Modern dating in a postcolonial city: Desire, race and identities of cosmopolitanism in Metro Manila

Christianne France Collantes
De La Salle University, Philippines

Jason Vincent A. Cabañes
De La Salle University, Philippines

Accepted version. 17 April 2023.

Original citation
Collantes, CF and Cabañes, JVA (2023) "Modern dating in a postcolonial city: Desire, race and identities of cosmopolitanism in Metro Manila." In Andreassen, R, Lundstrom, C, Keskinen, S, and Tate, SA (eds.) *The Routledge international handbook of new critical race and whiteness studies.* Routledge.

Abstract
The chapter discusses dating in a Global South post-colonial city. Specifically, it looks at the lives of middle- and upper-class women who date foreigners, providing insights into the ways that performances of cosmopolitanism are entwined with colonial ideas about white and non-white bodies. It focuses on the case of Metropolitan (Metro) Manila, the Philippine capital that has served as a key site for the country's long colonial history of racial tensions between Filipinos and Westerners. Of particular interest is how these tensions have been expressed around intimate and marital relationships between Filipino women and foreign men. Scholars have long problematised the concept of the Filipino women as the post-colonial other through their studies on women participating as 'mail-order brides', participants in sex tourism, and in marriage migration. But in rapidly globalising Metro Manila middle- and upper-class Filipino women engage in intimate relationships with foreigners in ways that can subvert the racial and sexual stereotypes often ascribed to them. They fashion themselves as the exception, precisely because their elite education, career-orientation, worldliness and feelings of sexual empowerment allow them to participate in and perform upper-class and cosmopolitan lifestyles even while problematic dynamics and tensions around race and class differences persist.

Introduction

This chapter explores a subset of Filipino women in post-colonial Metropolitan Manila (henceforth 'Metro' Manila) who assert a cosmopolitan identity and prefer to date foreign and expatriate white men. As middle- and upper-class women in the globalising city, they relate more to men who are 'non-Filipino', because they view themselves as worldly, well-travelled and sexually liberated, and members

of an elite and cosmopolitan social class. Simultaneously, they present themselves as different from 'other' Filipino women who have traditionally been considered 'gold diggers' in their relationships with white foreigners. Nevertheless, these women still experience racialisation and exoticisation by foreign men.

Here, we reveal the complicated dynamics that undergird the attempts of middle- and upper-class women from the post-colonial capital to subvert racial and gendered stereotypes. In their performances of a cosmopolitan ideal in their dating lives, they seek to position themselves on a level footing with foreign men. However, their self-fashioning inadvertently perpetuates Filipino class divides, which have been ingrained and embedded since the colonial occupation of the Spanish (1565–1898) and the Americans (1898–1946). They also maintain longstanding racial hierarchies which bestow Western and European whites with the greatest power and status. Thus, the cosmopolitan identities that are performed in these Filipino women's relationships with white foreigners uphold privileges of whiteness, even though the women do not express any explicit desire to be white.

Filipino women and foreign men: a complicated history around desire, sex and race

Many scholars have sought to locate the structural and economic impacts that led to the emergence of markets and industries geared towards facilitating the availability of Filipino women to foreign men, including the markets for international marriage migration, mail-order brides and sex tourism. During the Marcos administration (1965–1986), in particular, the sex tourism industry thrived and was part of a purposeful government strategy to offset national debt and attract foreign capital. Marcos sought to maximise the sexual and racialised desirability of Filipino women to Western customers and clients – particularly foreign men on the numerous United States military bases that were established during the American occupation (1898–1946) (Tadiar 2004). He pitted 'images of exotic "beautiful Filipino girls" against "emancipated" Western (white) women' and 'sold Filipino women as "natural resources" to foreign men who believed that "Oriental" women were more available and subservient than women in their own countries' (Ignacio 2000, p. 557; see also Chang and Groves 2000; Enloe 1989).

The sex tourism and prostitution industries that prospered under Marcos's leadership can be linked to larger projects of 'fantasy production' (Tadiar 2004). Specifically, by offering the sexualised and labouring bodies of Filipino women to Western powers, the government participated in global economic restructuring, positioning the Philippines amidst the new world order. During this era, economic development was especially reliant upon export labour, free-trade zones and sex tourism. Still, these economic projects can be viewed as structural echoes of longstanding 'colonial desires' for racialised, colonial bodies that are sexually subservient to 'white culture' and dominance (Fanon 1967).

Such problematic stereotypes are still prevalent, as the social and economic dynamics connecting Filipino women to foreigners have persisted. Several scholars have revealed how digital technologies, in particular, have perpetuated these stereotypes in an increasingly globalising space. For instance, online platforms that serve as an interface between Western men and Asian women (e.g. intermarriage websites and dating apps) show how these men's desire for Asian women is commonly rooted in processes of 'othering' due to the women's 'exotic' appeal (Cabañes and Collantes 2020; Pananakhonsab 2016; Saroca 2012): they serve as a 'space where Western men's subjectivity is exercised while Asian women are reduced to "exotic love" or the "desirable Other", the "otherisation" of Asian women is grounded on the basis of their gender, nationality, youth, and race' (Angeles and Sunanta 2007, p. 15).

