

SCHOOL OF THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

YOUTUBE FOR THE UNGLORIFIED FILAM BODY

The Westernized Islander Diaspora In Relation To “Belonging” And “Longing”

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Visualizing the Afroasian Divide

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Filipino Americans are the second largest Asian American/Pacific Islander (API) population in the United States (US Census Bureau, 2010). As the only Asian country to be colonized by both Spain and the United States (Spain for more than three centuries (Pranav, 2009) and by the United States for around 50 years (US Department of State, 2015)) the sociopolitical, sociocultural, and historical aspects surrounding the identity of Filipino-American peoples have been like none other. Because of factors such as the long history of conquer and colonization, the plentiful and widespread groups of indigenous Filipino tribes, and the assimilation and accommodation of other people internally and externally of Filipino cultures, the identity crises of Filipino-Americans becomes harder and harder. What doesn't benefit this cause is the amount of racism, colorism, and discrimination faced by Filipino-American individuals from the American groups they try to assimilate to, the minority groups they seek acceptance from, and an internal struggle between their own people. But how does a population so large, predominant, and influenced by other cultures still face discrimination and erasure within media cultures? In mainstream American media, Filipino bodies continue to be under represented and ignored. Online-media publishing platforms such as *Youtube* allow Filipino and FilAm's to procure and cultivate their own identities in ways relatable to their experiences and lives.



Map of the Philippines

There are a numerous amounts of similarities between the experiences that Filipino's and FilAm's have regardless their identity and their connection to the Philippines. However, it would be beneficial to none to cast an umbrella over either identity and say that they are one in the same and that the struggles and opportunities attributed to one is or is not also attributed to the other. That being said- it is entirely possible for Filipino people to suffer from individual struggles regarding their racial and ethnic identities which overlap with the individual struggles that FilAm people suffer from. The Filipino-American is one of Filipino descent that self identifies with such a label- for reasons ranging from the location where they were born, their current immigration status, or for living in America for a prolonged period of time. On the other hand, many Filipino people that reside within America don't identify as being Filipino-American or may diminish their connection to their ethnic background of being Filipino for a number of reasons. One of these reasons is closely connected to the innumerable relations and interrelations between the Philippines and Filipino peoples to other cultures. It is said that the Filipino culture and blood has been an amalgamation of Malay, Chinese, Hindu, Arab, Polynesian, Spanish and possibly English, Japanese, and African cultures (Purugganan, 2013). A large factor of this is a result of the history of colonial rule within the Philippines- who can Filipino people and FilAm's turn to in terms of cultural influence and development if, historically, their culture has become derivative and impacted from so many places at once? The problem of this comes from the inability to solidify a decision between the assimilation of a dominant culture and the conflict this may have to enculturating the Filipino and FilAm identities.

With the rising population of Philippine bodies in America it only makes sense that they see a rising amount of popularity and/or representation in the media. However, Filipino

characters and actors seem to be nearly nonexistent in American media- whether it be actors and/or actresses in the entertainment business, singer/songwriters in the music industry, or other media-based celebrities. An archived webpage under *San Francisco State University* holds a webpage written by an unnamed student entitled, *Fictional Filipinos in American Media*. While outdated, this student has recognized the underrepresentation of Filipino and FilAm bodies within the country's media despite being "second largest Asian subgroup and the largest Southeast Asian group" present (SFSU). The list of characters compiled within the site comes to a grand total of eleven (11) characters. Focusing on characters that are represented by real life bodies, and not digital or virtual depictions, only three (3) out of those eleven (11) characters listed have been/are played by actual people: Kato from the radio program and film *The Green Hornet*, Hikaru Sulu from the television show *Star Trek*, and Carlos Nieto from the television show *Third Watch*. The other eight are characters from videogames, comic books, and cartoons with no current real life adaptation or not large enough of a following: Grail published in *Wildstorm Productions* (now an imprint of *DC Comics*) and created by Filipino artist Whilce Portacio, Nicole from *Dead or Alive 4* who is from a town on Mars named New Legazpi which references Legazpi in the Philippines and is only vaguely hinted at being Filipina, Jose Astrada and Pham Luis from the videogame *Front Mission 3*, Ricardo from *Family Guy* who speaks no English or character traits other than exuding stereotypically gay characteristics and married to a dog, Santos from the fighting videogame *Def Jam: Fight for New York* who specializes in a Thai martial art, Talim from the *Soul Calibur* series whose weapon names are often in various Philippine languages, Juan Rico from the book *Starship Troopers* who was later casted as the Latin Johnny Rico in the film adaptation, and Bishop of *Marvel Comics* who was originally

listed as Filipino by a trading card company but has, as of recently, been listed as having Australian Aborigine roots.



