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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

Tao Po: Finding Filipinx-/American Twitter

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in Asian American Studies

by

Manuel Demetrio De Leon

Thesis Committee:
Dr. Judy Tzu-Chun Wu
Dr. Dorothy Fujita-Rony
Dr. Isabela Seong Leong Quintana

2020

DEDICATION

Para sa pamilya ko, for my family

Para sa pamayanan ko, for my community

Para sa kapwa ko, for my people

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT OF THESIS	v
INTRODUCTION	1
Why Twitter?	7
Twitter Enclaves	9
Black Twitter	10
Asian Twitter	11
Filipino Twitter	14
Filipinxness	18
Transnational Tensions	21
Performativity of Filipinxness	23
Social Movements	26
Conclusion	33
Bibliography	36
Appendix	40

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Tao Po: Finding Filipinx-/American Twitter

by

Manuel Demetrio De Leon

Master of Arts in Asian American Studies

University of California, Irvine 2020

Professor Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, Chair

This project utilizes the online platform of Twitter to investigate the diasporic identity formation of 1.5 and 2nd generation Filipinx-/Americans. The socially constructed phenomena of “Filipino Twitter” serves as an abstracted stage where Filipinxs collaborate, (re)negotiate, and contest the varying interpretations of “Filipinxness.” Select tweets by and interviews with active contributors on Twitter reveal a collective conversation on the complexities of the Filipinx identity. Navigating through the overlapping uncertainties and anxieties around authenticity and belonging, these dialogues indicate a burgeoning consciousness distinct to this generation.

Introduction

“You’re not Filipino enough. You’re Filipino when.... You’re not any less Filipino because....” These statements are used by many within the Filipinx-/American (Fil-/Am) community to measure one’s “Filipinoness.”¹ Since moving here from the Philippines at the age of eight, similar statements have been uttered against me by other Filipinos and *by* me to fulfill and enforce an idea of being “Filipino.” These remarks have been used by members of the Fil-/Am community to invalidate claims to a Filipino heritage and identity. The comments measure one another’s proximity to an idealized version of the Filipino culture and demand performances of cultural authority. Whether it is through language proficiency, cultural practices, or immigration narratives, certain criteria are utilized to determine an individual’s self-proclamation of “authenticity” to the Filipino identity.² These community standards of Filipinoness create a sense of insecurity among Fil-/Ams about their identity. These evaluations raise the question, “Are Filipinos less authentic for not having particular traits?” These exchanges serve to discipline diasporic Filipinos. This widely used process of gatekeeping the Filipino identity by Filipinos draws boundaries around what it means to be “Filipino. “

¹ Derived from “Filipino-/American” coined by E.J.R. David, Filipinx-/American is an inclusive identity used to include both the Filipino and Filipinx American identities. The contemporary construction of “Filipinx” within the U.S. diaspora utilizes the “x” to render the gendered “o/a” into an inclusive term for gender non-binary individuals. Considering the multiple ways individuals identify themselves, the term “Filipinx” is more so associated with the U.S. based diaspora while “Filipino” refers to those in the Philippines. In the interest of brevity, “Filipinoness” will be used encompass the Filipino identity.

² Emily Ignacio, *Building Diaspora : Filipino Community Formation on the Internet* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 208.

During the October 2019 celebration of Filipino American History Month (FAHM), this on-going conversation revolving around cultural authenticity materialized in multiple platforms but most prominently on the social media platform of Twitter. Tweets, or brief 280-character messages that are published on Twitter, questioned Fil-/Am involvement, and criticized the efforts of Fil-/Ams who organized to celebrate their Filipino identity. The messages mainly targeted the Friendship Games, the largest Filipino-American event held each year at California State University, Fullerton. The frustration came predominantly from those living in the Philippines, who interpreted diasporic Filipinos, particularly Fil-/Ams, as having a superficial involvement with Filipino culture. The tweets critiqued the cursory and repetitive conversations that Fil-/Ams have about their Filipino identity. Observing these interactions between Filipinos in the Philippines and those in the U.S. converging on a single platform made me interested in Twitter as a site for hosting conversations within a fractured imagined community.³

This project comes at an interesting moment for the Filipinx community. Filipinos, both in the Philippines and abroad, are postcolonial subjects of Spanish imperialism as well as subjects of ongoing U.S. neo-colonialism. As a result of this layering of imperial histories, discussions of Filipinx identity recognize the traumatic after-effects of colonization. Bearing in mind the centuries of oppressive violence, the communal grief for all that has been lost and stolen, and the anxiety of an uncertain future stemming from the insidious impact of colonialism, the current discourse builds from the previous generation's racial melancholia

³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1991; repr., London Verso, 2016), 256.

and evokes the contradiction of being postcolonials within an extremely powerful country.⁴ Being a postcolonial subject does not mean that the effects of colonial rule are gone since the imparted trauma from previous generations persists to this day. Through the proclamation of “benevolent assimilation,” the U.S. introduced an Americanized education system, political ideals, religious institutions, and popular culture in the Philippines to replace the Spanish. These institutions, along with the Philippine’s colonized status, facilitated migration and some forms of adaptation by Filipinos to the U.S. Nevertheless, clear racial hierarchies emerged both in the Philippines and in the U.S. In addition, a fracture emerged between Filipinos in the Philippines and in the U.S. While the former might have greater claim to cultural authenticity (although Filipino culture has evolved over the course of two major imperial powers), the latter gained greater access to U.S. economic opportunities and everyday exposure to American culture. Fil-/Ams are certainly not equal to white Americans, but they tend to hold an advantage compared to Filipinos back home. Considering the neo-colonial relationship the United States has cultivated with the Philippines and the Filipino people, comparing the U.S. based diaspora across the transpacific reconfigures these colonized places and teases out the complexities in this relationship between Filipinx Americans and Filipinos. These postcolonial subjectivities continue to define and redefine what it means to be a Filipinx, a complex and enigmatic identity.⁵

⁴ David L Eng and Shinhee Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation : On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 232.

⁵ Yen Le Espiritu, *Home Bound : Filipino American Lives across Cultures, Communities, and Countries* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 282.

Coming from the perspective of a contemporary scholar, a millennial, and a techie, I consider Twitter an intriguing site to examine and research. As society steadily moves online and becomes more digitized, the processes of identity formation shift accordingly. Facilitated through social media platforms, online places have become primary sites of collaboration, negotiation, conflict, and tension. Due to its popularity as well as its significant role in processing the current zeitgeist, Twitter encapsulates the here and now. My own engagement on Twitter is limited to consuming the different ideas and topics produced, but what drew my attention was the active Fil-/Am presence. Twitter provided a unique opportunity to explore the ways Filipinx made sense of their diasporic identity and privilege as a U.S. subject, even as they shared commonalities with Filipinos in the Philippines. On a personal note, I conducted this research to further participate in my community and navigate the processing of my Filipinx identity.

