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Stories Underfoot: Reconstructing a Filipino American Identity from a Patchwork Rug

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These quilts is my albums and di'ries, and whenever the weather's bad and I can't git out to see folks, I jest spread out my quilts and look at 'em and study over 'em, and it's jest like goin' back fifty or sixty years and livin' my life over agin.¹

As Eliza Calvert Hall's words suggest, a patchwork quilt, made up of a lifetime of castoffs and remnants, not only brings together the artifacts of intimate relationships and events in an individual's life, but also becomes something larger – a tangible extension of memory itself. Operating on the premise that “material objects... can [not only] act as the analogues of human memory... [but also] prolong and preserve them beyond purely mental existence,”² the material bases for my research are several patchwork floor mats from my childhood home that my family refers to as, *Apo Nanang's* rag rugs.³ My grandmother, Catalina Pacleb Gonzales (1918-1986), made several of these rugs from old household linens and garments that passed between her hands from approximately 1946 to 1965 (fig. 1). Embedded within these simple and unassuming rugs is the complex story of my family's immigration from the Philippine Islands to Hawaii and their transformation from Filipinos to Filipino-Americans. In this project, my grandmother's rugs are the vehicles through which I explore a period in my family history and our dynamic cross-cultural identity with the Philippines, with Hawaii and with America.



Figure 1: *Apo Nanang's* rag rug, Catalina Pacleb Gonzales; cotton; 24 inches by 18 inches, Author's photograph.

¹ Eliza Calvert Hall, *Aunt Jane of Kentucky* (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995) [First Print: Little, Brown, and Company, 1907], 59.

² Adrian Forty and Susanne Küchler, *The Art of Forgetting* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1999), 2.

³ *Apo Nanang* translated to grandmother in the Ilocono dialect of the Philippines. We referred to them as rag rugs for two reasons: They were made up of fabric remnants, that is rags, and they served a utilitarian purpose in our household as floor mats in the bathroom and kitchen.

The supported data for this story stem from two primary sources: photographs and interviews. The photographs, taken by my grandmother and mother from their earliest days in Hawaii, are not only vital snapshots into the daily lives of Filipinos in Hawaii, but also confirm that the textiles within the patchwork rugs originally served as garments and household linens. Of the thirty-eight textiles in the rugs, twelve were identifiable in photographs that are dated from 1946 to 1965. This timeline coincides with the period in which my grandparents, Juanito and Catalina, and their six children immigrated to Kauai and lived in the Lihue Sugar Plantation Camp until its disbandment in 1965. This essay, therefore, focuses on these formative years from 1945 to 1965, which I refer to as the Lihue Sugar Plantation period. Additional data were collected from interviews with Juanito and Catalina's five surviving children, which include my mother Josephine, my aunt Warlina, and my uncles Galiardo, Virgilio and Juanito Jr. During the course of the interviews, the five siblings shared their childhood memories, the ideals instilled in them by their parents, and the significance of Hawaii and the Philippines throughout the various stages of their lives.

Structure

The organization of this essay is based on the four structural elements of the rugs themselves with each part coinciding with distinct time phases in the Gonzales family experience.

- **The Face**
With its many textures and colors, the face is the focal point of the rug. Thematically it represents the main Lihue Sugar Plantation Camp Period of 1946 to 1965.
- **The Backing**
In direct contrast to the face, the backing represents the cultural and familial foundation that Juanito and Catalina brought with them from the Philippines. It therefore corresponds with the events leading up to their immigration from 1940 to 1946.
- **The Understructure**
Made up of three distinct patterns, the understructure corresponds with the Gonzales family's first impressions of the diverse ethnic make-up of plantation life in Kauai from 1946 to 1948.
- **The Border**
The single design element that transform the three parts above into a finished rug, the border represents several pivotal events that mark the Gonzales family's full immersion and into American culture.

The Backing: Philippines, 1940-46

When I asked my elder relatives why their parents came to Hawaii, without fail they all had the same simple reply, "They came for a better life." And yet, little could be said about the specific occurrences in the Philippines that compelled Catalina and Juanito to migrate to Hawaii. As is evident from the photograph in figure 2, the backing fabric originally served as curtains in the Gonzales home (fig. 2). Just as the photo shows the original vibrant colors of the backing fabric, the retelling of Catalina and Juanito stories of the Philippines deepen our understanding about their motivation to leave their native Philippine Islands for Hawaii.



Figure 2: Josephine with floral printed backing fabric in background, Kauai, 1963.
Printed with permission, Josephine G. Morris.

