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## Umuwi: Coming Home: Decolonizing Filipinx-American Identity

Theresa Joyce Esmejarda Arocena  
*Dominican University of California*, terocena2468@gmail.com

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**Umuwi: Coming Home**  
**Decolonizing Filipinx-American Identity**

By

Theresa Joyce Esmejarda Arocena

A culminating senior project, submitted to faculty of Dominican University of California in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Communication and Media Studies

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates Filipinx-American identity using contextual understandings of decolonization as a conceptual framework. We will explore some of the long-term consequences of colonization on identity in the Filipinx-American community, including labeling theory's current psychologies within the community, the formation of certain ideologies, and the attempts to reconcile transgenerational trauma and dismantle negative ideologies within the community. Seven participants were selected through non-probability sampling and were interviewed individually over Zoom video conferencing. Participant interviews revealed five interconnected themes regarding how identity is formed and sustained. Given the complexity of identity, more research is needed to explain other nuances of the Filipinx-American identity.

*Keywords:* identity, Filipinx-American, Filipinx-American identity, individual experiences, contextual understandings, Filipino

## **Dedication**

Para sa'inyong lahat.

Ipinangako kong magkakaroon ako ng maraming kuwentong isasalaysay sa inyo.

*For all of you.*

*I promise I will have many stories to tell.*

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my seven participants for entrusting me with your stories. This research would not exist without any of you. It means the world to me that you not only chose to share your experiences with me but believed in my ability to convey them to the world. You are enough. You have always belonged.

I would also like to thank Dr. Katie Lewis for being my mentor through this process – from figuring out how to adjust my IRB, especially with COVID-19 hitting, to talking me down a cliff when I panicked about whether or not this research is any good. Thank you for believing in this project when it was more of a feeling than tangible ideas and taking me on as a student. I could not have completed this project without your expertise and guidance.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the love and support from my family, my friends, my mentors, and my partner. Mama, Dad, thank you for letting me go. I know it had to be hard letting me leave home and go to college where we did not know anyone. Thank you for trusting me to find my own path. To my little sister, I hope that if you ever ask the questions I did growing up, you find answers here. To my friends and my partner, thank you for listening to my many, many rants, and anxieties about this project. The patience you had and the encouragement you offered when I did not believe in myself helped me get through this in more ways than you might know. To my partner specifically, you are enough. I hope this research can be another reason for you to believe that. Lola Flor, I have so many feelings and so few words to describe the love and gratitude I have for you. Thank you for the lessons you disguised as simple stories you told me when I was curled beside you in bed. There is not a day that goes by where I do not miss your laughter.

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## **Umuwi: Coming Home: Decolonizing Filipinx-American Identity**

Previous research has considered Filipinx-American identity and the ways in which colonization and assimilation have formulated current identities, beliefs, and values. For example, David (2013) has explored how internalized oppression has shaped the psychological experience of Filipinx-Americans. In this paper, I examine Filipinx-American identity through the lens of decolonization. The purpose of this analysis is to understand where ideologies originated, why they developed, and whether the effects of these ideologies have become positive or negative in the long run. If viewed as negative, this study hopes to reveal if and/or how the Filipinx-American community has begun to dismantle the ideology. The nature of this research is to examine how perceptions of identity are partially formed through the psychological, spiritual, and physical imprint left behind by colonization. I will also explore the ways in which Filipinx-Americans exhibit colonial mentality and how they attempt to dismantle these ideologies.

### **Research Questions**

Previous research examined how colonization has affected Philippine culture and society, both in the Philippines and in the diaspora. For example, David's (2013) *Brown Skin, White Mind* explores how the Philippines historical and colonial relationship affects the psyche of Filipinx-Americans. Ocampo's (2016) *The Latinos of Asia: How Filipino Americans Break the Rules of Race* contextualizes Filipinx-American racial identity within colonial history and analyzes our position as in-between immigrant groups from Latin American and other Asian immigrant groups. However, I found a lack of current research about how nearly four centuries of colonization has affected identity and how this factor presents itself in identity politics.

The research questions framing this project are: (1) What are some of the long-term consequences of colonization on identity in the Filipinx-American community? (2) How does labeling theory apply to current psychologies in the Filipinx-American community?; (3) Why did certain ideologies form within the Filipinx-American community?; (4) How is the Filipinx-American community reconciling with transgenerational trauma and dismantling negative ideologies in their community?

### **Description and Rationale for Research Approach**

Three hundred thirty-three years of Spanish rule in the Philippines has resulted in long-lasting consequences for the people of the Philippine archipelago. Much of the original culture was wiped out during this period of colonization. After that, the period of American colonization of the Philippines lasted 48 years, from cession of the Philippines to the United States by Spain in 1898 to United States' recognition of Philippine independence in 1946. During this time period, Filipinos were continually assimilating to survive in their occupied state. For many, this meant giving up their own beliefs and practices to ensure that they might succeed and live in the new world formed by colonizers. Those that did not adapt, lost their lives, or moved into the margins of their own communities. Cultural practices once prominent throughout the entire archipelago would now only be found in the most remote regions of the Philippines, if at all. Worst still, were that things once revered would become taboo and/or rejected.

Prior to Spanish colonization, the Philippines and Filipinos did not exist. Instead, the Philippines were made up of various ethnolinguistic nations which could all be considered indigenous. Though the Philippines is now considered one nation, the experience of those descended from these peoples still feel the effects of being forced into one identity. The

Philippines and its peoples are not a monolith, and this should be considered when examining identity; more so, as the peoples of the Philippines have become pushed into states of diaspora.

Another contending factor that calls for specification is the marginalization of Filipinx-Americans within the Asian American community. “Filipino Americans are often regarded as the ‘forgotten Asian Americans’ by society or the ‘invisible minorities’ by the psychological community” (David, 2013, p. xxi). Filipinx-Americans are grouped as Asian American, but Asia itself is made up of billions of people, all originating from hundreds of countries within Asia, each with their own culture and history. Despite this, Asian-American studies is dominated by East Asian rhetoric, thus allowing for the erasure of Filipinos and Filipinx-Americans. I did not want to risk accidentally generalizing Filipinx-American identities by simply examining a generalized Asian American perspective on identity and thus erase crucial information about how Filipinx-American peoples view themselves. I also wanted to ensure that I was examining Filipinx-Americans specifically and not the experience of Filipinos from the motherland. The two groups have uniquely different experiences and thinking they could be one and the same would be a disservice to both communities. This led me to believe that qualitative research is the more appropriate approach to data collection and analysis (as opposed to quantitative research).

### **Positionality**

Growing up in the diaspora, my identity as a Filipino-American always felt like a question mark. I grew up in America but spent most of my formative years traveling to the Philippines during my summers and staying there for the entirety of my summer breaks. I grew up feeling close to the motherland, but as I grew older, this dynamic began to confuse me. This phenomenon is called third culture kid (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). Third culture kids (TCK)

or third culture individuals (TCI) are people who were raised in a culture other than their parents' or the culture of their country of nationality and live in a different environment during a significant part of their child development years (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). My formative years were shaped by a feeling of being inherently an outsider. Within my own Filipinx-American community, many of the people I grew up with were immigrants themselves or 1st generation. I felt inherently close to my culture, but outside of those spaces, I was surrounded by a hegemonic white society. Some of my earliest memories of school are of being taunted — on the school bus by the other kids who would yell, “Ching chong chee,” and in lunchrooms where the food of my ancestors would be ridiculed. I was put into speech therapy at one point because I did not speak “proper” English, my speech patterns mimicking that of my immigrant community. I would say things like “close the light” or get my pronouns mixed up because I was used to a language that did not have as many gendered words. From a very young age, I began to understand that the way I understood the world was very different from the society around me and that was coded as being inappropriate. I found myself more and more ashamed to be Filipino, yet I would spend my weekends “being” Filipino with my immigrant Filipino community and my summers returning to the motherland. Looking back on it, it was as if I lived a double life. I wanted to be safe from the censure of my peers for not being “American enough,” but in doing so, I alienated myself further. I was letting myself be determined by outside forces instead of allowing myself to be true to how I felt inside. At the same time, I look back and realize that I did not have the language to verbalize the feelings and thoughts I experienced. The language available to me, generally categorized my existence as either Filipino or American, but I dwelled in an in-between space.

It did not help that where I grew up in New Jersey was not an incredibly diverse place. When I graduated high school, Asians made up 5.8% of the total student population (130 out of 2,257) at my high school (Department of Education, 2017). We had a total of 160 Black students, 130 Asian students, 97 Hispanic students, and 31 mixed raced students out of 2,257 students. Our total minority population was 418 students and the remaining 1,839 were white students. From there, the average number of students per grade was 555. According to the Civil Rights Project at UCLA, New Jersey is the sixth-most segregated state in terms of education in the United States. A quarter of all students in New Jersey attend schools that are either at least 90% white or 90% nonwhite and more than 100 districts are 90% or more nonwhite (Orfield et al., 2017).