Importantly, stereotypes of Filipino women are not limited to those painting a subservient and sexually available 'other'. They also perpetuate a 'good girl'–'bad girl' dichotomy that positions them as either a 'bar girl' or 'gold digger' in the sex industry, or a 'decent', 'traditional' and 'docile' companion to a Western man: 'Hence, the promiscuous bar girls and prostitutes are placed in opposition to the "traditional" and "family-oriented" women on the marriage market who observe conservative and moral codes of sexual conduct' (Angeles and Sunanta 2007, p. 15). Indeed, the opposite of the 'bad girl' stereotype of Filipino women is that of Maria Clara, who represents the ideal of a 'proper, marriage-minded, Filipino Catholic woman with "good morals" ' (Ignacio 2000, p. 558; see also West 1992), based on a character from a novel written by Jose Rízal. This image of Rízal's heroine accommodates the symbol of the Virgin Mary within the Madonna–whore dichotomy that is often projected onto Filipino women (Peracullo 2017). The Maria Clara trope thus perpetuates a gendered and colonial ideology that promotes moral purity, martyrdom and domestic traditionalism – virtues that are still imposed on women in the Philippines. With all of these tropes in circulation, Filipino women have had to continually contest the race, class and sexual stereotypes that are projected upon them within interracial intimacies, sexual transactions and marriage.

While the relationships and power dynamics between Filipino women and foreigners have long been fraught with power imbalances, exoticisation and negative stereotyping, Filipino women have not been simply passive participants in these dynamics. In fact, the literature contains several interrogations of this assumption. In particular, scholars have shown that these interracial and intercultural relationships can be complex and humane, as well as empowering to women, despite the problematic dynamics involved. This invites us to question assumptions of 'the desperation, passivity, or lack of agency of Asian and other foreign brides when they engage in cross-border or transnational marriages' (Angeles and Sunanta 2007, p. 4; see also Constable 2003, 2010) and to challenge the 'simplistic binaries of authentic or inauthentic relationships' that surround the intimate and marital dynamics between Filipino women and Western men (Meszaros 2018, p. 15).

We delve into these points later in this chapter, as we explore the narratives of upper- and middle-class Filipino women who seek out and engage in both casual and serious relationships with foreign men in Metro Manila. On the one hand, these women consciously attempt to counteract both the 'good' and the 'bad' labels that have persisted throughout the Philippines' social, cultural and economic histories, involving sex, marriage and intimacies between Filipino women and foreigners. On the other hand, they actively participate in and seek out relationships with Western men, acting as empowered agents in this process. In their simultaneous enactment of these behaviours, they are aware of and affirming of their cosmopolitan identities, which allow them to separate themselves from previously held racial, sexual and class assumptions about 'Third World' women. In relation to both Western men and other Filipino women, however, their cosmopolitan projections uphold certain entitlements and privileges granted to elite and foreign statuses that are still deeply associated with whiteness in the Philippines.

Colonial mentality and whiteness in the Philippines

A key social dynamic underpinning the interest of upper- and middle-class millennial Filipino women in dating foreign and expatriate men is the power associated with whiteness in the Philippines. To better understand this dynamic, we must critically examine the country's colonial history with the Spanish and the Americans. Both colonising parties granted land titles and governing power to elite families, most of whom were *mestizo* or *mestiza* – that is, of mixed Spanish and Chinese descent. This influenced the structure of political systems and created class divides that are still deeply embedded in the contemporary social, political and economic landscape of the Philippines (Kusaka 2017). The prevalence of Western culture and the integration of the English language within higher education, government and business are also legacies of the country's colonial relationship with the United States (Singson 2017, p. 4). American colonisation, especially, 'made a lasting impression on the Filipino cultural taste in favor of the foreign and specifically American' (Montefrio 2020, p. 490).

Today, those who are considered *mestizo* or *mestiza* are often assumed to be members of an elite social class. Within the Philippines, there is a post-colonial skin tone–based racial hierarchy that is 'often unarticulated but deeply embedded' (Cabañes 2014, p. 631), which places lighter-skinned Filipinos such as *mestizos* and *mestizas* 'in prime position in contrast to other kinds of racialised identities' (Laforteza 2015, p. 6). This hierarchy, and its connection to class and socio-economic status, is discussed by Lasco and Hardon (2019), whose informants reported that lighter skin made individuals 'look rich' ('*mayaman tingnan*') and more professional*,* while darker skin made individuals look 'dirty', and was associated with manual labour (p. 9). Moreover, the authors posit that 'those with more precarious social positions seek whiteness as a

validation – or as a proxy – of the socio-economic status they aspire to, while those who are already secure in their positions need not worry about what skin may signify' (Lasco and Hardon 2019, p. 9). Within this context, whiteness in the Philippines not only refers to Caucasian foreigners and expatriates who travel, live or invest in the country; rather, it is also – and especially – affiliated with the prevailing remnants of colonial histories that have granted cultural, economic and political entitlements to individuals and families of European or American descent (however far removed).

One can see two glaring manifestations of this hierarchy in Filipino popular culture. The first is the high consumption of skin whitening products (Lasco and Hardon 2019; Mendoza 2014; Singson 2017), which is a key indicator that 'Filipinos also have an overwhelming preference for light skin' and 'consider their own culture and appearance inferior to that of their European and American counterparts' (Singson 2017, p. 4). The second is the predominance of *mestizos* and *mestizas* in the country's entertainment business (Cabañes 2014). While an increasingly strong counter-current is valorising brown-skinned Filipinos on screen, it is typically only lighter-skinned celebrities who become film and television superstars (see Lo 2008; Tiongson 1984).