Bruce Lee as Kato from The Green Hornet

But have these characters been justly showcased? Looking closer The Green Hornet's sidekick, Kato, was originally and is evidently Japanese as show by his last name. He's

unbelievably intelligent and an expert in cars and martial arts (because how else would an Asian man fight.) However, in the 1940s, about 10 years after Kato's radio debut, the character was referred to as Filipino- as to avoid backlash in response to Japanese Imperial Army general Hideko Tojo's bombing at Pearl Harbor (SFSU). Regardless of this, Kato has never found himself being played by any Filipino or Filipino-American individuals, let alone a Southeast Asian person in general. Kato is an embodiment of the Filipino identity being co-opted into popular culture only when it is convenient and necessary to the western world.



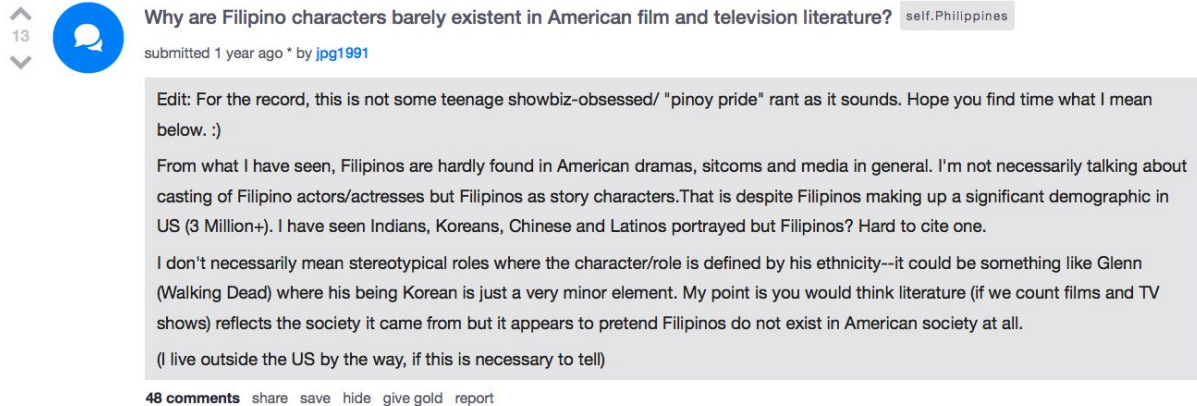
George Takei (Left) and John Cho (Right) as Hikaru Sulu

Star Trek's Hikaru Sulu, surprisingly, takes quite a large role in the series as a captain of the ship, as well as being an astrophysicist, helmsman, and a commanding officer at one point of

the series. Sulu is said to be a mixed race Japanese-Filipino American from San Francisco, California- with the Japanese first name 'Hikaru' and surname, 'Sulu', after a Philippine island and sea. In original installments Japanese-American actor George Takei played the role of Hikaru Sulu- in honor of his half Japanese descent. Unfortunately, Korean-American actor John Cho was the next in line to take on the role of Hikaru Sulu in the *Star Trek* reboot film series- adding to this idea of interchangeability between Asian and Asian-American identities. On the other hand, never has the role of Hikaru Sulu been played by a Filipino or FilAm individual. In the case of Sulu it is interesting that East Asian actors have taken priority over Filipino or mixed race actors.

Carlos Nieto in *Third Watch* is an interesting case for the case of Filipino representation. While the character is definitively labeled as Filipino, little of this culture is depicted within the series. But perhaps this is a step in the right direction. Not every Filipino is stereotypically Filipino- far from that, in fact. If this had been that case then the default body cannot be Filipino, or any Southeast Asian, or Asian identity for that matter. If every character that happens to be a person of color had a backstory, sideplot, history, or similar that dealt with their cultural background or ethnicity- then what does it say about them as a majority? It disallows them to be removed from those contexts and those ideas and, thus, we (the collective United States and world as a whole) turn to the white body (generally the cis-gendered, heterosexual, white male) as the default body. There is a huge problem with representation and societal equality when there is only one (or any limiting number for that matter) possible identity in which anything can happen; in which they are the clean slate or blank canvas for a story to be driven around and not a story to drawn out of. White is default in many scenarios and Carlos Nieto makes a case in

maneuvering PoC bodies into the spaces of white comfort and the ordinariness of the white body to solidify the non-rigidity of accessible existence.



