

**Does 'x' Mark The Spot?:
Negotiating Filipino/a/x Identities Online in the Philippines and the Diaspora**

by
Nuria Inez Benitez

May 2022

This senior thesis was submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Bachelor of Arts Degrees

Department of Anthropology
Department of Linguistics
Haverford College

Professor Zainab Saleh, Anthropology, Advisor
Professor Brook Lillehaugen, Linguistics, Advisor

Abstract

This thesis studies the different contexts behind and understandings of the term “Filipinx”, which is intended to be a gender-inclusive alternative to “Filipino” but is now a controversial topic that is largely divided along diasporic/homeland lines. In this paper I uncover underlying tensions between Filipino(/a/x)s from the Philippines and from the diaspora, which lie in the vastly different contexts and lived experiences that people from the diaspora and the homeland have, all attempting to fit under the same identity term/s. In particular, Filipino/a/x Americans (Fil-Ams), who grew up and live in the United States, tend to use and support the term “Filipinx”, seeing it as empowering and a show of solidarity (or identification) with the LGBT+ community and other marginalized communities in the US. By contrast, people in the Philippines tend to consider “Filipino” to be already gender-neutral and see “Filipinx” as a way to further impose the Western binary—and thus see it as a form of colonization.

Through an analysis of online Twitter conversations and two interviews, I tease out the various definitions and connotations of “Filipinx” and show that “Filipinx” indexes a specific (educated, activist) Fil-Am experience. I argue that the tensions that have risen around this word are due to the desire among Fil-Ams for a sense of belonging and identity that is being denied by those in the homeland, at odds with the resentment Filipinos from the Philippines feel towards those perceive to be more privileged than them and who are assumed to represent them, but end up doing so inaccurately (and, to some, in a colonizing way).

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the help of many people. First and foremost, I would like to thank my thesis advisors, Professor Brook Lillehaugen, who has guided me throughout my entire undergraduate journey in Linguistics, and Professor Zainab Saleh, who helped build the foundations of this thesis and my understandings of diaspora. Thank you both for being so understanding, and for supporting me in writing this joint thesis.

I would also like to thank my family, for being there for me every step of the way. Thank you for all the discussions, the read-throughs, and for the sources you found for me. Thank you Mama and Jie for your thoughtful comments and your unwavering support; Papa for articulating my argument back in 2020 before I even knew I was going to write a thesis on this (and for the three extra pages I wrote and the pile of books I skimmed); and Wen for telling me that “Filipinx” was trending on Twitter, because I don’t actually use social media.

Finally, I would also like to thank my friends, who kept me sane throughout this process. Thank you Summer, who was the first to ask me “what do you think of Filipinx?” and start discussing the term with me (and for never stopping these discussions even after I started writing my thesis). Thank you also Kim, my wonderful writing partner, who listened to my rambles and told me that I was making sense when I was lost in the work. And thank you to my roommates, Gen and Tana, who listened to me read out countless tweets and helped make this process fun (and also for feeding me!). This thesis would not have been possible without all of you.

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
“Filipinx”	6
“Filipino”	7
Methods and methodologies	16
Positionality	19
Outline of this thesis	21
Chapter 1: The ‘x’	23
Is “Filipino” gender-neutral?	25
Grammatical gender	26
The gender binary	30
In what language(s) and context(s) is “Filipino” gender-neutral?	34
Why the ‘x’?	39
Is “Filipinx” decolonial and inclusive, then?	43
Chapter 2: Filipino Representation	46
Neon is Filipino—not Filipinx!	47
Filipino representation in Western media	50
Rhetorics of respect	53
The Philippines against Filipinx	57
“Filipinx” vs. “Filipino” representation	62
Chapter 3: What does it mean to be “Filipinx”?	63
Who uses “Filipinx”?	64
What does “Filipinx” mean?	70
Conclusions: Negotiating a “Filipinx” identity	81
Works Cited	83

Introduction

In the midst of the chaos that was 2020, my social media accounts were flooded with posts about Black Lives Matter (BLM) movements in the United States (US) and beyond. At the same time, I saw an increasing number of posts that had the word “Filipinx” in them, from casually using the term in a solidarity post (“Filipinx for BLM!”) to condemning the very use of the word. “Filipinx” became a large topic of conversation that year, especially on social media, as some pushed for its use and others rejected it angrily. Soon, however, it became very clear to me—as well as many others—that those who were pushing for “Filipinx” were from the diaspora—specifically from the United States—and those who responded vehemently were from the Philippines. This sparked my interest, as I myself was unsure how to feel about the term, having lived in both the Philippines and the US. What aspects of the debate surrounding “Filipinx”, I wondered, were actually about the tensions surrounding and between the Philippines and the Philippine diaspora?

In this thesis, I study the different contexts behind and understandings of the term “Filipinx” in an attempt to answer this question. “Filipinx”, a term that is intended to be an inclusive and gender-neutral alternative to “Filipino”, has become a controversial topic that is largely divided along diasporic/homeland lines. In particular, Filipino/a/x Americans (Fil-Ams) tend to use and support the term “Filipinx”, seeing it as empowering and a show of solidarity (or identification) with the LGBT+ community and other marginalized communities. For someone who considers “Filipino” to be gendered and masculine and who comes from a diverse context that exposes them to specific histories and structures of racism and violence, as well as the social justice movements that developed from those—like those that led to the term “Latinx”—it makes sense that “Filipinx” would be suggested and preferred, as a gender-neutral alternative that aligns

itself with larger movements of decolonisation. By contrast, people in the Philippines tend to consider “Filipino” to be already gender-neutral and inclusive and do not understand the Western binary in the same way, nor are they exposed to these larger activist movements. “Filipinx” is thus seen by those in the Philippines as a way to further impose the Western binary—in order to then “decolonise” it—and therefore considered a form of colonization.

Through an analysis of online Twitter conversations and two interviews, I tease out the various definitions and connotations of “Filipinx” and what underlying tensions exist behind them—tensions surrounding language, ethnicity, nationality, and identity. These tensions lie in the vastly different contexts and experiences people in the Philippines and in the diaspora have, all attempting to fit under the same identity term/s. “Filipinx” as a term symbolizes much more than gender inclusivity; its use also brings about questions of representation and what characterizes “Filipinoness”. It also brings to light the diasporic desire for an inclusive, unified “Filipinx/o” identity—one that crosses borders, gender, and even time. This inclusive, unified “Filipinx/o” identity is impossible to achieve, however, not only because of the current tensions between the diaspora and the “homeland” (the Philippines), but because the imagined “homeland” does not exist; both communities—Fil-Ams and the communities their ancestors came from in the Philippines—have since grown and changed, such that the experiences, troubles, and even celebrations are no longer shared. Thus, by analyzing the term “Filipinx”, which I argue has evolved to index the specific Fil-Am experience, I hope to shed light on the broader and complex relationship between Filipino/a/xs from the Philippines and from the diaspora, as well as the ways in which identities are negotiated between these two groups online.

Using metapragmatics and critical discourse theory, I analyze Twitter posts and threads to answer my research question and uncover what “Filipinx” indexes, as well as people’s opinions

both of the word itself and the people who supposedly use them. This information is supplemented by two interviews I conducted. After providing background on the term “Filipino” and the history of Filipino/a/xs in the introduction, I move to discussing “Filipino” and “Filipinx” linguistically in Chapter 1, determining the gender-neutrality (or lack thereof) of “Filipino” as well as the history of the 'x' in “Filipinx”. In Chapter 2 I analyze a series of Twitter threads from a specific moment in January 2022, looking at the politics of representation through the use or denial of “Filipinx”. Finally, in chapter 3, I analyze the bulk of my Twitter data to determine who uses the term and in what contexts, and what “Filipinx” means to people.

1. “*Filipinx*”

Discussion on the use and meaning of “Filipinx” itself has remained minimal in academic scholarship, although it is widely used in American academia and activist circles—especially in the creation of “Filipinx” studies, organizations, or journals, such as University of California San Francisco’s United Filipinx Association or *Alon: Journal for Filipinx American and Diasporic Studies*. Often, people will briefly explain the use of the 'x' instead of the “o” or “a”, although others do not discuss it at all and simply use it without explanation. Barrett, Hanna, and Palomar (2021) discussed the 'x' in “Filipinx”, but focused on the genderqueer aspect of the term/letter, and only briefly touched upon the diasporic divide evident in the online conversations about the term. While queer identities, experiences and naming are, of course, related to this conversation, the focus of my thesis is on the diasporic tensions related to the general use of the term “Filipinx”—that is, the use of the term as a group identity—and not “Filipinx” as a third option to “Filipino/a” that marks an individual non-binary or gender nonconforming person. Thus, while any discussion involving “Filipinx” must include a discussion on queer identities, and indeed my

paper does, my focus is instead on the people who use (or reject) “Filipinx” as a group identity term, and what identities they are indexing with it.

Outside of scholarly material, “Filipinx” has widely been debated online, via social media, news articles, and blog posts. Some scholars from the Philippines have published in open-source Filipino journals or news sites (see for example Aguilar and San Juan 2020 or Toledo 2020). The general consensus of those in the Philippines, including in academia, is that “Filipino” is already gender-neutral and inclusive, and that “Filipinx” is unnecessary and useless—if not harmful or colonizing. For many in the US, however, “Filipinx” is an empowering term that signals solidarity not only with the LGBT+ community, but with other marginalized communities in the US, as social media influencers and activists have emphasized.

2. *“Filipino”*

While the term “Filipinx” is relatively new, discussions and debates on what it means to be “Filipino”—both within the Philippines and outside of it—have been widespread. One of the reasons for this is that “Filipino” can mean a whole host of things. “Filipino” can refer to a nationality (those who are citizens of the Philippines, a nation-state), an ethnicity (those who have a shared ancestry and cultural history that can be traced to the Philippines), or a language (specifically, the constructed national language of the Philippines, which replaced Tagalog as an official language in an attempt to create a unified mode of communication among Filipinos). While it is often obvious when “Filipino” is being used to refer to the language, it is rarely specified whether people are using “Filipino” to refer to the nationality or the ethnicity; in fact, it is often assumed to refer to both, as ethnic Filipinos from all over the world are expected to care about the Philippines and Philippine nationals are expected to share the ethnic identity and

cultural history of their fellow citizens. These two concepts, however, are not the same. Although there is an ideology that a nation's citizens all share one ethnic and cultural identity (i.e. Filipino nationals all share a Filipino identity), an ethnicity is not and does not have to be connected to any nationality (i.e. being ethnically Filipino does not mean you are nationally Filipino). Thus, when asked the question, "what does it mean to be Filipino?", one's answer will vary depending on the context and whether one is prioritizing nationality (and the ethnicity attached to it) or ethnicity (separate from nationality).

The term "Filipino" comes from "*Las islas Filipinas*", after the Spanish King Philip II. Prior to Spanish colonization, the islands now known as the Philippines were ruled by independent states who traded with other Asian powers such as the places we now call China, India, Thailand, and many others. However, prior to Spanish colonization, these islands had not thought of themselves as a collective whole. When the Spanish came, they colonized most of the islands, treating them as a whole instead of multiple different societies. However, "Filipino" was first used to describe creole Spaniards, or those with Spanish blood born in the Philippines. Those native to the Philippines who were not *mestizo* (mixed) were instead called *indios* until the Philippine revolution, when people began identifying as Filipinos—and not Filipino-*mestizos* (Doeppers 1994). The term "Filipino" then became connected to the fight for independence against the Spanish at the end of the 19th century, which came hand-in-hand with the budding imagination of the Philippines as a nation-state. Even Jose Rizal, the "Father of Filipino Nationalism", whose works are credited in creating a unified conception of a "Filipino" and the Philippines, was educated in Spain and wrote in Spanish, although his works were later translated into Tagalog and other Philippine languages (Anderson 1991). Since a nation is a social construct, it is created only through the collective imagination of said nation (Ibid.); in the

Philippines, this national consciousness began developing alongside the desire for independence—for nationhood and citizenship—from the Spanish, and then later the US.

During this fight for independence, however, the Spanish, at war with the US, sold the islands they called the Philippines to the United States of America, including a region in the South that is now the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, and which the Spanish had never fully colonised. The US established the Philippines as their territory, claiming Manifest Destiny and a moral obligation to teach the Filipino people how to be a civilized, self-governing nation, which apparently could only be achieved through American colonization (Krenn 2006). The US stipulated that once Filipino people were educated in the American way and proved they could govern themselves through a commonwealth government under American rule, the Philippines would be granted independence. This was interrupted during World War II, when the Japanese invaded the islands, declared the Philippines “independent”, then occupied the country until the US forcibly reclaimed it—but the Philippines was officially granted independence from America in 1946.

The Philippines is thus a group of islands with a similar history of colonization and within a certain geographic territory, under a single government.¹ Even this shared history, territory, and government, however, is not equally shared; as said above, the Spanish, who used religious conversion as a powerful tool for colonization,² were not equally successful in ruling—or converting—all the islands they claimed to own when they sold them. The US, however, buying the islands from Spain, found themselves fighting a people who were largely beginning to consider themselves—and were then considered by Americans to be—“Filipino” (Krenn 2006). Thus, the term “Filipino”, from the very beginning, was a term of Spanish origin

¹ Kinda.

² Alternatively, one could say that the Catholic Church used colonization as a tool for spreading Catholicism—for the Spanish at the time, religious conversion and colonization came hand-in-hand.

that attempted to encapsulate a heterogeneous group of people tied together by a (semi-)shared experience of Spanish—and later, American (and Japanese)—colonization.

It is often said within the Philippines that even though we may all be nationally Filipino, the islands themselves are extremely heterogeneous, and that regional loyalty is more important than nationality. The history of the Filipino language, the official language of the Philippines, is a good illustration of this often antagonistic regionalism. Language, especially a unified language, is an essential aspect of the imagining of a nation, or any community in which one cannot personally know all the members of (Anderson 1991), whether or not it reflects the reality of the people living there. Spanish missionaries, whose goal was to convert the native population, often did so through the vernacular, learning the language of the community they lived near in order to spread their faith instead of teaching Spanish (Rafael 1988). The US, with their education-focused imperialism, required Filipinos to learn and use English as a way of “civilizing” them, as if speaking English was proof of “civilisation.” When the Philippines gained independence, they declared Tagalog, the language spoken in Manila and the surrounding area, was to become the national language (Philippine Constitution of 1943, art. IX, sec. 2).³ This, however, caused much uproar from those who spoke other languages, such as Cebuano, which was just as widely spoken as Tagalog. Since Tagalog was not the majority language, it was clear that it was chosen because of location, which many disagreed with. In 1973, the national language of the Philippines was changed to Filipino, a constructed language based on Tagalog, but which would evolve to include aspects of the other languages spoken in the Philippines (Gonzalez 1998).⁴ This change came with a greater push towards a cohesive Filipino national identity, although—unsurprisingly—many are still unsatisfied with the dominance of Tagalog.

³ English, at this time, was the *de facto* official language, although Spanish was also still in use.

⁴ English was also named an official language “until otherwise provided by law” (Philippine Constitution 1987, art. XIV, sec. 6-9).

What does it mean, then, to be nationally Filipino? Filipino nationality—and the ethnic identity tied to it—is so intertwined with its history of colonialism that some have argued that the Filipino nation and its people cannot be defined except in contrast with the US and whiteness (Ignacio 2005, Rodriguez 2010). Emily Ignacio (2005), who conducted what she calls a “nethnography” on an Internet newsgroup called *soc.culture.filipino*, found that even among members who live and are aware of the complexities of the Filipino experience, there is a tendency to create stereotyped and essentialized definitions of both American and Filipino “cultures” in order to show loyalty to and the superiority of Filipinos and Filipino values. Thus, despite the fact that Filipino citizens are quite different and divided, there is still a conception of a “Filipino”, ethnically, that is attached to the imagined community of the Filipino nation.

Outside of the Philippines, particularly in the US, “Filipino” is generally used to refer to an ethnic group separate from nationality. American imperialism in the 20th century led to the increase of migration of Filipino workers to the United States, in order to provide cheap labor. In the 70s—after independence from the US—the Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos established the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) program, which encouraged even more Filipino workers to immigrate and find work abroad by making it easier for a Filipino to obtain a visa for certain forms of work (Ocampo 2014, Espiritu 2003). The current and historical push for Filipinos to find work abroad, especially the United States,⁵ has led to a large number of Filipinos all over the globe, many of whom then decide to settle down long-term and raise children in their host countries, thus forming the Filipino diaspora. While some Fil-Ams⁶ are nationally Filipino, many are not, or are also nationally American; however, due to the ties they

⁵ All of which is a result of American imperialism and the reliance the Philippines has on the US, which now includes the money OFWs and other Filipino immigrants send back home.

⁶ Although “Filipino American” is often used to mean any Filipinos living in America, including first-generation immigrants, in this paper, I will be using “Fil-Am” to mean children who are ethnically Filipino and were raised in the US, whether 1.5, 2nd, or later generations—not Filipinos who immigrated to the US as adults.

still have with the Philippines and the racial position that Filipinos hold in the US, the ethnic identity of “Filipino” can be incredibly important to Fil-Ams, regardless of nationality.

