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The Pinay Scholar-Activist Stretches: A Pin@y Decolonialist Standpoint

Melissa-Ann Nievera-Lozano

In the 1983 groundbreaking book, This Bridge Called My Back, Mitsue Yamada reveals, “I am weary from starting from scratch each time I speak or write, as if there were no history behind us, of hearing that among the women of color, Asian women are the least political, or the least oppressed, or the most polite.” And still I write, tired of being polite or of quickly silencing myself in what bell hooks calls the “dominator context.” As a Pinay (pronounced Pee-nye) scholar, I struggle to speak in fits and starts. I struggle to write in fits and starts with words that parrot the academy, with words to legitimize my worth and position. I do belong here. Urgency is met with hesitancy, and I hate this feeling; it stings. Like you, I carry an ever-evolving epistemology, so dynamic and sometimes arbitrary that I can never fully detail my continuities and contradictions moment by moment; but today, I will try.

This paper is a chance for me to communicate how I wrestle with such conflict: holding, shifting, sharing, and transforming a personal/political identity in academia. As part of an interconnected web of thinkers, actors, and players in relation to an agenda called equitable education, I lay bare the dynamic fluidity of this identity. To explain, my dissertation research involves collecting the life histories of critically engaged Filipino American faculty in higher education to see how transformative moments in their lives (personal confrontations with race, class, gender and sexuality) inform their teaching today. However, before I can approach others with questions eliciting their vulnerability, candidness, and realness, I am obliged to put forth my own.

In this paper, I travel an unconventional route to explicate the transformative processes throughout my life as an eventual scholar-to-be. I assemble an unorthodox framework of decolonized feminist methodologies, Buddhist philosophy, and human rights discourses to develop what I am calling a Pin@y decolonialist standpoint. This paper describes selected theoretical and analytical tools, which allow me to see self as subject. In this critical looking inward of private (often painful) formations of race, class, gender and emerging sexuality, this paper shall reveal my process of becoming a scholar-activist: my personal/political identity and its meaning in my work.

I proceed with the understanding of education—not merely as a form of privilege for a select few, but rather—as the state constitution of California declares: “a fundamental right.” In this process of rearticulating “rights,” I offer a small but significant piece of a tremendous puzzle that I will assemble throughout the paper to elucidate how power is “always circulating in multiple and multi-directional ways” throughout my research. However, the puzzle begins here: where pieces of me have been pulled apart in education—as a K-12
student, as a community educator, as a graduate student, and now as an aspiring researcher/professor. The power I must elucidate first is that which resides within me.

Breaking Silence: A Process of Decolonization

While writing with multiple boundaries, my tongue wrestles with a language too foreign. I feel delayed. I am naive. I process thoughts across an imagined 8 ½ x 11 sheet of paper while trying to carve out a space so I can intimately share my formation of a Pinay de-colonialist standpoint. The ways in which I have survived in alien spaces: shape my epistemology, and it is important that I make it as transparent as possible. I must tell you my story and unplug it before I begin unearthing the stories of others as a new Eurocentric, colored, and privileged researcher has recklessly done with imperialist ears and eyes. I deliver my testimony with a different kind of understanding then, akin to the humble Buddha notion that one “cannot travel the path until she has become the path itself.” In doing so, I boldly attempt to show the bigger picture of my role as a Pinay scholar-activist from various angles with a multi-sited approach located within an imagined 8 ½ x 11 sheet of paper while trying to carve out a space so I can intimately share my formation of a Pinay de-colonialist standpoint. The ways in which I have survived in alien spaces: shape my epistemology, and it is important that I make it as transparent as possible. I must tell you my story and unplug it before I begin unearthing the stories of others as a new Eurocentric, colored, and privileged researcher has recklessly done with imperialist ears and eyes.

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The pressure to attempt to show the bigger picture of my role as a Pinay scholar-activist from various angles with a multi-sited approach located within an imagined 8 ½ x 11 sheet of paper while trying to carve out a space so I can intimately share my formation of a Pinay de-colonialist standpoint is that which resides within me.

These hives, the lump in my throat, and the strands of hair falling are externalized signals of the stifling pressure I’ve internalized and privileged researchers have recklessly done with imperialist ears and eyes. 

And yet that obtrusive, penetrating pressure to carry my role as a little young lady comes not just from a white man cop, but also from my grandfather. How do I split myself to answer both? Why must I? When was I assigned this duty? What am I supposed to say? I just want to be heard. I write to break silence, to self-determine my time and place of exposure. It is here. 

I began writing my life when I was handed a diary as a gift by an aunt who insisted it was a tradition for young girls to begin journaling at the tender age of seven. I never stopped. The journals included handback covers with campy floral designs, pretty locks with keys, basic spiral notebooks, romantic cursive-colored pages bound in leather, and Ward documents on file. All are saved. I penned the thickest, most dense material particularly in the darkest of times, when answers appeared to be the furthest from me. This act of writing, of needing to write moves from the diary to scholarly notes. As leading transnational feminism theorist jacqueline Alexie comments, “This gesture of looking back then is not one of nostalgia or an expression of loss … a critical looking back, an act of self and collective reflexivity. For how could we truly apprehend the archeology present, unaware of its lay contours?”* ** Here are my lay contours; that is, the conditions, relationships, and questions shaping the way I have come to see my position and work in the academy. 

