Notes on Pinay Pedagogical Practices and Decolonizing Mentorship  
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I do not offer today a polished paper on pedagogy and decolonization, but more so notes and reflections on my approaches to teaching and mentoring. I hope that what results from our time together today is a give and take, a discussion and exchange, a moment of collaborative knowledge production about what it means to “teach diversity” at UCSD, particularly when it comes to Asian American and Filipina American students. In truth, when I proposed the panel, what excited me the most was to offer with Josen, Edward and Donald multiple perspectives from instructors and students concerning our shared goal to create empowering and critical spaces of learning that explore Asian American and Filipino American experiences. I believe that centering student empowerment and collaborative knowledge production in Asian American Studies courses is fundamental; in truth, that is what defines a Critical Asian American Studies course for me. To do so would ensure that such courses do not simply pay lip service to equity, diversity, and inclusion, but actually help materialize social justice by breaking down hierarchies within the classroom and between university and community, theory and practice.

For the rest of my time, I will briefly trace through the development of my pedagogy, my understanding of decolonial mentorship, and how I attempt to practice decolonial mentorship with Asian American and Filipino American students in the local community as well as here at UCSD regardless of class size and topic. In doing so, I will offer specific examples or case studies of my pedagogy in practice. Ultimately, it is my hope that in offering these notes on my experience and philosophy as a Pinay educator and mentor, they will provide the fodder for a
rich dialogue about teaching Critical Asian American Studies and Critical Filipin@ Studies here at UCSD as well as beyond La Jolla.

Pedagogy/Mentorship

“The fundamental task of the mentor is a liberatory task. It is not to encourage the mentor’s goals and aspirations and dreams to be reproduced in the mentees, the students, but to give rise to the possibility that the students become the owners of their own history. This is how I understand the need that teachers have to transcend their merely instructive task and to assume the ethical posture of a mentor who truly believes in the total autonomy, freedom, and development of those he or she mentors” (Paulo Freire, *Mentoring the Mentor*)

Pedagogy is generally defined as the method or practice of teaching. Methods and practices though are shaped by philosophies and ideologies and my graduate training and research into Philippine writing in English during the time of US occupation, the writings of Paulo Freire, and my work with the Kuya Ate Mentorship Program or KAMP have fundamentally shaped my pedagogy. For me being a professor and being a mentor are inextricable.

As an academic, the critical stake of my research is to imagine a radical politics that is highly attentive to the ways in which power and domination are multiply and dynamically manifested. To this end, I focus on the Philippine Commonwealth period to determine how at the moment of official separation of the Philippines and the U.S., the two were tied even closer together through neocolonial policies particularly the establishment of English-only universal public education in the islands. If the promise of national sovereignty has only resulted in increased poverty, a widening gap between the upper and lower classes and the exponential exportation of Filipina migrant labor, then the promise of sovereignty has failed to bring self-determination and liberation to the lives of millions of Filipinos. In my research and scholarship, I constantly interrogate the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality and
nationality as well as the power of education and writing to both establish and resist imperial structures of power.

While the colonial history of the Philippines reveals how the establishment of western curriculum, universities, and schools were clear tools of oppression, the writings of Paulo Freire have provided me the framework to understand how to encourage liberatory spaces of learning. As highlighted in the quote above, the key is in constantly practicing what I think of as radical humility. By radical humility, I mean a constant awareness of and redirection of power: an attitude of openness and equity, not domination and hierarchy; a multidirectional recognition of what the student can teach the “teacher,” not the unidirectional flow of learning from the elite instructor to the uneducated student. This Freirean understanding of pedagogy is thus fundamentally decolonizing, going very much against the grain of western images of instruction and education in which the teacher stands at the head of the class, depositing facts and figures into the ears of students sitting in straight rows of desks all facing front. (It’s obviously not difficult to see how the analogy of teacher and student has been used to justify colonial regimes as this political cartoon circulating during the US takeover of former Spanish colonies at the end of the 19th century demonstrates.)

