

# Touching Community: The Risky and Impressive Work of an Experimental Community

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This essay describes my collaboration with a community-based organization of women serving a predominantly, but not exclusively, immigrant and diasporic Filipino community in the county of Hawai'i to co-create an education project. It offers an analysis of two seemingly divergent communities and their presumably distinct practices and linguistic registers: social foundations expertise and the production of academic knowledge and practitioner expertise and community base organizing. With a focus on the processes, challenges, and risks of this collaboration, I show the formation of an experimental community in which a group of women with different professional backgrounds, skills, interests, and political outlooks came together to create an actionable project: a community education conference that addresses a pressing community issue and discuss the social knowledge that unfolded as a result.

There are two aims of this essay. The first is to illustrate how theoretic-practice is enacted in a space that is deemed "non-academic." The second is to bring that non-academic space of learning into the network of pedagogical discursive practices. I do this to encourage a broader view of education. This broader view proceeds from the belief that education cannot be confined to what happens in schools and classrooms but is a situated human activity embedded in everyday social life (Levinson et al. 2000, 5).

The ideas for conceptualizing the collaborative effort draw primarily on the conceptual work of philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (1991) on community, Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman (2014) on relationality, and the late social theorist Gillian Rose (1997) on feminist research. The essay begins with a consideration of formulations on the problem of community and a discussion of feminist praxis. Next, I elaborate on the two face-to-face meetings that were held in December 2012 and February 2013 and the community education conference that took place in March

2013. I end with an evaluation of our collaboration and its transformative effects.

## Community

The notion of an experimental community is not simply a fixed location or place but a site of relations characterized by temporal and spatial dimensions of association. The temporal draws attention to duration, as in the gathering of groups or individuals that come together for a period of time for collaboration on a specific situation, and intensity, as in the set of social exchanges and psychic incoherences that arise in sites invested with hopes, desires, and expectations (see Berlant and Edelman 2014). The spatial dimension draws attention to the distribution of relations as, for example, relations of proximity-in-distance, connecting, separating, appearing and disappearing, and being with one another; but never a relation of appropriation or fusion (Nancy 1991; McMahan 2011). In other words, it captures how we experience our connectedness, or lack thereof, to each other. Apart from its distinctly corporeal dimension of space, there is an implicit political dimension, too. An experimental community sharpens our ability to envision a collectivity that is not based on hierarchical relations or that collapses multiple kinds of differences for the sake of harmony or in the name of a communal identity.

Attending and negotiating the spacing of relations is a key dimension in this formulation of community, for it interferes with the drive toward a static form of social unity or enforced consensus. In other words, community is formulated as something other than containing, integrating, managing, or absorbing the innumerable particularities through and within which individuals are constituted. This formulation of community is hospitable to the porous boundaries and uncontrollable seepage of its members' experiences and what is inevitably unleashed when human

lives come together in association. It differs from John Dewey's (1927) formulation of community inasmuch as it reticulates what are deemed "negative" forces such as discord, disagreement, and dissention as productive forces integral to human association and to the enactment of community. The themes of social cooperation, rational procedures of problem solving, and integration of all human lives into a self-organizing community that are the substratum of Dewey's (via Hegel) formulation of community and his notion of democracy, contrasts with Nancy's (via Heidegger) formulation for which "community" is not obliged to have communion, totality, or complete immanence.

Basualdo and Laddaga (2009) describe the characteristics of experimental communities as "durable associations of individuals who explore anomalous forms of being together while addressing a problem in a certain locality" (199). Community is not conceptualized as a fixed communion or collectivity based on identitarian politics, but is *enacted* through what Nancy calls "contingent modalities of spacing" (as cited in Hinderliter et al. 2009,15). Significantly, it is expressed as "a form of relation" rather than as "a form of totality" or a collection of "identified selves" (14). Because the concept of spacing introduces aspects of seepage, interruption, and disjunction, community becomes the enactment of dislocations (14). By this I mean that experiences that take the form of feeling unhinged from ourselves, or estranged, or overwhelmed are not seen as problems to manage or overcome but are part of the risk, excitement, and possibility we confront with each other when in community.