At the root of it all, my project seeks to understand how 1.5 and 2nd generation Fil-/Ams see themselves, present themselves, and imagine themselves. Working within the framework of belonging, I look into how Fil-/Ams of this generation formulate spaces both physically and metaphorically as a means of co-creating a sense of self.⁶ The generative space of social media functions as a critical repository of collective memories for the current generation. Twitter offers a virtual space to explore what it means to be Filipinx in America. Due to the limited availability of cultural education within communal and academic structures outside of concentrated Fil-/Am locations, many Fil-/Ams turn to alternative sites to (re)learn their Filipino identity. Building from established scholarship

⁶ Theodore S Gonzalves, *The Day the Dancers Stayed : Performing in the Filipino/American Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 215.

(Ocampo, 2016; Aguila 2012; Gonzalvez 2010; Ignacio 2005; Espiritu 2003), I place the formation of Filipino Twitter alongside the genealogy of Filipinx alternate space-making.⁷ Understanding the dialectic relationship between cultural production and consumption – what gets produced and consumed– reflects the dynamic nature of social media; a place for individual memories to be transcribed into the collective consciousness. As postcolonial subjects living within the United States, the Filipinx American diaspora’s position enables critique of the postcolonial space of both the Philippines and the United States. This postcolonial project was borne not only out of the trauma from colonization, but also through the collectivized envisioning of a generation of Fil-/Ams’ possible futures. Through Twitter, Fil-/Ams are making sense of their dislocation, airing out their anxieties on identity, and finding belonging.

To capture the nuanced voices and experiences of Filipinx-/America, I conducted podcast interviews with eight active contributors on Twitter to understand how they explore their self-identity and Filipinx collective identity. These conversations were conducted partly in-person but mostly through video conference. Although the substance of these conversations was consistent, conversations flowed more easily when conducted in-person. Owing to the peculiarities of video calling, the dialogue occasionally deviated off-topic or were interrupted. These factors aside, each participant still conveyed important insights. Those selected reflected the wide range of Filipinx-/American users on Twitter. All my contributors are situated in the United States, and all were explicitly chosen because of their involvement and participation in the Fil-/Am community. I took into consideration their geographic location in the U.S., generational status, gender identification, class, and

⁷ Espiritu, *Home Bound : Filipino American Lives across Cultures, Communities, and Countries*, 282.

online presence. Living in places ranging from California, Seattle, and parts of the Midwest such as Chicago and Michigan, the geographic placement of my peers shapes the ways in which they come to terms with their individual and ethnic identity. Their locations coupled with their self-described middle-class background influence their exposure to other Fil-/Ams and opportunities to learn about Filipinx/American identity. The respondents and I both referred to generational status as a benchmark for cultural proximity to the homeland. And, gender identification contributes to how they understand their Filipino identity, as evident by the various conversation threads that they engage with and how they interact on Twitter. I consider my respondents as my peers and colleagues since we are all in our early to mid-20s.

Recording these interviews on a podcast platform provides the opportunity to share our conversation with a larger audience. The dialogue format gave us a chance to navigate complex topics in a natural way, similar to the Filipino *kwentuhan* (otherwise known as storytelling, talking, and/or gossiping). To keep the conversations candid, I incorporated relatively open-ended questions to encourage the respondents to speak on their experiences and to navigate Filipino Twitter from their own understandings.⁸

I also supplemented these interviews with a digital ethnography of Filipino Twitter.⁹ Doing so provides a snapshot of how Fil-/Ams utilize Twitter to explore their individual and collective identities. I created a website (sites.uci.edu/taopo) to feature the podcast interviews and to foreground particular themes that emerged in Filipino Twitter.

⁸ Appendix

⁹ A digital ethnography adapts ethnographic methods of data-gathering to study online communities and cultures through online-mediated social interactions

This paper first contextualizes the emergence of Filipino Twitter through the already developed digital enclaves of Black and Asian Twitter.¹⁰ I then explore the various aspects of online Filipino identity. From these individual accounts of Filipino Twitter, I identified four main themes, which I explore in this paper: what constitutes Filipinxness, transnational tensions between the Philippines and the diaspora, the performativity of the culture, and how Twitter fosters political activism and forms social movements. I conclude with commentary on the current and future possibilities of the Twitter platform.

“Why Twitter?”

A recurring question asked by my interviewees and peers is, “Why Twitter?” The immediate response that comes to mind is that Twitter is a formative tool in documenting this present moment. A microblogging site and social networking service, the platform has produced a timeline that archives the accumulated thoughts and trends from its users. While brainstorming for my M.A. thesis project, I investigated various generative spaces for collective deliberations regarding Filipinx-/American identity. Initially, I envisioned a broad study of social media and its impact on the identity formation of Filipinx-/Americans. Considering the popularity of Twitter, the diversity in its user base, and its quasi-role as a public forum, I became intrigued by how this site reveals and shapes the coming of age for Filipinx-/Americans.

Acclimating to the platform has revealed various norms and nuances within Twitter’s culture. The platform employs brevity, validity, and feedback to facilitate overlapping conversations from an extensive number of voices. Instead of a physical venue

¹⁰ “Digital enclaves” is a term used as an online rendering of physical ethnic enclaves.

for a meticulously programmed dialogue, Twitter 'hosts' these 'communities' to foster spontaneous conversations.

Twitter is a generational, inherently performative, and privileged platform. Existing online, entry is determined by access to the internet, the available technology, and online competency. For that reason, Twitter tends to attract contributors whose ages range from 19 to 30, who are primarily from the U.S., and who are of middle to upper class backgrounds.¹¹ These barriers to entry are not necessarily inaccessible to those outside of the U.S. but are indicative of the advantages of being in the U.S. As such, the dynamic exchanges on the platform aggregate a snapshot of contemporary U.S. society through "tweets"; unfiltered and/or composed thoughts arbitrarily distributed for a general audience. In addition, Twitter's placement on the global landscape allows it to broadcast American culture throughout the world. Moreover, the participation of international users from the Philippines allows them to speak back to those based in the U.S. The platform's ability to attract a global audience facilitates a transnational exploration of the Filipino identity.¹² This global dialogue between Filipinos and Filipinx Americans challenges the myth of a monolithic Filipino identity. While Fil-/Ams seek to learn and perform their homeland culture, Filipinos from the Philippines dispute the authenticity of Fil-/Ams. Bearing in mind the history of U.S. occupation in the Philippines and the ongoing presence of U.S. cultural influence, Twitter exchanges reveal the ways Filipinos and Filipinx Americans differ in their interpretation of Filipino identity.

¹¹ Andrew Perrin, "Social Media Usage: 2005-2015" (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, October 8, 2015).

¹² Lisa Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, vol. 23 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 248.