In *The Somatechnics of Whiteness and Race: Colonialism and Mestiza Privilege* (2015), Elaine Laforteza engages with whiteness studies to reveal the ways in which racial bias and hierarchies operate in the Philippines. In particular, she acknowledges that the colonial underpinnings that elevate white and *mestizo/mestiza* aesthetics, culture and status are inherently tied to other prejudices, such as those based on class and religion (Laforteza 2015, p. 9). She claims that such biases 'demonstrate [...] how Filipinos activate racialised hierarchies that materialise through religious and class distinctions, as well as gradations of skin-colour, whether *tisayin/tisoyin* (light-coloured), *kayumanggi* (brown), or *itim* (black)' (Laforteza 2015, p. 9).

Here, we offer an extension of Laforteza's framework by examining how a sample of Filipino women dated Western foreigners and subscribed to cosmopolitan identities. While our research participants did not explicitly claim a desire to *be* or *look* white or *mestiza*, they conceptualised themselves as cosmopolitan, and this made them feel more on par with their foreign counterparts, and even superior to Filipino men. Later in the chapter, we will explore how their cosmopolitan self-fashioning acted to separate them from the problematic stereotypes that reduce Filipino women in interracial relationships to 'bar girls', 'gold diggers' or Maria Clara types. We will also explore how the women's cosmopolitan identifiers – while seemingly associated with more worldly, cultured, travelled and sexually modern lifestyles – still participated in and engaged with social, economic and cultural hierarchies that have long provided more privilege to colonial whiteness and *mestizo/mestiza* people in the Philippines.

Cosmopolitanism, class and culture in the Philippines

Following on from the above section, a second dynamic that underpins the preference of some upper- and middle-class millennial Filipino women (i.e. those born between the early 1980s and mid-1990s) to date foreign and expatriate men is cosmopolitanism in the Philippines. Broadly understood, cosmopolitanism refers to 'place-derived identities, new learning, new perceptions of class and status, as well as exposure to more urban ways of life' (Soco 2008, p. 2). It usually involves exposure to other traditions and aesthetics, as well as the adoption of a global lifestyle through the consumption and absorption of foreign practices and products. Weenink (2008) captures the tangible practices of cosmopolitan individuals, describing how such people:

> *accumulate, deploy and display cosmopolitan capital while living abroad for some time, visit and host friends from different nationalities, attend meetings frequently for an international audience, maintain a globally dispersed circle of friends or relatives, read books, magazines, and journals that reach a global audience and possess a near-native mastery of English and at least one other language. (p. 1,092)*

Clearly, there is a kind of 'self-conscious cosmopolitanism' that can be seen as a project of 'self-fashioning' (Conradson and Latham 2005). This involves the practice of purposefully cultivating a global sensibility by embracing cultural diversity in social and professional relationships, consuming foreign music and food, and participating in certain lifestyles (e.g. practicing environmentalism and eating an organic diet) that are characteristic of a cosmopolitan sensibility (Ho 2011, p. 730). The construction of a cosmopolitan identity and lifestyle seems to rely on a calculated process of *becoming* (Thompson and Tambyah 1999, p. 217), through deliberate cultural consumption and global mobility and movement. Indeed, in the literature, expatriates frequently claim that travel provides them with 'a sophisticated, worldly outlook' (Belk 1997; Morris 1988).

From the above, we can glean that the term 'cosmopolitan', as it is commonly used, is associated with a 'transnational capitalist class' (Ho 2011) comprised of individuals with 'power and privilege', who consider themselves citizens of the world (Sklair 2001). Crucially, the entitlements that accompany this kind of cosmopolitanism include 'social standing within the bourgeois circles of the global economy' and 'an aesthetic frame of reference that transcends parochial tastes and value systems' (Thompson and Tambyah 1999, p. 219). In the Philippines, cosmopolitan self-fashionings align with this notion. As Weenink (2008) showed, many Filipinos consider cosmopolitanism a form of social capital (p. 1,092). In his study, he surveyed parents in the Netherlands who consciously exposed their children to international education and study abroad opportunities in order to prepare them for success in the global economy, which values cosmopolitan ideals. Recognising that cosmopolitan training and living is a form

of 'capital', Weenink argued that desire for cosmopolitanism often involves a struggle to obtain privileged positions in multinational companies, non-governmental organisations, academia and the civil service at the European level (2008, p. 1,092).

Thus, cosmopolitanism still requires *access* and is not entirely available to individuals who (as briefly aforementioned) are exposed to global sensibilities, aesthetics or knowledge through consumption, learning and transnational work. This is largely due to the fact that global and local economies and societies are shaped by rigid class hierarchies, in which cosmopolitan identities are more readily obtained by the middle, upper and elite classes (Lamont and Aksartova 2002; Uy-Tioco 2019). Accordingly, in the Philippines, class stratification dictates who can or cannot achieve a cosmopolitan identity, even if the country itself has become a major export market for migrant workers, and therefore more global in terms of economic gain and cultural consumption (Hau and Tejapira 2011).