For me as an instructor, I am constantly aware of this colonial history of education and of the potentially dominating nature of my position. This is why practicing radical humility, as a self-checking mechanism, is so significant to me; it is also why I constantly attempt to approach my position as an instructor as an opportunity to serve as a decolonizing mentor. My understanding of mentorship has been fundamentally shaped by my time with the Kuya Ate Mentorship Program or KAMP. KAMP is a grassroots organization of volunteer kuyas (“big brothers”) and ates (“big sisters”) who educate themselves about being Filipino in America and
in turn share those lessons with local middle school and high school students. KAMP’s vision is to educate and inspire its students to be fully participatory and transformative in their communities. Its teaching and mentoring methods are inspired by Freire and are thus fundamentally decolonial, meaning that KAMP focuses on exchange and self-expression by both students and mentors through dialogue and creative activities (rather than lecture) and on engaging hearts and souls (not just the mind) in order to cultivate critical thinking skills, new attitudes, and exploration of values. (See slides for images of lesson plans in action embodying KAMP mentoring practices).

In his discussion of decolonizing mentorship, Glenn Omatsu succinctly sums up what I have learned in KAMP:

[The colonial definition of mentoring] promotes a narrow belief that we can only mentor a select and special few, that we can only mentor during specific times in a day, and that we can only mentor in particular locations… the colonizer’s perspective focuses on the individual person as the basic unit in a society (as opposed to seeing the individual within a community), the overarching power of reason (as opposed to understanding the relationship of reason with emotions, values, and other human qualities), the separation of thinking from acting (as opposed to focusing on the interaction between knowing and doing), the emphasis on distinct stages for creating change (as opposed to appreciating the process), and the conviction that change consists of “big moments” prepared by small steps (as opposed to recognizing that small steps shape the bigger outcomes and are really the most important part of social change). (Omatsu 3-4)

This emphasis on interrelation rather than individuality, on the whole person of the student rather than just the intellect, and on “small moments” of mentorship rather than formalized one-on-one settings are the practices I take as an *ate* and attempt to translate into my classrooms as a professor.

**Decolonial Mentoring in CAAS Courses**

I would now like to share two courses I have taught at UCSD that demonstrate how I have attempted to incorporate decolonial mentorship into my pedagogy. The first is an upper-
division course entitled “Asian and Latina Women in the Global Economy,” which was offered in spring 2013 and cross-listed in the Ethnic Studies and Urban Studies Planning. The second course was offered just last quarter through Ethnic Studies as well and was a lower-division “Introduction to Asian American Studies.”

“Asian and Latina Women in the Global Economy” explored the complex relationships between the flows of globalized capitalism, the workings of the U.S. nation-state, and the lives of Asian and Latina immigrant women. In particular, the course analyzed how (neo)colonialism and militarism, Cold War geopolitics, labor recruitment, and international investment in the global south have affected the (im)migration of women from Asia and Latin America to the US. While we interrogated these larger social and historical forces, we also importantly recognized how local Asian and Latina women have negotiated, resisted, and re-imagined their positions in the global economy. To this end, I arranged for students to collaborate all throughout the course with community groups, non-profits, and labor organizations to interview local Asian and Latina workers and witness their narratives.

The topic and workload of this course was thus challenging in multiple ways. Clearly, it constituted an academic challenge, as we studied a range of texts from the historical to the ethnographic to the theoretical. It also challenged students to go beyond the classroom and work with local communities; students had to thus reckon with the different positions of privilege and power not just between students within the class itself but also between the students and the community organizers with whom we collaborated and, of course, between students and the immigrant women they interviewed. The course began with a clear discussion of the expectations, objectives, and challenges of a class so heavily reliant on community interaction.
Students generated beautiful community ground rules that recognized the necessity of embracing potentially tough moments as opportunities to learn and grow. (See slide).

The willingness of the Filipino Migrant Center, AnakBayan San Diego (a local youth organization fighting for national democracy in the Philippines) and the Caregivers Association for Rights and Empowerment to work with my students was invaluable. We organized six weeks of training, once a week for two hours, at a local community space where students discussed best approaches for taking testimony from local Asian and Latina domestic workers, practiced student interview skills, discussed the framework appropriate to analyzing the testimonies, and ultimately strategized how to publish their research in order to support legislation including the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights that protected the dignity of the women they interviewed. If students could not attend these trainings, I made arrangements for them to work instead with the San Diego History Center. They were assigned the task of interviewing an Asian or Latina woman in their own lives who resided and worked in San Diego. Representatives from the San Diego History Center then educated these students in recording oral history during a scheduled class meeting. These interviews were then archived at the San Diego History Center, helping diversify their collection of voices from San Diego. In this way, all students in the course collaborated with a community organization and interrogated issues of race, class, gender, and labor not just intellectually but with their whole person as they witnessed the narratives of women that are not usually told in mainstream society.