You will get acquainted with my pain, its source and its twisting path. Here, you will be exposed to the love of Chela Sandoval call to “place greater trust in the creative potential of my own personal and cultural biography”*** and I explore the kind of love Patricia Hill Collins call to “get used to the discomfort of my position. Let us not discount our emotions, for they too are sites of knowledge production. Feminist scholar Annette Luongo echoes Alexander’s encouragement to look back/look in the side notes, “Critical reflection on emotion is not a self-indulgent subdomain for political analysis and political action. It is a tool of a kind of political theory and political practice, indispensable for an adequate social theory and social transformation.”***

Women of color before me have been trying to change the game in academia, aiming to transform society while transforming themselves. They were reaching, stretching, breathing, linking and living as bridges. They were revealing more explicitly this “between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries … living in this liminal zone … a constant state of displacement—an unbearable, even alarming.”**** They make the simple case—we are not the same. 

Human rights scholar Eve Bruns reveals the danger in assuming sameness across apparently different approaches. In the context of human rights, Bruns imagines that women and men are equal and that white women and women of color are equal (and so an). It attempts to illustrate universality and neutrality around gender, culture, privilege, or experience as if non-Western women are not discriminated daily for simply being non-Western women. We know they are. The assumption that their lives are the same as anyone else’s haphazardly erases the truth of their experiences, from the American classroom (as student or professor) to the global stage. Bruns stresses that natural law no longer prevails in today’s global context, and further insists, “the reasons for opposing [a] practice must be close to the experiences of the women who are most concerned.”***** Thus, I take up her challenge to depart from the sameness approach and focus on “managing multiple specificities”****** and pay attention to the intersections of multiple identities. While it remains a huge challenge for
international human rights law to manage multiple specificities, this paper marks my participation at least within the realm of education, as Brems further explains: “Non-Western women from developing countries will certainly be more effective in arguing [for change]… as insiders,” (they) have to resolve conflicts that arise between human rights and cultural practices, on their own terms rather than on any abstract notion of right and wrong.”

As a descendant from the Philippines, born and raised in the West, my story has been distorted by others who rely upon colonial ideologies as sources of information. Brems notes that even well-intentioned sociologists, anthropologists and educators should check their views that have been influenced by the enlightenment era on “human nature.” According to Brems, the well-intentioned folks who “attempt to assume a common human nature inevitably result[s] in a projection of their own experiences, needs, and values onto the rest of humanity—the needs and values of well-off white Western men.”

My epistemology attempts to clear up distortions about what it means to be a Pinay scholar-activist. I did not stride through college and into graduate school in typical fashion. I did not reach the academy in ways a normed middle class white male traditionally can. I do not nor have ever taken for granted the availability of relevant curriculum and critical pedagogy. I must create it all. I must study it and be clear about a specific history—forget sameness. This paper will let me air out my wounds. It will let me stitch together fragmented pieces, piece fractures, presenting trauma, which has disconnected me from others. I have not been able to understand others’ viewpoints well enough, hushing myself to first fully acknowledge my own essence, my own being—being Pinay. To say that I am Pinay, in and of itself, is not one thing, as Pinay scholar-activist Josephine-Rubin explains:

“Pinay is a woman of Filipino descent, a Filipina in American and/or a Filipina American… Pinayism is localized in the United States… making connections to the issues of Filipinos and Filipinas in the diaspora… Pinayism is a revolutionary action. Pinayism is self-affirming condition or conduct. Pinayism is a self-determining system or anarchism… Pinayism is not just a Filipino version of feminism or womanism, Pinayism flows from a postpositivist of other theories… including those, which have been silenced.”

Tired of being silenced (as well as polite), I employ Pinayism—as a mode of operation—to move forward in the educational research I pursue from one Pinay to another; or from one Pinay to a non-Pinay, either way forthrightly reengaging (each moment I write, speak and act) a kind of coalition identity politics with other differential modes of consciousness—which move towards what Kyra Nagyman imagines as: a democratic, anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-capitalist, anti-colonial egalitarian society. Though Pinayism can shift gears to address different issues and different social movements, it also promotes the Pinay scholar-activist, a descendant of a colonial history, to first begin working diligently just to explain her own life— to recognize and name her scars, to educate herself about her specific cultural history, and to uncover its connections to her subjectivity.”