Fil-Ams, by virtue of living and/or growing up in the United States, can often feel removed from their Filipino heritage and the Philippines, both culturally and physically (Ignacio 2005). Since Fil-Ams are also generally more ignorant of the Philippines and of current affairs in the Philippines, typically do not or have not visited the country, and often lack close relationships with people physically in the Philippines, they are often dismissed by those in the homeland as not Filipino, and instead considered “Americanized” or “whitewashed” (Ignacio 2005). However, Fil-Ams are also excluded from being considered truly “American”, even among Filipinos, because to be an “American” in the US is assumed to be white. Thus, Fil-Ams are considered too American to be Filipino and too Filipino to be American. Still, within the racialized systems at play in the US, being ethnically Filipino (American) is a way for Fil-Ams to shift between their identities and fit into the US, their home (Espiritu 2003; Aguilar 2015)

Fil-Ams are also often asked to represent Filipinos in the US, to play their part in multiculturalism by educating others about and performing being “Filipino” (Rodriguez 2010). This often occurs in places like university, which is typically the first place where race and ethnicity are brought to the forefront for Fil-Ams, thus sparking a desire to “return to their roots” (Ignacio 2005). This often led Fil-Ams to search for an authentic “Filipino culture” from the Philippines, thus leading to the physical location of the Philippines to become a source of authenticity and a singular culture (Ibid.), despite the fact that Fil-Ams have their own rich cultural history that has diverged and evolved from those in the Philippines. This “authentic” Filipino culture is then created through the collective images and memories of the “homeland” and is often characterized by being untouched by the US—by a separation from the colonizers’

culture and the racial oppression that came with colonization (Ibid.). This is linked to the diasporic desire to return to the “homeland” (Ignacio 2005, Clifford 1994), to the “Philippines” of their past—both in their collective memory and the history of the Philippines as a whole—a place which no longer exists and perhaps never did (Ignacio 2005). For some people, this means a return to the pre-colonial state, to an Indigenous Filipino culture. This singular “Indigenous” Filipino identity does not exist, however, and never has.

This decolonial desire for an Indigenous past is related to issues of culture and the essentialization of cultures. Culture, which was pushed for in replacement of the biological view of race by anthropologists such as Franz Boas, became a tool of colonization and white supremacy to create singular, static, and cohesive representations of people separated from history and context, representations which were written by white male ethnographers and hailed as the singular truth about that group of people (Clifford 1994). Despite—or perhaps because of—this, mainstream media and social constructions of political identities focus on this essentialized view of culture, such that Fil-Ams are considered lacking in culture unless they can somehow perform a “Filipino culture” that aligns with this unchanging, un-nuanced version of the Filipino, even though “finding one’s identity is not the same as unearthing untouched preserved cultural artifacts on an archeological dig.” (Ignacio 2005, 51-52).

These experiences and contexts have led to a Filipino identity that is often being renegotiated and redefined (Ignacio 2005). The term “Filipino”—which is generally unspecified between the nationality and ethnicity—and what it means to be a Filipino is thus further complicated by the different experiences of being Filipino all across the globe. There is also an increased desire among those in the diaspora to have a unified identity of “Filipino”, to have a set definition of “Filipinoness”, no matter how impossible that may be (Ignacio 2005). Additionally,

“The discourse of diaspora is thus often localized to the US experience and methodologically reduced to the US–Philippines binarism. As a result, the serialized and interconnected global reality of the dispersal of migrant Filipino workers is obscured” (Aguilar 2015, 457); that is, even within the diaspora, the US (and thus Fil-Ams) carries a hegemonic position in defining the diaspora and the diasporic experience.⁷ The advent of the new term “Filipinx”, then, enters this pre-existing conversation about what it means to be “Filipino”.

This discussion on the Filipino identity has been studied in-depth with regards to Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and/or first-generation Filipino immigrants (see, for example, Aguila 2014, San Juan 2001), as well as their children, often specifically Fil-Ams (Bischoff 2012, Ignacio 2005, Espiritu 2003, Ocampo 2014). A few of these studies tackle the virtual Filipino community as well (Aguila 2014, Ignacio 2005) and explore how Filipinos use the decentered, transnational space of the Internet (specifically, social media) in order to connect with those in the “homeland” (Ignacio 2005). In her book *Building Diaspora*, Emily Ignacio (2005) focuses on the ability of technology to allow people in the diaspora to “go to the source”, to connect with and gain information about the homeland and in that way define or redefine what it means to be “Filipino”. Although the Internet platform that Ignacio conducted her “nethnography” on no longer exist (she conducted her study in the late 90s) and there has since been more written about the way people in diasporas use the Internet, Ignacio’s book is nevertheless foundational in understanding how and why Filipino youth in America use virtual spaces to define and redefine their identities.

Focusing on a more current Internet platform, Almond Pilar Aguila’s dissertation on Facebook and the “renegotiation of Filipino diasporic identities” (2014; from title) looks at the

⁷ That said—or perhaps *because* of this—I will be focusing mainly on that binarism, partially because those who have pushed for “Filipinx” are from the US. Thus, when I say “diaspora”, I am generally speaking about Fil-Ams, which is a unique experience to many other diasporic Filipino(a/x)s outside of the US.

ways Filipino immigrants in Canada maintain their connection with The Philippines while renegotiating their identities—or perceived identities—as immigrants to the Global North through the careful curation of their Facebooks. Aguila explores how the renegotiation of identities is a balancing act between resisting the ethnic migrant label in the host country and the prosperous immigrant stereotype in the home country, both of which are imposed on them on the same platform, as their loved ones in the Philippines, their new friends in their host country, and other Filipino diasporics are all on their friends lists, seeing and interacting with them on Facebook. Thus, although Aguila’s participants of the study were young first-generation Filipino immigrants, she was able to focus on both the pressures from loved ones in the home country and the pressures of assimilation from the host country—something which even second- or third-generation Filipino immigrants feel (Mendoza 2002; Espiritu 2003; Ignacio 2005).

Aguila also highlights the overwhelming amount of Filipinos and Filipino community online, citing that the Philippines “lead[s] the world in social networking, blogging, video and photo uploading” and holds the title of “social networking capital” (2014, 1). This has held even until today, as the Philippines tops the world on time spent on social media for the sixth year in a row (Chua 2021). While much of this is often attributed to the need to connect to loved ones abroad, studies have also shown the importance of social media within the Philippines, such as the Hjorth and Arnold (2011) study on the use of the mobile phone by Philippine activists in the 2001 People Power Revolution. Thus, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter (and even Instagram and, recently, TikTok) are essential spaces where Filipino(a/x)s from all around the world—however they might define or identify themselves—are able to connect, interact, and share their personal experiences with one another, thereby being a space of much (re)negotiation and (re)defining of what it means to be “Filipino” (or, more recently, “Filipinx”).

3. *Methods and methodologies*

Social media as a field site is relatively new and constantly changing, as are our relationships to the Internet and social media. Online, we are able to create and curate identities and personas and interact with individuals from all over the world (Aguila 2014). Twitter is a sphere where Filipino/a/xs from the Philippines and from the diaspora can interact, respond to one another, and ultimately work together to negotiate and re-negotiate identities (Ignacio 2005). Many of the debates surrounding “Filipinx” occur and have occurred online, between strangers.

While conducting what Bonilla and Rosa (2015) call “hashtag ethnography” would be useful in understanding the activist aspect of the term, my search must go beyond just posts with “#Filipinx”.⁸ Many, especially those who do not agree with the usage of the term, will post about “Filipinx” without using the hashtag.⁹ In order to find a wider variety of posts—called “tweets” on Twitter—that discuss or use the word “Filipinx”, I instead use the search tool on Twitter to find the “top posts” with the keyword “filipinx”.¹⁰ Searching for “filipinx” can yield many different types of posts, some with “#filipinx” or “#FilipinxAmerican”; other tweets will use the word in the post itself proudly, while others will critique its usage or (re)open the debate about the word. Around January 2022, “Filipinx” began trending on Twitter again, as a recent public usage of the term brought it back into the forefront of conversation;¹¹ while many tweets in my

⁸ The hashtag “#Filipinx”, when it blew up in 2020, had clear links to activism and was often explicitly used as part of social media activism, often linked to the Black Lives Matter movement.

⁹ Bonilla and Rosa (2015) give an extensive discussion of hashtags in the wake of social media activism, including the various reasons one might use or not use a hashtag; these might explain the decision of Twitter users to include or exclude “#Filipinx” from their posts.

¹⁰ Twitter top search is meant to provide tweets the algorithm believes the searcher will care about the most, according to the Twitter FAQ about top search results; the purpose of using this search is not necessarily to find the most popular or widespread tweets, but instead to find a broad set of posts that contain or are about the word “filipinx”. To prevent/minimize bias, I conducted most of my searches from the US without signing into my Twitter account, save for in January 2022, when I was in the Philippines and “Filipinx” was trending.

¹¹ Specifically, the video game Valorant launched a new character who was described by some as Filipinx, although they also used she/her pronouns for her and marketed her towards their clients in the Philippines. The tweets surrounding this announcement were mixed, as many celebrated the representation while others derided the company for not doing their research about their target market. More on this in chapter 2.

data are from the fall of 2021, I have also gathered data from this moment, and analyze them separately in chapter 2.

Ethics with regard to social media, especially Twitter, are always tricky. Although all Twitter users, prior to making an account, have to be above 13 years of age (or have parental consent) and must accept the terms and conditions which allow whatever information they make public to be public domain, most people do not read the terms and conditions prior to accepting them. Furthermore, accepting that your data may be public does not necessarily mean consenting to be part of a study, and even though I remove usernames, it is possible to back-search tweets—and further possible to locate the device that is connected to the account. Thus, I removed any tweets from my data that were posted by someone under the age of 16, according to their profiles, in order to protect minors. Still, many people see Twitter as a way to speak to a general public, and there is an understanding that once you have tweeted something from a public account, anyone with Internet access can see and interact with it—they are, in essence, existing texts which I will analyze and treat as such.

I analyze the tweets¹² that I find using metapragmatics and critical discourse theory following Bridges' (2017) study on the term “mansplaining”. Metapragmatics is a subfield of pragmatics that analyses communication about the way we communicate, that is, talking about language. In Bublitz and Hüber's “Introducing metapragmatics in use” (2007), they discuss various forms of metalanguage or metacommunication (i.e. talking about language), from explicit to implicit utterances, as well as the various functions, which range from talking about language in linguistics papers to reflecting on and proscribing language use. Metapragmatic

¹² The tweets I search for may be part of threads, which are connected responses to an original post. These responses may be written by the same person in order to continue a post (there are character limits to tweets), or may be other people's responses to someone's tweet.

utterances can thus be used by individuals to structure both their and other's language, including constructing or positioning one's identity (Bridges 2017; Silverstein 1993). Related to metapragmatics is the concept of indexicality, wherein a term or phrase is linked to a specific thing, usually an identity, through co-occurrence, such that eventually, using that term or phrase results in "pointing at" that identity, even when other, more explicit cues, are missing (Johnstone 2016). Critical discourse analysis, on the other hand, is a way of examining discourse (either textual or talking) as it relates to, perpetuates, or resists social inequalities (Bridges 2017, 96). Specifically, it claims that language cannot be separated from its context, including the various power dynamics involved between those who are participating in the discourse (Ibid.).

With this in mind, then, my analysis of "filipinx"-related tweets must include more than an interpretation of the poster's purpose or apparent goal of the post and the use of the term "filipinx", but also context about the poster themselves and how they understand or perform their social status (online). Specifically, I use the apparent identifiable personal information such as gender, age, locality, nationality, and ethnicity¹³ of the poster to understand the way they are situating their "filipinx" identity or lack thereof. I also take note of what the text itself is doing with regards to "filipinx", whether they are denouncing, debating, declaring an identity, or something else entirely.

In addition to data gathered from Twitter, I also conducted unstructured interviews with individuals, one who recently graduated from a university in California (where there is a substantial Fil-Am community) and one currently in university in the Philippines. These interviews were approached in line with post-colonial theory, along the understanding that there

¹³ There is no way to know the accuracy of this information, and it is not always discernible, as I will merely be using whatever information is publicly provided by the poster. Unfortunately, I will have to assume the information given is accurate; this includes assuming that a person's pronouns reflect their gender identity (i.e. she/her pronouns means they identify as a woman, they/them as non-binary, etc.).

are complex ways in which we operate, create, and maintain power and agency within oppressive structures, which are unique to the social circumstances of the individual and must be historicised (Hall 1996). Similarly, following Black Feminist methodology, I focused on understanding and acknowledging the complex intersectionality of my interviewees, whose whole selves are involved when negotiating and creating identities and identity terms that they feel fit their whole and complex selves (Crenshaw 1989). Black feminists insist that language and the way one lives their lives is always political. While my interviewee's experiences and opinions cannot be generalized to all young Filipino/a/x adults, their understanding of their situation/s is still political, and still valuable in informing my own analysis.

4. Positionality

My research cannot be separated from my own positionality. As someone who has grown up both in the United States and in the Philippines, I hold a unique position in this debate and within the diaspora. I was born and spent a majority of my primary years in the US, but attended a high school in the Philippines. Now, I attend college in the US, and identify as an international student here, even though I am a US citizen (I hold both a US and Philippine passport). I no longer identify as Fil-Am, but often tell people in the Philippines that I'm from the States. As such, I can relate to the lived experiences that both Fil-Ams and Filipinos from the Philippines have, while simultaneously being considered an "outsider" in both groups. Therefore, while my work is not auto-ethnographic, in that I am not myself posting or interacting with any tweets nor focusing my analysis on my own experiences, I cannot remove myself and my own thoughts, opinions, and experiences from this topic. In fact, I do not wish to, and believe that my own experiences and understandings of the word are also relevant to my research (McClaurin 2001).

However, this means that I must be reflexive in my research and ensure that I fairly and accurately reflect the thoughts and opinions of all sides of this debate, not only my own.

I must also be transparent about my own opinions of the word: I myself do not identify as Filipinx, and rarely use the term as a group identity. That said, I am also not against the term, and if I was asked to use it and/or was within a setting that did use it, I would willingly and even gladly do so, even if I myself do not identify with the term. Furthermore, despite my bias, my goal in this paper is not to take any sides in this debate, but to highlight the different contexts that people are coming from, experiences they are drawing from, and struggles they are facing in order to explain why someone would—or would not—use the term “Filipinx”.

These contexts are multilayered and extremely complex, and I cannot represent all the different aspects and opinions in this paper. Every individual has their own reasons behind using or refusing to use “Filipinx” that may relate to language, ethnicity, and nationality, as well as histories of imperialism and racial violence—which are the aspects I am focusing on in this paper and hope to analyze, but will never be able to fully flesh out within the limits of this thesis. Those reasons may also relate to understandings of gender and sexuality, both socially and individually, which are aspects that I touch upon but do not study in-depth.

Since I am studying an identity term and the groups of people the identity term may or may not refer to, language is extremely important. For the most part, I place both “Filipinx” and “Filipino” in quotation marks when discussing the terms themselves or the groups that are being arbitrarily defined through said terms. Other times, I try to use alternatives such as “Philippine” or “people of Philippine descent” to refer to ethnically and/or nationally Filipino/a/x people. Outside of those instances, however, and especially when understanding may become difficult, I use the default “Filipino” as the catch-all term for those both in the Philippines and in the

diaspora. This is not because I reject the use of “Filipinx” as a catch-all; however, because many people find the term offensive and do not identify with it, I felt it most appropriate to not use it when referring to them.¹⁴

Related to this, while the goals of my paper are to uncover tensions between the Philippines and the diaspora, the diasporic experience that I focus on is, in fact, that of Fil-Ams—individuals who have grown up in the US. This is partly because the data (tweets) that I have come overwhelmingly from either the Philippines or the US (or are from an unknown locality), and “Filipinx” is largely connected to the Fil-Am experience.¹⁵ Thus, unfortunately, I am unable to make observations on the larger (global) diaspora and diasporic experiences as a whole, especially since the Fil-Am experience is quite unique from other experiences in the diaspora (Aguilar 2015). This very issue of American hegemonic influence on academic discourse surrounding the Filipino diaspora is therefore not only shown in my work (as I am writing from a US institution), but in the very data I am analyzing and the tensions I observe.

5. *Outline of this thesis*

This thesis is organized into three chapters. The first chapter, “The ‘x’”, deals with the first major arguments surrounding “Filipinx”, that of language. In this chapter, I look at the foundations of “Filipinx”, by first analyzing whether or not there is a need for a gender-neutral term in the language, essentially answering the question, is Filipino gender-neutral? I then move on to look at the history behind the ‘x’, which is not a letter that exists in the Filipino alphabet, to

¹⁴ There are also other terms I could use and discuss in this paper, such as “Pinoy/Pinay”, but I have limited this paper to only discussing “Filipino/a/x”, and as such refrain from using them.

¹⁵ In addition, because of US imperialism, the US also has the largest and longest Filipino immigrant and diasporic community.

understand why, of all possibilities, ‘x’ was chosen, linking the term to “Latinx” and wider movements of social justice, as well as the controversies that come with them.

In chapter two, “Filipino Representation”, I address the issue of representation through a case study regarding a Filipino(/a/x) video game character. Using various tweets that express anger towards the term “Filipinx”, I discuss the erasure of Filipinos from the Philippines in Western media, media representation, and who is expected to represent the Philippines and/or “Filipinos”. I analyze tweets that claim this representation is inaccurate and create a notion of “Filipinoness” that excludes “Filipinx” from its definition—and thus also excludes Fil-Ams.

I then expand on this creation of “Filipinoness” in chapter 3, where I look at the bulk of my data to better understand how, exactly, “Filipinx” (and “Filipino”) is being used, and what identity it indexes. I examine the ways that identity and “Filipinoness” are negotiated through and around this term, and how the term is used to understand—or prove a lack of understanding of—one another’s contexts.

Chapter 1: The ‘x’

The primary understanding of “Filipinx” is that the term is (or is meant to be) a gender-neutral version of the identity term “Filipino/a”, and thus is inclusive and decolonial. “Filipino” and “Filipina” are both taken from Spanish, similarly to many other words derived from the Spanish language, such as *Tito/a*, “uncle/aunt”, or *Lolo/a* “grandfather/grandmother”. Spanish is a language with grammatical gender, where each noun belongs to one of two gendered noun classes, “masculine” and “feminine”, and word final <o> and <a> typically correlate with masculine and feminine grammatical gender (Alvanoudi 2014), though there are exceptions and many nouns that don’t end in <o> and <a>. In addition, adjectives, demonstratives, and determiners must agree in gender and number with the noun they modify—thus, in Spanish, “Filipino”, both as an adjective and a noun, is masculine in grammatical gender.

