. territory of Guam in 1983 under "sponsorship" for American citizenship by his uncle. My father then went back to the Philippines to pursue his bachelor's degree for about a year but felt dissatisfied with his pathway in higher education and decided to enlist in the U.S. military. His path ultimately led him to a personal expedition of self growth, and eventually an American citizenship in the United States. My mother also moved from Manila, Philippines, but entered the U.S. later in her life in 1991 to pursue her master's degree in graduate school. She had already accomplished her bachelor's degree by the time she moved but was encouraged by her parents to study abroad in the United States. My mother moved to the United States as an international student, struggling to assimilate into an American life and acclimating to a different culture. She eventually finished

her master's degree and, shortly thereafter, moved to her first job in San Diego, California, where she intersected paths with my father, who was stationed there for military service. After three months, my parents decided to get married; eventually starting a family with me and my two younger brothers a few years later. As previously mentioned, their stories are a few of many whose backs rest on the deeply intertwined Philippine-American colonial relationship. My parents were a part of the generation that came from the soils of the Philippines, and I am a part of the generation who tends to the roots they planted here in the United States.

The Philippines has a deeply rooted relationship with colonialism and has been colonized for over 400 years. Primarily, it was occupied by Spain for about 350 years, and the United States for about 50 years. Colonialism and imperialism are defined as, "...a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another... Like colonialism, imperialism also involves political and economic control over a dependent territory" (Kohn and Kavita, 2017). The United States unofficially annexed and colonized the Philippines, after its defeat of Spain in the Spanish-American War in 1898. The United States' victory in the war signified the passage of the Philippines from one colonizer to another, without the consent of the Pilipino¹ people. Playing on the false narrative that the U.S. would eventually grant the Pilipino people their prolonged desire for independence, the U.S. continued to occupy the Philippines until "Independence" in 1946. The motive of the United States colonizing the Philippines was for imperialist gain.

¹ The term "Pilipino" is used to distinguish itself from its colonized counterpart "Filipino." The word "Filipino" is a colonized term because the F was not originally a part of the Philippine alphabet. The word "Filipino" was not used until Spanish colonization, and is used in this paper to note the importance of identity, especially in everyday vernacular.

As stated by the U.S. Library of Congress from their collection, *Last Days of a President: Films of McKinley and the Pan-American Exposition, 1901*, “By annexing the Philippines, the United States took up the so-called ‘White Man's Burden,’ as urged by poet Rudyard Kipling. It would be our purpose, said McKinley, ‘to take them all and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift² and civilize and Christianize them” (Library of Congress). The “White Man’s Burden” is a concept in reference to Rudyard Kipling’s extremely racist, degrading poem towards Pilipino¹ people, which expresses the idea that it is white people’s “duty” to help their non-white counterparts; it perpetuates the idea of the “White-Savior Industrial Complex.” In addition, McKinley was the 25th president of the United States, who pushed for Philippine annexation under the U.S. post-Spanish-American War. McKinley believed in benevolent assimilation, and therefore declared the “Benevolent Assimilation Proclamation;” the proclamation would label America in the eyes of Pilipinos as “kind colonizers” who would help to “uplift” the Philippines. Since this is stated by the United States Library of Congress, it acknowledges the fact that the United States justified the colonization of the Philippines through means stated above; colonization is always problematic, especially when a power establishes control over a certain area, and when it is through means like the erasure of culture, massacre, and exploitation.

America utilized its tools as a colonizer in an aggressively agile manner. Advantageously, it used soft power, otherwise known as economic or cultural influence through international relations, to create a legacy of establishing further control over the Philippines. As stated by Daniel B. Schirmer and Stephen R. Shalom, authors of *The Philippines Reader: A History of Colonialism, Neocolonialism, Dictatorship, and Resistance*, “The importance of education as a colonial tool was never under-estimated by the Americans...The educational system established

by the Americans could not have been for the sole purpose of saving the Filipinos from illiteracy and ignorance. Given the economic and political purposes of American occupation, education had to be consistent with these broad purposes of American colonial policy” (Schirmer and Shalom, 1987). Although the United States justified their occupation of the Philippines through reasons like “humanitarian aid” or “being consistent” with American colonial policy, American colonization reformed education in the Philippines dramatically. By whatever means necessary, the United States used overarching methods of characteristically familiar dynamics of power to perpetuate narratives of colonialism and portray itself as the “kind colonizer.” Exploitation became all too familiar to the Pilipino¹ people, after centuries of forced subjugation. Colonization was simply observed as a means for American benefit.

