

Exploration of multigenerational mother-daughter relationships by Filipina-Canadian youth using Readers Theatre

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Abstract: This paper shares the testimony of Filipina-Canadian youth participants in the “Asian-Canadian youth identities in a pandemic era: Arts-based research” study led by Dr. Nazilla Khanlou and funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Insight Grant. Through this study, six youth created a scripted story documenting their experiences as Asian-Canadian youth who navigated the COVID-19 pandemic in a Readers Theatre workshop. Their script, entitled *Tita Barbie*, is shared in this paper, as well as their general reflections on the experiences shared in the script and as study participants. Key themes identified in the script through this study included mental health stigma, mother-daughter relationships, and stereotypical representation in mainstream media.

Key words: Readers Theatre, youth, identity, arts-based research, mental health stigma.

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Introduction

This paper provides an overview of the experiences of the Filipino participant group in the “Asian-Canadian youth identities in a pandemic era: Arts-based research” study led by Dr. Nazilla Khanlou and funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Insight Grant. Our group was called the ‘Flame Group’ and consisted of six Filipino youth across Ontario. Participation in this project started as early as 2022, when members of the group were first individually interviewed on their experiences as Asian youth in the pandemic and were then invited to participate in the next phase of the study, the Readers Theatre workshops (RT).

Our group’s script, entitled *Tita Barbie*, explored the intergenerational, intersectional experiences of Filipina-Canadian women and girls. The RT story captures a group of older Filipina mothers (referred to as Titas) and their daughters coming out of the movie theatre after watching the popular movie *Barbie* (2023). The characters engage in a discussion sharing their thoughts on the movie and try to connect it to their own life experiences.

The themes of *Tita Barbie* can be broken down into four key points:

1. Stigma around discussing mental health with a Filipino family.
2. Economic hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. The complexity of our Filipina intersectionality.
4. Our community’s tenacity.

The first scene, an exchange between the first mother and daughter pair, discusses the first two themes. We get an intimate view into their dysfunctional dynamic - one where the mother believes that the root of her daughter’s mental health problems is her phone, and the daughter does not feel truly seen by her mother. The mother argues that the daughter’s phone kept her distracted from their relationship during the time they spent together throughout the COVID-19 lockdown, while the daughter argues that her phone was her escape from thinking about the economic hardship their family was facing. She reflects on the

fact that her mother had lost her job and there was a lot of uncertainty throughout the pandemic. A lot of these experiences were drawn directly from what our group was experiencing or hearing from other Filipinos in our community. These are the experiences of individuals that we wanted to share through our script.

The scenes that follow involve conversations between the three mother and daughter pairs, exploring more about the Filipina-Canadian identity as a whole, and what distinguishes them from other women and other immigrant communities. These moments were inspired by our discovery that none of the Barbies with lead roles in the 2023 film were of Asian descent. This realization was met with a lot of disappointment. The movie was marketed as a story every woman would relate to - and the consensus in our group was that while the movie was touching, a lot of its messaging and relatability could fall flat. Here, discussions of the intersection of our identities as not only women, but women of colour, heavily influenced our brainstorming sessions. Our experiences overlap with those of Caucasian women, but we also have our own world views and experiences forged from our differing heritages as Filipina-Canadian immigrants.

The script ends with a funny gag about the tenacity of Filipinos. We referenced “TV Patrol,” a popular Filipino news station, and revealed that one of the mothers had found her way into a news report for everyone else to see. This was borne from a desire to end the script on a high note. We talked about heavy subjects, but we wanted to make sure that the community we created amongst ourselves putting this project together was still conveyed. Humour was, in our opinion, the most effective way to get this across to the audience.

Below you can read the script that we wrote for this project. All names used are pseudonyms.

The Script: *Tita Barbie*

SCENE 1: Outside the movie theatre

Narrator: “Three Titas and their daughters are exiting the theatre after having seen *Barbie* (2023).”

Tita Danielle: "Anak, that was so expensive! We could have just watched something at home!"

Janell: "Yes Inay, but it's about the experience! I barely get to go to the theatre anymore, especially after Covid."

Tita Danielle: "Yes, but I don't understand the excitement, they didn't even have real problems, they are just complaining. Pero, at least we look dressed up."

Janell: "I don't wanna argue about this. It was fun, and we don't really get to do this anymore! But just because they're dolls doesn't mean the problems aren't real! We experience them too! Ugh, I just wish you understood!" Begins texting on her phone.

Tita Danielle: "See that's your problem, you're always on your cellphone. Why you don't want to talk to me?"

