

# “Am I *halo-halo*?” Finding the Filipino-American Re-Storying Framework Through Consent

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## **About the Author:**

Matt Denney is a Filipino-American educator and researcher with a mixed-race background. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Higher Education, focusing on Theatre for Social Justice. Matt has a broad range of experience, having worked at various theaters across the country as an Intimacy Director and Teaching Artist. His work has been showcased at several notable institutions, including East West Players, Scoundrel & Scamp Theatre, Ottawa School of Theatre, the Center for Creative Photography, and the Shakespeare Theatre Company. Additionally, Matt has presented his research at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE), covering various aspects of his work, including Mixed Race Student Engagement and Food Justice. Beyond his academic and artistic contributions, he has also served as a Grant Committee Member for the National Endowment for the Arts. Matt is the proud recipient of TheField NYC's Fiscal Sponsorship for Social Justice Practitioners for his work with community engagement and self-consent, highlighting his commitment to advancing social justice through the arts.

*“I started to worry that I was a stranger to my own identity, and I felt like I was doing something wrong” (DeGuia 2021).*

### **The Impetus**

Halo-Halo, consisting of Ube Ice Cream, young coconut, red beans, and many other fruits and toppings, is one of the most famous Filipino desserts. It is one of my favorite desserts that I grew up with, and it reminds me of the connection to both childhood and culture. Doreen G Fernandez talks about the connection between culture and food and how food is a touchstone to memory and history (Fernandez 2021). Halo-Halo translates to “Mix-Mix” which points to how the dessert is eaten: you mix all of the toppings together and either eat it with a spoon or a straw. This idea of Halo-Halo relates to many of the current topics in not only the Intimacy and Consent fields, but also within the identities of what it means to be “Filipino-American.” The artistic fields related to intimacy and consent in performance are changing constantly, much like the culture of Filipino-Americans in the United States. With all this change, we also see many people with prior training in other areas that intersect with our own work such as cultural consultants, trauma-informed practitioners, and mental health workers. We are constantly building and rebuilding our own practices within the fields of intimacy and consent. However, with the rapidly growing field that we are in, we must begin to consider what narratives, identities, and inquiries are being pushed to the forefront of these conversations. DëQueer and Valentine polled many Intimacy Professionals within the field and found that 79% of respondents identified themselves as “white” while Filipino representation was at 8% but was the only Asian ethnicity represented among all respondents that were polled (DëQueer & Valentine 2022). As the field has continued to develop further and include many more non-Filipino Asian and Pacific Islander Intimacy Professionals, I began to wonder: is there a reason why there are and were many Filipino-Identifying Intimacy Professionals amidst the Asian Diaspora? Whatever the reason may be, a more important question arose: are these artists being supported in ways that are culturally sustaining? Being Filipino myself, I knew that there was more to this story and the intersection between the intimacy field and the sense of “Pinoy Pride” (Alsaybar 1999) and wanted to generate a framework to support artists such as myself.

### **The History**

I feel that it is important to start from a historical perspective to hopefully understand a bit about the history that the Philippines and America have together. Filipino sailors were among the first Asians in the United States back in 1763; they were first called Manilamen (V 2019). Due to the timing of their arrival, the Manilamen were in the United States during the early Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. For centuries, Filipinos have been a part of the U.S. landscape and American culture. From 1898 to 1946, the Philippines were under American colonization, where Filipinos were imported to America for entertainment and, in at least one case, a human zoo<sup>1</sup> (for real, look it up!). The Philippines has had a long history of colonization and conquests—first conquered by Spain, then Britain, then the United States—before reaching eventual independence on July 4th, 1946. Yes, the United States and the Philippines share the same day of independence, which takes on a whole new meaning as someone who is Filipino-American (Ribunal 2016). The Philippines has been colonized enough times that much of the history we receive in the Philippines is colonized beyond recognition to the point where we don't even have a storyline to follow anymore. However, the 1940s and 1960s were a time where great resilient activists and manongs came to America in hopes of work and education. Activists like Larry Itliong and Philip Vera Cruz, who helped lead the Filipino Farm-Workers Movement and the Great Delano Grape Strike, advocated for equitable pay and conditions for the Farmworkers in California and America as a whole. This led to the National Farm Workers' Association, which worked alongside Cesar Chavez. Around that time, Carlos Bulosan wrote many poems, essays, and novels, the most famous being *America is in the Heart*, on what it was like to be a Filipino in America. We rarely see these names in history books, but they contributed to the continued activism that has rooted our experience in America (Romasanta 2019; Solano 2019). Filipino-Americans are grounded in activism and, as such, prioritize uplifting and advocating on behalf of others—not by a want but by necessity to survive in equitable conditions.

