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## **COLORISM, COLONIAL MENTALITY, AND DATING AND RELATIONSHIPS FOR FILIPINO AMERICAN WOMEN**

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**Colonialism, Colonial Mentality, and  
Dating and Relationships for Filipino American Women**

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Fall 2022

# **COLORISM, COLONIAL MENTALITY, AND DATING AND RELATIONSHIPS FOR FILIPINO AMERICAN WOMEN**

Gabrielle Abrazaldo

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## Acknowledgements

I cannot even begin to express my gratitude to those who have accompanied me in the undertaking of this project. To put this into context, as an undergraduate student, this is by far the longest paper that I have ever written, and to this date, this is the most passionate that I have ever been about a graded assignment. That being said, I would first like to thank my mentor Dr. Daniela Pila for supporting me from the very beginning. As an advocate, an academic, and an advisor, I look up to Dr. Pila in more ways than one. Thank you for picking my brain and always challenging me to push myself.

I would also like to extend a thank you to my thesis advisor Dr. Vivian Lu and my seminar advisor Professor Caley Johnson for their support throughout this semester. Thank you for your patience and understanding. Every revision and suggestion strengthened this thesis paper and helped me grow as a writer. Most importantly, your endless belief in me taught me to trust in myself and my own abilities. On a similar note, I would like to thank Professor Jilliane Fowle, who I took last semester for Research Methods in Psychology - it was you who made me feel as though I was worthy to pursue academia. You made me realize that I had something worth writing about... Words cannot even begin to describe how grateful I am to you for that.

Lastly, I would like to thank some of the most important people in my life. I would like to thank my mother and my late grandmother. Thank you for teaching me to love and accept myself as I am for who I am. Because of you, I understand my roots and my heritage as a diasporic Filipino. I would also like to thank all of my *kasamas*. You have shaped me into the person that I am today, and I am proud to be a part of your movement. My heart belongs to you, and my place in this world is beside you in the revolutionary struggle for the liberation and decolonization of the Filipino people and of all oppressed people.

## **Abstract**

As a consequence of a long colonial history under Spain and then the United States that lasted over 300 years, Filipinos have internalized a sense of cultural and ethnic inferiority known as ‘colonial mentality.’ When it comes to Filipino women, who have historically entered into romantic or sexual relationships with their colonizers, in which they were often mistreated, degraded, and discriminated against, colonial mentality continues to have an impact on their dating behaviors, attitudes, and experiences. This paper reviews a variety of literature, drawing particularly on qualitative sources such as personal narratives and interviews, to build case studies that effectively illustrate the ways in which colonial mentality continues to shape how Filipino women, specifically Filipino American women, navigate romantic relationships. What the paper essentially seeks to answer are the following questions: In what ways might colonial mentality manifest in the dating behaviors, attitudes, and experiences of Filipino and Filipino American women? What does this mean at the individual and the societal level for Filipino women? A sweep of the literature evidenced an apparent pattern across (1) the ways in which Filipino women characterize themselves as romantic or sexual patterns, (2) the criteria by which women evaluate dating partners, and (3) the ways in which women behave in their romantic relationships, which are discussed in the paper and later analyzed through the framework of colonial mentality and the Colonial Mentality Scale as developed by psychologists E.J.R. David and Sumie Okazaki. Overall, the purpose of the paper is contribute to the growing body of knowledge on Filipino psychology and to address a gap in the literature on colonial mentality and Filipino decolonization studies by drawing attention to Filipino American women, an often overlooked population in Filipino studies and in Asian American studies in general, and shifting the focus of colonial mentality from the intrapersonal to the interpersonal.

## **Introduction**

### *Situating the Paper in the Personal*

“The personal is political” became a rallying slogan of second-wave feminism in the 1960s, widely popularized by a 1969 essay of the same title, published by radical feminist activist Carol Hanisch. In her essay, Hanisch discussed women’s therapy groups and their treatment in the radical feminist movement as neutral or “apolitical” entities (1969). As Hanisch discussed in her essay, the women in these groups were actually not “apolitical” at all. Rather, as the essay’s title suggested, women and their personal experiences are always rendered political under the system of patriarchy (Hanisch, 1969). As she put it, “One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution” (1969). That being said, I have found that in academia, we as scholars are often impassioned to explore and to write about that which is deeply personal to us. That is, the experiences that have shaped our own lives, molded our own psyches, and those which continue to guide the ways in which we navigate the world around us. This is the place from which I began writing this paper.

A Filipino born in the United States and raised in Manila until the age of five, I immigrated to a small, white suburb in Chicago and was forced to quickly assimilate into American culture. Growing up, I remember being torn between my Filipino heritage and my American identity, struggling to find a sense of belonging to either group. When I started developing crushes and an interest in dating, I only had non-Filipinos to choose from. Although I suppose that it was always something in the back of my mind, I became acutely aware of how different I looked compared to the other kids in my class the moment my second-grade crush pointed out how dark my skin was compared to his. I came home crying from school and asked

my mom if she would buy me papaya soap to lighten my skin and spent the rest of the day looking at myself in the mirror, asking god why he had cursed me by making me Filipino. These are the memories that have stuck with me to this day. There are still days that I look in the mirror and see that same insecure child staring back at me. My tan skin, my flat nose, and my dark black hair are the Filipino features that I could never and will never be able to hide. That being said, my own personal experiences in dating as a Filipino American individual have made me interested in studying the ways in which other Filipino Americans, especially Filipino American women, navigate dating.

