From Plantation to the Academy: The Journey and Yearnings of a Filipina American Scholar from Moloka'i, Hawai'i

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This narrative is the author's story as a Filipina American social welfare scholar. She hopes to draw lessons for social work practitioners, researchers, and policy makers who deal with Asian immigrant populations. Such lessons include creating "spaces" and "places" of positive identity formation, sense of community, and effective and supportive structures and systems that promote social justice.

Introduction

Having a "voice" to tell your story and to be heard as a woman of color can bring strength and a sense of healing and empowerment. Like many Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, I find it difficult to tell my story because of issues related to discrimination, oppression, and trauma. Yet, I find a way to use my voice to explain and communicate important issues or concepts.

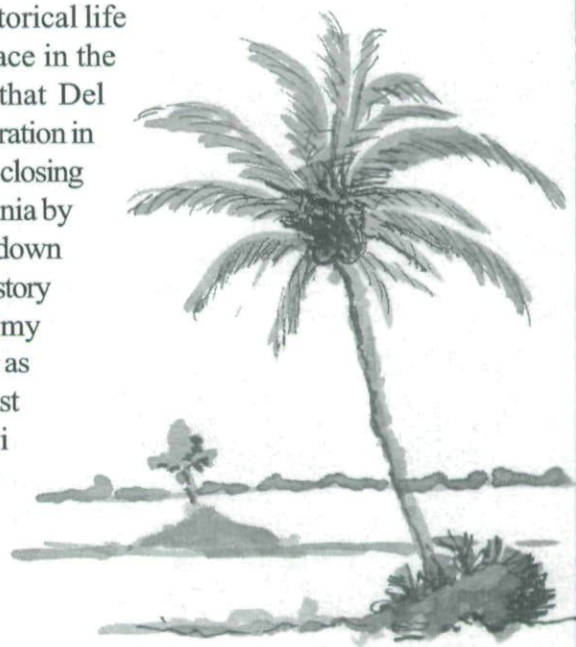
This narrative is my story as a Filipina American scholar, written to help me reflect upon my life experiences, focus on the purpose of being part of the academy, and continue the journey of finding my place in this world, both professionally and personally. Sharing my journey highlights the formation of my identities and positionalities, which are salient issues for me.

Throughout my years as a social worker, the story of where I have been has not been conveyed, except to close family members and friends. Not all of them have heard my story in its entirety. Because of the relevance it may have only to certain situations and times. I choose to tell my story from the heart as I move forward in my career aspirations as an Asian American Pacific Islander social welfare scholar from Moloka'i, Hawai'i. It is important for me to embrace where I come from and to feel grounded so I know the direction I am heading in life.

I share my story to address the issues of race, class, and gender—all of which encompass social positionalities and status. It is my hope to empower those who read my narrative and to encourage them to analyze history and the systems that influence migration across the world. Lastly, I share my story to bridge and encourage my Filipino community—especially young Filipinos—to create a space of empowerment and to perpetuate the true sense of *barangay* (in Tagalog, close-knit community relationships). Together, I envision a way to promote social justice and advocate for a better quality of life for everyone in our Filipino community.

Triggered by Trauma

It is interesting how historical life events remind us of our place in the world. I recently learned that Del Monte (a multinational corporation in the pineapple industry) will be closing its pineapple company in Kunia by 2008. This will definitely go down as a turning point in Filipino history in Hawai'i. Kunia is one of my hometowns where I grew up as an adolescent. It is also the last plantation village in Hawai'i and is currently home to fifty to seventy families, most of whom are of Filipino descent. My family has



lived there since 1988 after moving from Moloka'i to work on the pineapple plantation. This will mark the *second* time my family will be displaced from a place we called home. My family's first experience was when Del Monte closed its business in Moloka'i; I was thirteen years old at the time.

Although I am now older, I still grieve such a loss because my hometown will forever change. Although I no longer live in Kunia, I grieve because there are others who will face difficulties transitioning out of the plantation village, just as my family did in 1988. My heart aches as I think about the possibility of disadvantaged or underprivileged families being displaced. I relive the memories of my family's migration from Moloka'i to O'ahu, and realize how things come in cycles. These memories provoke feelings and thoughts of social justice.