Both Juanito and Catalina came from poverty-stricken circumstances. Juanito was born on February 5, 1911 in the coastal village of Tondol in Anda, Pangasinan, where the primary occupations of the region were fishing and salt farming. As a young man, he traveled around the country working not only as a fisherman and salt farmer, but also a tradesman and a certified tailor. Catalina was born on December 8, 1918 in the barrio of Rimos 5 in Luna, La Union, an area in which rice farming was the primary occupation. In 1925, she and her siblings were orphaned. She and her younger brother Pedro were, thereafter, raised by their three oldest sisters. In spite of the fact that she attended school only up to the third grade, Catalina excelled at reading and writing, a skill that would prove to be quite fortuitous many years later.

Juanito and Catalina met in 1940 in the metropolitan mountain resort city of Baguio. She was working as a waitress in a Chinese restaurant and he as a street-side tailor, when she commissioned him to make her a pair of pants in her favorite color, red.⁴ When she came for the finished garment a few days later, Juanito was so mesmerized by her beauty that before he realized his actions, he had kissed her on the cheek. In Catalina's word, "*Nalpasin!* [That was it!]," she felt branded and for the sake of her reputation, she had no alternative but to marry him.

They married on June 14, 1941 in Juanito natal province of Anda, just six months before the Japanese Imperial Army lead a surprise attack on the Philippines forcing the American colonial powers to retreat. Pangasinan, off the coast of the Langayan Gulf, was one of the most strategic naval ports of entry into the Philippines, and became a lucrative market serving military personnel. Thus, rather than returning to their metropolitan life in Baguio City, Juanito and Catalina remained in Anda to take advantage of the wartime market.

During that time, they had two children, Galiardo on April 30, 1942 and Warlina on June 10, 1944. They also gained another son, Santiago, who was born in 1933 from Juanito's mistress twelve years earlier. By the early-1940s, Santiago was of age by Filipino custom to begin learning his father's trade, and so it was only natural that he came to live with Juanito and Catalina. Catalina and Santiago were only fifteen years apart, but they quickly established a strong mother-son relationship that would last throughout their lives.

⁴ I was surprised to learn that in 1940 Catalina was wearing pants, but according to her daughter Josephine, *sapin*, the Ilocano term for pants, is the word Catalina always used. when she told this story. Josephine Morris, interview with author, Torrance, CA, 16 April 2006.

Soon after the Japanese surrendered to Allied forces on September 2, 1945, Juanito and Catalina gathered their children and resettled in Catalina's natal barrio of Rimos 5. It was at this point that Catalina's reading and writing skills proved useful; upon her return she fell into the role as the village scribe. In January 1946, she was the first to read a letter from a distant uncle named Lucas Jimenez. Lucas had migrated to Hawaii as a laborer around 1929, and was writing to inform the family that the Hawaiian Sugar Planters' Association (HSPA) was recruiting Filipino again.⁵ According to a 1916 study conducted by the HSPA, married laborers were more dedicated and responsible on the job than unmarried laborers.⁶ To encourage new migrants to bring their wives or to marry, the HSPA promised safe passage for wives and children, in addition to family housing upon arrival. As a result, in 1946, of the 6000 Filipino workers recruited, 3626 were married.⁷ This was a much higher married-to-unmarried ratio than in previous years. Of the 120,000 Filipinos who immigrated to Hawaii between 1906 and 1935, only a few hundred were wives and children.⁸

As the Philippines suffered the repercussions of WWII, as well as the uncertainties of forthcoming independence, Catalina and Juanito seized this opportunity to improve their circumstances. Implied in the simple statement, "They came for a better life," is the anxiety, excitement and optimism with which the Gonzales family set out for an unknown land.

The Understructure: Kauai, 1946-48

The three textiles that make up the understructure of the patchwork rugs are a visual metaphor for the diverse meeting of cultures that Catalina and Juanito encountered in Hawaii. It is made up of a lively Hawaiian print of ukulele motifs on a black ground, a Japanese *shashiko*-inspired textile of broken white stripes brocaded onto a bluish-black ground and a simple blue and white gingham check.

The plantation system that Juanito and Catalina entered in 1946 had already been well established for over a century. Between 1835 and 1946, approximately 300,000 laborers, primarily men, immigrated to Hawaii to work the sugar cane fields, coming successively from China, Korea, Portugal, Norway, Germany, Puerto Rico, Japan and finally the Philippine Islands. In bringing together these disparate cultural groups to a small chain of islands, a new labor-based community and culture emerged, resulting in the development of a common language, pidgin English, as well as the cross-cultural sharing and melding of foods and customs.