I want to read from the final reflection paper of one of my students that I believe embodies why a decolonial mentorship approach in Critical Asian American Studies Courses is so important:

I was incredibly thankful for the patience they [the community organizers and caregivers] expressed while teaching me and other classmates, as well as the
meaningful experience they tried to provide for us. What I learned most from them was that what we have been attempting to do is not an active investigation of a particular object. The stories the project is determined to collect will be used to advance and enhance the movements caregivers are already actively engaging in. My participation in this project really solidified my drive for active community engagement. I truly value my university education and all that I have learned these past three years, but I have come to realize that it is not enough for me. Applying the knowledge that I gain, exploring the issues and needs of my community, and engaging actively are all things I take very seriously now.

Courses that fundamentally emphasize community and collaboration (rather than a possessive individualism and social hierarchy), that engage the whole person of the student (not just rationally but also affectively, ethically and creatively), and that give students opportunity to act and share (not just sit and listen) empowers students to see the impact they can have. This to me must be the ultimate goals of Critical Asian American Studies.

I acknowledge that integrating decolonial mentoring approaches into an upper-division course with roughly twenty-five students can be more manageable than doing so in a lower-division two-hundred plus course, especially those that fulfill general education requirements (like the equity, diversity, and inclusion requirement here at UCSD). In truth, incorporating decolonial mentorship into a lower-division system of undergraduate education with daunting lecture sizes and armies of teaching assistants in required humanities and social science courses on a predominantly STEM campus can seem a Sisyphean situation. I am still struggling to find the best way to do so but I do want to close by sharing some strategies I employed this past quarter in my “Introduction to Asian American Studies” course.

While the original number of students in this course was near 200, ultimately 136 students completed the course and three amazing graduate students from the Ethnic Studies department, Mohamed Abumaye, Amrah Salomon-Johnson, and Jennifer Mogannam, honored me by collaborating with me as my teaching assistants. Even with their help and excellent work
in their discussion sections to engage their students, the greatest challenge in a course of this size was the lecture hall. With fixed chairs and desks and a podium, the lecture hall fundamentally disciplines both students and professor into a hierarchical spatial relation while the teaching assistant system further enforces as sense of distance between the lecturer and class. In order to actively push against this power hierarchy, I forced myself never to stand behind the podium but to constantly walk around the lecture hall and into the aisles as I spoke. More importantly, every Wednesday after lecture I required the students to write one comment or question on a three by five index card they wanted to share that was inspired by the week’s lectures or readings.

Though I am still seeking to refine this simple assignment, these lecture cards have proven one of the most satisfying and stimulating pedagogical choices I have ever made. I would read through these weekly cards and use them to shape my lectures. I would identify certain ones that already foreshadowed the important concepts I wanted to discuss or posed points that I myself had not considered or simply showed a “whole person” response to the material – these ranged from sincere grappling with their own sense of identity as Asian Americans, commentary on intergenerational conflicts in their own families, and/or signs of nascent politicization as they realized the dynamics of racial formations in their own experiences.

Through these cards, I was able to glimpse my students – their interests, their confusion, and their investments – rather than just continue to relate to them as silent faces in the hall. I began to know their names and enjoyed the pleasant look of surprise when I would address them personally and asked them to share their point further and help me develop the day’s lecture. The cards thus allowed me to combat the unidirectional flow of learning as through them students helped shape the content of the course and educated me about their own perspectives and interpretations of the material. It was a small step towards humanizing the hierarchical structure
of a general education course. The cards enabled an opening of dialogue between the students and myself as I openly acknowledged that many students were posing questions that I in no way could answer. Questions like:

Why haven’t I heard about what happened to the Hawaiian people until this class? How can we get justice for them and for other indigenous people?

I realize now that I used to dehumanize illegal immigrants and how wrong it was. How can we all stop doing this as a society?

I feel my identity as a mixed race Asian is so complex. Why do I feel I must choose one part of myself or another? Is there another way of identity formation?

What do I do with the anger I feel as an Asian American woman? I feel so much when I read what has happened to us.

Power seems everywhere and inevitable. How do we dismantle power?

Will there be a time in which race really no longer matters?

More than anything, these questions that I cannot answer in any authoritative way fulfill me as a Pinay educator invested in decolonial mentorship, because they are an invitation to more dialogue, to breaking down the hierarchies in classrooms, and to imagine the university and society differently. And if that is not the point of a Critical Asian American Studies then I do not know what is.