As Filipinos celebrate the one-hundredth year of our immigration to Hawai'i, I feel sad to see the sugar or pineapple industry, which served as impetus for Filipino immigration to Hawai'i, come to an end. I see my Filipino community as more diverse and different from previous generations. Through the years, I have sensed a more heterogeneous Filipino community in class, acculturation, assimilation, time of migration, language, and regional origin—just to name a few. I also see this heterogeneity in my own extended family. Through it all, I desire that our Filipino values of *pamilia* (family), *respecto* (respect), and *barangay* (close-knit community relationships) will bind us together.

My Earlier Years: Born and Raised on the "Most Hawaiian Island" — Moloka'i

I was born and raised on Moloka'i (Kualapu'u and Kaunakakai). My home island, with approximately seven thousand people, was very close-knit. Native Hawaiians and Filipinos were the dominant groups. I enjoyed forming close relationships with my neighbors. Even my siblings' *ninongs* or *ninangs* (in Ilocano, godparents) made me feel as if I were their godchild. I was proud to be a part of this great community because it gave me a sense of home, and I felt safe.

I have many memories of my community coming together. I remember a time when I was eight or nine years old. There was a brush fire that burned out of control on the slopes near my family's home. It was impressive to see my family and neighbors helping other neighbors hose down the homes in our subdivision.

I also remember how we shared home-grown vegetables and fish with our neighbors and friends. My mom would say, "Give the *utoong* (in Ilocano, string beans) to your Auntie Deling." My dad would say, "Give fish to your Auntie Nona." Papa Scott (a White, retired teacher from Spokane, Washington, who rented the annex in our Kaunakakai home) would pop popcorn for my siblings and me on a weekly basis. I also observed my parents always donating their money—the little they had—to a Filipino association every time someone passed away. I later learned how this helped families deal with the high funeral expenses. I also remember celebrating Filipino holidays like the observation of Jose Rizaldy (a Filipino national hero) and *Flores de Mayo* (Blessed Virgin Mary) as a Filipino community. Additionally, we were invited to a lot of baby *lu'aus* (first birthdays and baptismals), weddings, and funerals.

Looking back, it was quite amazing to have seen everyone get along, regardless of ethnicity or race. Race was never an issue, for I had quite a diverse set of friends—Filipinos, Japanese, Caucasians, Native Hawaiians, and mixed race. The spirit of *aloha* (in Hawaiian, love) came alive through those relationships. We were all pretty much in the same socioeconomic class. It seemed we had the basic necessities of life—a home to live in, two vehicles to take us around the

island, food on the table, and a multigenerational family where grandparents made sure we were okay. Little did I know that by virtue of my attending Head Start and having free or reduced lunch throughout my childhood and adolescence, my family was considered poor.

The Great Move from Rural to Urban: Adapting to the City Life of Honolulu

I came to understand the difference of my place in society when I moved to Kunia, O'ahu. I had mixed emotions—including feeling lost and excited—about this move. It was extremely difficult for me to leave Moloka'i and the strong ties to family and community there. Yet my father reminded my mother time and time again that there were better economic opportunities on O'ahu in the long run. So, we packed one of those huge trailers and shipped our belongings to the neighboring island of O'ahu.

My parents continued to work for Del Monte but had to start from the bottom. I attended Wheeler Intermediate School, a military-based school with predominately Japanese and Caucasian students from military families. It was during this period of my life that ethnicity and class (i.e., being poor) became salient to me. Although generally I enjoyed school and made a lot of new friends, I was struck by the socialization that affected me. The first was the way I dressed and talked. I no longer could wear my regular pants, t-shirts, and slippers. I had to wear nicer pants, blouses, and sandals. I recall my English teacher scolding me to speak "proper English." She asked me where I was from, and when I told her from Moloka'i, she responded, "Please speak proper English. No more Pidgin."

Secondly, I began to notice that people made judgments and stereotypes when I told them I lived in Kunia. I often heard the following kinds of statements: "Oh, Kunia kids, they're losers. People from there smoke too much. Oh, the druggies. Kunia is the ghetto, huh." I got good grades and participated in sports, and I worked hard to demystify these scripts, which were affirmed in high school by a friend who told me, "Only a few Kunia kids do well in school. You go, girl! Make Kunia proud." I continued to wonder why so few of us from Kunia were thriving in school. Internally, my desire to combat the stereotypes about Filipino people from Moloka'i and Kunia began to burn!