Catalina and Juanito reaped the benefits of this diversity from the very beginning. By some stroke of luck, they secured one of the best family homes in the Lihue camp.⁹ It was equipped with some of the exotic natural delicacies of Hawaii including mango, mountain apple and tangerine trees, and plots for vegetable and flower gardens. In addition, the previous residents,

⁵ 1946 marked the third wave of Filipino labor recruitment by the HSPA.

⁶ Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston, Toronto and London: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 58.

⁷ Brett Melendy, *Asians in America: Filipinos, Koreans, and East Asians* (Boston: Twayne Publishing, 1977), 41.

⁸ Dean Alegado, "The Filipino Community in Hawaii: Development and Change," *Social Process in Hawaii* 33 (1991): 14-18.

⁹ Many thanks to Virgilio Gonzales and Warlina P. Crawford for reproducing an elevation of the Gonzales family's home in Lihue Sugar Plantation Camp

the Suzuki family,¹⁰ had installed many of their traditional comforts from their native Japan, including orchid gardens and a *furó*, a deep vertically oriented bathtub.¹¹

The Gonzales children fondly recall the pleasure at the end of the day of sinking in the *furó*, filled with steaming hot water up to their chins and sloshing over the lip of the tub. On occasion, Juanito and Catalina took baths with the children, but Josephine emphasizes that her parents always maintained their Filipino sense of propriety and never undress completely.¹² While Catalina and Juanito were certainly open to non-Filipino customs, particularly when they were literally in their own backyard, they never forgot their ethnic identity. In reinterpreting others' customs within their own sense of respectability, they were inherently defining what it meant to be a Filipino in Hawaii(fig.3).



Figure 3: (Clockwise from top left) Santiago, Virgilio, Josephine, Juanito, Warlina, Juanito Jr., Catalina and Galiardo, 1948, printed with permission, Josephine G. Morris.

The Face: The Lihue Sugar Plantation Period, 1946-65

Having survived through years of shifting colonial powers in the Philippine Islands, Filipinos in America were well adapted to an ever-changing social and political environment. Rural Filipinos in particular were accustomed to making the most of available resources and had an uncompromisingly strong work ethic. This was certainly true for the Gonzales family, and their ability to adapt throughout the Lihue Sugar Plantation Period is reflected in the wide variety of color, texture and print found in the face of the patchwork rugs.

In total, there are thirty-five distinct textiles in the face, but for the sake of simplicity, the textiles are categorized into four basic design motifs. Each print, or lack therein, conveys a different meaning and as such served unique purposes in the Gonzales household:

¹⁰ Josephine Morris, interview.

¹¹ Takaki describes the traditional comforts Japanese families brought to their camp homes in Hawaii, “They... developed artistic gardens... with flowers and... ‘little rocky pools [with] goldfish’... Determined to have their traditional hot baths, Japanese workers also built *fueros* [deep vertically-oriented bathtubs].” Takaki, *Strangers*, 159.

¹² Josephine interview, April 16, 2006.

- **Solid Colors**
The unadorned simplicity inherent in the solid-colored fabrics suggests that they would have most likely been used for utilitarian purposes, so that thematically these textiles are associated with working at home.
- **Floral Prints**
In contrast to the solids, the floral prints are highly patterned and feminine and would have likely been worn in public for women's dresses and, in Hawaii, as men's dress shirts, so that thematically they are the impetus for a discussion of gender.
- **Stripes and Plaids**
Plaids and stripes have historically been associated with working class attire in many cultures. In this context the plaids and stripes signify issues of labor in the Hawaiian plantation system.
- **Geometric Prints**
Finally, geometric prints have an underlying sense of modernity and liveliness and would likely have been worn as casual celebratory attire. These textiles are therefore a means of discussing cultural ideals, achievement and celebration.

Solid Colors: Home Enterprise

The majority of the plantation laborers were unmarried men, so many women living in the camps took in laundry as an extra source of income. According to Josephine, as soon as the children returned from school or church, the girls immediately changed out of their "public" garments into rather nondescript solid-colored housedresses to help their mother with the loads of washing and ironing from her laundry business. For almost twenty years, Catalina, with the help of the children and Juanito, served as many as twenty regular clients. Every week, the men could expect their laundry to be washed, dried, pressed and mended, as well as picked-up and delivered, for about \$1.00 a week.¹³

While my mother detests ironing now, she fondly recalls, working with her mother and sister, while singing along to Filipino love songs on the radio or, as they say in Hawaii, "talking story."¹⁴ The solid colored textiles in the patchwork rug, thus, reflect the enterprise and comradery that Catalina and numerous plantation camp women, made out of housework.