Since the ideals of cosmopolitanism are affiliated with elite class standing in the Philippines (often dependent on whether one is a light-skinned *mestizo* or *mestizo*), there are intimate linkages between cosmopolitan identity and whiteness in this context. Scholars have drawn out these critical connections in their explorations of 'white cosmopolitanism' (Hübinette and Arvanitakis 2012; Lundström 2019; Shome 2014). Lundström's study (2019), in particular, examined the ways in which Swedish women who worked and lived abroad were able to gain 'cosmopolitan capital' and become 'worldly' citizens due to the power of their whiteness in global locales. Again, in differentiating between cosmopolitan identity making and the simpler acts of travelling or cultural consumption, Lundström recognised that cosmopolitanism is 'structured by both class and whiteness' (2019, p. 105). Cosmopolitanism, as we will show later in the chapter, is thus attached to both class and racial hierarchies and their associated privileges (or lack thereof) in the post-colonial backdrop of Metro Manila.

Soco's (2008) study also provided insights into the ways in which class and cosmopolitanism are negotiated and perceived in the society of the Philippines. She explored the narratives of domestic workers who were employed overseas in cosmopolitan locales, who gained a sense of cosmopolitanism through their experiences abroad. Soco wrote,

> *as part of the mobile non-elite, these migrant workers gain, not only the means to raise their level of consumption, but also cultural skills and a kind of awareness generated from a particular engagement with the world. They become in some way, cosmopolitan.*
> *(Soco 2008. p. 3)*

Yet, upon returning to the Philippines, the same migrant workers were treated with resentment or jealousy by their local communities (particularly if they

returned home to less urban areas, such as the provinces). While they viewed themselves as having become more cosmopolitan through their experiences working abroad, they were denied the ability to present themselves as such in their home communities. Instead, they were recategorised into their previously held positions within the class system, even if, in practice, the women felt they had elevated themselves through their global mobility.

In the Philippines, then, cosmopolitanism is undeniably embedded within the social, economic and political landscape and imaginaries, and often reserved for the upper and elite classes. Returning our focus to the country's capital, Metro Manila, we can see how cosmopolitan tastes, identities and performances are also linked to preferences for Western or American aesthetics (Montefrio 2020). This can be considered yet another side-effect of colonialism, since cosmopolitanism – similar to white and *mestizo*/*mestiza* privilege – is closely tied to and reserved for the upper classes.

In the following sections, we show how cosmopolitanism and the ways in which it was adopted and claimed by our female interlocutors maintained racial hierarchies, even though the women did not explicitly claim a desire to be white or *mestiza*. Rather, cosmopolitanism featured in the women's dating narratives, influencing their preferences to be romantically and sexually linked to Western foreigners. Yet, in enacting their cosmopolitan identities and dating preferences, the women simultaneously negotiated their race, culture and ethnicity in relation to foreign men, and demonstrated how cosmopolitanism contributes to upholding class and racial hierarchies in the Philippines.

Methodology

In our study, we took an ethnographic approach to understanding the ways in which upper- and middle-class Filipino women in Metro Manila dated foreign and expatriate men, especially through the mediation of online apps such as Tinder and Bumble. In a previous study, we focused on the role played by mobile technologies in this context (Cabañes and Collantes 2020). Here, we focus more on how the women asserted their cosmopolitan identities in their dating lives with white foreigners in such online spaces.

Our research spanned 18 months, from August 2017 to April 2019. During this period, we conducted life story interviews and follow-up conversations with a total of 15 participants – all of whom resided either on their own or with their family in Metro Manila. When we first met the women, their ages spanned from mid-20s to early 30s. We selected this age range, in particular, because we wanted to study women who were likely to have experienced dating both before and after the tremendous growth in mobile dating apps in the 2010s (see Fetters 2018). In our attempts to draw the contours of participants' social standing in Filipino society, we considered both the material and the symbolic dimensions of class.

As regards the material dimensions, we selected participants who belonged to what the Philippine Institute of Development Studies defines as the 'upper middle' to 'upper income' clusters of Filipino society (see Albert et al. 2018). This meant that they lived in households with a family income in the range of PHP 66,640.00 (USD 1376.00) to PHP 190,400.00 (USD 3932.00), in 2017 prices.

As regards the symbolic dimension, our snowball sampling was particularly attentive to participants' socio-economic status and self-ascriptions. With regard to the former, we recruited participants from the upper and middle classes, with 'class' understood as representing a 'a social category pertaining to individuals or groups sharing comparable behaviours, characteristics, and way of life' (Fresnoza-Flot and Shinozaki 2017, p. 891). In relation to self-ascriptions, which we understood as participants' performances of 'social divisions [through their] individual practices, subjectivities, and perceptions' (Fresnoza-Flot and Shinozaki 2017, p. 891), we looked for specific indicators of status: (1) an undergraduate (or higher) degree from one of Manila's top-tier universities, (2) a professional salaried post, (3) strong social connections to middle-class Manila society and (4) a cosmopolitan sensibility borne from living and/or travelling abroad (Pinches 1999).

Finally, as our informants identified as heterosexual, we must acknowledge that the study was limited in scope to heterosexual intimate and romantic relationships between Filipino women and foreign men. We recognise that cosmopolitan intimacies and practices also apply to non-heteronormative relationships (Cornelio and Dagle 2019). However, the experiences and perspectives of the Filipino women in this work also reflect prominent heteronormative discourses around relationships in both popular and legal discourse (UNDP, USAID 2014), which are products of colonial ideas around romantic unions in the Philippines. As such, we considered them most relevant for our analysis.

