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Reflections on Fil-Am History Month From an Autonomist Filipinx

Andrea Alakran

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Where do I begin? I was born in the Philippines almost three decades ago. My story there is brief — by the time I was two years old, I'd already migrated with my parents to the United States.

As a kid, learning my history, holding on very tightly to Filipinx identity, and being nationalistic were ways of surviving the isolation, alienation, and racism of whitewashed inland valley sprawl. I learned the Philippine national anthem when I was nine. I memorized OPM songs. I knew about Andres Bonifacio and Emilio Aguinaldo and key events in the Philippine Revolution. In fourth grade I was reading Jose Rizal and Carlos Bulosan and Sionil Jose and Nick Joaquin and... This is what it means to be Filipinx, right?

Whenever I came back from a rare trip to the Philippines I'd cry for months, missing the large extended family that I have there. I wanted so much to just belong.

But the more I tried to "be" Filipinx, the more that I was called into question — especially by my parents and other elders. I was

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always too American to be Filipinx and too Filipinx to be American — and I’ve always ever understood “the United States of America” to be a myth, built on exploitation and empire. Here’s where I began to find names for what it means to exist in-between: Hyphen. Liminality. Diaspora. Third Culture.

When I was younger, I would get frustrated, and even angry, when I met Filipinx/a/os who I felt didn’t have a strong enough connection to the Philippines. I resented Filipinx/a/os wearing the Philippine flag on everything and talking about pancit and lumpia — but never politics, history, or the “real” stuff. But I realized that there are so many barriers to knowing history and language — time, distance, shame, faulty memories, colonization. I was lucky enough to learn as much as I did. I’d also romanticized what it meant to be Filipinx — I learned that just because someone shared my origin didn’t mean that they also shared my values or politics...

Gatekeeping is when you believe that you get to determine whether someone qualifies to be “enough” of something, and that you hold the keys to and the authority over a certain space or identity. I haven’t just been told that I’m “not Filipinx enough” because I didn’t show up to certain group meetings or events, I’ve also been told that I’m not feminine enough, not obedient enough, not humble enough, that I don’t have enough shame, that I’m disrespectful — *walang hiya, walang respeto sa magulang* [you have no shame, no respect for your parents]. I’ve been told that I’m not doing “real work” because I’m not part of an official organization, that I’m not an “actual organizer.” But who gets to say? Who gets to be the ultimate arbiter of what’s “enough” for myself, or for anyone else?

Over the years, I’ve learned to be wary of groups that tell me that I need to be one thing, and that I must follow their lead — or else.

My experience has shown me that I need space to be my fullest self, and that nobody — and no state — should have the authority to dictate or define who I am. This is why I am an autonomist.

Filipinx/a/o isn’t a monolith — hardly anything is. I’ve learned that where I don’t find belonging in identity, I can still find affinity through compassion and being in struggle with others — especially Bl&POC autonomists. I’m Filipinx and I’m also more than my origin — I’m everything that I’ve been through on the way to where I am now. And I’m also grateful for every autonomist Filipinx that I meet, because they remind me that I’m not alone.

Filipinx/a/o-ness is complex. The Philippines is an archipelago of 7,600+ islands whose borders were defined by colonization, leaving us with so much unlearning to do: colorism, anti-Blackness, classism, patriarchy, homophobia, ableism, and so on. The Philippine state is a product of *U.S. imperialism* — the Philippine flag is inspired by Masonic imagery. Are we Latinx/a/o? Are we Asian? Both? Even the term “Filipinx” is contested as a colonial construct. At the end of all of that, what am I left with?

I’ve called myself a brown autonomist femme for years, because I exist in between, because it’s what makes room for the most of who I am — but I know that even those identifiers can change over time, as I continue to understand myself better, as I find other names.

What I’ve learned best is figuring out how to move through *unbelonging*, and that it’s okay to be more complicated than what others expect or want from you. What I know is that — as long as you aren’t advocating for harm or evading accountability — it isn’t okay for other people to silence, erase, or exclude the fullness of your lived experience because it doesn’t fit into their neat narrative of who is “enough.”