Note on Terminology

While writing this book, I had to make a decision about whether to use F or P when referring to the Filipina/o American community. Although most older immigrants who arrived in the United States before the post-1965 emigration use the F spelling, many other community members refer to themselves as Pilipino and Pilipina. The formative 1976 anthology Letters in Exile, in which the term Pilipino was used, explains its choice of terminology as follows: “‘Pilipinos’ is used here instead of ‘Filipinos’ technically because there is no phonetic ‘ph’ or ‘f’ sound indigenous to the Philippine language. However, ‘Pilipinos’ is more than ‘Filipinos’ spelled with a ‘p’ instead of an ‘f.’ The term represents a recognition of the identity and the history of the Pilipino people in America.”¹ Because many Filipina/os in this country grew up with the F spelling, though, the change has met with some controversy. A decade after Letters in Exile was published, the editors of Amerasia Journal, in a special issue entitled “Filipinos in American Life,” discussed how the P/F controversy represents the struggle over community self-definition:

In the late 1960s, activists emerging from the struggle for ethnic studies advanced the spelling “Pilipino” as part of a redefinition of the Filipino American experience. They argued that the Tagalog language did not contain an “F” sound and that the imposed spelling “Filipino” was a remnant of colonized mentality. However, more recent immigrants have contended that other languages in the Philippines do contain “F” sounds and that the spelling “Filipino” is consistent with their cultural heritage.²
In this book, I have chosen to use Filipino and Filipina in deference to the regular usage of these spellings by the community members from the period under study. I have, however, chosen to make these terms more inclusive of gender. Traditionally, Filipino is used to refer to Filipino men as well as Filipina women, while Filipina refers only to Filipina women. Many people feel that the term Filipino serves to reinforce the historical absence of women because of the use of the male ending, o. Hence, as with the term Chicana/o, I have opted to use Filipina/o to refer to both men and women. In this book, I use Filipina/o American to refer to Filipina and Filipino Americans inclusively, and Filipino American or Filipina American when I discuss the experience of one gender alone. I chose to use a/o as opposed to o/a because of my desire to argue for the centrality of women in the community’s history. Women, like men, are at the core of the community history I tell, and because of their marginalization in many recounts of pre–World War II Filipina/o American history, as an intervention I have chosen to place the feminine ending, a, first.

Addressing these kinds of categories leads to even more questions. Sometimes, deciding when to use the a/o ending versus using o or a has not been easy. Since the experience of Filipina/o Americans in the pre–World War II period was so skewed toward men, many of the people featured in my story are males. At the same time, it is quite possible that despite gender discrimination, a few women pioneers were present in any given occupation or experience, whether or not they were identified in the historical record. On another level, since gender and sexuality are such fluid categories, the binary opposition represented by Filipina and Filipino seems problematic. These issues indicate how much more there is to pursue in terms of understanding and documenting the experience of Asian Americans in American culture.

Finally, I also want to note that much of the documentation about Filipina/o Americans in the era before World War II used Filipina or Filipino instead of Filipina American or Filipino American when referring to Filipina/o Americans, as did many of the interviewees themselves. Hence, at times I use Filipina or Filipino when referring to Filipina/o Americans because this is how people would identify themselves. Similarly, when I address the Chicana/o experience, I sometimes use Mexican if this was the term used in the historical evidence. Similar issues exist for other groups, such as Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans.