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Title

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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/60f424zd>

Journal

Aleph, UCLA Undergraduate Research Journal for the Humanities and Social Sciences, 20(0)

ISSN

2639-6440

Author

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Publication Date

2023

DOI

10.5070/L620061628

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**Stories of (S)kin:
Afro-Asian-Indigenous Relationalities
and Anti-Blackness in
Diasporic Filipinx Hawai‘i**

Sean Sugai



Stories of (S)kin: Afro-Asian-Indigenous Relationalities and Anti-Blackness in Diasporic Filipinx Hawai‘i

Sean Sugai

Abstract: In this paper, I explore how Filipinx settlers in occupied Hawai‘i are racialized in proximity to Blackness, in relation to US-centric and colonial articulations of Blackness, and within the settler colonial system of power and domination in the transpacific. Across the Filipinx diaspora, critiques of white skin valorization are conceptualized primarily as colorism where Asian beauty and desirability are routed through the white colonial imagination. However, drawing from ethnographic research on local skin whitening discourse among first and second-generation Filipinx-American settlers in Hawai‘i, I consider how these stories of skin reveal how Filipinx settlers are racialized in proximity to Blackness, where Blackness is denigrated, whiteness reigns supreme, and Kanaka Maoli are entangled in US racial binaries. As such, I move beyond colorism to argue that the processes of racialization indexed by skin whitening is an anti-Black project of US empire that renders dark-skin bodies abject and undesirable. In confronting anti-Blackness in Hawai‘i, I contend that Afro-Asian-Indigenous relationalities challenge enduring racial colonial discourses and contribute to alternative possibilities for Blackness, Indigeneity, and settler allyship to become entwined components of an anti-racist and decolonial Hawai‘i.

Keywords: *Hawai‘i, Blackness, Indigeneity, Filipino-Americans, skin-whitening*

Racialized Bodies, Racialized Skin: “Whitening” the Transpacific

Walking through the aisles of Seafood City—the largest Filipino/Asian supermarket chain in the US and Canada—in my neighborhood of Waipahu, Hawai‘i, I am embraced by an assortment of delicious imported sweet and savory snacks from the Philippines, fresh local produce, and the typical traffic of moving shopping carts and families. The air, chilled by the constant air conditioner, is rich with the muffled voices of passing customers and the mixed scents of fried chicken from Jollibee, freshly baked pastries, and a hint of seafood from the counter in the back corner of the store. As I perused through the store with my high school friend Allyson, a 20 year-old Filipina, we were quick to visit the skincare aisle like museum visitors: solely to look, sometimes to hold, but very rarely to purchase. “They don’t have these in stores like Walmart,” she notes, gesturing to the brightening and lightening cleansers, creams, serums, and moisturizers, “Asian stores just have better products for our skin.”

Among the assortment of products are rows of papaya soap boxes, which has become a widely-accessible and cheap alternative to many expensive skin-lightening creams and procedures (Casillan 2020). One brand of papaya soap, Silka, describes their product as “a natural and effective way to cleanse and whiten your skin...[and to] eliminate dead skin cells for clearer, younger-looking skin.” The description on the box further insists that Silka’s papaya soap strengthens the skin’s barrier function and resiliency against “free radicals,” acting as a conditioning agent for improved softness (see Figure 1).

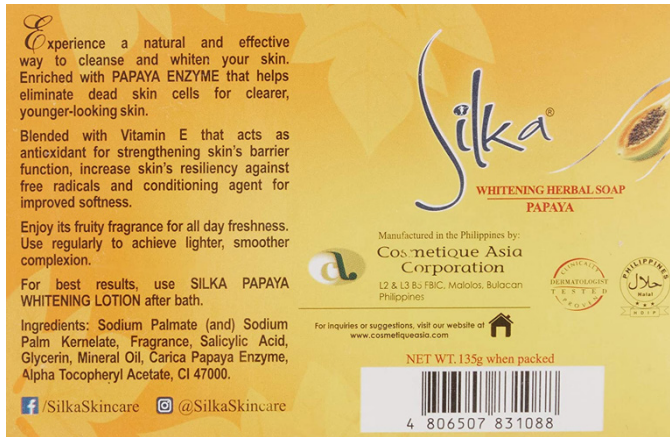


Figure 1. Silka whitening herbal soap product description

At a glance, this product advertises that users can achieve whiter, fresher, softer, and younger-looking skin due to its exfoliating properties. Yet, read through the eyes of Allyson, who notes how these products are predominantly sold in Asian stores, I noticed that the allurements and value of whiteness is packaged and imported through the aspiration of youthfulness, vitality, and ultimately, beauty. On our drive back, I asked Allyson what she meant by Asian stores carrying “better” products for our skin:

A: YouTubers and social media influence us a lot, like, what products to use and buy, but I think Asian stores and products just have better ingredients too, like, they're moisturizing and help with that dewy, glass skin look...I guess that's just the standard for Asian beauty, that flawless, like poreless, dewy, fair skin look.

S: What do you mean by fair skin?

A: I mean like looking white physically. I guess having lighter skin.

S: Do you think that's important or something?

A: I guess so 'cause my [Filipino] family loves fair skin, like, I get plenty compliments from my grandma when I don't go into the sun as much because I turn light. She always used to make comments about my darker skin. It's hella annoying.

