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# ON FILIPINX: WHO GETS TO NAME WHOM?\*



*Michael Joseph Viola*

Growing up during the late 1980s and early 1990s, my immigrant mom would at times confuse her gender pronouns. I would at times say to her impatiently, “I am a ‘he’” or “Susan is a ‘she.’” My mom’s native language is Filipino, which does not have gender specific pronouns. For example, the Filipino word for sibling is “kapatid,” which is interchangeably used for “brother” or “sister.” While I did not always see it this way as a youth, I now understand that navigating the Filipino culture—its linguistic practices and its history of struggle—has provided me with an important ontology, a way of being and seeing in this country. For instance, as a professor in California’s Bay Area, it feels familiar, if not like a homecoming of sorts, when my students articulate their preferred gender pronouns in my classes as they normalize more inclusive learning environments for transgender and gender-queer classmates of color. What other ways can the culture of my mother’s homeland assist in not only navigating but more so transforming the deeply engrained hierarchies of racialized-gendered capitalism? What other forms of collective intelligence informed by struggle can the wisdom of our ancestors proffer so that we can participate in the deconstruction of a settler and (neo)colonial architecture that this country is built upon while co-creating a new, more peaceful world?

These are some of the questions I am exploring in my book, currently titled *v*. In this work in progress, I argue that the descendants of colonial subjects from the Philippines occupy both a peculiar and powerful place in this country. As a racialized formation, Filipino/as in this country have been instrumental to the development of U.S. society—from agribusiness to healthcare to our educational systems—yet we have been peripheralized in

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\* Thank you to Donna Denina and Jill Mangaliman for their insights shared here and informed by their activist commitments that I have the privilege of uplifting in this short piece.

such sites and a broader national consciousness. As a result, we are often disregarded as agents of transformative change. Meanwhile, our unique histories, experiences, and aspirations for the future too often have been defined by others, labeled as “Little Brown Brothers” at the turn of the 20th century and more recently as “Junior Partners” to White folks in the reproduction of Black suffering.<sup>1</sup> It is in this peripheralized place that U.S.-born children of Filipino/as are redefining themselves as Filipinx.



*Activists with the Third World Resistance coalition blockading the Oakland, California Federal Building on January 15, 2015 in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. Photo by Sunshine Velasco via @sunshinevelascoimages.*

The move to Filipinx follows the example set forth by their Latino/a counterparts who in the early 2000s coined *Latinx* for a variety of reasons not limited to: a rejection of the gender binary reproduced in the Spanish language; signification of a shared pan-ethnic identity; and to represent a more fluid, multifaceted border-crossing identity.<sup>2</sup> Shortly after the appearance of *Latinx*, the term *Filipinx* emerged largely from a U.S.-based context in the mid to late 2010s, circulating in social media accounts and online posts of LGBTQI+ artists, activists, allies, and academics. While its intent has been a linguistic expression of inclusion and solidarity with queer, transgender, and gender non-conforming

<sup>1</sup> The first Governor-General of the Philippines and later President of the United States, William Howard Taft is recognized as popularizing the term, “Little Brown Brother,” in describing the people of the Philippines at the onset of the Philippine American War. Black intellectual Frank Wilderson in his ambitious manuscript, *Afropessimism*, plots an immutable color line where Blackfolk are structural antagonists to White people and all other non-Black people of color. Wilderson refers to non-Black folks of color as “junior partners.” See: Frank Wilderson, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2020).

<sup>2</sup> See: Ed Morales, *Latinx: The New Force in American Politics and Culture* (London and New York: Verso, 2018).

(QTGNC) individuals and especially youth, the use of both Latinx and Filipinx have not been widely embraced beyond U.S. borders or outside campuses of higher education. A recent Pew Research Center study reports that only 23% of U.S. adults who self-identify specifically as Latino are familiar with the term Latinx and only 3% use it to describe their own identity.<sup>3</sup> While a similar study has not yet been conducted focusing on the use of Filipinx, it is fair to assume that it is less accepted considering that a substantial segment of Filipino American voters supported Trump in the 2020 election and his administration's perspicuous record of anti-transgender and anti-LGBTQI+ policies.<sup>4</sup> A critique of rightist ideological tendencies entrenched within the Filipino American community and its dangerous consequences for trans and queer youth is an urgent endeavor that is beyond the scope of what I can offer here.