The permeability of national borders and the variety of migration patterns make this a particularly powerful and productive way of conceptualizing community that can account for movement related to the complexity of human experiences. At the same time, because this conceptualization of community is cast in temporal and spatial terms, it has the potential to be responsive to those many instances when border-making crossed over members of preexisting polities, such as the case of Hawai'i (Sai 2011). Though Basualdo's and Laddaga's examples come from contemporary art practices in aesthetics, I am drawn to the concept of experimental community primarily because it extends the repertoire of community making and opens up new genres of experience. It extends how we might

think about what a community can become and the kinds of engagements it might enable. Community is a site of relation and enactment. Community is not based simply on identity or locality.

An experimental community also allows for the "redistribution of positions and of roles in the site in which it takes place" (Basualdo and Laddaga 2009, 206). The spacing of relations can sensitize us to pedagogical possibilities and processes of learning that are reciprocal and relational. We do not have to submit to the longstanding cultural habit of banking or to the institutional forms of hierarchical ordering. Finally, the appeal may have to do with my own hybrid (Bhabha and Camaroff, 2002) positionality and a long intellectual preoccupation with discerning the shifting socio-historical practices related to racial subjection (Tavares 2008, 2009, 2011).

Working with visual archives, particularly photographs, was largely motivated by a concern to articulate the complicatedness of identity formations and in some sense validate the messy, contingent, historical, and contemporary strains upon its making against purist and essentialist accounts (Butler 1993; Collins 1991; Gilroy 1993, 2005). It is becoming clear to me that there is a peculiar temporality to identity, whether pinned on to individuals by institutions (USA racial categories not only change but are assumed to be mutually exclusive) or self-selected by the individual herself (self-identification tends to underestimate the fundamental disunity of the self and its constitution by and through processes which are only partially accessible) (Alcoff 2002).

### **Feminist Praxis**

Like many feminist scholars, I too desire to have the activities I perform and the work I produce understood as feminist work. However, doing "feminist" work is neither a self-evident nor transparent activity. Donna Haraway (1991) and Sandra Harding (1991) have argued that all knowledge is situated, produced in specific conditions and circumstances. Their argument applies to the production of feminist knowledges, which make no claims to have universal meaning and applicability to all things and contexts. They treat the knowledge produced and the knowledge studied as specific, partial, and open to different translations, routes of circulation, and political investment. To this I would add, knowledge is always imperfect and without teleological

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certainty (see Walker 2011, 263). Such views contrast with the production of knowledge that legislates itself under the sign of the universal, that is to say, disembodied, unattached, value-free, and ahistorical. The aim to “situate academic knowledge reflexively” as Rose (1997) put it, “is to produce non-overgeneralizing knowledges that learn from other kinds of knowledges, and *that* remains the crucial goal” [emphasis mine] (315).

To think and act along these lines is to recognize the productive power of academic knowledge, as, for example, the way academic knowledge produces its objects of study and legitimizes a particular perspective. To put it in terms of schooling contexts, think about how youth, students, families, and communities in many research studies are often “conscripted into pathological identities by labeling” (Shields, Bishop, and Mazawi 2005, 9) and categorization *a priori*. This is what scholars in the interpretive social sciences identify as the “discursive and organizational arrangements” embedded in the work of institutions of knowledge production (Mehan 2000). As one feminist scholar put it, “there are real dangers that are inherent in our position within the powerful institutions of knowledge production” (McDowell 1992, 413). I share these critiques that argue knowledge is partial, situated, and embodied and that academic knowledge in particular is productive of social realities and the challenges that they presented for both understanding my relationship to the women of *Ating Bahay* and for conceptualizing the work that we did together.

## Background Context

I was introduced to the members of *Ating Bahay* through e-mail in mid-November, 2012. Prior to this introduction, I had heard about the work of the group from one of its board members who had a position funded through a federal Violence Against Women grant. *Ating Bahay*, translated by its members as “Our House,” is a community-based organization of women professionals and para-professionals in the fields of social work, health care, immigration and law, sex assault and domestic violence, and economic opportunity development in Hawai‘i county. The individuals came together to find a community and culturally appropriate response to a tragic domestic violence incident that resulted in the death of a Filipino woman in May 2010. Immediately after the incident the group of women began a series of monthly meetings at a small Filipino bakeshop near the

scene of the incident that culminated in their planning of culturally relevant community-based responses to the social trauma of domestic violence. Before I was contacted, *Ating Bahay* had organized numerous community education events in Hilo that included coordinating an open forum “Building the Filipino Response to Domestic Violence” that was held in February 2011 for community members to identify concerns and resources and to build alliances. They had also organized a conference on Filipino Domestic Violence in October 2011 as well as a number of other events.

