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Spring 2023

### Cultural Pride & Transmission: How Nonprofit Leaders Aid Filipinos & Shape Transnational Identity

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UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

CHANGE THE WORLD FROM HERE

**Cultural Pride & Transmission: How Nonprofit Leaders Aid  
Filipinos & Shape Transnational Identity**

by

Lauren Cristine Castillo Williamson

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Capstone Research Report Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the  
Master of Nonprofit Administration Degree  
in the School of Management  
directed by Dr. Richard Gregory Johnson III

San Francisco, California

Spring 2023

## **Abstract**

Filipino identity is marked by its openness and diversity as part of the Asian & Pacific Islander community. Yet the unique history and experiences of Filipinos is underrepresented, particularly in discourse in relation to the diaspora of the Philippines. Though there is positive representation, very strongly in healthcare and media, there are great needs in the community that go unheard. Such adversity helps prepare Filipino leaders for the challenges they face when addressing issues in nonprofit work. The research in this project explores not only how Filipino identity is shaped, but also how Filipinos are bringing communal aspects of the culture to leadership that is to the benefit of the public sector and communities served.

This research intends to demonstrate the role of strong Filipino representation in society, particularly leadership, and what improvements are still required to better support the community. This area of study is applicable to the nonprofit subfields of community development, advocacy, human rights, and social justice.

*Keywords:* Colonialism, intergenerational trauma, internalization, health equity, immigration

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to dedicate this to my Filipino community, but particularly my mother. She taught me that working hard and achieving dreams was not just for me, but for those before and after me. Thank you for showing me how to be all I can be. I also cannot thank my research participants enough for their amazing candor and wisdom that has not only shaped this project, but me as a person even moreso.

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## **Section 1. Introduction**

This study explores how the Filipino immigrant story is one of success, but also struggle. Colonialism left the Philippines with a divided identity, which has only become more complex as the diaspora of Filipinos in the 20th century saw generations of Filipinos attempt to retain cultural ties. This project will test whether outcomes of Filipino immigrants in the United States are comparable to other Asian and immigrant groups. It will also seek to find if Filipino immigrants have better socioeconomic outcomes than their non-immigrant peers in the Philippines, but feel less connection to the community and their overall Filipino identity. Lastly, it will aim to understand if and how retaining and passing on Filipino identity is hindered by Westernization and immigration leading to detachment with the Philippines.

The hypotheses of this project are that the Filipino identity is defined by culture, language, and tradition under a unique influence of transnationalism compared to other Asian & Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities and that passing down of cultural identity is hindered by racism. This project will focus on the impact of Westernization and colorism on self-identification and intergenerational language fluency. Additionally, a major hypothesis is that immigration has created a transnational Filipino identity, creating socioeconomic challenges for immigrants indicated by the prevalence of health and financial disparities that create barriers to Filipinos embracing their identity. Furthermore, immigrants not only struggle to maintain deep ties with the Philippines, but also lack a support system and strong community ties that enables the preservation of cultural identity in a community. Lastly, the representation of Filipinos in media, education, and politics creates barriers to a unified identity.

This project will determine the following questions:

What is Filipino identity and what are nonprofits doing to shape it?

- How do nonprofits respond to transnationalism and Westernization to unify Filipino identity?
- What are the hardships of access and passing on that identity?
- What are nonprofits doing to help empower Filipino identity and break barriers?

## Section 2: Literature Review

### Colonial History

Colonization in the Philippines began when Spanish explorer Miguel López de Legazpi arrived from Mexico in 1565. Many Filipinos were brought to New Spain, a territory under the Spanish Empire, as slaves and forced crew. The term Filipino was derived from the name of the Spanish monarch, Phillip II, for those that were born in the Philippine archipelago, while Native Filipinos were called “indios.” During the Spanish colonial period, natives of the Philippine islands were usually known by other terms including *chino* and *indigenta*. During the early Spanish colonial period the term Filipinos, or Philipinos, were sometimes used by Spaniards to distinguish the “indio chino” natives of the Philippine archipelago from the “indios” of the Spanish colonies in the Americas, which were free people and legally barred from being used as slaves, unlike Filipinos. In 1571, Spanish Manila became the capital of the Spanish East Indies, the Spanish territories in Asia and the Pacific. The Spanish invaded local states using the principle of divide and conquer, bringing most of what is the modern Philippines under one unified administration. Boundaries, currencies, languages, and surnames were standardized and dictated by Spanish colonial rule. Villages were deliberately consolidated into towns, where Catholic missionaries could more easily convert their inhabitants to Christianity and control the population through colonial education (Schwartz).

The Philippine-born Spaniards of the 19th century began to be called *españoles filipinos*, eventually shortened to just Filipino, to differentiate them from the Spaniards born in Spain, although they in fact resented this designation, choosing to identify themselves instead as *hijos del país*, sons of the country. This gave way to the ilustrados, an educated class of mestizos, both of Spanish, Chinese, and indigenous descent, who would become responsible for building Philippine nationalism (Owen). The ilustrados developed and disseminated radical writings, most notably *La Solidaridad*, which



challenged Church propaganda that upheld Spanish colonial order and demanded Spanish government representation. Their writings generalized the term Filipino to one which refers to everyone born in the Philippines to promote equality, particularly during the Philippine Revolution and American Colonial Era when the term started shifting from a geographic designation to a national identity as a citizenship entitled by law (Lahiri). This time period is alluded to as the social and political “enlightenment” of the Philippines.