My intention in this short piece is to offer further insight as to why there is opposition to Filipinx for different political reasons that deserve our careful attention. Many radical activists and Filipino intellectuals, including renowned critical theorist, E. San Juan, do not embrace the turn to Filipinx. By no means is such a position grounded in resistance to a project of inclusion for those who are transgender, genderqueer, or non-binary. Rather, such a response is in recognition of the assiduous and unequal cultural-linguistic exchanges undergirded by an enduring legacy of U.S. colonial relations in the Philippines.

I am in community with, and my scholarship is partially informed by, U.S.-based activists who are organizing in solidarity with a Philippine social movement active against imperialism, racism, heteropatriarchy, and other forms of structural violence. I appreciate how community organizers understand the necessity of meeting people where they are politically in order to build relationships, develop campaigns, and nurture the vitality of social movement praxis. In their efforts, activists and cultural workers have shared their challenges in building community and bridging generations with many second and third generation

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<sup>3</sup> Luis Noe-Bustamante, Lauren Mora, and Mark Hugo Lopez, "About One-in-Four U.S. Hispanics Have Heard of Latinx, but Just 3% Use it." Pew Research Center, August 11, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2020/08/11/about-one-in-four-u-s-hispanics-have-heard-of-latinx-but-just-3-use-it/>.

<sup>4</sup> "2020 Asian American Voter Survey," (September 15, 2020), which reports that 34% of the Filipino Americans surveyed indicated their support for Trump in the 2020 presidential election. <https://aapidata.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Slides-AAVS-2020-sep15.pdf>. In regards to the Trump administration's attacks on transgender and LGBTQI+ peoples, see The National Center for Transgender Equality. <https://transequality.org/the-discrimination-administration>

youth and college students openly identifying as Filipinx, while undocumented, migrant care workers, and Filipino elders feel alienated by this identification. For many who identify as Filipino, the source of their alienation is that the term Filipinx is not culturally and linguistically relevant. The term denies Filipino as a gender-neutral language reflecting the lived realities of people in the Philippines and throughout the global diaspora (without denying the brutalities of patriarchy, macho-fascism, anti-trans, and other forms of gendered violence expressed in that country).

Toward a shared objective of abolishing oppression in its various manifestations and in the spirit of comradeship, solidarity, and dialogue, I turn to E. San Juan's latest works. Through his writings, activists and scholars located in the U.S. who are engaged in political and knowledge projects with grassroots organizations and social movement formations in the Philippines can distill important precautions as well as questions worth pursuing. Ultimately, how we define ourselves, whether it is Filipinx, Filipino/a Americans, or anything else (will it be Filipino in the near future?) has implications for how we make sense of our past, what we seek to decolonize in the present, and with whom, as well as toward what, we will build in the future.

While E. San Juan's scholarly interventions span more than five decades and is highly regarded by radical intellectuals throughout the world, his work is not widely engaged by a new cadre of scholar activists within the academies of the United States.<sup>5</sup> *Racism and the Filipino Diaspora* (2017) is a collection of three essays, with insights spanning the time period of 1998 to 2017.<sup>6</sup> These essays elaborate upon his groundbreaking text, *Racism and Cultural Studies* (2002), where he examines Filipino racial formation through a global analytic. More specifically, E. San Juan draws upon an open and creative Marxist tradition to examine the racialized conditions facing a subjugated Filipino/a polity in the Philippines and dispersed throughout the world.<sup>7</sup> *Racism and the Filipino Diaspora* provides an important counter-narrative to the widely held perspective that Marxist thought treats race, gender, and culture as epiphenomenon in its analysis.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, the late Amiri Baraka describes E. San Juan as "one of the sharpest and most clarifying voices vis-à-vis Filipino/U.S. and Filipino/world relationships extant." Kenyan novelist, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, calls E. San Juan's theoretical interventions in the wide-ranging debates on cultural studies over the years as "both necessary and significant." See: E. San Juan, *Maelstrom Over the Killing Fields* (Quezon City: Pantas Publishing, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> E. San Juan, *Racism and the Filipino Diaspora: Essays in Cultural Politics* (Naga City: Ateneo de Naga University Press, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> E. San Juan, *Racism and Cultural Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