In one way, Allyson's reference to social media illuminates how Asian beauty standards are (re)produced through online discourse, popular culture, "mainstream" media, and other virtual mediums; viewed another way, Allyson's point about Asian beauty and its popularity across virtual platforms and physical locations, such as specific markets and stores, gestures toward the racialized processes, discourses, and aesthetics that pin Asian beauty standards against the backdrop of whiteness. As a Filipina, Allyson's quick mention of how her family compliments fair skin and looks down on dark skin also suggests how notions of whitening and lightening are gendered and regulated by the family kinship structure. Policed in the household, yet not exclusively confined to specific localities, the value of whiteness, in this way, hinges on the unfixed and indeterminate position of racialized bodies becoming darker and therefore being treated as undesirable and abject. Put another way, this potential to become darker drives Asian beauty standards towards whiteness and away from notions of darkness and Blackness. Together, the allurements, discourses, and aesthetics of whiteness in beauty reveals the *transpacific* significance of race, that is, how skin makes visible the unstable, pervasive, and fixed notions of race that resonate and reverberate throughout the Pacific, across time, and into the stores, homes, and everyday conversations among Filipinx settlers in Hawai'i.

Drawing from scholar Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu (2021, 8)

who argues that “an investigation into skin can tell us as much about the history of science and aesthetics, of colonialism and capitalism, of dialectics of visibility and invisibility, [of] fixedness and erasure,” I engage with skin through both its material and metaphorical articulations in settler occupied Hawai‘i. “Everything has a surface, a membrane that gives it form by differentiating between inside and outside, below and beyond,” Tu writes, “Most often, we call this surface a skin... calling attention to its function as cover, protection, [and] display” (Tu 2021, 5). According to historical biomedical frameworks of Western science and the field of dermatology, skin emerged as surface conditions, marked by blemishes and diseases whose treatments were usually surface-level and localized, like a bruise, wound, or cut; however, as physicians began to recognize the skin’s capacity to protect from disease and environmental conditions, skin became an organ with its own properties and functions that concealed the hidden workings (and failings) of the body underneath (Tu 2021, 6). Accordingly, skin materialized through the colonial imagination as the seal between the body and the ever changing, unstable external conditions. In a similar gesture, skin emerged metaphorically as a marker of separateness, boundedness, difference, and distinction—racial, gendered, and otherwise along axes of health, beauty, and aesthetics. Put another way, skin became both object and allegory for the scrutiny and tensions between race and beauty work, where Allyson’s comments on that “dewy, glass skin look” emerges as a critical site of material and metaphorical articulations for gendered and racialized Asian beauty.

Skin, in other words, is not simply where beauty and race clash and are contested, but instead, it is the material and metaphorical site that bears witness to the processes of gendered racialization that regulate, govern, and control the stakes around how we have fixed and mapped race onto skin and into standards of beauty. Knowing that skin continues to bear the wear and tear of time, of labor and leisure, and of the memories, histories, and stories of struggle, I ask: what does it mean for a body to be cleansed of darkness and its potential to become dark? How might metaphorically “opening” up the body to read stories of

skin reveal the stakes between race and beauty? And how does engaging skin as both material and metaphor contend with the fraught decolonial and relational struggles against US empire, anti-Blackness, and Indigenous dispossession?

To frame this thinking, I consider both ethnographic encounters and scholarly work on the pervasiveness of whiteness in settler-occupied Hawai‘i and across the broader Pacific context. According to comparative race scholars Nitasha Tamar Sharma and Jinah Kim (2022), the recent interventions in Pacific Islands studies and Trans-Pacific studies across Oceania that have surged the urgency to address how militarism, settler colonialism, and white supremacy are routed and related through colonial racial formations. As interdisciplinary fields, Pacific Islands studies centers Indigeneity and the Indigenous/settler binary as central paradigms of analysis, whereas Trans-Pacific studies focuses on migration, diaspora, resettlement, and militarism. At the nexus of these fields, Sharma and Kim contend that a deeper engagement with race, in particular Blackness, can reveal how imperialism and settler colonialism structure belonging and difference and how movements for sovereignty, resistance, and demilitarization shape racial solidarity and decenter whiteness (Sharma and Kim 2022). From fading scars and darkened skin to the attempts to alter the inevitable, these stories, memories, and histories of race are mapped both materially and metaphorically onto skin. Turning to a Pacific context, I now consider how these mappings of race bear witness to the unstable and dynamic processes through which we have come to read racialized bodies and skin.

The State of Race in the Aloha State: Racism in Paradise

According to militarized and capitalist US imaginaries, Hawai‘i is a geopolitical region defined as a group of islands located in Oceania, also known as Moana nui (the great, expansive ocean) in ‘Olelo Hawai‘i (the Hawaiian language) and the “Pacific” in English. At the same time, Hawai‘i is an illegally occupied settler colony with colliding and enduring histories of military occupation, extractive capitalism, forced migration, dispossession, and anti-immigration, which continue to shape

diasporic and Indigenous experiences, as well as movements in and out of the Hawaiian Islands (Saramosing and Labrador 2022). In Hawai‘i, race is a socially contested and politically charged category of power and difference, whereas ethnicity is the central paradigm through which local people self-identify, recognize each other, and share identities, culture, and social relations (Sharma 2022, 176). Historically, Hawai‘i has been conceptualized as “the model of US multiculturalism,” a “post-racial paradise” of “colonial progress,” and a racially harmonious melting pot in which differences among racial minorities are flattened under a dominant “local identity” (Altemus-Williams and Hobro 2021; Labrador 2018). According to Jonathan Okamura (2013), this “local identity” is a panethnic consciousness that emerged during the pre-World War II period of plantation labor recruitment where working-class Native Hawaiians and settler groups, including Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans, Okinawans, Portuguese, and Puerto Ricans immigrants, shared a collective subordinate social status to the dominant white settler oligarchy (Okamura 2013, 162-163).