Floral Prints: Gender

The women may have worn shapeless dresses at home, but Catalina took great pride in dressing her family well for public activities. All of their clothing, from dresses, shirts and slacks down to their most basic undergarments, was handmade. She had a particular love for lively floral prints.

Unlike their counterparts in the mainland, in Hawaii it was acceptable for both men and women to wear floral printed textiles. However, gender distinctions were maintained through

¹³ In a similar account, Juanita Mamaclay recalls, "I had never done laundry in the Philippines, but I did it here... I don't think I ever had a day off." Elizabeth Hahn, *West Kauai's Plantation Heritage* (West Kauai Community Development Corporation: Waimea, 2002), 217.

¹⁴ In addition to the laundry, for an extra charge, Catalina made basic pants, shirts, under-shorts and *kuakua* [lunch] bags for her clients. While she was already a skilled dressmaker before coming to Kauai, Catalina learned from her husband the tailor's art of drafting and cutting patterns. The children remember many nights of their parents leaning over the kitchen table together, drafting patterns and cutting the garments out of yardage purchased at the Lihue Sugar Plantation Store.

sub-classifications of floral prints. Men were more likely to wear graphic Hawaiian floral prints, while women continued to select delicate European-style floral prints.¹⁵ These gender distinctions were particularly apparent in the treatment of daughters versus sons in Filipino families.

In the Gonzales family, Warlina and Josephine were subject to many rules pertaining to proper appearance and behavior that their male siblings were not even aware of. In terms of appearance, whether they were going to school or going to the beach, the Gonzales girls never wore bathing suits and were instructed to stay out of the sun. In terms of behavior, Catalina stood by her self-made axiom of, “Holding hands leads to having babies.”¹⁶ As such, the girls never went anywhere un-chaperoned. Josephine’s childhood friend, Vicky Ramos remembers, “It wasn’t that Josephine never went anywhere un-chaperoned... she never went anywhere!”¹⁷ Josephine was at least allowed to attend her high school prom, but even then, it was a double date with her twin brother, Virgilio, and her date was her cousin, Leroy Tangolin. Virgilio says, “In those day... the girls had to stay home and the boys could do what they wanted. We didn’t think about it then though, because that’s how everybody grew up.”¹⁸

Thus, in the Gonzales family, and in Filipino families in general, men were more involved in Hawaii’s public and visual culture than women and, as such, more rapidly adopted local idiosyncratic fashion. The contrast in the patchwork rugs of Hawaiian versus European floral prints therefore expresses the gender-based behavioral distinctions in Hawaii of the 1950s.

Plaids and Stripes: Labor

In terms of work attire, gingham checked *palaka* shirts, the predecessor to the Aloha shirt, had already gained popularity among plantation laborers and *paniolos*, or Hawaiian ranchers, for almost a century. By the late-1950s and early 1960s, a wide variety of stripes and plaids were the fabric of choice for work shirts.¹⁹ There are several examples of stripes and plaids in the patchwork rugs along with corresponding photographs of Warlina as she is departing for work at the Dole Pineapple Company.

Unlike the men who came to Hawaii on labor contracts, Warlina was a student laborer. By the late 1950s, Hawaii’s sugar industry was in steep decline due to several factors, including the rise of new international beet sugar markets, unionization of the labor force, which increased wages, and an industry shift toward tourism. To combat the rising overhead and exodus of laborers, the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association developed a special agreement with the local high schools in which, during the summer, junior and senior students were offered jobs in the fields and factories. Galiardo, Warlina and Virgilio all took advantage of this opportunity to earn a little money as well as a few hours of freedom from their mother’s watchful eye.

Working for Dole, Warlina enjoyed her first taste of independence, and was determined to take charge of her life. In her junior year, she applied to business-college in Chicago and was accepted. The plaids and stripes in Catalina’s patchwork rugs, therefore, reflect the shifting

¹⁵ Some women did wear Hawaiian floral prints, but they most often second generation residents.

¹⁶ In fact, my mother reiterated the same axiom to me when I was a teenager.

¹⁷ Vicky Ramos, interview with author, 3 July 2006.

¹⁸ Virgilio Gonzales, interview with the author, 21 April 2006.

¹⁹ The traditional characteristic *palaka* shirt is blue and white check fabric with short sleeves. The shirt is believed to have been introduced in Hawaii by Japanese plantation laborers and was widely adopted by plantation workers of all ethnicities.

aspirations and sense of potential between the first and second generations of the Gonzales family.