“...This, I will do throughout this paper. However, let me be clear: this paper, in its entirety, is not about my oppression. It is about resilience. Diaspora: World Traveling Inside and Out

In keeping up as a resilient woman of color, I travel through different worlds reaching for different understandings. A crucial exercise it has been, as Maria Lugones describes, “The outsider has necessarily acquired flexibility in shifting from the mainstream construction of life… required by the logic of oppression. I recommend this resistant exercise that I call “world-traveling”… I break walls and throw open doors to get to new places, even if it leads me to a paradox where others find such “world-traveling” foolish. Tension arises in the distance. Feminists alongside Daphne Pato posit that this walking in “endless querying modes” threatens our work…” I argue that this paper and all of its content—in its questioning and challenging; in all its Remembering and recording—is a process that isn’t just preliminary. It is a continuing and constitutive process in activist scholarship.

Nor do I believe this is a but a “phase” of my graduate career, as I was told by another Pinay when I first got involved in cultural/community work in San Diego. At the time I was a nineteen-year-old at the junior college, wet behind the ears, excited to facilitate discourses highlighting facts on Filipino American history. I am still here. So, despite Pato’s view that “we are spending much too much time wading in the mires of our own positionings…” I do not deviate from my purpose. My questioning does not render me useless. And no, Pato, I do not posit “perpetuating fads” that leave me “staying up nights worrying about representation… in a mental game of self-reflexivity.” I am not about fads. I know that people are hungry. I know the economic crisis is real. I know that our country is still at war—I was in it. And in it, I traveled.

When I was seventeen when I raised my right hand to join the U.S. Army at the request of my parents, who said we otherwise could not afford college for my five younger sisters. In the practice of utang na loob (abiding debt to one’s parents), I raised my right hand to Uncle Sam. As a young Filipina American woman, I stuck out among the sea of white men donned in the same battle dressed uniforms, matching in the same combat boots, carrying the same M-16 rifle. I hung on, tolerating their bonehead remarks about my “kick-ass hair,” my almond eyes, or my wide hips protruding the sides of my cargo pants.

In this pivotal stage in my academic career as a young doctoral student, I insert myself completely in these questions, to the point of becoming the question. Naturally then, understand that this paper is less about proving theory; it’s more about being theory—materializing theory through the act of writing. The discount I feel in my position to “tell it like it is” might very well dissent the reader who habitually reads academic prose. There will be no linear argument or cohesive thesis. I take this opportunity to exercise/exorcise the phantoms that plague me in approaching to make change in educational research—a field still much more beholden, it seems, to traditional curriculums and pedagogies than other fields of inquiry. I become intimate with these reservations with the (earlier mentioned) wisdom shared by Alexander and Jaggar: that my deep reflections are all towards the service of an argument and epistemology I must build before my identities such that I participate in my own colonization and marginalization and, by extension, that of my own people—those with whom I feel a cultural and collective commitment?”

With as Brems further explains: “Non-Western women from developing countries will certainly be more effective in arguing [for change]… [As] outsiders,” (they) have to resolve conflicts that arise between human rights and cultural practices, on their own terms rather than on any abstract notion of right and wrong.”

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I reflect on how my doctoral work has been influenced by the historiography of my graduate education. In the Fall of 1969, the College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University was established to meet the needs of the students on strike. This strike called for a “redefinition of education, which in turn was linked to a larger redefinition of American society.” I then turned my gaze to observe the disparity of jobs assigned to enlisted soldiers of color in contrast to those managed by officers, predominately middle-aged white males, as we coordinate the transportation of units from Kuwait to Iraq. Being there heightened my awareness of marginalized groups on a global level. Returning to the U.S., I realized I wanted to use my skills as a Sociology Major where it hit home. I realized that in my own coming-of-age, I had no one with whom I could honestly discuss the many societal ills I was witnessing in the world, how they affected me, and how they affected my family. Thus, I found my niche in volunteering as a youth mentor in the Filipino American community.

I am a nuisus.

My life course has been testament to theories I have read after such experiences. It took years to find academic language that validated my life course as a place of learning, a “fund of knowledge.” Call it narcissistic, but I fall in line with Wanda Fallow’s response to Patra: “although we do not escape from the consequences of our positions by talking bout them endlessly” I do not believe that the solution is then to stop talking about our positions. Thus, I talk about it all, and write about it all. While I don’t readily invite discussion around my disturbing military experience, I still look back on it as a part of my own growth process in the pursuit of my Sociology degree. Patricia Hill Collins’ leading work in Black Feminist thought helps me fit together such pieces, as she argues:

At its best, outsider within status seems to offer its occupants a powerful balance between the strengths of their sociological training and the offerings of their personal and cultural experiences. Neither is subordinated to the other. Rather, experienced reality is used as a valid source of knowledge for critiquing sociological facts and theories, while sociological training offers new ways of seeing that experienced reality.

I know that at the end of the day, I hold down the same small corner Pulido holds: I have “never been the leader of a major organization, nor am I an academic star. I am an average-performing academic who has tried to keep one foot firmly in academia, the other is then to stop talking about our positions.”