Janell: "I do want to talk to you! During lockdown we had all the time in the world to talk but everything just felt so tense, you didn't know when you could get back to work, and no one knew what would happen... So, it was easier to just be on my phone. And now, even after lockdown, I still feel like it's easier. So sorry if I have to disengage for a bit... It's for my mental health."

Tita Danielle: "Mental health this, mental health that, if you were on your phone less, and started sleeping early, you would feel better."

Janell: "See? This is what I mean! You're not listening to me. I'm trying to talk and explain how I feel, but I'm running into a brick wall with you."

Tita Danielle: "My god, Anak, you're so dramatic, it's because of your social media. When I was your age we didn't have all this social media, we had to deal with real life."

[Enter other Titas]

Tita Val: "Ladies, ladies let's stop arguing and just enjoy the night we all get to spend together!"

Angie: "Yeah exactly! Why don't we all get some gelato next door before we end the evening?"

Titas in unison: "What?!"

Tita Maymay: "After what we just spent on that movie and snacks? We should just go home!"

Gabby: "Inay, you didn't even buy any snacks, you brought peanuts in your purse!"

Tita Maymay: "Yes, because it's so expensive Anak! Eight dollars for a small bag of popcorn, they are practically robbing us! And these companies were the first ones to let people like us go unemployed during COVID."

Angie: "Listen Titas, I know we have all been affected by COVID, and worrying about where the next pay cheque might come from....Some of us lost our jobs for a long time, and all of you worked so hard just to get here, but I want to be able to enjoy a small cup of gelato with my family and friends while we still can. We don't know if another lockdown will come again so maybe tonight, we can indulge ourselves."

Tita Val: "That makes sense, Anak. You and all the other kids look out for us Titas and remind us that we deserve treats and fun things too. It's just difficult to turn off that survival mode once you're in it. But I want gelato too. Let's go!"

Tita Maymay: "Okay, you're right, it's okay for once in a while. Let's do it for our girls. I'll bring the peanuts!"

SCENE 2: At the gelato shop

Narrator: "All the Tita's and their daughters are sitting, enjoying their gelato. The mood has become more enjoyable now that they have something sweet to eat."

Tita Val: "I try to be open, but Anak, we can make halo halo at home! And you want to spend 6\$ and there's no ube or toppings?"

Tita Danielle: "You know why Barbie is so skinny? She doesn't eat expensive ice cream."

[The Titas agree, and the kids groan]

Tita Maymay: "I'm like Barbie did you know, because I eat vegan ice cream. For my diet." Wink.

Tita Danielle: "Vegan vegan ka dyan. Your Tita lost her accent when she became like Barbie ha."

Tita Val: "You're 'dieting', but you ate lechon at Gabby's debut!"

Tita Maymay: "Shh! I may be Filipino, but I can be a Barbie din ha!"

Tita Danielle and Tita Val: "Weh..."

Janell: "No, I think Tita Maymay could be a Barbie!"

Angie: "Wait I feel like there were so many Barbies of colour! ... Was there even an Asian Barbie?"

Janell: "... There has to be one. The movie is, like, being praised for its diversity."

Tita Maymay: "There was an Asian Ken! He was so Pogi."

Janell: "But that's different. He's not Barbie he's just Ken; it just would've been nice to see an Asian Barbie."

Angie: "I'll look it up! ... There was a South Asian Barbie, she was the Pulitzer Prize winning journalist!"

Tita Val: "Anak, why can't you be more like South Asian Barbie and win the pulling prize journal?"

Gabby: "Oh, Angie as a journalist. That's as funny as Tita's pulling prize. I do wish she had gotten a bigger role though, or that there were more Asian Barbies from different regions... Considering how big "Stop Asian Hate" Campaigns became during the pandemic, you'd think they would consider more diverse roles within the Asian community itself."

Janell: "Yeah! 'Asian' is a term describing so many diverse peoples and cultures. It's not enough to have one Asian character with maybe a line or two. We need more positive representation, especially after the pandemic!"

Tita Danielle: "Anak, don't be so nega ha? You're always complaining, you can be a Barbie if you want to right. Isn't that what you are always saying?"

Janell: "Rare Woke Inay moment. But that's what we're trying to say Nay. The different representation is important, because there's so many different Asians. Even in the Philippines, Manila City Barbie is different from Bicol Province Barbie."

Angie: "Right! Imagine Filipinos in Barbie land. Getting dolled up, and excelling at our jobs is what we do!"

Janell: "But at least all of us Filipinas get the opportunity to go out and watch it, together. Think of all the young Filipinas, young Asian girls, that might feel the same way we do. Maybe in the future, one of them will make an even more diverse Barbie land. With Manila City and Bicol Province Barbies."