### *Conceptual Foreground*

In his seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon, psychiatrist, political philosopher, and prominent figure in decolonization studies explored the idea of internalized oppression, as it is often called in minority studies, “a condition in which oppressed individuals and groups come to believe they are inferior to those in power” (David & Okazaki, 2006a, p. 2). “Let us have the courage to say it outright: It is the racist that creates his inferior” (Fanon, 1952, p. 93), he wrote. As Fanon explained, the colonizer, despite being in the minority, never feels inferior in the same way that the colonial subject does (1952). “In South Africa there are two million whites against almost thirteen million native people, and it has never occurred to a single black to consider himself superior to a member of the white minority” (Fanon, 1952, p. 92-93). That is, colonized peoples are indoctrinated into believing that they are intrinsically inferior, and they go about carrying this sense of inferiority throughout their lives, becoming dependent upon it, even to the point that they no longer think to question it and simply internalize it completely. In the context of the Filipino experience, this sense of internalized oppression has become known as ‘colonial mentality’ (Clymer, 1986; David, 2013; Mahajani, 1974; Salazar, 1983).

### *Documenting the Filipino American Experience*

The diasporic Filipino experience is one that is nuanced, widespread, and varied. When we write about it as academics, we cannot ever expect to ever fully understand or encapsulate it. That being said, it is my greatest hope that this thesis paper, in drawing from the personal narratives of Filipino women in order to explore the ways in which they navigate dating, will be able to contribute a fragment to, if not a mere glimpse into, part of what constitutes the Filipino American experience for women of the diaspora.

Examining the foundational works of leading academics in the field of Filipino American studies, such as that of critical Filipino feminist scholar Melinda L. de Jesús, as well as the studies of psychologists such as E.J.R. David and Kevin Nadal, this thesis paper will take a look at the existing literature on the experiences of Filipinos and Filipino Americans and reinterpret, re-examine, and rework qualitative studies on the lived experiences of Filipino women within the framework of colonial mentality and their manifestations, as envisioned in the Colonial Mentality Scale developed by David & Okazaki (2006b), in order to better understand the ways in which the Philippines' colonial history has left a lasting impact on the psyche of Filipinos and Filipino Americans and, more specifically, impacted the ways in which Filipino American women navigate dating and relationships.

### **Literature Review**

#### *Historical Context*

In order to understand the profundity of colonial mentality in Filipinos and Filipino Americans, it is first necessary to trace it back to its origin in colonialism. The colonization of the Philippines began more than 500 years ago, when Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan landed at the island archipelago and claimed a large portion of its territory for Spain in 1521



(Aquino, 1992; David, 2013). Contrary to popular belief, the indigenous Filipino people, known as the *Tao*, had developed a rich culture and an established government prior to the arrival of the Spanish. For the next 300 years, these vibrant indigenous traditions would be ransacked under Spanish rule (Aquino, 1992; David, 2013). The *Tao* were not complacent, banding together to protect their society from the Spanish, even beheading Magellan for invading the islands (Constantino & Constantino, 1975; David, 2013). The Spanish, however, were persistent in their mission. They subdued the *Tao* through rape, abuse, and exploitation, subjecting the *Tao* to violence and death for resisting Spanish rule (Constantino & Constantino, 1975; David, 2013).

Slowly, the Spanish were able to gain control over the *Tao* (David, 2013). One of the most successful tools in levying power over the *Tao* was Catholicism, through which the Spanish were able to convince the *Tao* Spanish ways of life were, in the eyes of god, superior to indigenous traditions (David, 2013; Rimonte, 1997). The *Tao* began to internalize these beliefs, degrading themselves and becoming ashamed of their native ways (David, 2013; Rimonte, 1997). José Rizal, highly regarded as the National Hero of the Philippines, was among those who advocated for the rights of the indigenous *Tao* during Spanish colonialism (David, 2013). In a collection of essays published between 1889 and 1890, Rizal wrote of the *Tao*'s shifting about their own ways of life: "They forgot their writings, their songs, their poetry, their laws, in order to learn by heart other doctrines, which they did not understand" (Rizal, 1912, p. 32). Rizal explained that the *Tao* were eventually indoctrinated to believe Spanish were superior to their indigenous traditions: "There was a falling-off, they lowered in their own eyes, they became ashamed of what was distinctively their own, in order to admire and praise what was foreign and incomprehensible: their spirit was broken and they acquiesced" (Rizal, 1912, p. 33). Rizal was executed in 1896 for his criticism of Spanish colonial rule (David, 2013). Nevertheless, his

writings left a lasting impression on the ways in which scholars understand the early history of colonial mentality in the Philippines (David, 2013).

At the conclusion of the Spanish-American War in 1898, Spain ceded the Philippines to the United States at the Treaty of Paris by decision of then-U.S. President William McKinley (David, 2013; Welch, 2016), beginning yet another period of colonial subjugation for the Filipino people. Again, as with Spanish colonial imposition, the Filipino people resisted control over the islands. From 1899 to 1902, the Filipino people, led by revolutionaries like Emilio Aguinaldo, fought earnestly for their independence from the U.S. in what became known as the Philippine-American War, resulting in thousands of casualties on both fronts (David, 2013; Welch, 2016). In order to mitigate increasing dissent regarding the U.S. presence in the Philippines, President McKinley adopted a rhetoric of benevolent assimilation, arguing that the U.S. was fulfilling a responsibility to “uplift and civilize and Christianize [the Filipino people]”, (De Chavez, 2008, p.134) as McKinley himself articulated in a 1899 pronouncement. Thus began what scholars refer to as the systemic “miseducation of the Filipino” (Constantino, 1987; David, 2013).