Thirdly, my attitude toward others changed. People were not as friendly as people on Moloka'i. Greetings like, "How are you?" with a hug were rare. I felt I could not truly trust others as I used to. Back on Moloka'i, I didn't worry about things being stolen or strangers taking advantage. In fact, we left our doors unlocked. No one ever came to our yard and messed it up or stole things. But in the city, I was becoming more urbanized, and my rural socialization was thrown out the window! This social dissonance became evident as I cautiously was approached by strangers, even if they were from my own ethnic group! Nevertheless, I managed to get along with my Filipino, Japanese, Caucasian, and *Hapa* (mixed-race) friends.

I had fun in high school as I participated in extracurricular activities ranging from community service clubs to a national honor society, but I continued to clearly see the dynamics of ethnic relations and class. I met fellow Filipinos who denied their origins. They would claim, "I'm Japanese, Portuguese, and something else." Many of them were children of nurses and other professionals. In contrast, I saw other Filipino friends join gangs, experiment with drugs, and get pregnant. I, too, was pressured to smoke and experiment with drugs, but chose not to.

Worse yet, I saw tensions between local and immigrant Filipinos. At times, I felt I was in the middle because I had friends from both ends of the spectrum. On one hand, I valued

the fact that my Filipino immigrant friends were able to speak our native tongues and uphold the traditional values of dating. On the other hand, I understood how my local Filipino friends were frustrated that Filipino immigrant youth were not able to understand English and appeared to be cliquish. Sadly, stereotypes of Filipinos in general were all around—*book book* (in Ilocano, termite; using mismatched clothing and accessories, a derogatory term used for a Filipino immigrant); quiet; dog eaters; talk with heavy accent; Filipino girls are easy; Filipino men are horny; chicken fighters; hotel workers; laborers; druggies; smokers; gangsters.

The Places I Found Empowerment and Strength: The Guiding Light

With negative stereotypes being played out in school and in the general community, I was ashamed to be a Filipino! I was even more ashamed that I did not have parents with higher education! It was not until I went to a leadership conference sponsored by the *Sariling Gawa Youth Council, Inc.* that my whole life changed. This was my greatest source of empowerment as a Filipino American youth. I met fellow Filipino youth who were experiencing similar situations in life (e.g., discrimination, generational misunderstandings with parents, having to work part time, boyfriend problems). At the leadership conference, I finally had the chance to meet positive role models with similar backgrounds to mine who encouraged me to do well and served as my support system for life! The leadership conference equipped me with leadership skills (e.g., communication, decision making, group processing, life choices) that have been extremely helpful. For me, the venue was a safe place to talk about my issues as a Filipino youth. This experience had a profound impact on me—it was where I found my home and my Filipino community.

Starting in my senior year of high school, things went uphill for me. I attended the University of Hawai'i, Manoa, for my undergraduate degree and was the first in my family to obtain a higher education. Although I felt lost at times, the university had support systems in place for minority young adults like myself. I continued to find my home and place through participation in numerous extracurricular activities.

During my time at the university, I was the vice president of the Associated Students of the University of Hawai'i (ASUH) and served as a student representative to the University Board of Regents. I remained involved in the *Sariling Gawa Youth Council* as a youth leader. I joined Timpuyog (Ilocano language student organization), Philippines Cultural Club, New Student Orientation, Health Careers Opportunities, Operation Manong, and national honor societies.

Being involved in these activities taught me many lessons. The Filipino-based organizations provided me with the space to increase my understanding and later embrace the beauty of my Filipino heritage. The national honor societies and career-oriented organizations provided me with access to resources (human and social capital) that gave me many opportunities to thrive academically. I continued to develop appropriate skills (e.g., effective communication and conflict resolution) and had many meaningful experiences that propelled me in school and life. Most importantly, I learned how to work with different people to and embrace team building or group dynamics.

The University of Hawai'i is where I found many influential people: mentors who taught me life lessons and friends and colleagues with similar goals and interests. I also met my future husband and some of my dearest friends who continue to serve as strong social and intellectual networks.

