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IN DEFENSE OF THE X: CENTERING QUEER, TRANS, AND NON-BINARY PILIPINA/X/OS, QUEER VERNACULAR, AND THE POLITICS OF NAMING

Kay Ulanday Barrett, Karen Buenavista Hanna, Anang Palomar

ABSTRACT. This essay is an engagement of the dialectics of naming and violence, discussed from the perspectives of the trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming Pilipina/o/xs whom we interviewed in the Summer of 2020. Applying a transnational queer diasporic methodology, we center their material realities, which we feel remain missing in both scholarly and popular debates about the term “Filipinx.” Indeed, it was LGBTQI+ Pilipinxs in North America who were the first to use the term “Filipinx” and “Pilipinx” in online spaces. Instead of positioning the X as our main focus, we use it as an entry point to discuss the violence that LGBTQI+ people of Philippine-descent have historically faced for simply identifying themselves on their own terms. It is toward such violence that the queer, non-binary, and trans people who began using the X and other linguistic innovations were and are asserting themselves. Revealed are perspectives and practices of dignity, self-determination, resistance against cultural homogenization and gender gatekeeping, and self-naming as radical imagination initiated by those facing intensified carcerality and other forms of violence that stretch within and beyond nation-state boundaries.

*To those who demand this X be erased:
Have you taken the time to remember the story, not just of
Our ancestors and the Iberian royalty that demanded our conquest,
But of how they cut those like me down, told us we were
Not M or F enough, that we were too X, too Other?
They fed us to crocodiles and would not even plant their X
On our graves, the sign of their pale martyred god crowned in thorns.
Have you taken the time to uplift and empower us,
To bring us back from the belly of those who devoured us?
To fight for our rights and keep them from continuing to murder us?
Or do you just focus on a letter as if that is what will make us all free?
If I call myself a Filipinx that does not mean I force all of us to
be Filipinx*

If you call yourself a Filipina that does not mean you can force all of us to be Filipina

If you are a Filipinx, call yourself a Filipinx

If you are a Filipina, call yourself a Filipina

—From “To Mark the Spot: An Essay Poem” by Lukayo Estrella¹

At the end of June 2020, Philippines-based writer Marrian Pio Roda Ching released the article, “Is the Filipino Language Even as Gender-Neutral as We Think It Is?”² Published in CNN Philippines’ Culture web section, the article calls into question the suggestion that Filipino is a gender-neutral term. While Ching notes that technically, “Filipino, as an indicator of citizenship, is a gender-neutral word,” she reminds her readers that:

as far as languages go, it is hard to find a language that is gender-neutral in a world where imperialism, colonialism, and white supremacy persist. We may have gender-neutral words like “*magulang*,” but we curse in Filipino by calling one’s mother a whore instead of calling one’s parent a whore. We may have the gender neutral “*asawa*,” but our books still describe a mother as the light of the house while the father is the pillar. We refer to our country as “*Inang Bayan*,” often describing the violence of colonization and imperialism under a patriarchy in ways that approximate rape.

Using this context as catalyst for the creation of new identity terms, Ching traces the historical linguistic interventions of people of Philippine ancestry, focusing on women (e.g., Filipina), Filipino Americans (e.g., Pinoy, Pinoy, and Pin@y), and those who are “transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming” (e.g., Filipinx). By incorporating “Filipinx” in her article, Ching, based in Cotabato City, suggests that this newest term of expression has “found [its] way back” to the Philippines, much like the terms “Pinoy” and “Pinay” (citing Dawn Mabalon in Melinda de Jesús’s 2005 edited anthology *Pinay Power*). By asking, “How hard is it, then, to accommodate a substitution of letters if it leads to a better understanding of one’s place in the global diaspora?” Ching affirms its usage, offering a rare (at the time of this writing) Philippines-based writer’s engagement into debated discourse about the “X.”³

1. Lukayo Estrella, email interview with Karen Buenavista Hanna, Aug 20, 2020. Lukayo is an artist, educator, wordslinger, and healer from the Bikol diaspora and based in the territories of the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Wyandot. They currently reside and travel between the cities of Toronto and Ottawa, Canada.

2. Marrian Pio Roda Ching. “Is the Filipino Language Even as Gender-Neutral as We Think It Is?” *CNN Philippines*, June 29, 2020, <https://cnnphilippines.com/life/culture/2020/6/29/filipinx-gender-neutral.html>, accessed July 15, 2020.

3. Since we first wrote this essay, a number of online conversations and webinars about the use of the “X” have emerged, featuring Philippines-based scholars in

As she is in favor of these linguistic interventions, Ching notes their limitations. For example, she recognizes Indigenous Peoples who do not identify as “Filipino”; as she states, “Filipino as an identity, regardless of our good intentions, sometimes risks the erasure of pre-colonial identities such as that of the *Bangsamoro* and the *Lumad* who seek to assert their right to ancestral land and self-determination within the Philippine state.” She astutely ends the essay by indicting the structures that shape discourse, asserting, “We must focus on the historical and material conditions that surround our language and identity if we are to dismantle the imperialist, white supremacist, and capitalist patriarchy that defines the landscape of domination and oppression here in the Philippines and abroad.” In other words, changing the letters are meaningless if the material conditions of those marginalized by these systems do not also change. Foremost, we appreciate Ching’s acknowledgement that language changes across time and space and that there are historical-political-economic-social structural reasons for these changes. Her thesis about the embeddedness of hetero-patriarchy and colonization in a language otherwise posited as “gender neutral” echoed many of our thoughts.

While we praise Ching for her recognition that language changes, we wish she had gone further to historicize the term “Filipino.” In her opening paragraph, Ching writes, “That our country is called the Philippines and we are called Filipinos are both markers of a colonial past. Apart from being tagged as “*Indios*,” we were named after a king whom we never saw.” Here Ching stops short of explaining the emergence of the term “Filipino,” implying a blanket imposition onto those residing within the archipelago. However, historians note that Filipino has historically been a term of contestation. Luis Francia notes that Filipino:

Originally applied only to Creoles—Spaniards born in the Philippines. The Spaniards who had come over from the motherland didn’t care for the designation, preferring instead the term “Peninsulares,” implying a snobbish hierarchy. Anyone outside these two categories was simply an *Indio*...However, due to economic progress and a growing sense of a common cultural Hispanicized background that cut across ethnic boundaries, the Creoles, the mestizos (both Chinese and Spanish), and the educated natives came to view themselves as “Filipino.” The *Ilustrados* were at the forefront of extending the term to all

conversation with those in the United States who share their use of the X. See: “I Am FILIPINX: A Roundtable Discussion on the Emergence of #Filipinx,” featuring Andoy Evangelista, Jaya Jacobo, Kale Fajardo, Sampa Tumaliuan Westerlaken, Kaya Candaza, Joseph Ruanto-Ramirez, and Rod Singh (Twitter Live Updates: https://twitter.com/upbabaylan/status/1304358558402621440?s=21&fbclid=IwAR1rpwgO6sRSpf8GLZ5_3lkiZu-t8O6T8YLLP_LLVI0kdGKpcmZMxhtC2Ag or Virtual Discussion: <https://www.facebook.com/189687661070970/videos/614092619226067>), and Delia Aguilar and E. San Juan Jr.’s essay “A conversation on ‘Filipinx’ and its vicissitudes” <https://www.bulatlat.com/2020/10/05/a-conversation-on-filipinx-and-its-vicissitudes>

local inhabitants of *Las Islas Filipinas*—except for the Muslims, or Moros, who had never identified with the Christian majority and indeed resisted the incursions of the colonial state.⁴

In the last decades of the 19th century, Filipinos continued to broaden and evolve into a shared term of active affront (linking some with assimilationist, reformist, and revolutionary aims) against Spanish colonial corruption and the Church's abuse of power in the archipelago. Given this history, it is perhaps unsurprising that the term, almost 150 years later, continues to provoke a continuum of strong feelings while also opening up debate about the politics of naming.