Growing up, I did not know of any kind of research readily available that might have answered my questions nor did I have the access to it as a middle or high schooler. I did not know where to begin my search and my community was limited in their perspectives and knowledge. At the end of the day, I was a child simply looking for representation in the world around me. Unfortunately, my community did not have the kind of diversity I needed to feel included instead of excluded.

My first and most obvious bias is that I unconsciously define myself as “not belonging” or “other.” For example, when I came to college in California, specifically the Bay Area, that was the first time I ever felt beautiful in a conventional setting. Prior to this, I was beautiful, in spite of or beautiful *for* an Asian. I was only ever a fetish and not a preference. Therefore, the first time someone showed interest in me, I was incredibly confused. I had not expected to ever be considered as the standard. I grew up hearing, specifically white men, consider non-white women as someone they could have sex with, but not take seriously in an actual relationship. “I

could never bring a brown girl home,” was something ingrained in me pretty much from the moment dating was something I thought about. It was not until I arrived in California that I realized how much these words affected the way I viewed relationships, especially with white men. I just automatically assumed that I was not going to be taken seriously. This was one of the insidious little ways that my negative experiences dug their way into my psyche. I had not realized that so many of my own negative experiences had inadvertently become things I had taken on as a part of my identity.

Unfortunately, I still struggle to understand where I belong in the grand scheme of things. When I came to the West Coast, I met Filipinx-Americans whose families have been in the United States for generations. It was a culture shock to meet people who did not have that level of connection to even the food, something that seemed like the most basic thing to me. On the flip side, I had never been around so many people outside of Filipinx-Americans who knew about the culture and the ethnicity. Where I grew up, I experienced people not even knowing what the Philippines was. Thus, my bias was two-fold in this way; I would expect other Filipinx-Americans to automatically understand Filipino culture in the way I understood it and I would expect non-Filipinx-Americans to be absolutely clueless.

I am ashamed to admit my own judgmental behavior and attitude toward those I perceived as complacent or taking their privilege for granted. I remember at one point commenting to a friend that people should be grateful because at least they lived in the Bay Area instead of somewhere less diverse. She heard what I had to say and made space for the bitterness and resentment I felt while also educating me as to why what I was saying was not helpful for solving problems. My friend could have reacted negatively to my problematic words, but instead she said something that has continued to stick with me: “You are allowed to ask for more.” I had

been so used to being treated poorly that I would accept the bare minimum. The censure I would give to others was born out of a fear that if I asked for too much, I would have the bare minimum taken from me.

I am ever grateful for people like my friend who have invited me into safe spaces of learning and have been gentle, but firm in their teachings. These spaces have forced me to humble myself. The Filipinx-American experience is not a monolith, and neither are the Filipino people. It is a disservice to smooth over or look over individual experiences. I have met Filipina/o/x who have a longing for a culture they have become divorced from by no means of their own. Filipinx in the diaspora and Filipinos may not be the same, but we are still family.

It is this history that has led me to this path of learning. Someone once told me to let love lead me, especially with my research, since previous research about marginalized communities has occurred through a deficit-based lens. Academia is oversaturated with individuals outside of these cultures and as much as they might be allies, they can never know what that community is like, not like people who actually belong to it. When I write and do this research, I think about what I needed growing up. I write for myself as much as I write for others. My work, at heart, is a journey of grieving, of forgiveness, and of trying to come home.

## Methods

### Research Design

Qualitative research relies on a completely different paradigm from quantitative research. The methods used by qualitative researchers to gain knowledge center on honoring cherishing individuals' contextual understandings of concepts, while also acknowledging the researchers' own values. Your beliefs, your experiences, your background do not stand apart from your research. Qualitative analysis It creates an in-depth understanding of the attitudes, behaviors, interactions, events, and social processes that compose everyday life; . In doing so, it helps explore how everyday life is influenced by societal society-level wide factors, things like social structure, social order, and all kinds of social forces. Qualitative research is better equipped to examine these differences and account for them in a tangible way as opposed to quantitative research, which runs the risk of erasing unique individuals' experiences. Another layer complicating this topic is the examination of the diasporic conditions in which this study's participants dwell. Demographics, such as age, sexuality, ethnicity, region, etc. will influence the perspectives of all these participants. It is crucial to factor in this demographic information when trying to analyze datasets and create findings. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world (Merriam, 2009). According to Merriam (2009) qualitative data are collected through interviews, observations, and documents and are analyzed inductively to address the research question posed. (Merriam, 2009).

For this qualitative interview study, participants received a letter of introduction, a consent form, and a video consent form (see Appendix A, B & C) that informed them of study details and reminded them they could opt out of the study at any time. The video consent form

(Appendix C) doubled as both my consent for recording, but also as consent for using the footage for an accompanying documentary. Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 restrictions, all interviews were conducted via Zoom and the quality for video and audio were not up to standards for creating a documentary. Participants asked clarifying questions before signing the form to give consent for the interview and an audio and video recording of the conversation. Prior to the interview session, I reminded participants that I was recording the interview, but only my faculty advisor and I would see the raw footage. I told them that I would ask some broad open-ended questions and that I may follow-up with other questions. I made sure participants understood all three consent forms they were signing, knew they could leave the study at any time, and knew they did not have to answer every question and could opt out/skip questions they did not feel comfortable answering.

To prepare for the interview session, I created an interview guide based on the one used in Tuason et al. (2007)'s research (see Appendix D). The first question posed was, "Tell me the story of how you have come to immigrate to the United States," and the rest of the questions ask participants to share about their experiences related to the Filipinx-American Ethnic Identity. I added questions focusing on the individual experiences of my participants. I wanted to make sure that I was exploring what Filipinx-American culture is as an entirely different category from Filipino or American.

### **Participants and Sampling Procedure**

I recruited participants via convenience and snowball sampling. These participants were recruited through social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. I asked other interested participants to pass along flyers, emails, and information sheets with my contact

information. Potential participants then reached out to me. From there, I sent out a Google Form with the following open-ended demographics questions for them to answer:

1. What is your name?
2. What is your gender?
3. What is your age?
4. Please specify your ethnicity or cultural identity.
5. What is your sexuality?
6. Where did you grow up? (Region, state and/or city)
7. Where are you currently located? (Region, state and/or city)
8. Would you be willing to be part of a documentary?

This kind of sampling is purposive sampling, which falls under the broad category of non-probability sampling. According to Merriam (2009), “purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 77).

After receiving informed consent and answering all questions from participants, I scheduled individual interviews with each participant through video conferencing (Zoom); I used a series of basic interview questions for each semi-structured interview. Each individual semi-structured interview lasted no longer than one hour. I used Zoom’s recording features to record audio and video for each interview. I also used Zoom’s transcription feature, as well as Otter to create written transcriptions of the audio. All recordings are stored on a password-protected computer owned by me (primary researcher) and all data will be destroyed after one year.

After the seven sessions, I transcribed and coded all interview data. Then, I sent transcript snippets to participants for a member check — checking with them to see if I understand what they were saying (Merriam, 2009). The process involved in member checks is to take your preliminary analysis back to some of the participants and ask whether your interpretation “rings true,” although you may have used different words. Participants should be able to recognize their experience in your interpretation or suggest some fine-tuning to better capture their perspectives (Merriam, 2009).

I selected participants based on their demographic data (age, gender, ethnic or cultural identity, sexuality, region). My goal was to have a diverse group of participants who have different perspectives and experiences about the way they grew up. I wanted to minimize homogeneity to get a broader picture of the diversity within Filipinx-American identity. I was also curious to see how growing up in different regions of America would influence participant experiences.

The sample included seven Filipinx-Americans, with ages ranging from 21 to 46 years old. The participant group consisted of individuals who were born in the United States and those who migrated to the States. Participants grew up on either coastal side of the United States as well as in the Southwest, but currently live all over the country as well as overseas. Participants’ ethnic identities ranged from being only of Filipino heritage (i.e., Tagalog, Ilokano, Visayan), being of mixed heritage, and being adopted by Filipino parents. The following table shows the self-reported demographics of the seven participants.