Enlightenment led to sedition, as Filipino revolutionaries declared independence in June of 1898 and briefly enacted the first Philippine republic in limited territories for three years. Though a constitution was formed, its lack of establishment served for a limited form of transfer from colonial power to the Philippines. The formation of local legislative assemblies that were indirectly chosen by the people and organized at the municipal level where municipal captains elected provincial assemblies. “However, even this government reflected the socio-political divide between the landed principales and the peasantry. Suffrage would have been limited to the principales and friar lands would similarly be theirs. The elite were rewarding themselves with the first fruits of the Revolution” (Iglesias).

With the evolving revolutionary rule, the reorganization and “Filipinization” of the provinces and municipalities began, but that same year, Spain lost its war with the United States of America and ceded the Philippines as its colony. This came to a head in the Filipino-American War where, “Americans brutally quelled by 1902. Even the Muslim areas, which the Spanish never wholly subdued, were assimilated” (Iglesias). Again, the Philippines found itself under a new type of colonial power and a new era of resistance began.

In the country and villages, to American miscalculation and frustration, secret underground organizers created municipal governments that continued to campaign for independence. Local governments were thus completely reorganized again by the United States to reduce the mass support for these guerrillas. The United States retained a system

of administrative units from the Spanish, keeping them as previously under their rule under the control of a strong central government. The colonizing powers carefully restricted the privilege of suffrage, ensuring the retention of political power by the local elite whose support they “assiduously” courted. The founding of the Philippine Commonwealth in 1935 resulted in the gradual Filipinization of the colonial government and provided for a Filipino president that would exercise “general supervision” over all local governments. The commonwealth status that was achieved provided the transition from colonial to independent rule, but World War II and the Japanese occupation interrupted this progress (Iglesias). Through commonwealth status with the United States the Philippines was closer to independence, but would have to endure more atrocities and warfare.

The narrative of the Philippines fighting for its independence only to be repeatedly colonized complicates its relationship with the United States that has been both a colonizing and allying force. While the brutality of the Japanese occupation is how American historical narratives differentiate the U.S. colonial era as a less hostile time compared to the Japanese occupation, nonetheless the U.S. was also a brutal colonizer. “Both Japanese and Americans initially adopted a policy of ‘civilizing’ these ‘headhunters’ in their respective empires. And while Japanese colonizers thought they were modern and the Americans thought they were different from the older colonizers in adopting this policy, they were, in reality, both acting as ‘modern colonial powers.’ Both tried to build a modern colony, and both were predisposed to the use of force if necessary” (Jose). The prior colonial presence of the United States and the fierce national resistance against the Japanese colonial rule in World War II led to Filipinos fighting side by side Americans of the Allied forces on the battlegrounds.

Not only is the Filipino contribution to World War II underrepresented, the efforts of Filipino women and their tactical impact is undervalued. Scholars recount that for every ten male guerrillas, one Filipina guerrilla served in the underground resistance.

Their guerrilla efforts proved women were more than capable of taking on numerous roles: soldiers, leaders, activists, journalists, nurses, doctors, spies, and dedicated patriots (Lanzona). Filipina guerrillas proved to be a vital resource for both combat and reconnaissance missions that allowed for the Allies to gain an opportunity to retake the Philippines. This research brings to light the missing narratives of a traditionally very American-centered written history on the liberation of the Philippines of World War II. The wartime experiences of women of color in the Pacific provide opportunities to address the various contributions, struggles, and cultural diversity that aided and represented the Allied front of the Pacific.

Philippine independence from the United States was granted on July 4, 1946. Like other colonizers, the implications of this remain in the country today. While shedding colonial oversight, the governmental structure of the Philippines is modeled on and shared by the very United States government. The government of the Philippines as well as the constitution are based on having a similar legal structure with the United States. The executive branch of the Philippines even invoked its emergency presidential powers and incited a new wave of revolution.

### **Revolution & Reformation**

Traditions of revolution in the Philippines are one of the oldest in Southeast Asia, particularly when it comes to rising against colonial powers. Filipino nationalism is tied to connecting more with the Asian identity and community, demonstrating independence and sovereignty from the United States, and capitalizing on economic improvements since World War II to reduce U.S. dependence (Meadows). Despite the gains made during the ilustrado enlightenment and resistance campaigns against colonial rule, much of that wealth and power remained centralized within the wealthy and elite. Calls to change the political system dominated by the elites and upper-class are still divided particularly on whether the change should be brought about by media pressure on the current ruling class

or immediate radical action, including violent revolution. The nationalist movement is mainly composed of business and labor groups, while radicals are mostly students and intellectuals that have a greater impact on the direction of the movement.