To catch myself, for there is no hand or arm nearby of fellow activist scholars who “get me.” I ache for their proximity and physicality. My conceptual, intellectual, theoretical, methodological, epistemological, counter-hegemonic tools once developed in community ground in community struggles and institutions.

There are a good number of us in this corner, and I don’t say this to further divide us—feminist scholars, future educators, good students, etc. I only mean to shed light on a space that often feels overshadowed by the traditional, binary imagination of the highly accomplished intellectual or the bleeding heart revolutionary. I am neither, and yet I unabashedly aim to be a bit of both. I accept this. There is a historicity in my trying to be both.

“You Cannot Cross Out My Lives Reality”. Navigating the Academy as a Pin@ly
with [...] hegemonic tendencies that work to dilute [the] “other.””

My story, now dilated. My being, violated. This moment in class is akin to what Merry would define as “epistemic violence [...] a situation where radically divergent ideas are joined together without any possibility of resolution.”” In her research, Merry examines the work of Buddhists trying to claim secularism as a human right in Nepal. The “problem” for them is that their Buddhism does not entertain individualist assumptions underlying human rights framework. So how do they make their epistemologies count? It is the age-old story of unequal power, resonating with my position in the academy, as I butt heads with positivist assumptions driving much of educational research. Without my comrades, I felt like I had to submit. I was alone. Note that comrades is Spanish for close friend. In this context, she is one who shares personal experiences and political ideologies.

Sofía Villenas feels my pain and recoils with utmost eloquence, her strikingly similar dilemma in an education seminar:

I was the only Chicana there, and had to think and speak individually rather than collectively. I was with my Latina friends from home who shared the power of our actions in defying the colonization of our identities and of our people. In the absence of that collectivity...deep inside, I wanted to voice...the disempowerment that comes from being cut off from your own.”

In this position, it becomes easy to fall prey to the coloniality of power” that is, the process of being colonized, even while still undergoing processes of decolonization within. I propose that coloniality occurs and reoccurs in the university classroom when third world feminists aim to speak on their own terms, but are debilitated by the constraints of the subject topic at hand; by the lack of allies in the room; by the need to “belong,” acquiesce, fly under the radar; and consequently, by the feeling of alienation. As Pierce additionally describes from my standpoint:

Being Pinsidey means...constantly negotiating neo- and postcolonial identities...[it] means having a relationship to decolonization: whether active or passive, engaged, conflicted, opposed, or in denial, the relationship is automatic by virtue of living in America...or by virtue of taking up doctoral studies in the university.”

While Pierce’s words walk dangerously close to essentialism, I buy most of her claims, which posit: “the project of decolonization is both personal and political; it hinges on identity politics, interrogated and contextualized.”

Unraveling Coloniality

As this paper swims through a series of personal and political interrogations, it becomes what Shiwy might view as a: “Unraveling Coloniality” colonial, to embrace the more fitting idea of coloniality (of power), seeking ways to speak from the subalternized voice (the voice I had/...the room; by the need to “belong,” acquiesce, fly under the radar; and consequently, by the feeling of alienation. As Pierce additionally describes from my standpoint:

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[ a study of epistemic relations of power, (which) comprises research on epistemologies that were subalternized in the process of colonization and its aftermath...For many involved in thinking coloniality a crucial step has been to think from subalternized perspectives that may be evanescence through multiple media and bodily enactments.”

It is my hope that my writing illustrates a bodily enactment that moves from this concept once understood as postcolonial or neo-colonial, to embrace the more fitting idea of coloniality (of power), seeking ways to speak from the subalternized voice (the voice I had/...have which is often silenced in the academy, as earlier demonstrated in the example of my research of “fixed realities” being questioned).”

Nelson Maldonado Torres offers a new lens in his article “On the Coloniality of Being” by explaining coloniality as different than colonialism; it is what survives colonialism. It is the longstanding power that exists as a result of colonialism’s history. “Coloniality defines labor, knowledge production—way beyond the limits of colonialism (some encapsulated historical moment in time). Coloniality is not just the residue of colonialism, because to call it “residue” would lighten its weight. It is real. It is here. It is current. It is maintained. Re-
that what we cannot imagine, we cannot bring into being… that is not confined to some private dream but is a fully public imagination.”

In this regard, I write my work into being for you to read, and for me to reflect upon. To point to the essence of being, I exhibit points in my life when/where I was clearly not allowed to be or wasn’t supposed to exist: as young girl in new immigrant family, having to answer to American authority; as a Filipina in battle dressed uniform, as a doctoral student who couldn’t write about “lived realities;” as a grown woman choosing queer identity. I write then, to survive. I’ve noted my lifelong practice of journaling since age seven to underscore my sincerity; like other young ones with pen in hand, “If I couldn’t write, I would die.”

In liberating myself through writing, I aim for a mutually transformative process in our work as scholars in arrangement towards equity in education. We start at different levels on a hierarchy determined by the larger institution, but our work begins with a single, shared impulse as women. In the ways described by Badjohn philosophy, “each impulse we have lays down an imprint (our writing); when it's repeated it becomes a groove. The groove creates a channel, and energy as well as more material things start to be pulled and channeled more and more in that direction.”

