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Abstract

This duoethnography (a dialogic approach to studying the meanings given to a similarly experienced phenomenon among two or more individuals; Norris, 2008) engages dilemmas of identity and authenticity for two mixed heritage Filipina/o Americans on various points in their ongoing journeys toward decolonization. We center our analysis around recent travels to the “motherland” of the Philippines, engaging two guiding questions: (a) What does it mean for us to claim Filipino-ness within the context of the Philippines when we are solely visiting? And (b) How is the dissonance of being in a different national context helpful for better understanding our relationships to our Filipina mothers? Despite educational and cultural experiences that have promoted a sense of belonging and confidence in identifying with Filipinx communities, we share the realization that there is no escaping our proximity to whiteness despite connections to Filipinx family members. We also highlight how our narratives help us make meaning of memories, yet ultimately conclude that we can and should not claim something we are not. This conclusion leads us to critique the rigidity of the systems that cause us to question our identity.

Keywords

duoethnography, Filipinx, multiracial, culture, decolonization, travel

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At Home or On Tour? Mixed Race Filipina/o American Reflections on Identity and Visiting the Motherland

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This duoethnography (a dialogic approach to studying the meanings given to a similarly experienced phenomenon among two or more individuals; Norris, 2008) engages dilemmas of identity and authenticity for two mixed heritage Filipina/o Americans on various points in their ongoing journeys toward decolonization. We center our analysis around recent travels to the “motherland” of the Philippines, engaging two guiding questions: (a) What does it mean for us to claim Filipino-ness within the context of the Philippines when we are solely visiting? And (b) How is the dissonance of being in a different national context helpful for better understanding our relationships to our Filipina mothers? Despite educational and cultural experiences that have promoted a sense of belonging and confidence in identifying with Filipinx communities, we share the realization that there is no escaping our proximity to whiteness despite connections to Filipinx family members. We also highlight how our narratives help us make meaning of memories, yet ultimately conclude that we can and should not claim something we are not. This conclusion leads us to critique the rigidity of the systems that cause us to question our identity.

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Introduction

If I am being honest, I have spent most of my time feeling like I did not belong to a Filipinx community. I can point to specific memories where I was not accepted as a multiracial person by both my family and society. I remember asking my grandma if she thought that I looked like I was Filipina. She said no, and I can remember her smile and giggle as she answered that question. It’s as if she were happy that I did not look this way. My mom and grandma socialized me to distance myself from my Filipina identity. It was as if this was an act of liberation for them. (Lisa)

I was really looking forward to spending time in my late mother’s homeland. The term motherland now has new meaning. I was going to do a lot of soul-searching. You see, ever since my mother’s passing, I felt a disconnect – a true loss of my ability to identify as Filipino American. I no longer had that link, and there was so much I wish I could’ve been taught by my mom about what it means to be Filipino. She didn’t tell me a lot growing up, or at least from what I can remember... but her cultural values were seen in how she raised us and what she valued. I wouldn’t realize this until later though. (Marc)

The quotes above are pulled from a duoethnographic project focused on understanding the cultural dynamics related to mixed Filipina/o American identity. As education scholars, we push methodological boundaries in this study by engaging an inherently postmodern methodology that centers narratives surrounding our recent visits to the Philippines: duoethnography (Norris, 2008). Though both authors grew up in the Midwestern United States, the traveling to the Philippines represents an acute experience to anchor our analysis, particularly given the connection to the land that is so important for understanding Indigenous ways of knowing (Deloria et al., 2018). The naming of us as Filipina/o American and the building of community within this duoethnography aligns with Strobel's (2015) process of decolonization for Filipinx¹ Americans, which includes the stages of naming, reflecting, and acting. In this study, we weave together the naming of our identities as they relate to our cultural upbringing as mixed Filipina/o Americans, the reflecting upon the specific experiences with recent visits to the Philippines as adults who have begun the decolonization journey, and the potential for acting in ways that better honor Indigenous peoples in the Philippines (such as the Igorots in Luzon and the Lumads in Mindanao) and beyond.

Filipinx Americans are a unique case for examining questions of mixedness, racial identities, and cultural connections. We hear the various terms like mestizo, mixed, Mexipino, Amerasian, Eurasian, half-and-half, and claims that all Filipinos are mixed/ambiguous (Corañez Bolton, 2022; Guevarra, 2012; Johnston-Guerrero & Chaudhari, 2016; Ocampo, 2016). Mixed heritage Filipinxs can experience feelings of not belonging (Root, 1997), especially within academia that too often operates from a monoracial-only paradigm of race (Harris, 2020). Further, the dominant discourse about being "full" Filipino might marginalize those multiracial, multiethnic, or transracially adopted Filipinx Americans who do not feel Filipino "enough" to claim such terms (Nadal, 2021). Moreover, there is a common belief that mixed heritage Filipinx Americans tend to have Filipina mothers. Indeed, Yang and Bohm-Jordan (2018) document from 2008-2012 American Community Survey data that "23.3% of foreign-born Filipino female householders were interracially married compared to 8% foreign-born Filipino male householders" (p. 9). This dynamic creates an opportunity to further explore relationships between Filipina mothers and their mixed heritage offspring.

