
Cartographies of Ethnicity

Etnik ba talaga tayo? Aba, 'di ba ang mga etnik e 'yung mga Igorot at Mangyan? Hindi naman ako Igorot, a. [Are we really ethnic? Well, isn't it that ethnics are the ones who are Igorot and Mangyan? Well, see, I'm not Igorot.]

—Filipino American interviewee

Pilipino tayo kasi galing tayo sa Pilipinas. At saka ngayon, Amerikano na rin tayo kasi nandito tayo ngayon sa Amerika... Pilipinong Amerikano. O, 'di ba? [We are Filipino because we came from the Philippines. And now, we are also Americans because we are now here in America. Filipinos who are Americans. Well, isn't it true?] It's a problem for others, but it's something I'm proud of.

—Filipino American interviewee

In my fieldwork, my use of the words “ethnic,” “ethnicity,” and “ethnic group” was usually received with apprehension or, at the least, misunderstanding, as the first quote in the epigraph suggests. For this person, “ethnic” implied “pre-modern” or “aboriginal.” And even though I was not drawing on a similar construct, it was clear that these were markers she opted to keep her distance from. Etymologies of the term “ethnicity” reveal origins and descriptions

associated with Greek, Latin, and French, as well as English, usage (*ethnikos*, *ethnos*, *natio*, respectively).¹ Depending on the language dictionary one consults, its meaning ranges from “people who are heathen” or “pagan” to people who are “members of a religious group” or “parts of a nation.” And ethnicity varies not only across linguistic contexts but within local and national communities with geographical borders.

By looking at ethnicity as it relates to the concepts of identity, location, and nationhood, I here lay the cartographic groundwork for an analysis of ethnic identity formations and constructions among Filipino Americans. I use this three-part framework to establish a conceptual logic that flows from the relationship between ethnicity and identity as historically specific, contextual, and multilayered; to considering the centrality of “location” as both a space and a constitutive part of ethnicity; and eventually to conceiving of Filipino American identity formation as a set of claims about ethnicity and nationhood.

Ethnicity and Identity

The connection between ethnicity and identity is not inherent, though it may appear to be. One’s ethnicity, however defined, does not unproblematically and automatically refer to one’s sense of identity. And one’s identity is not only and always defined by one’s ethnicity. In this book, I stress the notion that the relationships between identity and ethnicity are so completely the products of historical and contemporary interactions that the definitions of the terms and their links with each other are always shifting.

The multiple perspectives on ethnicity from the disciplines of sociology, history, and anthropology reflect such shifts, when one examines the nature and causes of ethnic group formation. What is ethnicity? What is it that makes people identify themselves as an ethnic collective? When and how does this happen? The answers to these questions have been generally formulated between two opposing poles, the primordialist and the instrumentalist views.² Primordialists emphasize that people naturally group themselves together out of a sense of primordial attachment, mostly in the form of orig-

inal ancestry, culture, and homeland. These bonds are created and maintained through "an array of potent symbols" such as name, language, and religion that, in turn, generate affective sentiments among individuals, holding them together by virtue and through acts of unquestioned belonging.³ Instrumentalists maintain that having an "identity" in terms of belonging to a group arises from the "circumstantial manipulation of identities" by individuals gathering as one to suit their collective interests.⁴ They forge commonality under a unifying ethnic category to promote and protect these shared goals.

From the instrumentalist perspective, when changes in people's social environment disrupt their traditional lives (such as contact with other groups, perceived inequalities arising out of relationships with other people, or movement to another place where other people have already settled), they build coalitions based on identifying and fighting for shared interests. In the process, they struggle to create and sustain common bonds from forged collective affinities, perceiving these struggles as rationally determined.⁵ The primordialist stress, however, is on the essential permanence of the commonalities that united the group in the first place. Primordialists explain the nature of ethnicity as a value (or a sentiment, as opposed to an "objective" of the instrumentalists) that has always been held by the people in a group.⁶

Although they differ with regard to explanatory focus, scholars from both perspectives basically concur that ethnicity involves actions predicated on senses of likeness and difference.⁷ One may be predisposed to belong to a particular group because of shared features with its other members. Or, based on perceived differences from other groups, one realizes a bond that acts as a glue and sets one's group apart from the rest. Ethnicity, therefore, involves a binary relationship. "Likeness" can be understood or realized only through an understanding and realization of difference. "Difference" carries meaning only as a corollary of likeness. What sets the instrumentalists apart from the primordialists is their contrasting view of the cause or causes of these perceptions of similarity and difference.

To a limited extent, both perspectives also acknowledge that, while attributions of belonging are the same in all ethnic groups, the degree

of such attributions may vary *within* each ethnic group, that is, the magnitude and scope of attachments are not always uniform or stable across, for instance, age, sex, and social status differences.⁸ In her study of Filipino Americans in San Diego, sociologist Yen Le Espiritu says that for immigrant Filipinos, “ethnicity is deeply subjective, concrete, and cultural . . . [while] for the second generation, it is largely cognitive, intermittent, and political, forged out of their confrontation with and struggle against dominant culture.”⁹ Generational distinctiveness, in this case, is a function not only of differences in age and life histories, but more importantly, of the sharp contrasts in each generation’s allegiance to and immersion in particular cultures. Thus, we have parents who were born and raised in the Philippines immigrating to the United States and professing a Filipino ethnic identity “reinforced on a daily basis”; and we have children who were born and raised in the United States and whose ethnic behavior is “largely symbolic, characterized by a nostalgic but unacquainted allegiance to an imagined past,” but nevertheless creating new constructions of both Filipinoness and Americanness.¹⁰

These findings suggest that the ethnic identification of social actors in a group changes over time. Individuals in the group may profess affinity to an ethnic sensibility along a continuum from “none” (or distanced) to “full” at any given time. This is one of the reasons that one’s identity is not always the product of one’s conception of ethnicity, and one’s ethnicity (say, as defined by a state bureaucracy, regardless of one’s affiliation with it in practice) is not always a component of one’s identity.

How then do we account for ethnic group construction? What particular forms does it take when people identify as a collective? What do we take into account in these processes of ethnic construction? One source of answers may lie in the notion of “identity” itself, which recent scholars have called “subject position” (see Chapter 6).

We can locate a great deal of scholarship in the social sciences, from both the primordialist and the instrumentalist perspectives, in which much of the focus is on enumerations of various ethnic groups to account for similarities in the ways they pursue collective action.¹¹ To many of these scholars, identification with an ethnic category meant