Industrial and commercial entrepreneurs have not only shored up more power since the 1940's, but also aligned with the nationalist movement. While these business leaders provide a majority of the finances to the nationalist movement, entrepreneurs have not played a larger political role because they are divided on whether their interests align with Filipino elite and U.S. business interests or social and political reform greater than just anti-American sentiment. Some simply want to further their business interest and limit market competition, rather than improve equity or change the status quo in the Philippines. Labor movements have been ineffective political actors in the Philippines, which some critics attribute to insufficient voting rights and capitalism overall, while the radical nationalist movement blames it on a small working class and a greater influence of Western liberalism over socialist ideals that would benefit the labor movement. In times since the 1940s, from 1964 to 1965 in particular, nationalism and political upheaval was quite high, as the Philippines particularly embraced anti-Americanism, which heavily impacted trade, investment, and military relations between both countries.

“Nor is it unexpected that, in the opinion of most observers, the most striking characteristic of Philippine unionism is conservatism rather than radicalism” (Meadows). Intellectualism, or radicalism, is concentrated in the wealthy elite groups who have access to education, despite the fact that inequality is a driving force in political protests and reformation demands of the working and poor classes. The wealthy elite ultimately maintained the status quo they benefited from at the expense of the Filipino masses. Those in power sought to preserve their position by supporting colonial interests and adhering to post-American colonialism, many elites continued to support the colonial power structures. Despite persisting liberal ideals and growing access to public education, a more educated Filipino population still primarily benefits and serves entrepreneurs and

the elite, both Filipino and American. Filipino public schools mean more access to education, but also greater government oversight meaning teachers fear retaliation if they were to go against government teaching. Furthermore, anti-democratic corruption has hindered further political change for the Philippines and its relations with the West. Though nationalist ideals were once widely championed by revolutionaries and uprisings, unity is a major driver of change, but is not the main issue when a political system has been entrenched with traditional and elite powers.

This culminated in the declaration of martial law beginning in 1972 and the start of the Marcos era of authoritarian rule. Though originally claimed to be a temporary emergency measure in agreement with presidential powers, authoritative rule was quickly cemented. Marcos was even emphatic in the international press about how soon his authoritative role would conclude, but, despite global attention, still usurped power. In order to be perceived as a populist, Marcos espoused that his power was granted from “the consent by the people” and that his authority was an issue for the Filipino people to decide. Characteristic of the Marcos administration, scrupulous care has been taken to try to demonstrate that, unlike other dictatorships, the President's power under martial law is determined by the will of the people. To bolster this claim, the regime hosted two nationwide meetings of "citizens' assemblies", or barangays, held in 1973 where the Filipino people voted overwhelmingly for the continuance of President Marcos in office and for his martial law reforms. There was another meeting of the country's 42,000 barangays in 1974 to enable the people to voice their grievances against the conduct of civil and military officials and the government to assess political reforms. The proposed referendum had no tangible outcome, partly because of the timely climate and geopolitical crisis. As part of cementing his martial law, he established the New Society Movement, a right-wing political party in the Philippines that claimed it would reform society. It capitalized on feelings of disenfranchisement from colonialism and promised to restore Filipino greatness.

Despite its claims of “constitutional authoritarianism,” a major characteristic of the New Society is the regime's historical and continued detention of political opponents without due process of law. Those incarcerated ranged from anti-Marcos oligarchs to reformist priests and radical journalists (Lin). Press censorship persists in the Philippines, despite the abolition of the Media Advisory Council and the Bureau of Standards for Mass Media. Although press freedom in the Philippines is protected and was technically established by the 1987 Constitution, media laws and freedom of the press are typically inconsistent and volatile. In fact, the country continues to be negatively ranked in the Reporters Without Borders Press Freedom Index. In response to attacks on press freedom, international media organizations have stepped up to defend and support the Philippine press. Where once the lively and critical Philippine press with roots to the ilustrado era would uphold journalistic integrity and expose the schemes of officials, modern critical discourse on government policies by journalists is limited and avoids controversial issues.

The People Power Revolution was a series of popular demonstrations in the Philippines, mostly in Metro Manila, in February 1986, also making it known as the February Revolution. There was a sustained campaign of civil resistance against the authoritative regime violence and electoral fraud. The nonviolent revolution led to the departure and exile of Marcos and his family, who fled to the United States, marking the end of his 20-year dictatorship and the restoration of democracy in the Philippines. Though autocratic rulers and Westernized politicians have done much to entice Western investors in the Philippines and its economy, the spoils of these investments have yet to trickle down to the Filipino masses. But rather, the presence of foreign capital entails accommodating foreign investors and keeping the country's workforce on a leash by confining labor relations and upholding elite rule and classist envisioning of society. This continues to underscore democracy in the Philippines today, as evidenced by the popular national reception to authoritative measures of conservative presidential leaders like

Rodrigo Duterte and the political resurgence of the Marcos family. This political leadership is also characterized by their Western, particularly American leanings.