### **The Story of Now**

There has been a rivalry amidst the Filipino-American community on what makes a “true” Filipino and how we are able to assimilate to a culture that is relatively unknown to those of us who are first-generation American. What does it even mean to be Filipino-American? What does it even mean to be Filipino? Usually it comes down to which culture we associate more with, and Filipino-American culture is continuously evolving into its own subculture that creates a

Eurocentric version of Filipino traditions around family parties, holidays, and how loud we cheer when Lea Salonga sings. Dr. Anthony Ocampo says that we are the “Latinos of Asia,” pointing to parallel histories of durational colonialism and highlighting how the negotiations of race and cultural identity are changed through the communities we are in, especially with Filipino-Americans who are first-generation. Through these negotiations, we are continuously finding our own stories and narratives, often both discovering and expressing these stories through the work that we do (Ocampo 2016).

### **The Framework**

Dr. Kevin Nadal (2004) first originated the P/Filipino American Identity Development Model and its centeredness in relation to white-dominant culture within the United States. Artists working in intimacy choreography and direction need to recognize that— especially for P/Filipino Americans due to our specific cultural context and inheritance—those in the dominant white supremacist class have dictated what is socially acceptable to say yes and no to (Blount 2022), imposing those cultural norms onto people of color living and working in places and industries shaped by white supremacist ideals and culture. Consent is discussed and utilized as a tool of empowerment in many intimacy workshops, classrooms, rehearsals, and filming spaces; consent-based practitioners seek to help participants better understand and communicate their physical, emotional, and mental boundaries (St. John 2022). Consent is giving yourself or others the agency and power to say yes and no equally in their lives. As Rikard and Villarreal (2022) write, “we must acknowledge that a person who is marginalized is already, and always, carving out a brave space within and for themselves, not by choice, but as a requirement created by a world, a society, and an industry that was not created with them in mind.” (6). For Filipino-American artists who have to work constantly to carve a space for themselves in U.S. culture *and* in the arts, the autonomy to reclaim our stories and communicate our needs is not only affirming—it is a *need*. The Filipino-American experience is embodied research; our bodies breathe in history and a contextual colonization that is beyond ourselves, which includes our ancestors. Due to the specific experience of embodying and living within overlapping histories and ongoing colonial forces, and because Filipinos were the only Asian identity represented among intimacy professionals according to the DëQueer & Valentine’s survey, we should consider ways in which sustainable practices that relate to identity development can be introduced to serve the unique cultural needs of Filipino artists. I

offer the Filipino-American Restorying Framework, which is informed by Nadal's P/Filipino American Identity Development Model and the multitude of current and evolving consent-based artistic practices<sup>2</sup> which also emphasize boundary-setting and knowing that consent is only consent when we can actively engage with the practice of yes and no equally. Some environments may not allow us to fully engage with this framework in its entirety due to trauma related to personhood, historical context, or current conditions, such as access to resources. However, I offer the Filipino-American Restorying Framework as a tool to help those in our industry understand the forces acting upon us as Filipino-American artists, to better support our needs, and to infuse consent-based performance practices with cultural competency.