This is my site of passage. I do not move forward from here with grand illusions of “social justice” or “human rights” as weighty rhetoric. I deliberately push back on “the rules instead of becoming integrated into a multicultural [universalistic idea of] diversity.” I do this because I believe in “the potential of this other thinking, the possibility of reflecting from other angles on what it could mean to deconstruct naturalized identities and power relations framed by these identities (which) demands an approach that engages with subalternized discourses without reducing them to colorful objects of study or consumption.” I am novel, but I don’t aim to be sought. Our stories together are more than novel, and should be taken more seriously than some “edgy, sexy stuff” currently examined across interdisciplinary fields at the moment.

Most enticing about advancing my use of decolonizing feminist methodologies in this research is the chance to employ an even stronger position of reflexivity, so as to include and problematicize my aliased epistemology as a second-generation Filipina American researching in an American university towards social change.

I first start by seeing the American classroom as both a fragile and powerful place of becoming, where “emerging identities are being invented within a context of dominant discourses of race, class, gender, and sexuality.” My own dissertation project is interested in exploring how one’s epistemological relationship to race, class, and gender informs her/his purpose in teaching and subsequently their pedagogy, and will serve as my overarching question for this paper. It extends from the understanding that the exclusion of particular histories and texts in the traditional classroom has forced the construction of new alternative spaces, wherein the production of knowledge requires creative, critical, and collective thinking towards radical transformation.

My story then, isn’t just reactionary. It is a “cultural production from which [one] can identify the meanings, hopes, aims, and desires contained within… lines of force and affinity… to contribute to a redefined decolonizing theory and method.” It is pushing to reveal the educational experiences of Filipina Americans, in particular, can be faulted for being too political? I return to Pinaysim as a way of theorizing that self-acknowledges the multiplicities within and across Pinay scholar activists (or Pinays in general) who locate themselves in post-colonial discourses on race, class, gender, sexuality, spirituality/religion, educational status, age, place of birth, diasporic migration, citizenship, and love cross.

Recapturing My Totality

Frérot asserts, “I am a totality and not a dichotomy.” I look inward: how do I make sense of my perceived dichotomies as I step towards honoring my totality? In pursuing this representation/damaged future of a Pinay scholar activist, I admit I feel more fragmented than ever. Pieces of me, too many to mention, are simultaneously sites of sorrow and strength that have something to do with me being here today. I have played a distinct role, as eldest child, as a transformative role as daughter reaching across; both roles informing my place in the world.

Papa, a former US Navy sailor, soothed his recurring nightmares of the Vietnam War with a nightly dose of alcohol, marijuana, and meth. Watching Mama endure the ensuing mental, physical, and emotional abuse for nearly a decade broke me. She contemplated suicide on numerous occasions, but eventually plotted and executed a quick “family escape.” We stuffed our clothes into trash bags, loaded the family van and fled to find a hideaway. Mama carried us through her addictions lead to homelessness, while Mom’s accounting career flew through the roof along with a second marriage. By the time I turned 25, I was already Papa would die alone. I stood by, Grocery shopping, calling homeless hot and job placement agencies, copin’ legal documents, remitting my half of funds to his new family in the Philippines, and visiting him to connect on some level of hope—these were all indescribable acts of a lifetime love I cannot explain.

I reflect on my family life as one starting place and arrive at the realization that through our journey—the military drugs and, alcohol use, the abuse, the family separation, as well as the divergent trajectories of each of my parents—what I take away from this “broken-ness” is in fact the skill to locate myself in this healing. I already merged together. I already have found a way to traverse imaginary opposite ends of a continuum, to close the fractures setting up the walls between us.

The endless internal shifting follows a shifting that has already occurred through life’s course. The having to redefine and rearticulate the circumstance of my family through the years; the strainings to understand our condition, trying to fit myself onto some continuum, the transformation of my mother—strong, resilient Pinay—it all taught me… love. Papa and mom—despite the mayhem in our family history—taught me how to really love. The women writers in This Bridge Called My Back complete the translation of life and its implications for our work as they reflect: “We are still trying to separate the fibers of experience we have had as daughters of a struggling people. Daily, we feel the pull and tug of having to choose… This is how our theory develops. We are interested in pursuing a society that uses flesh blood experiences to construct a vision that can begin to hold.”

In beginning to heal, I have become a bridge in both worlds: breaking bread with homeless and upper middle class; talking to the abuser and the abused, it has taught me how to be a healer throughout life, and these are my beginnings. Today, the same tense and painful love I wrestled with as a budding Pinay scholar activist has evolved into a practice of managing the injuries which occur between teacher and student, academic and ‘activist’, researcher knowledge and local knowledge, university and community, Filipino and American; male and female; heterosexual and queer, etc.