Invoking this panethnic identity and consciousness around localness connotes a cultural tolerance, which has been upheld through the popularized “Aloha spirit” that is predicated on idealizing ethnic relationships without stereotypes or prejudice. Taken together, this panethnic consciousness of shared and mixed culture and the pervasiveness of the “Aloha spirit” provide the foundation to what Jonathan Okamura (2013) considers the structural dimensions of local identity that “is based on the categorical opposition between groups considered local and those considered nonlocal, including Haoles, immigrants, military, tourists, and foreign investors” (Okamura 2013, 165). More plainly, “local” refers to people who “are fluent in cultural practices that are recognized by others as Hawai‘i-grounded ways of being and doing... [and] having cultural and codified knowledge central to creating and expressing a sense of ‘we-ness’ among Hawai‘i’s people” (Sharma 2021 84).

However, this “we-ness” of a shared collective category of “being local” tends to homogenize and in turn, flatten out differences between Asian immigrants and Kanaka Maoli (Native

Hawaiians). For example, claiming localness obfuscates racial difference by privileging this uniform panethnic consciousness; likewise, localness has also received criticism from Kanaka Maoli scholar-activists for contributing to Indigenous erasure by lumping Kanaka Maoli among the broader local ethnic groups (Trask 2000). In this way, localness privileges ethnicity through the illusion of an idealized multicultural and post-racial paradise, effectively erasing racial inequalities and masking settler colonial repertoires across the Hawaiian Islands. Simply put, the everyday articulations of localness circumvents racism and settler colonialism.

Together, the images of Hawai‘i “as a multiracial paradise, commoditized touristic scenes of white sandy beaches, swaying palm trees, picture-perfect sunsets, and highly sexualized hula girls and surfer boys” operate in relation to local identity formation to mask the enduring legacies of occupation, territorialization, and Indigenous dispossession in Hawai‘i (Saramosing and Labrador 2022, 216). In effect, I consider the recent “oceanic turn” in Filipinx Studies to consider how the oceanic—as method, ethic, and praxis—can bring together geographies, regions, spatial specificities, and places to “reimagine the decolonial potentiality of being in relation to the oceans, wai (water), and ‘āina (land) we live on and are in relation to” (Achacoso 2022, 393). Specifically, this oceanic turn, marked by varying diasporic experiences, migrations, identities, and entanglements with US empire, exemplifies a place-based and de-continental understanding of diasporic Filipinx and Indigenous relationalities that contend with the enduring histories of migration, racialization, dispossession, and resettlement across archipelagic spaces, like the Philippines and Hawai‘i. In other words, this oceanic turn attends to the overlapping geopolitics of race and Indigeneity in the transoceanic.

By centering the oceanic as method, ethic, and praxis to theorize the related histories of US empire and settler violence, however, I want to underscore scholar Katherine Achacoso’s critique on the limitations within Oceanic Filipinx studies, specifically cautioning that “it is problematic to impose colonial remapping of Filipinx and Pacific Islander relations that undermine native Pacific

relationalities” (Achacoso 2022, 391). Following this approach, I bring together diasporic Filipinx settler, Black, and Kanaka Maoli histories and entanglements with US empire in Hawai‘i not to argue that these histories neatly map onto one another. Rather, in this paper, I engage with this oceanic turn in Filipinx Studies to bring together Filipinx immigration, resettlement, and concepts of localness within the context of skin whitening in Hawai‘i to understand how these histories of dispossession, occupation, and racialization are materially and metaphorically mapped onto skin in uneven, yet related, ways. More specifically, by encountering the undesirability and abjection to dark-skin in a geopolitical region rich with multicultural logics of race and beauty, I situate skin as the site of inter-diasporic struggles against US empire, anti-Blackness, and Indigenous dispossession in settler occupied Hawai‘i.

First, I explore the history of dark-skin abjection across the Pacific, specifically among Filipinx settlers, to locate how logics of race were mapped onto racialized bodies and used to justify racial colonial violence and Indigenous dispossession. Then, I introduce how critiques of white skin valorization across the Filipinx diaspora are conceptualized primarily as colorism where Asian beauty, belonging, and desirability are routed through the white colonial imagination. By using an ethnographic sensibility about localized skin whitening discourse, I overlay the relational histories of dispossession to argue that the processes of racialization indexed by skin whitening undergird a specific anti-Black project of US empire that renders dark-skin bodies abject and undesirable in the transpacific, from the Philippines to Hawai‘i. Moreover, by centering the processes of racialization, I contend that being racialized, not *as* but in relation to Blackness, places Filipinx settlers in varying “proximity to Blackness,” a term I use to encompass the unfixed and indeterminate position that brings together how race and beauty are indexed through stories of skin as either desirable or undesirable, as abject or acceptable. These stories offer retellings and alternative histories to the peculiar ways in which Filipinx settlers in Hawai‘i are ultimately racialized in proximity to Blackness, in relation to US-centric and colonial articulations of Blackness, and within