In this text, E. San Juan builds upon the idea that theory must always be useful for Filipino/as as opposed to making Filipino/as useful for theory. His historical materialist analysis proves prophetic in light of the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of anti-Asian violence in this country. E. San Juan's argument is emphatically clear: the racism expressed toward Asian immigrants and their descendants in North America is not new and its manifestations have always been fundamentally linked to the expansion, maintenance, and perceived threats to U.S. global hegemony. With a U.S. empire in drastic decline and the dangerous maneuvering and rise of authoritarian regimes throughout the globe, E. San Juan takes the position that the geopolitical role of the Philippines will continue to be a crucial site or a "first-line defense against perceived threats from China and others... from Asia up to the Middle East."<sup>8</sup> Thus, if we are to intervene in theory or in our activism to the heightened conditions of anti-Asian racism in this country, we must grasp the dialectic of racial and global antagonisms propelled by the totalizing imperatives of capitalist imperialism.

Building upon a tradition of Global South Marxism(s), E. San Juan demonstrates that the epistemic is useful in not only mapping the linkages between Filipino racial formation and an ongoing project of imperialism but to also problematize the "universality of American nationalism."<sup>9</sup> The move to Filipinx by U.S.-born immigrants is certainly a rejection of a dominant form of U.S. nationalism that has seen a resurgence exemplified in the refashioned credo of "America First" (used by the Ku Klux Klan during the 1920s) now seeking to unify a U.S. polity around a culture war platform of xenophobia, heteronormativity, and white supremacy. E. San Juan's *Maelstrom Over the Killing Fields* (2021) reminds the reader that other forms of nationalism exist, including an emancipatory form of belonging in the Philippines that has never been allowed to breathe outside of its own unique breed of despotism and conditions of foreign domination.

E. San Juan's *Maelstrom Over the Killing Fields* is organized around eight chapters and includes an especially insightful afterword by his life and thought partner, Delia Aguilar. E. San Juan centers the alter/native forms of knowledge production enfolded in the ongoing resistances to (neo)colonial and author-

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<sup>8</sup> San Juan, *Racism and the Filipino Diaspora*, 57.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

itarian regimes in the Philippines. His position is that a people's struggle in the Philippines offers an important curriculum for the world to learn from with its orientation toward socialism, science, and solidarity; motivation to end foreign rule; and mobilization for the material and social betterment of a broad sector of subaltern peoples. The realities of a people in the Philippines persistent in their struggles for sovereignty is why the use of Latinx is not compatible for Filipinx. Specifically, Latino/a, and by extension, Latinx, does not seek to identify with a nation but rather identifies a disparate people located within the U.S. who share a common language and cultural ties to the region of Latin America. The term Filipino is an identification with the Philippine nation. Thus, there are implications for Filipino/x/as located within the United States. Specifically, what is our relationship for those within the United States to the historic and ongoing struggles taking place in the Philippines? What needs further clarification is the relationship between a Filipinx collective identity being enunciated within the United States and an anti-colonial sense of belonging, or what E. San Juan (per Antonio Gramsci) describes as a "national popular" that persists in the Philippines. Does Filipinx (dis)identify with such a project?

I appreciated reading Barrett, Hanna, and Palomar's recent essay, "In Defense of the X," where the authors discuss the politics of naming and the potentials of Filipinx in centering "an evolving nomenclature which more deeply reflects the lived experiences" of queer, trans, and non-binary peoples of Philippine descent.<sup>10</sup> I look forward to further scholarship that elaborates how many people who identify with the "X" in the U.S. and the Philippines see Filipinx representing an "overarching demand for dignity, rights, and humanity for LGBTQI+ people that are currently being undermined through the structures that shape our society."<sup>11</sup> We must never forget that the enunciations of activist subjects who are bravely renaming themselves and their world also require collective organization, a social force behind it for such demands to become reality. In this light, I was surprised that in their respective analysis, Barrett et al. make no mention of the transnational activist response to the murder of transgender

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<sup>10</sup> Kay Ulanday Barrett, Karen Buenavista Hanna, and Anang Palomar, "Centering Queer, Trans and Non-Binary Pilipina/x/os, Queer Vernacular, and the Politics of Naming," *Alon: Journal for Filipinx American and Diasporic Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2 (July 2021): 125-148. Gratitude to Valerie Francisco-Menchavez for sharing their article with me at our Critical Filipino Studies Collective (CFSC) retreat.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.