Why are Filipino characters barely existent in American film and television literature? self.Philippines

submitted 1 year ago * by jpg1991

Edit: For the record, this is not some teenage showbiz-obsessed/ "pinoy pride" rant as it sounds. Hope you find time what I mean below. :)

From what I have seen, Filipinos are hardly found in American dramas, sitcoms and media in general. I'm not necessarily talking about casting of Filipino actors/actresses but Filipinos as story characters. That is despite Filipinos making up a significant demographic in US (3 Million+). I have seen Indians, Koreans, Chinese and Latinos portrayed but Filipinos? Hard to cite one.

I don't necessarily mean stereotypical roles where the character/role is defined by his ethnicity--it could be something like Glenn (Walking Dead) where his being Korean is just a very minor element. My point is you would think literature (if we count films and TV shows) reflects the society it came from but it appears to pretend Filipinos do not exist in American society at all.

(I live outside the US by the way, if this is necessary to tell)

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Why are Filipino characters barely existent in American film and television literature?, jpg991

Turning towards online communities such as *Reddit*, a social networking platform that works similar to a digital bulletin board with content added by registered users, we can see Filipino users engaging in thread topics such as "Why Are Filipino Characters Barely Existent in American Film and Television Literature?" (jpg1991 via Reddit, 2015). In reply, a user comment states that,

"Filipino-Americans do not exhibit any qualities that are Hollywood worthy. We are statistically law abiding. Thus, we won't make great suspects for Law & Order. We have integrated easily into the US social citizenship. Thus, there is no culture clash to make a drama out of. There aren't many Filipino-Americans in the entertainment industry, specifically as writers,"

(Deleted user via Reddit, 2015)

And there lies a larger problem facing American media- that, at least in the eyes of one Filipino individual, Asian and Asian American populations need to have a “Hollywood-worthy quality” to deserve screen time. Which may or may not be far from the truth; if we look at how other Asian races have been portrayed throughout other films and televisions shows there are endless amounts of bastardizations of language, racial slurs thrown around left and right, and stereotypical and fetishistic characterizations in American cinema history. Whether it be the timid and quiet Japanese schoolgirl, or the goofy Chinaman that runs the dry cleaners with a thick accent, Asian bodies of any ethnicity have gotten far less than their fair time in the spotlight. The entertainment industry seeks to gain a buck off of the culture and bodies of PoC and, as it stands now, Filipino and FilAm identities are not seen as trendy, exploitable, or profitable enough to warrant more exposure.

But even still- with the amount of racism that Filipino and Filipino-Americans receive within the States, how come that side is not represented in the media? Why aren't the issues which face an entire population of people, which happen to be the second largest Asian American/Pacific Islander population present, being shown to the public? There is an unbelievable amount of erasure that comes with the term and identity “Filipino-American.” Phrases like “too Asian for the Islanders, too Islander for the Asians,” and “the Mexicans/Hispanics of Asia” spring to mind when thinking of said erasure. In regards to the first phrase: “too Asian for the Islanders, too Islander for the Asians,” what is *too* much of one kind of identity? Does genetic makeup account for difference between being a little too much or much too little of either Asian descent or Islander descent? This acts as a signifier to deny Filipino bodies a right to their own identity- to say that they should belong to one side or the other, and

that, even though they should be leaning towards one extreme or the other, that it is impossible for them to even do so because of the inherent nature of Filipino identity. In this case, it is also important to think about who has autonomy over these phrases. Is it individuals with Philippine ancestry claiming that they exist as the inbetween of these two identities, members of other Asian and Islander communities shunning those who try to buy into those systems and structures, or perhaps a western outsider looking into the struggles and seeks to gain power and dominance by policing identity politics.

As for the phrase “the Mexicans/Hispanics of Asia,” it says a lot about both the definitive erasure of identity in America as well as the normalization of colonization, and imperialism. This saying not only denies Filipino individuals a separate and individualized identity from an entirely different culture, but it is also ignorant to the historical background of the Philippines. For being conquered by Spain for over two hundred (200) years, the cultural diffusion and forceful impact of Spanish tendencies and rule will evidently show through. Calling Filipino and FilAm peoples the Mexican or Hispanics of Asia continues to associate their identity with their conquerors which perpetuates and supports the continuous imperialism and colonization of these people.