Through duoethnography, we explore these experiences further for mixed heritage Filipinx Americans by highlighting the narratives of two mixed heritage Filipina/o American scholars coming together to learn about their Filipino heritage and history through recent travels to the "motherland" of the Philippines (as adults after many years away from childhood visits). Specifically, our study centers two guiding questions: (a) What does it mean for us to claim Filipino-ness within the context of the Philippines when we are solely visiting? And (b) How is the dissonance of being in a different national context helpful for better understanding our relationships to our Filipina mothers?

Framework: Decolonization of Mixed Heritage Filipinx Americans

This study engages in a dynamic and ongoing process of decolonization that is specific to Filipinx Americans based on the work of decolonial psychology scholar, Leny Strobel. In the Foreword to Strobel's (2015) second edition of her groundbreaking book, *Coming Full Circle*, noted scholar of colonial mentality E. J. R. David reminded readers that "decolonization

¹ The naming of Americans who descend from the Philippines is varied and contested (Barrett et al., 2021). We choose to use Filipinx when broadly referring to a larger community that could include those who identify outside of a gender binary that is typically captured by Filipino or Filipina. Because neither of us personally identifies as Filipinx, when referring to ourselves we use Filipina/o. Like Maramba et al.'s (2022) approach, by using a variety of terms we attempt to resist the flattening of the vast diversity of our communities.

is a process and a struggle that is still – and perhaps always will be – ongoing.” So as Strobel (2015) outlined three stages of decolonization (naming, reflecting, and acting), we note how this is an ongoing process and journey for us. Halagao (2010) applied this framework to Filipino Americans in teacher education and summarized the stages as first, “naming the oppression and articulating its impact on one’s identity” then second, using reflection “to look deeply and think critically of one’s position,” and third, moving to action to give back and continuing to both question and spread our stories (p. 498). In this project, we engage in an iterative process where we name, reflect, and act upon our Filipinx identity through the lens of recent travels to the Philippines that helped us initiate this journey.

Considering our search for identity and belonging, Strobel (2015) wrote how “decolonization, as the search for cultural identity, must be grounded in a sense of history” (p. 119). She goes on to describe the importance of memory:

The process of reclaiming Filipino history as a counter narrative to the history written by outsiders, becomes a process of reclaiming one’s memory: memories that were submerged because they were considered unimportant, inconsequential, and memories that were negated because of the internalized self-hatred of the colonial psyche. The recovery of language, of one’s voice, of one’s story, is re-created in the memory. (pp. 119-120)

Our study is grounded in this framework because we reflect upon memories of trips (both childhood travels and more recent ones) to our imagined motherland to recover our memories and reclaim our Filipina/o identities. We use “imagined” here as a provocative way to unsettle our comfort in claiming somewhere we were not born, though we do not wish to force that questioning onto others who feel confident in their claims to ancestral homelands. Our recovered memories are also inseparable from our relationships with our Filipina mothers, who were both born in the Philippines and immigrated to the US, and extended families in the Philippines and of the diaspora.

Furthermore, Strobel (2015) identifies the importance of re-telling stories in the ongoing process toward decolonization:

the new narratives foreground the experience, beliefs, values, folkloric traditions, and Indigenous knowledge which were submerged during the period of silence. These narratives are a re-telling of the Filipino story. The re-telling is, therefore, a process of imagining and creating a new story, a useful fiction, so to speak, in order for the story to become a source of empowerment through a new way of looking at history. Re-telling, therefore, sets free the over-determined aspects of Filipino colonial history. (p. 82)

We use this guidance as further validation of the importance of centering our narratives in this duoethnography, which focuses on “storytelling to simultaneously generate, interpret, and articulate data” (Norris, 2008, p. 234).

While we ground this study in Strobel’s work on decolonization, we also recognize that mixedness was not explicitly incorporated into her study. Covering historical background on mixed racial and ethnic classification in the Philippines, Hara and Celero (2020) explain how the inherent diversity of Filipinxs seen today is the result of centuries of colonialism, extensive migration, and intermarriage, grounded in a racial hierarchy where “mixedness was key to upholding one’s social status” (p. 695). The Spanish created a system of classification that was based on birthplace, ethnicity, physical appearance, and socioeconomic status, with “full-blooded” Spaniards at the top of the hierarchy. Mestizos were in the middle of the hierarchy

and were identified by being from mixed marriages between Spanish and “Indios” or the Indigenous peoples of what is now known as the Philippines (Hara & Celero, 2020).

Because of this inherent connection between mixedness and Filipino identity, we also engage the theoretical work of Maria Root around mixed Heritage Filipino Americans. Root (1997) aptly noted:

The Filipino of mixed heritage is positioned liminally and symbolically in the psychological space that confronts the larger community. What does it mean to be Filipino in America? What does it mean to be American of Filipino heritage? If Filipino Americans emphasize race-based markers in determining and defining who is Filipino, our community will suffer. We will use the colonizer’s tool against each other. (p. 92)

Root’s use of “colonizer” to refer to the U.S. reflects the legacy of U.S. colonization of the Philippines and the ways that reverence for “America” was instilled into Philippine compulsory education system and government (Francia, 2014) in line with ambitions of U.S. empire (Coloma, 2013; Maramba et al., 2022). The Philippines was ceded to the US by Spain in 1898 (along with Guam and Puerto Rico), beginning what Delmendo (2004) described as the “vexed and contradictory” meaning of the U.S. to the Philippines, including “variously military oppressor and liberator, political model and antithesis, economic savior and enslaver; moreover, often it has been all these things simultaneously” (p. 1). Yet, through the colonial relationship, white Americans, in essence, replaced the Spanish at the top of the racial hierarchy, enshrining Americanness as whiteness. Espiritu (2003) noted how her Filipino American immigrant respondents “seldom identify themselves as American... they equate *American* with *white* and often use these two terms interchangeably” (p. 159, emphasis in original).