*Table 1 Self-Reported Participant Demographics*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Ethnicity and/or Cultural Identity</b>	<b>Sexuality</b>	<b>Childhood Location</b>	<b>Current Location</b>
Beatrice	Female	32	I am Filipino-German-Lithuanian-American. I was also raised Jewish,	Heterosexual	South Orange, NJ	Los Angeles, CA

			but we also celebrated Christmas.			
Amy	Female	22	Cebuano, Visayan, Tagalog, Filipina, American	Bisexual	Parañaque, PHIL. Arnold, MD. Dover, DE	Newark, DE
Hana	Female	21	Filipino (Tagalog) - Korean - American	Heterosexual	South Jersey	South Jersey
Jose	Male	38	Cebuano, Ilocano, French, German, American	straight	Arivaca, Arizona	Tucson, AZ
Phoebe	Female	30	Filipinx-American (cultural identity)	Bisexual	Greater Seattle area, Washington State	Geneva, Switzerland
Cherry	Male	46	Tagalog	Hetero	Philadelphia, PA	Philadelphia, PA
Leah	Female	21	Tagalog	Queer	Lipa, Batangas/ Quezon city, Philippines/ South San Francisco, CA	South San Francisco, CA

### Data Analysis

To begin the data analysis process, I reviewed individual interview transcripts, used Otter's highlight feature to note quotes of interest, and used the comment feature to assign categories to the quotes. According to Merriam (2009), qualitative data analysis and collection occur simultaneously. After each interview, I reviewed the audio recording and written transcripts created through Otter. From there, I wrote notes and memos related to the data. I assigned potential themes to participants' quotes by highlighting the transcript and inserting a comment. The comment included the potential theme(s) associated with the quote. Throughout the data collection process, I inductively analyzed the data, using each interview as a comparison, narrowing down potential themes. Data collection became more organized, my thoughts becoming focused and refined, and thus began to reveal emerging themes. During this

period of intensive analysis, tentative findings are substantiated, revised, and reconfigured (Merriam, 2009, p. 178).

### **Validity**

As a Filipina-American woman myself, I took care to not apply my own life experiences to the experiences of my participants. One way I accomplished this was that during my interviews, I was forthcoming with my participants about my experiences and my own biases. For example, I explained how I experienced racism, implicit and explicit, growing up in New Jersey and was honest about my surprise that they did not experience something similar. This sharing of experiences allowed us to have a conversation about different factors that may influence the area and cause it to change. In another conversation, I compared experiences with one of my participants I grew up with and that attended the same high school I attended. It was interesting to see the way our experiences converged and diverged. For them, their questioning of their identity became more apparent in college, whereas mine started in high school. We compared our experiences of living in the same environment.

Qualitative researchers agree on strategies that promote trustworthiness in a study. These procedures are described well by Merriam (2009, p. 229) and include:

- Triangulation, or using multiple investigators, sources of data, or data collection methods to confirm emerging findings
- Member checks or taking data and tentative interpretations back to the people from whom they were derived and asking if they are plausible.
- Saturation, or “the point at which you realize no new information, insights, or understandings are forthcoming” (p. 183)

- Peer review/examination, or discussions with colleagues regarding the process of study, the congruence of emerging findings with the raw data, and tentative interpretations
- Audit trail, or a detailed account of the methods, procedures, and decision points in carrying out the study
- Thick description or providing enough description to contextualize the study such that readers will be able to determine the extent to which their situations match the research context, and, hence, whether findings can be transferred.
- Maximum variations, or purposefully seeking variation or diversity in sample selection to allow for a greater range of application of the findings by consumers of the research

After I reviewed my notes and memos about the audio recordings and written transcripts, I started the process of saturation. I looked through the different categories assigned to participant quotes and highlighted categories that appeared frequently. To qualify as a primary theme, each needed support from at least three participant quotes. The primary ways I checked and confirmed my understanding were through member checking and audit trails. I sent my participants the quotes I pulled from the transcript and asked them to check what I gathered from the data. For the audit trail, I consistently reviewed audio transcripts to ensure that I was pulling quotes that made sense, given the context of our conversations. I also used maximum variations to select a group of individuals I felt would give a well-rounded perspective on Filipinx-American identity. I wanted my participants to come from a wide range of backgrounds, especially in terms of region and ethnic and cultural identities.

## **Findings**

I developed the following primary themes from analyzing and coding all interview transcripts. The primary themes I found were: Belonging, Denying or Mocking the Culture, Pride and Overcompensation, Joy and Resilience and Traditions and Change. These categories came up consistently throughout the seven interviews I conducted. Each theme features at least three quotes from at least two different participants.

### **Belonging**

The first theme that emerged from conversations with participants was about belonging. This theme encompasses feelings of being included, excluded, and the longing to have a social bond. Participants illustrated their personal struggles of finding belonging in Filipino and American cultures, as well as in Filipinx-American cultures. There is a specific emphasis on how Filipinx-Americans are in the process of trying to figure out how to apply their lived experiences to the traditions they look for in Filipino cultures. For example, Leah noted,

I feel that Filipino Americans... they look for that Filipino identity more than Filipino communities. I feel like the ones that I know, at least, they're actively looking because it's not around them and when you're in the Philippines it's like you're living it.

She further elaborates by stating that,

I have this weird feeling of like, I step out of the shower, and I get this chill, like, I don't belong here. I thought it was gonna be like, when I moved to America, that's going to change, I'm going to feel like I'm at home... but I still feel that chill 10 years later, of 'I don't belong here. Where do I belong?'

For some Filipinx-Americans, their questioning of where they belong can lead them to identify where they do *not* fit. For example, Phoebe shared why her own experiences have led her to simply rejecting the labels given to Filipinx-Americans by Western society-

I would not at all identify with being Asian, or Asian American. And so now I try to use all the opportunities that I can to, to tell people it's a very distinct thing to be Filipino American, and it's, yeah, don't put us in a box with Asians or Pacific Islanders.

Other participants explored how their statuses as mixed children affects their sense of belonging, at both interpersonal and intrapersonal levels. For Amy, her Filipino community is where she most feels a sense of belonging-

If I'm just around other Filipinos, it just feels like community to me. I feel like I have a place where I belong and it feels like just one giant family and that's something that I really, truly value a lot.

The impacts of race and physicality, as well as whether other people consider them part of the community, seem to be strong influences on feelings of belonging. For mixed children like Beatrice, belonging was an ongoing struggle growing up. She constantly faced comments about the way other people perceived her. "I don't look Filipino, so people are always so surprised." She describes the doubt she would face from other people when she tried to claim her heritage, "...it's always like 'You are? No!' like, they don't believe it." She would face censure from both sides of her racial identities, "I feel like I never looked like anybody. I felt like I never fit in anywhere." However, for her, physicality was ironically also a way that she felt connected to her ethnic and cultural identities. She states, "I always remember looking at my aunties, and being like, one day, my body's gonna look like that." It gave her a sense of comfort to know, at least in this way, she belonged.

For Jose, who had spent most of his life being accidentally mistaken for Latino, but never Filipino, being seen was an epiphanic moment, "... that was one of the first times that I felt like, 'Oh, hey, somebody actually is kind of seeing me and kind of not just assuming that I'm Hispanic.'" He grew up in Arivaca, Arizona, a place with few Filipinx-Americans or even of a broad Asian community. In some ways, Jose felt it was easier to just let people make the assumption rather than correct it.

### **Denying or Mocking the Culture as a Coping Mechanism**

The second theme that emerged from conversations with participants was using rejection of culture as a reactionary response to the environment in which participants lived. Participant responses revealed the rejection of culture as a survival strategy; it is self-protection. As Hana explains, "we would just do what we could to fit in." Participants lived in situations where being proud of their culture was continually seen as, at best, "other" or at worst, something to reject them over. In Hana's case, she already felt isolated because of her predominantly white town and it gave her solace to have another person who identified as she did-

One of my really good friends is also another adopted Asian, and we would just always stick out just being the two Asians. So, we thought that it was funny if we just started to make fun of being Asian or making all the typical stereotypes into a joke. Basically, making fun of our culture to just get laughs out of everyone. It was very hard, but I didn't feel like that until I looked back.

Amy echoed this experience when she shared what it was like for her to grow up as a mixed kid in predominantly white spaces in Delaware-

I was so embarrassed by how much I was getting made fun of for my ethnic background and it actually caused me to go into this phase where I just kept identifying as white. I

wasn't really eating my mom's food that much. I didn't really like to think about Filipino culture or anything. I guess I tried to act white, because I just wanted to fit in and I didn't like that people were bullying me in school, because I just looked different and the way I acted was different.

Cherry revealed another potential reason for why it was so hard for Filipinx-American children to address the mocking of their culture and allowed it to continue-

In my own experience, in every experience that I've had with racism it's sort of been an experience as a joke, where kids mess around. You know adolescent immature kids messing around with calling each other names.