The path of inquiry I shall follow here is one that regards human experience as a yearly site of knowledge production: epistemology. I do this so that I can fully bring myself to understand the creative potential of my personal and cultural biographies of the people (with whom) I research. I dwell in the interconnectedness: “as with them” versus “as and them.”

Interconnectivity

Recalling my personal link in this web of thinkers, actors, and players on an agenda called equitable education, I move towards exemplifying the agenda as a matter of human rights. Within the body of work is a human rights discourse that exists in the overall context of education. It may be floating over, or buzzing beneath, somewhat invisible, yet ever present. Like air, like gravity; like the bullet that hits you, tearing away at you, but you can’t quite see it—the concern of human rights is there. Education. It may be floating over, or buzzing beneath, somewhat invisible, yet ever present. Like air, like gravity; like the bullet that hits you, tearing away at you, but you can’t quite see it—the concern of human rights is there. We cannot deny this.

This standpoint aligns with the human rights battle of other third world women and/or women of color seeing, feeling and confronting a different kind of pain, reaching for a different kind of wholeness not found in the traditional academy. It is in this way to the academy where I find and build security in womanist pedagogies of spirituality and wellbeing. In planting seeds here, I hope this work engenders endless possibilities, beginning with the impulse. I turn repeatedly inward and see that I:

[In awe is impulse based on past experiences. My impulse leads to… thought, the thought becomes a movement (words or deeds) that will bring (me) to [connect with others pursuing similar work, personally, locally, globally]. This establishes a pattern. Through repetition, a pattern becomes habit. Habitual patterns help form character, which in turn determine our destiny. This is karmic evolution. This is how we constantly shape and reshape our lives—for better or worse.]

Papa reappeared after years of desertion (living in the Philippines). He came back with nothing. I was 17. His drug addiction led to homelessness, while Mom’s accounting career flew through the roof along with a second marriage. By the time I turned 25, I was already Papa would die alone. I stood by, Grocery shopping, calling homeless hot and job placement agencies, copin’ legal documents, remitting my half of funds to his new family in the Philippines, and visiting him to connect on some level of hope—these were all indescribable acts of a lifetime love I cannot explain.

I reflect on my family life as one starting place and arrive at the realization that through our journey—the military drugs and, alcohol use, the abuse, the family separation, as well as the divergent trajectories of each of my parents—what I take away from this “broken-ness” is in fact the skill to locate myself in this healing. I already merged together. I already have found a way to traverse imaginary opposite ends of a continuum, to close the fractures setting up the walls between us.

The endless internal shifting follows a shifting that has already occurred through life’s course. The having to redefine and rearticulate the circumstance of my family through the years; the strainings to understand our condition, trying to fit myself onto some continuum, the transformation of my mother—strong, resilient Pinay—it all taught me… love. Papa and mom—despite the mayhem in our family history—taught me how to really love. The women writers in This Bridge Called My Back complete the translation of life and its implications for our work as they reflect: “We are still trying to separate the fibers of experience we have had as daughters of a struggling people. Daily, we feel the pull and tug of having to choose… This is how our theory develops. We are interested in pursuing a society that uses flesh blood experiences to construct a vision that can begin to hold.”

In beginning to heal, I have become a bridge in both worlds: breaking bread with homeless and upper middle class; talking to the abuser and the abused, it has taught me how to be a healer throughout life, and these are my beginnings. Today, the same tense and painful love I wrestled with as a budding Pinay scholar activist has evolved into a practice of managing the injuries which occur between teacher and student, academic and 'activist', researcher knowledge and local knowledge, university and community, Filipino and American; male and female; heterosexual and queer, etc.

The path of inquiry I shall follow here is one that regards human experience as a yearly site of knowledge production: epistemology. I do this so that I can fully bring myself to understand the creative potential of my personal and cultural biographies of the people (with whom) I research. I dwell in the interconnectedness: "as with them" versus "as and them."

Interconnectivity

Recalling my personal link in this web of thinkers, actors, and players on an agenda called equitable education, I move towards exemplifying the agenda as a matter of human rights. Within the body of work is a human rights discourse that exists in the overall context of education. It may be floating over, or buzzing beneath, somewhat invisible, yet ever present. Like air, like gravity; like the bullet that hits you, tearing away at you, but you can’t quite see it—the concern of human rights is there. We cannot deny this.