the settler colonial system of power and domination. Through engaging with these histories, memories, and stories of skin, I conclude by returning to skin as both material and metaphor for connectivity and relationality, as opposed to an embodied marker of difference, distinction, and separation. I consider how these stories of skin stitch together histories of collective struggle to theorize Afro-Asian-Indigenous relationalities, which decenters whiteness and generates alternative possibilities for Blackness, Indigeneity, and settler allyship to become entwined components of an anti-racist and decolonial Hawai‘i.

On Home, Methods, and Participants

Born and raised in Hawai‘i, I am the son of a first-generation immigrant Filipina mother and a third-generation Japanese father, which means that I am Filipinx-Japanese and neither Native Hawaiian nor Black. Throughout my childhood, I never took a significant notice of my race as Asian, and conversations about race were isolated in the classroom, particularly US and world history courses, or in the evening news about the continental US. Due to this isolation, the realities of race and racism felt like historically suspended concepts rather than structuring categories of power and difference that permeate throughout everyday life. This research emerges from this lack of engagement with race and how the purported colorblindness on the local level shapes the persistence and erasure of anti-Black racism in Hawai‘i.

Through formal and conversational interviews with first- and second-generation Filipinx settlers on O‘ahu, Hawai‘i, I explore how the firsthand and/or translated (that is, passed down from first-generation parents, grandparents, or relatives) experiences of immigration and resettlement influence race, place, localness, and political relations in O‘ahu. The majority of my participants (n=15) are women between 20 to 40 years old and use pseudonyms in this writing unless they explicitly requested to be named in order to give credit for their artwork and writing. From June to September 2022, I was welcomed into the homes, backyards, and dining tables of Filipinx families in the regions of Waipahu, Ewa Beach, Waianae, Kapolei, Pearl City, Aiea, and

other parts of West and Central O‘ahu. According to the 2021 Census, the racial demographics in Waipahu, where I was born and raised, are 3.9% white, 0.5% Black or African American, 14.6% Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders, 6.6% Hispanic or Latino, and 67.8% Asian, of which is 55.5% Filipinx (U.S. Census Bureau). Despite being categorized as an urban city with a prevalent Filipinx history tracing back to the 1910s plantation era and the formation of multigenerational homes, Waipahu and the broader West O‘ahu region have been underrepresented in Filipinx and Pacific Islands Studies in understanding how race relations and histories of colonial rule shape perceptions of Blackness and the treatment of Black folks across the Hawaiian Islands.

While I formally interviewed fifteen participants, I discussed the content and scope of my research to dozens of people whenever the context fit the occasion, such as when my interlocutors brought the topic up. From community events, political gatherings, and barbecues to more intimate conversations at bars, restaurants, and even funerals, I spoke about my research topic, often summarized as “anti-Blackness in the Filipinx community.” whenever possible. Being born and raised in Hawai‘i, my presence at these events was welcomed and expected, with conversations that started with my time in college and what brings me back home. When I told folks about my research, I often received mixed reactions, from praise to a raised eyebrow. One Filipino man probed my research topic by asking “Racism? It’s not like we’re African American or Micronesian.” A Filipina woman, who immigrated to Hawai‘i from the Philippines after she graduated from college at 23-years old, mentioned that “Hawai‘i doesn’t have those problems like over there,” which gestured to her experiences with colorism in the Philippines and the continental US. Meanwhile, Filipinx youth and some Filipinx community organizers tended to understand and affirm my research, expressing how this research is “needed especially in a place like Hawai‘i.” Indeed, these discontinuities and tensions about race reveal how misunderstood it actually is. Not only do these varied reactions demonstrate how perceptions of race distort the realities and existence of racism, but it also

helped to structure my analysis of racialized Asian beauty.

Through sharing stories over coffee, drinks, and food and sometimes heated debates about race and racism, I focus on racialization in my analysis as opposed to race. Whereas race refers to particularities and categories within shifting hierarchies of power, I focus on racialization to consider how the interplay between individual, group, state policies, and national movements alter the landscape of race and anti-Black racism in Hawai‘i. While this work engages with traditional anthropological methods, combining participant observation with semi-structured in-depth interviews and archival research, I center my analysis toward racialization, as opposed to scoping attitudes and perceptions of race, in order to examine the various context in which meanings and valences of race emerge and are upheld in everyday life.

My consideration of racialization shifts attention toward the processes, context, and contours through which skin whitening is interrelated, oftentimes contested, and routed through the broader project of race and transpacific empire-making. In doing so, I use each formal and informal interaction with my interlocutors to chart the multiple settings and relationships in which Filipinx settlers construct knowledge about, contribute to, and transform race and racism in Hawai‘i. While the racialization of Filipinx settlers is mediated through the production of the historical, geopolitical, and contingent realities of race, this does not deny the significance of other processes of identification, such as class, ethnicity, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. At the same time, however, my consideration toward racialization contends with how race is the necessary category through which structural hierarchies of changing economies (tourism and militarism, for example), migration and immigration, gender dynamics, and other configurations are made legible in settler occupied Hawai‘i. The location of this project—O‘ahu, Hawai‘i—also affords ethnographic and historical contributions to the processes of racialization by engaging with the roots, routes, and relations that weave together racial formation and settler colonial ideologies within a distinct geopolitical region. As such, I explore racialization from a place-based analysis while also attending to the various contexts and contours through which

race and (anti-)Blackness emerge and are contested in everyday and political life.