He elaborates further by explaining how there was not a way for the microaggressions to be addressed when he was growing up. Individuals were expected to deal with their feelings on their own rather than make it into a point of conversation.

...it was never addressed, where someone got offended and said hey guys can we stop doing this?... It's just been my experience that it never hurt my feelings, but, you know, I've seen people who have been destroyed by it enough to know that you know there's a time to joke around and there's a time not to.

### **Pride and Overcompensation**

In conversations about belonging, Leah talked about how Filipinx-Americans look for Filipino identity more since it is not something they actively find around them. When it is found, this can cause pride in the individual. Pride for one's identity is important, but it can lean into arrogance and overcompensation out of a feeling of insecurity. Beatrice spoke about how her circumstances as a child of mixed race, a second marriage, and with parents of different religions caused her to feel like she had something to make up for- "As a child of so many different things,

it was so confusing for me growing up. And I tend to struggle with needing to be more of something to sort of mask my halfness.”

The need to overcompensate by being overly prideful can also come from places of shame about where an individual has come from. It can become a way to make up for past actions (i.e., mocking or denying culture). Hana mentioned,

Sometimes I feel like a lot of people had the same, growing up story as me, you know, just kind of like being ashamed of who you are because of living in a predominantly white area. Sometimes I feel like because of that, people try to overcompensate like ‘I was ashamed of being a Filipino so now, let me be 112% like Filipino culture, all the time’.

Pride can cause other Filipinx-Americans to judge those they view as “not good enough,” and therefore, exclude them from the group. Beatrice describes this experience- “I feel like Filipinos love each other, but they are also the first to hate on each other. Like we're so proud but it's still not good enough.” Hana continued to illustrate how being prideful can come across as arrogance and turn people off, “I feel like Filipinos are very proud, like very proud of their culture, very proud of who they are and that kind of also comes off as being really obnoxious which some people just don't vibe with.” The need to prove how “Filipino” an individual is can also present itself as a superiority complex. However, participants explained that trying to overcompensate did not make them any happier or make them feel more accepted. For them, being happy was about being happy. Hana provides an explanation precisely,

I used to try super super hard to be as Filipino as Filipino can be, but then I stopped. I made a new goal and then my next goal was, I just want to be happy with who I am. I try to live by that — to really be proud of who I am despite if I'm Filipino enough or not.

## Joy and Resilience

“Filipinos are by nature — joyous people” -Beatrice

Typical Filipino parties, in the diaspora or in the homeland, usually feature raucous laughter. The moment you walk into the party, there are various introductions that occur — cheek kisses, cheek to cheek, hugs, *mano po* (literally translating to your hand please and it describes a traditional Filipino gesture to honor our elders by bowing to them or pressing one’s forehead on their offered hand), etc. No one goes to a Filipino party and goes unnoticed. Phoebe describes the experience as “that openness, and that warmth, and that humor and laughing at yourself and laughing at each other.” For some Filipinx-Americans, this experience is a defining part of their identities. In Amy’s case, she found belonging with her Filipino side of the family as opposed to her white counterpart due to their warm behavior-

I feel more like myself when I'm around my Filipino family because they're not as strict. You know, we can make a lot of dirty jokes to each other and everything. And we laugh and joke all the time and have all these fun parties. That's the kind of person I am, I love to laugh and have fun and so this is who I feel, I can really, truly be myself around.

Phoebe backed this thought up by saying,

We love, you know, we are always singing and laughing and just being loud and obnoxious. There's a very jovial quality to Filipinos... like you just have to come to one family dinner once and you're forever part of the family.

She specifically adds how the joy is not just shared within the immediate community, but extends to those who are invited in. It displays a deeper level of joy instead of simply being superficial.

For Jose, the laughter was accompanied by the memory of finding joy in spite of whatever may have been happening. Joy had an added layer—resilience

And just laughing and joking, which is also something my dad has, he's always laughing and joking and that's something, unfortunately, that didn't quite pass down to me. And that's something that I've always kind of wanted to incorporate into my own personality and figure out how to do. I'm still working on it; just even in the bleakest of times, you can still laugh and joke and have fun.

### **Tradition and Change**

Tradition is the foundation of culture; it can be a source of comfort for individuals and communities. At the same time, tradition can also be the reason for conflict. Participants noted their struggles of balancing American culture with Filipino culture and traditions. Many expressed frustrations with the rigidity of Filipino traditions and how they clash with their existence as diasporic children. A critique Filipinx-Americans seem to have for their parents is that they are not aware of what life is like in the United States for their children. Cherry explains it as, “There's this saying that their parents are living in their own land, and they're not living in the US. Their mentality is in the islands somewhere.”

By being unchanging, Filipinx-Americans can feel resentful of Filipino culture and feel a lack of belonging. Beatrice explained how frustrating it was to feel as if domesticity was being pushed on her. While she does value that choice and it may be one she chooses for herself one day, she resents how her choices are not seen as valid—

... [they are] commenting on when we're going to get married and have babies and all these things that just don't align with where we're at right now. I also recognize that that's just like, ingrained in the culture and the only way to break that is to do it myself or to

work on just having a different way of thinking or not feeling like the focus of your life has to be, as a woman, to be married and have children, like for some people, yeah, but some of us, we want a career and I want to do all of these things.

Hana echoes this sentiment,

Just like all these traditions that have been within Filipino culture for who knows how long, I feel like with the Filipino American groups, we are embracing the Filipino culture, but we're also getting used to American cultures, because obviously things are a lot different in America and then just trying to find that happy medium between the two.

However, as Filpinx-Americans move to adapt tradition with their lived experiences, they should be mindful of how they do it. Cherry explains his perspective,

I always classified myself as an old school type of guy, where you don't really answer back to your parents. You don't show an attitude, you respect them. You don't talk back. That was what was my base, my baseline, beliefs, that's what came out of the Philippines. But in the US, it developed, and I sort of tweaked it a little bit. Yes, I can talk back to my parents if I don't do it in an angry fashion and I discuss instead of yell and sort of speak to them in a tone and language that they will start seeing what I'm trying to convince them of.

Cherry synthesizes his traditional Filipino values with his American ones, creating his own happy middle. He believes in taking a gentle approach with change, rather than trying to make fast paced ones that could result in more pushback. At the same time, Cherry asks that those who hold more strict traditional Filipino values like his parents give their children the same kind of understanding—

So, the challenging thing is that there are immigrants such as my parents who had just

sort of a one-way mentality that this is how it was done in the Philippines; this is how it should be done here. You can't really bring or develop a child that way... it's a totally different experience so you have to have that understanding that your child isn't growing up with just all Filipinos anymore. So, you have to open up and broaden your mind.

## **Discussion and Implications**

The Philippines was subjugated to 333 years of Spanish rule before being annexed by the United States, who continued to colonize them. The Philippines does not just happen to be poor or low on resources; they are in fact overexploited. White Europeans and Americans stole resources, labor, and land to further their respective countries, resulting in countries like the Philippines being considered as developing or third world countries (Parenti, 1995). They created a diaspora, defined by Merriam-Webster as “the movement, migration, or scattering of a people away from an established or ancestral homeland” (Merriam-Webster). Arguably, there would be no such large diaspora had imperialist countries not created a need for peoples to leave their homelands. More than 2.2 million Filipinos worked overseas in 2019 (Yeung & Bacani, 2020). The primary reason for them needing to work overseas is because there are not opportunities to make money in the Philippines like there are overseas (Yeung & Bacani, 2020). The World Bank estimates that personal remittances are approximately 10 % of the Philippines’ GDP (Kaye, 2016).

### **Belonging**

Filipinx-Americans are direct consequences of the diaspora; in a way, they are its children. Filipinx-Americans are especially aware of their positions in the diaspora, even without the proper language to verbalize their feelings. The diaspora is not built for them to feel belonging; they are deviant. As stated by labeling theory, deviance is not inherent to an act, but instead the result of the externally imposed label of “deviant” (LibreTexts, 2020). For Filipinx-Americans, feelings of exclusion from either of their cultural identities are imposed by external forces that then create internal feelings. No matter how middle class they become, how well they speak English, and how familiar they are with American ways of life, race marks

Filipinx-Americans as foreign. “In short, immigrants today may become Americans, but they almost certainly will never become white,” (Ocampo, 2016, p. 7).