This standpoint aligns with the human rights battle of other third world women and/or women of color seeing, feeling and confronting a different kind of pain, reaching for a different kind of wholeness not found in the traditional academy. It is in this way to the academy where I find and build security in womanist pedagogies of spirituality and wellbeing. In planting seeds here, I hope this work engenders endless possibilities, beginning with the impulse. I turn repeatedly inward and see that I:

[In awe is impulse based on past experiences. My impulse leads to… thought, the thought becomes a movement (words or deeds) that will bring (me) to [connect with others pursuing similar work, personally, locally, globally]. This establishes a pattern. Through repetition, a pattern becomes habit. Habitual patterns help form character, which in turn determine our destiny. This is karmic evolution. This is how we constantly shape and reshape our lives—for better or worse.]
If change starts within, then this paper is part and parcel of the bigger picture. I write unconventionally, perhaps “untruthfully” in my tension to delver, but it is not and is never in vain. In taking stock of my life, I have pinpointed pieces of me that vulnerability and candidly illustrate the splitting, which occurs in mind, heart, and soul in poignant memories of my past. The sort of splitting that challenged my purpose and position at every turn brought a necessary discomfort that encouraged an immediate questioning of self. The place of discomfort becomes a place of transformation so that what once felt weak and unwarranted, is real, solid, and foundational. I become a bridge, where theory meets practice. I become a bridge, where theory, methodology, and pedagogy intersect. I become a bridge, of the personal, local, and global issues plaguing our transnational communities in education. As Freire scholar-activist insist being life, I have answered Donna Kate Rocker’s urgent call to, “Smash…or die.”

Theorizing From Vulnerability Towards the Operationalization of Love

I return to the place where language is a place of stretching or struggling, for “when I say…that these words emerge from suffering, I refer to that personal struggle to name that location from which I come to voice—that space of theorizing”.

According to Merry’s human rights perspective: “...there is the immediate bleak image of the vulnerable. How do we understand this vulnerability and what do we do with it? First, there is the immediate image of the vulnerable. They try to speak for us. We will not – I will not – be silenced again.”

In practicing their perceived blurring of gender lines – in all of their vulnerability, in the eyes of an outsider assuming “authority”—we try to speak for us. We are a menace to this society, facing righteous claims on separate sides of the spectrum. They try to speak for us. We will not – I will not be silenced again.

I lie naked in the harsh light, in all my vulnerability, trying yet again to find a source of wisdom from this place so difficult to find. How do we understand this vulnerability and what do we do with it? First, there is the immediate bleak image of the vulnerable. According to Merry’s human rights perspective:

Vulnerability is central. People of human rights violations are typically those who are somehow helpless, powerless, unable to make choices for themselves, and forced to endure forms of pain and suffering. Women and children, indigenous people, poor people, and marginalized ethnic and racial groups are the most common categories of people who are identified as suffering human rights violations... This conception of vulnerability hinges on the idea of agency.”

While the center of a human rights interventions protocol aims to “preserve the agency of vulnerable people,” how does a vulnerable person speak for themselves? If others do not know how to speak for her? I acknowledge vulnerability as a place of suffering, by briefly returning to the image of Balboa feeding indigenous “queer” bodies to forty dogs.

In practicing their perceived blurring of gender lines — in all of their vulnerability, in the eyes of an outsider assuming “authority” — native peoples of Panama are put to death without reservation. Thus, a law was defined. There existed no international human rights system that would “provide a recourse against the array of abusive laws and practices that criminalize, pathologize, or demonize those whose (alleged) sexual orientation or gender identity does not fit the perceived norm.” There exists only very definitive ways of being male and female, separately.

Western law researcher Valerie Oosterveld gives us an example of how the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court must define gender, and inextricably define sexuality. We must ask ourselves if law is being politicized above humanity, if it is indeed acceptable to have a definition, and for what cause? In assuming we can provide or come up with clear definitions (of anything, for that matter), do we not overlook the notion of iteration? This notion of iteration points to how “every repetition (of any terms such as gender or sexuality) is a form of variation. Every iteration transforms meaning, adds to it, and enriches it in ever-so-slight ways.”

In being discussed or performed, the term and its meaning undergo a transformation. Furthermore, every performance is always different, so that it also changes the vision or function of the term and meaning at play. Understanding the notion of iteration loops us back to Oosterveld’s work in international law as she discusses “constructive ambiguity.”

Constructive ambiguity is often where states seek refuge, whereby the International Criminal Court (ICC) can take a progressive position in defining gender and sex by “understanding the ‘context of society’ as equal to ‘socially constructed’, seeing definitions of ‘gender’ as ‘broad, multifaceted, and cross-cutting’ and hopefully not ‘delimiting to a misogynist or homophobic context’ as Balboa did in 1513. It is where the Rome statute doesn’t clearly define gender, its definition is broad and flexible enough to ensure a positive and sensitive interpretation by the ICC’s Prosecutor, Registrar, and judges, its text is open and circular... broad enough, allowing the ICC to interpret the definition to reflect the approaches taken within the United Nations... (the definition) is also enough of an empty vessel that increased attention to the theories of ‘gender’ by international lawyers could also have a significant and positive impact on the content of ‘gender’ within international law.

Constructive ambiguity becomes helpful in thinking about how such an approach can work in the American classroom or American educational policy: where gender, class, or race is open for definition by law and/or by students to allow freedom to move and promote liberators, where democratic iterations “not only change established understandings but also transform what passes as the valid or established view of an authoritative precedent.” So that while we aim to define labels, perhaps we should – not remove them – but unfurl ourselves from them. Is this loosening of labels irresponsible? Or is it responsible?