Additionally Paul Kriesberg, who was a writer on policy issues relating to Asia for *The New York Times* and a senior associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, wrote in his article, “In those decades when the Philippines were America's showcase of democracy in Asia, the United States built schools, encouraged elections and self-administration, promoted economic development and preached ethical values. Mr. Karnow makes it clear that the success of these American programs was roughly in that order” (Kriesberg, 1989). The ideals imposed by Americans like the values of “democracy” or “education” during their era of occupation less than 100 years ago remain alive in the minds of Pilipinos today. Americans continued to perpetuate the internal oppression felt by Pilipinos, deeming their cultural identities as inferior to their counterparts, because their personal, cultural standards did not live up to what their colonizers deemed as “worthy.” These ideas are perpetuated through the educational system, again set up by colonizers, my parents and grandparents were conditioned under; these ideals are passed down through generations. In Philippine culture, the United States is

unspokenly placed on this pedestal, which many from my homeland “look up” to as a standard for living well. Because the Philippines lacks support for its people as a result of its government and resources being overexploited by colonization for over 350 years, there is also a large appeal of coming to the United States for a “better life.” Many Pilipinos yearn for this “American Dream” to escape from the harsh realities people in the Philippines commonly face; people would not try to escape from these harsh realities in the first place if they were well-supported by the government and the conditions of the country they were living in.

The fact that my grandparents encouraged my mother to study abroad in the United States since “the education is better” is a minor example, reflective of these ideals imposed on them as a result of colonialism. The general education in the Philippines being of poor quality is also telling of how deep the cuts are with regards to how its government and resources have been overexploited. Yen Le Espiritu, author of *Filipino American Lives*, says that textbooks under the educational system set up by the U.S. in the Philippines are “*Infected* with colonial culture and with grand illusions about the United States,” sarcastically citing it as “the land of opportunity and fair play” (1995). In addition, a short essay by Linda M. Pierce touches strongly on the neocolonial Pilipino-American identity in *Pinay Power : Peminist Critical Theory : Theorizing the Filipina/American Experience* and expresses, “...these promises inextricably tied to the value of whiteness; the history of the United States is a long and repetitive narrative of the inaccessibility to the promises of the American dream to mean people and communities of color” (Pierce). Those raised in the Philippines under this colonial system were conditioned to think that America is *the* land of opportunity. Many people like my parents are immigrants, who move here in hopes for a better life, when in reality that perception of a “better life” through renditions of the “American Dream” is overinflated and deceiving. Growing up, being Pilipina-American has

become a very conflicting identity, because of the juxtaposition of perspectives in the two cultures that have raised me. Being the culmination of the oppressor and the oppressed, in addition to being a byproduct of their cultures, provides context as to why me and my parents' identities have been proven difficult to navigate.

Despite being able to “make ends meet,” the establishment of this country was built on a system that was not made for me or people like my parents. To hear my parents talk about their identity-related internalized conflicts and hardships pain me. They say that they will always have this lingering feeling, as if *they will never belong here* as immigrants. Ironically, the whole basis of this country stands on the backbones laid down by immigrants and were built by institutions and systems in the United States that were predominantly designed for white, cisgender men, to work against all those outside who do not lie within the confines of this identity.

Ronald T. Takaki, an established scholar who was in the field of Asian-American studies, said two quotes that resonated with me strongly. In one quote he said, “We need to 're-vision' history to include Asians in the history of America" (Takaki, 1998). In the other quote he expressed:

To answer our questions, we must not study Asian Americans primarily in terms of statistics and what was done to them. They are entitled to be viewed as subjects- as men and women with minds, wills, and voices. By “voices” we mean their own words and stories as told in their oral histories, conversations, speeches, soliloquies, and songs, as well as their own writing... Their voices contain particular expressions and phrases with their own meanings and nuances, the cuttings from the cloth of languages. (Takaki, 1998)

My Asian immigrant parents did not leave everything they knew, but instead came to the stolen land which taught them everything they knew. Being from a country colonized by the United

States meant that my parents did not move to the United States without some understanding of American culture and ideals, which they were also raised with. I do not want to say that my parents moved here for a better opportunity or in search of the “American Dream,” because they did not. They moved here because the conditions in the Philippines were not good enough for them in the first place- nor was it for my grandparents, or my great grandparents, and so on. The reason they moved out was because of the impact the United States’ colonialism and imperialism left on the infrastructure of the Philippine government. The United States, after the Spanish, further perpetuated systems of oppression and stepped on the Philippines, leaving it flat, oppressed, and in poverty. My family's values are tied to centuries of colonialism. As circulated in some of the spaces that I am involved in within the Pilipinx community, being Pilipino¹ is an inherently political identity in itself. My parents’ immigration story is rooted in a colonial identity, and so is mine.

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