### **Transnational Identity & Diaspora**

An identity that extends past the boundaries of the Philippines and with the dispersal of Filipinos from their homeland for immigrant opportunities, is even more diversified by various time periods and generations of Filipino immigration. “After more than a century of emigration from the Philippines and settlement in the United States, the US Filipino population continues to be largely foreign born. Indeed, during different periods of time over the last decade, Filipinos were the largest immigrant group on the west coast of the US, second only to Mexicans. According to the 2010 Census, Filipinos are the second-largest Asian group after the Chinese. At the same time, the Philippines is one of the top migrant-sending countries in the world. As of 2012, nearly 4,500 Filipinos boarded airplanes to work far from home on a daily basis” (Rodriguez). A noteworthy aspect of the Philippines is that its people are its biggest export. Filipino identity so often associated with immigration has highlighted recent research on the patterns of the community. In data collected by Migration Policy, it can be seen how much the immigrant community sends back to the family in remittances. In 2019 alone, Filipinos living abroad sent more than \$35 billion in remittances to the Philippines via formal channels, according to the World Bank’s estimate. Remittances more than doubled in the past decade and represented about 10 percent of the country’s gross domestic product in 2019. (Batalova). This economic pattern does have an unseen human cost, with immigrants struggling to maintain strong ties to their Filipino identity.

With the immigrant experience being so prominent in Filipino identity, understanding the unique internal struggle they face in the United States is important for understanding Filipino identity in its entirety. A recurring theme emerges that, “The challenges of being in between two countries, two continents divided by great oceanic

distance, and two different cultural formations have led to hyphenated identities and biculturalism or multiculturalism, indeed a common questioning of self and identity” (Manalansan). In addition to the very strong drivers of geography and culture, institutional racism also contributes to the immigrant sacrifice of Filipino identity. Summarized as, “The insidious nature of racism in the United States fosters self-hatred in many individuals, who employ tactics of defensive othering to improve feelings of self-worth and to avoid experiences with racism. Individuals who engage in defensive othering often become labeled as ‘whitewashed’ or ‘selling out’ because they attempt to align themselves with the dominant racial or ethnic group by presenting themselves as exceptions to the existing stereotypes. While defensive othering may increase an individual’s status, it does not challenge stereotypes or stigmas that encourage individuals to engage in social distancing; rather, it strengthens and affirms stereotypes, while maintaining a hierarchy of kinds of people” (Eisen). While many Filipino immigrants feel pressure to reject their identity and community in order to preserve individual value, socioeconomic and health outcomes of the collective Filipino immigrant population highlight inequity.

### **Socioeconomics & Health**

According to a 2019 study, in the United States 7% of all Filipinos are reported to live in poverty with 10% representative of all Asians and 13% representative of all Americans (Budiman). While poverty is not a prevalent socioeconomic barrier for Filipinos, health disparities are still high among the population. Filipino Americans are the third-largest Asian subgroup in the US, with a significantly disproportionate prevalence of cardiometabolic disorders compared with non-Hispanic Whites and other Asian subgroups. Despite their relatively large population size and being well represented in the U.S. workforce, the representation of Filipino Americans in biomedical research has been limited, possibly due to participants’ concerns over their immigration status, specific health beliefs, and the aggregation of Asian subgroups under the Asian category.



The underrepresentation is widening the knowledge gap about disease prevalence in the Filipino American community and their relative disease risks.

Nonetheless, limited reports, including medical records data and small cohort studies, have suggested that Filipino Americans are at a greater risk for developing cardiometabolic disorders at much higher rates than their non-Filipino Americans counterparts (Coronado). Diabetes is another major health concern for Filipinos, particularly in the United States. According to 2017–2018 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey data, Filipino American adults had the second highest type 2 diabetes prevalence (10.4%) among Asian Americans, following Asian Indians at 12.6%; the rate of type 2 diabetes for Chinese adults was 5.6%. A high prevalence of risk factors for chronic diseases, including obesity, smoking, and binge drinking, has also been reported for Filipino American people (Raquinio). Furthermore, data shows that these outcomes are even worse for Filipino immigrants, particularly when they are younger in age and are even more susceptible to developing chronic illness. The variation in American lifestyle that comes from change in diet and nutrition, as well as more sedentary culture. Overweight and obesity and the presence of other risk factors shows an increase from the first to subsequent generations. First-generation immigrants were less likely to report type 2 diabetes than immigrants of subsequent generations who were born in the United States or whose parents were born in the U.S. and only the prevalence of type 2 diabetes was significantly elevated in the 2nd generation compared with the 1st generation (Raquinio). These particular health indicators are not just physical and can also be linked to poor psychological health outcomes as well.

Psychology is another area of needed expansion for Filipinos. Many Filipinos, particularly immigrants, can feel isolation and high-stress. Scholars have found the need to re-examine Filipino emotionalism as a heightened inner sensitivity, or *pakiramdam*, and desire to understand and be understood by others (Santiago). Recognizing how the remnants of colonialism and Westernization are present in Filipino mental health will

support better treatment of it and advance the discipline. Psychological research also calls for greater understanding of the historical and sociological implications of colonial mentality for the Filipino American population. The recognition of the psychological impact of colonialism in the practice of mental health today for not just Filipinos, but other people of color with ethnicities linked to colonial oppression (David & Okazaki).

### Section 3: Methods and Approaches

This project used a mixed-method approach for research. Secondary data was used with literature reviews. Some reviewed literature includes public government and think tank databases. The supporting qualitative data highlights socioeconomic trends for the Filipino immigrant community. The literature review is mainly composed of scholarly articles and journals that provide historical contextualization and analysis of Filipino identity. The sources cover the history of the Philippines from the pre-colonial to post-independence era and identify themes that parallel the primary data.