Twitter Enclaves

Filipino Twitter did not emerge within a vacuum. Locating the site of Filipino and Filipino interaction requires a contextualization of community formation through (and adjacent to) the previous spaces generated on Twitter, namely Black and Asian Twitter. In addition, Filipino Twitter often replicates real life communities, emulating similar interconnected relations and group cohesion. I interpret these racial and ethnic designations to categorize the ever-shifting network of individuals who engage in dialogue and community building.¹³

In the absence of corporeal markers online, the digital enclaves such as “Black Twitter” and “Asian Twitter” established themselves as racially-based platforms.¹⁴ These concentrated userbases reflect only a fraction of the Twitter platform as a whole. What separates these spaces from the broader Twitter discourse is the display of cultural knowledge that is crowdsourced through user tweets and the implementation of racial designations to affirm identity.¹⁵ While these identifiers might be interpreted as exclusionary, the boundaries defined are not restrictive. Operating more like a semi-permeable membrane, these boundaries facilitate or limit access for users to congregate.

The loose assemblages of individuals and their Twitter conversation affect the external perceptions of these communities and shape their internal development. Through the act of distinguishing themselves, these marginalized communities can (re)gain their

¹³ Amy Shields Dobson, Brady Robards, and Nicholas Carah, *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media.*, 1st ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), XXVIII, 304.

¹⁴ Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet*, 248.

¹⁵ Sarah Florini, *Beyond Hashtags : Racial Politics and Black Digital Networks* (New York: New York University Press, 2019), 288.

agency to render themselves visible while simultaneously holding a place for themselves to be in community.

Black Twitter

Black Twitter demonstrates the cultural adaptation created through the Twitter social network. In the absence of corporeal signifiers, the performance of racial identities and cultural knowledge mark group inclusion. Through the use of tweets, hashtags, and signifiers, the performativity produced within this abstracted plane functions as a discursive, public performance of Black identity. Adopting this virtual space allows a collective of active Black-identified users to come together to form a virtual community. This is not to say that Black Twitter fully represents the Black community. Not all Black-identified users are on Black Twitter. Also, not everyone on Black Twitter is Black-identified. Tweets on Blackness tend to address the commonalities of shared experiences and foster interactions online.¹⁶ In essence, Black Twitter becomes a digital counternarrative source, challenging the white-dominated mainstream culture in the U.S. Commentary on racial identity and politics generated from Black Twitter is often broadcast throughout Twitter. Black Twitter is not the definitive source of commentary and critique when it comes to race in America, but because of the platform's prevalence, sensitive racial and interracial dialogue has been pushed to the forefront of contemporary discourse.

Black Twitter paved the way for other digital enclaves to appear on Twitter. Like Black Twitter, Filipino Twitter uses a racial/ethnic designation to attract particular users interested in exploring identity and racial politics. Being engaged with, influenced by, and

¹⁶ Meredith Clark, *Black Twitter 101: What is it? Where did it originate? Where is it headed?*, interview by Whitelaw Reid, November 28, 2018, <https://news.virginia.edu/content/black-twitter-101-what-it-where-did-it-originate-where-it-headed>.

in solidarity with Black lives, Fil-/Ams engage in conversations about Afro-Indigenous marginalization, the perpetuation of colonial mentality, anti-Blackness as well as immigrant rights.¹⁷ Fil-/Am Tweeter, Clarissa Mae Calimbas recognizes the interconnectivity between the Black and Filipino experiences by affirming that, “Yes, both Filipino and Black twitter speak to their experiences, colorism, the media, but I also believe Black Twitter influenced Filipino Twitter in a way. Like Black Twitter sparked #blackgirlmagic and it made me reflect on my experiences of what does that look like as a Filipina? Does Pinay girl magic exist? And then I remembered Pinayism.”¹⁸ A digital platform produced from activism, Black Twitter has been and continues to be a formative site for the movement against racial inequities and towards justice. While not dependent on Black Twitter, Filipino Twitter has been affected by the topics and conversations produced from Black Twitter and continues to be influenced by the platform.

Asian Twitter

Asian Twitter functions and is conceptualized differently from Black Twitter. While common experiences bring individual users together under the category of Asian American, the diverse narratives of each ethnic community make it more difficult to construct a shared identity. What distinguishes these two platforms from one another is that Black Twitter represents a more established racialized identity compared to Asian Twitter. Given that the Asian American category is a recent construction dating back to the

¹⁷ E.J.R. David, *Brown Skin, White Minds : Filipino -/ American Postcolonial Psychology*. (Information Age Publishing, Incorporated, 2013), 328.

¹⁸ Clarissa Mae Calimbas, interview by author, *Tao Po: Finding Filipinx-/American Twitter*, March 11, 2020.; Developed by Dr. Allyson Tintiangco-Cubales in 1995, pinayism explores the notion of a radical Pinay sisterhood that connects the global and local to the personal stories of PINAY struggle, survival, service, sisterhood, and strength to emotionally, mentally, physically, politically, and spiritually uplift the lives of pinays.

late 1960s, disagreement on who belongs and who is considered Asian American still persists. Created from the need to establish a pan-ethnic coalition, the categorization of “Asian American” is intrinsically a socio-political construction but has since been misrepresented as a biological and racial reality.¹⁹ The relative coherence of Black identity, compared to Asian American identity, is due to the systemic and institutional structures from slavery which erased ethnic differences among African Americans through incarceration and the pervasiveness of anti-Blackness. The deliberate erasure of African identities, along with how Blackness has been racialized, resulted in the formation of a more homogenized diasporic African identity to form in the United States. Asian Twitter, however, is splintered between the various ethnic communities and identities labeled underneath the broad demographic of Asian America. Aside from ethnic diversity, Asian Americans are also stratified by other factors such as class, immigration status, and sexuality.

In comparison to Black Twitter, Filipino Twitter users interviewed for this study have noted the instability of Asian Twitter’s presence and function. Serving as a transient space for expressing outrage about Asian American issues, Asian Twitter has been described as temporary and fluctuating, reacting to hot button issues that impact Asian Americans.²⁰ This space does not convey the lived experiences of Asian Americans to outsiders, but it is a manifestation of the multitude of voices reacting to the experiences and representation of Asian Americans within U.S. society. And although the outcry from

¹⁹ Pawan Dhingra and Robyn Magalit Rodriguez, *Asian America : Sociological and Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 224.

²⁰ Lori Kido Lopez, *Asian American Media Activism : Fighting for Cultural Citizenship* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 272.

Asian Twitter has led to shifts in the portrayal of Asian Americans, the amount of effort focused on this issue diverts consideration of other pressing topics for the Asian American community. Asian Twitter is too limiting and is reflective of the racialization of Asian Americans as a monolithic group. Although a similar argument could be made in regards to Black Twitter, the difference in how the social communities are facilitated distinguishes the two. To incorporate the multitude of people, cultures, and identities that are related to “Asian America” is complicated. As a result, the limited and momentary nature prevents Asian Twitter from establishing itself as a social community similar to Black Twitter.²¹

Some Fili-/Ams subscribe to Asian Twitter because of their close association and/or identification to the Asian American identity; however, Fil-/Am’s relationship to Asian Twitter and Asian American identity remains mixed. Many refer to the ongoing efforts to include Filipinx into the Asian American body politic. Others emphasize the disconnect to Asian American identity, characterizing Asian Twitter as a primarily East Asian space for Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans.²² These critics point to the lack of commonality between these groups and Filipinx communities, due to the impact of Spanish colonization and U.S. formal empire.²³ Regardless of the reason, Filipinx-/American inclusion into the Asian American enclave on Twitter, parallels the complicated relationship Fil-/Ams experience when associating with Asian America and the complexities of racialization.