The women's careers and travels abroad (and dating in the Philippines and abroad)

Each of the women who participated in the study asserted their upper- and middle-class status in several ways. To be sure, they discussed their elite academic backgrounds and high-flying careers and businesses; but above all else, they emphasised their exposure to foreigners (whether through work, study or travel) and their resulting sense of worldliness. The women valued travelling for leisure, and either worked (or planned to work) and/or attended school abroad, mostly in a Western locale. For instance, Grace shared with us that, during her third year of college, she embarked on a life-changing and extensive 6-month trip to Australia. Reflecting on this important time in her life, she said: 'That trip changed who I am. That's the one thing that shifted everything about me because they say you never come back the same person'.

Additionally, Karla, a 26-year-old physician, had travelled and worked overseas, mainly through an internship in Europe. However, similar to some of the other women, she did not develop her cosmopolitanism through her international experiences, only; she also socialised with foreigners within the Philippines: first she befriended a Japanese exchange student during her college years, then her social network expanded to include other foreigners of different nationalities, whom she met at parties and social events.

Clearly, the women had distinct access to travel and international professional and educational opportunities; they also tended to have high-level careers and exposure to foreign cultures through their social circles. Nevertheless, they still felt limited by the gendered, classed and racial expectations of Filipino women. In particular, they felt encumbered by gendered prescriptions. As Queenie shared, her parents once told her: 'No matter how progressive the times are, the woman should always keep the household together'.

In their own ways, the women felt that their choices around marital unions and reproduction allowed them to break away from traditional stereotypes. Camille, for example, felt that marriage was 'not a big priority'. To her, a relationship could be meaningful and committed, even without the 'legality and the papers'. She also said that she did not desire to have children – something that is often considered an important aspect of being a 'good' Filipino woman.

Such understandings about Filipino women – especially expectations that those in the upper and middle classes should enact a Maria Clara trope – also affected the ways in which these women related to local and foreign romantic partners. The value they placed on their independent and cosmopolitan lifestyles created tensions not only at home and in society, but also in their dating lives in Metro Manila. They disclosed several instances of feeling stereotyped or labelled by both Filipino and Western men, due to their class, gender, sexuality (including sexual histories) and preference (and ability) to speak English. Many of them were concerned about being viewed as either too submissive and/or dependent, or too sexually empowered and/or financially independent.

As a result, our interlocutors compared dating Filipino men to dating Westerners, despite Filipino discourses presenting such interracial relationships as problematic. Even when the women experienced racism in their interactions with foreign men, their sense of cosmopolitanism and worldliness made them comfortable engaging in romantic relationships with them. From this lens, we might conclude that the women preferred white men due to the privileges and power that whiteness shares with cosmopolitanism. Still, colonial power imbalances emerged in these intimate connections, which the women had to negotiate in their dating lives.

Social class, English and sexuality: dating Filipino versus foreign men

As previously discussed, Filipino society is highly stratified by class. As a result, most individuals socialise, attend school and date within their own socio-economic brackets. Due to these norms, many of our women interlocutors had met previous romantic partners in college or via mutual friends, and they experienced their social circles in Metro Manila as small, and shrinking.

Discontent with the classed dating scene in Metro Manila was one of the key factors that led several of the women to explore dating foreign men. Grace, for instance, felt bored during her dates with Filipino men in Metro Manila:

> The conversations would be limited to “Who do you know?”, “Do you know this person?”. And it would just be about finding [something in] common [...] I don’t want to talk about that. I want to talk about culture, about your family – like something more than our college lives.

Grace’s trip to Australia changed the way she viewed foreign men and ‘white guys’. Prior to leaving the Philippines, she had assumed that many of these men only dated for ‘sex, money and other benefits’.

Flo, a 27-year-old marketing professional, told us that, ‘you need to have a connection or the background needs to be the same, such as the same school or crowd, because the social classes in the Philippines are very different’. She claimed that it was difficult for her to date outside her own class, as the men ‘find [her] intimidating’. While she shared in the common experience of repetitive conversations with Filipino men, she was less conscious of socio-economic class during her dates with foreigners. Thus, she felt she could have more fulfilling interactions with them. As she put it:

> whatever [Filipino men] say, I won’t care because I already know about it and it’s not adding value. I like to date foreigners because I never stop learning [...] there’s always something new I can get out of the conversation. If you’re dating a foreigner, they’re just total strangers and you do not know anything about them and everything is just fresh.

The women’s use of the English language seemed to provoke different reactions or responses from Filipino versus foreign men. As mentioned, use of English in different social and corporate sectors of the Philippines is often a marker of higher class, higher education and more cosmopolitan sensibilities. Flo and Bea (Flo’s co-worker at their marketing firm) felt more comfortable speaking in English rather than Filipino, yet they found that the Filipino men they dated were intimidated by this. ‘Just because I speak English, it’s hard for me to get a guy’, Flo ranted.

When Annika shed light on this topic in relation to foreign men, she revealed that there were still assumptions made about women who grow up in the Philippines. Describing her encounters with foreign men while dating in the United Kingdom, she said that several British men seemed 'surprised' at her English fluency. In relaying her experiences to us, she felt the need to assert the difference between herself and 'other' Filipino women who speak English while abroad:

> *I asked my aunt why [the men] were surprised and then she said something I found offensive but understandable. She said that Filipinos in the UK are more blue collar. Their blue collar jobs meant they aren't trained to speak English well and that those who have grown up there are fluent because they are British. The men told me it was tricky for them to navigate because I don't have a British accent. They even thought that I grew up in America [...] Learning more about it, they just don't meet a lot of Filipinos from Manila. Most of them have met Filipinos from the province [...] It was hard from their perspective because they got used to accents that sounded like Filipinos were having a hard time speaking English.*

Thus, while the women felt more at ease speaking English, they either experienced judgement from other Filipino men (for being too 'intimidating') or felt the need to explain to Western men why their English was different from that of other Filipino women (who spoke with an accent). This spurred them to use the English language as part of their cosmopolitan self-fashioning, which allowed them to feel more connected to the world, beyond the confines of Metro Manila.