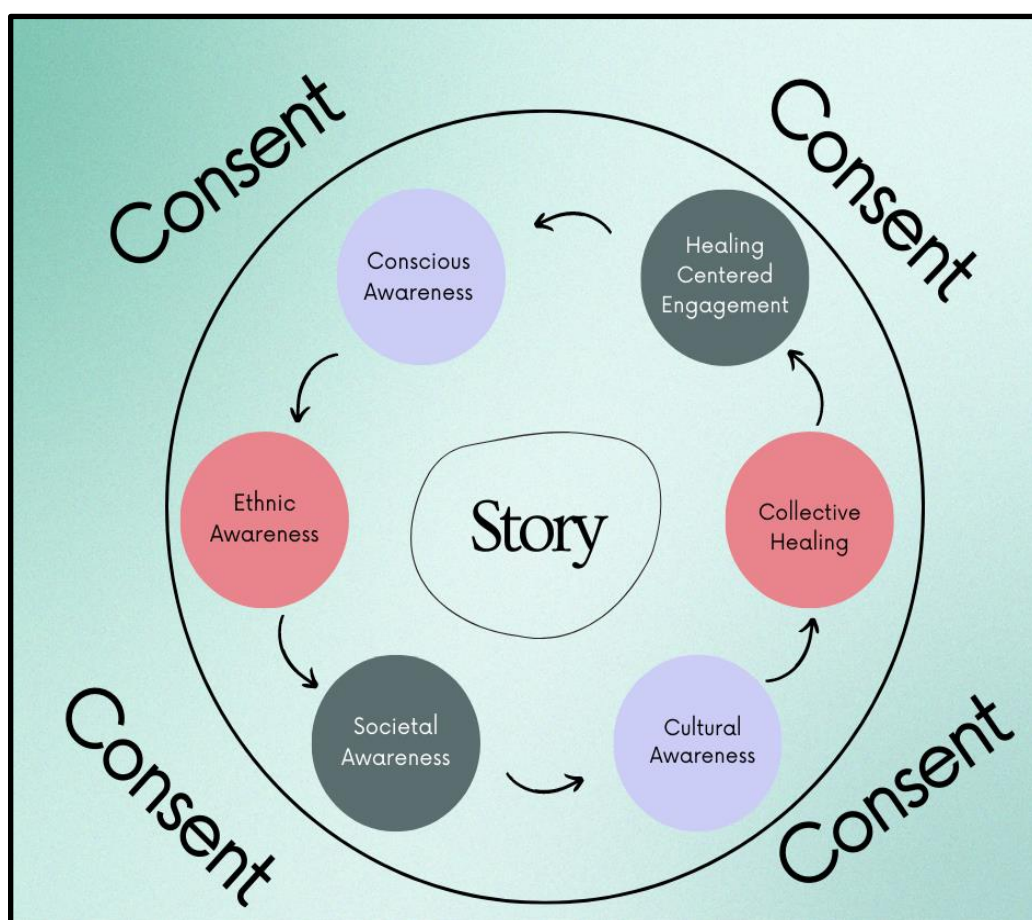


Figure 1: Filipino-American Restorying Framework

**Societal Awareness:** Social perceptions of us as Filipino-Americans can play a significant role in our identity development. Many people in the U.S. cannot tell if Filipinos are Asian, Latino, or somewhere in between when first meeting us, which affects educational experiences, job opportunities, and abilities to be cast in TV and film (Ocampo 2021). All of these factors also play

a role in our financial and professional stability: when our cultural narratives are clouded or obscured by uncertainty from a societal perspective, we cannot continue developing the story of our individual selves with confidence. In relation to consent, Filipino-Americans have to say “yes” to themselves and be vulnerable enough to seek community within times of uncertainty from a societal perspective. When an understanding of self is paired with a community of other Filipino-Americans or those that are Asian-American, it creates a new narrative rooted in another aspect of the framework—collective healing within each other.

***Ethnic Awareness:*** This stage occurs within the first few years of life, and is often connected to our earliest memories. Many Filipino-American mixed families attempt to teach their children the importance of Filipino culture through food, dance, dress, music, or attempts to teach the native language. Children in this stage will have an impartial view of Filipino culture because they have been socialized to understand that their culture has a place in society (Nadal 2004). In relation to consent and our stories as Filipino-Americans, we must learn our shared and individual histories, as well as learning about the activism that has allowed us to be who we are today. Our stories are beautiful, our people are beautiful, and our creations are beautiful. It is up to us and society to say yes to our history and make our invisible stories visible again.