#### *Colonial Education and Colonized Psychology*

American sociologist Y en L  Espiritu explained the process in her book, *Home Bound: Filipino American Lives across Cultures, Communities, and Countries*: “Convinced that education, rather than outright military suppression, was the more effective means to pacify the Filipinos, U.S. colonizers introduced universal public education and revamped Philippine educational institutions and curricula using the American system as its model and English as the language of instruction” (2003, p. 26). As a part of what was called the Pacification Campaign, hundreds of American educators known as *Thomasites* (named after the military transport ship)

were exported to the Philippines (David, 2013; Espiritu, 2003). Public schools became a vital instrument for the United States to rebrand itself as a benevolent entity that worked for the Filipino people's best interests. Portraying the U.S. as the paradigm of freedom and democracy, school textbooks pushed the narrative that the Philippines was unfit for self-governance and needed the U.S. to guide it out of poverty. As Filipino historian Renato Constantino put it, the American education system successfully molded the Filipino into "a citizen amazingly naive and trusting in its relations with foreigners, devoid of the capacity to feel indignation even in the face of insults to the nation, ready to acquiesce and even to help aliens in the despoliation of our national wealth" (1987, p. 8). In other words, colonial education convinced the Filipino people on a systemic level that the U.S. was not colonizing, but rather, saving the Philippines (Constantino, 1987).

Although the Philippines gained its independence from the United States in July of 1946, the American education that the U.S. had established in the Philippines left a lasting legacy of neo-colonialism on the minds of the Filipino people, especially in the way that Filipinos think of the Philippines and themselves in relation to Americans and the United States (David, 2013). Modern day Philippine society perpetuates Western ideals and standards that have origins in colonialism (David, 2013). For instance, a prolific beauty industry specializing in skin-whitening products continues to engender Filipinos, especially Filipino women, with the idea that whiteness is the pinnacle of beauty (Singson, 2017). Meanwhile, the continued use of English as the primary language of instruction "sends the message that English is the language of the educated and the civilized and, thus, better than indigenous Filipino languages" (David, 2013, p. 43). These lingering beliefs of Filipino inferiority and White or Western superiority make up what is commonly known today as 'colonial mentality' (David & Okazaki, 2006a, 2006b).

### *Theoretical Framework*

E.J.R. David, a professor of psychology at the University of Alaska Anchorage and a scholar of Filipino psychology (David, 2013; David & Okazaki, 2006a, 2006b), and Sumie Okazaki, a professor of psychology at New York University who specializes in the study of the impacts of immigration and social change on Asian American populations (Okazaki, 1997, 2002; Wong et al., 2014), were not the first to coin the term ‘colonial mentality’ (Clymer, 1986; Mahajani, 1974; Salazar, 1983) to refer to the sense of cultural and ethnic inferiority internalized by Filipino and Filipino Americans as a consequence of their colonial past, but they were the first to design a tool to measure it (David & Okazaki, 2006b). David and Okazaki devised the Colonial Mentality Scale to assess the extent to which individuals exhibit colonial mentality (2006b). The self-report measure consisted of statements such as “I’m ashamed of newly arrived Filipinos” and “I do not want my children to have Filipino (flat) noses,” of which participants ranked their agreement on a 6-point scale, with higher scores on the measure indicating higher levels of colonial mentality (David & Okazaki, 2006b).

The Colonial Mentality Scale sorted manifestations of colonial mentality into five categories: (1) Within-Group Discrimination, (2) Physical Characteristics, (3) Colonial Debt, (4) Cultural Shame and Embarrassment, and (5) Internalized Cultural/Ethnic Inferiority (David & Okazaki, 2006b). The first category, *Within-Group Discrimination*, measures the extent to which Filipinos, especially Filipino Americans, discriminate against less American-ized Filipinos (those considered ‘fresh-of-the-boat or ‘FOBs’). Items include statements such as “I am ashamed of newly arrived Filipinos because of their inability to speak fluent, accent-free English” or “I do not associate with newly-arrived (FOBs) Filipino Americans” (David & Okazaki, 2006b).

The second category, *Physical Characteristics*, measures the extent to which Filipinos and Filipino Americans associate White or Western physical features, such as pale skin or blue eyes, with beauty and believe Filipino features, such as a darker complexion or a flat nose, are inferior. Items include statements such as “I would like to have children with light skin-tones” or “I find people with bridged noses (like Whites) as more attractive than persons with Filipino (flat) noses” (David & Okazaki, 2006b).

The third category, *Colonial Debt*, measures the extent to which Filipinos and Filipino Americans justify colonization and feel grateful, if not indebted, to their colonizers. Items include statements such as “Filipino Americans do not have anything to complain about because they are lucky to be in the United States” or “Filipinos should feel privileged and honored that Spain and the United States had contact with them,” which exemplify beliefs that Spain or the United States had civilized or saved the Filipino people from savagery (David & Okazaki, 2006b).

The fourth and fifth categories, *Cultural Shame and Embarrassment* and *Internalized Cultural/Ethnic Inferiority*, respectively, focus mostly on the relationship of Filipinos and Filipino Americans with their own Filipino culture and heritage (David & Okazaki, 2006b). The fourth category, *Cultural Shame and Embarrassment*, includes statements such as “I feel embarrassed of the Filipino culture and traditions” or “I feel that being a Filipino/a is a curse” (David & Okazaki, 2006b).

The fifth category, *Internalized Culture/Ethnic Inferiority*, includes statements such as “I feel that being a person of my ethnic/cultural heritage is not as good as being White/European American” or “There are situations where I feel inferior because of my ethnic/cultural background” (David & Okazaki, 2006b). That being said, the Colonial Mentality Scale has most

often been used to assess the intrapersonal effects that colonization has had on Filipinos and Filipino Americans (David, 2008; 2010; Tuazon et al., 2019). That is, its primary focus has been on the individual.

### *Gendering Colonial Mentality*

There have been some studies, such as various collections of personal narratives or ethnographic studies, that have explored the interpersonal relationships experienced by some Filipinos, particularly Filipino women (Arnado, 2019; De Jesús, 2006; Khanna, 2010; Nadal, 2010; Nemoto, 2006). Some of these studies have related these experiences back to the lasting impacts of colonialism on the contemporary lives of Filipino women, especially in the context of dating and marriage, reflecting, for instance, on the ways in which colonial mentality has shaped standards of beauty when it comes to viewing oneself as a dating candidate (Khanna, 2010; Nadal, 2010).