Mediating between being mahinhin and being 'liberated'

A common theme relayed by the women about the difference between dating Filipino versus foreign men was that the latter were experienced as more 'straightforward'. According to the women, Filipino men tended to be less aggressive in their approach, yet dominant later in the relationship. This may be associated with the social and gendered expectation that Filipino women should wait for men to make the first move, even within the modern dating scene in Metro Manila. Lec described this dynamic in her own account of dating in Manila, narrating that she could not see herself 'working out' with a Filipino man. She felt that, although she saw herself with someone who was 'dominant', she also felt he should be someone '*yung kaya ako i-handle*' (i.e. 'someone who could handle her'). At times, when she caught herself waiting for a Filipino man to make the first move, she worried that she was representing the '*mahinhin* Filipina' (i.e. 'passive Filipina'), reminiscent of the Maria Clara trope of the traditional and 'good' Filipino woman. Foreign men, according to her, have 'a different way of handling you'. During a dinner interview in Bonifacio Global City (BGC) – one of the central business districts within Metro Manila – Flo elaborated on this idea of foreign men 'handling' women differently. She told us: 'I think [foreigners] are just more liberal and upfront. If they want something they just go for it [...] I don't know, the culture is probably different'.

The women felt that Filipino men not only expected them to be *mahinhin* in the early stages of dating, but that they were also uncomfortable with the women's careers and financial independence, which subverted the widespread stereotype of the passive Filipino woman. Bea (Flo's co-worker at their marketing firm in BGC) explained that Filipino men – even those in the upper class – tend to be more 'sheltered and insecure', especially in their interactions with women who are financially independent. She compared this to her experiences with foreign men, who she claimed were

> actually impressed when you can pay for yourself or own a place. It's more empowering to date foreigners because you get to be whoever you want [...] you have to be more than who you are but not feel less than where you are at.

Additionally, the women felt their sexual histories and practices were judged by Filipino men, regardless of whether they were part of the same social class and circle. Lec discussed feeling that Filipino men were more 'judgemental' about women's sexuality (as women were expected to be traditional and sexually 'pure'). She explained that, whenever she relayed her number of previous sexual partners to the Filipino men she dated, they would initially believe she was 'interesting' for having the same level of sexual experience as them. However, soon after, they would express to her that they 'can't be with a girl who has been with that many guys'. 'I'm only okay for fun', she told us, 'but for serious relationships, [the men] think I'm too liberated'.

Experiences of being labelled and stereotyped by Filipino men in their dating lives – in connection with the social and cultural perceptions of what Filipino women *should* or *should not* be like – led many of the women to explore and enjoy dating foreign men as an alternative. This romantic preference presented a particular racial hierarchy formulated by the women, themselves. At the top of this hierarchy was Western men, because they were more acceptable and 'actually impressed' by the women's financial independence, interest in other cultures and liberal sexual expressions. Through this lens, the privileges of whiteness were upheld within the complicated post-colonial setting of Metro Manila. Yet although the women faced being 'judged' by other Filipinos of the same socio-economic class, they also experienced stereotyping from foreigners, as a result of their race.

The limitations of whiteness: navigating racial tensions with foreign men

For many of the women, the criticism they received for dating white men dictated their approach to dating foreigners. While several expressed that they felt more 'liberated' and accepted by foreigners, some also felt that dating Western men could confine them within another set of negative stereotypes. Annika, for

instance, discussed her initial fears and reservations about dating foreigners due to these racial and cultural assumptions:

> I guess the stigma in the Philippines is that when we see females in relationships with non-Filipinos, they're labelled as 'gold diggers' and that they are not independent of themselves. So for me, I was strict about that because I've always wanted to be independent, self-reliant and by that I was shying away from the idea of dating a foreigner [...] because of that stigma.

The possibility of being labelled a 'gold digger', which was described by Angeles and Sunanta (2007) as being part of the binary between 'good' and 'bad' Filipino women, led Annika to avoid pursuing romantic relationships with Western men. 'Yes, I wasn't open to it', she told us. 'For example, I would encounter foreigners at a bar when I'm out with my friends and realise that I would rather lean towards Filipinos because I might be labelled as someone [who is] not independent'. Yet, as she continued to narrate her experiences with modern dating, Annika began to discuss her eventual trajectory towards meeting her current partner – a British man whom she met while travelling in the United Kingdom.

On the other hand, while Flo and Bea expressed their personal inclinations towards dating foreigners, they also recognised and tried to navigate the racial tensions they experienced when they perceived displays of white privilege in their dating partners. Flo lamented how some of the men she dated would assume that she 'wanted [them] just because [they're] white', and she hated 'the feeling or idea of white supremacy and prejudice against [her] race'. She reflected on instances in which the men would 'humbly brag' about their own travel and global exposure, despite her being well-travelled, herself. According to her, the men assumed she was not similarly cosmopolitan or that she did not have her own set of international experiences. When Bea joined in to elaborate on this point, she noted that the men 'feel that when they [come] here, they feel like they're a treasure or are special because they're white in a different culture'.