The colonial history of the Philippines does a number on both the lack of human rights and the self-identification of individuals of Filipino descent. Before the Spanish colonization of the Philippines, the people that lived within that area were not known as Filipino. The people that inhabited the Philippine Islands were separate, indigenous peoples that lived in the Southeast part of Asia and were- similar to the Native Americans, given their present name by their foreign conquerors (Nadal, 2012, 20:36). Through the connectivity of people it has shown that there were similar values and systems in place between the communities of people in the Philippines.

Extending past mainstream Hollywood productions Asian Americans, specifically FilAm's, saw the opportunities in online communities and social networking sites that Hollywood weren't taking to create content relevant to them- presenting themselves and their culture as they want to be presented without the restriction or filter of white-dominated media.

In pre-colonial Philippines (and to some extent afterward) there existed an overarching collectivist spirit and the value of *kapwa* (literally translated as "other" or "other person", meaning a shared identity among others (Reyes, 2015)). *Kapwa* is the feeling of a personal connection to other people within the same community (specifically other Filipino people), which manifests itself today within FilAm populations in actions such as seeking out other Filipino individuals and families within an area and fostering a community. It's very common within FilAm communities for these families to look for and point out other Filipino individuals and find connections between each other- and while it's arguable that this statement may be attributed to other communities (minorities in particular) the same trait is applicable to and has historically been true for the people of the Philippines as a whole.



More Processed Meat, HappySlip

Looking at this in the frame of video sharing sites like *YouTube*, we see many Filipino YouTubers making videos about their experiences using food, family, or cultural tendencies to find connections between themselves and their (primarily Filipino) audiences. In the video “*More Processed Meat*” Christine Gambito, also known as *HappySlip* on *YouTube*, explains the common Filipino family experience of packing balikbayan boxes, cardboard boxes used to ship gifts and goods between relatives and friends to the Philippines generally around Christmas, the New Year, or other special occasions (*HappySlip*, 2012). Gambito plays all the characters in the video showing a range of characters to present a common Filipino household situation- it also acts as a way for her to reconnect to her family and behave the way her parents and other

relatives did as a form of reliving memories. Culturally, we can also look at the gesture of sending balikbayan boxes as *kapwa*- using offerings from overseas as a way to connect and communicate through object oriented and material cultures. This *kapwa*, specifically in regards to family, is sometimes met with a sense of *utang na loób*.

Utang na Loób, translated literally to “debt of will”, is the reciprocation of kindness and generosity towards each other- the “self-imposed obligation to give back the same kind of [kindness and generosity] to the person who has shown it to you” (Reyes, 2015). This value, which stems from the pre-colonial roots of the Philippines, is most easily understood in a familial context where the children are expected to do everything their parents ask of them. This notion grows from the idea that the parents have done so much to give them life, provided for them, and sacrificed opportunities for the betterment of their children. Kevin Nadal, author and psychology professor specifically for Filipino American studies, offers an example of *utang na loób*, with the premise of being a student and having to choose between attending a college further off from one’s home in search of the opportunities it may provide for their career or attending a college nearer to home, which may not bring about as many opportunities as the other college, in order to more easily travel back home to the family and tend to their needs whenever possible. (Nadal, 2012, 25:32) The value of *utang na loób* manifests itself within Filipino and FilAm individuals, in this situation, by staying closer to home for the greater good of the family.



Being Filipino, thatlinguistic

Further, this feeling and urge to create videos relating to one’s culture and family can be seen as a gesture stemming from *utang na loób*. Not only is a lack of representation in American media pushing FilAm’s to create content for themselves and by themselves, but it also cycles back all the way to the indigenous upbringings of Philippine peoples. Filipino and FilAm individuals feel indebted to return the favor of generosity in ways that can be presented to a larger community, such as the those who exist on the internet, through videos such as *thatlinguistics’ “Being Filipino”* where she answers questions about her own experiences being FilAm, and *Mrkuyaellis’ “10 Reasons Why I Love Being Filipino”* where he details several

things from his childhood and references past times which helped him grow up into loving his identity of being Filipino.