***Conscious Awareness:*** With many of our stories rooted in activism, we have to spend time understanding how our conscience coincides with the world around us. Professor Virgilio Enriquez discusses Filipino Psychology and the term *kapwa*, which has come to be known as:

A recognition of a shared identity, an inner self, shared with others... it is the moral obligation to treat one another as equal fellow human beings. If we can do this – even starting in our own family or our circle of friends – we are on the way to practicing peace. We are Kapwa People. (Enriquez 1975, 73)

***Cultural Awareness:*** There are large differences between those who are Filipino and those who are Filipino-American. First-generation Filipino-Americans have to ask ourselves: Do we like our culture, or the Americanized version of our culture? Are we simply chasing a shadow of what life was like in the Philippines? Filipino-American culture is becoming its own subculture as a “halo-halo” of both cultures. One must understand some Filipino culture in order to further develop and understand their own sense of identity as someone who is “halo-halo.”

***Collective Healing:*** Cowan, Dill, and Sutton combine the theories of radical healing and the collective impact model to create what we know as the Collective Healing Framework, which roots

frameworks and community healing in a practice that is ongoing and consistently engaged with (Cowan, Dill, & Sutton 2022). In practice, collaborators can hold or attend community listening sessions, build community voice, and gain an interpersonal understanding of needs while working towards a common agenda within their community.

***Healing-Centered Approach:*** Dr. Shawn Ginwright writes how healing-centered engagement expands how people view trauma and offers more holistic approaches to fostering well-being that go beyond Trauma-Informed Practices (Ginwright 2020). Healing-centered engagement is culturally grounded and views healing as the restoration of identity. As mentioned previously, Filipino-Americans are part of embodied research, with our containers already partly filled historically with stories of how Filipino-Americans have been treated in this country. In order to fully create and contribute to our cultural narrative, we have to understand that healing is a part of the process of storytelling.

***Story:*** The formation of identity and the creation of our own narrative that is both collective and individualistic is at the heart of the framework, and it should be centered in the work we do within the consent and cultural competency intersections. To establish a sense of identity means claiming purpose, vision, dreams, and culture for us as a community and for yourself as a human being. By claiming our story, we remind ourselves of our own humanity in practice. We have to say yes to our story and history because it is tangible and challenging. By consideration, recognition, and celebration, we are able to create the story that encapsulates both our ancestors and ourselves as storytellers.

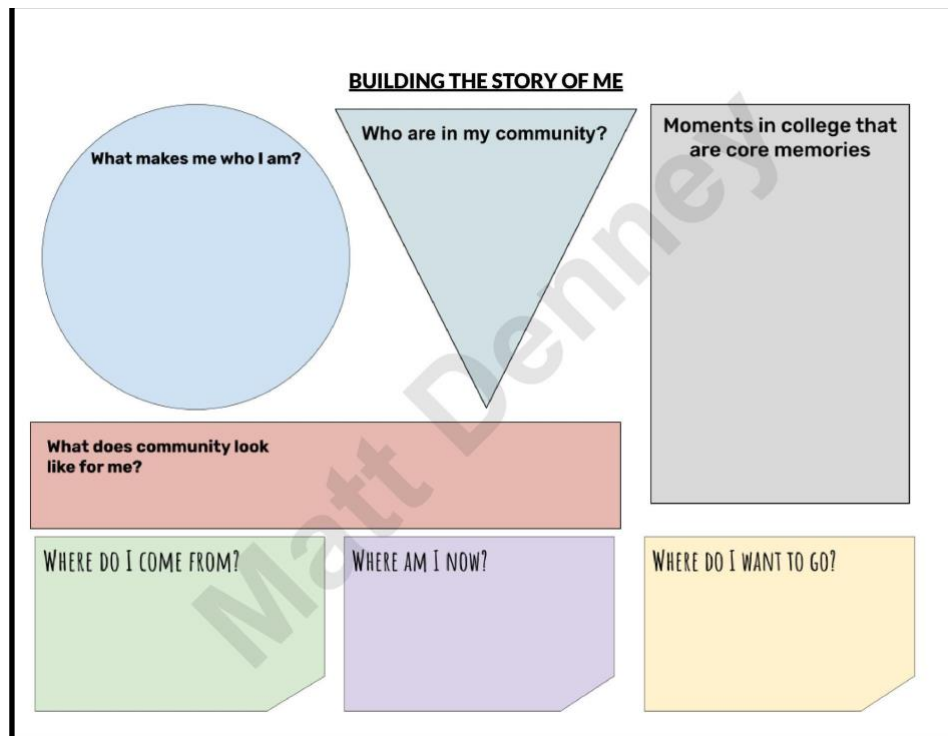
### **The Framework in Practice**

The Theatre has been and always will be political. If we are disembodied from the context, how do we move forward to a creative and sustainable theater that is interdisciplinary, antiracist, decolonized, and equitable towards their local and international communities? When thinking about putting this framework into practice, a poem by M. NourbeSe Philip (2018, 31) comes into my mind:

