US Centre Summer Research Grant

Recipient Name: Stephanie Rodriguez

Project Title: Mediated civic becoming: Understanding civic agency through social media amongst Filipino American youth

Summary of Project:

How the more private everyday practices of scrolling, alongside the more traditional participatory practices of commenting and sharing, can cultivate civic empowerment remains underexplored. Yet, on today's algorithmically driven platforms, social media feeds have increasingly turned into personalised broadcast channels. To expand beyond the pejoratives of 'clicktivism' or 'lurking', this thesis explores whether such practices are civically consequential through an enquiry into a US ethnic minority's everyday digital engagements: What role might social media play in affording Filipino-American youth the ability to engage in civic practices? What might such practices mean for the development of civic agency?

This project is guided by a materialist phenomenology (Couldry & Hepp, 2017), embracing the role of the social and the technical in co-constructing civic possibilities. Fieldwork was conducted over three months, beginning with eight weeks of participant diary-keeping and an initial round of virtual interviews to collect insights into the lifeworlds, beliefs, attitudes, and practices of 15 Filipino-Americans across four Filipino enclaves in the US. This demographic was chosen to capture how ethnic minority cultural values might factor into an American civic becoming. Following the diary-keeping period, a second round of interviews was conducted in person to perform a digital walkthrough.

In employing reflexive thematic analysis, four forms of civic pathways were identified: seeking belonging, maintaining a public connection, engaging in connective social practices, and nurturing a collective. Through these avenues, participants demonstrated the socio-technically contingent ways they employed their agency, ranging from the non-political to the civic practices. These findings reveal that through everyday discursive encounters, the political can surface in unexpected ways, whether it be through engaging in content about one's hobbies or in sharing information as an act of care. This study's contributions lie in drawing attention to the seemingly insignificant but civically consequential encounters necessary for a civic becoming.

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Report

With the generous funds provided by the U.S. Centre Summer Research Grant, I attended the Association for Asian American Studies conference to present a paper titled 'Contemporary civic becoming: Filipino American cultivation of civic agency.' The goal of attending this conference was to expand my understanding of Asian American Studies as it relates to my research and develop relationships with scholars in this area. I achieved both goals through my attendance. Sitting through many panels and workshops, I grasped the ontological positioning that grounds this field. This experience expanded my ability to identify cultural patterns while being a deeply perspective-shifting event that allowed me to more firmly situate my theoretical position relative to the various interdisciplinary fields my project employs, making this exercise necessary and eye-opening, as it challenged my ability to articulate the cultural dynamics surfacing in my empirical findings.

My project focuses on everyday meaning-making moments when people engage in discursive encounters as they move through their online spaces. I employ a Gramscian common sense to understand how participants come to understand themselves relative to systems of power. Being surrounded by scholars who study power in relation to ethnic minorities introduced me to different concepts and theories to make sense of my own research. For example, I was introduced to the work of Kanesaka (2025) on 'boba liberalism', which has enabled me to make sense of dynamics specific to Asian American culture. Introduction to such theories expanded my language and theoretical toolkit for naming and framing empirical observations. Engaging with scholars who wrestle with the intricacies of being an ethnic minority in the United States opened my eyes to how people name these power structures, particularly as they manifest in everyday life and through different forms of performance and interpersonal interaction. Beyond expanding my theoretical lens, I presented my own perspective on cultural identity, bringing in insights from British Cultural Studies theorists. Bringing this perspective into a space where it was not common challenged my ability to defend my position and my reading of cultural identity. This experience led me to vital texts, both expanding what I knew to be true and fortifying my ability to defend the core thesis of my project.

This was also a fantastic opportunity to connect with scholars asking similar questions. I took every opportunity for coffees to better understand how they make sense of the American socio-political environment. This might be the single most valuable part of the experience: I met brilliant scholars who challenged and pushed me but also inspired me. These scholars work closely with various Asian American communities, some specialising in Filipino Americans, and span theological studies through critical Asian American and race studies. I continue to exchange recommended readings and feel that I now have a network of scholars who have that deep contextual understanding of Asian American ethnic minority culture.

Since this experience, I have submitted my PhD thesis. This experience has directly informed not just many points in my empirical analysis, but how I situated the larger significance and

contribution of this project in the contemporary American socio-political context. Being able to attend this conference has materially expanded my perspective on my area of research, where I situate myself, and where my contributions fit.