Filipino and other Philippine languages, however, do not have grammatical gender, and the only apparently gendered¹⁶ nouns are borrowed from Spanish. Therefore, a large point of contention between those who approve and those who disapprove of the term “Filipinx” is whether or not “Filipino” needs a gender-inclusive term, or if it already is gender-inclusive. A second point of contention is why, if “Filipino” does need a gender-neutral counterpart, should that counterpart use an 'x', when there is no 'x' in the Filipino alphabet (and, according to most Filipino speakers, the word sounds strange). These points of debate call into question whether or not “Filipinx” truly is inclusive and decolonial as it is meant to be, or if it is exclusive and colonial, as many from the Philippines claim.

In order to understand both sides of this debate, we must first understand the history of “Filipino” and “Filipinx”, and the Philippines in general. In particular, both words—and the

¹⁶ By “apparently gendered”, I mean a word that is seemingly grammatically gendered, which often overlaps with sociocultural gender, which we will discuss further.

nation and people—are connected to Spanish and Spain, and the colonial contact that occurred¹⁷ between Spain and the place we now call the Philippines. As said before, Spanish colonization brought with it a drastically new and different language and cultural context. Contact with Spain led to new social roles, governments, and religion, in addition to language. Therefore, when discussing words like “Filipino” and even newer words like “Filipinx”, we are harking back to both colonial-era Spanish (both linguistically and culturally) and colonial and pre-colonial Philippine languages and cultures—as well as current Philippine (and diasporic) languages and cultures. However, since this debate is largely between educated individuals in both the Philippines and abroad, to limit this discussion, I will be primarily focusing on the Tagalog language and the cultures in Metro Manila and California, where my interviewees are from, and online, where I have gathered Twitter data.

These diverse sets of people who all have a stake in the term “Filipino” (and “Filipinx”) makes it even more difficult to pinpoint its meaning, as different groups might have differing interpretations of the words, as we see within this debate. Languages are constantly evolving, and words shift meaning depending on the contexts and communities people are using them in. Therefore, the same word—or words—can have different meanings depending on who is using and interpreting them; my observations and analysis are thus not so much regarding what is the “true” or “real” meaning of the word “Filipino” (or “Filipinx”), but instead about the negotiation of the meaning(s) of the word between two different stakeholder communities.

In the first section of this chapter, I grapple with this question of “is “Filipino” gender neutral?”. In order to do that, there must first be a separation between grammatical gender—that is, having a noun class system that has distinctions of at least masculine and feminine, like Spanish has—and sociocultural gender—that is, the social category of gender. Grammatical

¹⁷ Is still occurring?

gender is inherent to the noun itself and has no semantic meaning in itself,¹⁸ and dictates grammatical agreement with other elements of the noun phrase, such as adjectives (Alvanoudi 2014, 1). Sociocultural gender, on the other hand, refers to the socially constructed expected behaviours, norms, and expressions, often based on biological sex. The Western binary is that of masculine and feminine genders, or man and woman, and the roles and expectations that are associated with the two genders. Words that have grammatical gender are not necessarily at all related to the sociocultural gender(s) of the society that speaks that language; however, there are also nouns that lexically refer to the sociocultural gender of the society that speaks that language—like Tagalog *babae* “woman”, English *mother*, or Spanish *hombre* “man”. Spanish has grammatical gender noun classes (feminine and masculine), but Tagalog does not, although it does still have terms that refer to sociocultural gender. Thus, is “Filipino”—a Spanish noun borrowed into Philippine languages that refer to people who have sociocultural gender(s)—a gender-neutral term?

In the second part of this chapter, I focus on “Filipinx” and look into why it has become the gender-inclusive alternative to “Filipino”. I discuss the history of the 'x' in identity terms, primarily in the term “Latinx”, to place “Filipinx” within the context of larger waves of activism, as well as the history of controversy and differing opinions to the 'x' that “Filipinx” inherits.

1. *Is “Filipino” gender-neutral?*

Speakers of Philippine languages, when discussing the usage of “Filipinx”, often claim that “Filipino” already is gender-neutral, and therefore does not need a gender-neutral

¹⁸ That is to say, a word having a certain grammatical gender does not necessarily mean anything semantically, although as we shall see, it also can (Corbett 1991).

counterpart. John Toledo, in his article “Choose: Filipino or Filipinx?” describes “Filipino” to be gender-neutral despite the “o”:

Especially in 21st century Philippines, the ethnic identifier denotes a collective identity, a mass of people - Indigenous peoples, women, peasants, fisherfolk, working class, unemployed, youths, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, non-binary, and many more... Even though we have other gendered words such as Filipina, Pilipino, Filipina [sic], Pinoy and Pinay, Filipino is us [sic] instills that collective consciousness which ties us to our fellow Filipino by mere ethnicity. (2020)

Toledo—and others who see the term similarly—do not deny the gendered origins of “Filipino”, nor the existence of similar gendered words—like “Filipina”. However, gender—both sociocultural gender and Spanish grammatical gender—in the Philippines is also not understood or experienced in the same way as Spanish speakers do.¹⁹

1.1. Grammatical gender

Spanish—especially Early Modern Spanish—seems to have had two grammatical gender classes that were connected to two sociocultural genders: masculine and feminine for both. However, just because a noun is masculine or feminine does not mean that the object being referred to is masculine or feminine in the cultural sense. For example, “table” in Spanish is *la mesa*, which is feminine; however, this appears to be a semantically arbitrary designation. This becomes more complex, however, when it comes to nouns that have lexical gender, or the lexical marking of sociocultural gender (Alvanoudi 2014, 2); that is, they directly refer to a specific sociocultural gender and are marked for gender, typically because they refer to humans, who culturally have genders, for example “mother” or “brother”. Generally, languages that have grammatical gender will reflect sociocultural gender categories of the people who speak it in words that have lexical gender, although this is not always the case (Alvanoudi 2014, 13-31). In

¹⁹ Not that all Spanish speakers understand and experience gender in the same way.

Spanish, this reference to sociocultural gender is typically directly related to grammatical gender marking; that is, words that reference people that are grammatically masculine tend to also refer to socioculturally masculine people (men), and the same with feminine words. This conflates the two so that it is difficult to separate the grammatical gender from the sociocultural gender that is marked. “Filipino”, therefore, as a Spanish word, is grammatically masculine, and presumably is/was marked as socioculturally masculine for Spanish speakers. Table 1, below, defines the different types of “gender” discussed here, with examples from Spanish ([Sp]) and Tagalog ([Tag]). *Filipino* is marked with a “?” in Tagalog, as this is where the uncertainty lies.

Table 1. Definitions of “gender”s

Grammatical gender	A noun class system that requires distinctions based on gender (masculine/feminine) and requires grammatical agreement	<i>La mesa</i> “table” (fem) [Sp] <i>El libro</i> “book” (masc) [Sp]
Sociocultural gender	A sociocultural system of expected behaviours, norms, and expressions, often based on biological sex	The Western gender binary is a sociocultural gender system that has masculine (man) and feminine (woman) genders
Lexical gender	Lexical markings of sociocultural gender; typically in words referring to humans and/or human gender roles	<i>Nanay</i> “mother” [Tag] <i>Tatay</i> “father” [Tag]
Words with lexical and grammatical gender	Words that have human controllers and which are marked both grammatically and lexically for gender (i.e. the grammatical gender and referenced sociocultural gender match), such that the two are conflated	<i>amigo</i> “friend” (masc) [Sp] <i>amiga</i> “friend” (fem) [Sp] <i>Filipino</i> (masc) [Sp] <i>Filipino</i> (masc?) [Tag]

The question, then, is what will happen to “Filipino” when put in the context of Tagalog?

Tagalog, unlike Spanish, has no grammatical gender noun class. However, it does have words that refer to sociocultural gender, like *lalaki* “man” and *babae* “woman”. Even so, there

are²⁰ fewer lexically gendered words than Spanish (Hajek and Klinken 2019).²¹ For example, there is no word for “husband” or “wife” in Tagalog, there is only *asawa*, “spouse”; *bata* instead of “boy” or “girl”; *anak* instead of “son” or “daughter”; and although Tagalog has *ate* and *kuya*, “older sister” and “older brother”, there is no “sister” or “brother”, only *kapatid*. If gender needs to be clarified—if someone wants to say “boy” or “girl”—one must add *babae/lalaki*—*batang lalaki*, “male child”, or *batang babae*, “female child”.

This, according to many people online, is directly related to the Indigenous/pre-colonial Philippine lack of gender binary.²² In particular, people have been citing the lack of gendered pronouns (specifically the third person singular pronoun) in Tagalog as an example of how, even today, Tagalog speakers have trouble with the (Western) gender binary.²³ Indeed, at least linguistically, Tagalog speakers often struggle with English pronouns, switching between “he” and “she” indiscriminately. Of course, this does not actually mean that there is no gender binary in Philippine cultures, or even no gendered words, as we will see in the next few sections.

Many common Tagalog nouns do not refer to any sort of sociocultural gender, even if they refer to humans. Currently, many nouns which do refer to sociocultural gender are Spanish borrowings or contain Spanish gendered morphology (Baklanova 2016). The question remains, however, whether or not Spanish loanwords into Tagalog—specifically nouns—are borrowed into the language with its gender (both grammatical and culturally referenced). In Tagalog, a sort of partial or marginal gender system has been adopted from the Spanish, such that some Spanish nouns that refer to humans and some adjectives that describe humans retain their Spanish gender,

²⁰ Or were, since many lexically gendered words have since been borrowed into Tagalog.

²¹ There are also fewer “gendered” words in Tagalog than in English, which does not have grammatical gender noun classes either.

²² This will be explored a bit more in the next section (1.2); the accuracy of these claims, especially since they are made online, are unclear, but nevertheless extremely persistent in people’s current understandings and imaginings of pre-colonial Philippines.

²³ An example of this is (3), in section 1.2, which is discussed again in chapter 3 as well.

both grammatical and sociocultural (Hajek and Klinken 2019). T. Stolz proposed three restrictions for grammatical gender in Spanish: a) grammatical gender only applies to Spanish loanwords; b) gender agreement only occurs for nouns that refer to humans, and therefore the sociocultural gender of the human; and c) masculine/feminine distinctions are neutralized in the plural²⁴ (Hajek and Klinken 2019). Baklanova (2016) expanded on Stolz’s findings, especially the first restriction, adding that gender also applies to blended words with non-Spanish roots that have Spanish derivational affixes (that is, Spanish gendered morphology is productive in Tagalog), but also finding that gender agreement in Tagalog is inconsistent. This suggests that Tagalog “gender agreement” may actually be an optional semantic phenomenon, not a grammatical one (Hajek and Klinken 2019).

Taking Stolz’s restrictions and applying them to “Filipino”, we see that when the term is plural or modifying a plural noun, the masculine gender may be neutralized.²⁵ If, as Baklanova suggests, the apparent gender agreement in Tagalog is actually semantic, then the question remains of whether or not “Filipino” includes sociocultural gender within its semantic meaning—and how Filipinos perceive and understand that sociocultural gender. This is especially important, as many Spanish loanwords in Tagalog have deviated from the original in semantics, as well as phonological or grammatical features, as Spanish concepts—especially ones related to Christianity, which was introduced by Spain—were reinterpreted into local understandings of the world (Wolff 2001).

²⁴ This could follow the Spanish convention of using the masculine (plural) form to refer to mixed groups (i.e. a group with both men and women), or it could mean that grammatical gender is completely neutralized in the plural (such that, for example, “Filipinos” is entirely gender-neutral, instead of marked for a masculine or mixed group). Hajek and Klinken (2019) suggest that it is the former. Notably, however, this convention has been changing among Spanish speakers, and may therefore evolve/be evolving in Tagalog. Teasing this out further is beyond the scope of this paper, however.

²⁵ Again, this is uncertain. Additionally, because there is no number agreement in Tagalog, “Filipino” keeps its form no matter if it is modifying a plural noun or not.

1.2. *The gender binary*

The current understanding of a gender binary is a result of the cultural (and linguistic) contact between Spanish and pre-hispanic Philippine societies, which was then influenced by American colonization centuries later. The Western conception of the gender binary was first introduced by the Spanish through the Catholic Church, which was one of the major tools for colonization, and specifically Catholic missionaries. Within Catholicism, marriage between a man and a woman is a sacrament, which establishes both the gender binary (there must be a man and a woman, and there is no acceptable option outside of the two) as well as heterosexuality. The gender binary became a moral and religious concept, even more so because many pre-hispanic Philippine societies had spiritual roles for what the Spanish missionaries considered gender non-conforming, such as the asug, cross-dressing men who held religious and spiritual roles in society and were often revered (Yarcia et al. 2019).

Not only was the gender binary important for religious conversion—one aspect of colonization—but it was also imposed and established through the racial project, one which was further propagated by US colonization. Imperial rhetoric and media in America created not only a dichotomy between the “civilized” Western (read: white) colonizer and the “savage” native (in this case, the Filipino), but also between men and women of each society, which created a story of the Western man as a protector of Western women and savior of native, exotic women from the savage native man (McClintock 1995, Ignacio 2005). This has evolved into the commodification of Filipino women, who are compared to Western (independent, free) women and depicted and seen as objects of desire for Western men (Ignacio 2005).

Therefore, the popular understandings of men and women and the gender binary as a whole are colonial impositions by both the Spanish and the US as part of the colonial project.

Pre-hispanic gender systems were erased in favor of Spanish indoctrination and colonization, and the Western gender binary—alongside other structures such as economic and governmental—were imposed in their place. That said, this does not mean that the current understanding and experience of the gender binary is the same in the Philippines as in the West. In fact, because of the difference that is made between men and women in both places within the colonial rhetoric, as well as the general understanding that the binary was a result of colonization, the experience of gender and the gender binary is inherently different in the Philippines than it is in the US.

My two interviewees, one born and raised in the Philippines and one raised in the US but who had experience living in Manila, both discussed how, in the Philippines, words that refer to sociocultural gender (which may appear to be grammatically gendered or not) are more fluid and less visible than in the US, and that misgendering someone seems to be not only more difficult in the Philippines, but also less offensive. An example of this is *mamsir/mamser*, a portmanteau of “ma’am” and “sir”, said as a single word to address individuals, usually strangers, in the Philippines. *Mamsir* is used very commonly, even in situations where a person’s gender may be unambiguous, often used instead of “ma’am” or “sir”.

However, that said, my interviewee Alex, when discussing their own journey towards identifying as Filipinx and non-binary,²⁶ described how their experience in the Philippines as a Filipina American (that is, being treated as a woman, and from the US), and specifically the sexism and misogyny in comparison to their life in California, was a trigger for them to realize that they were non-binary. “Despite the fact that Filipino was an all-encompassing gender-neutral term there, I experienced gender binary so much more there,” they said, adding that the gender binary is “more limiting around women, in my experience, in the Philippines... it’s binaried in

²⁶ Alex (they/them) identifies as a “non-binary woman,” and was assigned female at birth.

the sense of how they treat men and women, and I think I experienced just overall more freedom to experiment, and explore myself when I was here [in the US]. And me coming to the understanding that I'm non-binary, a big part of that was the ways I experienced how gender can be very rigidly put on people.”

These ways included expectations surrounding how a Filipina American is meant to carry herself, especially sexually, and her behaviours, which Alex described as limiting. This can be attributed to the ways in which the patriarchy has been imposed and propagated not only culturally—such as through religion and within family structures—but also legally, as the legal system was created and heavily influenced by both Spain and the US (Yarcia et al. 2019).

Spanish and American colonisation not only imposed the Western gender binary, but also heterosexuality. Therefore, to further understand the experience of gender and the gender binary within the Philippines, the conversation must also be expanded to discuss sexuality and queer culture in general. The Catholic Church, while establishing a strict gender binary (and hierarchy within that binary), also teaches that any sexual acts that are not procreative in intent/nature (such as sodomy) are sins, a belief that is still prevalent and highly influential in the Philippines today. Queer people in the Philippines face quite a bit of discrimination and violence, and have very little protection from it (Yarcia et al. 2019). However, at the same time, queer people are relatively visible, especially within beauty pageants and entertainment media.

This understanding of queerness, however, is not the same as in the US. The most prominent queer term in the Philippines is *bakla*, which generally refers to someone who is assigned male at birth but demonstrates femininity, and can include trans women but also gay men—*bakla* is typically translated into English as “gay”. Other common terms are *tomboy*, people who were assigned female at birth but demonstrate masculinity, and *silahis*, men who

have sex with men (and possibly also women) and who have masculine gender expression (Yarcia et al. 2019). According to Yarcia, de Vela, and Tan (2019),

Concepts of sexual orientation, gender identity and expression do not figure into contemporary Filipino understanding of queers... the various categories in the gender spectrum are not fully socially recognized. Often, queers are colloquially grouped together and described as the ‘third sex’, which in effect merely affirms the binarity of gender—with males as the ‘first sex’ according to the dictates of the patriarchal narrative. (266)

My other interviewee Maria, a queer woman from the Philippines, described her own experience of queerness in Manila. She described labels (such as gender and sexuality identities) as a result of colonization, and that even within queer communities in the Philippines there is little movement to be politically correct. “Even in discussions of queerness in the Philippines there isn’t like, that need to be very strict or politically correct with labels,” she stated. With labels such as gay, bisexual, or lesbian, she said, “it’s all under that general word of *bakla*, and, I think, *kasi* [*because*], in the Philippines *rin*, there’s not really that need to be very politically correct, to be very specific.”