²¹ Deen Freelon et al., “How Black Twitter and Other Social Media Communities Interact with Mainstream News” (Miami, FL: Knight Foundation, 2018).

²² Anthony Christian Ocampo, Portrait Of: “The Latinos of Asia,” interview by Maria Hinojosa, Latino USA NPR, May 22, 2018.

²³ Anthony Christian Ocampo, *The Latinos of Asia : How Filipino Americans Break the Rules of Race* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2016), 272.

Filipino Twitter

On February 21, 2007, the tweet - "Looking for Filipino Twitter users" - marked the first instance of the phrase "Filipino Twitter" appearing on Twitter. Sent by user @mikoko, the term "Filipino Twitter" initially emerged as a categorization: an ethno-specific designation to reflect an individual's association to the Filipino identity. During the early years of Twitter's formation (2006 - 2010) and before the emergence of prominent digital enclaves, this label identified and located fellow Filipinos, both in the Philippines and in the diaspora.²⁴

Interestingly enough, the term shifted to encompass a marketing designation when digital advertisers used the handle of "Filipino Twitter" to sell products. Coinciding with the increasing popularity of Twitter, entrepreneurs primarily based in the Philippines utilized the term "Filipino Twitter" to specifically target a Philippines-based audience. The configuration of "Filipino Twitter" as a marketing designation notes the impact of digital marketing online but also speaks to the ways in which the "Filipino" identity has been and is continually constructed in multiple configurations. Having said that, many of the statistical reports concerning "Filipinos" on Twitter overwhelmingly emphasized Filipinos located within the Philippines. In contrast, research on Filipinx-/Americans is often relegated underneath the Asian American category. These two factors, the consolidation of Filipinx-/Americans under Asian American and the emphasis on Filipinos situated in the Philippines, obscures the Filipinx-/American community. The obfuscation is one of the factors leading Filipinx-/Americans to distinguish themselves from Asian Twitter and to make themselves more visible on Filipino Twitter. The existence of at least two audiences -

²⁴ Twitter Inc. "*#numbers*." Twitter, 14 Mar. 2011.

Filipinos in the Philippines as well as Fil-/Ams - reveal the subtle partitioning of Filipinos based on transnational tensions.

The expanded understanding of “Filipino Twitter” began to take hold once both modes of identification joined the lexicon of Twitter and Filipino users. Filipino Twitter slowly became a platform where more and more users began to use the term “Filipino Twitter” to reference the network of contacts they were personally connected to, regardless of where they were based physically. Users then applied the hashtag “#FilipinoTwitter ” to denote a Filipino audience and/or to draw attention from a Filipino audience. From this implementation, the use of “Filipino Twitter” became indicative of an emerging community of Filipino Twitter users. Similar to Black Twitter, Filipino Twitter gradually became a platform that reflects the physical communities it represents. While Filipino Twitter fulfills a similar role as Black Twitter in presenting the lived experiences of Fil-/Ams to an external audience, Filipino Twitter also allows Filipinxs to embody and reconnect with their Filipino heritage. Currently, Filipino Twitter aggregates and mediates numerous conversations and threads relating to Filipinos broadly.

Despite these examples of socio-cultural advocacy present within Filipino Twitter, there is still disagreement within the community concerning modes of online engagement. Active community organizer Tyrell Malonzo notes how, “there’s a bit of a divisiveness within the Fil-/Am Twitter community. I think we might all be on the same page, but the fact that you [still] have your green card jokes tend[s] to normalize how these systemic issues brought us [to the U.S.] and affected our conditions today.” The ‘green card jokes’ Tyrell mentioned is a persistent manifestation of the internalized racism, with more assimilated or American-born Filipinx pointing out their superiority compared to more

recent arrivals. These disparaging jokes, while not exclusive to the Filipino community, often rely on the negative caricature of foreign-born individuals as deceitful opportunists. This xenophobic characterization questions the legitimacies of an individual's belonging and maintains the longstanding alienation imposed on those deemed "different." He cautioned how, "in terms of the pursuit to liberation we're not all on the same page."²⁵ The differences in socio-economic, generational, and legal status amongst Filipinx shape political differences and articulations of identity. Activists and organizers who are aware of the potential reach and influence of Twitter have become disillusioned because of the prevalence of superficial tweets engaging in identity discourse for the sake of recognition. This tension echoes the frustration homeland Filipinos have against diasporic Filipinos. Ironically, as Filipinos situated in the Philippines assert cultural authority based on their "authenticity", Americanized Fil-/Ams assert their superiority through their proximity to citizenship and their distance from the Philippines. These authenticity battles between homeland and diasporic Filipinx, between more assimilated versus "fresh off the boat" Filipinos, between lighter versus darker Filipinx undermine the efforts to decolonize the Filipinx community.



²⁵ Tyrell Malonzo, interview by author, *Tao Po: Finding Filipinx-/American Twitter*, April 14, 2020.

In regard to aggregating the interactions and presence on Filipino Twitter, this poll conducted by a notable Filipino Twitter user and academic Anthony Ocampo (@anthonyocampo) attracted respondents from a sliver of the entirety of Filipino Twitter. Yet, it reveals insights as to who tends to be active on the platform. The overwhelming majority of users who participated in this poll attended college. From this majority, over half of the respondents claimed that they did not participate in their respective collegiate organizations. For these respondents, Filipino Twitter provides an important space to explore issues around their identities and engage with other Filipinos. In other words, Filipino Twitter steps in as a replacement for Pilipino collegiate and community organizations and Pilipino American cultural nights. Nearly half of Filipino Twitter users who responded to this poll were active in college clubs. For them, Twitter can serve as a continuation of their previous explorations or an extension of their in-person social and cultural networks. For both groups, their first interaction with the Filipinx culture, outside of their homes and apart from collegiate and community organizations, is through Twitter. The platform becomes a pocket space separate from the prevailing Twitter dialogue. It serves as a platform where Filipinos come together and interact, which sometimes leads to real-life interactions away from Twitter as well. Regardless of participation, this small snapshot provides an insight into the social-economic background of users on Filipino Twitter. As indicated by the minor percentage of respondents who did not attend college, the poll also indicates the class and privilege of Filipinx American users on Twitter.