As the broader community works toward the establishing of a decolonized Filipinx American identity, Root (1997) argues that the community must not police its boundaries with the colonizer’s tools of racial classification. We embrace Root’s poststructural perspective because it pushes against the rigid systems that are a symptom of colonization and pervasive whiteness within higher education. Root calls for deconstruction and reconstruction around community-building and racial authenticity to engage in empathy across and between Filipinx communities. We intend to adapt this poststructural lens by sharing our individual stories of ongoing decolonization to contribute to the larger community narrative.

Additionally, as Filipinx Americans work toward decolonization, we recognize critiques of “decolonization” being used as a metaphor (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Our utilization of Strobel’s (2015) decolonization framework acknowledges the history of colonization in the Philippines—over 400 years by Spain and the United States (and Japan during World War II). While Indigenous groups—like the Igorots and Ifugao of Northern Luzon—still exist in the Philippines and have similar struggles for sovereignty as other Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island, we write from a position of post-colonization and a transnational context. We see the need to do the self-work of the longer process and journey toward decolonization before being able to truly be in relationship with Indigenous peoples of the Philippines to prevent us from falling into “savior” mentalities, especially given our proximity to whiteness (discussed in narratives to come). Thus, part of our ongoing project is to move further toward the third “acting” stage of Strobel’s project to one day better stand in solidarity with Indigenous peoples. We also want to note our recognition of how travel might easily fall into a form of “volunteer tourism” and limit transformational learning potential, especially when connected to study abroad or service-learning (see Gambrell, 2018). Therefore, we further contextualize the study below and connect it to the literature on heritage tourism in the next section.

Further Contextualizing the Study

Within higher education, study abroad has become a mainstay opportunity to give students international experiences toward becoming more globally aware and culturally competent. Indeed, studies have demonstrated the impact of study abroad on U.S. students, including better understanding their national identity (Dolby, 2004), changes in attitudes, behaviors, and cognitive development related to American identity (Savicki & Cooley, 2011), and increases in global and civic engagement (Millora, 2011). Though we do not equate our self-directed travels to the Philippines with study abroad programs, there are some connections in terms of potential goals for transformative learning about culture through education (Gambrell, 2018).

Though literature has explored the importance of returning to the homeland for U.S. immigrants and how such “heritage tourism” influences ethnic identity and belonging, this literature is limited in several ways. First, much of the previous research has focused on specific heritage tours with the purpose of connecting emigrants to their homeland (Garrido, 2011; Powers, 2011). Less attention has been paid to self-directed travel (Maruyama, 2017). Second, while literature has focused on first or 1.5 generation immigrants (i.e., those who are first to leave, whether as adults or children, respectively) returning to their homelands (Io, 2017), we know very little about the unique experiences and identities of second-generation immigrants (i.e., born in the US) who may not be “returning” or do not see heritage countries as a “homeland” (Garrido, 2011; Maruyama, 2017). Third, focusing on a specific country or population is important because these types of studies can better capture the broader sociopolitical contexts and forces affecting immigration/relocation, travel, and memory. For example, Garrido (2011) explored Filipino Americans who participated in specialized heritage tours in the Philippines. However, this and similar studies are limited in that they do not include (explicitly) a focus on multiracial or mixed heritage individuals.

Given the scholarship that documents the unique identities and experiences of multiracial Americans generally (Csizmadia, 2011; Renn, 2008; Rockquemore et al., 2009; Root, 1996), and mixed Filipina/o Americans specifically (Desai, 2017; Guevarra, 2012; Root, 1997), this study seeks to understand the unique contributions of visiting the Philippines for the ever-evolving identities of mixed heritage Filipina/o Americans. The study is part of a larger project on decolonizing Filipinx identities and is grounded in an Indigenous-informed epistemology that honors land- and water-based ways of knowing and being (Deloria et al., 2018; Strobel, 2015). Therefore, the focus on traveling to the land where our mothers were born—the literal motherland—connects us to the landedness within our decolonizing journeys (Strobel, 2015).

Methodology and Methods

We employ duoethnographic methods and methodologies in this paper. Duoethnography is a collaborative methodology in which two authors share their life stories and narratives to reveal larger themes about cultural context and the world (Norris, 2008). Though duoethnography’s genealogy is embedded within the narrative research traditions of storytelling and *currere*, or the curriculum of life (Norris, 2008), it can also be viewed as an extension of autoethnographic methods. Ellis and Bochner (2006) described autoethnography as:

The look through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of... personal experience. Then the look inward, exposing a vulnerable self... As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward,

distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond distinct recognition. (p. 119)

As authors, we examine our own personal experiences, trips to the Philippines, and relationships with our mothers from different perspectives and angles so that our “personal” becomes “cultural” (i.e., our experiences are not just individual but connected to larger cultural processes). Moreover, autoethnography “plunges the reader into the interior, feeling, hearing, tasting, smelling, and touching worlds of subjective human perception” (Denzin, 1997, p. 46). In this article, we capture our lived experiences through vivid storytelling to take our readers with us on our journey. It is through these narratives that we intend to share the personal to illustrate a larger cultural dynamic around mixed Filipinx identity and decolonization. This duoethnography is a collaborative chronicle of our lives and a vehicle to share the similarities across our experiences and how our stories diverge to transform personal narratives into strong implications for practice.