Through my college years, I experienced some issues of discrimination and other hardships. I had a conflict with a White male graduate student leader who did not think I was good enough to serve as the ASUH vice president because I was a twenty-year-old Filipina woman. Before my decision to major in social work, I applied to nursing school but was rejected. This rejection was hard on my parents. They originally had aspirations for me to become a nurse, but I realized it was not for me. In both instances, because I had the support systems and skills to deal with such situations, I was able to cope with them effectively. And that is true empowerment for me.

To the Ivory Tower: So I Thought

I continued my education and attended the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor to broaden my horizons. I thought, "Wow. Moloka'i girl makes it to Michigan!" I was so proud of myself for being accepted to the *top* social work school in the nation. I felt honored. Additionally, I thought, "I'm too comfortable in Hawai'i." Boy, was I in for a shock!

Although I felt prepared to be away from home, my significant other, and everything familiar, I was not prepared to deal with a different face of discrimination — ageism. As I embarked on my graduate studies in social work, I came across a conflict with my practicum instructor, who undermined my intelligence and ability to be in the master's program. She had told another graduate student that I was "too young." To hear this from another student was devastating! I never thought someone in a position of authority, especially an instructor, would have these negative thoughts. I wished she had first informed me and told me how to become a better student. I was there to learn from the program. This situation did not sit well with me. I was furious! I thought, "Who is she to say that about me to another student? The nerve of that woman!"

A White, male colleague tried to support me but made matters worse. As he consoled me, he asked me, "Do you have someone to turn to? Times like this, I turn to my dad, who is a businessman. He gives me good advice on how to deal with people like this." It hit me. I realized that I had *no one* to turn to! Sure, I had my family and my significant other—all of whom were not professionals or part of the academy. It was then, as in high school, that I realized once again my underprivileged place in the world. I talked to my then boyfriend (now husband) and a faculty member (who was originally from Hawai'i), and found comfort in knowing I was supported by them. I refused to be a victim. I did not want to feel sorry for myself. I thought, "I deserve to be here. I earned it!" This experience led me to realize the power a person of authority has over me and my academic career. Although I dealt with this incident appropriately through mediation and team-building efforts at my practicum site, it left wounds that were impossible to heal completely.

I did find strength through the relationships formed through my involvement with social work student organizations focusing on social justice, community organization, and Asian American issues. Some of the Asian American social work students formed an informal support group. This stemmed from the collective experiences of being invisible as minority students. We ate lunch or dinner on a weekly basis to debrief on issues that were bothering us. Similar to my undergraduate experiences, I found support through meaningful conversations and discussions with my colleagues. The energy of this support group was empowering!

Dusting Myself Off and Walking Straight with My Head High

After graduating with my master's degree in social work, I returned to Hawai'i to my home island of Moloka'i. By then, I had experiences working with troubled youth in Hawai'i, African American families in Detroit Head Start, and Hmong women who fought for their rights. My dream to give back to my island community came true. I thought, "I'm now a professional. I'm an MSW. I've made it! I have made my parents proud of the work I am doing." I worked at a nonprofit organization as a program developer and increased the social work profession on the island by 50 percent. My job was to develop social services programs and to write grants to fund them. It felt good being home and reconnecting with old family friends and childhood friends, yet I was mindful of my privilege as a professional social worker. I struggled with the perception that some saw me as the "Alma from long ago," and the feeling that I had too much education and thus might not be able to reconnect with my community. I worked mostly with Hawaiians and was made aware of parallel experiences of discrimination, yet I perceived the privilege that Filipinos have over Hawaiians.

Being back home on the island gave me an opportunity to work with my Filipino community by organizing Filipino youth during my spare time. My after-work hours and weekends were spent coordinating fundraising activities for Filipino youth to attend an annual leadership conference and conducting weekend social and skill-building workshops. These activities gave me a sense of fulfillment.