Furthermore, we notice that Ching's discussion of "Filipinx" is thin. In the section entitled, "Is Filipinx a valid term to use?", Ching explains:

Unlike the now commonly used Pinoy and Pinay, the word 'Filipinx' is a relatively new label that Filipino-Americans have been using to differentiate their own "identities and experiences." Debates regarding the use of Filipinx as an identifier pops up every now and then in an increasingly online world, as every side asserts seemingly strong points of contention such as inclusivity, gender neutrality, and solidarity.

By focusing liberally on a broad inclusivity of "identities and experiences" in the United States, it was a missed opportunity to highlight the lived material violence experienced by non-binary, gender non-conforming, and other LGBTQ people all over the world.

Collectively, we, the co-authors of this essay, have served on national funding boards and selection committees for social justice foundations, spoken and keynoted at global forums at the United Nations and various international campaigns and conferences. We have observed that there is an obvious lack of resources, support, infrastructure, and safety of transgender, non-binary, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and gender variant people in every facet of these conversations. We have worked in the streets and in communities that are disabled, trans, queer, non-binary, undocumented, *and* migrant at multi-generational capacities. In all of these formations, there is urgency around systemic harm and violence happening to LGBTQI+ people. Their voices, no matter where their home country, are considered vital, political, and at center since access to resources for those communities are immeasurably obstructed.

We write this essay to recast trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming Pilipina/o/x/os and their experiences of violence and self-determination into the center of this discussion.⁵ Indeed, it was

4. Luis Francia, *A History of the Philippines: From Indios Bravos to Filipinos* (New York: Abrams Press, 2019), 112.

5. We use Pilipina/o/x and move between Pilipino, Filipina, Filipinx, Pilipinx, etc. in recognition that these identity markers are fluid and changeable, and that not everyone uses the X. See: Karen B. Hanna, "A Call for Healing: Transphobia, Homophobia, and Historical Trauma in Pilipina/o/x American Activist Organizations,"

LGBTQI+ Pilipinxs (in North America) who were the first to use the term “Filipinx” and “Pilipinx” in online spaces. But instead of positioning the X as our main focus, we use it as an entry point to discuss the violence that LGBTQI+ people of Philippine-descent have historically faced for simply identifying themselves on their own terms.⁶ It is toward such violence that the queer, non-binary, and trans people who began using the X and other linguistic innovations were and are asserting themselves.

Using a transnational queer diasporic methodology in which we write collectively from the Philippines and the United States, this piece is an engagement of the X discussed from the perspectives of the trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming Pilipina/o/xs whom we interviewed.⁷ By amplifying multiple diverse and sometimes contradictory insights across nation-state boundaries, we apply English-literature scholar David Eng’s “methodology of queer diasporas.” Eng argues that a methodology of queer diasporas “declines the normative impulse to recuperate lost origins, to recapture the mother or motherland, and to valorize dominant notions of social belonging and racial exclusion that the nation-state would seek to naturalize and legitimate through the inherited logics of kinship, blood, and identity.”⁸ Instead, it “highlights the breaks, discontinuities, and differences, rather than the origins, continuities, and commonalities, of diaspora.”⁹

Moreover, we insist on grounding this essay in queer diasporic epistemologies. Queer diasporic epistemologies, we argue, interrupt and blur “here” versus “there” binary logics (e.g. “queerness is a Western convention” vs. “gender-crossing is inherently ‘Filipino’”) that reproduce heteronormative and homonormative ideas while simultaneously naturalizing and preserving the nation-state. Robert Diaz argues in his pathbreaking collection *Diasporic Intimacies: Queer Filipinos and Canadian Imaginaries*:

Diaspora disrupts orders of knowledge that are shaped by gender, race, sexuality, and geography. As Gayatri Gopinath suggests, “to understand queerness as diasporic and diaspora as queer is to recuperate ‘desires, practices, and

Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy 32, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 696-714; *Diasporic Intimacies: Queer Filipinos and Canadian imaginaries* Robert Diaz, Marissa Largo, and Fritz Pino, eds. (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2018). Kay identifies as a queer trans Pilipinx man, Karen identifies as a queer Pilipina/x Thai Chinese American woman with cis and straight privilege, Anang identifies as a queer transnational womxn.

6. LGBTQI+ refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and related communities.

7. Kay writes from Jersey City, NJ, Karen from Queens, NY, and Anang from San Juan City, Philippines. The perspectives raised are not meant to represent all queer and trans people in the diaspora. Rather, they are some insights that we feel have been missing from the discussions. We used email to contact and solicit responses from interviewees, as COVID-19 impacted our ability to conduct in-person interviews.

8. David Eng, *The Feeling of Kinship: Queer Liberalism and the Racialization of Intimacy* (Durham, N.C., Duke University Press, 2010), 13-14.

9. Eng, 14-15.

subjectivities that are rendered impossible or unimaginable—within conventional diasporic or nationalist imaginaries.”¹⁰

Framing queerness as diasporic and vice versa upends conventional nationally bound notions of naming. Revealed are perspectives and practices of dignity, self-determination, and radical imagination enacted by those facing intensified carcerality and violence that stretch within and beyond nation-state boundaries.

Queer Filipinx Vernacular and Violence

In his landmark text, *Philippine Gay Culture*, J. Neil Garcia cites the emergence of “colorful” “subcultural lingos” of urban gay men called swardspeak, gayspeak and baklese in the Philippines in the 1970s (422).¹¹

Martin Manalansan’s *Global Divas* expands Garcia’s analysis of swardspeak, discussing its use by gay immigrant Filipino men in New York City in the 1990s:

The word swardspeak comes from sward, a Cebuano word for homosexual and/or sissy... swardspeak is not a mere bundle of words but actually reflects the politico-historical and cultural experiences of multiply marginalized men from a former Spanish and American colony. Furthermore, swardspeak appropriates elements from dominant Filipino, American, and Spanish codes, and re-articulates their symbolic meanings... Filipino gay men use swardspeak to enact ideas, transact experiences, and perform identities that showcase their abject relationship to the nation. At the same time, the practice of swardspeak highlights Filipino gay men’s complicated struggles in negotiating their sense of belonging, or citizenship, and self-identity... Filipino gay men claim pleasures and attempt to work out miseries and disappointments by utilizing idioms and linguistic practices that capture these men’s search for modernity, the itinerant quality of immigrant life, and the sometimes-elusive cosmopolitan ideal of living life away from the homeland.”¹²

The scholarly works of both Garcia and Manalansan lay a foundation for understanding how queer vernacular and linguistic wordplay serve as both rejection and reconstitution of “the colonial” in “colonized” Filipino gay male subjects as they forge identities, build community, and seek pleasure.