While this work is housed in anthropology, I approach this ethnography knowing the harm the discipline has enacted on people of color, particularly Indigenous people in the Americas, the Pacific, and across the globe. Drawing inspiration from comparative race and ethnic studies scholar Nitasha Tamar Sharma, who also has familial ties but no genealogical connection to Hawai‘i, I approach this work with the tools of anthropology but with the political and intellectual motivations of contributing to the work of Pacific Islands, Transpacific, and Afro-Asian studies in order to disrupt the anthropological canon that has distilled the salience, vibrance, and resistance of these communities into the dehistoricized “Other.” This research brought me back home, afforded me the privilege to “make the familiar strange,” as we are taught to do in anthropology, and allowed me to breathe new life and meaning into my academic and intellectual pursuits.

Unsettling Histories of Colonization, Importation, and Racialization: How Do Filipinx Settlers “Fit” in the Pacific?

Filipinxs settled in the Hawaiian Islands in 1906 as labor recruits for the Hawaii Sugar Planters Association and shortly thereafter experienced denigrating characterizations as “poke-knives” from the Honolulu Police Department because of the alleged ways young Filipino men used knives to harm each other (Okamura 2010, 497). This violent depiction of Filipinxs in Hawai‘i can be traced back to the Philippines after annexation by the US in 1898 where official and popular discourse “racialized Filipinos as less than human, portraying them as savages, rapists, uncivilized beings, and even as dogs and monkeys,” demonstrating the sexist and racist ways in which Filipinxs were discriminated against in the Philippines and in the Hawaiian islands (Espiritu 2003, 51). Further demonization of Filipinxs in Hawai‘i appeared in *Temperament and Race* written by psychologists Stanley Porteus and Marjorie Babcock in 1926. As a purported study on “the importance of the temperamental

qualities in *national* or *racial* character and to describe some attempts to measure and compare some of these traits in various ‘races’ in Hawai‘i,” Porteus and Babcock interviewed twenty-five people, all of whom were white, to gather their “social ratings” of six major races in Hawai‘i, where the “white race” represented the normative psychological standard (Okamura 2010, 498). In their study, Porteus and Babcock contended that:

Filipinos represent a fine example of a race in an adolescent stage of development. They exhibit all the signs of imbalance and temporary mal-adjustment that many adolescents show. The marks of their departure from the normal balance of maturity are to be seen in their egocentric attitude, in their rather obtrusive habits and desire for personal recognition, in their super-sensitiveness, love of display, and noisy self-expression... Obviously, these defects must interfere seriously with good judgment and a balanced and sane reaction to affairs in general. (Porteus and Babcock 1926, 67)

Porteus and Babcock’s description asserts a pacified view of Filipinxs, claiming that they think and behave like children and exhibit psychological defects through their “mal-adjustment” and lack of “good judgment” and “sane action.” Data from court convictions between 1910 and 1924 was extrapolated to inform the conclusion that Filipinxs “committed 52 per cent of murders, 43 per cent of sex offenders, 36 per cent of gambling offences and 28 per cent of burglaries” (Okamura 2010, 498). Rather than contextualize these numbers among the predominant youth and pervasive masculinity in the Filipinx population, the authors contended that the “Filipino crime wave” was due to their “primitive” and “explosive extrovert temperament” which positioned Filipinxs as the violent, uncivilized, and perpetual foreigner in Hawai‘i’s plantation era history (Okamura 2010, 498; Porteus and Babcock 1926; see also Anderson 1984; Fuchs 1961; Reinecke 1979). Indeed, these racist stereotypes of Filipinxs as

temperamental and violent carried over into the popular media, specifically through one of the largest and most prolific Japanese newspapers in Honolulu during the mid-1920s, *Hawaii Hochi*, which wrote about Filipinxs as inferior, alien, and a source of cheap labor:

Filipinos will eagerly avail themselves of every opportunity to grab jobs by underbidding the citizen labor... That is the reason that thousands of our own people, Portuguese, Hawaiians, Japanese, and Chinese are unable to work... [Filipinos] herd together in little tenement rooms like sardines in a can, living in the barest squalor... [and] save money on wages that would mean starvation to any American... Things have come to a point where American citizens, born and raised here in what is assumed to be an American community, find that there is not any room for them in their own land because it has been flooded with recruited labor from an alien country!... Filipinos are of an alien race, of a stock that does not fit in with our social system (1930)

According to the white settler plantation owners, Filipinxs were seen as inferior, incapable, and lacking the judgment to self-govern; however, according to other groups such as the Japanese, Filipinxs were viewed as greedy, inhuman laborers capable of living “like sardines in a can,” surviving “on wages that would mean starvation to any American,” and belonging to “an alien race.” During the 1920s, Hawai‘i was described “as a place that offered Asian laborers economic opportunities, a political haven from universal conscription or political persecution, or a site from which they believed they could better sustain nationalist struggles in their homelands” (Okamura 2008, 6). On the plantation, however, Filipinxs laborers, among other Asian labor groups, experienced anti-Asian racism and dehumanization, being “referred to as ‘cattle,’ viewed as ‘instruments of production,’ and ordered as ‘supplies’ along with ‘fertilizer’” (Okamura 2008, 7).