At the same time, however, prior to speaking with me, Maria had discussed “Filipinx” with a friend of hers who was both non-binary and used the term. According to her, this friend reasoned that other Filipino words have masculine and feminine forms, and thus they accept “Filipinx”. Still, Maria specified that the word is “still not used much in the Philippines” and that her friend uses it more to describe themselves.

“It’s very nuanced *din kasi* because “Filipino” and “Philippines” is not even Filipino-sounding,” she explained further, “A lot of our vocabulary is Western, so you can argue that because it’s Western, why don’t we comply to this Western standard already [of saying Filipinx]? But I think people are also trying to maintain that Filipinoness that hasn’t been tainted

by colonialism.” This “Filipinoness”, to Maria, includes a more fluid understanding of gender and sexuality. This understanding was corroborated by Alex, who claimed that,

being non-binary, that’s not something that is as visible in the Philippines and I think that speaks to the fact that gender—you know, these ideas, these terms, non-binary, third gender, all of that—that is a Western concept, that is Western language used to organise ourselves around those identities... There are those identities that exist in the Philippines... those identities can coexist with the fact that Filipino is gender-neutral in the Philippines.

1.3. *In what language(s) and context(s) is “Filipino” gender-neutral?*

With these linguistic and cultural contexts in mind then, it is understandable that the question of “is Filipino gender-neutral?” is not easy to answer. People define words based on their own cultural and social contexts and the ways they are used around them; words don’t just exist in a vacuum with set definitions everyone knows and agrees upon. On Twitter, many people who argue against “Filipinx” do so on the premise that “Filipino” is gender-neutral, such as in example (1),

- 1) “idk how to be feel about filipinx because i've always believed that filipino is unisex and was always used that way except for some certain situations. like if i were to be asked (or anyone really), i don't really say "i'm a filipina" ,, it's always "i'm a filipino””

In this example, the poster, who uses she/her pronouns, is expressing uncertainty towards “Filipinx” because she had always understood “Filipino” as gender-neutral. To prove this, she gives an example of identifying as “Filipino” even though “Filipina” is an option.²⁷

Another example of this is (2), which states point-blank that “filipino” is gender-neutral, dismissing “filipinx” and citing Tagalog lack of gendered pronouns as proof:

- 2) “just a reminder that filipino is a gender neutral term- there is no filipinx or filipina or whatever

²⁷ More on “Filipina” later.

tagalog does not have she or he there is simply a pronoun for everyone regardless of whether gender exists”

In this example, the poster—who uses she/her pronouns but whose other demographics are unknown—uses the word “reminder” to show that the fact that “filipino is a gender neutral term” is not new, and has been said before by many others, or perhaps even by the poster herself. Interestingly, the poster goes even further, claiming that “there is no filipinx or filipina”. By saying “there is no”, it can be assumed that she does not mean that these words do not exist at all, but instead that these words are not Tagalog (or Filipino, perhaps) words. This is a strong stance to take—especially regarding the term “Filipina”, which we discuss later—coupled with the dismissive “or whatever” at the end that not only encompasses any other variation of “Filipino” that is marked for gender (or a lack of gender) but also closes the discussion to any responses.

The second part of example (2), focusing on Tagalog pronouns, draws the connection between the widespread discussion regarding the singular “they” in English, which has become a site of debate surrounding gender and specifically non-binary people, and this debate regarding “Filipinx”. The solution to both, according to this poster, is that Tagalog words are gender-neutral—specifically, both “Filipino” and *siya*, the third person singular pronoun (which is unmarked for gender)—“regardless of whether gender exists”. This last part dismisses people who would disagree—or even agree—with her along the lines of gender and its existence or non-existence, narrowing the conversation to one of language,²⁸ which is what she believes is the only thing needed to reject the term “filipinx”.

Of course, although they are related, the lack of gendered pronouns is not, in fact, a reason that “Filipino” is gender-neutral and “Filipinx” should thus be rejected, as seen in example (3), which also makes the point that Tagalog (and other Philippine language varieties)

²⁸ Which, of course, cannot be separated from those who speak it or even come into contact with it.

have no gendered pronouns, but which uses “Filipinx” in a positive way, to signal a group identity:

- 3) “Wanna know why my mom and all her friends mix up the pronouns He/She? Because in Filipinx dialects there is no gendered pronoun! It's all the same word! And yet they function in the world and know who people are and everything!”²⁹

In this tweet, the poster—who also uses she/her pronouns—is participating in the pronouns debate that the poster of example (2) referenced, drawing from the same information to make the point that without gendered third person singular pronouns, people can still “function in the world and know who people are and everything!” However, even though “there is no gendered pronoun”, that does not mean that “Filipino” is similarly not gendered, as suggested by the poster’s use of “Filipinx”. Importantly, although her locality is not specified on her profile, the entering of English in the first sentence of her post suggests that the poster is writing from an English-speaking place, and definitely to an English-speaking (and not Philippine) audience.

“Filipino” is often discussed alongside “Filipina”, as we have already seen. This brings us to the question, if “Filipino” is gender-neutral, then why do we have “Filipina”?

“Filipina” is, without question, a gendered term, and specifically a feminine version of “Filipino”. Indeed, there seems to be little controversy around “Filipina”, as it clearly identifies a certain subset of people of Philippine descent and/or nationality. The existence of a feminine term that follows Spanish grammatical (and lexical) gender suggests that “Filipino” is thus similarly marked for gender, just like in Spanish, and that “Filipino” and “Filipina” are the masculine and feminine forms within a binary system. However, the purpose of “Filipina” is not

²⁹ This tweet will be analyzed more in chapter 3.

agreed-upon, and thus the question of whether the two words are binary opposites within that same system is not so simple to answer.

“Filipina”, just like “Filipino”, comes from Spanish. It was used by Filipino women as an organising term as early as 1905, when a group of prominent women formed the *Asociacion Feminista Filipina* (Association of Filipina Feminists) “aimed at securing reforms in schools, prisons, factories, and other institutions employing women” as well as women’s suffrage (Aquino 1994, 34). The use of both “Feminista” and “Filipina” was to highlight the intersectional issues of a Filipino woman, as well as separate themselves from the more passive connotation of *mujeres* (“women”)—but “Filipina” in this context was a Spanish word, as Spanish was used in the social circles of these women. Still, over time, as both “Filipino” and “Filipina” were adopted into Tagalog,³⁰ “Filipina” kept its connection to organizations and associations such as *Asociacion Feminista Filipina*, where the use of “Filipina” was in order to highlight the intersectional identities that the group is focused on.

Now, in the Philippines, “Filipina” is not the binary opposite to “Filipino”, but instead a marked term used for emphasis: if you are Filipina, you are stressing your gender and aligning yourself with the wider history and community of Filipino women. For example, in the tweet in (4), the poster (and the post they are responding to) identify both as Filipino and Filipina, interchangeably:

- 4) “This is exactly what i thought of filipinx bc filipino is already gender neutral if ur not specifically saying filipina. And i have ALWAYS called myself filipino and HARDLY filipina.

[screenshot of another person’s reddit post, which includes “the term Filipino/filipina to us is used interchangeably between men and women, meaning it’s actually fine for

³⁰ If it even has been adopted into Tagalog, which example (2) refutes.

nonbinary purposes

for ex - I identify as a girl. if I get called filipino or Pinoy it really doesn't bother me"]”

This is echoed by Maria, who does identify as Filipina, but claims it's a personal preference, and just because she likes “the ‘a’ ending words”. She claims that she has used “Filipina” quite a bit and that it has more connotations of femininity, but that she uses Filipino more interchangeably, and “Filipina, not so much.”

Therefore, in terms of identity, “Filipina” and “Filipino” are virtually interchangeable for women—“Filipina” provides slightly more information, but when that information is not necessary, many people who identify as Filipina will just as readily identify as Filipino. Of course, not all people who identify as Filipino would identify as Filipina; Filipino men would only use “Filipino” as an identity, and might even be offended to be misgendered. According to google ngram, “Filipino women” has been published (in English books) significantly more than “Filipina women”, and “Filipino men”, but “Filipina men” has never been used. However, some claim that the two words are completely interchangeable. A quick google search for “Filipina men” results in dating sites for Filipina men and women and online stores selling “Filipina men’s T-Shirts”.³¹ Google does, however, suggest correcting the search to “Filipina women”, and there are many more results for “Filipina women” and “Filipino men”, including a wikipedia page for Women in the Philippines and a “People also ask” section.

However, the sentiment that “Filipino” is gender neutral and “Filipina” is specifically marked for gender is not shared across the world. According to Alex, in the US and among Fil-Ams, “Filipino” is masculine, and that there is no “conception of how it can be gender neutral.” They further clarified that “in the United States, when you say Filipino you only mean

³¹ There might be a certain connotation to “Filipina men”, since it appears to be limited to dating and clothing; that said, the first google result for “Filipino men” is also dating-related.

men, most of the time.³² When you say Filipina you only mean women.” Alex also mentioned knowing women who would only identify as Filipina, and would correct people by saying “I’m not Filipino, I’m Filipina.”

This, according to Alex, is largely because of the exposure to other languages, and specifically to Spanish and Latin America.³³ “If you’re coming here and you’re surrounded by people saying I’m Latina, I’m Latino, that’s just how [the word] evolves,” she explained. Thus, in some ways, even if “Filipino” had been adapted from the Spanish to become gender-neutral, in the US context, that gender-neutrality is not understood, partially because of the exposure to the Spanish language and Spanish grammatical systems.

2. *Why the ‘x’?*

As shown in the section above, “Filipino” is explicitly not gender-neutral in the US, and is often linked to “Latino”. In order to then understand why “Filipinx” was proposed, we need to discuss the way that Spanish and “Latino” have also been evolving. The 'x' in “Filipinx” is understood to come from the 'x' in “Latinx”, a term to describe people of Latin American descent or from Latin America—a gender-neutral form of “Latino”. “Filipinx” is therefore often understood through the term “Latinx”, and shares many of its foundations, connotations, and controversies. The following section will elaborate on some of the history behind the 'x', its evolution and use in “Latinx”, as well as who uses it and the controversy behind “Latinx”, in

³² The rest of the time, it can be assumed, refers to mixed groups, which would use the masculine “Filipino” even when the group contains or is mostly women, as it would in Spanish.

³³ Filipinos often identify with Mexicans and other Latin Americans due to the shared experience of Spanish colonization, which left its impacts through Catholicism, the Spanish language (including last names), and food (Espiritu 2003, Ocampo 2014, Ignacio 2005). This solidarity towards Latin Americans (and especially Mexicans) is also often related to the tendency for Fil-Ams to be mistaken for Mexicans in the US (Espiritu 2003), as well as a lack of shared experiences with other Asian American groups (Ocampo 2014). Still, this creation of similarity and solidarity is important towards the identity of “Filipino” in the US.

order to understand why the 'x' was chosen as a gender-neutral alternative, and what issues might come with that.

Like “Filipinx”, “Latinx” seems to have gained traction outside of strictly academic and activist spaces and into the general public—specifically, social media—around 2017 onwards (Salinas 2020). “Latinx” also has its own controversy, which has many parallels to the debates surrounding “Filipinx”—including its connection to white liberal universities in the US. In addition to these parallels, however, “Filipinx” also has the additional problem of emerging directly from “Latinx”, thus inheriting not only its controversy, but also the issue of being linked to a Hispanic and Western (and thus possibly colonial) term.

“Latinx” can be traced back as far as the 90s, although there is no agreement as to when it first started being used (Salinas 2020; Figueroa 2021). The 'x' in “Latinx” seems to have two different—but related—origins: one being introduced by a Puerto Rican periodical to challenge the gender binary, and another used by activists of Mexican descent to change “Chicano” to “Xicano” (Salinas 2020). This first usage of 'x' focuses on the Spanish language and the sociocultural gender binary that is encoded within its grammatical structure—specifically for words with lexical gender—and using the 'x' to challenge that gender binary. The second, “Xicano”, was either used for empowerment of those of Mexican origin within the US or to indigenise the term “Chicano” by using the Nahuatl letter 'x', which Salinas claims also Mexicanizes the 'x' (Salinas 2020). Later, there were also changes from “Chicano” to “Chicanx”, mostly in university settings (Salinas 2020).

However, a recent Pew study revealed that while 25% of adults in the US who self-identify as Hispanic or Latino have heard of “Latinx”, only 3% actually use the term, and most of those people are young (ages 18-29), speak English (either solely or bilingually with

Spanish), are college-educated, and/or US-born (Noe-Bustamante et al. 2020). This term has been largely introduced in academic settings—mostly in higher education—and is therefore used by students in higher education in the US, not all of whom would use the term outside of an academic setting (Salinas 2020). In fact, some students who use “Latinx” choose not to even introduce it to members of their family or their community back home, claiming that it is difficult to translate (into Spanish), and because their parents are still struggling to differentiate Latino (which includes Latin Americans who do not speak Spanish, such as Brazilians) and Hispanic (which is limited to Spanish-speaking places and people, including Spain but excluding Brazil) (Salinas 2020). This, as a whole, seems to reflect how people use (or don’t use) “Filipinx” as well; the people who would use “Filipinx” are understood to be the same as those who use “Latinx” (i.e. young, English-speaking, college-educated, and/or US-born).³⁴

Part of the struggle is simply the speed at which the language is changing, something which people always resist, especially in older generations (Figueroa 2021). There are claims that “Latinx” is ruining the Spanish language, which comes from more than just the fact that 'x' or “eks” is awkward to pronounce in that sequence for Spanish-speakers; the 'x' is seen to fit better with English pronunciation, specifically stress, and many consider the people who use the term as English speakers of Latin American descent in the US, not Spanish speakers (Figueroa 2021; Salinas 2020). However, another large part of the struggle is with the term “Latino/a”, which is a pan-ethnic term that encompasses a wide variety of ethnic and national groups, many of which are vastly different from one another (Figueroa 2021).

“Filipinx”, then, which inherits this history regarding the 'x', also has roots in social activism within both gender/queer-related activism and Indigenous/decolonial activism. Its connection to the term “Latinx” thus connects it to these larger activist movements, as well as

³⁴ More on this in chapter 3.

reflects the solidarity that many Fil-Ams feel towards other Hispanics in the US (Ocampo 2014). However, just like “Latinx”, “Filipinx” was also introduced and is primarily used in American universities and activist settings, which will be discussed more in chapter 3. Additionally, “Filipinx” is not a word that many people in the Philippines even necessarily know exists; the debate, even among people in the Philippines, remains within a certain socioeconomic class and education level—although its presence online does increase access.

Just like with Spanish, “Filipinx” is also cited to be linguistically awkward to pronounce. One of the first things Maria said about “Filipinx” was that 'x' was not even in the Filipino language and joked about not knowing how to pronounce the word. As with “Latinx”, saying “Filipinx” (as “Fil-i-pin-EKS”) requires a change in the stress and syllabification of the word (from “Fil-i-PI-no”), although some people have joked that it should actually be read as “fi-li-pinks” as a way to highlight the absurdity of the 'x'.

Another parallel between the “Filipinx” and “Latinx” controversies are the ways that both are attempting to include and encompass a diverse group of people across the globe. As said in the introduction, not only is the Philippine diaspora diverse and different from those in the Philippines, but even people born and raised in the nation are distinct from one another. In fact, Maria, when talking about “Filipinoness”, mentioned how the Philippines is very divided, even before colonization, and that there is no “purely Filipino” concept that is not Westernized. She talked about a lack of rootedness, an erasure of history—especially Indigenous history—and how the concept of being “Filipino” is separate, in the end, from any Indigenous identities, because “Filipino” is “something very rooted in the Spanish past.” Instead, within the Philippines, she described the importance of regionalism in order to gain that feeling of rootedness or connection to a community with a past: “Everyone in the Philippines is divided. There’s not that sense of

kinship within the country.” It is thus difficult to ascribe a standard—such as “Filipinx”, which is not only gender-inclusive but meant to be all-inclusive, from diaspora to Indigenous people—to a diverse and divided country like the Philippines.³⁵ Speaking specifically about the ‘x’, Maria added, “if you think about the local languages like Cebuano, Bisaya, I’m not sure how they would also localize that ‘x’ standard.”

3. *Is “Filipinx” decolonial and inclusive, then?*

As we have seen, the answer to whether or not “Filipino” is gender-neutral is not universally agreed-upon. “Filipino”, as a Spanish loanword borrowed into Tagalog, does retain some of its gendered meaning, but most Tagalog speakers seem to agree that the term is gender-neutral, and its feminine counterpart, “Filipina”, is specifically marked for gender in a way “Filipino” is not. This sentiment is not shared in the US—by people who are largely English speakers—and “Filipino” to Fil-Ams is specifically masculine and “Filipina” specifically feminine, as a result of exposure to Spanish and terms such as “Latino/a”.

This exposure to “Latino/a” has also led to an exposure to “Latinx”, which is where the ‘x’ in “Filipinx” comes from. As a term explicitly meant to be all-inclusive within a gendered system, “Latinx” is one of the many words used in activist and decolonial movements with the letter ‘x’. However, at the same time, “Latinx” is itself controversial, as very few people use and approve of its usage, due to how awkward it sounds in Spanish, its association with American universities, and the difficulty of attempting to include an incredibly diverse group of people. These are all issues that “Filipinx” inherits, alongside the additional connotations of having come from “Latinx”, which can either be seen as an act of solidarity to other similar movements of social justice, or be seen as further proof of Spanish/Western imposition.

³⁵ This regionalism will be elaborated on in Chapter 2.

Is Filipinx decolonial and inclusive, then?