Additionally, we push methodological boundaries by choosing to center stories of self in our research and scholarship, particularly as higher education scholars socialized into more positivistic paradigms. Autoethnography and duoethnography are inherently poststructural and postmodern by nature because centering one’s narrative calls for giving up on grand narratives and deconstructing traditional methodologies to create more expansive ways of knowing (Agger, 1991). We describe the similarities and differences across and between our narratives as threads that hold together a tapestry. In alignment with poststructural feminist thought, Munro (1998) describes a similar methodological approach in her own research, “I weave my own story of the research process throughout the life histories as a way to create a tapestry of our lives, an interweaving of connections, which is not only central to women’s survival, but an epistemological act” (p. 9). Additionally, Tachine (2018), a Navajo scholar of higher education, used weaving of a “story rug” to integrate Indigenous research methodologies with familial lessons and to guide her research. We use these examples to illustrate our intention as authors to share our personal accounts and the “interwoven” nature of our experiences to illustrate larger epistemological and cultural contexts.

To ensure the quality of our study, we draw upon Norris and Sawyer’s (2012) tenets of duoethnography. They describe the first tenet, *currere*, as “viewing one’s life as curriculum” (p. 12). Norris and Sawyer (2012) expand upon this by describing the method as looking back at one’s past and future and interpreting this lived experience. Our study aligns with this tenet because we reflect upon our past experiences visiting the Philippines and interpret our narratives to suggest future implications about decolonization. The second tenet of Norris and Sawyer (2012) is a polyvocal and dialogic process. In other words, they call for multiple voices and narratives in the data and conversations between the authors for threshold meanings to emerge. Throughout the process, we developed independent narratives that honored our unique voices while engaging across the narratives through commenting features and phone/video discussion to make meaning of our data.

Norris and Sawyer’s (2012) third tenet are disrupting metanarratives, which is also in alignment with poststructural perspectives around deconstructing grand narratives. Our work aligns with this tenet because we share two stories of mixed Filipina/o Americans and center our voices as marginalized people to share stories outside of the dominant narrative. The fourth tenet recommends focusing on differences across and between both authors. As authors, we recognize that our stories are not the same and have been influenced by our social identities. Therefore, we do not assert sameness across all experiences. Rather, we examine where our stories converge and diverge to illustrate larger contextual implications for decolonization and Filipinx communities. It is through our differences that we built social empathy for one another (Segal, 2018). For example, we both felt more connected to our mothers in our trips home to

the motherland. However, Marc had recently lost his mother before his trip while Lisa went on the trip with her mother. Conversations around this important difference caused Lisa to form a deeper connection and relationship with her mom and her Filipina identity.

Dialogic change and regenerative transformation are the fifth tenet (Norris & Sawyer, 2012), which aims to allow the past to inform the present. Throughout our narratives we provide recollections of past experiences related to childhood and past trips to the Philippines to reveal a present picture of mixed Filipinx experiences that is situated within the context of Filipinx experience and decolonization. Our present is very much informed by these past formative experiences and relationships that we share in this paper. Our intention is that the implications and findings from this research create transformational change around discourse in Filipinx communities.

The sixth tenet is that trustworthiness is found in self-reflexivity and that authors do not see their work and scholarship as universal truth (Norris & Sawyer, 2012). We do not believe that our story is the only “story” about Filipinx Americans, mixed Filipinx Americans, or (re)visiting the Philippines. We share our narratives to reveal pieces of a much larger story. The seventh tenet focuses on the relationship between research and practice. Our article aligns with this tenet because we intend to make our stories accessible to inform larger implications for practice around decolonization. Norris and Sawyer (2012) discuss one last tenet, trust. As researchers we developed trust with one another through vulnerable storytelling about our childhood, trauma, grief, and not feeling racially enough (Ashlee & Quayle, 2020). Like Guillaume et al. (2020), we share our stories to recognize and engage vulnerability around our identities. This project is a product of trust and relationship building among the authors over the course of many years and is rooted in conversations that center identity exploration. We intend to establish this same trust with our readers by sharing pieces of our story not only to connect with our audience, but to display vulnerability through our own writing and scholarship.

Data Collection and Analysis

Autoethnographies require structured data collection, deliberate analysis, and a connection between individual narratives and cultural contexts (Chang, 2013). Given that autoethnographic research transgresses boundaries of traditional scholarship, there is not a formulaic system for engaging this methodology. However, both authors engaged in intentional journaling with guided questions that focused on returning “home” to the Philippines. We also both used the comments feature to engage in dialogue and respond to each other’s stories. This study is a part of a larger research project on mixed Filipinx identities and an ongoing decolonization journey. In this paper, we focus specifically on the parts of our narratives and meaning making that centered our trips to the Philippines. We engaged open coding (Saldaña, 2021) to find parts of the data that specifically related to trips back to the motherland. While the focus of this paper are responses to that specific context, our narratives also include continual and more recent reflections about our trips to the Philippines.