10. Diaz et al. (2018), xxvii.

11. Baklese is a reference to *bakla*. J. N. Garcia, *Philippine Gay Culture: Binabae to Bakla, Silahis to MSM* (Diliman: The University of the Philippines Press, 1996), 109; According to Manalansan (2003), “*Bakla* is the Tagalog term that encompasses homosexuality, hermaphroditism, cross-dressing, and effeminacy,” ix.

12. Manalansan, 46-47.

We build on their scholarship by turning to the queer vernacular used by queer women, trans, and non-binary Pilipinos in the Philippines and transnational queer and trans migrant Pilipinx in the diaspora in 2020. For example, trans and gay Pilipinx use “nanette imbentor” to describe a person who invents stories or creates stories as if they were true. This is a reference to a Pilipina actress named, Nanette Inventor, popular in Philippine pop culture in the 90s. Trans and queer Pilipinx would say it like, “*Nag-nanette na naman si bakla*”¹³, meaning, “Someone invented a story.” Another example is “chanda romero,” or someone who has a big stomach. Referring to another Pilipina actress, Chanda Romero, and the *tiyan* (which is pronounced “chan” and means stomach in Filipino), queer and trans people will say, “*Bakla, pogi sana kaya lang ma-CHANda romero*,” or “S/he/they [someone] looks cute but s/he/they has big “CHAN-da romero.”

The style of communication is quick as well as lighthearted. This playful sense of humor embedded into everyday language must be understood within the contextual everyday violence LGBTQIA+ Pilipina/x/os face as gender and sexual minorities in a hetero-patriarchal cissexist world who have doubly inherited historical traumas related to centuries of colonial violence.¹⁴ Over 500 years of Spanish and American influence, gender-crossing in the Philippines has become ignored at best and pathologized at worst.¹⁵ These histories shape the present moment.

Violence against transgender people in the United States today is considered a national epidemic by large non-profit organizations, such as The Anti-Violence Project (AVP). In the U.S. in 2019, at least 25 transgender or gender non-conforming people were fatally shot or killed by other violent means, according to The Human Rights Campaign. Truthfully, this data is inherently under-reported, as considerations for violence and death of transgender and non-binary people can be

13. The term *bakla* was originally used (and still is used) as a slur, but it has been reclaimed as a term of empowerment and endearment among people who identify as *bakla*.

14. Just as in other indigenous two-spirit communities globally, gender-crossing has a long history in the Philippines. During the Spanish colonial period (1565-1898), the Spanish massacred *babayan* leaders, some of whom could be considered gender-crossers. Some escaped underground in order to survive. Although *babayan* and their regional equivalents continue to exist today in small numbers, their societal power has greatly diminished (39). Catholicism condemned same-sex desire, and traditional gender-crossing became increasingly difficult to maintain given Spanish norms of *machismo* (J. N. Garcia, “Villa, Montano, Perez: Postcoloniality and Gay Liberation in the Philippines,” in *Asiapacificqueer: Rethinking Genders and Sexualities*, F. Martin et al., eds. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press 2008), 167. During the American period, gender-crossing continued despite stigma. Filipina/os’ ideas of sexuality and gender, increasingly influenced by ideas derived from the US’ and Europe’s burgeoning field of sexology, shifted further (Garcia 2008, 167). New perspectives deepened the perception of homosexuality as perversion, conflated gender and sexuality and imposed a “homo/hetero” binary onto sexuality (Garcia 2008, 165). Stigmatization occurs predominantly in the elite educated class, as working-class and poor communities often ignore one’s deviant sexuality and gender as long as they can work and gain income for their families.

15. See: Garcia, 2008.

misconstrued due to frequent misgendering by authorities, statistical reports, journalists, and media outlets when there is even coverage. Moreover, trans and non-binary people's assigned-at-birth families, who for various transphobic reasons and public stigma, may not disclose accurate sexuality and gender identity of people who are harmed. Meanwhile in the Philippines, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of LGBTQI+ people are not only excluded from receiving benefits of the 'Social Amelioration Programme' (SAP), but also organizations, collectives, and communities in Southeast Asian countries, who are in need of urgent need of access to basic healthcare and emergency support, are being scapegoated, and even facing serious human rights abuses.¹⁶ These multiple realities can demonstrate refusal to acknowledge trans and non-binary people's experiences, skewing statistics and analysis on demographics, legislation, safety, reporting and enforcement. In essence, cultural erosion strips not just individual dignity of transgender people, but additionally severs transgender people from the accuracy of their lived experiences and broader community relationships. Outside of individual murder case coverage, thus far, there is no funding or government support data coverage about the safety and concerns that affect transgender and non-binary people directly.

Transgender people and women of color specifically face terrifying violence in the United States. AVP's report *Hate Violence on Transgender Communities*, published in 2017 shares the majority of the victims of hate violence homicides (72%) in 2013 were transgender women.¹⁷ More than two thirds of the homicide victims were transgender women, while 67% of victims of homicide were transgender women of color. Black and Latinx women are immensely impacted by police violence, interpersonal violence, and state violence of all kinds. In the realm of police violence, transgender people of color were more likely to experience police violence. Transgender people of color were 6 times more likely to experience physical violence from the police compared to white cisgender survivors and victims.

According to the Trans Legal Mapping Report authored by The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), which spans global analysis by country and continent of trans and non-binary people's rights, trans people are not, by policy, supported to change their names or gender markers in the Philippines. This legal precedent supposes that if there is not recognition before the law, how can there be cultural and societal recognition for safety when the court system doesn't permit trans and non-binary people to be who they are formally and legislatively? Though it is not legislated in the Philippines, IGLA's data, however, does highlight in some lower provincial courts, few

16. ASEAN SOGIE Caucus. "Call to Donors and Funders Operating in Southeast Asia: Mobilize Rainbow Resilience," (May 11, 2020).

<https://aseansogiecaucus.org/news/asc-news/143-call-to-donors-and-funders-operating-in-southeast-asia-mobilize-rainbow-resilience>, accessed Aug 21, 2020.

17. https://avp.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/ncavp_transhvfactsheet.pdf

trans people who have been able to access name changes and/or gender marker changes. The lack of sanction and legal infrastructure to support trans and non-binary people's identity, gender markers, and names emphasize a distinctive obliteration and cultural shortfall by many cis and heterosexual Filipinos who have the privilege to identify with their assigned-at-birth names and gender markers. By actively blocking pathways to name changes and gender marker changes, it can be determined that transgender and non-binary people are not within the realm of legal acceptance which can lead to violence in private, public, and institutional spheres. For example in the case of Gretchen Custodia Diez, a trans woman from Manila, Diez "was prevented from using a women's restroom by a janitress who insisted that she use the men's restroom."¹⁸ She recorded it as evidence. She was later arrested by the police because they said, "Diez recorded the incident via Facebook live."