Regardless of these frictions with white men, Flo and Bea still expressed their partiality towards dating foreign men over Filipino men, precisely because they valued their cosmopolitan lifestyles and tendencies too highly to allow themselves to feel limited by the social and cultural constructions of Filipino women in Metro Manila. Despite acknowledging the 'white supremacy' that tended to surface in their romantic encounters with foreigners, they could not compromise their global sensibilities and cosmopolitan practices. Flo felt 'exhausted' at having to defend her sexuality, financial independence and worldliness to Filipino men:

> It gets really exhausting that since most of your experiences end up like that, you just veer away from it. And since it's never been that case with foreigners, it just becomes a safer outlet. I do not want to explain myself

> on why I am driven or I do not want to be a housewife, why I travel so much [...] I don't want to be with someone who doesn't live a life similar to mine.

And Bea, finally, asserted:

> I don't think I can ever be with a guy who has never travelled, at the very least. If he doesn't know how to drink, or how to party or travel on his own, he doesn't value meeting strangers or making friends with random people – it's going to make it hard because it's just who I am.

Conclusion

The women in this study pushed to assert their independence and cosmopolitan identities in relation to either Filipino or foreign men in the dating scene. In doing so, they were forced to persistently navigate around labels attached to Filipino women; at times, they were seen as too *mahinhin*, and thus placed within a binary of 'good' versus 'bad'. And while many of them found relief from these social and cultural expectations (which were usually placed on them by their Filipino counterparts) by dating foreigners, they still confronted racial tensions and imbalances in their interactions with Western men. Their cosmopolitanism and global sensibilities and experiences allowed them to feel more romantically aligned with white men, but not without certain racial limitations.

Cosmopolitanism not only manifest in the women's choice of lifestyles, social networks and romantic relationships, but it also operated within the larger social and cultural context. This is because the intimate lives of Filipino women are shaped by class, gender and race – especially in relation to the privileging of whiteness and Western ideals in the post-colonial setting of Metro Manila. Moreover, while the women's narratives focused on comparing Filipino with foreign men in the Metro Manila dating scene, they also revealed broader insights into the complexities around race that have existed in the Philippines since the colonial period. The women viewed white men as more relatable and therefore more suitable romantic partners, due to their own cosmopolitan assertions. Thus, cosmopolitanism offered these women a particular status – one of financial and sexual independence, English proficiency, international mobility and cultural exposure – that has long been associated with the elite, *mestizo*/*mestiza* and white colonial privilege in the Philippines.

In presenting the personal and intimate experiences of Filipino women and thereby foregrounding the role of post-colonial subjects in constructing cosmopolitanism, this work has expanded the scope and critical discussion of 'white cosmopolitanism' (Hübinette and Arvanitakis 2012; Lundström 2019; Shome 2014). In alignment with the studies mentioned above, the cosmopolitan self-fashionings of the Filipino women studied here were shaped by the

parameters of white privilege. However, the women who were engaged in this cosmopolitanism were non-white.

In this chapter, we have shown the ways in which cosmopolitanism operates within a post-colonial city. We have also identified the continuum of racial and sexualised ideas about Filipino women – especially in relation to interracial intimacies and Western perspectives on women in the Global South. Filipino women must constantly navigate these ideas in order to enact cosmopolitan performances. Linked to this point, we have also spotlighted how cosmopolitan identities, practices and sensibilities in certain regions of the developing world are inextricably linked to colonial hierarchies of race and class. The legacies of whiteness are embedded in cosmopolitan projects, even where intentions exist to disrupt the stereotypes attached to post-colonial bodies.

The women studied here did not explicitly articulate a desire to *be* white. And they recognised the problems inherent in whiteness, even in their romantic partnerships with foreign men. However, their narratives and experiences with modern dating in Metro Manila show how ideas of whiteness and cosmopolitanism work in tandem to reproduce and validate racial and class hierarchies in the Philippines.

References

Albert, J. R. G., Santos, A. G. F. and Vizmanos, J. F. V. (2018). *Profile and determinants of the middle- income class in the Philippines*. Discussion Paper Series No. 2018–20. Quezon City: Philippine Insti- tute of Development Studies (PIDS).

Angeles, L. and Sunanta, S. (2007). “Exotic love at your fingertips”: Intermarriage websites, gendered representation, and the transnational migration of Filipino and Thai women. *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies*, 22(1), pp. 3–31.

Belk, R.W. (1997). “Been There, Done That, Bought the Souvenirs: Of Journeys and Boundary Crossing” in *Consumer Research: Postcards from the Edge,* ed. Stephen Brown and Daruch Turley, New York: Routledge, pp. 22–45.

Cabañes, J. V. A. (2014). Multicultural mediations, developing world realities: Indians, Koreans and Manila’s entertainment media. *Media, Culture & Society*, 36(5), pp. 628–643.

Cabañes, J. V. A. and Collantes, C. F. (2020). ‘Dating apps as digital flyovers: Mobile media and global intimacies in a postcolonial city’, in *Mobile media and social intimacies in Asia*. Dordrecht: Springer, pp. 97–114.

Chang, K. A. and Groves, J. M. (2000). Neither “saints” nor “prostitutes”: Sexual discourse in the Filipina domestic worker community in Hong Kong. *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 23(1), pp. 73–87.

Conradson, D. and Latham, A. (2005). Transnational urbanism: Attending to everyday practices and mobilities. *Journal of Ethnic & Migration Studies*, 31, pp. 227–233.