To develop our narratives analyzed for this paper, both authors revisited journals, photos, and social media posts from those trips, and responded to some specific questions about our experiences. Those questions included: (a) Describe a time when you were fully comfortable claiming your Filipinx identity? A time where you didn’t feel comfortable claiming your Filipinx-ness? Reflecting on your life now, which occurs most often? Why do you think that was the case? And (b) Describe a time where you felt like you belonged or didn’t belong to a Filipinx community? The data analysis process was informal yet detailed and happened through conversations as well as through an open coding process where we utilized the comments feature to find broad themes and differences across the individual narratives. We

responded to each other's work through the comment feature and engaged in multiple phone and video conversations to discuss emerging themes, similarities, and differences across and between our narratives. Below are two unique and individual portions of our stories that we selected to best capture experiences related to our trips to the motherland. We then focus on interweaving major themes across both narratives and connect these to implications for practice and situate our themes in a larger discussion focused on current literature and context.

Our Narratives of Revisiting the Motherland

A key tenet of duoethnography is trust and vulnerable storytelling (Norris & Sawyer, 2012). Therefore, we present pieces of our individual excerpts from our narratives to situate our stories and share our experiences with our audience.

Lisa's Narrative: Reclaiming, Remembering, and Reimagining Relationships

The context in which I experienced my multiracial and Filipino/a identity is very interesting and has changed over time. My dad was in the military, and he met my mom in San Diego, California where my mom was working as a full-time nanny. My mom's story has a sort of beautiful sadness in a way. She talked to me about how only two of the nine children within her family were able to access higher education because of cost restraints. My mom and her brother were both successful in school, so she was able to attend college for two years. My mom's parents were able to pay for her brother's education, and my mom's grandma paid for her education. When her grandmother died, she could no longer attend school and did not have a trade or specialized skill, so she moved to the United States from Zambales to become a nanny. This is where she met my dad, they got married, and they had me. Within six months of my birth my dad was relocated to Yokosuka, Japan and we lived there for five years. My preschool in Japan was ethnically diverse (because of the military base), but I was not there long. When my dad left the military, we moved to a suburb called Cuyahoga Heights outside of Cleveland. The suburb was predominantly white and middle class. Most people I went to school with identified as white, and even when they were not white, this was ignored. There were no cultural organizations in my high school or middle school. The town even had a very inappropriate and racist mascot, the redskins.

My trip to the Philippines this past January (2020) felt brand new and nostalgic at the same time. My connection to my Filipina identity has felt broken for most of my life. My mom rarely talked to me about my identity, and it hasn't been made clear to me why. The language, the food, and the culture felt very distant from my existence. As I grew up my proximity to whiteness grew closer and my distance and detachment from my Filipina identity grew further. This led to a broken relationship with my mom that I have spent the last few years rebuilding. I can remember things from my trips to the Philippines in fragments. I can remember words with no meanings, smells without memories, and foods with no names.

Over the past few years, I have done more exploration about what it means to be Filipina and through that exploration I have learned that there is not one way to be Filipina. My trip to the Philippines and taking Tagalog lessons has given me the language and the words for the memories that felt real, but that I ultimately never made meaning of. For example, I could remember that there was a brown sticky rice dessert that I loved to eat when I was at family gatherings or in my earlier trips to the Philippines. However, I never knew what the name of this was. I learned in the last few years that the name is biko. I remember growing up making fun of my mom for pronouncing the letter "f" like "p." Through my Tagalog lessons, I have learned that this is because "f" is not a letter in the Tagalog alphabet. My Tagalog lessons served as a connection to my identity and gave me further foundation to claim being Filipina.

During my trip, my mom was speaking Ilocano (a language spoken by the Ilocano people in Northern Luzon) with her siblings. Because of my Tagalog class, I could tell when they switched between languages. Ilocano had a sharper tone with staccato and abrupt sounds. It was reminiscent of how my mom, and I spoke to one another growing up. Others thought we were angry. However, for us this fast paced and short way of speaking was endearment. These fragments of memories came back to me during my time in the Philippines as an adult and helped to explain things I never understood growing up

I want to spend some time reflecting on how my whiteness was perceived in the Philippines especially given the fact that my white partner was with me. All my cousins referred to him as Harry Potter. I am not sure why. Maybe because of the glasses? My time in the Philippines brought back some memories from childhood trips. I remember going to school with my cousins and being seen as the “smart student” because of my proximity to whiteness. I was called up to the board to do math problems in front of everyone. On this trip and previous trips, the word I heard the most to describe me was *maganda* or beautiful. As a kid, I remember my Titas and Titos telling me that I should be an actress on TFC (The Filipino Channel) or that I should be a singer. I am a horrible singer and I have no acting skills. I did not think they would say this to me during my trip there as an adult. I was wrong. 20 years later, they were still saying I should be an actress or singer even though I had a career in education. I still heard the words *maganda* and beautiful echo through the walls of my Nanay’s home. I want to sit with this sticky and uncomfortable feeling I have around all of this. Am I uncomfortable because of my access to privilege or am I uncomfortable because I felt exoticized? Maybe both. They kept describing my partner as my *puti* boypren (white boyfriend), *guapo* (handsome), and told me not to lose him. Did they mean not to lose him, or did they mean not to lose my access to whiteness? During our trip, we tried to find sunscreen at one of the stores in the Philippines. We could not find a sunscreen that did not have whitening elements in the formula. Everywhere we went, people stared. I was hit on at a store and felt extremely uncomfortable. My family constantly asked to take photos with us as if we were celebrities. My cousins spoke of the United States as their saviors and as the country who set them free from Spain. Their adoration of a country that I am often disappointed in left me confused. I am used to whiteness being a privilege and to white supremacy shaping the norms in which I lived. However, in the Philippines it felt different, even more intense. Whiteness felt as if it were revered. They saw me as royalty. All of this made me feel uneasy. It’s an interesting dichotomy for the feeling I get in monoracial Filipinx spaces in the U.S. I often feel like I don’t belong, and I start to experience the gatekeeping that Maria Root describes. However, my experience in the Philippines kind of makes me understand why.