This visible denial of legal endorsement encourages invisibility and presumable lack of authenticity in the Philippine understanding of citizenship. Transgender, *bakla*, *tibo*, *bading*, intersex, non-binary and queer community do exist and in fact still engage in self-determination despite government protocol within provincial courts.¹⁹ This possibility means that there are people, on a local level, invested in the livelihoods and survival of transgender and non-binary people in the Philippines.

Transphobic gendered violence based on a gender binary is normalized as microaggressions that occur daily. For example, misgendering occurs regularly in the Philippines, as non-binary and trans people are frequently misgendered when they enter public establishments, such as malls, restaurants, and government institutions. As is typical in Filipino society, the workers in these spaces call visitors "ma'am" or "sir" out of respect. When corrected, their reactions vary. Either they look at you twice, or say things like "Oh, *akala ko lalaki*" [Oh, I thought it was a man" (usually muttering to themselves)].

Such expansive forms of violence shape non-binary and trans Filipina/o/xs' methods of survival. Queer vernacular is just one small way that queer and trans people defend themselves against everyday microaggressions and outright violence, asserting themselves and forging community among others experiencing similar forms of violence within and beyond the nation-state.

The Emergence of the X

Filipinx and Pilipinx are examples of self-naming by queer, non-binary, and trans people. Contrary to those who believe the X

18. Talabong, R. "Trans woman arrested after being blocked from using the women's restroom," *Rappler*, Aug 13, 2019, <https://rappler.com/nation/transgender-woman-arrested-after-blocked-using-women-restroom-cubao>, accessed Aug 21, 2020.

19. *Tibo* is the Tagalog slang-word for "tomboy" and is used to refer to lesbians. *Bading* is another word for *bakla* or "gay" in Tagalog.

originated in academia, it was actually everyday queer, trans, non-binary, and gender non-conforming Pilipinx in the Filipinx diaspora playing with language and identity in online posts and digital communication who began using the term.²⁰ It was in their appreciation for the creative and gender expansive sentiments behind the creation of the term Latinx that “Filipinx” and “Pilipinx” was born.²¹

While some have critiqued the X for “cultural appropriation” of Latinx and Afxlatinx, Sony Coráñez Bolton’s forthcoming “A Tale of Two X’s: Queer Filipinx and Latinx Linguistic Intimacies” moves beyond such critique, suggesting the X’s revolutionary possibility.²² Coráñez Bolton argues that a comparative framework is necessary for understanding the limits and possibilities of Filipinx/Pilipinx, which he names as “a product of borrowing.”²³ For this author, a comparative framework between Latinx and Filipinx Studies reveals that:

Filipinx or Pilipinx should not just be reduced to a more inclusive gender-neutral term...[Rather,] a “Hispanic-American” analytic [that complicates Filipino Studies’ tendency to center US empire as the *only* antagonist Filipino draws upon] serves as a gesture of comparative Ethnic Studies meant to understand the comparative racialization of Latinxs and Filipinx within a US multiracial imaginary which connects histories of westward discourses of Manifest Destiny *and* US transpacific empire building. As such the “Filipinx” of Filipinx American Studies represents an exciting intervention into the deconstructionist operations of what was/is Filipino American critique.

20. See: Hanna 2017 and Kim Compoc. “Weaving Our Sovereignities Together: Maximizing *Ea* for Filipinx and Hawaiians,” *Amerasia Journal* 45 no. 3 (2019): 316–335. 2019.

21. See: Sony Coráñez Bolton, “A Tale of Two X’s: Queer Filipinx and Latinx Linguistic Intimacies” in *Filipinx American Studies: An Interdisciplinary Reckoning*, eds. Rick Bonus and Antonio Tiongson, Fordham University Press (forthcoming); Kevin L. Nadal, *Filipino American Psychology: A Handbook of Theory, Research, and Clinical Practice*, 2nd Edition (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2020), 8. On the politics of Latinx, see: Macarena Gómez-Barris and Licia Fiol-Matta, “Introduction: *Las Américas Quarterly*,” *American Quarterly* 66, no. 3 (2014): 493–504; Gilbert Guerrero and Gilbert Orbea, “The argument against the use of the term ‘Latinx,’” *The Phoenix* (Nov. 19, 2015), retrieved from http://swarthmorephoenix.com/2015/11/19/the_argument_against_the_use_of_the_term_latinx/; C. Salinas Jr. and A. Lozan, “Mapping and recontextualizing the evolution of the term Latinx: An environmental scanning in higher education,” *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 1–14 (2017) DOI: 10.1080/15348431.2017.1390464; and Jessica Marie Johnson, “Thinking about the ‘x.’” *African American Intellectual History Society Blog* (2015): <http://www.aaihs.org/thinking-about-an-x/> (accessed March 18, 2017); The term Latine has emerged as a response to debates around the X in Latinx communities. See: C. M. deOnís, “What’s in an ‘x’?: An Exchange about the Politics of ‘Latinx,’” *Chiricú Journal: Latina/o Literatures, Arts, and Cultures* 1.2 (Spring 2017): 78–91.

22. Coráñez Bolton. In 2020, in-depth engagement of the terms “Filipinx” and “Pilipinx” remains limited. See: Nadal 2020 for a helpful overview of various Filipino American identity terms “Pilipino,” “pinoy,” “pinay,” “Filipina/o,” “Filipin@,” “Pin@y,” “Filipinx,” and “Pilipinx.”

23. Coráñez Bolton.

In other words, Coráñez Bolton suggests that Latinx Studies might “queer” Filipino American Studies by forcing it to reckon with previously unaddressed questions, including that of indigeneity and settler colonialism, in addition to US empire building. Here Coráñez Bolton contests a common concern raised by critics of the X that Filipinx is merely an outcome of appropriation by raising the productive solidarities that can emerge from it.

When the terms “Filipinx” and “Pilipinx” emerged in academic scholarship starting around 2017, it is likely they had already been in use for several years. In 2020, aside from Coráñez Bolton’s forthcoming article, scholarly discussion about the X primarily resides in footnotes or short paragraphs in which authors share reasoning for their use of these and similar terms.²⁴ Most scholars use Filipinx to “destabilize” the gender binary that requires people to choose either masculine or feminine and, as Melissa Nievera-Lozano puts it, “to be inclusive of people who identify as transgender, genderqueer, or non-binary.”²⁵ Others utilize terms like Filipina/o/x or move between Filipina/o, Filipina, Filipino, and Filipinx to show that ethnic identity markers are specific to individual people and communities and subject to change.²⁶ That some authors have not footnoted an explanation for their use of the term suggests Filipinx’s growing mainstream adoption to refer to people of Philippine descent in both North America and the Philippines.²⁷ A notable reflection of its acceptance into the academic lexicon is the creation of *Alon*, a new journal for Filipinx American and Diasporic Studies, which released its first call for papers in 2020.