I argue that, as with this entire debate, “Filipinx” can be both decolonial and colonial, depending on one’s context. For someone who considers “Filipino” to be gendered and masculine and who comes from a diverse context that exposes them to specific histories of racism and violence, as well as the social justice movements that developed from those—like those that led to “Latinx”—it makes sense that “Filipinx” would be suggested and preferred, as a gender-neutral alternative that aligns itself with larger movements of decolonisation. However, at the same time, for someone who considers “Filipino” to be gender-neutral already and who does not understand the Western binary in the same way, nor is exposed to these larger activist movements, “Filipinx” is seen as a way to further impose the Western binary—in order to then “decolonise” it, when that perhaps is not necessary in the first place.

However, this is not that simple; Maria herself mentioned how Western the Philippines (and “Filipino”) already is, and that she has a non-binary friend from the Philippines who identifies as “Filipinx”. Despite the fluidity of gender and queerness both currently and historically in the Philippines, much of the country is still highly religious and conservative.³⁶ Every individual, no matter where they live, has their own unique experiences and positionalities that affect their understanding of both “Filipino” and “Filipinx”, as well as what it means to be Filipino or Filipinx. The difficulty then is how these lived experiences and interpretations of “Filipino/x” are negotiated into a shared identity and definition of “Filipinoness”.

There are, of course, other alternatives to the ‘x’ that have been suggested, that do not have the same histories as the ‘x’ and that may even sound better in local languages. Most of

³⁶ While a rejection of “Filipinx” could be due to a rejection of queerness and gender nonconformity, within this paper I focus mainly on those who reject the term for reasons outside of that, or despite being queer/otherwise supportive of the trans community. That said, a rejection of “Filipinx” on the grounds that it is unnecessary could be a way to sidestep very real issues in the community; this will be further discussed in chapter 3.

these suggestions have been for “Latinx”; for example, <e> has been suggested, such as “Latine”, which allows the word to maintain its stress. Other alternatives to the ‘x’ have been “Latin*” (Salinas 2020), or the @ symbol, both of which are specifically for texts and not the spoken word. One tweet that I came across suggested, mostly as a joke, “Philippians”, which they claimed had been mistakenly used by a pen-pal at 12 years old, following it up with:

5) "Does it solve colonialist rooted naming? Nah, it makes it worse by using nonlocal linguistic sounds not found in our vernacular.

But at least we can feel like St. Paul likes us a lot, no? Silver linings?"

None of these alternatives (serious or otherwise) have seemed to gain as much traction as “Filipinx” (although the <e>, I have heard, is quite popular among Spanish speakers). Either way, I would argue (and the poster of example (5) likely would, too) that the issues behind “Filipinx” as a term is not because of the actual letter, but the very existence of the term—as an all-inclusive, gender-neutral identity term—brings to the forefront already existing tensions between two different communities who interpret “Filipino” very differently.

Chapter 2: Filipino Representation

In early January 2022, Valorant, an internationally popular video game under Riot Games, a video game company based in the US, announced a new character named Neon. Neon is a Manila-based playable agent with electricity powers, and was created with the help of a Filipino designer and Filipina voice-actor (Bashir 2022). Valorant, which has introduced many country-specific playable characters, was praised by its fans (many of whom are based in the Philippines) for its representation of this Filipina character.

However, as people celebrated Neon's reveal, many—especially media outlets—used the term “filipinx” when referring to the character or when lauding the “Filipinx” representation. This (re)sparked the debate about the term “Filipinx”, as Twitter users began posting about their displeasure at the word and the widespread use of it by media platforms, journalists, and personalities. “Filipinx” thus began trending once again, as more and more individuals—whether aware of Neon's reveal or not—joined in expressing their anger towards the word.

In this chapter, I will be highlighting a few of the Twitter threads that went viral during this time, discussing “Filipinx”. These tweets not only repeat many of the same arguments against “Filipinx”—that it does not fit the language, that “Filipino” is already gender neutral, and that “Filipinx” is colonizing—but also highlights issues of respect and representation. Neon is meant to be from the Philippines, based in Manila, representing the country, and yet many news outlets announcing and celebrating her reveal used a word that many who live in the Philippines find offensive and do not use. Who, then, is Neon truly supposed to represent? And what does it mean when a diasporic community is expected to represent their homeland?

1. *Neon is Filipino—not Filipinx!*

- 1) “apparently it needed to be said but Neon is filipino. she's a filipino. she can be a filipina if you wanna be specific, but she is FILIPINO!! O. it's an O!! not an x. SHE'S NOT A FILIPINX”

In this example (1), which was posted by a cosplayer who uses she/her pronouns, this Twitter user is directly referencing the use of “Filipinx” to describe Neon, who she is assuming is a woman and has been referred to by the creators with “she/her” pronouns and as “Filipina”. In this tweet, which uses multiple exclamation points, repetition, and capitalisation to highlight the poster’s frustration, the poster (locality unknown) emphasizes that Neon is “Filipino”—that is, the gender-neutral “Filipino”, which she clarifies by adding that “if you wanna be specific” you can call Neon “filipina”. It is unclear whether by saying that Neon is “not a Filipinx”, the poster is saying that Neon is not non-binary, or that “Filipinx” is not an appropriate term to call anyone from the Philippines. It can be assumed to be the latter (although the former is also likely true), which is further highlighted by her follow-up reply to her post, here in example (2):

- 2) “just fucking give us this for once in our lives”

Here, the poster’s frustration is clear in her use of an expletive and the added “for once in our lives”. This follow-up to her original post also makes it clear what her frustration is towards: the apparent erasure of “Filipinos” who were supposed to be represented by Neon, but whose representation has been taken from them by labeling Neon as “Filipinx”, a term that this poster feels does not represent her. Not only this, but the “for once in our lives” suggests that this is a pattern, that there is an ongoing feeling of being ignored or made invisible, that occurrences such as this are not unique—something which is discussed further in the later examples in this chapter.

Although there are many interesting responses to this post (including one that claims, jokingly, that Neon is a “mamser agent”), I would like to highlight two reply threads. The first is one that discusses whether Neon is Filipino from the Philippines or from the US (example (3) and its response (4)), and another that (perhaps jokingly?) claims the Philippines is going to get canceled, example (5).

3) “HAAHAHAH

i will leave it at: riot can decide if neon is based off a filipino who was born and raised in the philippines

or a filipino who grew up in the bay area or smthing”

4) “I claim her until further notice” (reply to example (3), posted by the original poster of example (1))

5) “Can't wait for the Philippines to get cancelled.”

Example (3), which starts off laughing at the original post (example (1)), then goes on to say that the game makers are the ones to decide if Neon’s character was born and raised in the Philippines, or grew up “in the bay area or smth”. In this way, the poster is connecting “Filipino” with those in the Philippines, and “Filipinx” with those who were born in the US, specifically somewhere like the Bay Area in California.³⁷ This poster is also using a rather neutral stance on Neon’s identity itself, although not on the “Filipinx” controversy or the divide that is being made between those in the Philippines and those in the diaspora. The original poster’s response, example (4), however, “claims” Neon as a Filipino born and raised in the Philippines, and thus as representation for people in the Philippines. It appears that Neon’s character background does, in fact, have her grow up in Manila, which suggests that her “claim” is correct.

³⁷ Which is where, according to Maria, Filipinx was first coined and used.

The last response I mentioned, example (5), is referring to the widespread ire that appeared surrounding the word “Filipinx” (which I illustrate further in section 3.4), and how “Filipinx” is considered “politically correct”. When a member of society or an organization is revealed to have or perform certain ideas or ideologies that are considered “morally wrong” by those who subscribe to “cancel culture”—typically youths with social media presences—that person or organization is “canceled”; that is, they are considered “canceled” from society for their views/actions/words, and they/their products are boycotted. Interestingly, however, this poster did not say that the original poster—or others replying with similar sentiments—are going to be canceled; instead, *the Philippines* is going to be canceled. This seems to conflate the anti-“filipinx” sentiments with the entirety of the Philippines, suggesting that all of “The Philippines” or all citizens (residents? Members?) of the Philippines reject the term “Filipinx”—and that, because of this, they are going to be canceled.

This is interesting firstly because it reflects the widespread assumption that all Filipinos in the Philippines do not use or support the use of “Filipinx”, which, while my data supports (as we will see in chapter 3), is inaccurate in that not all Filipinos share that sentiment. However, this post is also using the word as a way of unifying the Philippines, in a sense—something which we will get more into in section 3.4. Secondly, this post is interesting because of what it suggests about the geopolitical hierarchy and structures in play with cancel culture—where on the sociopolitical hierarchy must the entire country of the Philippines be at for it to be canceled? Who will cancel the Philippines? What group would have the power to cancel an entire country?

This hierarchy becomes even more important when one begins to discuss the politics of representation in the case of Neon and “Filipinx”. While Neon is meant to represent the Philippines—which is, as said before, an impossible task already, with the diversity of

experiences even within the country—the use of “Filipinx”, as these examples above show, suggests that Neon is, instead, representing Fil-Ams. According to Maria, this boils down to authority and power, of the West being “the epitome of knowledge and everything” such that when Fil-Am scholars in the US decided to use Filipinx, the rest of the world—and mainstream media—took that at face-value. The Philippines, then, and those living in the Philippines, have less power and authority than the US and those living in the US—and that allows for the idea that “the Philippines” can be canceled.

2. *Filipino representation in Western media*

Representation in media—or lack thereof—was also discussed explicitly by people rejecting the term “Filipinx”. In example (6), the poster, a 24-year-old man (locality unknown), equates Filipino representation in Western media as something for Fil-Ams or the diaspora and not those in the Philippines:

- 6) "I feel like "Filipino representation" in Western media only really caters to Fil-Ams and migrant Filipinos, which, while nice and all, isn't really congruent with the lived experiences of those who remain in the islands
No wonder the term "Filipinx" sounds so wildly out of touch"

Not only does (6) make explicit that the poster feels as though people who remain in the Philippines³⁸ are not represented in “Filipino representation” in Western media, but also that “Filipinx” is not representative of those in the Philippines. In this way, he is connecting “Filipinx” with the West and with the Fil-Am representation in Western media that he believes people are considering “Filipino representation”. Therefore, this post maintains an erasure of

³⁸ He himself is likely one of them.

those in the Philippines by Western media, but one which does so in favor of Fil-Am and diasporic representation.

This is in line with the experiences Fil-Ams themselves face, as described in the introduction as well as Alex, who stated, “I think there’s this expectation that Fil-Ams are supposed to represent the Philippines... it almost seems like Fil-Ams are the easy sources for global mainstream media, maybe? So people want us to like, represent,” which makes people upset, because Filipinos from the Philippines “are just like, well that’s not who we are—but I’m just like, we’re not you.” The problem, according to Alex, is that Fil-Ams are expected by Western/mainstream media to represent the Philippines, but because Fil-Ams have their own experiences, community, and history, this “representation” does not align with experiences of those in the Philippines, even if people—including Fil-Ams or people from the Philippines—claim that it does or should. This, of course, cannot be detached from the influence that living in the Global North can grant you within mainstream media, and the authority that Fil-Ams are thus assumed to have over “Filipino representation”, which includes the term “Filipinx”. This authority is related to the academic authority that Fil-Am scholars (or scholars in the US) have over the discourse on the Filipino diaspora and the diasporic experience (Aguilar 2015), which Maria linked to the reason that “Filipinx” became a “standard” one is expected to use—and why rejecting the term can be a form of rejecting Western hegemony and imperialism.

This post garnered a few responses, such as one which—like many other posts against “Filipinx”—points out how difficult the word is to pronounce (example (7)), and one that talks more about what “Filipino representation” looks like and points out the Hispanic history and influence that is apparently missing in that representation, as seen in example (8).

- 7) “How would you pronounce that anyway. It’s like mocking our very culture with that word.”
- 8) “It’s mostly just jeepneys and Tagalog greetings. They appear to keep trying to minimize the Hispanic element in Philippine cultures, hence why they’re prolly expecting Raya to resonate here. I wouldn’t mind being seen as a “Sea Mexican”.”

In example (8), “Filipino representation” is characterized as “just jeepneys and Tagalog greetings”, and is seen as lacking in the Hispanized aspects of Philippine cultures. In this way, the poster is creating a sort of solidarity with other Hispanic/Hispanized communities and highlighting the history the Philippines has with Spanish colonization—as opposed to American colonization. The poster continues by separating Philippine cultures from Southeast Asian cultures, which were the design basis for the movie *Raya and the Last Dragon*, and instead suggesting that our cultures are closer to “Sea Mexican” than Southeast Asian.³⁹

However, interestingly, this phrase “Sea Mexican” seems to do more than create a sense of solidarity with Mexicans; it also harkens back to the period of time when the Philippines was under “Mexican” rule—that is, when the Governor-general in what is now Mexico was in charge of the Philippines for Spain.⁴⁰ Thus, in a way, this post seems to wish for an understanding of the Philippines pre-American colonization but not pre-Hispanic colonization, and seems to be lamenting the erasure of the history of Spanish colonization—although, of course, the erasure of Philippine cultures can be traced back to the Spanish.⁴¹ Still, this “Sea Mexican” seems to be suggested as an appropriate or preferred way of representing “Filipinos” as opposed to what is

³⁹ This post is a very interesting take that I’m not sure I entirely agree with personally, although it is true that *Raya and the Last Dragon* did not seem to resonate as much in the Philippines as other Disney movies such as *Moana* (which is Pacific Islander) or *Encanto* (which is Latin American).

⁴⁰ There is a common rhetoric in the Philippines that Filipinos were, in a sense, “colonized” by Mexico colonized by Spain.

⁴¹ This can be linked to the diasporic desire for a pre-colonial/Indigenous (or pre-American) “Philippines”, as discussed in the Introduction.

currently being done to cater to Fil-Ams. Perhaps this goes back to the Westernization of the Philippines, and the fact that “Filipino” in itself is a Western—specifically Spanish—conception.

At the end of the day, media representation cannot ever fully capture the nuances of any lived experience, whether that be those of Fil-Ams or those living in the Philippines. Any form of Western representation of “Filipinoness” will contain stereotypes and generalizations, such as Tagalog greetings and jeepneys, some of which may be seen as positive to some and negative to others. However, the complaint that these posters are making is not only the inaccuracy of “Filipino” representation in Western media; these posters are pointing out that “Filipino” in Western media supposedly encompasses both homeland and diasporic communities, but is instead catered towards Fil-Ams, something which is exemplified by the use of “Filipinx.”

3. *Rhetorics of respect*

9) ""we used the term Filipinx to respect 🇵🇭😊"

continu[es] to disrespect Filipinos by ignoring the fact that "Filipino" is already a gender neutral term and proceeds to make up a new term

This example (9) above was written by a 16-year-old who uses she/her pronouns and is presumably from the Philippines and ethnically Filipino (she used a Philippine flag emoji). Here, we see her “quoting” an ambiguous person, who can be assumed to be either the media outlets who announced Neon’s reveal with the term “Filipinx”, or even anyone who uses the term without first educating themselves on its meaning, connotations, and how the people they are referencing (Filipinos) feel about it. She points out the irony of claiming to use the word to “respect” people (Filipinos) when it actually shows the “disrespect” of “ignoring the fact that “Filipino” is already gender neutral”—that is, the disrespect of not finding out if their target

audience would find the word respectful or not, and the disrespect of “making up” a “new term” without asking if it were necessary in the first place.

Example (9) shows the importance of representation and the politics behind representation in the media. The poster, who presumably knows that Neon is Manila-based, likely assumes that she and other people from the Philippines are the target audience of announcements about the new Filipina character in Valorant.⁴² Therefore, when media outlets (or this unnamed other) use “Filipinx”, a word she believes is superfluous and believes other Filipinos do as well, this is seen as a sign of “disrespect”, because that makes it clear that either these people do not care enough to research about their target audience, or that she is not, in fact, the target audience despite her assuming she is/should be. This post is thus pointing out the irony in the invisibilization of this poster and her community, in a situation where she is meant to be represented and to celebrate her representation.

This rhetoric of “respect” that this poster is making fun of is similar to what Maria described as “the PC [politically correct] American standard”. People using Filipinx, according to her, is an example of a “desire of integration, of being part of a global standard”, a conformity that disregards the layers and nuances that come with any of these terms. “It’s kind of like, they don’t really know the basis of it,” she explained, “it’s not as much from a very informed place... because a lot of knowledge just kinda gets passed along without people really understanding it.” Instead of assuming that ascribing to “the PC American standard” is automatically the respectful and right thing to do, she believed that “people should understand the language a bit more before adapting it straight away.” Thus, like the poster in example (9), Maria saw “Filipinx” as an example of misguided “respect”, that it may have good intentions but may still fall short of

⁴² This is assuming that this post is in direct response to the Neon reveal.

actual understanding and respect, especially when it comes to listening to what local Filipinos (i.e. Filipinos from the Philippines) think and say about it.

This rhetoric regarding “respect” is two-fold; while people in the Philippines who have spoken against “Filipinx” believe that it is disrespectful for people to assume that Fil-Ams speak for all Filipinos and ignore the voices of those who disagree with Fil-Am experiences and “representation”, Alex also expressed that it was disrespectful to Fil-Ams to not see them as their own community instead of just a stand-in for the Philippines. “It can be very disrespectful when Fil-Ams are then viewed as just Filipino homelands who were exported out and were just supposed to represent the homeland,” she said, “it all goes back down to like, Fil-Ams and Fil-diasporans almost being expected to represent a community and society that we are not part of.” Thus, in a sense, Western media is disrespecting both Filipinos from the Philippines and Fil-Ams, by not realizing that the two have vastly different communities, and not listening to them when they describe and explain their own experiences.