Filipina, Jennifer Laude, by U.S. Marine, Lance Cpl. Joseph Scott Pemberton, superbly documented by P.J. Raval in his documentary film, *Call Her Ganda* (2018)<sup>12</sup>.

The Laude murder and aftermath offers a case in point to the intertwinement of anti-trans violence and U.S. neocolonialism on the other side of freedom in the Philippines. On the night of October 11, 2014, Pemberton, who was stationed in the islands for joint military exercises, met Laude at a nightclub and together they left for a motel room. After discovering that Laude was transgender, Pemberton choked her and forced her head into a toilet bowl until she drowned. Pemberton was found guilty of homicide and was sentenced to serve time in a large Philippine prison. Yet, in deference to the longstanding Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) between the U.S. and the Philippines, Pemberton was detained in a private air-conditioned cell at a special facility inside a Philippine military headquarters. After serving less than six years, Pemberton was placed aboard a U.S. military cargo plane and flown out of the Philippines as he received an absolute pardon from Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. The attorney of the Laude family, Virginia Lacsua Suarez, was quoted in *The New York Times* responding to the Philippine court order and Duterte's pardon of Pemberton: "It shows that the U.S. looks down on us, that the U.S. does not even respect our laws." Suarez continues, "This [case] should give us a lesson that the U.S. has no respect for our sovereignty."<sup>13</sup>

The grassroots women's organization, GABRIELA, was at the forefront of this struggle articulating global demands of justice for Jennifer Laude, all the while making visible how anti-trans violence is intertwined with a history of U.S. militarism in the Philippines. Not only did Barrett et al. elide the important contributions of GABRIELA in propelling this campaign throughout the world, they inferred that GABRIELA youth in the Philippines enact a form of "trans-exclusionary" feminism.<sup>14</sup> I spoke with the current chairperson of GABRIELA Seattle, Jill Mangaliman, as well as its founder, Donna Denina. Denina explains, "I can't speak to what was said by the GABRIELA youth in the Philippines. Just like in any organization, there can be members

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<sup>12</sup> *Call Her Ganda*, directed by P.J. Raval (Unravel Pictures, 2018).

<sup>13</sup> Corinne Redfern, "He Killed A Transgender Woman in the Philippines. Why Was He Freed?" *New York Times*, September 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/17/magazine/philippines-marine-pardon-duterte.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Barrett et al., "Centering Queer, Trans and Non-Binary Pilipina/x/os," 143.



who are not exposed to queer politics and certainly transphobic comments can be made. Yet, as a political organization, I can attest that GABRIELA is not an anti-trans organization.”<sup>15</sup> In reflecting upon their organizing practice, Mangaliman shared the challenges of organizing as a “queer, non-binary Filipino/a” and how too often a trans rights movement in the United States expresses little interest in “connecting transphobia and gender violence with the calls for liberation in the Philippines and the removal of the U.S. military on the islands.”<sup>16</sup> Drawing upon their activism, both Mangaliman and Denina point to how Filipino/x/a Americans must carefully consider the enduring colonial relations that endure between the United States and the Philippines and how the experiences, strategies, political directives, and visions, even in international organizing, can too often reproduce U.S. power relations. This asymmetrical relationship between the two countries is also the reason why English is the widely accepted language used in schools, popular culture, news, and government correspondence throughout the Philippine islands yet I, like so many of my Filipino American brethren and mga kapatid in this country, are unable to speak the native language of our ancestors. Activist interventions in dialogue with people of the Philippines and throughout the Global South ultimately call for greater discernment of who has the power to name whom, who gets to define whose justice.