Filipino Twitter acts as both a stage and an archive. As it stands, Filipino Twitter has no definitive boundaries and is interpreted in different ways depending on the user. The diverse narratives, perspectives, and understandings that appear on Filipino Twitter reveal

a picture of Filipinx-/America. Examining the ways respondents interpret Filipino Twitter suggests that their immigration narratives contextualize their cultural proximity and exposure to their Filipino heritage. The generational differences between 1.5 and 2nd generation respondents allow for a more nuanced conversation to interrogate the dislocation and subtle indoctrination due to U.S. assimilation and neo-colonialism of Filipinos in the Philippines.²⁶ From this dialogue, the differences between generations are indicated based on their position. Second generation Filipinxs come from the perspective of living in the U.S. with their immigrant parents serving as their link to the Philippines. One point five immigrants, however, possess the lived experience of inhabiting both the Philippines and the U.S. Out of my eight respondents, two of them who have immigrated from the Philippines spoke briefly on their experience interacting with social media in the motherland. For them, their interactions demonstrated the different values, commentaries, and humor between Filipinos in the Philippines and abroad. Contextualizing how Filipinoness is interpreted and formed provides a better understanding as to how and why Fil-/Ams turn to virtual spaces for cultural learning.

“Filipinxness”

I explored with my interview subjects the question of “Filipinxness” –what it is, who defines it, how it has been constructed, etc. Thinking back to these questions and conversations, when asked to define “Filipinxness,” most respondents had a notable reaction– nervous laughter, a big sigh, and/or contemplation. I recognize that this is a heavy question to ask directly and defining a complex concept and lived reality succinctly is

²⁶ 2nd generation immigrants are those born in the diaspora from immigrant parents, while 1.5 immigrants are those who immigrated during their childhood and/or adolescence.

a difficult process. What is telling, though, is that their responses and reactions reveal the anxieties around their understandings of identity. I recognize and empathize with this level of uncertainty. Addressing the idea of being Filipino necessitates an unpacking of many overlapping layers of trauma and history. This introspection is difficult without having the necessary language or structure to articulate that uncertainty.

One respondent provided an interesting understanding of Filipinxness by describing it as a “confused identity.” Born and raised in Philadelphia, Alyssa Geniza explained that reconciling with her Filipinxness was a process of mitigating the disconnect between the homeland culture and the diaspora.²⁷ For her, the confusion regarding her identity stems from the overwhelming effort to (re)learn the Philippines’ national culture and issues, all the while coming to terms with her diasporic dislocation. Lacking the knowledge and the language to articulate this dissociation, Alyssa inhabits a “disconnected” position, and experiences what David Eng and Shinhee Han describes as “racial dissociation.”²⁸ As a social mechanism, dissociation happens when the individual self-image is not reflective of how they are seen by others. To Alyssa, she is Filipina and claims that ethnic heritage, but a dissonance occurs when Alyssa compares herself to others and recognizes that, “these people look like me, these people share the same roots as me but at the same time, there’s a disconnect.... It creates a confused identity in my mind.”²⁹ Alyssa’s disconnect is a common sentiment among 2nd generation Filipinx-/Americans as the dissociation manifests from the ignorance and invalidity they feel regarding their Filipinx identity.³⁰ This process of

²⁷Alyssa Geniza, interview by author, *Tao Po: Finding Filipinx-/American Twitter*, April 10, 2020.

²⁸ Eng and Han, *Racial Melancholia, Racial Dissociation : On the Social and Psychic Lives of Asian Americans*, 232.

²⁹ Alyssa Geniza, interview by author, *Tao Po: Finding Filipinx-/American Twitter*, April 10, 2020.

³⁰ Ocampo, *The Latinos of Asia : How Filipino Americans Break the Rules of Race*, 272.

mitigation, as Alyssa shares, sometimes creates tension with regards to Filipinx identity, since claiming cultural identity is undermined by their insecurity regarding lack of cultural knowledge and physical distance from the Philippines.

Another respondent seeks to address this anxiety by discussing how she previously held metrics for evaluating authenticity before deciding that identity should be determined based on self-reflection. Having immigrated to the San Francisco Bay Area at the age of five, Sofia De Leon shared how her upbringing in the Philippines influenced how she interpreted the Filipino culture, “I think that if you are Filipino then you are Filipino, that’s it... I always thought that oh you can’t be Filipino if you don’t eat Filipino food. You’re not Filipino if you don’t know the language, you’re not -I hate those things but I also used to think those.”³¹ Her comment rejects the need to demonstrate cultural authenticity and instead legitimates individual claims regarding self-identity. When asked about this shift in understanding, Sofia simply answered, “who am I to say if you’re Filipino or not?”³²

The respondents each engaged the topic through various points of entry. Some spoke to their interpretations of their Filipinxness, while others addressed the collective or commonly defined understanding of their ethnocultural identity (Filipinoness). The recurring motif present in these individual insights is the fluidity and nuance of their interpretations. Numerous factors play into the understanding of “Filipinoness” both individually and collectively, resulting in variations of its understanding. Despite these variations, arbitrary standards of Filipinoness are derived from the idealized “Filipino.” The ways that Alyssa, Sofia, and the other contributors displayed their shifting understandings

³¹ Sofia De Leon, interview by author, *Tao Po: Finding Filipinx-/American Twitter*, April 10, 2020.

³² Sofia De Leon, interview by author, *Tao Po: Finding Filipinx-/American Twitter*, April 10, 2020.

of identity demonstrates how standards on “Filipinoness” are limiting and detrimental to one’s own identity. If there had to be a takeaway from these insights from Fil-Ams, it is that “Filipinxness” is difficult to define. As a result, claiming an “authentic” Filipinx identity is near impossible to achieve.

Transnational Tensions

A consistent thread that most, if not all respondents stated, was the palpable distinction between homeland Filipinos and diasporic Filipinxs. Citing different lived experiences based on physical location, those mainly rooted in the Philippines tend to express an antagonism towards and foster misconceptions of Fil-/Ams. While these transnational tensions are present in the discourse of the broad Filipino/x collective, there is a recognizable separation between a *Filipino Twitter*, composed of the voices from individuals primarily based in the Philippines and a more *Filipinx-/American Twitter* formed by the U.S. based diaspora. Both share the commonality of being Filipino and coming from that cultural heritage. However, they sometimes talk past each other. The tensions that emerge due to claims of homeland authenticity and transnational dilution are attributed to power differentials between these disconnected populations. Those at “home” in the Philippines assert that beliefs regarding American superiority need to be critiqued. And Filipinx in the U.S. diaspora believe that homeland Filipinos should question their assertion of what constitutes authentic cultural identity.

A second-generation Filipinx American, Christopher Mendoza-Smithour experienced this antagonism directly when he was in the Philippines during the summer of 2018. During our conversation, Christopher cites the friction and claims that:

There is a Pilipino Twitter, like Pilipino, like Philippines mainland Twitter and they’re mostly the ones promoting [these tensions] I think....I think [that] they think

Fil-/Ams feel superior over Filipinos and that they're constantly trying to prove who they are, when that's not truly the reason why Filipino Americans prove who they are.³³

In unpacking this conflict, Christopher's comment on the nationalism of Filipinos in the Philippines is reflective of the U.S./Philippines relationship. This assumption and suspicion of U.S. superiority is a direct consequence of the colonial relationship between the U.S. and the Philippines. Through the promise of the "American Dream," Filipinos were instilled in the belief of U.S. superiority and privilege. Filipinos were indoctrinated through the institutionalization of an Americanized education system, implementation of a U.S. modeled government, and the promise of American citizenship through military service. This ongoing colonial mentality fosters Filipino antagonism against Filipinx Americans who possess privileges due to their location in the U.S. and citizenship status.