That being said, there have been minimal studies, if any, that have comprehensively contextualized such experiences in dating within the colonial history of the Philippines, and even fewer, if any, that have synthesized them with the theoretical framework of colonial mentality as presented by David and Okazaki (2006a, 2006b). Thus, the purpose of the following section will be to take a closer look at a select few of these exploratory studies on the dating and marital experiences of Filipino women with the intent of later analyzing these cases through the lens of colonialism and the theoretical framework of colonial mentality. Ultimately, the objective of the paper will be to cultivate a more holistic understanding of the complexities and nuances that encapsulate the romantic relationships of Filipino American women.

### **Case Studies**

Although existing scholarship on the romantic relationships of Filipino Americans evades using language such as ‘colonial mentality’ to characterize the dating experiences of Filipino American women (Nadal, 2010; Nemoto, 2006), descriptions of internalized sentiments of inferiority, indebtedness, or ineptitude based on one’s Filipino identity are prominent themes that occur across studies (Abrazaldo, 2022; Nadal, 2010; Nemoto, 2006), pointing to the pervasiveness of colonial mentality in the social relationships of Filipino Americans, including the ways in which Filipino Americans navigate dating and relationships. For Filipino women, who have historically entered into romantic relationships with their colonizers in order to achieve upward mobility (De Jesús, 2006; Root, 1997), the impact of colonial mentality on dating and relationships is particularly salient in explaining the dating attitudes, behaviors, and experiences that Filipino American women hold. A sweep of the literature pointed to three areas in which colonial mentality affects the dating experiences of Filipino American women: (1) the characterization of oneself as a romantic or sexual partner, (2) the criteria in choosing a partner, and (3) one’s behavior in romantic or sexual relationships. The following paragraphs will discuss the literature used to inform the identification of these three areas.

*Case Studies: Skin Tone and Characterization of Oneself as a Romantic or Sexual Partner*

Firstly, literature has shown that colonial mentality impacts the ways in which Filipino American women conceptualize themselves as romantic or sexual partners (Khanna, 2020; Nadal, 2010). In a world where Eurocentric features prevail as the beauty standard, Filipino women are constantly bombarded with the message that white skin is preferable to brown skin and are urged to whiten their skin with bleaching agents to achieve beauty -- whether that pressure comes externally from their family members, friends, or society at large, or is a consequence of internal feelings of shame about being *kayumanggi* (“brown-skinned”) (David,

2013; Khanna, 2020; Natividad, 2006; Singson, 2017). That being said, the Philippines has a booming skin whitening industry that continues to be popular especially amongst women of lower socioeconomic status, who dream of achieving greater social acceptance in Philippine society, which praises whiter skin and views it as a marker of social status, wealth, and beauty (Singson, 2017). These young Filipino women are willing to pay money for skin whitening products, despite the fact that many of these bleaching agents contain harmful chemicals that can potentially cause anything from increased blood pressure to skin irritation (Dadzie, 2016; Singson, 2017).

To give a personal example of my own experience with skin whitening, I myself have used skin bleaching products before. As a young child, I vividly remember walking through aisles upon aisles of skin bleaching products in the cosmetic sections of Filipino grocery markets not only in the Philippines itself but in the United States as well. That being said, I was only a child the first time that I tried papaya soap, a popular skin whitening product. While my mother had never whitened her skin, after the run-in with my grade school crush that I discussed in the introduction of this thesis paper, I was so desperate to embody the whiteness that I, even as a child, had learned at a tender age to associate with beauty. Thus, I begged my mother to purchase the product that I often heard my aunt, who was born with much darker skin, swear by so religiously.

Now, when I think of this anecdote, I think that there are two important things to note. First, I think it is important to note how young I was when I decided to lighten my skin. I was merely twelve years old at the time, yet I was already full of so much internalized hatred for my heritage and my ethnic features. Secondly, I think it is important to note that this practice and this mindset was passed down to me through my family. I learned it in a way that was so insidious



that it felt natural. I was born *kayumanggi*, and as a *kayumanggi*, it felt as though it only made sense for me to lighten my skin to fit into this world and to long to be a *puti*. That being said, like the practice of skin whitening, colonial mentality, as a byproduct of the legacy of Spanish colonialism and U.S. imperialism, is intergenerational and inherited through one's family members and the society that one is brought up in.

When I was young, for example, I was often told by my aunts and my grandparents to “stay out of the sun,” as I know many other Filipino children are. Playing in the sun too long meant becoming darker, and becoming darker was associated with becoming ugly. Therefore, Filipino family members often scold children, especially young girls, for staying out too long or for not putting on enough sunscreen (David, 2012; De Jesús, 2006; Rondilla, 2012). To give an example of the prevalence of such rhetoric in Filipino families, the song “Brown Out” by Filipino American rapper and spoken word artist Ruby Ibarra, which is about internalized colorism within the Filipino community, particularly among Filipino women, features a short introduction from a woman who is presumably Ibarra's mother. In the introduction, Ruby and her sister are told to stop playing and to come inside the house: “Ruby, you guys come inside the house now... You and your sister will get dark. You'll get ugly if you are dark” (Ibarra, 2017). This kind of message is popular among aunties and grandparents, and as children, we learn it all too well.