Although Hawai‘i was described as a place of opportunity and a haven for Asian laborers, the plantation system, which acted as the economic base for US empire, also became a site that normalized anti-Filipinx rhetoric into everyday life. Rendered as the racialized “Other” from both the white settler authorities and from other racial groups, Filipinx were not only subject to imported racist ideologies but also viewed as a commodified object of colonial power in the plantation. In this way, the institutionalization of plantation labor in Hawai‘i through the recruitment of colonized peoples, particularly Filipinx settlers, reified the racial colonial order of the settler state.

Indeed, Nitasha Tamar Sharma (2015, 18) writes that “White colonialists distinguished themselves from their Filipino and Indian subjects... Filipinos in the Philippines and the U.S. were bestialized as ‘Brown monkeys’ and ... [racialized] as perpetual foreigners, outsiders to the nation [where] their social locations are to be understood in relation to the foundational Black-White binary rooted in US slavery and to indigeneity.” Operating across and between oceans, the racialization of Filipinx settlers is an example of how US empire is mapped throughout the diaspora, effectively creating geographically, regionally, and culturally distinct diasporic identities. In Hawai‘i, Filipinx diasporic identity is indeed funneled through claims of localness, indexing how the legacies of colonialism and conquest in the Philippines inform the racialized position within structural hierarchies in the diaspora. In this way, the formation of Filipinx as “Other” in Hawai‘i is not an isolated case of racialization, but rather a product of US empire that strings together the colonization in the Philippines and the importation of Filipinx labor into Hawai‘i. Subsequently, these racial categories shaped by racist ideologies and colonization reflect the intermediary hierarchical position diasporic Filipinx occupy within the imaginary of global white supremacy that makes them neither Black nor (fully) white.

Stories of Skin: Race, Belonging, and Whiteness in Settler Occupied Hawai‘i

Engaging with this intermediary racial position of

Filipinx in Hawai‘i, I explore how the processes of racialization indexed by skin whitening are historically contingent and socially refracted through the discourses of whiteness among kin. In the multigenerational Filipinx community, conversations about skin color are ubiquitous and often connected to conversations around beauty, belonging, and desire. For Filipinx settlers who are born and raised in Hawai‘i, their childhood memories within the household, at school, among family, in the stores, and especially in the sun are laden with comments about their dark skin and the possibility or risk of becoming darker from their immigrant parents and relatives. A 23-year-old Ilokana woman named Maria who came to Hawai‘i when she was 9 years old recalls how she was taught at a young age about her skin color and the dangers of being in the sun:

“You know, the typical ‘you can’t stay in the sun for too long’... Like I was taught to actually cover up to make sure I was not getting too dark. And I would remember being compared...that I would be darker than my cousin because I am always in the sun and they are always inside... My nieces and nephews would also talk about wanting to use skin whitening products like papaya soap and I would see my Aunty giving them products. She would use papaya soap all the time.”

Maria’s recollection of avoiding the sun alongside her family’s use of papaya soap demonstrates how skin whitening and lightening is an everyday practice of both distancing oneself from having dark skin and aspiring toward white features, traits, and aesthetics. In her research on the racial mappings of the Pacific and the colonial invention of race, Kanaka Maoli scholar Maile Arvin (2019) articulates the simultaneity of anti-Blackness and anti-Indigenous logic in reifying settler colonial ideologies of white racial hegemony in Polynesia. Namely, she argues that the “logic of possession through whiteness” expresses how both Polynesia (the place) and Polynesians (the people) are positioned as “almost white” to allow white settlers to claim Indigeneity and

to naturalize white settler presence and belonging in Polynesia (Arvin 2019, 3). Through this logic, Polynesians possessing whiteness became routed through anti-Black and anti-Indigenous rhetoric that juxtapose the explicitly racist discourses of Melanesians as dark-skinned savages against the “almost white” Polynesians. This rhetoric, as summarized by Kanaka Maoli scholar Hi‘ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart (2022, 16), of being “almost white, at times too brown, but never close enough for self-governance” ultimately emerged through the ways Blackness was used to undermine claims to Indigeneity, signaling how racial settler knowledge of Blackness ruptured and ran counter to Indigeneity.

Across the Filipinx diaspora, both in the Pacific and beyond, ideologies of white skin valorization have been inscribed on the body through colorism, which is defined as “discriminatory treatment of individuals falling within the same ‘racial’ group on the basis of skin color” (Herring et al. 2004). Among diasporic Filipinx settlers like Maria, colorism is more specifically defined as valorizing light and fair skin complexion, primarily due to the 300-year Philippine history of colonization from Spain, followed by a half century of US colonialism, and another half century of US neo-colonial domination (Rondilla and Spickard 2007, 71). While Maria’s story of avoiding the sun, being afraid of becoming darker, and using papaya soap to be lighter can be viewed as colorism, I read these instead as processes of racialization that position Filipinx settlers within broader structures of anti-Blackness and settler colonialism that render dark-skin bodies as abject and undesirable. While colorism, as Angela P. Harris (2009, 2) explains, “operates to sometimes confound and restructure racial hierarchies,” I gesture toward the broader interplay between beauty work and empire that informs Filipinx skin whitening across the transpacific.