As a multi-racial Filipino and (white) American, Christopher embodies and experiences the complicated associations of being Filipinx and American. Constantly labeled as "half," Christopher's proximity to Filipinoness has been invalidated by others due to his mixed heritage. As he is also white-passing, Christopher is often disregarded and/or excluded as Filipinx owing to the perception that he is not Filipinx or not "Filipinx enough," i.e. "white-washed." Venting his frustration and supporting Sofia's views regarding identity, Christopher expresses that, "People should have the choice to figure out what being Filipino means in their life and what aspects to attribute to....I think that's like so dumb when people [set up standards of authenticity] personally, because I feel like

³³ Christopher Mendoza-Smithour, interview by author, *Tao Po: Finding Filipinx-/American Twitter*, April 7, 2020.

everybody is trying to figure themselves out and people should stop knocking each other down.”³⁴

Our mutual peer from college and Los Angeles native Angie Ubaldo echoes Christopher’s sentiments by recognizing the conflict present within the Filipino community:

There're so many different personalities and so many different people from different backgrounds that –like, there’s going to be conflict somewhere. I’m sure that you’ve seen this and I’m sure everyone [has] seen beef on Twitter and stuff, and I think that’s where the sense of community is broken, because everyone has such different belief systems and –like, that’s totally ok, but I think that sometimes that it is kinda taken overboard or people find the need to argue just to argue when there’s really no reason to be arguing.³⁵

Both Angie and Christopher speak to these persistent frictions within the Filipino community. Described as a “crab mentality” by psychologist E.J.R. David, these assertions of cultural authenticity are hypocritical considering the colonized past that continues to persist to this day in the Philippines.³⁶ Despite attempting to become a unified nation, the claim to being an authentic “Filipino” remains inconclusive as it is based on a false belief of a monolithic Philippines.

Performativity of “Filipinxness”

While some respondents claim performing Filipinxness is not and shouldn’t be necessary to claim a Filipino/x identity, there is a certain “nostalgia without memory” present within these greater schemas of identity.³⁷ For Fil-/Ams, family is commonly the site of initial exposure to Filipino culture and the primary space for cultural transmission.

³⁴ Christopher Mendoza-Smithour, interview by author, *Tao Po: Finding Filipinx-/American Twitter*, April 7, 2020.

³⁵ Angie Ubaldo, interview by author, *Tao Po: Finding Filipinx-/American Twitter*, April 13, 2020.

³⁶ David, *Brown Skin, White Minds : Filipino -/ American Postcolonial Psychology*, 328.

³⁷ Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Economy,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 7, no. 2 (June 1, 1990): 295–310.

Unstructured and passively learned, home is where cultural learning begins. Such knowledge is always partial and reflective of how Filipinoness is defined within the family. Factors such as the context of immigration, gender, class, and location affect what is taught and how it is taught. Cultural learning is gendered as the cultural traditions and practices taught differ for boys and girls. Class and location also shape opportunities for learning and the cultural content being taught. Those living amid a notable Filipinx presence, or who have the financial means to travel or enroll in language and cultural schools, have greater access to gain cultural knowledge.

Contributor Sarah Mae Dizon, who identifies as a second-generation Filipinx American from Virginia, shares how Filipinx culture was facilitated through her family: “I’ve always kind of relied on my family, and like my parents especially, as sort of like my window, my sort of like tether to back home to the Philippines and like Filipino culture.” Given this reliance on family transmission, Fil-/Ams recognize multiple omissions in their cultural understanding. As a result, Fil-/Ams interpret and practice their cultural identity based on the traits and characteristics they have accumulated from home.

This sentiment is evident within the collegiate spaces that commonly function as the initial site for Fil-/Ams to embody and perform their culture outside of the home environment. Community spaces, like Filipinx collegiate organizations and/or Filipino Twitter provide an opportunity for Fil-/Ams to compare and amalgamate a collective identity. For many young Fil-/Ams navigating higher education, cultural organizations replicate the normative practices and familiarity of home. It is, however, within this communal effort that the performance of the Filipino identity is initiated.

Given the limited information available to Fil-/Ams and the improvisation of the uncertain, these salvaged and performed identities bear the markers of stereotypical or caricatured Filipinxness. For Fil-/Ams, the reliance solely on the home or extracurricular activities to learn about their culture marginalizes their identity. Fil-/Ams live vicariously through these practices and reinterpretations to re-codify/re-negotiate “Filipinxness.” Becoming “Filipino” involves both a process of individual growth and a collective performing of Filipinxness to an audience. In other words, performativity is used as a tool to display becoming “Filipino.” For example, Fil-/Ams have replicated folklorico dances in Filipino Cultural Nights. Tracing the genealogy of these dances to the Philippines, performing folklorico allows Fil-/Ams to embody Filipinx identity.³⁸ While these specific examples are spectacular ways to reconnect with the homeland culture, Fil-/Ams also perform cultural competency and practices through the mundane acts of sharing their lived sense of self, such as through tweets.

Twitter serves as a virtual extension of the performative platform. The limited 280-character count per tweet presents the need to be concise. If the author seeks feedback, then tweets must be powerful and/or humorous. When speaking on these tweets, respondents introduce varying intentions of tweets, ranging from superficial pandering for likes/retweets to assertions of community solidarity.

Performative rhetoric and superficial acts have been present on Twitter since its inception, but Filipino Twitter also serves as a powerful space for the expression and intersection of social movements and collegiate activism. Having been a student leader and community organizer, Christopher Mendoza-Smithour explains how, “the purpose of

³⁸ Gonzalves, *The Day the Dancers Stayed : Performing in the Filipino/American Diaspora*, 215.

Twitter for certain communities can vary. Some people just use it to present themselves a certain way....When I was a student leader and I was involved in that space I felt that...people were just saying things for the sake of saying things rather than saying things because that's what they really think."³⁹ On the other hand, a longstanding and active user on Twitter, Angie Ubaldo recounts her experience on Twitter, "basically sparing a tweet to say something and [communicating] that this is taking place in our community."⁴⁰ This embodies the purpose of Twitter as a social media space. It provides a space for asserting performances of self and to seek recognition and validation for those assertions of identity.

Social Movements

As Twitter matured from the mid-2010 to host more critical dialogues on socio-political issues surrounding different communities, some aspects of social movements became digitized. Online platforms naturally reach a wider, if targeted, audience. These members in turn can engage and be exposed to a range of issues. Understanding activism as it relates to the Filipino community can provide insight into how social movements are organized online. Taking into account the multiple forms of digital activism, this section provides an overview of the ways social movements have emerged on Twitter while also exploring specific instances for context.

Functioning like a public forum, Twitter becomes a platform for issues that tend to be un- or under-reported through conventional media. While activism may take on numerous forms, Twitter is slowly becoming a recognized formative site to organize. Both Black Twitter and Asian Twitter demonstrate varying efforts of digital activism. Filipino

³⁹ Christopher Mendoza-Smithour, interview by author, *Tao Po: Finding Filipinx-/American Twitter*, April 7, 2020.