The original post in example (9) garnered many responses, all echoing and elaborating on that original tweet:

10) “its all about respect until actual filipinos argue against it”

11) “I totally respect and value your culture! I just think you’re too simple a people to have a gender neutral term. So instead of using Google to check, I’ll just fix it myself with a letter that has no business being in the word in the first place 😊 You’re so welcome!”

 😬”

12) “literally them getting themselves in Filipino discussions speaking over us and our culture 😭” (reply to (11))

In example (10), the poster is again invoking the idea of “respect” in order to highlight not only the irony shown by the original poster, but also to make the point that the lack of visibility of “actual filipinos” is in fact an erasure of “actual filipinos”, who are ignored and treated with disrespect when they speak up. This sentiment is continued in example (11) and its reply in example (12), where sarcasm, like the original post, is used to describe what the poster assumes someone means when they claim to “respect and value your culture”. In example (11), phrases such as “your culture”, “too simple a people”, and the final “You’re so welcome” mimics the Western (and specifically American) rhetoric of white saviorism and manifest destiny, which were used to justify the colonization of the Philippines. In writing these sentiments in an “upbeat” way with exclamation points, words like “totally” and “just”, and an angel emoji (which also reflects white savior imagery), the poster is able to exaggerate these problematic ideas—thus making it clear what is problematic about them—and discredit them at the same time. This is punctuated by the two emojis outside of the “quote”, a facepalm emoji (of a brown girl) and eye roll emoji, which reflects the poster’s reactions to and feelings about said “quote”.

The tone of the quoted content in (11), as well as the rhetoric of white saviorism, also expands this unspecified “other” created in example (9). Whereas the “speaker” of the quotes in the original post appears to be media outlets or other similar groups, which is contrasted by the “actual filipinos” referenced in example (10), the quoted “person” in example (11) seems to be marked as Western, or American, or perhaps White American. This “other” persona that is being created is certainly not an “actual filipino”, an outsider who is commenting on “your culture” who might be well-meaning and think they are doing the right thing, but is wildly off-base to the point of “speaking over” (as example 12 phrases it) “actual filipinos”.

Example (12), which is a reply to example (11), drives home the point that all the posters have been making: not only are “they” (that is, “the other” that is being created in this thread) disrespecting, ignoring, and erasing Filipinos and Filipino experiences while claiming to be respectful and celebrating Filipino representation, but “they” are “speaking over us and our culture”. In a scenario where a Manila-based character, designed by a Filipino and voiced by a Filipina, is revealed by an internationally known video game, talking about “Filipinx” representation is not only an erasure of those who do not identify with the word (and find it offensive), but is “speaking over” those who believed that Neon was for them, and meant to represent them (and not Filipinx).

However, this then leads to the question not only of who is this “them” that is being created, but also who are “Filipinos” or “actual filipinos”, and what is “our culture”? As we’ve been discussing, there are plenty of people who are ethnically Filipino who use and even prefer the term “Filipinx”—and there must be a reason these media outlets were using it in the first place, after all. These people, it seems, are not included in “actual filipinos”, who are characterized in contrast to the created “other” and a distinct rejection/hatred of the term “Filipinx”—and perhaps, even, characterized by their erasure within media. Thus, although Fil-Ams are expected to represent the Philippines and have influence and a certain amount of authority on the subject, Filipinos from the Philippines push back against that by defining “actual filipinos” as anti-“Filipinx”, separating Fil-Ams from “our culture” and “Filipinoness”.

4. The Philippines against Filipinx

The creation of a “Filipinoness” that is specifically located in the Philippines and characterized by a dislike of “Filipinx” is further illustrated by this next thread, started by example (13) below:

13) "... There is probably gonna be a time where ppl start saying Filipinx instead of Filipino and I'm not ready for that"

Example (13), posted by a 19-year-old Filipino, is observing the changes in language and trends in the use of "Filipinx" and coming to the conclusion that "Filipinx" will one day replace "Filipino". The "... " pause in the beginning of the text, signaling hesitance or reluctance to admit this, alongside the last part saying "I'm not ready for that" shows that the poster's feelings toward the identity term—and its potential replacement of "Filipino"—are largely negative, although perhaps in a resigned way. This post was likely written because of the way "Filipinx" was trending and the way media outlets had used "Filipinx" in place of "Filipino" despite the anger many Twitter-users portrayed.

However, interestingly, the text specifies that people will start, not that people have already started, suggesting that at the moment the tweet was made, "Filipinx" had not yet begun to replace "Filipino". Some of the replies to the post, therefore, claim that this process has already begun, such as in example (14), to which the original poster responded with, "..... No...." and a sad Elmo picture to further illustrate their emotions (i.e. "not ready for that").

14) "That already happened" (response to example (13))

This replacement of "Filipino" with "Filipinx" is claimed to have already happened, but it is clearly not a universal thing, even among the numerous replies, which seem to be predominantly against the term "Filipinx" and by people in the Philippines. Therefore, example (14) may be true in that people have started to replace "Filipino" with "Filipinx", but only in certain places and by certain people, specifically the US and Fil-Ams such as in example (15).

15) "i think some filo-americans tried making that a thing a while back? anyway lol"

This reply connects “Filipinx” with Fil-Ams (“filo-americans”) and claiming that they were the ones trying to make “Filipinx” replace “Filipino”. The word “tried”, as well as the question mark and the dismissive “anyway lol” at the end suggest, however, that the attempt was not successful, and even if, as (14) suggests, it “already happened”. This lack of success is confirmed by another reply claiming that it would not happen in the Philippines specifically:

16) “As a Filipino. I Highly doubt the Philippines as a country would accept this word.”

Here, the poster is first establishing that they⁴³ are “a Filipino”, and that they therefore have a right to the discussion, and that their observations/opinions are valid and reliable in this topic. They then go on to claim that “the Philippines as a country” would not accept “Filipinx”, something which is proven in many ways in this post and by a lot of my other data. However, by pairing “as a Filipino” with “the Philippines as a country”, the poster is also establishing that “Filipino” is directly related to “the Philippines as a country”; that is, a “Filipino” national, which they are also suggesting allows them legitimacy and voice in this conversation.

Additionally, “the Philippines” in this post is established as a singular, united nation that can and does “accept” or not “accept” words. This reifies “the Philippines as a country” and personifies it, constructing an imagination of “the Philippines” characterized by not accepting “Filipinx”. As if that were a challenge, more and more people began to reply to this original post, all along the lines of fighting back against those who would use “Filipinx” as a replacement for “Filipino”. Some, like examples (17) and (18), suggest violence, while others, like (19), echo the sentiment of “the Philippines” not letting “Filipinx” replace “Filipino”.

17) “Me seeing filipinx: [GIF of a toggle button for violence being turned on]”

⁴³ This poster’s gender is unknown/not specified, and so I am using “they/them” pronouns for them. All posters whose gender is unknown will be referred to with they/them pronouns, and if their gender is known, it will be stated explicitly.

18) “You should be ready for that.

Always carry a thick and strong stick with you and use it to beat the shit out of anyone who tries to say it IRL near you”

19) “It won't, as long as these 7000+ islands don't sink below the Pacific.”

In examples (17) and (18), there is an explicit call to violence when one sees/hears the word in their vicinity. Example (17) claims that when the poster sees the word, they become violent (the “violence” option in their “settings” is turned on). Example (18), directly responding to the original post’s claim that “I’m not ready for that”, claims that the poster should be ready for that, by always carrying “a thick and strong stick... to beat the shit out of anyone who tries to say it”. While example (17) seems to be referring to online discourse and use of “Filipinx”, example (18) is clearly talking about physically hearing the word “IRL”, that is, “in real life”.⁴⁴

Example (19), like (16), constructs the Philippines as a nation and “Filipinos” as citizens of the nation living in its physical borders. This is done by specifying “these 7000+ islands” in the Pacific Ocean in lieu of saying “the Philippines”, as if the Philippines can be defined by the islands (whose exact number is even unknown), and as if the land itself has a say in whether or not a word is accepted. It also generalizes, just like example (16), that all the people who claim to be “Filipino” nationally speaking—or, more specifically, all the people who live physically on the 7000+ islands that we call “the Philippines”—would disagree with the use of “Filipinx” in replacement of “Filipino”. Thus, it is further characterizing the nation as against “Filipinx”.

This is articulated by another reply to this post:

20) “I think we found the key to Filipino unity.

The disdain for the term FILIPINX is shared by all Filipinos regardless of background.”

⁴⁴ And physically committing violence.

This reply references the regionalism within the Philippines, and the difficulty in creating a unified sense of “Filipino” nationality, something which is well-known and widely spoken about in the Philippines. As discussed in Chapter 1, Maria, when talking about “Filipinoness”, mentioned how the Philippines is very divided, and that there is no “purely Filipino” concept that is not Westernized. She added:

If you think about it, we’re just this clump of islands that the Spaniards came and said, okay, this is one territory, we’ll call it the Philippines... so we’re very divided, and much of what we ascribe to be Filipino—because we have this notion of ‘Filipino’, and we have a notion of ‘Indigenous’... when you think of something that is Filipino, you think of the early Spanish period.

She also talked about a lack of rootedness, an erasure of history—especially Indigenous history—by colonization and imperialism, that makes the experience “diasporic”:

it’s hard to root your personality, your history, when so much of it has been erased... I don’t feel that sense of, I belong to this kind of specific culture that’s in the Philippines... I’m Filipino, but I don’t know what else in the Philippines I can ascribe my culture to.

At the same time, she described the importance of regionalism in order to gain that feeling of rootedness or connection to a community with a past and to “try to stand out in the Philippines based on their region. So you always hear Cebuano people saying I’m Cebuano, first, before they say I am Filipino.” Still, there is a lack of kinship within the country and among the different regions—“we don’t even like each other that much”, she joked.

According to the poster of example (20), however, a “disdain for the term FILIPINX” is a unifying factor among those in the Philippines, a way to understand and define “Filipinoness”. Of course, in example (20), “Filipino”, like when it was used in example (16), refers specifically to the national identity of “Filipino”, which comes with it a specific ethnic/cultural identity. They are thus helping to create a singular image of a “Filipino” within the context of regionalism and in contrast to the “filo-americans” who have been identified by others to be the ones who pushed

for “Filipinx”. Therefore, this post attempts to create clear borders around who is or isn’t “Filipino”: if you are disdainful of “Filipinx”, then you can be considered “Filipino”, and if you are not disdainful of it, or you support the word or use the word, then you do not share this characteristic that “all Filipinos regardless of background” have. This, of course, can cause its own frustrations among those in the diaspora, as I will be discussing more in the next chapter.

5. *“Filipinx” vs. “Filipino” representation*

As we have seen in this case study of Neon and the Twitter posts created in the wake of her release, “Filipinx” as a term symbolizes much more than “inclusivity” and “exclusivity”. Its use brings about questions of representation and who gets to represent “Filipinos”, and what characterizes “Filipinoness”. Fil-Ams, by virtue of living in the US, have greater access to Western media than Filipinos from the Philippines (or perhaps more accurately, Western media outlets have greater access to Fil-Ams than those living in the Philippines). This leads to an expectation that Fil-Ams can and should represent the Philippines, which is upsetting and disrespectful because Fil-Am experiences are not equatable to the experiences of people in the Philippines, and to assume that one can accurately represent the other—despite people voicing the inaccuracies—is an erasure of both communities. In expressing their anger at this, however, people who reject the use of “Filipinx” thus create a notion of “Filipinoness” characterized by the rejection of the term, but which inherently excludes those who use/identify as “Filipinx”—or Fil-Ams in general—from being “actual filipinos”. In this way, so-called “actual filipinos” are able to reclaim some authority and power from the West (including and perhaps especially Fil-Ams), as well as push for a more unified sense of Filipino nationalism.

Chapter 3: What does it mean to be “Filipinx”?

As we have seen in the previous chapters, but especially in the last chapter, “Filipinx” is not simply an inclusive version of the term “Filipino”. “Filipinx”, like “Latinx”, carries with it certain connotations and understandings, links to colonization and decolonisation. What, exactly, does it mean to be “Filipinx”, then?

In this chapter, I will be analyzing Twitter posts that use the word “Filipinx”, trying to figure out who uses the term and who refuses to use it. In order to do this, I will not only be looking at the metapragmatic content of each tweet—if they make suggestions about who is included in “Filipinx” and who is not—but also who is making each tweet—specifically, where they are from—in order to understand what is being indexed by the term.

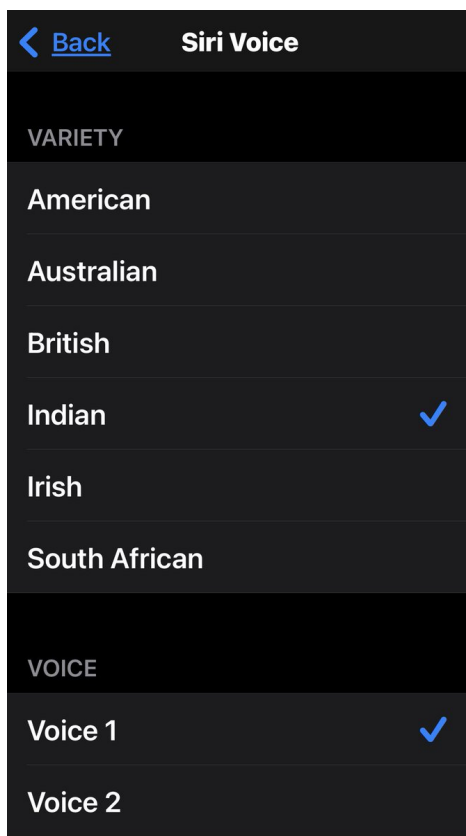
Over the course of fall of 2021, starting in October (coincidentally Filipino American History Month), I gathered a series of 22 Twitter posts and threads to analyze. Of those posts, seven were distinctly against the term “Filipinx”, nine were using the term positively, three were mostly neutral but slightly against the word, one was mostly neutral but slightly supportive of the word, and two spoke specifically about the debate and made no suggestions as to the poster’s thoughts of the word itself. That said, I will not only be looking at posts that are positive to “Filipinx” in order to understand who uses it; I will also be looking at what people who are against the word say about those who support it. In this way, I hope to shed light on what information, exactly, someone is conveying when they use “Filipinx”, and what information people gain about the speaker/poster when they see the term.

Thus, this chapter will first start with an analysis of those who use “Filipinx” in their tweets, looking at who they are, how they use “Filipinx”, and what they might be trying to convey with the term. I then transition to talk about posts that are against “Filipinx”, both to

understand what type of person is being indexed by “Filipinx” even when one is not in favor of the term, as well as to understand the type of person who speaks against it. Finally, using these tweets as well as other sources that discuss the term, I analyze the sociocultural tensions behind “Filipino” and “Filipinx” identities in order to better understand the ways that identity is being negotiated and renegotiated by Twitter users online.

1. *Who uses “Filipinx”?*

1) “Where’s Filipinx Siri? @Apple”



As the poster from Chapter 2 feared, “Filipinx” as a replacement for “Filipino” has become commonplace enough that posts such as example (1) above appear. In this example, “Filipinx” is used instead of “Filipino” to ask Apple why Siri does not have a “Filipinx” English voice (especially when there is an Indian English voice). This poster, like most others who used

or supported the use of “Filipinx”, was from the US—specifically California—and was using the term as a group identity. Of the 22 posts I looked at, 10 of those posts used or showed support of the use of “Filipinx” in similar ways to example (1). Some of them used “#Filipinx”, using the term as a group identity in order to empower others in the group or educate people about the group. A majority, if not all, of these posters were from the US, with two people’s localities as unknown. None of the posters who expressed positivity to the term were from a known location outside of the US; in contrast, only one of the people who expressed negativity towards the word was located in the US, and that tweet expressed a disconnect between the poster and Fil-Ams.⁴⁵

Example (1) shows how, as discussed in the previous chapters, “Filipinx” as a group identity can be an empowering word. By asking for “Filipinx Siri”, the poster is not only performing a form of activism, but also establishing that there can be a thing such as “Filipinx Siri”; that is, that there is a variety of English that is unique to Filipinx,⁴⁶ brought about by the history of imperialism and the language contact between those of Philippine descent and the US (or those who speak English). The poster is asking for Apple to acknowledge that history of violence and racism and provide Filipinx with their own version of Siri—they are, essentially, asking to be acknowledged as a community.

In example (2), posted by a person in the US who has “makibaka”, *struggle/empowerment*,⁴⁷ on their profile, “Filipinx” was used both as a hashtag and on its own, as part of the phrase “Filipinx struggle”. It was also used in conjunction with “#filipinoamericanhistorymonth”, and was followed by a long thread about the history of Fil-Ams or Philippine migrants in the US.

⁴⁵ See example (6) in this chapter.

⁴⁶ However this “Filipinx” group may be defined; that is, either only Fil-Ams or also those in the Philippines.

⁴⁷ Literally, “makibaka” means struggle and revolution, typically in a militant or violent way. MAKIBAKA, or Malayang Samahan ng Bagong Kababaihan (Free Movement of New Women), was a group of youth activists in the Philippines in the 1970s, during Martial Law (Aquino 1994), and is now typically used by Fil-Ams to mean empowerment (see, for example, themakibaka.com/).

2) “Happy Friday to the #Filipinx struggle and filipinx struggle only.

October is #filipinoamericanhistorymonth #FAHM2021 so before your TL gets flooded with Lumpia memes, let’s talk about real history for a bit 1/ 🍵”

Here, the use of hashtags connects this tweet with other posts that use the tag, which are largely activist/empowerment tweets just like this one. By also using “#filipinoamericanhistorymonth”, the poster, who uses they/she pronouns, is showing that the “filipinx struggle” that they are shedding light on is, in fact, Fil-Am struggle, something which is further proven when the rest of the thread only focuses on Fil-Am history. Thus, she is connecting “Filipinx” with “Filipino American”, using the term to empower other “Filipinx” (Fil-Ams) and educate people about their history.