Indeed, the desire for skin whitening stems from colorism, but for Filipinx settlers in Hawai‘i who have historically wielded less capital and been more distanced from whiteness than Japanese and Chinese settlers, the practice of and discourses surrounding skin whitening is also complexly embedded within the geopolitical context of settler occupied Hawai‘i through

dialogues of contested Blackness and Indigeneity. In one way, Arvin’s “logic of possession through whiteness” identifies how anti-Blackness and anti-Indigenous logics are inextricably linked through the settler colonial project. In a similar gesture, I contend that skin whitening among Filipinx settlers illuminates how the aspiration toward whiteness is an embodied marker of the settler colonial project that (re)produces dark-skin bodies as abject and undesirable. That is, while race cannot be reduced to solely skin color, this abjection and undesirability of dark skin reveal how Filipinx bodies are racialized according to the continental US Black/white racial binary, where Blackness is denigrated and whiteness reigns supreme. By extending beyond colorism and toward the processes of skin whitening in the Pacific, this consideration of skin whitening demonstrates how Filipinx settlers are, what I argue, racialized in “proximity to Blackness.”

Rather than restate that skin whitening among Filipinx settlers is colorist, I expand on “the logic of possession through whiteness” to consider Filipinx “proximity to Blackness” in order to illustrate how localized skin whitening discourse emerged through the anti-Black project of US empire across the Pacific. In response to Philippine interactions with US empire, Filipina anthropologist Dada Docot (2020) theorizes that diasporic Filipinx “absorbed the discourses about the universal ‘savagery’ of the colonized Other... [which] shaped [their] perceptions about [their] own brownness/darkness, and thereon also instilled stereotypes about Black people as another breed of ‘savages.’” Considering the intermediary racial position of Filipinx as neither Black nor fully white, Docot extols how such positioning—and proximity to Blackness—shapes Filipinx perceptions of Brownness and their contentious relationship to Blackness. In this way, not only is skin color an embodied social marker of difference, but it also performs as a racial parameter by which beauty standards orient, control, and manage bodies toward whiteness. A 22-year-old second-generation Filipina named Katrina Bersamin who was born and raised in Pearl City, Hawai‘i and has roots in Camiling, Tarlac in the Philippines illustrates these tensions of skin as she interrogates white beauty standards in her poem:

*Why don't I look like them?
Eyes hazel brown
skin fair without criticism
nose sharp enough to be admired*

*Why don't I get treated like them?
Always glamorized
not afraid to show off their beauty
never having peculiar stares
but admiration*

*Why am I harsh on myself?
For not looking the way they look
for having brown skin
and being a rare vision
as others idolize those who fit into our society's beauty standards*

*I should be proud
of the person I am
and the person I grew into*

*I am unique
with dark brown eyes
that are innocent when I smile*

*I am beautiful
with a pure soul
that compliments my charm*

*I am a Morena beauty
with a complexion that glistens
as it gets hit by the sun*

*Yet why
am I still put down by others
for the way I look?*

While not explicitly mentioning race, Katrina's poem about beauty standards indexes the interrelatedness between race, in particular Blackness and Brownness, and belonging in one's own skin and to their kin. As she questions herself for not looking "like them" and for "being a rare vision," Katrina implicitly draws attention to the ways in which perceptions of beauty and belonging are routed through the white, fair-skinned, and often exoticized feminine body in order to be legible to the white, cisheterosexual, and colonial masculine gaze. Although she includes the various stanzas of affirmation, stating that "I am unique," "I am beautiful," and "I am a Morena beauty," Katrina ends the poem with a provoking question, leaving the reader to think about how a person with such admiration and comfort with themselves, in their own skin and among their own kin, can feel criticized for the way they look. As the interview from family backgrounds and career aspirations to the contents of the poem, Katrina was quick to note that she was inspired to write this poem because of her relative's comments about her being "too dark" compared to her light-skin Filipino cousins:

"So it was hard because it wasn't my parents. It was more so my relatives... I was the only dark skinned cousin out of my first cousins. It's because my two [other first] cousins, they are half-white. So, you know, it does make them that, like, fair complexion. It's really hard because my poem was literally dedicated to, like, me comparing myself to my lighter cousin."

Katrina's comparison to her cousin, like many households, is an all too familiar experience. However, this desire and appeal toward white skin, as well as disdain toward dark skin, is not only policed through the kinship relationships within the family, but it also emerges through the ways in which Black people are also implicated in these racist comments. As Katrina recalled these negative perceptions of dark skin and how she felt constantly compared by her light-skin relatives and grandparents, she was reminded of her grandmother's reaction to her Black friend:

“Growing up, you recognize, like, anti-Blackness. I remember my grandmother when she first met my friend who was Black. She didn’t know how to react, but, like, I didn’t really blame her because, like, she did grow up that way, you know? She grew up, because she is more light and fair skinned, she grew up knowing like, ‘oh, this is like, this is like beautiful to me,’ you know? So, she would look at him a certain way, but in my head, I was kind of just like, ‘what are you thinking? Like, don’t say anything.’”