Marc’s Narrative: Lost and Found and Lost Again

Growing up I never really felt confident about claiming a Filipino American identity and it wasn’t until college that I began to feel some sense of belonging to Filipinx communities. At my undergraduate university, I got involved in the Pilipino American Student Society (PASS), and in graduate school I began doing research on Filipinx Americans. Most recently, I have been able to visit the Philippines over two summers. I think much of my feelings of not belonging have developed from my own self-doubts and feeling of inadequacy. Perhaps it is always a two-way street: that I am noticing subtle cues (even microaggressions) that make me realize I don’t “really” belong, but I do think much of it stems from how I make sense of my contributions to and fit within Filipinx communities. One experience was my first Filipino performance with PASS as a second-year student. I really did immerse myself within the group, trying to learn as much as possible—perhaps to make up for what I lost out on not learning from my mom (or not remembering from my own trip to the Philippines nine years before). I

could see myself fitting into those stage-based racial identity development models where I was in full immersion mode. And the pinnacle was my performing in an “Igorot” dance where I was on stage hopping around in a bahag (loincloth) like I knew what the heck I was doing. It was clearly performative, and that experience made me realize the limits to my claims of identity because I really didn’t think I should be doing that dance especially as someone who was only “half” and did not know that much about the Philippines or being Filipino. Hence, that performance made me feel like I didn’t belong because I was some sort of fraud within the community.

The past two and a half years have been up and down in terms of my comfort levels in identifying at Filipino. Much of it stems from my Filipina mom’s passing—and the automatic cut off from the link I had to the culture and nation of her birth. That separation was immediate and really has affected my comfort in claiming my Filipino-ness. This clearly happened because I was easily comfortable answering the “what are you?” types of questions about my ethnic identity by responding with, “My mom *is* from the Philippines.” After her passing, it was so difficult for me to come to the point of saying she *was* from there, in the past tense. And so, I couldn’t respond that way anymore because it tore at my heart every time. But with that link separated, I felt much less connected to being Filipino and claiming that as an identity. However, I had the opportunity to visit the Philippines the two recent summers (2016 and 2017) as an adult, with my new consciousness about being mixed and Filipino, and with the desire to try to learn first-hand what my mom may have experienced in her homeland. For instance, I went to visit where she went to high school in Pasay City. And by having a more intimate and recent experience in the Philippines, I have started to feel more confident in claiming my Filipino-ness because I had more direct exposure to the land and culture there.

As a faculty member, I’ve had the opportunity to lead a study abroad trip to Cuenca, Ecuador for three years (2017-2019). It is an experience I treasure as I never studied abroad during all my schooling. And this experience in Ecuador has brought important learning for my sense of self and affinity to various groups. For one summer, I led the study abroad in May and traveled to the Philippines in July to accompany my partner on a consulting trip. It was shortly after my Filipina mother’s passing, and so the opportunity to visit the motherland, without my mother, was both painful and cathartic. But it was something that I journaled while in the Philippines that stays with me:

Now that I’m in Manila, surrounded by Filipino people, I’m struggling with this sense of fitting in or not. In a lot of ways, I was hoping that being here would feel comforting, like that I would be able to find a piece of me and my history that was lost after my mom’s passing. And as I look around, I often see my mom in the faces of Filipinos walking by. I smile, warmed by the reflection of myself and family in their own faces. Yet I realize that they don’t see me as reflecting themselves. I don’t necessarily look Filipino, and I definitely don’t look like I live in the Philippines based on my dress and manners. And so, I continue to feel lost, because they also don’t seem to see me as a white person, who are often granted more privileges.

After my morning run, I’m realizing just how much I stick out. People really stare at me. I don’t know... but it just feels so different after being in Ecuador, where people didn’t seem to look at me—the feeling I get here is that I don’t belong. It’s clear that I’m a foreigner. Maybe it’s the way I’m dressed or the way I look, I’m not sure. I just know I didn’t get the same feelings in Cuenca when I would walk down the street or interact with people.

These types of interactions have cemented in my feelings of inadequacy and continue to mark me as different when all I want is to be able to have my mom back so I can ask her all the questions I never bothered to ask her about what it means to be Filipino.

Lessons from Our Narratives

Through our narratives, we identified several important themes that we share and expand upon to highlight important findings for this duoethnography. For us, themes are not just common experiences; they are threads that weave in and out of our narratives, sometimes converging to form a central stitch, and at other times diverging to hold together a bigger tapestry.