On June 12, 1898 the Philippines gained their independence from Spanish rule under the “Philippine Declaration of Independence” and, to this day, commemorate it by celebrating “Araw ng Kalayaan”- translated as “Day of Freedom)” (Utrecht Faculty of Education, 2015). However, just a few months later, American forces entered the Philippines and colonized the islands once again. Much like the Spanish colonizers that came before them, the American colonizers brought along and spread their own unique cultural and social values to the Philippines. Arguably, the biggest impact the Americans had was on the education system and the collectivist nature of Filipino peoples.

THE BLOG

What Asia Can Learn From Philippines About English Education

🕒 01/10/2014 02:08 pm ET | Updated Mar 12, 2014



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Amy Chavez

Columnist, The Japan Times & RocketNews24

I've just come back from the Philippines where English is an official language, along with the local Filipino language. This does not mean that everyone understands or speaks English but it does mean that exposure to the language is so great that those who do speak it can communicate quite fluently. I was impressed that even people who had never stepped outside of the Philippines were fluent in English.

According to an Educational Testing Service (ETS) [ranking](#) based on TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) scores for 2010, the Philippines ranked 35th out of 163 countries world wide. The only other Asian countries to score higher than the Philippines were Singapore (ranked 3rd in the world with a score of 98), and India (19th with a score of 92). Malaysia tied the Philippines for 35th place with a score of 88.

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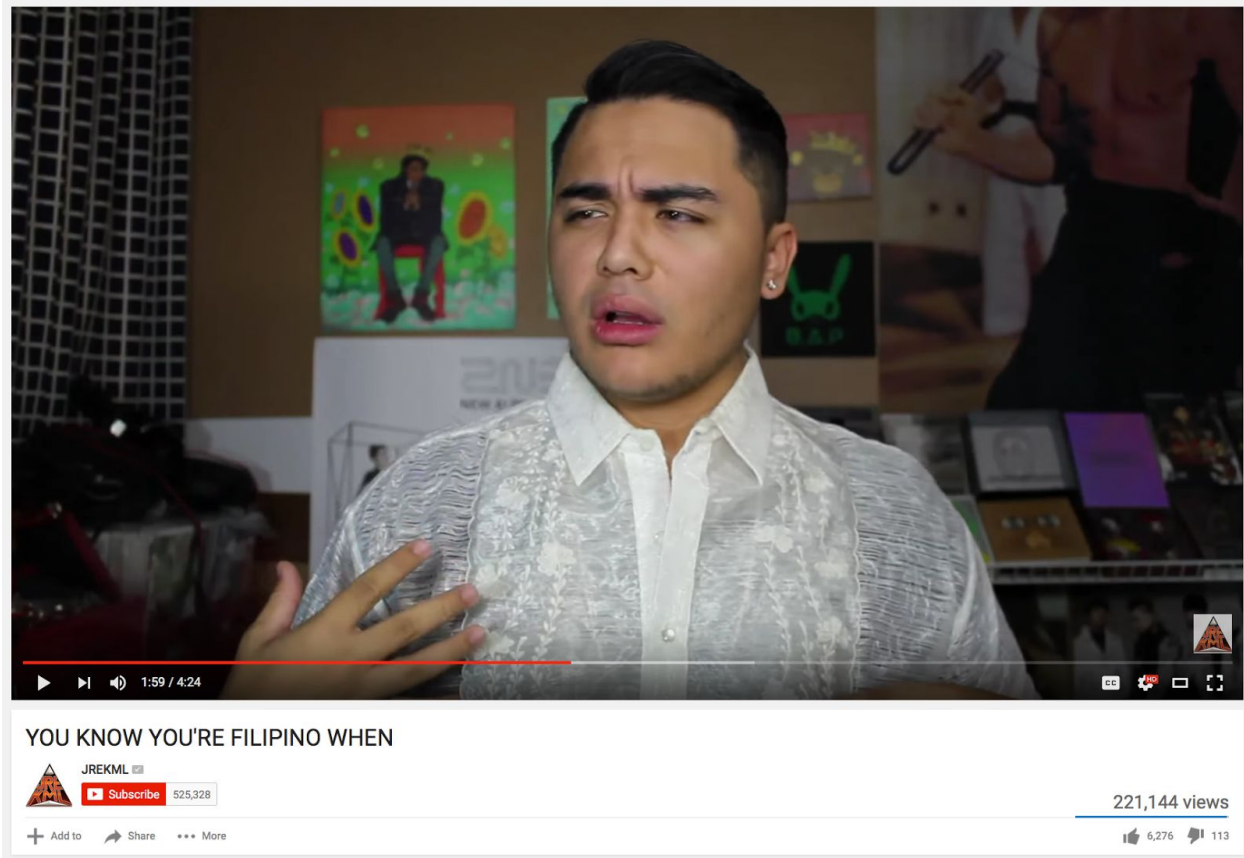
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What Asia Can Learn From Philippines About English Education, Amy Chavez