24. For example, see: Hanna 2017; Thomas Sarmiento, “Diasporic Filipinx Queerness, Female Affective Labor, and Queer Heterosocial Relationalities in *Letters to Montgomery Clift*,” *Women, Gender, and Families of Color* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2017): 105-128; J. Chan, “Complexities of racial identity development for Asian Pacific islander Desi American (APIDA) college students,” *New Directions for Student Services* 160 (2017):11-23; Ernest “Niki” Libarios, Jr., Melissa Arriba, Chris M. Lucas, Kawehionalani Goto, and Roderick N. Labrador, “Engaging Filipinx Americans in Higher Education to Foster Student Success,” *Journal Committed to Social Change and Race and Ethnicity* 4, no. 2 (2018); Diaz et al., 2018; *The Pilipinx Radical Imagination Reader*, Nievera-Lozano, Melissa and Anthony A. Santa-Ana, eds. (San Francisco: PAWA, 2018); Nikki Abeleda, Mikayla Aruta Konefal, and Katherine Nasol. “Gender Justice and Transgender Rights in the Pilipinx Community,” *Asian American Policy Review* (2018-19); Rita Kohli, Yu-Chi Lin, Nhung Ha, Amarilyz Jose, and Chadi Shini, “A Way of Being: Women of Color Educators and Their Ongoing Commitments to Critical Consciousness,” *Teaching and Teacher Education* 82 (March 2019): 24-32; Compoc (2019).

25. Nievera-Lozano, Melissa, “Introduction” in Nievera-Lozano, Melissa and Anthony A. Santa-Ana (2018).

26. Hanna (2017); Diaz et al. (2018); Sarmiento (2017): 128.

27. See: Tony DelaRosa, “Lessons of ‘Radical Imagination’: What the Filipinx Community Can Learn from the Black Community,” *Asian American Policy Review* 28 (2017-18); Arjee J. Restar, Alexander Adia, et al., “Barriers and facilitators to uptake of condoms among Filipinx transgender women and cisgender men who have sex with men: A situated socio-ecological perspective,” *Global Public Health: An International Journal for Research, Policy and Practice* 15, no. 4 (2020): 520-531.

In short, these arguments bolster Ching's point that language is dynamic. The X is a product of the social-economic-cultural-political-environmental forces that shape it, and has been cultivated as a marker for the kind of world in which we wish to live. We now turn to three themes that emerged during our interviews, conducted via email in Summer of 2020: Dialectics of Naming and Violence, In Resistance Against Cultural Homogenization and Gender Gatekeeping, and Self-Naming as Radical Imagination. These themes are grounded in queer epistemologies that center the material realities of the trans, queer, and non-binary people we interviewed, which we feel remain missing from both scholarly and popular discussion.

Dialectics of Violence and Naming: Naming as Threat to Social Order

The assertion that “Filipina” is gender neutral ultimately doesn't consider the accounts of the word itself, how “Filipina” can be connected to trauma for people who are not quintessentially considered in binary gender constructs or conventional mores of how “Filipina” is publicly and institutionally perceived. It is also vital to consider how the term can be weaponized through misgendering and erasure of many people whose gender may not be witnessed as feminine or cisgender. Filipina in our homes and family contexts in the Philippines and in the United States has forever meant “girl” and “woman.” For some of us, this identity is not our own. This inaccuracy purports and assumes that Filipina mainstream experience embraces all experiences of gender and sexuality for all assigned female at birth. Oftentimes it is met at worst with physical violence and at best with normative erasure.

Violence begins through the implementation and normalization of the gender binary starting in childhood in both the Philippines and in the diaspora. According to Roxanne Doron, a LGBTQI+ activist and the founder and Executive Director of *Bisdak Pride*, based in Cebu, Philippines:

My experience and with so many others like me would point out that by mere suspicion you are already prone to various forms of exclusion which begins at a very young age. Suspicion begets shaming, threats, and attacks. It was a childhood experience (with blood stains attached to it) which forms part on how I grow up, and in the process how I deal with those people. Unfortunately, my childhood experiences still hold true today with varying degrees. Then and now, the accusers were the ones giving labels, and how I self-identify already forms part of my consciousness as I grew up as an adolescent and a young adult. Unfortunately, the self-identification I consciously

identified with was a result of various labels being shamele
bombarded upon me while I grow up and learn to be who I am.²⁸

Here Roxanne shares both the emotional and physical harm they experienced as a child, and the impacts it had on their self-identification at a young age. Kert Tandog, a middle class, disabled, non-binary, gay Professor of Anthropology at the University of the Philippines Mindanao, based in Davao City, Mindanao, alludes to similar threats imposed by their father by way of their mother:

Hindi pa rin ako makapagsel self identify bilang gay at non-binary sa pamilya ko (liban sa nanay ko) dahil may takot na hindi nila maintindihan at buwagin nila ang aking relasyon sa aking girlfriend. May threats din na baka may gawin ang tatay ko. [I also still can't self-identify as gay and non-binary to my family (except for my mother) because I have a fear they would not understand or they would break my relationship with my girlfriend if they knew. My mother also warned me that my father might react in a certain way.]²⁹

Irish Inoceto, a lesbian woman and masculine presenting Chairperson of Iloilo Pride Team based in Iloilo City, Western Visayas, echoes both Roxanne's and Kert's sentiments about traumatic experiences of gender policing and pressures to conform by their family:

Even when I was young and didn't really have a word for what I was, I was coined more boyish than the other girls in my family. I didn't like dresses or girly stuff much. And even then my mom forced me to wear them. Even with just the slight trace of being queer my mom has been trying to erase that from my personality. When I identified as a lesbian it was not until I was in college, although it was a more liberal environment, one can still feel people judging you. Every time I'm with a girl people assume that we're together. People think they have the right to call you tomboy and that's your only identity. So have I ever felt excluded, attacked, threatened or shamed? The answer is YES. All the time. The moment I showed that I was different from the gender roles dictated by society I was treated differently. I am labeled butch by others in the community, but I identify as lesbian masculine presenting. I don't necessarily identify with the word butch. I also don't conform to the patriarchal power divisions in a relationship of butch-femme. I have felt excluded even in some LBQ groups simply because I am not butch enough.³⁰

28. R. Doron, email interview with Anang Palomar, Aug 20, 2020.

29. K. Tandog, email interview with Anang Palomar, Aug 20, 2020.

30. Irish Inoceto, email interview with Anang Palomar, Aug 20, 2020.

For Irish, being othered with labels forced upon them was a constant part of growing up, which has continued to today. The right to self-name has thus played an important role in Irish's life, as societal labels do not match their self-definition.

Jade Phoenix Martinez, a trans femme performance poet and actress based in Los Angeles, CA, says that the X has created for her both a space of belonging and safety from violence as a trans femme living outside of her ancestral homeland. Jade writes:

As a filipinx-american I mostly appreciate the use of “x” in Fili-pinx/Pilpinx as a signifier in our shared community spaces as a way signaling a more inclusive and safer space for myself and my peers, as someone that has experienced so much transphobia in most of the filipino community spaces I have been a part of growing up, and when so many of us trans and gender nonconforming filipinx’s with similar experiences share in, the use of “X” in any community gathering or event at least makes me feel much more welcomed and seen, with a sense of deeper belonging.