⁴⁰ Angie Ubaldo, interview by author, *Tao Po: Finding Filipinx-/American Twitter*, April 13, 2020.

Twitter engages with, expresses support, and is influenced by the activism produced from these sites. The solidarity between these groups are revealed through various means. Black, Asian, and Filipino Twitter indicate the possibilities of digital activism and the evolving role of Twitter within the United States socio-political landscape.⁴¹

The respective digital enclaves are involved in activism in similar yet distinct ways. Black Twitter offers a collective platform to discuss issues and concerns related to Black-identified individuals and Black communities.⁴² The tweets challenge and address the systemic racial inequalities perpetuated within U.S. society through exposition and dialogue. At the forefront of these conversations is “#blacklivesmatter,” a frequently used hashtag within Black Twitter.⁴³ The significance of “#blacklivesmatter” being the dominant conversation within the space of Black Twitter reflects the centrality of Black narratives and the significance of the hashtag as not just discourse but a social movement. Similar hashtags draw attention to the Black experience in America; #oscarsowhite, #blacktwitter, #blackgirlmagic, and #staywoke, all continue this trend of engaging Blackness and racial politics in America through Twitter.⁴⁴

Asian Twitter is similarly utilized as a tool for anti-racist organizing by serving as a platform to challenge Asian American misrepresentation and xenophobia. However, the platforms of Asian Twitter and Black Twitter do differ in that Asian Twitter is far more reactionary towards political and social issues pertaining to Asian Americans. Spawning

⁴¹ Deen Freelon et al., “How Black Twitter and Other Social Media Communities Interact with Mainstream News” (Miami, FL: Knight Foundation, 2018).

⁴² Freelon et al., “How Black Twitter and Other Social Media Communities Interact with Mainstream News”.

⁴³ Monica Anderson, Skye Toor, and Aaron Smith, “2. An Analysis of #BlackLivesMatter and Other Twitter Hashtags Related to Political or Social Issues” (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, July 11, 2018).

⁴⁴ Freelon et al., “How Black Twitter and Other Social Media Communities Interact with Mainstream News”.

the hashtags: #freshofftheboat, #aapisolidariy, #asianwhitewashing, #starringjohncho - many of the issues Asian Twitter engages with directly relates to the perceived media misrepresentation of Asian Americans. Despite its more temporary nature, the social commentary coming from Asian Twitter is meaningful. By raising awareness of Asian American media representation, Asian Twitter users confront the caricatures imposed by xenophobic sentiment and anti-Asian rhetoric. Dismantling the monolith of "Asian America" also enables the various voices housed underneath the "AAPI" demographic to demand equitable representation. The limits of challenging misrepresentation and xenophobia is superficial and fails to engage the systemic issues which maintain these misrepresentations. Advocating for representation also foregrounds the difficulties of this justification: *who is being represented and how are they represented?*

The construction of Filipino Twitter itself could be interpreted as a social movement since it allocates a space for dialogue and cultural learning for Fil-/Ams. This collective movement forms a social community which then leads to activism. As such, it is a way for Fil-/Ams to assert their identity and to build a sense of community. Social activism within the forum of Filipino Twitter is multifaceted, engaging in interracial solidarity work, community advocacy, and transnational discourse. Despite this, the general contention revolves around identity. The conversations include explorations of how Filipino identity sits within larger racial schemas, the socio-political position of Filipinos, and a postcolonial critique of Filipino identity. This constitutes a form of social activism by addressing the confusion around the Filipino/x identity and unpacking the trauma of colonial mentality

through critical discourse and/or humor.⁴⁵ One user understands the significance of Filipino Twitter as a persistent social movement. “Well I agree with it that it is like a social movement,” Fil- /Am scholar-activist Kamille Magante explains:

You know a lot of folks come into the space, say for example, who are unaware or live in communities that don’t necessarily have a large Filipino presence. When they look into Filipino Twitter a lot of them are learning about things they were never taught and are now aware of so in a sense it’s teaching folks or enlightening, I would say, to be more aware of certain issues they never would’ve thought of in the first place.⁴⁶

Kamille’s description of Filipino Twitter demonstrates the opportunity of this space as an integral undertaking in community building. Looking beyond the superficial ways Filipinxs gather online, Filipino Twitter provides a community to those who lack that collective and can be the site for (re)learning Filipino identity.

Considering the different modes of digital activism employed by various groups and individuals, it is no surprise that Filipino Twitter engages with forms of activism related to both Black and Asian Twitter. Filipino Twitter shares resources and knowledge about activism in the community, and the virtual space also launches explicitly political conversations to promote social change. These examples reveal how Filipinxs employ their activism through various means and how the presentation of activism is also tied to the performance of Filipino authenticity.

An early and prominent hashtag movement generated from digital activism is the “#magandangmorenx” movement.⁴⁷ Initiated by influencer and actor Asia Jackson

⁴⁵ Defined by E.J.R. David, ‘colonial mentality’ is the internalized oppression harbored by Filipinxs for generations

⁴⁶ Kamille Magante, interview by author, *Tao Po: Finding Filipinx-/American Twitter*, April 5, 2020.

⁴⁷ A “hashtag movement” is a social media trend initiated and/or sustained through the use of a hash tagged phrase.

(@aasian) in 2016, the online movement was launched to confront the ingrained colorism within the Filipino/x community and the systemic class stratification and assumptions regarding social hierarchies determined by the color of one's skin.⁴⁸ This movement was notable for addressing colorism, and it also was one of the first online social movements launched by Filipinxs. When approaching the subject of activism and social movements through Twitter, several respondents specifically named the “#magandangmorenx” movement as a prominent example of Filipinx activism on Twitter. One of my interviewees, Sarah Mae, recalled how social movements on the platform of Filipino Twitter, “started with the magandang morenx hashtag. It came out when I was in high school and that was sort of like the first time. I had been on Twitter for a little bit and that was the first time I really engaged with other Filipinos even if it was just as superficial as ‘liking’ someone else’s post or like ‘retweeting’ someone else’s post.”⁴⁹ For Sarah Mae, these interactions were a meaningful way to connect to a community and identity that she was not able to engage with before. Growing up in the suburbs of Virginia, Sarah Mae had limited exposure to a Filipinx-/American community. These interactions were meaningful to Sarah Mae beyond the intended goal of the social movement because it introduced her to a community she could relate to. The connection Sarah Mae experienced, however, was also a reminder of the “ambient co-presence” or the artificial intimacies afforded through the remote

⁴⁸ Pasion, Abby. “#MagandangMorenx: Calling in the Filipino Community to Take down Anti-Blackness.” One Down, One Down, 29 Oct. 2019, www.one-down.com/magandangmorenx.

⁴⁹ Sarah Mae Dizon, interview by author, *Tao Po: Finding Filipinx-/American Twitter*, April 9, 2020.

"connections" from online social interactions.⁵⁰ As intimate as these interactions were, the connections Sarah Mae made were still facilitated online.