The establishment of American education systems within the Philippines altered not only the way things were taught and learned within schooling in the Philippines, but also the focus on subjects. For instance, English as a language began to be taught at these schools in a much larger frequency than any Philippine-originating languages and/or dialects. While some may believe that this may benefit the Philippines in the sense that they become more globalized and learn to communicate with people outside of their country, it also demeans the languages that originate in the Philippines itself. Filipino adults grow up learning to take English as a superior means of communication because of its global presence and FilAm children are raised to learn both English and Filipino languages- or, sometimes, solely English. Amy Chavez explains in her article “What Asia Can Learn From Philippines About English Education” that the Philippines excels in teaching English comprehension and that, as a result, the education systems, or at the very least English Language Arts, in the Philippines are superior to other Asian countries. While at first glance it may seem like a compliment and a recognition of a well-rounded form of teaching but what articles such as Chavez’s promotes is Eurocentric education and the blatant disregard of not only languages other than English, but also teaching methods and systems that aren’t understood by the white individual. Not only does this sort of attitude divide Asian countries at large between each other but, internally, it hones classist attitudes within Filipino and FilAm communities between those who are and who are not as privileged to the means of learning foreign languages. It also results in videos such as *Take220Productions’ “Shit Filipino Moms Say (Parody of Shit Girls Say)”* which is a lighthearted joke to odd things Filipino mothers say to their children, but also jokes at the English-speaking skills of them as well.



YOU KNOW YOU'RE FILIPINO WHEN, JREKML

With the cultural values developed within the Philippines (which include pre-colonial Philippines, and the Philippines under both Spanish and American rule) it's clear that there are combatting qualities and traits within a single culture. As we transition from understanding the roots of colonial rule of the Philippine Islands to the manifestation of it and the development of future problems in regards to FilAm individuals, we must focus on the issues of "identifying the Filipino individual. With the authority of Spanish and American rule present for such a long time, the Philippines has formed a cultural identity which is, largely, made up of values derivative of their colonizers. As a result of this, the Philippines have a difficult time identifying

itself in the scope of the world globe. Many FilAm individuals describe themselves in differing ways such as Filipino, Filipino-American, Asian, South East Asian, Pacific Islander, Multicultural, or likewise. The presence of foreign forces for so long has disassociated the Filipino people and FilAm people from the “typical Asian” identity to the point where they are described as “The Latinos of Asia” (Ocampo, 2016), which is problematic because it perpetuates the idea of Filipinos as being the “other” Asian and mutilates years and years of colonization into an umbrella phrase. Filipinos and Filipino-Americans, as much as any other colonized territory/(ies), deserves to be acknowledged and respected as an identity which is separate from its colonizers. It’s brought up in several user videos, for instance, *JREKMLI* saying “I get mistaken of being Spanish all the time” in “*YOU KNOW YOU’RE FILIPINO WHEN*” and *Mrkuyaellis* reasoning around Filipino’s being “Asian” in “*10 Reasons Why I Love Being Filipino.*”

In 1946, with the signing of the *Treaty of Manila*, the Philippines finally becomes an independent nation free of colonial powers. However, the effects of colonial rule within the Philippines and in American was and is still very present within mainstream Hollywood media. Because of the history involved, the Philippines has not only taken these aspects of values and morals but also developed it into an important part of their own culture- which is where we find similarities to Spanish and American cultures. But doing this has also isolated the Philippines from its surrounding countries, making it a unique point of interest to many. Colonial rule has shaped the identity of Filipino and Filipino-Americans to the point where the identity of those groups is questioned and debated, even internally among the groups themselves.

Filipino-Americans have long been see as (too them and others) “too Asian for the Islanders, and

too Islander for the Asians.” Nonetheless, it is important that we recognize lack of representation and depiction of Filipino and FilAm bodies in popular culture and media as it stands now, and the steps that online communities have taken to push for an opposing power to it. The ability of having self-directed and applied media is a powerful tool that has and is being used by many Filipino and FilAm individuals to create an inclusive space within their own populations by creating content that is engaging and relevant to them.

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