To not be seen wholly, is to not be seen at all so one can only imagine the immense relief when someone does see you as you are. For Jose, he allowed people to mistake him for Latino and/or Hispanic rather than correcting them because it was simply easier given the context of where he lived. In addition, Jose’s close friendships and cultural similarities to Latine cultures allowed him to find a place in those communities. When he was being seen by someone for whom he is, it sparked an interest in exploring his culture. A longing for culture is ultimately a longing to be understood. Feeling seen can present in a multitude of ways; sometimes despite its flaws, the simplest form of being seen is physicality. Beatrice, who constantly had to contend with her own whiteness, knew her Filipino-ness distinctly through the way her body took up space.

However, the idea that an individual must look a specific way to be considered “legitimate” is flawed. The idea that an individual needs to “prove” their Filipino identity is rooted in colonial violence, whether an individual is mixed or “full.” Race and racial identity are social constructs; the notion of race is designed to divide people into groups ranked as superior and inferior (National Museum of African American History and Culture). Racial identity is constructed externally and internally as “*How do others perceive me?*” and “*How do I identify myself?*” (National Museum of African American History and Culture). Even the idea of splitting culture and heritage into fractions (e.g., “half-white, half-Filipino”) is racist. The notion of “blood quantum” first appeared in the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1705. It was created to track racial ancestry and define legal rights through “a series of laws that denied certain civil liberties to any Negro, Mulatto, or American Indian” (Encyclopedia of Race and Racism). The

laws defined generations — declaring “children, grandchildren and great grandchildren as inferior members of society, based on their ancestry” and labeling descendants of “full blood” members of a race as half-blood, quarter-blood or eighth blood (Encyclopedia of Race and Racism). However, the theory behind it extends far beyond just native tribes. Other colonies followed Virginia’s example; adopting similar laws that used blood quantum to determine the status, privilege, and rights of a free person or slave. “The growing body of laws, although originally rooted in the institution of chattel slavery, evolved into a legal and social system that measured the extent of participation and privileges associated with full citizenship under the banner of ‘whiteness’” (Encyclopedia of Race and Racism). Today, we classify mixed race individuals as half, quarter, part, etc. As David said in a 2019 conference, “One plus one does not equal half. Racism is so insidious that it got us distorting basic math.” While these concepts have real life consequences, they are arbitrary. If we are ever going to move beyond racism, colonialism, and a Eurocentric point of view, we also need to let go of these kinds of ideas. Belonging is not a classification that any government or academic institution can provide. No one can simply erase your family.

Filipinx-Americans must also contend with where they are classified racially. According to the United States Office of Management and Budget, “Asian” refers to a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent, including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam (United States Census Bureau). However, the Asian American identity tends to be associated with East Asian cultures, which excludes other ethnic identities besides Filipinos, but unlike other cultures, Filipinos also must contend with a Spanish influence on their pan ethnic identity (Ocampo, 2016).

“One of the first sociological studies to look at Latino immigration experiences from a comparative perspective, *Spanish-Speaking Groups in the United States* (Ocampo, 2016, p. 10), included a chapter, specifically on Filipinos.” Moreover, Filipinx-Americans have played key roles in Latin-American social movements; Filipino/Filipinx-Americans laborers like Larry Itliong were working alongside Chicano civil rights leader César Chávez and other Mexican American agricultural workers in establishing the United Farmworkers while Filipino/Filipinx-Americans activists were building the foundations of an Asian American coalition (Ocampo, 2016, p. 10). “The League of United Latin American Citizens, a national organization dedicated to fighting anti-Hispanic discrimination, at one point had all-Filipino chapters in different parts of the country” (Ocampo, 2016, p. 10). This history has led to academic debates about whether Filipinos should be counted as Hispanic or Latino. Further complicating the issue is the question of if Filipinos could qualify as Pacific Islanders. When Asia Jackson, a mixed African American and Filipinx actress, started a Twitter thread beginning with “Filipino Americans who call themselves pacific islander instead of Southeast Asian want to seem more exotic than being grouped together with other Asians, so they are choosing to appropriate another marginalized identity but lemme know when y’all ready for that conversation”, she sparked fierce debate. The original tweet received four thousand retweets, 690 quote tweets and 23.1 thousand likes. Filipinx-Americans, Filipinos, and other Filipino/x in the diaspora jumped in to give different perspectives and explanations for their experiences. One of Jackson’s biggest criticisms was that her original tweet was ignorant and erasing the experiences of Filipino/x/a outside of her own experiences. The Philippine islands are usually described as Asian or Southeast Asian even though they are located on the Pacific boundary. The historical reality is that Filipino influences extend into the Pacific, and Pacific Islanders regularly appear in

eastern Indonesian and Filipino histories (D'Arcy, 2018). There is a history of interoceanic travel between the Philippines and Pacific Islands to mainland interaction with Asia. In fact, some studies using DNA indicate that the Philippines could be the ancestral homeland of some Polynesian peoples (Spriggs & Reich, 2020). In Wilcken's (2013) book, *The Forgotten Children of Maui*, he explores how the story and traditions of Maui can be found throughout the Philippines. He cites oral tradition, linguistics and tattooing motifs as evidence of the Philippines' connection to Maui and Polynesia (i.e. Lumawig or Lumauig, the similarities in Samoan, Hawaiian and Filipino bird tattoo motifs, etc.). Wilcken (2013, p. 3) also cites a map of the Pacific from 1893 which includes the Philippines as a part of Polynesia.

Historically, Filipinx-Americans have fought to be removed from the Asian Pacific Americans (APA) grouping. One of the primary reasons being that Filipinx-Americans are "seldom accurately situated in history or culture and are therefore often misinterpreted" (Espiritu & Omi, 2000, p. 61). The above discussion illustrates how the question of belonging continues to linger in the Filipino psyche.

Further research on Filipinx-American identity and a sense of belonging should explore the ways Filipinos desire or do not desire being included in other racial categories. To ignore these desires is to ignore the complex history of Filipinos in a global context. I suggest contextualizing how the Philippines' complicated history with specifically East Asian countries, impacts the way they view identity. I am interested in a closer reading of the cultural similarities among Latin and Pacific communities. Why are Filipinos excluded from those labels? How could they be included in those labels? Other research on this topic could address how blood quantum has affected the Filipino community, as well as the impacts of said theory on other Filipino communities in the diaspora (like the Filipinx-American community). It would also be

worth examining how belonging and privilege play into how mixed children of Filipino descent relate to Filipino culture, as well as how this identity interacts with their other identities.

### **Denying or Mocking the Culture as a Coping Mechanism**

Intragroup marginalization is defined as the interpersonal distancing that occurs when an acculturating individual is believed to exhibit behaviors, values, and beliefs that are outside the heritage culture's group norms (Castillo et al., 2007). Filipinx-Americans must contend with cultural norms from at least two different groups. In turn, rejection of culture is not something that others should inherently be shamed for. In actuality, people who reject norms should be treated with love and understanding.

By rejecting their culture and mocking a part of who they are, Filipinx-American children are experiencing alienation. The primary cause of this alienation is that their desires are guided by an outside force — the sense that one's own core desires do not match with the desires one is following or living inauthentically. How aware an individual is of this form of alienation varies from knowing, not knowing, or somewhere in between. Thus, the individual never feels truly accepted or a part of an in-group; they are continually contending with feeling like an outsider, which can encourage the person to reject more adamantly what they perceive as keeping them from being accepted. An individual may do this at the expense of their own well-being, due to a mistaken belief that in doing so, they will be accepted.

However, this rejection of culture may be a temporary and unhealthy relief. It may work for a while, but eventually, individuals may realize the effect it has on them. For example, social rejection shares similar neural correlates with physical pain, supporting the significance of the social attachment system in an evolutionary context (Ferenczi et al., 2015). Thus, the experience of rejection from in-group members is psychologically and emotionally painful, especially when

coupled with the implication that an individual is reflecting poorly on a shared social identity (Ferenczi et al., 2015). Therefore, individuals should not be shunned if they used to deny or mock the culture, especially if they lived in environments hostile to the cultural group.

The simplest solution to a denial of culture is to find where you belong or to be with those who love you. This calls for emotional and psychological awareness on the part of the individual to understand what it is they value and how much they value themselves. In Amy's words, "I just remember like, I am proud of who I am and there are people who love me for who I am." We do not always need to try and make spaces for ourselves where we are not wanted. We can just create a new table with people who make us feel whole and seen.

At the same time, it is important to create spaces for young people to discuss racism, prejudices, microaggressions, etc. Children often repeat what they have been taught rather than their own opinions. Fostering inclusion and multicultural education and taking a culturally responsive approach to teaching young students encourages acceptance and helps prepare people to thrive in a diverse world (Drexel University). By promoting awareness and creating a personal connection with diverse cultures, people are less likely to develop prejudices later in life because they have been encouraged to be more open-minded (Drexel University, n.d.).