This connection between “Filipinx” and Fil-Ams is also seen in example (3), which celebrates a Fil-Am journalist for writing their story and increasing the Fil-Am representation in media. This tweet was posted by an activist in California whose profile shows her roles in various BIPOC organizations and her commitment to social justice.

3) “❤️🙏😭 amplifying and documenting Filipinx American stories, we outchea!”

In this tweet, “Filipinx” is in the same phrase as “American”, which connects the two, but also allows for “Filipinx” to be separated from “American”, and thus that “Filipinx” does not necessarily automatically assume “American”. However, at the same time, if “Filipinx” is specifically modifying “American”, then it can be argued that because “American” is being further narrowed down to “Filipinx” (instead of “Filipinx” being narrowed down to “American”), this does not tell us about who is being considered “Filipinx”. What this example does tell us, however, is that Fil-Ams—“Filipinx Americans”—can be considered “Filipinx”.

Not only this, but this tweet is quite emotional, with the use of emojis and an exclamation mark, showing how important “Filipinx” can be in creating a shared identity and sense of belonging that can then be turned into stories and voices. This tweet acknowledges the erasure of Fil-Ams in the US, and the need for Filipinx American stories to be documented and amplified in order to fight this violence. In this way, like in example (2), this post connects “Filipinx” with “the filipinx struggle”—specifically, the Fil-Am struggle.

This connection between Fil-Ams and “Filipinx” is echoed by nearly everyone. One of the first things Maria told me was that she was told that “Filipinx” came from UC Berkeley, and it is understood that the word came from and is primarily used in US academic (and activist) settings. This is similar to “Latinx”, which, as discussed in chapter 1, is generally only used by young, English-speaking, college-educated, and/or US-born people of Latin American descent. “Filipinx”, having come from a similar background, also seems to be connected to US colleges. Being born or raised in the US, however, seems to be the primary understanding of those who use “Filipinx”, and the word seems to be expanded to all “Fil-Ams” (not only college-educated youths), as seen in example (4), where a poster from the Philippines says that Fil-Ams created “Filipinx”, then expresses their displeasure at the term.

4) “Oh yeah right the Fil-Ams thing,

They created the "Filipinx" thing.

Hindi maaari yan.” (Translation: "that’s not right"/"it shouldn't be allowed")

This post is largely dismissive of both the term and of Fil-Ams, calling them “the Fil-Ams thing” and “”Filipinx” thing”, then using Tagalog to signal that they are not Fil-Am (that they are instead “Filipino”?) while essentially claiming that “Filipinx”—and by extension, possibly, Fil-Ams—is not right or should not be allowed.

However, “Filipinx” is not solely used to refer to Fil-Ams. In example (5), which I used in chapter 1, “Filipinx” is used to modify “dialects”, thus connecting the term to language.

- 5) “Wanna know why my mom and all her friends mix up the pronouns He/She? Because in Filipinx dialects there is no gendered pronoun! It's all the same word! And yet they function in the world and know who people are and everything!”

This is interesting specifically because of the way “Filipinx” is used to discuss language, which—especially within this debate and in conversations between and about the diaspora—has typically been connected with the Philippines and those living in the Philippines, and to separate Fil-Ams from “Filipinoness”.⁴⁸ In fact, one of the major reasons “Filipinx” is dismissed and often even mocked by people in the Philippines is that “Filipinx” is hard to pronounce or sounds funny in Tagalog and other Philippine languages. Many people who pushed for the use of “Filipinx”, especially in 2020, also pushed for other gender-neutral terms such as for *Tita/tito*, “aunt/uncle”, to be “*tite*”, which is the Filipino word for penis. This caused a great uproar that many still mention and mock, as an example of how people who use and support the use of “Filipinx” don’t even know the language, since they did not even know that the word they were suggesting was not only already a word, but specifically one that is considered inappropriate and rude to say, especially in front of your elders, who you are expected to show respect to. Even Maria said, laughing, that “Filipinx for me implies the existence of lolx and titx so, do we really want that?” and questioned whether the ‘x’ would similarly become localized into terms like “Ilocanx” (*Ilocano/a*) or “Cebuanx” (*Cebuano/a*), which she didn’t believe anyone would use.

Despite this, the poster of example (5) decided to write “Filipinx dialects” instead of “Philippine dialects”, which would be a gender-neutral option, or “Filipino”, which is the official

⁴⁸ Many Fil-Ams do not speak Philippine languages; since many of their parents could speak English, that often became the language spoken at home; many parents claimed they made this choice so that their children’s assimilation to the US would be easier (Espiritu 2003).

language of the Philippines.⁴⁹ This suggests that “Filipinx” has further connotations than “Philippine” and is more than just a gender-neutral version of “Filipino”, and that these connotations were important to the overall meaning of the text. These connotations are probably those of decolonisation, as the post itself is making a claim that, essentially, Philippine languages/cultures do not understand or express the (Western) gender binary in the same way, and “yet they function in the world and know who people are and everything!”

Additionally, however, the poster may have decided to use “Filipinx” in order to align herself with the type of person who is indexed by the term. As seen by the examples above, but especially examples such as (2) that use “#Filipinx”, the typical person who uses the term is understood to be a Fil-Am who cares about Fil-Am identity and empowerment, is well-educated and/or values education (especially with regards to educating others about marginalized people like Fil-Ams). They are activists, often fighting for social justice not only for themselves/Filipinx, but for other BIPOC such as the poster of example (3). In fact, of the ten posters who used or showed support for “Filipinx”, six of them had something in their profiles that indicated they were activists or actively worked towards social justice and equality, and two of them explicitly said that they are or were recently in graduate school. Although the poster of example (5) does not state in her profile that she is an activist or gained a higher degree (which does not mean she isn’t/has not), she is still aligning herself with these kinds of people, not only because the content of her post is meant to educate and empower, but also because “Filipinx” now indexes that kind of person.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ She also uses the word “dialects” instead of “languages”, but that is a separate issue that won’t be discussed here. I have decided to use “languages” to refer to the same set of language varieties that I assume the poster is referring to, although some could certainly be considered dialects.

⁵⁰ “Filipinx” is probably also used in/by queer communities and allies, but that is not something that was shown in my data, as none of the posters who used/supported the use of “Filipinx” disclosed their sexuality, and only one used “they” pronouns—again, this does not mean that none of them identify as queer, only that this information was not made public. Since “Filipinx” is explicitly meant to include gender nonconforming or non-binary people, it can be assumed that the word also indexes people who are or are accepting of non-binary people, which is reflected here.

2. *What does “Filipinx” mean?*

For people who are against the use of the word “Filipinx”, the term indexes the same type of person—Fil-Am, activist, educated—but in a specifically negative way. These Fil-Ams (if not all Fil-Ams) are Americanized, as seen by their lack of Tagalog/understanding of Tagalog, their lack of Filipino culture (often considered “white-washed”), and their focus on US-specific problems and experiences—which they push onto Filipinos in the Philippines. For example, (6) uses Tagalog in order to clarify the type of people who use “Filipinx” are “Suman”, a Filipino rice cake dessert, which they clarify to mean “Fil-Ams, brown on the outside, white on the inside”, and to claim that they should not be dragging others into their problems:

- 6) “Paandar ng mga Suman (Fil-Ams, brown on the outside, white on the inside). This is their American side shoving this down our throats. They can use Filipinx in the US, pero wag na nila tayo idamay. Their Filipino experience is different from our Filipino experience living here.” (Translation: "it was started by Sumans... They can use Filipinx in the US, but they should not drag us into it...")

This example was posted by someone living in the US (no other demographics known), but the first thing they do is use Tagalog as a way of signaling that they not only understand Tagalog, but they can use it. This is followed-up by the last sentence, where they specify that Fil-Ams have a different experience “here” (presumably the US) than “our Filipino experience”. Who is considered under “our” is never specified, but it can be assumed that this poster is a first-generation immigrant who was raised in the Philippines and is speaking about other first-generation immigrants, whereas Fil-Ams are second generation (or more) or those who were born/grew up in the US. Tagalog, then, is a major way of symbolizing this, even if the entire post is in both Tagalog and English, because the use of Tagalog is meant to show the poster’s

connection to the language and corresponding culture(s) of the “homeland”—in contrast to the “mga Suman”, who are “white on the inside”.

This post adds that the act of “shoving [Filipinx] down our throats” is attributed to Fil-Am’s “American side”. This suggests that Fil-Ams have a “Filipino” side and an “American” side, the former probably being the “brown on the outside” and the latter being “white on the inside”. Thus, an aspect of being “American”, or “white on the inside”, is forcing their problems and experiences onto others who may not have that experience. According to this post, “Filipinx” is allowed within the US to refer to Fil-Ams’ specific “Filipino experience” in the US, but this is “different from our Filipino experience living here”. Therefore, the poster contends, people who do not have these experiences or face the same problems should not be dragged into it.

This opinion of Fil-Ams having a distinct and separate experience from other Filipinos was echoed by my interviewees, especially Alex. Alex, who had been raised in the US but spent a few years in college in Manila, stated that they understood both the drive for “Filipinx” and why people would be against it, because at the end of the day Fil-Ams grew up in a significantly different community than those in the Philippines. One of the ways they pointed out was that the Philippines is very homogenous in comparison to the US, where Fil-Ams interact and live with people of many different races, ethnicities, and backgrounds, which brings about a different context when it comes to social justice and race. When speaking about how they transferred from college in Manila to one in California, they spoke about their own realization that Fil-Am experiences are valid, and “Filipinx” can be empowering. “I met so many other non-binary and queer Filipinos here [the US],” they said,

and they grew up here, but they’re wrestling with not only the identity and the disconnect, and also—I should add—the mental health impacts of being a Filipino American, being a Brown person in the US, and on top of that they’re dealing with queer phobia and transphobia—not just

from America, but from our own communities as well. And so for me, I'm just like, who the fuck are you, to invalidate that?

They also mentioned that Fil-Ams have their own unique history that goes back to the times their ancestors came to the US from the Philippines, bringing with them their own traditions and ways of living that have since evolved and adapted to help them survive in their new environment (the US), but are still legitimate and “Filipino”. For example, they spoke about Filipino Martial Arts (FMA), and how they remember people in the Philippines “ridiculing Fil-Ams who practice FMA”, claiming that Filipinos don't practice that,

but when I got here I realized FMA has a vibrant culture specifically in the Central Valley of California. Why? Because farm workers would have to learn it to protect themselves from white supremacist attacks. So who are you to say that that's not Filipino? ...Filipino ancestors come here, use what they knew, to exist as Others in the United States.

Thus, part of their reason for using and supporting the use of “Filipinx” was that, to them, the word was empowering, inclusive, and brought to light the struggles that they felt personally, living in the US as a non-binary Fil-Am.

However, while Alex felt that “Filipinx” was empowering for them and other queer Filipinx in the US, this sentiment was not echoed by all queer people in the Philippines. In example (7), which was posted by a queer Filipino who uses she/her pronouns, “Filipinx” is connected to “States-raised” and “feminists” who impose upon queer people in the Philippines:

- 7) “Not these States-raised Filipinx feminists imposing their western standards to the queer narrative-building and realities here in the Philippines. Istg, you are adding an unnecessary burden here. Not everything is abt the west.” (sic)

This post, which is not directly discussing “Filipinx”, places the term within the phrase “States-raised Filipinx feminists”. These “feminists” are not only raised in the US (thus, Fil-Am), but they are “Filipinx”—they are activists and educated, which goes well with the conception of

a “feminist”. In this way, “filipinx” is given an almost militant understanding, in a “social justice warrior” (or “makibaka”) way. However, these Filipinx feminists, even if they might think they are being inclusive and decolonial and empowering towards women and queer folk, are instead imposing their own “western standards to the queer narrative-building and realities here in the Philippines”. Thus, “Filipinx feminists” in this context seems like a sort of parallel to “white feminists”, which is used to describe a specific type of feminist who is not intersectional in her feminism and believes that her experience of oppression as a white woman is universal (as opposed to intersectional feminists, who understand that every individual’s experiences are impacted by their various identities and positionalities, which include but are never only limited to their gender or sexuality). White feminism is also often connected to white saviourism, as many white feminists follow the rhetoric of the white/western women being “free” and needing to “save” their brown sisters from their terrible oppressive cultures (Abu-Lughod 2002). In this way, “Filipinx feminists” seems to suggest a type of westernised feminist who believes that her experience of oppression—as a Fil-Am, or a Filipinx, even—is the only experience of oppression by Filipino/a/xs, thus imposing her understanding of her own oppression—and thus what her own liberation would look like—onto those in the Philippines, despite them having their own understandings, narratives, and realities.

Here, we see a repeated complaint of Western imposition on the Philippines, the sentiment that Americans are colonizing the Philippines again. However, this post goes beyond that to directly address “these States-raised Filipinx feminists” to tell them that “you are adding an unnecessary burden here” and “not everything is ab[ou]t the west”. This is another issue that people have expressed when discussing Fil-Ams and “Filipinx”, the issue of not only the Philippines having different experiences and problems, but that people living in the Philippines

have more pressing concerns than things such as inclusive language.⁵¹ For example, in (8), the poster, from the Philippines, is reacting to a comment on a Tiktok post about Filipino/a/x nurses being taken advantage of during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- 8) “it’s so shocking to me how people will care more about non-issues like “filipinx” than our nurses being taken advantage of. get a fucking grip.”

Although the comment she is reacting to is, in fact, against “Filipinx”, the sentiment that is echoed by many people in the Philippines is that there are more pressing concerns than language such as our nurses being abused, poverty, corruption, etc. (Included in these pressing concerns is, of course, American imperialism.) Generally speaking, it is believed that Fil-Ams, who are more focused on the societal problems they face in the US, do not understand Philippine issues and politics and are un-/misinformed about them—despite often wanting to engage with the country and activism within the country. This has many layers to it: for starters, Fil-Ams, by virtue of being othered in the US, use their Filipino roots and identity as a tool to organize and support one another and create a sense of belonging, separate from the Philippines. This, Alex explained, “can get frustrating” to those in the Philippines, because “there’s a lack of understanding [among those in the Philippines] of how race and ethnicity can also be in and of itself a thing. Because we don’t have race and ethnicity—in the way it’s used in the US—in the Philippines. And so there’s not an understanding of how having Filipino as a racial, ethnic, political identity can in and of itself be valid.” Not only that, but Fil-Ams, many of whom, Alex pointed out, are second, third, or even fourth generation, cannot or have not ever gone to the Philippines, and have trouble understanding the politics, issues, and conditions in the Philippines.

⁵¹ This does not mean that race, gender, and sexuality are not issues in the Philippines; in fact, as my interviewees have stated, they are issues, but they seem to pale in comparison to class.

At the same time, Fil-Ams who may want to be involved with the Philippines often find that they are limited in their reach and understanding of political events in the Philippines, but that they are less limited when focusing on US issues (Espiritu 2003). As a result, people in the Philippines believe that Fil-Ams do not care about the Philippines because they are not focusing their energy on understanding and helping the Philippines, instead focusing on the US. This belief, however, comes with the expectation that Fil-Ams should care about and focus their energy and activism on the Philippines, especially if they are using “Filipino” (or “Filipinx”, for that matter) as an identity or an organizing tool.

This is exacerbated when Fil-Ams still try to be involved with the Philippines despite lacking information and understanding, because they are then labeled as hypocrites for “imposing” their form of activism (like in example (7)) when they lack context. In the case of “Filipinx”, Alex described how people see the use of “Filipino” over “Filipinx” as transphobic, “because there is no conception of how it can be gender neutral.”

As a further example of this “hypocrisy”, in the summer of 2020, at the height of Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM) and while posts about “Filipinx for BLM” were abundant on social media, there was a lack of similar activism by the same people regarding issues in the Philippines. In particular, something which garnered a lot of criticism surrounding “Filipinx” was that in 2020 President Duterte fully pardoned an American Marine who was convicted of homicide—not murder—of a transwoman named Jennifer Laude in 2015. To many, this was a clear example of transphobia and US imperialism, but while Filipinx continued to post about BLM solidarity on social media and naming Black lives that were taken, few—if any—mentioned Laude. This was seen as proof that people pushing for “Filipinx” do not

actually care or take the time to find out about issues in the Philippines, even when that issue is within the topic of their activism.⁵²

In this way, many people have used the term “woke” to describe “Filipinx”. For example, on Urban Dictionary, an online “dictionary” where people may post definitions and examples of slang terms,⁵³ which people can then vote up or down, the top definition is:

- 9) “The Filipino language is already gender-neutral stop westernizing the usage of the Filipino language whoever created this clearly has no regard and understanding of the language and culture.

To apply Western movements such as Latinx to the Filipino context when there is absolutely no need for it; and to “convince” the Filipinos that Filipino is not gender-neutral is misleading and goes to show that the murikans (or not-so-real-Filipinos) [sic; Fil-Ams] have arbitrarily imposed their rules and culture (or lack thereof) to the real, rich and colorful Filipino identity.

The world thinks that Amurikan wokes speak for all of us. They do not.”

Here, we see echoes of what has already been said: “Filipino” is already gender-neutral and claiming that it is not is colonizing and proof that the people who coined it do not truly understand (or care about) the language; a connection to “Latinx” as a “Western movement” that is unnecessary and also further colonisation; Fil-Ams, who are referred to literally as a Filipinized version of “American” and called “not-so-real Filipinos”, are imposing “their rules and culture (or lack thereof)” on “the real, rich and colourful Filipino identity”. The last line of the definition also echoes the frustration regarding representation that I discussed in chapter 2, of “the world” seeing Fil-Ams as representative of everyone of Philippine descent. However, this

⁵² As expressed by some in Aguilar and San Juan 2020, for example.