Geometric Prints: Achievement and Celebration

Perhaps one of the most memorable celebrations of the Gonzales family's Lihue Sugar Plantation Period was Warlina's high school graduation and send-off party in 1962. Several of the textiles in the rugs correspond directly with attire the Gonzales family wore for that event, including the purple and blue geometric-patterned fabric of Catalina's dress and the black and white zigzag patterned fabric of Juanito Junior's shirt (fig. 4). Warlina's celebration was significant because she was the first of the Gonzales and Pacleb families to go on to higher education, fulfilling Catalina and Juanito's highest hopes in coming to this land of plenty.



Figure 4: Warlina's graduation party, (left to right) Catalina, Warlina, Virgilio and Juanito Jr., 1962, printed with permission, Warlina P. Crawford.

As Virgilio and Josephine were preparing for their own college-bound departure to Honolulu in 1965, several major events occurred which would make their experience significantly different from Warlina's. First, in April 1965, the Lihue Sugar Plantation informed the Camp residents that they would soon be dismantling the Camp, leading Catalina and Juanito to purchase their first home.²⁰ This move effectively terminated Catalina's laundry business, which contributed 30% of the family income. The financial situation became dire when, two months after moving in to their new home, Juanito suffered a debilitating stroke, leaving the family with no income at all. Determined to see the twins enroll in college, Catalina took out an emergency loan and sent them on their way, albeit on an extremely tight budget. In Honolulu, Virgilio and Josephine struggled but thrived. The sense of modernity, wit and life inherent in the design of these early-1960s geometric prints therefore reflects the mindset of the Gonzales children, that even in difficult circumstances, options beyond the cane field were theirs if they were willing to work for it.

²⁰ Juanito Jr. was the only one of Catalina and Juanito's six children to live in the second house on Laulona Road. Juanito Gonzales, Jr., telephone interview with author, 9 April 2006.

The Border

Just as the border of Catalina's rugs transform the parts of the cloth into a finished rug, the Gonzales family's full immersion into American culture is marked by key events. Santiago, the eldest, joined the U.S. Army in 1950, to fight in the Korean War. In 1958, Juanito became a naturalized citizen of the United States, a full year-and-a-half before Hawaii had even gained statehood. Galiardo would join the U.S. Navy in 1961 to fight in the Vietnam War. Catalina became thoroughly involved in local Kauai community affairs and Filipino landsman organizations.²¹ When Catalina and Juanito departed from their native Philippines, they had no idea of the extent to which they and their children would participate in the rich history of Hawaii and America. In investing their lives in the community on the local and national level, the Gonzales family declared themselves Filipino-Americans.

Conclusion

By 1966, the Lihue Plantation Camp was gone and all of Catalina and Juanito's children had left home for school or military service. I imagine, a scenario in which, Catalina is in the moving process, sorting through almost 20 years of accumulation, including castoffs of her children's clothing and draperies. Rather than discard them, she packs them up and brings them to her new home, and soon after makes a series of rugs. In the process of cutting the scraps to size and stitching them together she relives shared moments, grieves over her empty nest and the breakup of her camp community, and adjusts to life with her husband's new handicap.

While it may not have occurred to her when she was making up these utilitarian objects, my *Apo Nanang's* rag rugs, serve to memorialize the Lihue Sugar Plantation Period of 1946 to 1965 in the Gonzales family history, as well as the larger Filipino American experience in Hawaii. They are the few tangible links to that rewarding journey Catalina and Juanito, and thousands of other Filipinos, made from the Philippine Island to the Hawaiian Islands. Just as my grandmother stitched together the remnants of her life into a patchwork rug, while researching this project, my family and I have salvaged our memories to celebrate our Filipino American identity.

Acknowledgments

This project is dedicated to the memory of Catalina, Juanito and Santiago Gonzales. This journey has been a truly collaborative effort and I am grateful to all my *ohana*. First and foremost, I thank my mother Josephine who is the shining light behind this project. I am grateful to my Aunt Warlina, and Uncles Galiardo, Virgilio and Juanito Jr. for sharing their childhood memories and memorabilia and their warm hospitality. Thanks are also due to my brother Kimo for his constant insights and full-fledged enthusiasm. Thank you to all my Gonzales cousins, particularly to Sandy, Genevieve, Bryant, Michael and Leilani for their significant contributions and encouragement. Thank you to my father Steven and Auntie Vicky for their wonderful senses of humor, loving support and perspective. Thank you to Darlene for her technical assistance. Thank you to James for, well, everything.

Further Reading

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²¹ Again expressing her love of writing, she served as secretary in all of these organizations.