Further research could explore intragroup marginalization and alienation in the Filipinx-American community. This research could shed light on what specifically creates such intense resentment in the related communities. It would also be interesting to develop a program specifically centered around multicultural education taught by people from marginalized communities. This could help address feelings of isolation that children and young adults may feel, particularly in less diverse communities. Such a program could explore how to identify systematic racism and how to address it, especially within K-12 schools.

## **Pride and Overcompensation**

The feeling of belonging, of knowing and having a place in the world, is a sensational experience. To be seen is to be loved, so it is completely understandable as to why people hold on so tightly to whatever it is that provides that feeling to them. However, much like how denying one's own culture and identity is borne out of self-protection (a consequence of not belonging), pride and overcompensation is born from that same insecurity — with the risk of becoming nationalistic and superficial. The need to overcompensate or become overly prideful is a reaction to wanting to be accepted and to be told “I am valid.”

Pride can be a good thing. There is nothing wrong with having self-respect, dignity, and confidence, especially if the individual or group has been socially marginalized based on their identity, culture, and experience. Pride becomes negative when we allow it to uplift ourselves at the expense of others. In the case of Filipinx-American groups, Hana explained how pride would cause people to feel unwelcome. Additionally, “the concept of a nation-state is not only a European invention, but a colonial tool” (Yamahata, 2019, 3rd paragraph). The Philippines was like the India described by Yamahata (2019, 3rd paragraph), a land filled with various “ethnic, linguistic, dynastic, social and confessional fragmentations that existed” where “there was no shared ‘national unity’ nor a centralised state to control a certain territory,” before European colonialism. By perpetuating a nationalistic perspective on identity, we continue to reinforce colonial tools of violence and oppression upon ourselves and others.

Overcompensating can often be looked down upon, but it should not be brushed aside so easily. In the case of Hana, her need to overcompensate was deeply tied to her feelings of needing to make up for how she used to deny and mock her culture to fit in. She wanted to find

forgiveness for her actions by finding validation through others, but it was not until she accepted what happened that she was able to move on.

Additionally, trying to create a generic idea of what a Filipinx-American person *is* futile. It can be comforting to have a singular identity that people can relate to, but it can also do the opposite, especially if holding on to rigid definitions of Filipinx-American identity. Our lives are nuanced; it is what makes life interesting and it is such a waste to wash away those experiences to have people fit neatly into little description boxes. People are more than just one part of their identity. The human experience is beautiful because it is messy and complicated. Being proud of yourself for your entire being is more important than being proud of any one part of your identity. As Leah noted, “Just because I’m Filipino American doesn’t mean this and that.” Identities are complex and no one should have to try to fit solely in one box. Pushing such a concept will only drive people away and isolate them from the community of which they want to be a part of.

Further research could include explorations of how alienation from different diasporic cultures affects people through their formative years, including unintended psychological effects. I would like to explore how the physicality of different mixed Filipinx-Americans factors into feelings of overcompensating and seeing how that correlates to ideas about Filipino or Filipinx-American identity.

### **Joy and Resilience**

Today, the Philippines is the one of the countries most impacted by climate change. According to Amnesty International, the Philippines is the country most at risk from climate crisis; the country is hit by an average of 20 typhoons every year (Amnesty International, 2020). The Philippines did not become an independent nation until 1946 and spent four centuries living

under colonial rule. One might think that the Philippines would have a low rank for happiness. Yet in 2018, Gallup's 41st Annual Global End of Year Survey shows the Philippines ranking as the 3rd happiest country in the world (Musico & Danganan, 2018). The answer for this high rate of happiness might lie in its pre-colonial values that continue to exist into the present.

The Tagalog word, *kasiyahan*, roughly translates to joy or happiness, but the context of implies a group, which makes the meaning closer to a celebration. *Kasiyahan* emphasizes the collective identity, rather than an individual one. Filipino culture centers family in their values, but this is not exclusive to only those who are blood related. Family, in the different Filipino cultures, is an all-encompassing definition that views close friendships as family. This could be attributed to the collectivist culture of the Philippines, which reveals an implicit belief that happiness is only real when shared. This sentiment is backed up by an account in William H. Scott's book, *Looking for the PreHispanic Filipino*. Scott (1992) describes an account by the Spanish about a cabin boy who the Spaniards abandoned in the Philippines because they thought he would become a burden on them. However, the Mexican cabin boy, Juanes, did not die as the Spanish had thought. When the Spanish returned in 1566, they found that he had survived, by which time he was thoroughly tattooed, could speak no language other than Waray, and had sired two children by one of the daughters of the man who had taken him in (Scott, 1992). Early accounts such as this highlight pre-Philippine values that continue today. Therefore, it can be theorized that happiness is derived from sentimental values, not material ones.

Another reason for laughter is resilience. Resilience is defined as the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress (American Psychological Association, 2012). While the Filipino people have seemingly endless amounts of resilience, joy and resilience should be scrutinized. It can be argued that despite the inherent

value of laughter and joy within the cultural group, this can serve as a coping mechanism to deal with the trauma experienced on an individual and national level. Too much resilience can result in individuals accepting unreasonable amounts of adversity. So, we should not glorify, romanticize, or glamorize resilience. The peoples of the Philippines have been subjected to generations of suffering, oppression, and abuse and we need to hold the systems and the people who create and uphold systems of oppression accountable for their actions.

Further research might examine pre-colonial Filipino family structures and consider how those dynamics changed or stayed the same over time. I would like to examine resilience in the Filipino community and its positive and negative effects on psyche and how this might translate into the diasporic community. I suspect that extreme resilience might play into why mental health is often not taken as seriously within Filipino communities.

### **Tradition and Change**

Transgenerational trauma is trauma passed from one generation to the next through genetics and through experiences. This form of trauma often affects large groups of people who have experienced collective trauma (Mohn, 2019). One of the most prevalent ways that transgenerational trauma can be seen is by examining beliefs and traditions, especially when considering how colonization factors into belief systems. It is important to consider the factors and individuals involved in instilling a belief into culture. Beliefs are not born from nothing, especially when considering the historical and cultural context of colonized countries like the Philippines. What did it take for that belief to be instilled into a culture and its individuals that then lead them through their experiences?

Intragroup marginalization (denying or mocking the culture) also plays a role in tradition and change. Profound cultural differences between groups can lead to disagreement over heritage

culture maintenance. If the dominant group does not accept the minority group's maintenance of its heritage culture, the minority group's identity could be threatened. Furthermore, the dominant group's identity could also be threatened if the minority group insists on maintaining their different cultural values (Castillo et al., 2007). This turns tradition rigid and can be a reason why more traditional individuals in the group can react negatively to change. Orthodox teachings that insist on strict conformity are usually acting out of fear of change. These teachings are inflexible, harsh in their judgement, and refuse to adapt to legitimate development. The fear may be that change will weaken the community, which is ironic because traditions are meant to erase fear and create peace and harmony, not generate more fear. When we stay obstinate to the idea of allowing culture to change and evolve, we create a struggle for our descendants to face. They become "...things that we Filipino-Americans struggle with when trying to face the negatives of our traditional Filipino culture..." (Amy).

Amy noted that during the summer of 2020, the height of the Black Lives Matter movement and George Floyd protests, many individuals had to examine the anti-Blackness and outright racism that exists in their families and cultures. During this time, social media conversations arose, specifically regarding Asian-American and other non-Black immigrant communities being urged to have tough conversations with their family members. Some on social media were quick to condemn those they perceived as being tolerant of said behavior while others had tips for how to have those conversations and explored the complexities of why people avoid such conversations. This brought up the ideas of "calling in versus calling out" and where and when these conversations would be appropriate. Calling someone "out" is typically a public performance in which a person self-righteously demonstrates their knowledge, shaming an individual for their oppressive behavior (Mahan, 2017). While calling out is a way of engaging

with social change or justice, it is ultimately a form of oppressive behavior. Calling out describes the act of publicly naming instances of oppressive language and behavior. What makes calling-out toxic is the nature and performance of the act. Calling in is a proposed alternative to call out culture, which means having a private, personal conversation with an individual who used oppressive language or behavior to address the behavior without making a spectacle out of it (Mahan, 2017). Calling in recognizes that people are multi-faceted and that an instance of oppressive behavior does not define the totality of who an individual is.

For many children of immigrants like Filipinx-Americans, calling out is not a viable option for them, as this is intrinsically tied to the values of our community, such as respecting your elders. Calling out, with its undertones of wanting to shame, embarrass and humiliate the offender, goes directly against what the culture teaches. Another consideration regarding this topic is that many people simply do not know how to have that conversation in the first place, especially if the person initiating the conversation is younger.