In the midst of all of this, my job required long work hours. Again, I was reminded of my position in society. My boss questioned my commitment to the work and felt that I was not giving enough of my efforts for the sake of the community. Being questioned, I felt powerless! To me, this was another form of discrimination or mistreatment, but I could not quite pinpoint it. Again, I didn't know how to react to such feedback. I was not taught by my parents or mentors about how to deal with people in power, especially those who have power over your paycheck. I could hear the voices of my parents, "Don't cause any tension. Just do as you're told. Work hard. Listen to your boss. Lucky that you have a good job." I experienced internalized oppression as I fought my parents' voices. Although I did not want to make waves, for once I felt I had to stand up for myself and for what I wanted in my professional career as a social worker. This led me to analyze my situation.

Fortunately, another job opportunity arose. I was offered a job doing mental health research on O'ahu. I felt that was a better fit for me in utilizing my skills and talents as a professional social worker and researcher. This job provided me with a strong sense of independence. I had a boss who valued my work. I thrived as a social work researcher as I became more exposed to the mental health disparities in Hawai'i among minority youth.

I continued my work in research and evaluation and eventually took a position at Kamehameha Schools after being laid off from the state. Through my experiences on Moloka'i—which were later reinforced by my work at Kamehameha Schools—I quickly learned how comparable the experiences of Filipinos and Hawaiians were (e.g., socioeconomic indicators). I loved working at Kamehameha Schools, but I was the only Filipina researcher. It was tough because I felt somewhat invisible. Perhaps it was the structural ladder that existed. I was at the bottom of the research team. I was told I did not have enough qualifications or credentials to be among the lead researchers. I could not help but think that this had to do with my ethnicity. The lead researchers were of mostly Caucasian descent—a reflection of the power structure in American society in Hawai'i.

Like other places with professionals, there were very few Filipinos (pure or mixed)

working in administration at Kamehameha Schools. The Filipinos I met and conversed with in Ilocano were the custodians. It was wonderful to have the opportunity to know them. Many reminded me of my parents. They would tell me, "Oh, lucky, huh, *ading* (in Ilokano, younger sister), you work here. You have a nice desk. Good you made it." Did I make it? I was not sure.

My Future: A Call to Carry the Torch Together

I left Kamehameha Schools and moved to greener pastures. I was determined to obtain the credentials I was once told that I didn't have in hopes of serving my community. I returned to school for a doctoral degree in social welfare. My life experiences have led me to my research interests—positive youth development, resiliency, mental health promotion, identity formation, and community cohesion among Filipino adolescents and young adults. Although being in a doctoral program is demanding, I continue to realize my privilege in being in the academy. I have an obligation. I have a greater desire to seek ways to bring forth the voices of my Filipino community. Our stories are often unheard in mental health and community organizing. Although I've come this far, the realities of discrimination and mistreatment—as well as the effects of structural barriers that block our progress—are never far from me.

I recently returned home to Kunia with a goal to walk around the plantation village and capture through pictures the memories I have of my so-called home. Places that hold special memories were captured—the gym where my Kunia community gathered to celebrate weddings, graduations, and baby *lu'aus*; the mango tree where my friends and I ate green mangoes with *bagoog* (fish sauce) and vinegar or *shoyu* (soy sauce); and the road between the old elementary school and pineapple fields where my younger brother taught me how to drive stick shift.

Yet my plantation village was also the site of negative life experiences: the parking garage where I found one of my siblings smoking his first cigarette with his friends; the specific area where I knew drug dealing occurred; the street where I first smelled marijuana; the old house where I heard and saw domestic violence. This place called home carries both good and not-so-good memories. Nevertheless, it helps me remember my roots.

Although the closing of Del Monte will impact only a small percentage of Filipino families in Hawai'i, there are tough roads ahead. This situation affects Filipinos as well as other underprivileged communities. Thus, I urge everyone to take responsibility to prevent our fellow brothers and sisters from falling through the cracks and ending up in correctional facilities, dropping out of school, or not having a quality job with benefits. Not everyone has access to a savings account, quality education, or training to better his/her life situation. We need to provide the tools (i.e., life skills and access to supportive networks) to every human being to enable them to maneuver through these systems. If we pull together as a community, all will be given the opportunity to thrive successfully in a world that is unfair and where the structures may not be culturally appropriate.