No Escaping (from) Whiteness

One central stitch across our narratives deals with whiteness: There is no escaping the fact that we have white fathers and that has affected our physical appearance and how others view us. For instance, Lisa's reflections on being seen as a celebrity were common in Marc's experiences as well. Moreover, the messages Lisa received about her white boyfriend being *guapo*, also reflected a larger presence of colonial mentality and admiration of whiteness in the psyches of Filipinos (David & Nadal, 2013). Additionally, within Lisa's narrative she was referred to as *maganda* or beautiful because of the relationship between whiteness and traditional beauty standards. The feeling of discomfort she describes may be related to her evolving notions of what it means to be beautiful as she became more connected to her Filipina identity. Yet, this whiteness within our experiences was not always praised. Across both narratives, and particularly Marc's, whiteness and mixedness influenced feelings of not belonging or fitting in. Both Lisa and Marc were stared at—people could not necessarily place our ambiguous faces. Clearly, whiteness infiltrated our beings and led to us being seen as different—both in the U.S. and when we visited the Philippines.

Yet the feelings of inadequacy were somewhat different. The threads of our stories diverge somewhat when considering how Marc found belonging in college with various Filipino groups while Lisa did not come to further exploring her Filipina identity until graduate school. She felt a sense of guilt when accessing Filipino groups and spaces because she viewed her whiteness (both physically and culturally) as a barrier. Here, we realize how white supremacy transgresses national and international borders and shapes how we move through the world (Leonardo, 2004, 2009). White supremacy functions in a way that does not allow us to escape complicity because of our upbringing, context, and racialization, no matter how we individually claim our identities as mixed Filipina/o Americans (Leonardo & Matias, 2013).

However, whiteness is not only embedded in structures. It also creates and maintains the very system of rigidity around race that leads us to feel inadequate and forces us to choose one racial identity over another as mixed race people (Johnston-Guerrero & Renn, 2016). We argue that sharing stories focused on mixed identities has the potential to disrupt static racial structures that were inherently built by white supremacy (i.e., white Europeans on top of the racial hierarchy; Hara & Celero, 2020). This is not meant to center whiteness, nor take away from monoracial minoritized experiences. However, capturing multiracial experiences add nuanced layers to the conversation about racial identity and decolonization.

Connecting with Pamilya

Another thread across our narratives deals with our relationships and connections to our Filipino family members, or *pamilya*, and particularly our divergent ways we had a lack of

access to our Filipina mothers. Lisa's story highlights the broken and strained relationship she had with her mother growing up. This declining access to cultural knowledge likely contributed to Lisa's lack of racial authenticity and wondering if she was Filipina enough (Renn, 2004). The visit to the Philippines allowed her to reconnect with her mother through the powerful experience, which could not have happened without the change in national context. Similarly, Marc's sentiments about feeling lost in the Philippines signals the ways in which culture shock might force someone to make more intentional connections to those who can serve as guides, especially family members both close and distant.

Though Marc had a stronger connection with his mom growing up than Lisa did, it was severed when she passed away suddenly in 2016. This led to Marc feeling like he had a lack of access to his mother and could no longer ask her about all things related to being Filipino. Visiting his motherland (or mother's land) offered potential ways for him to learn more about what it means to claim a Filipino identity, yet too often resulted in him feeling less Filipino because of the ways others viewed him as an outsider, perpetuating questions of belonging and authenticity.

This thread of connecting to pamilya or family illuminates a notable experience for mixed Filipinx people which is a sense of questioning racial enoughness (Ashlee & Quaye, 2020) because of lack of access to culture, language, and family. Mixed people often wonder if they can claim their multiple identities based on whether they have access to cultural ties to their racial ancestry/ies (Renn, 2004; Wijeyesinghe, 2001). Our findings illustrate that severed ties with our mothers at different points in our lives led to a complex relationship with claiming our Filipinx and mixed identities. We call to question structures focused on identity and legitimacy: Does one need cultural knowledge, language acquisition, and family ties to fully claim their mixed Filipinx identity?

Making Meaning from Memories

As Strobel's (2015) decolonizing framework presents, reclaiming of identity is often through a recovering of memories. Our narratives highlight the importance of memories and the meaning made from their recovery. Lisa linked smells, tastes, language, and phrases from her recent trip with memories from childhood which led to a cultural connection with her Filipinx identity. Marc found memories of his mom and her early homeland experiences (such as visiting her high school) when he returned to the Philippines even though she was not there. Though his mother is no longer able to confirm that these memories are real or true for her, the memories relate to Strobel's claims around narratives of Indigeneity for U.S. born Filipino Americans being "useful fictions" that propel the decolonization process.

This direct exposure and physical relationship with land created opportunities to remember and reclaim our own identities. Memories stem from senses and substantial relationships with a physical homeland or more specifically, the motherland. Our assertion is that recovering memories, story sharing, and reconnecting to the land are innate components of decolonization, just as Strobel (2000) explained "it is the process of journey-ing itself that creates new liberating meaning as history, traditions, and personal memories of 'homeland' are integrated into consciousness" (p. 357).

Summary: Complexities in Claiming Filipina/o Identity

There were complexities associated with different contexts that made us feel like we could claim our identity at certain points in our lives. We also acknowledge how our lives and identities are tied to larger processes of colonization and immigration that manifest in current power structures (e.g., white supremacy) and classification schemas, which create individual

doubt and questioning regarding claiming authentic Filipina/o identities. The threads and lessons that are woven throughout our tapestry shed light on the tensions and intricacies of what it means to claim Filipina/o identities as mixed people with clear access to whiteness. Moreover, whiteness influenced our disconnection to Filipinx family and cultural ties, while the physical and temporal distance between the motherland and where we find ourselves in the US created barriers to accessing memories. All this contributed to hesitancy in claiming our identities.