Qualitative data was essential to the methodology approach. Primary data was collected through structured interviews with Filipino nonprofit and academic leaders. The research interviews were led in individual sessions that lasted one to two hours long and conducted with a structured set of questions (see Appendix A). Reciprocity in this community-based research was prioritized throughout the interview process. These leaders not only shared their expertise as advocates and academics, but also their personal experiences as Filipinos:

- *Mayo C. Buenafe-Ze*: As an educator and current Ph.D. candidate in Ethnic Studies she has extensive experience studying indigenous communities in the Philippines and identifying as an indigenous Filipina herself. She immigrated with her family as a child in 1989 before being forced to return to the Philippines as a young girl, which drove her to immigrate back on a Fulbright scholarship a decade later and just last year gain citizenship. Previously working in Anthropology, she moved to Ethnic Studies to focus on indigenous representation. Her goal is to address colonization in education, emphasize undocumented Filipino scholarship, and diversify Asian American discourse in academia.
- *Vivian R Faustino-Pulliam*: She works as a University of San Francisco International Business faculty member and Ph.D. Candidate in Leadership. She

has also worked in several countries across Asia for multinational banks. She began a banking career in the Philippines before moving around Asia and gaining exposure with nonprofits through my volunteer work. In the Philippines, her work included supporting abandoned and orphaned children through faith-based organizations. After immigrating to the United States, she became involved with Asian women's shelters for victims of domestic abuse where she also met several Filipino women who have gone through serious financial, emotional, and physical abuse. In academia, her professional and volunteer work is focused on educating those at the margins, including teaching online for refugee camps in Africa and the Middle East. As an educator, she encourages Filipino students to embrace and learn more about their identity.

- *John Nguyen-Yap*: With over 20 years working professionally in the community, he is currently Associate Director of Health Equity at Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations (AAPCHO). He immigrated from the Philippines to the United States with his family as a child in 1983. He gained insight into Filipino leadership growth through youth conferences. His professional career began working with Asian-American focused organizations in San Jose in the community working with middle school and high school youth targeting drug intervention. He currently oversees programs that promote health equity, specifically in the areas of addressing stigma related to COVID-19, increasing access to care, adopting infection protection control, promoting culturally responsive care, and facilitating worker safety.
- *Kristine Cecile Alarcon*: She works as Communications and Storytelling Manager at AAPCHO. She is passionate about promoting health equity and addressing social determinants to health. She also wants to emphasize mental health in the community as well. Prior to joining AAPCHO, she worked in public health and was responsible for managing the organizations' hepatitis B testing and its social media outreach. She exudes passion for leadership for Asian & Pacific Islanders,

particularly when it comes to gender representation and servant leaders. Her family is rooted in both the Philippines and United States mixing a Filipino American identity.

## Section 4. Data Analysis

A recurring message from all the interviewed experts is that Filipino identity is made up of a diversity of experiences and cannot be defined singularly. Undoubtedly Filipino identity is vast, which is why a variety of experts were interviewed to provide a diverse perspective. Yet, despite the range of backgrounds and experiences of the interviewed experts, many common themes and even language continually aligned. As shown in Table 1, the data counts the frequency of repetition of any particular word and ranks them by highest usage.

*Table 1: Interview Word Frequency Ranking*

	<i>Expert A</i>	<i>Expert B</i>	<i>Expert C</i>	<i>Expert D</i>	<i>Total</i>
<i>“Colonial”</i>	1	25	4	5	<b>35</b>
<i>“Lead”</i>	3	0	9	3	<b>15</b>
<i>“Assimilate”</i>	1	6	1	2	<b>10</b>
<i>“Shame”</i>	5	1	1	1	<b>8</b>
<i>“Resilience”</i>	1	2	0	1	<b>4</b>

*Source: Data from interviews by Lauren Castillo Williamson, 2023.*

Even the top word counts themselves reveal the duality and complexity of the Filipino identity, both of power and pain. Similarly, the following themes emerged from interviews:

### **Resilience**

The greatest theme regarding Filipino identity is its history in oppression and opposition. In summation, “Filipino is a colonized identity” (Buenafe-Ze). This history of fighting and overcoming anchors itself to the current experience of Filipinos where the immigrant struggle is a cornerstone. This struggle can be acknowledged as a “duality of existence” that encompasses what so many Filipinos feel, whether as colonized natives of the Philippines, immigrants, mixed-race, and indigenous, the complexity of Filipino identity is being rooted in two cultures or even places at once. With these strong emotions and experiences, how to empower Filipinos in the United States and beyond was a central question. These interviews challenged the very notion of what empowerment means itself. When thinking of empowering this community there is the concept of the power that already exists and to further calls to action of, “Realize the power of your culture, do you realize the power of knowing who you are, where you come from, where you belong? Do you realize the power of the legacy of your people? For me it has to start there. It's like you have to know why this is important, you have to see where you can utilize that power in your life” (Buenafe-Ze).