Aside from tweets and retweets, Twitter also facilitated meaningful expressions of community solidarity. Regardless of tensions, Filipino Twitter users can come together to advocate for their fellow kababayan (country person). A recent incident sparked the collective efforts of the Fil-/Am community: A Zoom-bombing incident during a meeting for San Diego State University's AB Samahan Filipino American student organization. As a recent graduate from California State University, Fullerton but having organized throughout the Southern California region, Angie Ubaldo explains the power of Twitter to express collective solidarity:

The whole issue with AB Samahan and [how] someone [made] xenophobic remarks in such a safe space for students, that in itself is such a huge issue and then I've noticed how many people I knew... on Twitter were talking about [it] and saying like, "we have to fight this or that we don't stand this type of behavior." That part of Twitter that is able to stand up and basically spare a tweet to say something and be known that this is taking place in our community, I think that part of Twitter is [what] I consider as Filipino community.⁵¹

This incident was not isolated, but it demonstrates the potential of online activism. The rise of xenophobic attacks against minority communities have been escalating during the covid-19 pandemic. The response by the Filipinx community on Twitter displayed a strong collective voice. Digital activism and the formation of Filipino Twitter are part and parcel, as this social space became a movement for expressions of community solidarity. While there might be disagreements and tensions within this community, the commonality of

⁵⁰ Earvin Charles Cabalquinto, "Ambivalent Intimacies: Entangled Pains and Gains through Facebook Use in Transnational Family Life," in *Digital Intimate Publics and Social Media*, ed. Amy Shields Dobson, Brady Robards, and Nicholas Carah (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 247–64.

⁵¹ Angie Ubaldo, interview by author, *Tao Po: Finding Filipinx-/American Twitter*, April 13, 2020.

being Filipinx and the persistent effort by Filipinx to be in connection with one another mobilizes these fragmented users to come together, regardless of geographic location.

These acts, while small, carried great weight for users on the site; Filipino Twitter allowed them to connect to a larger cause. Sarah Mae expands on this by saying how, “it felt very special to be a part of that [Magandang Morenx] and I felt seen in a way that I haven’t been seen before on social media, especially on Twitter.”⁵² These activist movements either continue from movements in real life or are generated entirely online. Regardless of its origin, online activism can be initiated from a single tweet or a series of tweets calling attention to an issue. Once momentum develops, these social movements can snowball.

Social movements are nothing without its people, and with a large number of users on Twitter, it has slowly become the platform for exposure and engagement. As inquisitive, young Filipinxs enter Filipino Twitter, their exposure and interactions with their networks and the platform affect their activism and involvement with social movements. As a product of this generation, these movements reside in both the physical and virtual moments of our time. With present-day happenings in the United States actively reflected on the conversations populating Twitter, Filipinxs are engaging with multiple dialogues involving racial justice, postcolonial critiques, and solidarity. Bearing in mind the shift in activism that the #blacklivesmatter movement introduced, the momentum generated online has the potential to transcend beyond the digital and manifest as a physical movement. Filipinx activism is shifting online to create a virtual community and to stand in solidarity with Filipinx ‘kapwa tao’ or fellow people.

⁵² Sarah Mae Dizon, interview by author, *Tao Po: Finding Filipinx-/American Twitter*, April 9, 2020.

Conclusion

[The commonality] is being Filipino. That's the one thing that I'm even a part of it because like whether you're a Filipino in the diaspora or "Filipino" Filipino whether we're on the other side of the political spectrum or not, what makes us part of that community is being Filipino.

Justine Suegay⁵³

Filipino Twitter, similar to the Filipinx culture, does not draw definitive boundaries and is interpreted differently depending on the user and their online presentation. As such, the platform, while inclusive and influential, is not the end-all-be-all for the Filipinx community. It has the potential for expanding the discussions and development of the Filipinx identity by connecting fragmented populations and separated individuals into a collective transnational discourse. By aggregating the transnational perspectives and knowledge of Filipinos, the evolving understanding of "Filipino" can continue to be analyzed and challenged. This space shows the potential good that can be done by participants of Filipino Twitter, as they address present-day issues alongside the ongoing grief and trauma inherited from previous generations.

The phenomena of Filipino Twitter, especially within Twitter, is potentially fleeting and its relevance confined to this contemporary period due to the momentary nature of social media. The formation of enclaves, whether digital or physical, is historically contingent upon the structural realities of the times. This digital observation of Filipino Twitter, while limited in scope, contributes to the growing research documenting the experiences of 1.5 and 2nd generation Filipinx-/Americans. These findings allow us to

⁵³ Justine Suegay, interview by author, *Tao Po: Finding Filipinx-/American Twitter*, April 13, 2020.

consider the expanding role of social media platforms within our communities and broader society.

For my interviewees and countless other users, Twitter is more than a digital platform and social microblogging site. Through the virality of tweets, retweets, and likes, the site has become a mainstay in American society and has become the platform to discuss and debate contemporary issues. As my respondents have substantiated and shared, Filipino Twitter has served as a site for postcolonial critique, created through the interdependent relations of Filipinx users addressing their “Filipinxness.” These efforts are generative and generational, documenting the understanding of what “Filipinxness” means for those in their teens, 20s, and 30s.

Filipino Twitter is formative to the community, guiding individuals in finding and defining themselves. Each presentation into the collective record of Filipino Twitter contributes to the ever-complicated identity that is “Filipinx.” Making sense of Filipino Twitter as an exhibition stage and collaborative archive illustrates the alternate learning community that formed to foster cohesion and express solidarity or *kapwa*, the sense of togetherness and of community.

This project was intended to understand the identity development of others but through this project, I also came to reflect on my own sense of self. I came to realize that our digital experiences reflect ourselves, our communities, and our society. As an immigrant, there was always a certainty to my claim and belonging to the Filipino culture. I had a conviction of what “Filipino” meant as a cultural identity and an assumption of how individuals navigated theirs. Over the course of these interviews and many more candid conversations, I was privileged to listen and consider the nuanced experiences of a select

group of Filipinx-/Americans and came to understand the various ways in which Filipinx-/Americans came to formulate their identities. Within the reality of our time, the Fil-/Am online experiment has been intimately interwoven into the narrative of the Fil-/Am diaspora. This project is part of an ongoing process of articulating that diasporic community, one through which we find and make a space of our own.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

How do you identify as a Filipinx American?

How do you define “Filipinoness”?

What is your family’s immigration story?

Are you active on Twitter?

Do you see Twitter as a community?

How do you interact on Twitter?

How would you describe Twitter?

Do you know of “Filipino Twitter”?

How would you describe Filipino Twitter?

Would you consider Filipino Twitter a community?

Are you part of Filipino Twitter?

Would Filipino Twitter be representative of the Filipino community/culture?

What would you say are the other prominent “communities” on Twitter?

Do you know of “Asian Twitter”/” Black Twitter”?

How would you describe Asian Twitter/Black Twitter?

Are you part of Asian Twitter/Black Twitter?