In addition to the popularity of whitening products in Filipino culture and society, Filipino women are also often encouraged to marry white men in order to yield half-white children (De Jesús, 2006; Nadal, 2010; Rondilla, 2012), which again promotes white beauty ideals and denigrates the indigenous ethnic features of Filipino women. That is, Filipino families generationally pass on the message that *mestizo* or mixed children are somehow more beautiful

or precious than those that are of pure Filipino blood and enforce the idea that those who are fully Filipino are of lesser value or beauty. As one Filipino woman recalled of her mother once saying to her: “Try and marry or meet a ‘*Puti*’ (White person). Look at your cousins. They married a *Puti* and they have beautiful children” (Nadal, 2010, p. 112). Later, in this woman’s narrative, she elaborated on her negative self-image, particularly her inability to find her own ethnic Filipino features, such as her darker skin tone, desirable: “I was a dark-skinned flat-nosed girl, a Pocahontas look alike. I believed guys (especially White guys) would never look at me” (Nadal, p. 110, 2010). As she put it, she constantly questioned her attractiveness and her overall value as a Filipino woman, especially when pursued by a white man (Nadal, 2010). Initially doubting his advances, she voiced the disbelief she first experienced: “Hello, look at how dark I am? Why would anyone be interested in someone with dark skin?” (Nadal, 2010). The experience that this woman shared about in her narrative is not an isolated one. Rather, it represents a persistent, pointed perspective that many Filipino women hold when it comes to dating and relationships: that they, as Filipino women, are undesirable as romantic or sexual partners, simply based on their ethnic features (Khanna, 2020; Nadal, 2010; Rondilla, 2012; Root, 1997).

In *Whiter: Asian American Women on Skin Color and Colorism* by sociologist Nikki Khanna, Daniela Pila, Filipino sociologist and scholar of race and ethnicity, similarly recounted her own experience dating her now-husband, a Jewish American man (Khanna, 2020). As Pila explained in her narrative, she struggled and sometimes continues to struggle with believing her husband when he tells her that she is beautiful: “I would look in the mirror and see what I perceived as the worst parts of myself -- my dark brown skin, my small nose, my curly-wavy hair. It was hard to feel worthy enough to be someone’s partner” (Khanna, 2020, p. 197). Her low

self-esteem, she explained in her narrative, was guided by Filipino beauty standards that have haunted her throughout her life, even after moving to the States from the Philippines (Khanna, 2020). After having her appearance, especially her darker skin and flat nose, constantly denigrated by relatives, Pila had been conditioned to believe she was ugly and that no one would find her attractive because of her Filipino features. For Pila, learning to love and appreciate herself and her physical appearance required what she referred to in her narrative as “reprogramming” (Khanna, 2020, p. 197). In order to believe her husband when he tells her that she is beautiful, she needed to first challenge the learned notion that Filipino features were ugly. Such is the case for many Filipino women, especially those who grew up surrounded by the message that being Filipino meant being ugly: viewing themselves as attractive dating candidates and navigating romantic relationships can be especially difficult and requires a component of unlearning the idea that Filipino features are deterrents to finding a suitable partner (Khanna, 2020; Nadal, 2010).

#### *Case Studies: Racial Gap in Evaluating Potential Romantic Partners*

The second way that colonial mentality impacts the dating experiences of Filipino American women is related to how Filipino American women conceptualize their ideals for romantic or sexual partners (Abrazaldo, 2022; Arnado, 2019; Nemoto, 2006). Of particular interest are the ways in which Filipino American women evaluate the overall attractiveness of potential partners and the criteria by which they determine who to date or marry. This is best exemplified by a general trend that is demonstrated in the literature, which is an apparent preference for white men or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, an avoidance of Filipino men (Arnado, 2019; Nemoto, 2006). This pattern seems to manifest primarily in two ways: (1) a sexual preference or attraction to the physical characteristics of white men over those of Filipino

men (Abrazaldo, 2022) and (2) an attraction to white men based on assumptions of social and economic superiority over Filipino men (Arnado, 2019; Nemoto, 2006; Root, 1997).

To give an example of the former, a young Filipino American woman who participated in my own original research disclosed a preference for men with lighter skin and high nose bridges and expressed a general aversion to Filipino men (Abrazaldo, 2022). This participant, a recent immigrant in her late teens, reflected on the young men she found attractive at her high school. She explained in her interview that she did not find the Filipino boys at her school to be very attractive. When prodded to elaborate, she told me that she did not like their physical features, such as their short stature, which she admitted was characteristic of many Filipino men, or their dark skin, which she said could either be a hit-or-miss, or their flat nose. She then went on to explain that the men at her school looked “too Filipino,” and that it was obvious that they were from the provinces of the Philippines. That is, that they were from the poorer and more rural areas of the Philippines rather than the cities. When I asked her how she could tell the difference between a Filipino from the province versus a Filipino from the city, she explained to me that Filipinos from the province look more Filipino, as though they do not have any Spaniard blood in them. She then admitted to me that those who look like they belong in a province or a tribe are not attractive to her, especially those who have dark skin (Abrazaldo, 2022). Statements such as these demonstrate an aversion to physical features associated with Filipino men, such as a darker complexion, shorter stature, and flat nose. At the same time, this participant and others in my study affirmed that they glamorize or at some point in their lives have glamorized the features of white male celebrities, such as Logan Lerman or Zac Efron (Abrazaldo, 2022), demonstrating a simultaneous preference for the physical features of white men over the features of Filipino men.

That being said, for some women, their preference for white men is not merely based on physical or sexual attraction to European features. Rather, it is related to the social and economic security and stability that is associated with whiteness (Arnado, 2019; Nemoto, 2006; Root, 1997). Janet M. Arnado, PhD in Sociology and professor at De La Salle University in Manila, Philippines, explained in her study on the lived experiences of Filipino women married to white men that marrying white can be a means of upward social mobility for many Filipino women, by which they are “able to gain access to a once restricted world of whiteness” (Arnado, 2019, p. 1999), whether that means being able to obtain citizenship to a Western country, obtain higher education, or generate greater income due to better work opportunities (Arnado, 2019). First, it should be noted that not all of the women in Arnado’s study married American men or immigrated a Western country. Some married men of German, Canadian, or Dutch citizenship, and some of the Filipino women interviewed in the study continued to live in the Philippines with their husband. That being said, what Arnado and other scholars essentially argue is that some Filipino women may be motivated to marry white men “at the expense of Filipino men” (Root, 1997, p. 202) because marrying white men would provide them with access to greater social and economic opportunities than marrying a Filipino man would (Arnado, 2019; Nemoto, 2006; Root, 1997). This viewpoint is further elaborated upon in a 2006 study conducted by Japanese sociologist Kumiko Nemoto, which examined the marital relationships of Asian women and white men. The study featured two Filipino expats, referred to in the study as Angelina and Linda, respectively (Nemoto, 2006). As Angelina explained in her interview, marrying a Filipino man was never an option for her: “I didn’t want to have a Filipino boyfriend. If I married them, I didn’t get to go to America” (Nemoto, 2006, p. 38). Angelina saw Filipino men as inherently inferior to white men because they could not offer the same financial resources that white men