*Ating Bahay* had heard about my interdisciplinary research project on the use of family photographs and photographic albums through one of its members, Lydia. The project I was working on was spurred by an interest in the role of visual images in shaping modernity’s common sense about social difference. This interest had several threads, one was related to the iconic photographs of different ethnic groups in Hawai‘i that were featured in the book *Temperament and Race* and in the images that circulated of “Filipinos” for the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis, Missouri. Another had to do with work of contemporary artists and scholars who were using images in a variety of ways to call into question that heritage. In what ways do images, particularly photographic images, play a role in shaping modernity’s common sense about multiple human differences? Could they tell us something about power relations? More specifically, do they say something about the production, circulation, and consumption of racial discourses and cultural dichotomies and stereotypes of the people who were pictured in the photographs? My preoccupation with visual archives and image-making, particularly photographic images and their pedagogic potential for understanding the influence of modernity on the present became the basis for a graduate seminar course that I began teaching in the fall 2012 semester in the Department of Educational Foundations.

Our first correspondence was through e-mail. The members wanted to build and extend on their previous outreach work that brought a culturally relevant and community response to domestic violence. I was invited to participate in the framing of the group’s conference. They had decided to frame the conference on the theme of historical trauma. Subsequent correspondence focused primarily on setting the day and place for our first face-to-face meeting in Hilo.

## Feeling Vulnerable

I flew to Hilo to meet the members of *Ating Babay* and to share the work I was doing with family photographs. What was unique about our association from the very beginning was the nature of our collaborative relation. First, our relationship didn't carry the meaning of "partnerships" promoted as an educational reform strategy between universities and communities and between researchers and practitioners' interests. I was not approaching the community organization with a set research agenda; rather, they had contacted me through one of their board members to assist in framing a community education conference that was in its planning stages. Secondly, the members expressed interest in my project and wanted to learn more about it. There was mutual interest and desire to relate to the space of each other's work and co-create an actionable pedagogic project. Finally, I came to this meeting thinking that the contemporary social theories and philosophies that had invigorated my thinking along with the technical skills that I had attained over the years could have very practical implications in other spaces and could be responsive to the educational and pedagogic needs of different publics.

We met early on a bright and sunny Saturday morning on December 15. I remember pulling into the parking area with Lydia and being overtaken by a sensation of vulnerability. How would the group receive me? What will my body signify to them? It could be said I experienced particular relations of social power. The hierarchical spacing of relations manifested in institutional and discursive networks that separates the academic and non-academic, the formal from the informal, the university from the community, and the insider from the outsider. Welcoming each other we settled at a large table outside of the immigration office—in retrospect, a fitting place. The women had brought baked foods from the Filipino bakery that served as their meeting place over the years. One of the members made an announcement about a referral for a woman with four children to a women's shelter. This is some of the work the group did.

We began with introductions. I listened as each member shared their social backgrounds, professional and/or activist work, interests and skills, and visions for change in their community. The women are a bold and diverse group ranging in age, experience, activism, and political outlook. All but one was of Filipino ethnicity. As we struggled to articulate our ideas it was very clear that they/

we were not a homogeneous group, representative of all women or spokespersons for all Filipina. I was reminded of Gwendolyn Parker's profoundly insightful book *Trespassing*, which had a passage that described the Harvard-Radcliffe black community in 1969 during student demonstrations. It's a beautifully written reflection on the limitations of her picture of "blackness." As Parker writes,

As I listened and looked around me, I found it hard to hold in mind that we were a singular anything. People began their sentences with 'We this' and 'We that,' speaking of the need for unity, while the participants, it seemed to me, kept dissolving into their constituent parts. There were tweed jackets and flack jackets. Gold wire-rimmed glasses and dark shades. Jeans and tailored pants. Some people took the microphone and spoke as if they were only days from becoming a professor. Others were already politicians, fiery, and pithy, peppering their speech with phrases that sang. Some slouched against the wall as they spoke, keeping their dark glasses on, punching the air with their fists. Others accused and assailed. That we looked like a cornucopia of all the world's people, in a blizzard of shades and tones, didn't surprise me. I was accustomed to that. But the fact that there was almost no single experience that could be said to represent everyone's was surprising indeed (1997, 105).