We all begin life in water  
We all begin life because someone once breathed for us  
Until we breathe for ourselves  
Someone breathes for us

We must breathe for one another. How are we as practitioners engaging with our own histories and saying yes to ourselves? If we truly center consent within the work that we do, we must continually embrace our backgrounds and intentionally work with others on a deeper level rather than in the silo of productivity.

In my own practice when working with college students and community theaters, utilizing this framework has taken a more educational and activity-based approach. One activity developed to support this framework is the “Building the Story of Me” activity which enables participants to build their own story and share with the group (Figure 2). By inviting folks you work with to communicate their own story, you can find the intersections your values, lives, and histories, which can be used to create a shared goal, vision, and ways of working and knowing one another moving forward.



*Figure 2: Building the Story of Me Activity*

Press Press and the Institute of Expanded Research’s Toolkit for Cooperative, Collective and Collaborative Cultural Work (Hanauer, 2020) is another integral resource to facilitate diving deeper into this framework. Hanauer writes:

Building a shared culture in the group also comes from prioritizing your relationships as part of the work. Prioritizing relationships as part of the work can mean a multiplicity of things, including critically acknowledging the socioeconomic conditions that our relationships are based in; knowing what's going on in collaborators' lives; learning how to best support, care for, and anticipate one another's needs; hearing life updates before delving into the "work" (if time allows); doing "non-work" activities together; and much more.

To begin engaging with the Filipino-American Restorying Framework, we must center and prioritize the relationships in our work. These relationships form and mold the collectivist culture of care that is so central to the consent-forward practices that should be within our work. When considering how to engage with this work and the call to action that follows additional knowledge-building, the introduction to embodying elements of this framework is a great starting point.

### **The Implications and Considerations**

This framework is by no means the end-all-be-all framework for decolonizing the structures that inhibit us from being our best selves. The framework should be utilized as a tool for reclaiming history and our stories as Filipino-Americans as we continue to navigate our own culture and relationship with colonization given the strained relationship with both America and Asia. This framework, article, and crash course on Filipino-American History should serve as the stones and foundation for the bridge that is consistently and constantly being built. Engagement in identity-based practices requires engagement with one's own identity community (Phinney 1996). How can we as practitioners, educators, and researchers create space and conversations around cultural competency if we do not think of the Asian Diaspora? Some opportunities for engagement could be community conversations, mentorship programs, and resources for folks who are Filipino-American. With this framework rooted in consent, we could go further and talk about what intimacy looks like to our bodies that have a history of colonization beyond the physical touch forms of intimacy. I would encourage folks to utilize this framework to explore how they have been creating space for Asian-American Pacific Islanders and not perpetuating the continual model minority myth where we are simply expected to do well, rather than be given space to tell our own stories (Blackburn 2019). So, the question still remains: am I halo-halo? The answer is yes. I am a beautiful mix-mix of both my ancestry and the future. I am a person preserving history while also preserving my own right to humanity. This model was developed using a combination

of research and experience, which one could argue is the halo-halo of academia. I find myself endlessly grateful for those who have contributed in my own learning and development, found in other Asian-American artists who have shown endless collective action and community care for my learning. To conclude this journey and new knowledge acquisition, I wanted to reiterate the importance of community in all works that we find ourselves in. My community of allies has been so vital for my own survival as the work continues to grow and develop, and I am endlessly grateful for those who have contributed knowledge by giving grace and space for me as a human, thus humanizing the educational process.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, any of the vast amounts of photographic evidence and documentation on exhibition of Igorot Filipino people during the 1904 World's Fair

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