could. For example, a Filipino man would not be able to get her citizenship in the United States. As Angelina went on to explain of her marriage to a white man, “The white American was the highest standard, and I chose somebody who’s higher standard” (Nemoto, 2006, p. 38). At the same time, what is particularly interesting about the two Filipino women featured in Nemoto’s study is that they hold two completely different viewpoints of their marriages to white men. On one hand, Angelina is completely infatuated with her husband and has always been attracted to white men. On the other hand, Linda has no romantic feelings for her husband and never expected to marry a white man, having been scornful of the way that American servicemen in the Philippines treated the local women. Nevertheless, both Angelina and Linda shared a common goal in marrying white men. As Nemoto put it, “Their desire for white men corresponded to their desire for status as an ideal white American citizen... Intermarriage, like education and occupation, can serve as one of the few means for non-European immigrants with fewer socioeconomic resources to gain upward mobility toward achieving such ‘honorary whiteness’” (Nemoto, 2006, p. 48). That is to say, the decision to marry a white man was driven primarily by their need for financial security and social stability, both of which they could quickly achieve through marriage. Sexual or romantic attraction aside, both were motivated to marry white American men because of their economic and social resources (Nemoto, 2006).

*Case Studies: Power differentials in Romantic Relationships*

The last way in which colonial mentality impacts dating for Filipino women is ultimately the ways in which Filipino women seem to behave as romantic and sexual partners. The literature evidenced a general pattern of sacrificial behaviors, pointing to power differentials between Filipino women and their partners. This was especially true for relationships where Filipino women were paired with white men. In these relationships, Filipino women were shown

to often accept some form of disadvantage to themselves in exchange for the security of their relationship or the happiness of their dating or marital partners (Arnado, 2019; De Jesús, 2006; Nemoto, 2006). In such relationships, for example, a Filipino woman might tolerate mistreatment or selfishness from her husband (Nemoto, 2006) and put up with discrimination or bigotry from his friends and family (De Jesús, 2006). For instance, Linda, one of the Filipino women interviewed in Nemoto's study, described how she simply endures her husband's complete disregard for her family's needs: "He doesn't ask how my brothers and sisters are doing. I'm getting used to it... I just accept it. I can't do anything" (Nemoto, 2006, p. 42). As Linda explained, she often wishes that her husband would show more concern for her family in the Philippines, but she has come to the conclusion that she is not in a position to ask for more. In her interview, she even likened her husband to a child: "It's like your kid. You don't want to wait for a kid to say 'Thank you'" (Nemoto, 2006, p. 42). For Linda, there is no point in arguing with her husband or trying to negotiate with him. Although she explained to Nemoto that she threatens divorce whenever her husband shouts at her, she also disclosed that divorce was the least desirable outcome as it was the most culturally unfamiliar to her and would cause great financial strain on her (Nemoto, 2006).

Other women have shared similar experiences of being treated unfairly in their relationships and simply having to tolerate it (De Jesús, 2006). Leny Strobel, Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of American Multicultural Studies at Sonoma State University in California and the Project Director of the Center for Babaylan Studies wrote of her experience dealing with white society after marrying a white man in the Philippines: "I married a white man and came to live in the master's house... Dissonance was produced by white folks' looks and malicious questions: Are you married to a GI? (read: Are you a prostitute?). Are you a

mail-order bride? (read: Are you for sale) Do you know of a maid? (read: Are you a domestic worker)” (De Jesús, 2006). Intrusive questions like these reflect everyday microaggressions that Filipino women, especially those in relationships with non-Filipino men, put up with in their relationships as sacrifices.

That being said, another significant sacrifice a Filipino woman might make as a result of her relationship is the abandonment of her Filipino culture and her traditional Filipino values as she adopts and assimilates into the culture of her partner. From no longer attending Sunday mass to talking back to her parents or not teaching the Filipino language to her mixed children, she slowly loses touch with her Filipino identity. At times, this can come even at the expense of her relationship with her family (Arnado, 2019). Of a Filipino immigrant to Canada, who married a white Canadian man, Arnado wrote in her article, “Her left-behind family viewed her as a Canadian citizen who lost a sense of being a Filipino, no longer the daughter with Filipino values that they knew her to be” (Arnado, 2019, p. 2001). As Arnado elaborated upon in the article, this woman’s husband even described her himself as appearing more Canadian than Filipino (Arnado, 2019). Statements such as these demonstrate the willingness of some Filipino women to abandon their Filipino heritage for the sake of their relationships, especially when those relationships involve non-Filipino partners.

In considering the ways these women behave and the ways that they are treated by their white partners, we must situate their relationships within the political and economic context of the Philippines as a country of the global south (Misalucha, 2015; Orberta, 2002) and, as explained before, as a country that has long been subjugated by Western powers like Spain and the United States (Constantino & Constantino, 1975; David, 2013). That is, Western powers have historically imposed and continue to enact violence, especially sexual violence, upon Filipino



women (David, 2013; Lacsamana, 2011; Reyes, 2015). A more contemporary example would be the Subic rape case of 2009 (Lacsamana, 2011; Reyes, 2015), which brought to public attention the prevailing sexual dominance imposed on Filipino women through the continued presence of U.S. militarism in the Philippines even after the Philippines gained independence in 1942 (David, 2013). The case involved the rape of a Filipino woman, known as Nicole, in Subic Bay by a U.S. Marine while three of the perpetrator's friends, also U.S. Marines, cheered him on. After the rape, Nicole was then dumped half-clothed on the side of the street, where she was later found crying (Lacsamana, 2011). This was not an isolated incident. Rather, it was a part of an increasing number of rapes and assaults of Filipino women by servicemen under the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA), a policy that extends certain privileges and protections to military personnel in the Philippines. That being said, instances such as these continue to instill the idea that Filipino women are disposable sexual objects that serve a singular purpose: to fulfill a white man's fantasy. For Filipino women and white men in the Philippines and abroad, this kind of thinking has the power to permeate our behavior, influencing the way that we interact with our partners.