Considering these contexts of skin and kin, the racist local discourses about dark skin as abject and undesirable in the Filipinx community are situated within, if not entirely drawn from, being in proximity to Blackness. By avoiding the sun, using skin whitening products like papaya soap, perpetuating negative perceptions about dark skin, and discriminating against Black folks, Filipinx settlers are constantly negotiating their proximity to Blackness, which gestures toward the idea that skin whitening is not necessarily about aspiring toward whiteness but more astutely distancing oneself from Blackness. These discourses, activities, and rhetoric of dark skin as abject and undesirable call attention to how the settler colonial processes of racialization indexed by skin whitening are, at once, inextricably anti-Black and anti-Indigenous. In this way, skin whitening discourses among Filipinx settlers operate vis-à-vis global processes of anti-Blackness that denigrate ideas of Blackness, Black culture, and Black people, ultimately rupturing cross-racial relations. Indeed, white skin valorization in the Filipinx community is an anti-Black project of empire that renders dark-skin people as abject and undesirable. In recognizing that these are distinct, yet interlocking, logics of the settler colonial project in Hawai‘i, however, proximity also indexes a relational and fluid social position, as opposed to a static and fixed racial identity. In other words, this means that the underlying anti-Black and anti-Indigenous rhetoric of skin whitening must be addressed, challenged, and undone together and in relation to the broader struggle against empire.

Afro-Asian-Indigenous Relationalities: What Lies Beyond Race

While discrimination against dark skin is pervasive among Filipinx settlers in the diaspora, it is not ubiquitous. Recently, there have been a surge of Filipinx scholars who center the presence and existence of anti-Blackness and stand in solidarity with Black liberation and Native Hawaiian sovereignty (Saramosing and Labrador 2022). Drawing from this emerging body of oceanic Filipinx scholarship, my analysis of proximity to Blackness calls attention to why some Filipinx settlers denigrate dark skin and Black people and how others, like Katrina, clash with these historical and ongoing racial tensions to reveal the instability of settler colonialism. At once, this relational ethic of proximity locates Filipinx settlers—and people of color, more generally—within anti-Black and anti-Indigenous systems of oppression, while also bringing attention to the dynamic processes through which Black and Kanaka Maoli struggles for liberation become legible to non-Black people of color. In other words, proximity invokes an ethical form of relationality, which recognizes, rather than flattens out, the multiplicity of histories, geographies, and politics that have been used to rupture cross-racial solidarities.

By focusing on relationality, I refuse to presume that the struggles of Kanaka Maoli, Black, and Asian settlers are fixed, as well as collapsible and commensurable to one another. Instead, I situate Asian settler colonialism, anti-Blackness, and Indigenous dispossession as projects of empire that operate both distinctly and in relation to each other to animate white supremacy within the Pacific and beyond. Drawing from Native studies scholars Tiffany Lethabo King, Jenell Navarro, and Andrea Smith (2020, 2-13) who argue that “...relationality suggests something *otherwise*...[something that] seeks to *feel* where we come from to arrive at where we want to be, together,” I imagine “Afro-Asian-Indigenous relationalities” as this *otherwise* where varying relationships to power and proximities braid shared stories of struggle against empire in ways that become legible to one another.

Through engaging with transoceanic skin whitening discourses, practices, and histories from the Philippines to Hawai'i, I reveal how stories of skin engage with the fraught and relational decolonial struggles against US empire, anti-Blackness, and Indigenous dispossession. Materialist approaches to skin calls attention to the processes of racialization that inform how we care for, maintain, and alter skin; metaphorically, this reorients and challenges us to read racialized bodies and skin not as separateness, boundedness, and difference but as connectivity and relationality, where beauty and race can be reworked to decenter whiteness as the ubiquitous backdrop of Asian beauty. Put another way, skin as material makes visible the tensions and conflicts that engender the everyday struggles of altering one's skin, enduring denigrating comments about one's appearance, and revisiting these memories of abjection and undesirability. As a metaphor, skin maps the terrain, geographies, and historical tensions of race where settler colonialism and US empire concurrently racialize dark-skin bodies—Filipinx, Black, Kanaka Maoli, and otherwise—as abject and undesirable. In this way, proximity as a relational framework contends with the material and metaphorical articulations of racialization, where our skin reveals, rather than conceals, the enduring impacts of settler colonial violence and how we might reroute beauty to contend with, embrace, and ultimately repair what has been altered, bleached, or cleansed.

As we continue to grapple with the struggles for anti-racism, decolonization, and Indigenous sovereignty in Hawai'i and across the Pacific, I offer relationality as a tool for resistance and an ethic for “thick solidarity” as scholars Roseann Liu and Savannah Shange write in response to the 2014 killing of Akai Gurley, a Black New Yorker, by Chinese American police officer Peter Liang. “It is a thickness,” writes Liu and Shange (2014, 196), “that can withstand the tension of critique, the pulling back and forth between that which we owe and that which we share.” Indeed, by attending to proximity and centering relationality, we begin to share, feel, and build alternative possibilities for resistance, community, and care across lines of difference and beyond impasses of race.

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