In the next paragraph Parker observes, "I realized that I had no up-to-date picture of 'blackness,' not one that could stretch to take in this whole gathering" (105). Parker's experience of encountering her self in relation to her community discloses what Barbara Johnson (1987) so meaningfully calls "the surprise of otherness," and Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman (2014) describe as "a nest of differences" about any encounter. I, too, experienced the multiplicity and historicity of our encounter alluded to by Parker as each of us hesitated, laughed, tried to clarify, got stuck, and struggled to share our views and articulate our particularity in relation to our collective purpose for coming together.

As I began to share with the group the work I was doing with family photographs, I became self-conscious of the academic tone in my voice and words and what seemed like difficult ideas and concepts for thinking about the genre of family pictures and the method of "memory work" (Kuhn

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1995) and the problem of the “familial gaze” (Hirsh 1999). In this non-academic space “difficult knowledge” seemed too much, yet in an academic setting it would have felt not enough. Similar to the experience described by Parker, the differential spacing of our social relations and social embeddedness asserted itself. As Berlant and Edelman put it, “Being in relation invariably involves the animation of distance and closeness; in that sense even direct address can be felt as indirect and acknowledgement can seem like misrecognition” (2014, xi). This is the messy, even confusing, work of translation and negotiation that occurs when human lives are engaged in dialogue.

Themes eventually emerged from my work that had connections to their work. Our discussion streams led to us thinking about Filipino immigrant and diasporic histories, cultural memory, patriarchal institutions, social trauma, and resilience. We focused on the conference theme, purpose, program, audience, and intended outcome. These are big topics and can be time consuming to pin down, but through sustained exchange we were able to consummate our ideas around these topics. Two purposes related to the theme of the conference were settled: create new narratives and highlight resilience. Future tasks and a division of labor were established. I volunteered to provide research literature syntheses on the topic of historical trauma that would become part of the conference program. I was also asked and respectfully accepted the invitation to present my work at the conference.

### Mapping Knowledge

Two months later, on February 2, 2013, I went back to Hilo. We met at the same place. At this meeting we shared the results of our specific tasks and worked at connecting them to the purpose of the conference. The scholarly research on historical trauma draws from ethnic minority psychology, social work, and mental health. Within educational studies there is a rich body of research that draws from psychoanalytics. Because the members of the group were most drawn to the literature that focused on micro-aggressions, healing, and resilience, I emphasized these aspects of the literature. This was not a random decision; it was based on respecting the conceptual work they had done prior to me coming on board.

Two of us brought articles that were relevant to the theme and we spent a good amount of time discussing

whether any of them should be included in the conference folders. The articles were organized around frames of interrupting, what I call “regime-made traumatic experiences;” that is, traumatic experiences produced by democratic regimes (like nuclear weapons testing, illegal overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom, racist laws of exclusion). Three in particular dealt with the Pacific context and nuclear weapons testing. All the members of the group agreed that the articles should be included, a decision that illustrated their desire to provide a forum that might speak to the structural resonances between regime-made trauma and broader community issues. We discussed in detail what the program would look like.

While there are significant differences in feminist epistemologies and no “coherent metanarrative” on the production of knowledge (Lemesianou and Grinberg 2006, 217), what is significant about this rich archive is the view that “all knowledge is situated” (Haraway 1991; Harding 1991). As a result, different spatial contexts and voices have been legitimated from which questions can emerge, knowledge can be generated, and reality can be transformed. Following from this, the members of the group began to envision how their translations and applications of historical trauma would take form. With varying degrees of political consciousness, their strategy was to enact the idea of “memory work” a concept that Annette Kuhn works through in her beautifully written book on family photographs.

### Sensible Pedagogy

I arrived at the Aupuni Center Conference Room on March 21. I could sense what Jacques Rancière calls “the distribution of the sensible,” the notion that aesthetic techniques can extend our narrow spatial and temporal notions of public life and politics. Each member of the group had brought a family photograph that had been blown up to the size of a poster, and they had hung them around the conference room. The visual effect was powerful, an “affectual address” that drew conference participants in.

The number of conference participants was about thirty and comprised county officials, community leaders, and students and teachers from the college and university. The morning session began with addresses welcoming county officials and thanking supporters of the conference followed by opening remarks by a member of the group and then by the county prosecuting attorney. An overview of data and

systems response to domestic violence was presented, followed by the presentation on historical trauma.