It is also a helpful way to find and connect with other queer and trans folks amongst our widely spread and diverse diaspora. The hashtag alone on twitter has connected me to many folks wrestling with many of the same struggles and questions of identity and home and culture that so many of us feel disconnected from. The solidarity that comes with having shared wonder or longing for home and belonging and the bonds that are formed in those moments of vulnerability, is like a taste of Lola’s sinigang for the soul.³¹

Gayatri, a trans woman living in Manila, speaks to how society continues surveillance and gender policing couched in respectability politics even after one becomes an adult:

I encounter microaggressions that suggest “you don’t belong here.” In a restaurant for example, people look at you as you enter the scene, as if questioning your presence. Even in the company of your friends, you are told to behave. Being loud or just asserting your *kabaklaan* (Diaz, 2018) is enough ground for censure. Violence comes in the form of behavioural policing. You cannot be *bakla* and respectable at the same time. Your existence in the eyes of others is always conditional.³²

Gayatri understands naming as not just interpersonally impacting friends and neighbors, but also holding the power to challenge the overall “social order”:

31. J. P. Martinez, email interview with Kay Ulanday Barrett, Aug 14, 2020.

32. Gayatri, email interview with Anang Palomar, Aug 20, 2020.

People are afraid of the power to name. By using language ourselves, we are able to assert who we are and claim our discursive spaces. There is always contestation because asserting ourselves threatens the social order. So we must keep going.

For Gayatri, in the Philippines, the name—whether represented as X or not—does not seem to matter. Rather, it is the process of asserting oneself discursively that she believes has the potential to challenge traditional epistemologies, which shape the material conditions of those marginalized from positions of power.

In Resistance to Cultural Homogenization and Gender Gatekeeping

For the last several years, every few months, predominantly cis and straight people of Philippine ancestry debate and reject “Filipinx” and related X terms on social media. During these often-public debates, trans, non-binary, and queer people (usually in the minority) intervene in frustration.³³ It is not the lack of unity we find concerning, but more so the intensity in which these debates and rejections seem to occur. In fact, we have noticed a hyper-defensiveness from cis-straight people about the x and a hypervigilance and reactive gatekeeping around language that exceeds those of the 1990s to the present around the @ symbol in Pilipin@ and Filipin@.³⁴ Some people we interviewed described it as a form of linguistic gatekeeping.

Some of the people we interviewed find it curious that some cis Pilipinas push back on the use of the X while also using the existence of pre-colonial non-binary and trans women, *bakla*, and *tibo* to argue that gender egalitarianism is inherent in Pilipino culture. To them, it feels both selective and colonial to call upon transfemme

33. In one exchange, a cis and presumably straight immigrant Filipino was upset that several Filipino Americans had publicly chastised her for not using the term Filipinx to identify themselves. She was incredulous that American-born Filipinos had the audacity to tell her, a Philippine-born Filipino, how to identify. She likened this chastising to linguistic imperialism, noting that Filipinx was not a term used by Philippine migrant workers outside of the United States. While we don't agree with the imposition of the X or any other name onto people, we were troubled by the implications embedded in her remarks, including that Philippine-born Filipinos were the “real” Filipinos, that migrants did not use the X, and that if they did, they were merely following a trend set by American-born Filipinos. Most troubling was the erasure of non-binary and trans migrants as potential users of the X or other self-naming forms of queer vernacular. The heated debate culminated in an honest and amicable off-line discussion/education session.

34. The @ symbol remains prevalent in some diasporic academic and non-academic literature with seemingly little to no pushback (see for example, A. M. Brazal, R. Odchigüe, in “Cyberchurch and Filipin@ Migrants in the Middle East,” S. Snyder, J. Ralston, A. M. Brazal, eds. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); V. R. Chan, “Visible But Yet Invisible—Filipin@ Academics in Diaspora: A Personal Reflection of the 35th Ecumenical Philippine Conference in Bonn,” *Fisch und Vogel: Nachrichten aus christlicher Solidarität mit den Philippinen*, <https://fisch-und-vogel.de/2019/11/visible-but-yet-invisible-filipino-academics-in-diapora/>, accessed Aug 15, 2020.

experiences and articulate vague connections to indigeneity that only seems to fulfill the benefit of straight and non-trans people. For some of the people we interviewed, the logic shores up past trauma, which Andrea Alakran, a Queer Filipinx writer based in Oakland, CA, states is one reason that naming is important to them “after being ostracized from so many cis-het spaces by our own people.”³⁵

Another way that selectivity plays out is regarding critique that the X undermines decoloniality because it is not part of the pre-colonial alphabet. But what about the F in Filipino and Filipina? Edxie Betts, a Black Indigenous Filipinx based in Los Angeles, CA offers the astute reminder that the F:

was [only] formally applied through the 1987 Constitution. From the ‘*abakada*’ alphabet, we now have the enriched version which includes “foreign” letters (i.e., not part of the original *baybayin*) like *x, z, c, f, v* and *j* among others (sourced from *filipiknow*). I find it fascinating that the people who historically never had an issue with the ‘F’ being added to the language of the so-called Philippines are now in an uproar about the ‘X’ being added, especially when the X added to the end of Filipinx was created to include the experiences of queer, trans, gender nonconforming, intersex, Bakla ppl’s back into the erased and criminalized histories of the islands. And by fascinating, I mean to say transphobic, colonized and cis hetero sexist. The gate keepers of language will have us questioning this grammatical rule breaking as if certain languages weren’t imposed by the conqueror and as though the subaltern doesn’t often need to disrupt, reclaim, rule break languages learned and imposed to counter dominant ruling class narratives of oppression and exclusion. How does the subaltern center themselves?³⁶

Andrea too recognizes that like Filipino, the term Filipinx linguistically continues to normalize Spanish and American colonial imperialist history (reinforced by Filipino elites and educated classes), who brutally and systematically sought to homogenize a diverse people and erase Indigenous autonomy and self-determination under the guise of one nation:³⁷

The consequence of [colonization] is AN ABSENCE, one that doesn’t leave me with many options. I can’t and shouldn’t choose any random identity from any indigenous group in the so-called Philippines. I could make up a new name, but how would other Filipinx in diaspora find + recognize me? Yes—it’s possible for us to create new words and identities. But it’s a painful process to always have to create something out of a history of

35. A. Alakran, email interview with Kay Ulanday Barrett, Aug 13, 2020.

36. E. Betts, email interview with Kay Ulanday Barrett, Aug 14, 2020.

37. See: Francia. 2019

loss (though we have done and will do it anyway). Many of us will not be able to retrace our ancestral origins. So far, “Filipinx” is how we’ve been able to see and locate each other in this wide world of diaspora, unbelonging, and cis-heteronormativity... It’s yet another authenticity check, another way to deny people of their chosen names without acknowledging the trauma of displacement, of fragmentation, of cis-heteronormativity, of rebuilding, of creating meaning, of starting anew.

Both Edxie and Andrea find the X is imperfect but recognize the effort toward decolonization on their own terms as non-binary people. Foremost, they recognize that trans and non-binary people are not pre-colonial fixtures but agents in this present moment interested in changing language and all other oppressive power structures. This includes the ways in which we might unknowingly be using such structures in our policing of others.