I believe a generative dialogue can take place between those who reside in the “belly of the beast” and Filipino/as in the Philippines—two interconnected yet distinct histories and experiences. Two years ago, Delia Aguilar attempted to create such a space with E. San Juan to explore the emergence of Filipinx by convening an email exchange that included a diverse range of perspectives (educators, activists, and intellectuals) and places (United States, Canada, and in the Philippines). This dialogue was later published online and much of what I have written here, elaborates upon the analysis shared in that exchange.<sup>17</sup> Based upon the reactions and comments that were made on social media, the core arguments of that dialogue seemed to be dismissed by those

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Donna Denina on May 11, 2022.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Jill Mangaliman on May 11, 2022.

<sup>17</sup> Freedom Siyam, May Penuela, Charlie Samuya Veric, Jeffrey Cabusao, Michael Viola, and Delia Aguilar, initiated by Delia D. Aguilar with the collaboration of E. San Juan, Jr., “A conversation on ‘Filipinx’ and its vicissitudes,” *Bulatlat* (October 5, 2020). [https://www.bulatlat.com/2020/10/05/a-conversation-on-filipinx-and-its-vicissitudes/?fbclid=IwARIfKwzX9qkmuIdbPvacc8vgRNjxkHmbxLPUBzh\\_UIVfmMQFbXeQx3Q5BDM](https://www.bulatlat.com/2020/10/05/a-conversation-on-filipinx-and-its-vicissitudes/?fbclid=IwARIfKwzX9qkmuIdbPvacc8vgRNjxkHmbxLPUBzh_UIVfmMQFbXeQx3Q5BDM)

residing in the United States. Rather than engaging the arguments presented, much attention was directed upon queries of representation. More precisely, Filipinx Americans seemed more invested in deciphering whether or not gender non-conforming or trans individuals were represented in the dialogue, eliding an engagement with the analysis presented, including the insights of Filipino intellectual, Charlie Veric, who explains,

Filipino and Filipinx are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they both need to flourish. But if one cancels the other, then that's where the problem begins. Filipino is founded on identification with the Philippine nation whereas Filipinx dis-identify themselves from the heteronormative and white supremacist American state. There's a crucial difference between identifying with a young Philippine nation and distancing oneself from the long imperial history of the US. So, if we force Filipinx on Filipinos in the Philippines, that creates more trouble than needed. Give the Filipino nation its time in the sun. Let it grow and mature first. Then we can start denying it. One cannot deconstruct what is not fully constructed.<sup>18</sup>

To be clear, I embrace the powerful intentions for those who self-identify as Filipinx. I will continue to use it as the name uplifts an emerging vision and lived reality, particularly those in the United States that do not fit the binaries of gender and sexuality and face various forms of violence. I honor the fluidity of language recognizing that in our collective strategies to create a more just world, we must always be adaptive, inquisitive, and willing to embrace change. The world we seek to create will not come about in our naming alone, but also through the active struggles to realize the aspirations of women, genderqueers, and trans people inside the United States in solidarity with the peoples in the country of our mothers, and their mothers. E. San Juan's writing and the activism of GABRIELA continue to remind us that we must connect the myriad struggles that we face, wherever we may be located, to those bearing the most brutal marks of (ongoing) colonial relations. In light of the recent Philippine elections, where the son of a U.S.-supported dictator and daugh-

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<sup>18</sup> Siyam, et al., "A Conversation on 'Filipinx'"

ter of an autocrat claim the highest seats of power, perhaps the timeless Filipino cultural worker in the U.S., Carlos Bulosan, said it best,

Never forget your people, your country, wherever you go. Your greatness lies in them...Do not misuse your gift; apply it toward the safeguarding of our great heritage, the grandeur of our history, the realization of our great heroes' dream for a free and good Philippines.<sup>19</sup>

Building upon such a perspective and as a means to conclude, when I tell you that I'm Filipino American, I'm not negating Filipinx. I cite our geographies to highlight where my mother was born, to bring forward a culture of struggle that I have inherited from my ancestors; to clarify where we are surviving now, and to honor the greatness of a people whose dreams, if realized, can help us all to get free.

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<sup>19</sup> Quoted in San Juan, *Maelstrom*, 90.