Interviews reflected how this power is being demonstrated in the public sector, as Filipinos are driven towards mission-driven work in response to their identity. Experts described how they and their peers leverage their sensitivity as Filipinos, which manifests as a communal approach to leadership that is indicative of the culture. This is driven especially with a cultural drive to give back to the community, with many Filipinos working in missions surrounding health and medicine. Two experts highlighted strong Filipino representation and high positions in leadership and board membership for the

Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations (AAPCHO) in comparison to experiences with previous organizations as a rewarding example. Despite the delineations against colonial and Americanized identity, an expert prescribes to, “Change the narrative of who we are as Filipinos so that people feel proud about their heritage and we should actually be more cognizant of the many good things that we contribute to the society as immigrants” (Faustino-Pulliam). In fact, all interviewed experts attributed their leadership with humility and through service as part of the major tenets of Filipino culture and identity. This benefit to the sector and broader communities as one expert describes, “That comes through in my work too. I’m always wanting to be a servant leader and putting other coworkers before my own needs” (Alarcon). However, in addition to colonial mentality, the pressure to live up to the community can have its own internal toll.

### **Internalization**

The consequences of colonialism are clear in its entanglement within Filipino identity. The greatest way that has manifested is through internalized shame and disenfranchisement of cultures. “Being a Filipino is something that’s based in colonization and our social political history where they forced us native Filipinos to be homogenized. Even the language Filipino is a variety of Tagalog is just one ethnolinguistic group out of 120 in the Philippines. You get into the political context of where that identity comes from if you look at how it even became an identity” (Buenafe-Ze). Through internalization, Filipinos inherently accept the superiority of Westerners, particularly American beliefs, that a generational inferiority complex is inherited. This messaging can be particularly powerful to young immigrant and second generation children of Filipinos.

Westernization is particularly strong in the Philippines, but the push to Americanize is even stronger for immigrants. Beginning from a young age, one expert



recounts, “I was being actively taught by my parents to assimilate into American culture for our survival, we needed to make it there was no option two. My parents did not want to go back. Our Filipino identity, even when I asked about it, our language, I was told ‘Learn how to be American’” (Buenafe-Ze). The pressure to not pass on language and traditions in the United States came from fear of being othered and ostracized as immigrants. Out of this fear, Filipino immigrants like many Asian and Pacific Islander immigrants internalized the pressure to live up to the model minority myth, which falsely promises that by attaining high status, they could also gain security and become less marginalized.

The concept of shame was also a recurring theme about the Filipino experience in interviews. The Filipino language itself indicates the cultural power of shame as one expert notes, “We even have a phrase, it’s not really talked about, *walang-hiyâ*, having to live without shame. It’s really interesting that there’s negative context to trying to live without shame, but we have shame driving us a lot. I definitely think that’s something that needs to be addressed in Filipino culture” (Alarcon). Many experts in my interviews also commented on how experiences of systematic issues perpetuate the shame immigrants feel.

### **Structural Violence**

Education is a major institution of structural violence and for Filipinos, prioritizes colonialist and classist narratives that date back to when schools were first established by Catholic missionaries and Spanish colonial rule formalized power through education. Evidence of this stronghold is present to this day as, “In the Philippines they don’t even teach Tagalog in some places. And villages in the Philippines that don’t have a really strong formal educational system I think out there, obviously it’s still like if people are getting education is going to become coming from the Catholic schools...they’re already being taught in English there and that was almost 30 years ago and so Tagalog even

unfortunately is not a priority for people in the Philippines. People have to react to a global economy, again all the tiers of colonialism that have impacted the country” (Nguyen-Yap). When the reduction and eradication of Filipino languages and dialects are lost to colonial history and displacement, the question of how to preserve indigenous languages becomes harder when the Filipino language overall has been relegated. In addition to the colonial impacts on language, unjust narratives and misinformation in education in the Philippines persists.

Systems can be challenging and seem too long standing to dismantle. One expert encourages critics to trust that, “The community will educate the community” (Nguyen-Yap). In response to traditional educational institutions grappling with decolonized and equal knowledge for Filipinos, community-led education creates a pathway. To disrupt this colonial system and mentality, “We have to change the educational system that whatever you feed them and talking about the Philippines it's still very traditional teacher has the knowledge and then students are sponges we have to encourage them to experience to practice and exercise more critical thinking they have the question authority not people who would just agree because as a Catholic country we have so much respect to people of authority” (Faustino-Pulliam).

Institutionalized health inequity was another aspect of focus in the research. Experts noted a lower recognition of the social determinants of health that impact Filipinos and indicate disparities against the broader Asian & Pacific Islander population. Specifically, lesser awareness around diabetes and cardiovascular health in the Filipino community and in medical research. Two experts emphasized mental health as a particular focus in Filipino health and its absence as a measurement of success for immigrants. The isolation that Filipino immigrants feel neglect the support systems that improve health, as well as the pressure, particularly for maintaining remittances to the Philippines and living up to the model minority myth standard in the United States. All

the interviews also noted how legal and socioeconomic systems have a significant impact on the mental health and greater livelihood of Filipinos.