Open to changing terms, Andrea states, “A non-binary friend from the Latinx community also gave me more information on using ‘Latine,’ which can be more accessible in terms of pronunciation and screen readers. So I’m thinking about using “Filipine” also!” We note the fluidity and inter-relationality in Andrea’s process as well as attention to accessibility and ableism in her process of finding and creating decolonial language.

J.A. Ruanto-Ramirez, an Indigenous, queer, refugee scholar born in the Philippines with a father who is Ifugao/Ilokano and whose mother is Iranun/Sambali/Sambal-Ita, based in Southern California, has also been cognizant of ableism embedded in discourse around the X:

The responses to queer, trans, and allied Filipinx has been met with ableist comments that have been used on queer and trans individuals as forms of verbal violence. These ableist responses contribute to the re-traumatization of many queer and trans individuals on their “coming to identity” processes and how they have been met with violence from their family and peers. Tagalog phrases such as “*Mga tanga kayo!*” (roughly— “You all are stupid!”) and “*Hindi niyo ginagamit ang utak niyo!*” (“You all are not using your brains!”) not only bring into the forefront the ableist languages around cognitive behaviors and intellectual disabilities, but are also commonly used against queer and trans Filipinx when they first “come out.” “*Para kang tanga!*” (roughly— “You seem stupid!”) and “*Nakakahiya kayo!*” (roughly— “You are shameful!”) has been used on social media as comments against those who use the “x” and how those in diaspora are lacking in cultural understanding of Filipino language structures and therefore, has become models of un-Filipino-like qualities (notice how I maintain the usage of “o” in this sentence). How many times have queer and trans Filipinx hear their gender, gender identity, gender expression, and sexuality being based on others’ perceived notion of them being “stupid” and being

“a disgrace?” How many instances have queer and trans Filipinx been told that being “gay” (as a lump-all category) is “not Filipino” by their own family members? Not only are queer and trans Filipinx navigating digital violence, but they are also reexperiencing the traumatic rhetoric that was used against them by those who they are / were close to. The re-traumatization through verbal violence against those who are trying to find an identity and seek community only reinforces the violence they are continuously experiencing “in community” and “in family”—as individuals who are seen as being “stupid (*tanga*),” “worthless (*walang kwenta*),” and “disgraceful (*nakakahiya*).” The use of these rhetoric decentralizes queer and trans Filipinx aspirations to be seen, heard, and have justice, and instead, centers cis-heterosexual Filipino-ness that demands any form of identity deviance to be reprimanded - just like the how queer and trans Filipinxs’ identities are seen as deviant and needs to be punished “back into being normal.” Therefore, I argue, that the demand for Filipin“o” is a continuation of ableist cultural homogenization, reducing Filipin“x” as an othered identity that need to be “re-Filipinized” and “need saving” from Western influences that have made them “*tanga*.”³⁸

J.A. shows the ways in which the X has pointed to larger questions of gendered, sexual, and ableist hierarchies that disrupt binaries deployed in “here” (the United States) vs. “there” (the Philippines) debates about cultural authenticity.

The aforementioned responses were generated by those in the United States. Thus they point to the specific challenges they and others face in the work of self-naming away from their ancestral “homeland.” Nonetheless Kert, based in Mindanao, also names trans-exclusionary feminist gatekeeping as a source of difficulty. While navigating people in her workplace, she also contends with her own internalizations of what society defines to be a “real” woman and feminist:

Matagal akong nagself-ascribe bilang non-binary dahil nahirapan akong ireconcile ito sa aking sarili. Mahirap noong nagcome out akong lesbian, mas mahirap ang pagcome out ko ng pagiging non-binary. Dati naisip ko na pagtataksill ito sa sarili kong gender. Ito ay common rhetoric kahit mula sa mga feminist (TERFS) na nababasa ko sa internet. [It took awhile for me to self-ascribe as non-binary because it was difficult for me to reconcile with this fact. It was difficult when I came out a lesbian, but much more difficult (and longer) to come out as non-binary. I used to think that I was betraying my own gender. This is a common rhetoric also among some feminists (or TERFS), which I see on the internet.] Noong nagcome

38. J. A. Ruanto-Ramirez, email interview with Kay Ulanday Barrett, Aug 14, 2020.

out ako bilang non-binary sa mga students at colleagues ko sa University of Southern Mindanao, hindi nila gaanong maintin-dihan. May mga inappropriate na mga bagay na sinasabi sa kin. Usually ay pa-joke ito ngunit ito pa rin ay matatawag na symbolic violence ika ni Bourdieu. Halimbawa, kinukutya ako na ako raw ang lalaki sa relationship at hindi ako pwedeng magka-gusto sa babaeng 'butch' o non-binary din. Mas may pag-intindi noong lumipat na ako sa UP Mindanao na mas may progresibong pananaw. [When I came out as non-binary to my students and colleagues in the University of Southern Mindanao, they did not completely understand it. I was told inappropriate things. They're in jest but they still constitute what Bourdieu would say as symbolic violence. For example, they told me I should assume the male role in the relationship because I am more masculine or that I can't fall in love with another butch, andro, or non-binary person. There was more understanding when I moved to UP Mindanao where views are much more progressive.]

Kert describes the ways that trans-exclusionary feminism intersects with the gender binary entrenched in Philippine society and culture. Her situation is not unique. A similar situation happened in 2012 during the University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman Student Council election.³⁹ During the campaign season, a member of Gabriela Youth, one of the biggest feminist organizations in the Philippines, shouted in the halls of the UP Diliman's dormitory, "*Ibalik ang USC Gender Committee sa TUNAY na babae!*" [Bring back the USC Gender Committee to REAL women!]. Gabriela Youth – UP Diliman chapter's candidate for Student Council was a cis-female, campaigning against a trans-woman.

Kert's reflection also points to the heterogeneity of academic discourse in the Philippines with regards to gender depending on location. We think that her experience at UP Mindanao differed from her experience at University of Southern Mindanao (USM) because of the experiences of the community and geographic location of both institutions. USM's campus consists of students and faculties who have experienced historical trauma, violence, and on-going conflict between the Philippine military, Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), New People's Army (NPA), Abu Sayyaf, and other militant groups. While UP Mindanao's campus comes from diverse backgrounds, some are from the Visayas, Luzon, or even in the Cordilleras. USM is geographically located between the border of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and the national region, while UP Mindanao is in Davao City, gateway to the finest produce and resources of the whole of Mindanao.⁴⁰ Because of these distinct backgrounds and

39. UP Babaylan Facebook Page, Feb 25, 2012 Statement, <https://www.facebook.com/upbabaylan/posts/351470648226003>, accessed Aug 21, 2020.

40. See: "Assessment of the Business and Investment Climate in the ARMM & Strategies to Address the Problems" Peter Wallace—funded by USAID.

experiences, a space to have meaningful conversations about difference are more accepted at UP Mindanao, compared to USM. This backdrop can be difficult for minorities, particularly gender minorities, and their communities (especially of peasant and poor working-class students at USM) who are raised in a region where the major conflict in the area is rooted in religion (in this case, Christian vs. Muslim).