Does it bring about the same worry that if we assert feminism, we thereby assert patriarchy in the same breath? The double-edged sword we hold in the classroom and in research keeps us alert, sensitive, and vigilant, to the new definitions we have to put into “law” which at the same time don’t become fixed or polarized so as not recreate another violence, or re-select who shall next become the “vulnerable.” Let us move from the muddled space of law and return to a brighter space of spirituality in observing this concept of vulnerability.

How can I shift this paradigm to see how spirituality can perhaps reclaim vulnerability as a place from which one can build agency, in preparation to link up with others in their struggle. In changing my story, I understand that “this visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength.” I do not replace the human rights definition of vulnerability, but encompass it and add on. If vulnerability calls for a voice to be heard, then I feel the urge to dialogue because we don’t partake in it enough. I offer my story. I don’t expose these jarring differences of sexuality and/or gender identity for shock and awe, for it is not these differences that immobilize us, it is our silence. In this “coming out” and honoring of self, I chart my development in the capacity to be with others in the most understanding way. To understand others deemed politically vulnerable in the greater landscape requires a soft spot born from a spiritual vulnerability within, as Buddha non Pema Chodon further highlights:

Fortunately for us, the soft spot—in our innate ability to love and to care—is like a crack in these walls we [often] erect. It’s a natural opening in the banners we create when we’re afraid. With practice we learn to find this opening. We learn to seize that vulnerable moment—love, gratitude, loneliness, embarrassment, inadequacy— to awaken... the rawness of a broken heart.

Writing self as subject in broad daylight is a heartbreaking process; indeed, but only through this journey of self-revelation will I be able to see, hear, and really be present for others when they share their story and testify their deep, raw truths. Golden words by Buddhist monk/peace activist Thich Nhat Hanh advise, “knowing thyself is the first practice of love.”

To know myself means to ask myself: Who am I? Where am I from? To whom am I accountable? What are my intentions?
What will be the gain? What are the risks? Thus, I offer this paper as part of my own participation in the process of dialogue, which Freire says cannot exist, “in the absence of a profound love for the world and for the people.” I argue that my experience of “romantic love can access revolutionary love.” Source from the work of Roland Barthes, Chelo Saavedra discusses the strength of “falling in love,” but another kind of love, “foreign to the Western dialectic…as it punctuates through traditional, older narratives of love (and) ruptures everything…demands human consciousness (to) undo the very forms dominant society depends…It is no-place where everything is possible—but only in exchange for the pain of the crossing.”

This crossing my partner and I have encountered in our love teaches me everyday how to transcend the sort of binary thinking which keeps society in gradalk. i.e., “You must be either gay or straight. There is no in-between.” Such limited, binary thinking kills our creativity in imagining possibilities for change. Thus, the revolutionary love that builds from this romantic love requires a “differential consciousness,” so that our “third voice” can break the binary. I now look towards a love that is concerned with the pursuit of egalitarian social relations in an ever-globalizing era. We need new theories for change. Something better. Old social/intellectual movements, fragmented and divided, make it difficult to locate domination/resistance in this day and time. Newer movements like those for sexual rights, Saiz shares enables us to address the intersections between…discriminations, and to identify root causes of different forms of oppression. It also offers strategic possibilities for building bridges and coalitions between diverse movements so as to confront common obstacles more effectively (such as religious fundamentalism) and explore how different discourses of subordination work together.

Alongside Saiz and Saavedra — from human rights to education — I am calling for a new order: I shamelessly recognize love as a common project in developing oppositional consciousness for change.

I am third world writers before we who understand love as a necessary piece as we theorize social change. I build up love as a technology, a tactic, and a tool for movement and mobilization. In the world of education, I see what Freire and Diderot see: a love wherein teachers, researchers, students, and community members can “find the strength, faith, and humility to establish solidarity and struggle together to transform the oppressive ideologies and practices of public education.”

Beneath this hot climate of No Child Left Behind, we are killing ourselves to meet standards. We are looking for ways to juggle competing goals of education: of social efficiency, democratic equality, and social mobility in a market-driven economy. In the push to pump out serviceable curriculum, reform school structures, and name “good teachers,” the educational battlefield has left us standing at the edge watching the dust settle, stirred by a faint feeling of isolation. Here, we sense the damned disconnect slicing the air between us and our students. The educational battlefield has left us standing at the edge watching the dust settle, stirred by a faint feeling of isolation. Here, we sense the damned disconnect slicing the air between us and our students.

Endnotes

1. MITSUTA YAMADA, “ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN WOMEN AND FEMINISM,” In This Bridge Called Al Back. Writings by Radical Women of Color, eds. CHERRIE MORAGA AND GLORIA ANZALDUÁ (NEW YORK: KITCHEN TABLE, WOMEN OF COLOR, 1983), 74.


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