Cherry's approach is to come at the issue with a "calling in" approach. By using the calling in approach, individuals can explore deeper, make meaning together, and find a mutual sense of understanding across difference. This allows for multiple perspectives and encourages paradigm shifts and is focused on reflection, not reaction. It is easy to hear something offensive and automatically get angry about it. Our gut reaction might be to make that other person feel stupid, but by doing so, the other person can become defensive and unwilling to hear the other out. Cherry also brought up how children of immigrants do need to give their parents some slack: "They can only go by their experience... so whatever my father, my mother experienced in the Philippines, they're gonna bring their sort of approach, as if they were living in the Philippines." Parents are often doing the best they can and may not even realize the way they continue to

uphold colonial violence and oppress others. People can be oppressed while still oppressing others. The key to any of these conversations is respect. We need to compromise and seek understanding on both sides of the hyphen in Filipinx-American households. Filipinx-American children should become cognizant of what their parents' point of view is and learn to convey their feelings and thoughts in a way that they understand. Filipino parents also need to try to understand where their children are coming from. Just as they might be struggling with transitioning into this new land, so are their children. These are not easy conversations to have, but it is ultimately a labor of love; it should be expected to take time. Tradition is not meant to be followed mechanically but used to keep the spirit of a people alive. Traditional practices are indicators of where we came from and hold the knowledge of those that came before to help us survive and remind us that we are never alone. It is also key to acknowledge and be okay with the fact that culture changes over time.

### **Final Thoughts**

When Beatrice said, “My soul is Filipino,” the conclusion I came to was that to be Filipinx-American is to participate in global citizenship. *Global citizenship* is a term which is used to describe the promotion of a global-centric manner of thinking, in which people consider themselves to be citizens of the world rather than of individual nations (Bullard, 2018). It is most often associated with the idea of global advocacy, in which a person identifies with an international community that seeks to be culturally aware and respectful of people from all backgrounds—while making positive contributions to the welfare of the planet. The meaning I would like to focus on is the one in which people simply recognize and understand the increasing interconnectedness of people around the world (Bullard, 2018). I do not believe that being Filipino is some concrete definition in a book or one that can be found in an academic paper; it is

a feeling. There are foods, clothing, tattoos, and other tangible things that represent the culture, but even when those things are taken away, Filipinos from all places, times, and ages still survive and live. What is left is perception: your perception of yourself and the perception of you by the rest of the world.

We are the products of colonization, which results in an inherently broken system. However, we should use the moments where we identify problems in our global and local communities as opportunities “to consider new ways of thinking and operating that are ultimately even more inclusive through deep engagement with questions of equity” (Hartman et al., 2020). I do not have a fool-proof solution when it comes to navigating decolonization or healing transgenerational trauma. My suggestion is to let yourself be led by love. When we walk forward, we walk with unconditional love for ourselves and others. That being said, people may believe that statement is too soft, but softness is not a weakness. A soft person does not necessarily mean a fragmented person; there is a great strength in softness — to know when to yield and surrender when necessary. Cultural humility is one of these concepts which was “birthed through wrestling at the intersection of settled understandings like intercultural competence, coupled with deeper appreciation of historic and structural oppressions, inequities, and processes” (Hartman et al., 2020, p. 37).

Filipinx-American identity is a multifaceted and layered topic. To be Filipinx-American is to understand that the identity is not a monolith. There are shared experiences, but even in that, people’s lived experiences diverge and that is okay. More research is needed to understand this complexity and break down the idea that the Filipinx-American experience is a monolithic one. I would like to further examine regional differences such as Filipinx-Americans in the South, the Midwest, the Northeast, etc. by conducting research specific to different United States regions. I

would also like to explore other factors like sexuality, being mixed, being adopted, or how coming to the United States younger or older affects identity development.

My truest belief is that the Tagalog concept of pakiusap (which roughly translates to a plea) is what will heal my community. The idea of pakiusap is that an individual is requesting to be heard. When we refuse to hold compassion for one another and regard the beliefs and feelings of another as less valid because it does not fit our expectations and experiences, we perpetuate colonial teachings. We need to hold space for each other without fear, shame, or a need to be accepted. When we can acknowledge that we are all learning and are humble in our misunderstandings, both in ourselves and others, we honor not only our ancestors but ourselves. After all, “The best or the worst enemy of a disagreement is a discussion... And, you know, the best end to racism is a discussion where two people are open minded enough to understand one another. You might end racism.” (Cherry)

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## Appendix A

### Letter of Introduction

Letter of Introduction

Title:

Researcher: Theresa Joyce Esmejarda Arocena

My name is Theresa Arocena, and I am an undergraduate Communication and Media Studies student at Dominican University of California. I am conducting a research project as part of my senior thesis requirements, and this work is being supervised by Katherine Lewis, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Education at Dominican University of California. I am requesting your voluntary participation in my study, which concerns how perceptions of identity are formed through the psychological, spiritual, and physical imprint left behind by colonization and how members of the Filipinx-American community have attempted to decolonize the mind.

Before agreeing to participate, I encourage you to read the following explanation of this study. This statement describes the purpose and procedures of the study. Also described is your right to withdraw from the study at any time. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board of Dominican University of California.

#### Explanation of Procedures

This study is designed to examine the ways in which colonization affects the Filipinx-American identity and show how postcolonial values and beliefs differ from their indigenous roots; this study also examines the ways in which Filipinx-Americans use, honor, and reclaim their Indigenous past to reject present day colonial mentality. The goal is to create a framework for challenging previously held notions of identity that are rooted in colonial ideology.

Participation in the study involves a face to face or video conference interview, which will last for approximately one hour. The interviews will be conducted by me, recorded (audio and video), and later transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. I will interview you either on the Dominican University of California campus, at an agreed upon location or through Zoom.

#### Risks and Discomforts

There are no risks or discomforts that are anticipated from your participation in the study. Potential risks or discomforts include possible negative feelings (e.g., sadness) when asked questions about your identity or experiences during the interview.

#### Benefits

The anticipated benefit of participation is the opportunity to discuss feelings, perceptions, and concerns related to the experience of being Filipinx-American, and to contribute to understanding identities of indigeneity versus identities of colonialism.

#### Confidentiality

The information gathered during this study will remain confidential in secure premises during

this project. Only myself and my supervisor will have access to the study data and information. The data will be neither anonymous nor confidential for the participants who agree to be filmed for the documentary. While the raw footage and original interview transcripts will be kept private and confidential (only viewed by the researcher and stored on a password-protected computer), the final documentary film will be presented at Dominican University of California, which will also be posted online. The documentary will include video clips of participants answering questions (only those participants who agree to be on video) and participants are provided the option to use their name or to select a pseudonym.

Participants who do not agree to be a part of the documentary will have their data be kept confidential. My faculty advisor, along with myself, is the only one that will identify the responses of individual participants. If participants do not agree to appear in the documentary, their individual interview responses will not be linked with their name nor their image. The tapes will be destroyed at the completion of the study. The results of the research will be published in the form of a research paper and a documentary to be showcased at Dominican University of California's Scholarly and Creative Works Conference. It may also be published online. The knowledge obtained from this study will be of great value in creating a framework for understanding trauma resulting from warped perceptions of identity.

#### Withdrawal without Prejudice

Participation in this study is voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty. You are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in this project at any time without prejudice or penalty. You are also free to refuse to answer any questions I might ask you.

#### Further Questions and Follow-Up

You are welcome to ask the researcher any questions that occur to you during the interview. If you have further questions once the interview is completed, you are encouraged to contact the researcher using the contact information given below. If, as a result of participating in this study, you feel the need for further, long term support, you are welcome to contact Dominican University of California's Counseling Services at (415) 485-3258 or complete a request form in the Student Health Center.

If you have other questions or concerns about the study, please contact the Institutional Review Board of Dominican University of California at (415) 482-3547 and leaving a voicemail message, by FAX at (415) 257-0165 or by writing to the IRBPHS, Office of the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dominican University of California, 50 Acacia Avenue, San Rafael, CA 94901.

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have read the above information. I freely agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to refuse to answer any question and to withdraw from the study at any time. I understand that my responses will be kept anonymous.

---

Participant

---

SignatureDate

If:

- (a) you would like a copy of your interview transcript once it is available
- (b) you are interested in information about the study results as a whole and/or
- (c) if you would be willing to be contacted again in the future for a possible follow-up interview, please provide contact information below:

Check those that apply:

- I would like a copy of my interview transcript
- I would like information about the study results
- I would be willing to be contacted in the future for a possible follow-up interview

Please provide an email address below.