The morning session ended with a powerful live performance, “Blanket of Shame,” that dealt with the silences around intimate partner violence, performed by the members of *Ating Babay* and some of the conference participants. Live performance, as the stage actor Geoff Moore put it, “offers something different. Another kind of attention. . . . You are required to be part of a social transaction. Your humanity is called upon. You have to be “there” with others” (as cited in Dixon 2007). After a short break, it was my turn to deliver the keynote address, *Memory Work and Historical Trauma*, that segued to each of the members of *Ating Babay* sharing their images through memory work. The afternoon session provided historical perspectives on Philippine colonization and Hawai‘i plantation violence by two community leaders and an open discussion on why the conference theme mattered for community.

There was critical engagement from the conference participants. Several perspectives stand out. A transgender participant told her story about intimate partner violence and in doing so raised the issue of the hetero-normative assumptions that frame domestic violence discourse. An East-African woman now living in the county of Hawai‘i talked about her experience growing up in her prior home and how those experiences had resonances with many of the issues related to the theme of the conference. The transnational connections she made to her prior home with postcolonial Hawai‘i illustrates what could be called experiences of entanglement, of living in a place and remembering/desiring another, which is common to diaspora cultures. A small group of students from the college were captivated by the delivery of the topics and indicated they would like to have classes and teachers that would let them experiment with other genre forms of learning historical material. Their observation, in effect, was a not-so-subtle critique of the disembodied knowledge that forms so much of the modern heritage of the contemporary curriculum. After the participant discussion the conference closed with a *Mirienda*.

### **Risky Work**

The analysis of my collaboration with *Ating Babay* highlights what is characterized as an experimental community. Our collaborative planning made possible to organize a community education conference and to engage in dialogue

and discussion held across different spaces and linguistic registers. It also enabled social relations to be formed and enhanced. It was risky inasmuch as the fruition of our collaborative work, in the form of an actionable project, arose from our exchanges with each other and the provocations of our ideas. These relations are never smooth and predictable. There are blockages, misunderstandings, shifts in perspectives, references that are often taken for granted, historical contexts that are never fully shared. Yet, such responses are not failures that need to be overcome or resolved. Rather, they were central to our engagement with each other. Berlant and Edelman view these kinds of exchanges, often construed as negative, as generative and indispensable to relationality. As they have put it, “conversation complicates the prestige of autonomy and the fiction of authorial sovereignty by introducing unpredictability of moving in relation to another” (2014, x).

But did the work we did and the frameworks we experimented with achieve transformative effects? There are small indications that it might have. After I returned to my campus I received an e-mail message from a volunteer in the Prosecuting Attorney Office requesting a copy of the power-point on historical trauma. *It was nice being part of your presentation on Historical Trauma . . . Is it possible to get a copy of your presentation via e-mail? I also look forward to future engagements and dialogue with you* (Personal e-mail correspondence dated 3/21/2013).

Reflecting on the open discussion and reviewing some of the comments on the conference evaluations suggest something transformative might have happened. One conference attendee wrote to the question, “What information was most helpful or important to you?” *Understanding the work “Historical Trauma, Memory [Work]” and the relation of our everyday events from the past and present*. Yet I also believe that the question may be both too abstract and too simplistic insofar as it obscures the various forms through which subordinated persons resist the conditions of their “devaluation” (Berlant and Edelman 2014).

Ever since I heard about the work of *Ating Babay*, I have thought deeply about the collaborative experience that the conference entailed, and I have struggled to find a way to conceptualize the complex pedagogic, social, affective, psychic, political, and educative dimensions of what transpired. In fact, this quandary became the topic of a pre-conference workshop for the 2014 American Educational Research

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Association held in Philadelphia. This essay is my attempt to give that experience expression and to put in circulation their impressive community education work.

## Epilogue

On January 21, 2014 a member of *Ating Babay* contacted me through e-mail to collaborate on another conference that would build on the theme of historical trauma. Through e-mail we began to share ideas. On August 26, 2014 the group put the conference project on hold, we hope to resume our conversation and collaboration again in the near future. A copy of an earlier version of this paper was shared with the group.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lydia is a pseudonym.

<sup>2</sup> A regime-made traumatic experience is a concept fused together from Azoulay's (2012) "regime-made disasters" and Regenspan's (2014) "politically induced trauma."