Self-Naming as Radical Imagination

For us, the X represents clarity. For some of us, it means our gender and sexuality come from a place of care and embrace, with definition having nothing to do with heterosexuality and cis people in power (which unfortunately includes those in our own communities). For trans and non-binary people, we get to name ourselves. We get to not be our dead names or some slip of pronouns at the next work dinner or planning meeting. The X represents resistance of which we are part and an ancestry that innovates. There are so many queer, non-binary, and trans artists, speakers, academics, organizers, and change makers. It's glorious, really: how our multiplicity and our resistance can engage in such carceral and violent times; how naming ourselves, our communities, and our shared experiences offers dignity to lead us to imagine new imaginative possibilities for change.

So many of the people we interviewed felt similarly. When asked about why she chooses to name herself Pilipinx, Angela Peñaredondo, a migrant Visayan poet, artist, and educator living in Los Angeles, CA stated:

I identify as Pilipinx and that self-identification significantly influences me. But because I'm not a millennial, Pilipinx being a recent moniker feels more like a newer extension of me, one that carries weight and promise. As a queer, first generation person of color, much of my art, aesthetic, and politik come from a space of exile and a search for home that embraces all of my fragmented and hybridized selves. Pilipinxism, especially the components of it launched by queer and trans-identified Pilipinos/as, is one mode of an uncompromising praxis of agency and inclusivity which resonates with me on many levels, most importantly because it makes visible and disrupts oppressive forces within hetero-patriarchy, misogyny, and gender binaries within our own Pilipino culture and community.⁴¹

Important to Angela is the X's signified "praxis of agency and inclusivity." She appreciates its recognition of and "disruption" of oppression embedded in Pilipino culture and the commu-

41. K. B. Barrett, "Queer Filipinx/Pilipinx Poetics: Celebrating Filipino American History Month" *Lambda Literary* (Oct 2017), <https://www.lambdaliterary.org/2017/10/celebrating-filipina-american-history-month/>, accessed Aug 14, 2020.

nity. That Angela switches between Pilipino, Pilipinx, and Pilipina/o seems purposeful and symbolic in juxtaposing the oppressive and traditional (Pilipino) with the possibilities suggested by the X. While her changing application may seem a bit confusing (e.g. why does she use “Pilipinos/as”?), we surmise it reflects her wish to capture the fluidity of the people who these terms represent. Moreover, as a migrant, she feels the X is representative of her “fragmented and hybridized” diasporic selves as a migrant in constant search for home.

For Anonymous Bat Queer, a gender non-conforming community organizer based in Brooklyn, NY, queer diasporic Filipinx vernacular spoke to them as simultaneously adaptive and grounding:

Filipino culture is very fluid and playful and it shows in our language. Everyone has at least five nicknames. Especially in gay linggo, words are invented all the time. When we are tired, we don't say we're tired, we're *Haggardo Versoza*. When I heard “Latinx,” it spoke to me. I felt culturally free to adapt it to describe myself. So, I started to use “Pilipinx/Filipinx” and it felt right to me.⁴²

Anonymous Bat points to queer vernacular as a site that embraces the expansive playful and fluid intersections of gay Filipino culture. Further their story of how they adopted the X as a name signifies the cross-racial connective tissue that binds together communities of color with colonial histories in the United States, albeit imperfectly. Indeed the X remains contested in both Latino and Pilipino communities, such that the language of the X is already shifting for some people, as noted earlier by Andrea, towards both Latine and Pilipine, respectively.

For people we interviewed in the Philippines, the X is respected and acknowledged for its potential. However, they felt conflicted about whether to personally use it. According to Kert:

I think *yung struggle ay nanggagaling sa kagustuhan ng mga intelektwal na Pilipino na ireclaim ang kanilang sariling naratibo na malaya mula sa kanluraning impluwensya*. [In my view, the struggle comes from the desire of Filipino intellectuals to reclaim their (our) own narratives free from Western influences.] *Sa totoo lang, takot akong gamitin ang salitang Filipinx or Pilipinx dahil takot akong maka-receive ng backlash mula sa*

mga kasama kong anthropology graduates. Kaya hindi ako nagkokomento masyado dito. Ngunit, sa palagay ko, liberating sana ito dahil nararamdaman kong recognised ang identidad kong hindi nakakulong sa gender binary. [To be honest, I am afraid of using the word Filipinx or Pilipinx because I am afraid of receiving backlash from my fellow Anthropology graduates. And so I usually don't make comments about it.

42. A. B. Queer, email interview with Karen Buenavista Hanna, Aug 21, 2020.

However, I think it has the potential of being liberating because I feel my identity as non-binary is recognised in that word.]⁴³

Irish also appeared conflicted, likening Filipinx with “gay,” as both terms have associations with “western countries” and the “elite” class of queer Filipina/o/xs in Manila with access to expensive forms of education influenced by the United States. In these ways, Irish and Kert point to the challenges of self-determination and self-assertion when navigating potential backlash from others. Still, Irish recognized the importance of language in survival and resistance for lesbians, bisexuals, and other queer people, stating, “Language can be used to empower and if they identify with it [the X] and [it] gives them the strength and passion to fight for self-determination, then go with it.”⁴⁴

For Gayatri, a change in letters does not hold significance as much as the structures, history, and power it represents. She argues:

We need to work more on studying our past, especially the political processes of erasing our diverse expressions of being. Retelling our history to include the diversity of people who inhabited the archipelago brings to light the transformations in our sense of identity. How we imagine ourselves need to be freed from unquestioned assumptions about humanity that are shaped by religion, education, the media, the state and popular culture. In other words, the debate needs to foreground the power of language to shape our senses, sensitivities and sensibilities. As long as there are erasures and misrecognitions, we need to keep on asserting our human need to name our experiences and being. Let’s use queer language to make our presence felt. Using x is just one of the symbolic forms of power to reclaim our humanity.⁴⁵

Put differently, the X is simply a stand-in for the overarching demand for dignity, rights, and humanity for LGBTQIA+ people that are currently being undermined through the structures that shape our society. Language is just one quotidian way that LGBTQIA+ people have exerted their “radical imaginations,” envisioning the world they wish to create.

Conclusion

We believe this work illustrates a global urgency for an evolving nomenclature which reflects the lived experiences of queer, non-binary, and trans Pilipina/o/x needs, involvement, and desires. Each voice cited has demonstrated visceral comprehension that the liminal terms of using

43. K. Tandog, email interview with Anang Palomar, Aug 20, 2020.

44. I. Inoceto, email interview with Anang Palomar, Aug 20, 2020.

45. Gayatri, email interview with Anang Palomar, Aug 20, 2020.

Filipino and Filipina are no longer apropos our current understandings of sexuality and gender. This collection of analyses, interviews, and experimentation is just the beginning of an intentional transnational dialogue we plan to conduct in the coming year linking the people who have shared their expertise and experiences to this essay. It is our aim in the future, to connect, expand, and integrate evolving dialogues among Pilipina/x/os throughout the world such as in UK, UAE, Australia, Asia, the Pacific, Africa, and Latin America. We hope this on-going global dialogue illuminates a convergence where Filipinx and Pilipinx livelihoods are not just possibilities, but living and salient realities.

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