Constable, N. (2003). *Romance on a global stage: Pen pals, virtual ethnography, and “mail order” marriages*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Constable, N., ed. (2010). *Cross-border marriages: Gender and mobility in transnational Asia*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Cornelio, J. and Dagle, R. C. M. (2019). Weaponising religious freedom: Same-sex marriage and gender equality in the Philippines. *Religion and Human Rights*, 14, pp. 65–94. https://doi. org/10.1163/18710328-13021146.

Enloe, C. (1989). *Bananas, beaches and bases: Making feminist sense of international politics*. London: Pandora. Fanon, F. (1967). *Black skin, white masks*. New York, NY: Grove Press.

Fresnoza-Flot, A. and Shinozaki, K. (2017). Transnational perspectives on intersecting experiences: Gender, social class and generation among Southeast Asian migrants and their families. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 43(6), pp. 867–884.

Hau, C. S., and Tejapira, K., eds. (2011). *Traveling nation-makers: Transnational flows and movements in the making of modern Southeast Asia*, NUS Press. Ho, E. L. E. (2011). Identity politics and cultural asymmetries: Singaporean transmigrants ‘fashioning’ cosmopolitanism. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 37(5), pp. 729–746.

Hübinette, T. and Arvanitakis, J. (2012). Transracial adoption, white cosmopolitanism and the fantasy of the global family. *Third Text*, 26(6), pp. 691–703.

Ignacio, E. N. (2000). Ain’t I a Filipino (woman)? An analysis of authorship/authority through the construction of “Filipina” on the net. *Sociological Quarterly*, 41(4), pp. 551–572.

Kusaka, W. (2017). *Moral politics in the Philippines: Inequality, democracy and the urban poor*. Chicago, IL: NUS Press.

Laforteza, E. M. C. (2015). *The somatechnics of whiteness and race: Colonialism and mestiza privilege*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Lamont, M. and Aksartova, S. (2002). Ordinary cosmopolitanisms: Strategies for bridging racial boundaries among working-class men. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 19(4), pp. 1–25.

Lasco, G. and Hardon, A. P. (2019). Keeping up with the times: Skin-lightening practices among young men in the Philippines. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, pp. 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2019.1671495.

Lo, R. (2008). Then and now, Fil-Ams dominate showbiz. Available from: https://www.philstar.com/entertainment/2008/10/18/408019/then-now-fil-ams-dominate-showbiz [Accessed 02/21].

Lundström, C. (2019). White women. White nation. White cosmopolitanism: Swedish migration between the national and the global. *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, 27(2), pp. 96–111.

Mendoza, R. L. (2014). The skin whitening industry in the Philippines. *Journal of Public Health Policy*, 35(2), pp. 219–238.

Meszaros, J. (2018). Race, space, and agency in the international introduction industry: How American men perceive women's agency in Colombia, Ukraine and the Philippines. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 25(2), pp. 268–287.

Montefrio, M. J. F. (2020). Cosmopolitan translations of food and the case of alternative eating in Manila, the Philippines. *Agriculture and Human Values*, 37(2), pp. 479–494.

Morris, M. (1988). At Henry Parkes motel. *Cultural Studies,* 2 (January), pp. 1–47.

Pananakhonsab, W. (2016). *Love and intimacy in online cross-cultural relationships: The power of imagination*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Peracullo, J. C. (2017). Maria Clara in the twenty-first century: The uneasy discourse between the cult of the Virgin Mary and Filipino women's lived realities. *Religious Studies and Theology*, 36(2), pp. 139–154.

Pinches, M. (1999). 'Entrepreneurship, consumption, ethnicity and national identity in the making of the Philippines' new rich', in *Culture and privilege in capitalist Asia*. London and New York, NY: Routledge, pp. 275–301.

Saroca, C. (2012). Filipino-Australian intimacies online: Love, romance and 'naughty emoticons'. *South East Asia Research*, 20(1), pp. 53–82.

Shome, R. (2014). *Diana and beyond: White femininity, national identity, and contemporary media culture*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Singson, F. (2017). Colonialism's role in the success of the Filipino skin whitening industry. *Auctus: The Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Scholarship*, 45, pp. 1–10. https://doi.org/10.25886/ JBZG-3742.

Sklair, L. (2001). *The transnational capitalist class*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Soco, A. (2008). Changing the discourse on return migrants: Cosmopolitanism and the reintegration of return Filipino migrant domestic workers. *Philippine Sociological Review*, 56, pp. 1–19.

Tadiar, N. X. M. (2004). *Fantasy production: Sexual economies and other Philippine consequences for the new world order*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Thompson, C. J. and Tambyah, S. K. (1999). Trying to be cosmopolitan. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 26(3), pp. 214–241.

Tiongson, N. (1984). *The Urian anthology, 1990–1991*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press.

UNDP, USAID. (2014). *Being LGBT in Asia: The Philippines country report*. Bangkok.

Uy-Tioco, C. S. (2019). "Good enough" access: Digital inclusion, social stratification, and the reinforcement of class in the Philippines. *Communication Research and Practice*, 5(2), pp. 156–171.

Weenink, D. (2008). Cosmopolitanism as a form of capital: Parents preparing their children for a globalizing world. *Sociology*, 42(6), pp. 1089–1106.

West, L. (1992). Feminist nationalist social movements: Beyond universalism and towards a gendered cultural relativism. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 15(5/6), pp. 563–579.