That being said, aside from U.S. militarism in the Philippines, other factors that are also related to Western imperialism continue to contribute to this harmful image of Filipino women and impact power differentials in relationships between white men and Filipino women. Through the rise of the mail-order bride industry in industrialized countries in Europe and East Asian, for example, Filipino women and other Southeast Asian women, especially those who come from impoverished families, can quite literally be ordered through a catalog or some other type of subscription service and be transported abroad to act as the subservient wives of white men who are often affluent and much older (Root, 1997). Of course, these types of relationships have an

intrinsic power imbalance based on gaps in wealth, age, and citizenship. That being said, even relationships in which Filipino and white partners may perceivably be on equal footing may be affected by attitudes of racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic inferiority and superiority that are rooted in the examples delineated above. This is not even accounting for other stereotypes commonly held about Southeast Asian women in general -- for example, stereotypes regarding hypersexuality or submissiveness (Law, 2012).

### **Analysis**

In this section, I will analyze the three areas I identified in the previous section through the theoretical framework of colonial mentality as developed by E.J.R. David and Sumie Okazaki (2006a). That is, (1) the characterization of oneself as a romantic or sexual partner, (2) the criteria in choosing a partner, and (3) one's behavior in romantic or sexual relationships. In particular, this analysis will examine the aforementioned case studies within the context of the five categories identified in David and Okazaki's Colonial Mentality Scale: (1) Within-Group Discrimination, (2) Physical Characteristics, (3) Colonial Debt, (4) Cultural Shame and Embarrassment, and (5) Internalized Cultural/Ethnic Inferiority (2006b). The purpose of this section will be to address the following questions: How do these case studies demonstrate colonial mentality? How are these case studies informed by the Philippines' history of colonialism? What does this mean at the individual and societal level for Filipino women?

#### *Analysis: Characterization of Oneself as a Romantic or Sexual Partner*

First, to take a look at the way that Filipino women characterize themselves as romantic or sexual partners, we must consider the colonial context through which Filipinos are socialized to think of themselves. Filipino psychologist Maria P.P. Root reflected on the colonial origin of Eurocentric standards of beauty in the Philippines in her book *Filipino Americans*:

*Transformation and Identity* (1997). As Root put it, “Four hundred years of combined colonization, first by Spain then by the United States, widened the Filipino gene pool with the possibilities of lighter skin, hair, and eyes. The tools of colonization gave meaning to the variation in physical appearance among Filipinos. Colorism and then racism inculcated the notions ‘White is beautiful,’ ‘White is intelligent,’ and ‘White is powerful’ in the psyches of many brown-hued Filipinos, thus inferiorizing the Filipino” (1997, p. 81). As a consequence, Filipinos, especially Filipino women, yearn to achieve whiteness (Abrazaldo, 2022; Khanna, 2020; Nadal, 2010; Rondilla, 2012; Root, 1997). For some women, this means engaging in skin whitening practices, encouraged by the prominent skin bleaching beauty industry in the Philippines (Natividad, 2006; Rondilla, 2012; Singson, 2017). For others, it means marrying a white man in hopes of yielding light skinned children who look less Filipino (De Jesús, 2006; Nadal, 2010; Rondilla, 2012). These are prime examples of the ways in which colonial mentality can manifest as physical characteristics and cultural/ethnic inferiority in the dating experiences of Filipino American women. Putting down one’s characteristically Filipino features, such as one’s darker skin or flat nose, and yearning after European features, demonstrates a desire for whiteness and an internalized sense of ethnic inferiority that is informed by the Philippines’ history of colonization and oppression (David & Okazaki, 2006a, 2006b).

*Analysis: Evaluation of and Criteria for Potential Romantic Partners*

That being said, the criteria by which Filipino American women evaluate potential romantic partners must also be situated within the colonial history of the Philippines. As demonstrated in the previous section, Filipino American women have displayed a general preference for white men over Filipino men, whether that attraction is based on the physical characteristics of white men or the financial and social resources of white men over those of

Filipino men (Abrazaldo, 2022; Arnado, 2019; Nemoto, 2006; Root, 1997). This reflects how colonial mentality can manifest as physical characteristics, internalized cultural/ethnic inferiority, and within-group discrimination (David & Okazaki, 2006b). In the case studies examined in the previous section, some Filipino American women chose to actively exclude Filipino men as dating candidates because they were averse to their distinctly Filipino features or had internalized beliefs about their inferiority (Abrazaldo, 2022; Nemoto, 2006). As Nemoto put it, “A Filipino man, as a marital partner, was coded as inferior and lacking in resources” (2006, p. 28). In other words, he would never be able to compare to the white man. These beliefs of white superiority are not random; rather, they are a consequence of years of colonial education under Spain and the United States that have inculcated the Filipino people with the notion that anything white, European, or American surpasses anything Filipino (David, 2013; David & Okazaki, 2006a, 2006b; De Jesús, 2006). When it comes to romantic or sexual partners, the same is true: Filipino women are taught from an early age that marrying white means ‘marrying up’ (De Jesús, 2006).