Email address:

Researcher contact information:

[theresajoyce.rocena@students.dominican.edu](mailto:theresajoyce.rocena@students.dominican.edu)

[katherine.lewis@dominican.edu](mailto:katherine.lewis@dominican.edu)

## Appendix B

### Informed Consent

#### CONSENT FORM TO ACT AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

#### DOMINICAN UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

1. I understand that I am being asked to participate as a subject in a research study designed to examine Filipinx-American identity and decolonization. This research is part of Theresa Arocena's Senior Thesis research project at Dominican University of California, California. This research project is being supervised by Katherine Lewis, PhD, Education, at Dominican University of California.

2. I understand that participation in this research will involve taking part in a one-hour in person or video interview, which will include a personal life history, as well as thoughts and feelings on the topic of Filipinx-American identity.

3. I understand that my participation in this study is completely voluntary and I am free to withdraw my participation at any time.

4. I have been made aware that the interviews will be recorded. All personal references and identifying information will be eliminated when these recordings are transcribed. If I agree to be in the documentary, my name and image will be used; alternatively, I may choose to go by a pseudonym. If I do not agree to be in the documentary, my name and image will not be shared; the master list for these pseudonyms will be kept by Theresa Arocena in a locked password-protected file, separate from the transcripts. Coded transcripts will be seen only by the researcher and her faculty advisors. One year after the completion of the research, all written and recorded materials will be destroyed.

5. I am aware that all study participants will be furnished with a written summary of the relevant findings and conclusions of this project.

6. I understand that I will be discussing topics of a personal nature and that I may refuse to answer any question that causes me distress or seems an invasion of my privacy. I may elect to stop the interview at any time.

7. I understand that my participation involves no physical risk, but may involve some psychological discomfort, given the nature of the topic being addressed in the interview. If I experience any problems or serious distress due to my participation, Theresa Arocena and Dr. Katherine Lewis will provide resources for therapy. Ms. Arocena may be contacted at [theresajoyce.arocena@students.dominican.edu](mailto:theresajoyce.arocena@students.dominican.edu). Dr. Lewis may be contacted at [katherine.lewis@dominican.edu](mailto:katherine.lewis@dominican.edu).

8. I understand that if I have any further questions about the study, I may contact Ms. Arocena at [theresajoyce.arocena@students.dominican.edu](mailto:theresajoyce.arocena@students.dominican.edu) or her research supervisor, Dr. Katherine Lewis at [katherine.lewis@dominican.edu](mailto:katherine.lewis@dominican.edu), Dominican University of California.

If I have further questions or comments about participation in this study, I may contact the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS), which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. I may reach the IRBPHS Office by calling (415) 482-3547 and leaving a voicemail message, by FAX at (415) 257-0165 or by writing to the IRBPHS, Office of the Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, Dominican University of California, 50 Acacia Avenue, San Rafael, CA 94901.

9. All procedures related to this research project have been satisfactorily explained to me prior to my voluntary election to participate.

I HAVE READ AND UNDERSTAND ALL OF THE ABOVE EXPLANATION REGARDING THIS STUDY. I VOLUNTARILY GIVE MY CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE. A COPY OF THIS FORM HAS BEEN GIVEN TO ME FOR MY FUTURE REFERENCE.

---

Signature

Date

## Appendix C

### Documentary Video Release

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (the undersigned), do hereby confirm my consent with respect to your photographing me in connection with your academic documentary film/video project entitled

\_\_\_\_\_.

I hereby grant to you the perpetual right to use as you may desire all still and motion picture or videotape recordings and soundtrack recordings which you may take of me or of my voice, including the right to use my name or likeness, in or in connection with your audiovisual project.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Name (Print) \_\_\_\_\_

Home Address \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address/Phone \_\_\_\_\_

I also agree to indemnify you and hold you harmless from any claims and demands arising out of my personal injuries and/or death, resulting directly from any act of negligence on my part while I am engaged in photographic activities upon your premises. I have been made aware of any and all potentially hazardous circumstances and have the option to refuse to perform, during the course of production, any act which I find exceedingly hazardous.

Course: \_\_\_\_\_

University: \_\_\_\_\_

Semester: \_\_\_\_\_

Professor: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix D

### Interview Guide for the Filipino-American Ethnic Identity Study (Tuason et al., 2007)

1. Tell me the story of how you have come to immigrate to the United States.
  - a. How did you and/or your family move to the U.S.?
  - b. What were the reasons why you left the Philippines?
  - c. How was life for you when you arrived in the U.S.? How was it for your family?
  - d. How do you now feel about having immigrated to the U.S. when you did?
2. Tell me about the experiences you have living here in the United States.
  - a. What are your current stressors? What gives you stress in your daily life?
  - b. In terms of culture or ethnicity, have you had negative experiences being in the U.S.? How do you cope with these?
  - c. In terms of culture or ethnicity, have you had positive experiences being here in the U.S.?
  - d. How did you come to know what career you want to pursue?
3. I will now ask you questions about how it is to be Filipino American.
  - a. How do you feel about the Philippines? About being away from the Philippines? About Filipinos in the U.S.? About Filipinos in the Philippines?
  - b. What are the parts of you that identify with the Philippines?
  - c. How do you feel about the U.S.? About living in the U.S.? About people in the U.S.
  - d. What are the parts of you that identify with the U.S.? How have you changed living here?
  - e. What does being Filipino-American mean to you?

## Appendix E

### Interview Guide

1. Tell me the story of how you or your family came to the United States.
  - a. What were the reasons for leaving the Philippines?
  - b. How was life for you or your family when they arrived in the U.S.?
2. Tell me, in detail, about your experiences both negative and positive in regard to your ethnic background.
  - a. Would you consider yourself indigenous, why, or why not?
3. Tell me, in detail, about both positive and negative experiences you have living here in the United States.
  - a. How do you cope with negative experiences?
  - b. How do you feel about the U.S.?
    - i. About living in the U.S.?
      1. About people in the U.S.
  - c. What are the parts of you that identify with the U.S.?
    - i. How have you changed living here?
4. Tell me, in detail, about both positive and negative experiences you have within Filipino-American community?
  - a. How do you feel the Filipinx-American community differs from the Filipino community?
  - b. How do you feel the Filipinx-American community is the same as the Filipino community?
  - c. How do you feel Filipinx-American culture differs from Filipino culture?
  - d. How do you feel Filipinx-American culture is the same as Filipino culture?
  - e. Did you participate in a Filipinx-American student organization?
    - i. How do you feel about Filipinx-American student organizations?
5. How do you feel about the Philippines?
  - a. About being away from the Philippines?
    - i. About Filipinos in the U.S.?
      1. About Filipinos in the Philippines?
6. What are the parts of you that identify with the Philippines?
7. What does being Filipinx-American mean to you?

## Appendix F

### Permission to Use Interview Guide

**Theresa Joyce Arocena**

April 24, 2020 at 3:37 PM

TA

Request for Permission to Use Interview Guide - On both sides of the hyphen: Exploring the Fi... [Details](#)

To: ttuason@unf.edu, Cc: Katherine Lewis

Hello,

My name is Theresa Arocena. I am a senior Communications student at Dominican University of California. I am doing a senior project about Filipinx-American identity through an indigenous lens. I would like to request permission to use the interview guide from your publication (On both sides of the hyphen: Exploring the Filipino-American identity) in my research.

Thank you for considering this request. I look forward to hearing back from you soon.

Sincerely,  
Theresa Arocena  
Pronouns: She/Her/Hers  
Communications and Media Studies '20  
English, Graphic Design and Leadership Minor  
Dominican University of California

<https://theresajoycearocen.wixsite.com/tarocena>

**Tuason, Tes** 

April 24, 2020 at 5:37 PM

TT

Re: Request for Permission to Use Interview Guide - On both sides of the hyphen: Exploring th... [Details](#)

To: Theresa Joyce Arocena, Cc: Katherine Lewis

Dear Theresa,

Yes, of course, you can use the interview guide for Filipino Americans. That would be an honor. As it is published, please just make sure to cite the source that was published in the Journal of Counseling Psychology, okay?

Good luck in your study! I am happy you are pursuing research on Filipino Americans.

Warm regards to you.

Dr. Tuason  
*Tes Tuason, Ph.D.*  
Professor and Clinical Director  
Licensed Psychologist PY 7275  
Clinical Mental Health Counseling  
Public Health, BCOH, University of North Florida  
tel no. 620-1611; email: [ttuason@unf.edu](mailto:ttuason@unf.edu)  
[www.unf.edu/bio/n00174682](http://www.unf.edu/bio/n00174682)  
CMHC Facebook: @UNFCMHC

[See More](#) from Theresa Joyce Arocena