One expert describes how family unit disintegration from immigration poses not only cultural challenges, but economic ones as well, “So parents who left the country with relatives and that’s part of the reason we have this cycle of poverty” (Faustino-Pulliam). As natives of the Philippines leave behind or “get out” despite financial support and remittances, there is a vacuum or even “brain drain” as the expert describes. The American legal system, especially related to immigration and citizenship are a major area of hardship or even trauma for Filipinos. Beyond family disintegration, family separation due to deportation that further contributes to negative physical, emotional, and financial health of Filipinos. One expert illustrates, “I really feel like being undocumented or being deported is a form of state sanctioned violence in immigration policies that racially exclude people, which is again the legacy of the United States, this has shaped our experience here” (Buenafe-Ze). How this insecurity with citizenship status interconnects with internalization again is evident in the Filipino language itself. This notion she counters with, “We call undocumented Filipinos ‘TNT,’ *tago nang tago*, which means you're in perpetual hiding. And if you think about that mindset, how will you know who we are if we always have to hide? Literally for our own safety and even within our own Filipino community” (Buenafe-Ze). These insights further explain the deeper need for discourse around inclusion as Filipinos.

## **Inclusion**

This study was intended to not only create space for diversity and inclusion, but also examine it as a recurring theme. The interviews for this study highlight the power of class privilege and its relationship to ethnocentrism in Filipino culture. A recurring discussion point was the deep-seeded roots and remnants of classism in Filipino society, which is brought over by immigrants and solidified by the racism of the United States.

“It's almost like the whole identity revolved around [wealth] instead of us being Filipino so if we removed that classism and oldest association with these prestigious, affluent social clubs I think we can be more inclusive, unfortunately the Philippines are not inclusive to that extent” (Faustino-Pulliam). An idiosyncrasy of Filipinos she sees as evidence of this is the common phrase, “I’m Filipino, but I’m from,” followed by a prestigious neighborhood or university that is supposed to supersede the identity as a Filipino foremost.

Interviews also highlighted criticisms of Filipino culture’s participation and continuation in its own colonization through racial identity. Nearly all experts explored how colorism and ethnicism are clearly evident in the Philippines and are perpetuated in the immigrant experience in the United States. While the society of the Philippines highlights this with standards of beauty validating white adjacency. Products such as skin-lightening and bleaching products are also popular to meet the Filipino standard of appearing “fair” (Faustino-Pulliam). This is also evident in celebrities, particularly those that eventually find success in the United States, despite the positive representation it brings the community, while still reinforcing these exclusionary mindsets.

Lastly, balancing inclusion within the Filipino community is a priority to ensure equal access to support and recognition. Organizations like Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations (AAPCHO) are pushing the needle for the community. A leader in health equity, “Our organization is built on that in terms of the need for a political or advocacy voice...I feel like a lot of our communities have been left invisible” (Nguyen-Yap). Furthermore, uplifting marginalized, particularly indigenous, voices that have not been given enough of a platform. It has been those motivators of isolation and exclusion that have driven the Filipino community to prioritize it in work. The duty Filipinos believe they have in the public sector is to pay it forward. As one expert shares, “I know exactly who I am, I know where I come from, I can speak my language, and that's also what I built my career from is being an educator, a cultural scholar, and a

cultural worker trying to help others like me reconnect to who they are and where they come from” (Buenafe-Ze). By helping Filipinos reconnect with their identity and better understand their community, a stronger Filipino solidarity can be forged.

## **Section 5: Implications and Recommendations**

The hypotheses of this project were that the Filipino identity is defined by culture, language, and tradition under a unique influence of transnationalism compared to other Asian & Pacific Islander communities and that passing down of cultural identity is hindered by racism. Westernization and colorism certainly hindered self-identification and intergenerational cultural fluency. Another major hypothesis was that immigration has created a transnational Filipino identity, which produced socioeconomic challenges for immigrants that can be indicated by the prevalence of poverty and health disparities. Moreover, immigrants were reported to not only struggle to maintain deep ties with the Philippines, but also lacked a support system and strong cultural ties that enables the preservation of mental and community health. Lastly, the representation of Filipinos in media, education, and politics was a significant area of contention and acts as a barrier to a unified, decolonized identity.

As nonprofits respond to transnationalism and Westernization to unify Filipino identity, community remains the biggest solution. By establishing community and support systems for Filipinos, nonprofit leaders are establishing cultural ties and servant leadership that brings further pride to the community. While simultaneously decolonizing major education institutions, also endorsing grassroots movements and community-based education for Filipinos remains a solution in the public sector. The hardships of accessing and passing on Filipino identity is often seen as superfluous to immigrants who feel they are fighting to survive. Reports of pressure to assimilate are common, beyond the fear of being in the outgroup of a country. Nonetheless, promised and perceived socioeconomic gains of detaching from the Philippines and the culture overall to be “more American” were powerful to immigrants. Even the lasting remnants of shame and internalization that make up Filipino identity in itself make it difficult to embrace.