Our society is multilingual and diverse. I yearn to keep alive the Filipino values of *pamilia* (family) and *respecto* (respect), and the true essence of *barangay* (close-knit community relationships). Discrimination and oppression come in many forms—racism, classism, sexism, etc. We have a responsibility as educated people, Filipinos and non-Filipinos, to continue to create safe places for the next generation to maneuver through and cope with tough life issues.

Although I know other people whose background is similar to mine, my experiences may be different from other Filipina scholars. Nevertheless, I know my story is not unique because I have met fellow minority brothers

and sisters with similar life situations. Our stories are worth sharing because they bring forth healing and a sense of community. This is my attempt to empower and encourage you to advocate for structural changes that are conducive to have all minority families, youth, and children succeed in life. I dare you to take the torch and carry it in your own place in this world!

Reflections on My Narrative: Lessons Learned for Social Work Practice, Research, and Education

Three themes emerge in the story of my academic and professional pursuits: identity, sense of community, and structural and systemic support. These concepts are necessary for social workers to understand when working with Asian-Americans in individual and family therapeutic settings, schools, group therapy, community organizing and development, and social policy.

Lesson 1: Positive identity formation matters

Although my narrative serves as an example of the stories of immigrants or children of immigrants in the United States, social workers need to be aware of the heterogeneity that exists in immigrant populations and ethnic groups. Children, adolescents, and young adults who have an immigrant or minority background struggle with multiple identities and positionalities. In a hostile or unwelcoming environment, identities based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, language, religion, and many other factors may be threatened (Coll et al.,1996; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). These identities are embodied through "positionalities," "place," or status in society. By "positionalities," I refer to the way in which identities are situated by others. For instance, ethnicity may be subjective, but it is also socially constructed, and it relates to difference (Franks, 2002). As a result, some experience great dissonance in their cultural values and may undergo stressful adaptation processes. Internal struggles or conflicts occur, which may be evidenced in different psychological or sociological ways. As social workers, this calls for culturally appropriate services. Not only do we need to know an ethnic group's values and history, but also how positionalities and one's place or status in society play out *politically*.

Lesson 2: We have a responsibility to build a sense of community.

Sarason (1974) first introduced the term "sense of community." It is related to various indexes of quality of life, perception of safety and security, social and political participation, and individual ability to utilize coping strategies (Tartaglia, 2006). In my narrative, I highlight aspects of the communities I belong to as safe spaces for me to explore my identity and solidify my values as a Filipina, a person from Moloka'i, a leader, and a social worker. Communities are constructed by individuals and are venues for creating important ties to an interest or purpose. In my narrative, my sense of community is felt through geographic places (e.g., Moloka'i, Kunia, Hawai'i) and through relationships formed for the purpose of maintaining a voice for minority youth and young adults. My call to create this sense of community is also based on ethnic and cultural factors—my obligation to perpetuate Filipino values that assist other minority youth in maneuvering through a Western world.

As social workers, how do we create communities that serve the purpose of promoting social justice for populations that have been historically disenfranchised? Examining our professional code of ethics is imperative in assuring that groups' and communities' voices are amplified in social work practice and research.

Lesson 3: We have a responsibility to create supportive structures and systems for success and social justice.

This lesson complements the second lesson and is the foundation of social work and social justice. A sense of responsibility to provide a structure that will be conducive for minority groups and communities to thrive is core to the social work profession. In my narrative, I describe receiving support through programs and services provided at the University of Hawai'i. They were made possible by the university's commitment to serving minority populations. Policies guide programs and services. Social workers need to be at the forefront in shaping and developing effective policies, programs, and services that meet the needs of minorities (based on race, ethnicity, class, gender, etc.).

For example, at the school level, policies and programs should be aligned with goals and values that create positive learning and growth. The social work profession is at a crossroads. Current policies, programs, and services have not been effective in meeting the needs of minority populations. The paradigm readily used in our practice and research is based on Western frameworks and values. Indigenous ways of knowing and values need to be embraced. What is our commitment, as social workers, in assuring that the structures and systems in which we operate are OPEN to a multicultural and diverse world with a strong focus in addressing social justice? Is there room for a paradigm shift? I believe there is. As a Filipina-American social welfare scholar, I have the responsibility and obligation to do so. I encourage you all, minority or not, to be allies in this effort!

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