⁵³ This often thus makes explicit the various things that a term indexes.

text does not say “Fil-Am” (in fact, nowhere in the definition is “Fil-Am” or “Filipino American” ever said; only “murikans (or not-so-real-Filipinos)"); instead, the text says “Amurikan wokes”. “Amurikan” (or “murikan”) is “American” written in a Filipino accent and Filipino alphabet, thus a literal Filipinization of “American”. “Woke”, the second part of that phrase, comes from the Black English term “woke” to mean being awake or aware, but which has evolved (largely online) and been appropriated into White culture and politics to mean socially/politically aware (Romano 2020). “Woke” is now often seen as performative, used by people who falsely claim to be because it’s trendy, but who ultimately help reproduce systems of inequality while performing the opposite (Romano 2020). Therefore, by linking “Amurikan”/Fil-Ams with “wokes” in this definition, the poster is claiming that “Filipinx” users think that they are being progressive, “woke”, and anti-imperialist, but in truth they are not. They may have good intentions, but ignorance and lack of understanding of Philippine politics and realities prevent them from being able to enact the change they are hoping for, instead reproducing the very systems of imperialism they want to change.

Related to this is what Maria described as the concept that “being diverse is cool now”, or a desire to stand out and be unique by being othered that she considered part of “the Western ideal”. Specifically, she described cultural appropriation, especially of Black culture, clarifying that “diversity is cool but it’s more cool if a white person is doing it.” In that sense, Fil-Ams are reclaiming their diversity, trying to “get that coolness” and be “diverse in that Western sense.” “It is a way to stand out, if you think about it... in that social media aspect, diversity is cool because you also stand out because of it, and we all wanna be more individualistic in that respect.” Thus, she explained, Fil-Ams search for that diversity, or to “make what makes [them] diverse stand out more”, which is not a problem, in her opinion, except “when they aestheticise or try to take

from it without acknowledging the source material.” Giving the example of Fil-Am writers and writing circles, she talked about how Fil-Am diaspora writers “use that sense of otherness, of being Filipino, as a way of getting into the writing circles... because they want to define themselves as even more othered, but it happens without them actually clearly acknowledging the source material, or even try to be... faithful to the Filipino culture.”

Here, although she explicitly states otherwise in her interview, Maria is suggesting that she believes Fil-Ams are not or cannot be the source of their own diversity or otherness—like white people, they must appropriate that, and sometimes problematically do so without acknowledging their source. This echoes the definition in (9) above, which characterizes Fil-Ams as lacking in culture. While the tweets I gathered in this past year have called Fil-Ams “white” or Americanised, most of them have not explicitly claimed that Fil-Ams are lacking in their own history, experiences, and ways of living—and, when asked, Maria agreed that “there definitely is a Filipino American-ness.... A Fil-Am culture that’s unique.” In fact, many of the tweets, such as example (10), posted by someone in the Philippines, acknowledge that Fil-Ams have their own experiences and histories that are different from that of those in the Philippines.

10) ”Let the Fil-Ams call themselves "Filipinx". If that's what they feel makes sense given the social and material conditions the face in 'Murica, who am I to impose? On the flip side, they shouldn't be forcing us to use it because it doesn't really match ours over here.”

However, there is still a rhetoric that “real” or “authentic” Filipinos would not use the term “Filipinx”, as shown in chapter 2 and the numerous tweets claiming that the word does not fit with the Filipino language (and therefore culture or people). These tweets reveal some of the tensions between Filipinos from the Philippines and those in the US/diaspora, such as described in example (11), posted by someone from the Philippines:

11) “Colonization alienates Fil-Ams from their roots.

It makes Filipinos in the homeland resentful of Fil immigrants who former think were given privilege to enter the Empire.

It makes Filipinos in capital believe that their national identity&language makes them more rooted/genuine.”

The first sentence here explains the rhetoric that Fil-Ams are lacking in “culture” or are Americanized; this occurs because Fil-Ams have been alienated from their roots, because of colonization and specifically colonial mentality. Colonial mentality has led people to consider Americans—including Fil-Ams—and American cultural products as superior to Filipinos and Philippine cultural products (Espiritu 2003), and therefore of the superiority of those who were “given [the] privilege to enter the Empire” (example (11)). This superiority, which includes the power and authority discussed by Maria in chapter 2, is exacerbated by the reliance on money and goods that Filipinos working abroad are able to send home, as well as the way Filipino immigrants sometimes play up that superiority when visiting home, often to feel better about their own downward mobility in the US (Espiritu 2003), therefore creating resentment by those still in the Philippines.

This resentment, as well as resentment towards colonization and the colonial mentality many people are actively fighting, causes people to express Filipino pride and gatekeep “Filipinoness”. To be “Filipino” is then characterized as having certain experiences, ones that are rooted in the country itself, thus creating an essentialized Filipino culture and nationality. In example (11), the claim is that “Filipinos in [the] capital” are the ones who believe themselves and their identity and language to be “genuine”. However, those in the diaspora, as said in the introduction, also have an imagination of “Filipino culture” and what a “Filipino identity”

consists of, a creation that is fueled by the diasporic desire to return to the imagined “homeland”—which is seen as the current nation of the Philippines, but which is actually fixed in time and no longer exists, if it ever did (Clifford 1994). Thus, Fil-Ams, who are physically disconnected from their “homeland”, are further alienated from their cultural roots due to their “Americanization” and the gatekeeping performed by “actual” Filipinos from the Philippines. Still, there is a need for Fil-Ams to create their own identity for social mobilization, especially because of their racialized situations and experiences in the US (Aguilar 2015, Espiritu 2003). “Filipino”, or “Filipinx”, can be that identity that Fil-Ams can organize themselves around and use to create a sense of belonging and home.

“Filipinx”, then, in many ways, can be seen as an example of the diasporic desire for an inclusive, unified “Filipino” identity—one that crosses borders, gender, and even time. This inclusive, unified “Filipino” identity is impossible to achieve, however, not only because of the current tensions between the diaspora and the “homeland”, but because the imagined “homeland” does not exist anymore (or never did), and both communities—Fil-Ams and the communities their ancestors came from in the Philippines—have since grown and changed, such that the experiences, troubles, and even celebrations are no longer shared.

Instead, “Filipinx” as an identity term has evolved from being (or hoping to be) a catch-all term for all people of Philippine descent or ethnicity, to one that explicitly refers to the Fil-Am struggle. “Filipinx” indexes a specific type of Fil-Am, a highly-educated (i.e. college or above) activist. For Fil-Ams, this term is and can be empowering, a way to make one’s voice heard, and to create solidarity with other marginalized communities in the US. For many in the Philippines, however, the term is a Western imposition that indexes a “woke” individual who propagates the very systems of oppression and imperialism they are hoping to dismantle.

Conclusions: Negotiating a “Filipinx” identity

What, then, does “Filipinx” mean? “Filipinx”, although it is meant to be a catch-all inclusive term for people of Philippine descent, specifically indexes well-educated, Fil-Am activists. It is also a nod of solidarity towards larger, US-based movements of social justice. To many, however, the Fil-Ams that “Filipinx” indexes lack an understanding and appreciation of social and political realities in the Philippines, and are thus “woke” and “Americanized”. However, those who gatekeep the identity of “Filipino” to only mean those who are both ethnically *and* nationally Filipino (or at the very least show understanding and care for the nation of the Philippines), often do so because they themselves lack an understanding of the racialized structural conditions that Fil-Ams have grown up with in the United States, a specific form of othering that leads to the desire for a stronger ethnic and racial identity, connection to one’s homeland, and larger movements for social/racial justice.

In posting about “Filipinx”, Filipinos in the Philippines and the diaspora negotiate the definitions of both “Filipinx” and “Filipino”, aligning themselves as for or against one or the other. “Filipinoness” becomes characterized through people’s specific historical contexts, such that Fil-Ams use “Filipinx” as a way to refer to the Fil-Am struggle, and Filipinos in the Philippines use the rejection of “Filipinx” as a way of unifying those in the country. These experiences—of living and surviving in the Philippines or in the United States—are vastly different, but both are impacted by the current and historical American imperialism that, while experienced differently, is shared by both communities. The tensions that have risen around this word are due to the desire among Fil-Ams for a sense of belonging and identity that is being denied by those in the homeland, and the resentment Filipinos from the Philippines feel towards

those who they perceive to be more privileged than them and who are assumed to represent them, but end up doing so inaccurately (and, to some, in a colonizing way).

This thesis has uncovered a tension between Filipinos in the homeland and in the US because of the differences in their situations, contexts, and lived experiences. While terms of identity are important in gathering together communities to create a sense of belonging or mobilize for social justice, they are also often unable to capture the nuances of individual lives. In creating and pushing for “Filipinx” as a catch-all term, people have instead created a word that—while it may be gender-neutral/inclusive—emerges from and indexes specific experiences of Fil-Ams. “Filipino”, as well, seems to prioritize nationally Filipino people and the experiences of those in the Philippines. This brings us to the question, is it even possible to have an identity term that encompasses the varied and nuanced experiences of both Fil-Ams and Filipinos from the Philippines? In order to do so, I believe, we must first resolve the long-standing tensions between the two communities and bring about greater understanding of the different and often individual contexts and experiences of being a Filipino/a/x in various parts of the world.

Works Cited

- Abu-Lughod, Lila. 2002. "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others." *American Anthropologist* 104 (3):783-790.
- Aguila, Almond Pilar Nable. 2014. "Social Media and the Renegotiation of Filipino Diasporic Identities." PhD diss., University of Alberta.
- Aguilar, Delia and E San Juan. 2020. "Problematizing The Name "Filipinx": A Colloquy| Countercurrents." Accessed 2 October 2021.
<https://countercurrents.org/2020/10/problematizing-the-name-filipinx-a-colloquy/>.
- Alvanoudi, Angeliki. 2014. "Introduction" and "Grammatical Gender." In *Grammatical Gender in Interaction : Cultural and Cognitive Aspects*. 1-31. Leiden: BRILL. Accessed April 20, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1991. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.
- Aquino, Belinda A. 1994. "Filipino Women and Political Engagement." *Review of Women's Studies* 4, no. 1 (1994): 32-53.
<https://journals.upd.edu.ph/index.php/rws/article/view/3152>.
- Baklanova, Ekaterina. 2016. "On Marginal Gender in Tagalog: A Case Study." *Proceedings on the XII International Conference "Languages of the Far East, South East Asia and Western Africa", LESEWA, Moscow, Nov. 16–17, 2016*, ed. by M. V. Lomonosova, 25–33. Moscow: Yaziky Narodov Mira.
- Barrett, Kay Ulanday, Karen Buenavista Hanna, and Anang Palomar. 2021. "In Defense of the X: Centering Queer, Trans, and Non-Binary Pilipina/x/Os, Queer Vernacular, and the

- Politics of Naming.” *Alon: Journal for Filipinx American and Diasporic Studies* 1 (2).
<https://doi.org/10.5070/LN41253177>.
- Bashir, Dale. 2022. “Valorant’s New Pinoy Agent Neon Sparks Discussion on Usage of “Filipinx”.” IGN Southeast Asia. Accessed 15 April 2022.
<https://sea.ign.com/valorant-pc/180539/news/valorants-new-pinoy-agent-neon-sparks-discussion-on-usage-of-filipinx>.
- Bischoff, Stephen Alan. 2012. “Expressions of Resistance: Intersections of Filipino American Identity, Hip Hop Culture, and Social Justice.” PhD diss., Washington State University.
- Bonilla, Yarimar, and Jonathan Rosa. 2015. “#Ferguson: Digital Protest, Hashtag Ethnography, and the Racial Politics of Social Media in the United States.” *American Ethnologist* 42, no. 1 (2015): 4–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.12112>.
- Bridges, Judith. 2017. “Gendering Metapragmatics in Online Discourse: ‘Mansplaining Man Gonna Mansplain....’” *Discourse, Context & Media* 20 (2017): 94–102.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2017.09.010>.
- Bublitz, Wolfram, and Axel Hübler. 2007. *Metapragmatics in Use*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
<http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/haverford/detail.action?docID=622840>.
- Chua, Kyle. 2021. “PH Remains Top in Social Media, Internet Usage Worldwide – Report.” *Rappler*. Accessed 4 October 2021.
<https://www.rappler.com/technology/internet-culture/hootsuite-we-are-social-2021-philippines-top-social-media-internet-usage>.
- Clifford, James. 1994. “Diasporas.” *Cultural Anthropology* 9 (3): 302–38.
<https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1994.9.3.02a00040>.

- Corbett, Greville G. 1991. "Introduction." In *Gender*. 1st ed. Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139166119>.
- Crenshaw, Kimberle. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1, Article 8.
<http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>.
- Doeppers, Daniel F. 1994. "Tracing the Decline of the Mestizo Categories in Philippine Life in the Late 19th Century." *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 22 (2): 80–89.
- Espiritu, Yen Le. 2003. *Home Bound: Filipino American Lives across Cultures, Communities, and Countries*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1ppbp8>.
- Figuroa, Megan. 2021. "Latino or Latinx? the linguistic debate over inclusive terms." Interview by Lauren Gilger. KJZZ's The Show, May 25, 2021. Accessed 3 October 2021.
<https://theshow.kjzz.org/content/1686198/latino-or-latinx-linguistic-debate-over-inclusive-terms>.
- Gonzalez, Andrew B. 1998. "The Language Planning Situation in the Philippines." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 19 (5): 487-525, DOI: 10.1080/01434639808666365
- Hajek, John, and Catharina Williams-van Klinken. 2019. "Language Contact and Gender in Tetun Dili: What Happens When Austronesian Meets Romance?" *Oceanic Linguistics* 58 (1): 59–91. <https://doi.org/10.1353/ol.2019.0003>.
- Hall, Stuart. 1996. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora". In *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Padmini Mongia, 110-121. London: Routledge.

- Hjorth, Larissa, and Michael Arnold. 2011. "The Personal and the Political: Social Networking in Manila." *International Journal of Learning and Media* 3 (1): 29–39.
https://doi.org/10.1162/ijlm_a_00059.
- Ignacio, Emily Noelle. 2005. *Building Diaspora: Filipino Cultural Community Formation on the Internet*. Rutgers University Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hj5ts>.
- Johnstone, Barbara. 2016. "Enregisterment: How Linguistic Items Become Linked with Ways of Speaking." *Language and Linguistics Compass* 10, no. 11 (2016): 632–43.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/lnc3.12210>.
- Krenn, Michael L. 2006. "Brown." In *The Color of Empire: Race and American Foreign Relations*, 21-50. Virginia: Potomac Books, Inc.
- McClintock, Anne. 1995. "Introduction: Postcolonialism and the Angel of Progress." In *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality In the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge.
<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.02146>. EPUB.
- McClaurin, Irma. 2001. "Theorizing a Black Feminist Self in Anthropology: Toward an Autoethnographic Approach." In *Black Feminist Anthropology: Theory, Politics, Praxis, and Poetics*, 49–76. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Mendoza, Susanah Lily L. 2002. *Between the Homeland and the Diaspora : the Politics of Theorizing Filipino and Filipino American Identities : a Second Look at the Poststructuralism-Indigenization Debates*. New York: Routledge.
- Noe-Bustamante, Luis. 2020. 'Latinx Used by Just 3% of U.S. Hispanics. About One-in-Four Have Heard of It.' *Pew Research Center's Hispanic Trends Project*. 11 August 2020.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2020/08/11/about-one-in-four-u-s-hispanics-have-heard-of-latinx-but-just-3-use-it/>.

- Ocampo, Anthony C. 2014. "Are Second-Generation Filipinos "Becoming" Asian American or Latino? Historical Colonialism, Culture and Panethnicity." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37 (3): 425–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2013.765022>.
- Rafael, Vicente L. 1988. *Contracting Colonialism: Translation and Christian Conversion In Tagalog Society Under Early Spanish Rule*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.02467>. EPUB.
- Rodríguez, Dylan. 2010. "Filipino American Communion: Cultural Alienation and the Conditions of Community." In *Suspended Apocalypse: White Supremacy, Genocide, and the Filipino Condition*, NED-New edition., 1–32. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttv1.4>.
- Romano, Aja. 2020. "A History of 'Wokeness.'" Vox. Accessed October 9, 2021.
<https://www.vox.com/culture/21437879/stay-woke-woke-ness-history-origin-evolution-controversy>.
- Salinas, Cristobal. 2020. "The Complexity of the "x" in Latinx: How Latinx/a/o Students Relate to, Identify With, and Understand the Term Latinx." *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 19 (2): 149–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1538192719900382>.
- Silverstein, Michael. 1993. "Metapragmatic Discourse and Metapragmatic Function." In *Reflexive Language: Reported Speech and Metapragmatics*, edited by John A. Lucy, 33–58. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511621031.004>.
- San Juan, E. 2001. "The Filipino Diaspora." *Philippine Studies* 49, no. 2 (2001): 255–64.
- Toledo, John. 2020. "Choose: Filipino or Filipinx?" *Bulatlat* (blog). 7 September 2020.
<https://www.bulatlat.com/2020/09/07/choose-filipino-or-filipinx/>.

- Wolff, John. 2001. In *Lo Propio y lo Ajeno en Las Lenguas Austronésicas Amerindias : Procesos Interculturales en el Contacto de Lenguas Indígenas con el Español en el Pacífico e Hispanoamérica*, edited by Klaus Zimmermann and Thomas Stolz, 233-252. Madrid: Iberoamericana Editorial Vervuert. Accessed April 25, 2022. ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Yarcia, L. E., T. C. de Vela, and M. L. Tan. 2019. 'Queer Identity and Gender-Related Rights in Post-Colonial Philippines Special Issue: Legal Regimes of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Asia'. *Australian Journal of Asian Law* 20 (1): 265–76.