These leaders are doing culturally transformative work to help empower Filipino identity and break barriers. Nonprofit leaders are ensuring Filipino history and figures are celebrated to ensure recognition of contributions to the Philippines and international community. The power of identification, particularly to younger Filipino generations, is important through recognition of historical figures, current events, celebrities, and entrepreneurs in their community. This cultivated pride is crucial through next generation mentorship according to these leaders. This is also the key national pride despite this transnational identity, and an overall ethnic solidarity to destigmatize the effects of colonialism and racism. Additionally, organizational focus on equity expands beyond health and is cognizant of intersectionality with diversity and inclusion of underrepresented populations.

This research has led to the following recommendations:

1. Reform education institutionally and develop alternative learning opportunities.
  - a. Addressing colonialist structures in the Philippines and decolonization of education overall is essential. By raising awareness through community-led education, institutionalized colonialism can be dismantled.
  - b. Deconstructing classism and privilege that education itself perpetuates, particularly in the Philippines. With equal access to education, as well as ensuring reciprocity in academia and research, education can be used as a vehicle for equity instead of class politics.
2. Increase representation and pride in Filipino leaders, but recognizing there is incredibly untapped potential in talent.
  - a. Amplify pride in those that are, but recognizing Filipinos are and can be more especially for youth. “more than caregivers, more than chefs, more

than entertainers.” Increasing Filipino impact in a variety of sectors, not just health and medicine, and requiring mentorship to guide future generations.

- b. Promote leadership, particularly in the public sector. In nonprofits this is important to ensure that the community is the one serving the community and voicing its own needs. Furthermore, increasing representation in academia will improve scholarly discourse and research into marginalized ethnic and indigenous identities.
3. Position that social justice has historical roots in Filipino identity and acts as a restorative community opportunity.
    - a. Advocate to be anti-racist and reclaim indigenous and ethnic heritage to acknowledge the roots of how Filipino identity was formed. Support solidarity with marginalized groups not just in the United States, but the Philippines as well, to improve access to the experiences and historical contexts that are overshadowed.
    - b. Create a platform for Filipino experience and psychology that expands research. Re-examine Filipino emotionality as a heightened inner sensitivity and innate yearning to understand and be understood by others. Recognize how the remnants of colonialism and Westernization are present in Filipino mental health.



## Section 6: Conclusion

There is no single definition or experience of Filipino identity. This adds to the complexity of determining how it is nurtured and shared when the narrative and identity of Filipinos are so distorted. The remnants of colonialism cannot be denied and that Filipinos are distinctive in a colonial mentality that persists. The colonial mentality of Filipinos especially necessitates exploration and further research in psychology. While the Filipino identity has an unprecedented amount of struggle, there is pride in this history of resilience in the face of adversity.

The community of Filipino immigrants, particularly in the United States, requires deeper research related to their socioeconomic integration that alleviates the burden of missing safety nets and pressures of the model minority myth. There is a plethora of quantitative data available for further study. However, greater polling and research of Filipino immigrants in the United States is needed to better understand broader sentiments and trends. A major gap in research would be addressed by improving subcategorization from the large umbrella that is the identity of Asian & Pacific Islanders. Particularly

Filipinos are already driven public sector leaders that are devoted to the communities that raised them. Though many of the structural issues that both natives of the Philippines and immigrants in the United States are prolonged and intractable, the opportunities with every generation improve. Representation plays a major role for the younger generations to aspire professionally and take pride in Filipino identity personally. By enabling Filipinos to lead, the roots and context of the culture create leadership anyone can benefit from in the public sector. Lastly, this project could be continued in a complete dissertation with the depth and density of the topics around 1.) colonialism and Filipino identity 2.) transnational identity and the immigrant experiences of Filipinos.

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## **Appendix A: Structured Interview Questions**

### **Individual**

- What is your background and history with the public sector / nonprofits supporting Filipinos and the Asian & Pacific Islander (AAPI) community?
- What do you think of or how do you define Filipino identity?
- How does immigration factor into that identity?
- What does empowerment to Filipino immigrants mean to you and researchers / organizations in your experience?

### **Community**

- What are the challenges Filipino immigrants face in your professional and personal experience?
- How has the Filipino immigrant population evolved or grown within your research / current organization and previous work?
- What does a strong Filipino community or representation look like in the United States?
- How does your current research / institution / organization address the needs of the Filipino or the overall AAPI community?
- What are the strengths of your research / organization and what makes it unique?
- How could your research / organization or organizations overall expand programming and services to support the Filipino community even further?
- How do you see Filipino or AAPI identity being strengthened and shared intergenerationally? And does your work / organization play any role in this?

### **Author's Bio**

As a daughter of an immigrant, Lauren Cristine Castillo Williamson has always been very passionate about international development and migration policies. Her interest and experience in development began with her recurring volunteer work abroad in Namibia prior to college. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in International Affairs and certificate in Peace & Conflict Studies from the University of Colorado Boulder. Her previous experience in nonprofit work has had a focus on refugees and immigrants, including a resettlement agency. More recently, she has been working in corporate social responsibility for startups and major tech companies.

Her current work at Meta focuses on climate resilience, disaster preparedness, and underserved communities on a global scale. Her mission-driven work has culminated into this Master's of Nonprofit Administration at the University of San Francisco and will be continuing her research this summer for Migration Studies in Spain and Morocco. Through the unique intersection of Silicon Valley, social enterprises, and nonprofits, she hopes to create innovative social change around the world.