Angie: "But we don't really have to imagine that hard. There are already so many Filipinos winning and succeeding in the entertainment industry. Like, Bruno Mars is Filipino, Vanessa Hudgens is too... and who knows, maybe Tita Maymay too could be the next Barbie or Olivia Rodrigo."

Tita Val: "I heard on TV Patrol about that Olivia Rodrigo girl! She became famous during the pandemic! Us Filipinos can bounce back and become successful."

Gabby: "Yeah, let's celebrate the little win of all being here together. Many families were not this lucky after COVID."

Janell: "Inay, I'm sorry I got mad at you earlier. You're right - I go on my phone a lot. But it's just so easy. It was my escape from everyday life during the pandemic, and I guess it still is now. It's a hard habit to break."

Tita Danielle: "It's okay Anak, I'm sorry to hear that you feel like you can't talk to me. This mental health, mental health is so new to me. When I was your age, mental health was not even something that we spoke about. We were all just trying to survive. And when some of us were starting to let go of that thinking, the pandemic brought it all back. All us Titas and Nanays were scared then and still now."

Tita Maymay: "Your mom is right. During COVID, it was so scary to go out, with all the news of the violent attacks against Asians, mentally, we went into lockdown mode too, thinking it was better to stay inside."

Tita Val: "It was better to keep quiet and stay out of trouble, than potentially be harmed due to people's impressions of us."

Janell: "But look at us now, we survived the lockdown and can gather together! We got to dress up, watch a silly movie, and eat expensive gelato together. What more can we ask for right now?"

Tita Danielle: (Sigh) "You're right. I promise I will try to do better at listening to you when you need me. Mahal kita, Anak."

Gabby: "Awww look at them, breaking the generational trauma!"

Tita Maymay: "The what??! Ha????"

Gabby: "Oh nothing." (laughing). "I enjoyed the movie... and I'm just glad we got to make time for each other after being stuck at home for a while!"

SCENE 3: Back at home

Narrator: "After having that discussion about their experiences during COVID-19 the Titas and their daughters leave the gelato shop having a stronger bond."

Gabby: "Thanks for having me over, Janell."

Janell: "Inay, Gabby no way. Look at this."

Tita Danielle: "Ano???"

[TV Patrol theme plays]

Karen Davila: "Local Filipino gone viral for her cover of Barbie girl on TikTok. Let's go to her now."

Tita Maymay: "LOOK HA, I'M A FAMOUS SINGER LIKE OLIVIA ANAK LOOK"

Gabby: "Oh my."

End Scene

Reflections on the Readers Theatre Exercise

Through this activity, the Flame Group was able to develop a virtual connection. Members of our group became close, using time allotted during the study and time outside of the study to get to know each other and share our stories. During one writing session, one group member mentioned that we had created a bahay kubo. This is a Filipino 'house on stilts', a type of house that can be moved to higher

ground in case of floods. Bahay kubo reflects the community so intrinsic to our culture - you can't carry a bahay kubo on your own, just like you can't really dissect how you feel or create projects like these completely on your own. A bahay kubo, a support system, was created between our group despite our connection only being virtual.

Sharing our presentations with the other two groups of Asian-Canadian youth, we all noticed similarities in the themes we expressed in our script, which shows that this connection goes beyond the Filipino experience, encapsulating a general Asian youth experience too. While mother-daughter relationships were central to our script, we noticed that parent-child dynamics were also present in the other scripts, alongside other struggles including but not limited to mental health and school pressures. Even though we had less time to work with other research participants outside of our group, a sense of solidarity was created.

There was extreme catharsis in this that made a research study feel very open and welcoming. Our group spent ages discussing our shared experiences, and writing this script seemed to come naturally to all of us. Everyone was able to open up in some way and share pieces of their story, all which influenced the tone and content of our script. There were many instances where someone would mention a specific thing that happened to them during the pandemic or a train of thought they explored in this time, and it always seemed that there was at least one other group member who had gone through or thought through something similar.

Catharsis was also a product of how Filipino the whole experience felt. While working on the script, we were able to talk freely, using Filipino and English words, many of which ended up in the script. Filipino accents were recalled intentionally to differentiate the mother characters from the daughter characters. We felt proud sharing this script with the other two groups and engaging them in discussion because of how culturally significant it felt.

Conclusion

Readers Theatre and the creation of *Tita Barbie* allowed the Flame Group of Filipina-Canadian youth to make virtual connections that translated into a

cathartic exploration of mother-daughter dynamics. Our group used the exercise to better understand the experiences of women and girls, both in general discussions of these groups in the media, and in our own personal lives.

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