Discussion and Future Research

Our study contributes to the growing body of literature regarding the connections between cultural heritage, tourism, and culture. Specifically, our duoethnography enhances and builds upon this scholarship by focusing on the multiracial experience, self-directed travel, and how these experiences shape our identities and connections to our mothers and the(ir) land as second-generation Filipina/o Americans. Visiting the motherland illustrated divergent yet similar stories focused on no apparent escape from whiteness, relationships with families, and making meaning of our memories. Ultimately, visiting our motherland led to an increased barrier toward fully claiming our Filipina/o identities given the ways that our whiteness/Americanness (Espiritu, 2003) became spotlighted.

Through our travels, experiences, and reflections, we searched to decolonize, yearned for connection, and hoped for more clarity around claiming our Filipina/o identity. However, as our lessons demonstrate, we were not able to escape from whiteness. While revisiting the motherland opened the door to this potential for fully claiming being Filipina/o, we found that while we could connect with family, we are still different because of our mixed heritage identities (Root, 1997). In our families' eyes, we are clearly not Filipino because of our proximity to whiteness (both because of having white fathers and being born in the US). This difficult finding should call on mixed heritage Filipinx Americans to think more deeply about some of the identity claims we make (e.g., Lisa's proclamation of her Filipina identity in her Tagalog class) or perform (e.g., Marc's performing of an Indigenous dance in college). We traveled back to the Philippines actively searching for the deeply connected land of our cultural histories, ethnic identities, and our family (Garrido, 2011). However, ultimately, we returned home to the US and re-surrounded ourselves with whiteness. This return begs the question: where we just tourists in what we believed to be our motherland? Upon further reflection now, we understand how the threading of the interwoven pieces of our stories was broken and instead created a security blanket, which was returning to whiteness and rebounding home.

While our study contributes to the scholarship focused on the mixed heritage Filipinx experience, there are also limitations in our study. An important component of duoethnographic research is to illustrate divergence in identity-based experiences. As co-authors, we share similar racial demographics and we both have Filipina mothers. Because of our similarities, our narratives cannot be representative of all Filipinx or mixed Filipinx experiences. Additionally, because of our identities as United States citizens and our lack of place-based proximity to the Philippines, we do not feel as connected to nor have first-hand knowledge about Indigeneity and the Indigenous peoples of the Philippines. As we continue to engage decolonization, it is imperative to continue learning and understanding the Indigenous context of the Philippines.

Even with these limitations, the lessons from our narratives still can inform implications for thinking about race, decolonization, and the influence of travel more broadly. We argue that highlighting mixed heritage voices and narratives is not meant to take away from monoracial minoritized spaces nor center whiteness. However, there is value and utility in anchoring mixed race and multiracial scholarship to illustrate the complexities and rigidity of

race that was ultimately created to maintain white supremacy (Harris, 2020). As scholars in higher education, we recognize how academia is inherently racialized: our advancement—and perhaps even our survival within the academy—is somewhat tied to our belonging to monoracialized groups and communities (Harris, 2020; Johnston-Guerrero & Combs, 2022), especially when there are so few Filipinx American faculty (Maramba & Nadal, 2013). Sharing multiracial stories may also call to question the structures that construct legitimacy associated with racial and ethnic identities such as travel, food, culture, and language. Moreover, it is crucial to be intentional when reflecting upon how travel, like study abroad programs (Dolby, 2004), can inform self-identification claims. While traveling may begin this journey by creating a connection to family and direct exposure to memories, ultimately, one cannot make confident identity claims from one trip. We encourage more research and exploration focused on self-directed travel and how this may or may not impact identity formation.

We also note how our traveling occurred well before the COVID-19 pandemic, yet our lessons have implications for the importance of connection and how the loss of the ability to travel and be in/on one's motherland might affect others searching for re-claiming of their histories. The pandemic has not only severed travel opportunities, but might have constrained familial connections, especially with our elders most at risk and whom may not have the technological savvy or resources for frequent virtual connections. As Marc experienced the loss of his mother, the separation from our elders risks the potential loss of culture, language, and knowledge that cannot be so easily transmitted. We urge readers to not take time for granted, especially for the Filipinx American community whose health care workers have suffered greatly by the pandemic.

Conclusion

Ultimately, we share our narratives to push methodological boundaries through the use of duoethnography, illustrate the complexities of race within the academy as mixed race scholars of education, and to encourage educators and scholars to think critically about how they engage mixed race topics in their scholarship and practice. Specifically, our study calls educators to think intentionally and critically about educational and reflective opportunities associated with international travel, whether through study abroad programs or self-directed. We encourage our readers to reflect upon how white supremacy creates racial rigidity in the academy, potentially causing questioning around claims to identity. Clearly, based on our narratives and reflections through this study, one potentially transformational trip to the Philippines did not – and we argue should not – allow us to settle comfortably into proclaiming our Filipina/o identities, especially when we still have so much more to learn. This is particularly true about Indigenous Peoples of the Philippines, which has been an important learning edge connected to our larger decolonization journeys. We encourage others engaging in similar identity-based work to recognize such limitations in travel, knowledge, and relationships, which take ongoing work to build and maintain. Similarly, we recognize how our attention now needs to be focused more outward from our selves toward further action to disrupt systems of oppression that work in tandem to make people question themselves and their heritage.

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