To put this further into context, Linda M. Pierce, Assistant Professor at the University of Southern Mississippi, who specializes in Filipino American, Asian American, and African American Studies, reflected on the impact of hypergamy, or ‘marrying up,’ on her own family’s consciousness. Her grandmother’s marriage to a white American, she disclosed, has always been understood by family members as a stroke of good luck. As she went on to explain, “One cannot discuss Filipina outmarriage without considering the colonial context... For many Filipinas, marrying ‘out’ meant out of an economic caste, out of an institutionalized, internalized, colonial sense of inferiority, and out of the Philippines” (De Jesús, 2006, p. 35). This is a shared sentiment among many Filipinos (Arnado, 2019; De Jesús, 2006; Nemoto, 2006) and one that is

deeply rooted in colonial attitudes (Constantino, 1987; David, 2013). From not finding Filipino men attractive (Abrazaldo, 2022; Nemoto, 2006; Rondilla, 2012; Root, 1997) to making the assumption that Filipino men cannot be economically successful or in high social standing (De Jesús, 2006; Nemoto, 2006), the viewpoint is clear: Filipino men and by extension, all Filipinos, are subordinate to white people.

*Analysis: Power differentials in Romantic Relationships*

The last area that I identified in the previous section referred to power differentials in the romantic and sexual relationships between Filipino women and white men. As I had explained before, literature has shown that Filipino women in relationships with white men demonstrate a general tendency to behave sacrificially, whether that means tolerating mistreatment from her husband or boyfriend and his social circle (De Jesús, 2006; Nemoto, 2006) or renouncing her own Filipino heritage in order to assimilate into white society (Arnado, 2019; De Jesús, 2006; Nemoto, 2006). In the framework of colonial mentality as developed by psychologists David and Okazaki (2006a), sacrificial behaviors such as these would constitute examples of colonial debt, defined as “a deferential attitude toward Western culture or Westerners” (p. 7), in which Filipinos may deliberately ignore or even try to defend injustices enacted by colonizers against them. Such behaviors are rooted in colonialism and reflect internalizations of the “Golden Legend,” the colonial ideology that the Spanish were not colonizing, but rather, educating and liberating the native Filipinos from their own savagery (David & Okazaki, 2006a; De Jesús, 2006; Root, 1997). As a Filipino American reflected on his interactions with other Filipino Americans, he noted the impact of the Golden Legend on shaping the ways in which Filipinos navigate their experiences with discrimination: “I know so many Filipinos (in America who) would deny that they have been discriminated against. Too many are so thankful to be (in America) that they shut their eyes

to avoid seeing the injustices” (David & Okazaki, 2006a, p. 10). The same can be said about the romantic relationships of Filipino American women. Though the motives for tolerating mistreatment in such relationships may be different depending on the woman, common themes have appeared across the case studies examined in this paper, perhaps the most prominent and problematic being the apparent belief that a romantic relationship with a white man, regardless of how unhappy, unsatisfactory, or even abusive it may be or become, is the most respectable and desirable form of a dating or marital relationship that a Filipino woman could ever hope to attain solely due to the fact that her partner is white (Arnado, 2019; De Jesús, 2006; Nemoto, 2006).

## **Conclusion**

As this paper thoroughly discussed in the previous sections, colonial mentality has had and continues to have lasting effects on the ways in which Filipino American women navigate romantic relationships. That is, the contemporary dating attitudes, behaviors, and experiences of Filipino American women continue to be shaped by the legacies of Spanish colonization and U.S. imperialism in the Philippines, whether this manifests as a Filipino women’s insecurities about her desirability based on her ethnic features, such as her darker skin tone, (Khanna, 2010; Nadal, 2010), her inclination to date non-Filipino men or her apparent aversion to Filipino partners (Abrazaldo, 2022; Nemoto, 2006), or her decision to assimilate into white society after marrying or dating a white man (Arnado, 2019; Nemoto, 2006). As we examined in the aforementioned case studies, these instances demonstrate the ongoing consequences of the Philippines’ colonial history on the contemporary interpersonal relationships of Filipinos, focusing specifically on the romantic relationships of Filipino American women in relation to colonial mentality, the byproduct of colonialism on the Filipino psyche.

That being said, I find it imperative to state that no one should believe himself to be in a position to pass judgment or shame upon any Filipino woman who prescribes, in some way, to some form of colonial ideology. Decolonization is a process, and we must recognize in others as much as in ourselves that it was not a choice for us to be born into oppression. To quote Professor Linda M. Pierce in *Pinay Power: Peminist Critical Theory* (2006), “Regardless of your nativity, your memories are colonized. You are born into trauma without an initial understanding of or hermeneutic for your fragmented self and you must work diligently just to explain your own life -- to recognize and name your scars, to educate yourself about your specific cultural history and uncover its connections to your subjectivity” (De Jesús, p. 35). Colonial mentality is an artifact of years of oppression under Spain and the United States that taught us to inferiorize ourselves. It is an undertaking that requires years of commitment, and we cannot expect every person to start or finish at the same place that we do, or even to start at all. Perhaps more importantly, we cannot blame Filipinos, *especially* Filipino women, who are taught from a young age to beautify themselves by lightening their skin (Natividad, 2006; Rondilla, 2012; Singson, 2017) and to aspire for white men (De Jesús, 2006; Nadal, 2010; Rondilla, 2012), for these beliefs are so prominent and widespread in Filipino culture and Filipino society that they come almost naturally to us.

By focusing on the interpersonal, rather than the intrapersonal, effects of colonial mentality, this thesis paper draws attention to a relatively unexplored and unexamined niche in the field of Filipino psychology and decolonization studies: the romantic relationships of Filipinos, particularly Filipino American women, an often overlooked and understudied population group. Broadly, its purpose is to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on Filipino psychology that serves to put together the fragments that form our individual and

collective *talambuhay*, or life narrative, as Filipinos and Filipino Americans, and allow domestic and diasporic Filipinos to understand and situate themselves and their stories in the larger colonial context of the Philippines.

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