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Are second-generation Filipinos 'becoming' Asian American or Latino? Historical colonialism, culture and panethnicity

Anthony C. Ocampo

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Abstract

This article examines how second-generation Filipinos understand their panethnic identity, given their historical connection with both Asians and Latinos, two of the largest panethnic groups in the USA. While previous studies show panethnicity to be a function of shared political interests or class status, I argue that the cultural residuals of historical colonialism in the Philippines, by both Spain and the USA, shape how Filipinos negotiate panethnic boundaries with Asians and Latinos, albeit in different ways. Filipinos cite the cultural remnants of US colonialism as a reason to racially demarcate themselves from Asians, and they allude to the legacies of Spanish colonialism to blur boundaries with Latinos. While the colonial history of Filipinos is unique, these findings have implications for better understanding racialization in an increasingly multiethnic society – namely, how historical legacies in sending societies interact with new racial contexts to influence panethnic identity development.

Keywords: panethnicity; colonialism; Filipino; Asian American; Latino; second generation.

Introduction

During his 2011 visit to the Philippines, Pulitzer Prize-winning Latino author Junot Díaz (Matilla 2011) had this to say to a local reporter:

You should come to the Dominican Republic because from what I've seen so far, Filipinos would have no problem over there. You wouldn't even notice you'd left . . .

We have certain strong similarities. Our countries have been colonized by both the Spanish and [American]. I feel the similarities very strongly.

Having grown up around Filipinos in New Jersey, Díaz is alluding to the history of Spanish and American colonialism shared by the Philippines and many Latin American societies. Díaz implicitly blurs the boundaries between Filipinos and Latinos by drawing from what Cornell and Hartmann (1998, p. 237) term a ‘symbolic repertoire’ – the stories, histories and cultural markers that bond different groups together. These historical and cultural connections between Filipinos and Latinos are echoed by scholars, historians and journalists (Pisares 2006; Morrow 2007; Guevarra 2012). However, within the US context, Filipinos are classified as Asian rather than Hispanic by including the US census. Filipinos were also involved in the establishment of the Asian American movement and continue to participate in pan-Asian organizations today (Espiritu 1992).

The links of Filipinos with both Latinos and Asians introduce an interesting question: how do second-generation Filipinos understand and negotiate their panethnic identity, given their connections to two of the largest panethnic groups in the USA? In everyday life, race involves the complex negotiation of factors beyond institutional designations, including outsiders’ perceptions, cultural knowledge and ways of behaving (Jackson 2001). Racial categorizations constantly evolve, and groups may develop a panethnic consciousness that transgresses ‘official’ designations. To address my question, I use multiple data sources that elucidate Filipino panethnic identity patterns. First, I draw from in-depth interviews and surveys of 50 second-generation Filipino adults from Los Angeles, a multiethnic city and the primary destination of Filipino immigrants. Second, I analyse two large-scale surveys of the immigrant second generation – the Immigrant and Intergenerational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles (IIMMLA) and Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS) – which provide a baseline of panethnic identity patterns of Filipinos and other Asians.

Although it was not the original intent of the study to examine how colonialism affects panethnicity, the majority of interview respondents themselves brought up both Spanish and US colonialism in the Philippines when discussing identity. Previous research highlights colonialism as an important historical backdrop for understanding assimilation (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). As Massey and colleagues (1993) have argued, colonialism matters because it creates cultural links between members of the sending and receiving countries. However, past studies mainly consider how colonialism links immigrant groups to *mainstream* members of the host country.¹ As such, this study focuses on the way that colonialism shapes how immigrant groups relate with *minority* members of society. Additionally, this study also examines

how colonialism might affect assimilation outcomes specifically among *children of immigrants* in a multiethnic society. Although children of immigrants may not have been socialized within the colonized society, colonialism has an enduring imprint on the culture passed on to them by their parents, which in turn affects identity (Kasinitz et al. 2008). Filipinos draw on their colonially influenced culture when negotiating boundaries between themselves and other groups.

Classical assimilation models once posited that immigrants and their children would assimilate into a white middle-class mainstream (Gordon 1967), but contemporary frameworks have shown them now being incorporated into diverse segments of US society (Portes and Zhou 1993). Ongoing Latino and Asian migration is dramatically changing the US racial landscape, which in turn is reshaping immigrant assimilation processes. For example, in Los Angeles, among the top destinations for Latino and Asian immigrants, nearly half of the residents are of Latino descent, and non-Hispanic whites constitute a mere 28 per cent of the population (Census 2010). Children of immigrants living in such multiethnic contexts might find more incentive in identifying with their minority peers, rather than align themselves with groups associated with the white mainstream.

Understanding panethnic identity through a cultural lens, Filipinos cited US colonialism as a reason to demarcate themselves from Asians while alluding to the cultural legacies of Spanish colonialism to blur boundaries with Latinos. While existing scholarship has explained panethnicity as a function of shared class status or political interests (Espiritu 1992), I find that the cultural legacies of Spanish and US colonialism play a defining role for Filipinos' panethnic identity development. These findings challenge studies that suggest that children of immigrants prefer identities associated with upward mobility (in this case, Asian over Latino) and highlight the mechanisms that facilitate panethnic consciousness *across* class lines, a phenomenon less discussed in previous research. This study also considers how identity is shaped by the negotiation of cultural aspects associated with both the pre-migration society and the multiethnic landscape of contemporary US society.

Assimilation theory and panethnicity

Identity has long been considered a mechanism of immigrant-group assimilation. Early scholars asserted that immigrants and their children identify as unhyphenated Americans to fully assimilate into US society (Park 1950; Gordon 1964). However, contemporary reformulations of assimilation suggest that children of immigrants are incorporated into different segments of society due to a constellation of structural, economic and cultural factors, a perspective known as segmented

assimilation (Portes and Zhou 1993). Notably, this framework posits that connections to *ethnic* identity allow children of immigrants to acquire social and economic resources that facilitate upward mobility (Zhou and Bankston 1998). However, studies in this tradition say relatively less about the mechanisms shaping *racial* or *panethnic* identification. Some have critiqued these studies for overemphasizing the negative aspects associated with ascribing to racial identities that are externally imposed (Neckerman, Carter and Lee 1999).

Theories of panethnicity have highlighted the social, economic and political advantages of identifying with one's racial group (Espiritu 1992). Recent studies discuss the viability of panethnic identification, highlighting how children of immigrants seamlessly switch between ethnic and panethnic labels depending on the situation (Kasinitz et al. 2008), rather than viewing them as mutually exclusive options. However, intragroup dynamics and racialized constructions in mass media often prompt individuals to develop culturally based notions of panethnicity (Dhingra 2007). When these individuals feel that they do not fit the 'rules' for panethnic 'membership', they in turn express ambivalence or resistance to being lumped into these racial categories (Kibria 1998).

Colonialism and assimilation

Some scholars have argued that assimilation, identity and panethnicity models are implicitly US-centric and overlook the transnational nature of these processes (Espiritu 2004). Recent studies show that assimilation and identity formation of immigrant groups are influenced by US economic or military presence in the home country (Espiritu 2007; Kim 2008), transnational media (Roth 2009) and migratory flows between sending and host societies (Jiménez 2010). Focusing on colonialism can highlight how historical and contemporary relations *between* sending and receiving nations interact with immigrant experiences in the US context to shape assimilation.

The effect of colonialism on immigration and assimilation patterns is multi-layered. Colonial regimes exploit the natural resources and labour of the colonized society, and the resulting economic underdevelopment of the latter creates the impetus for members of its society to migrate in the first place. Second, colonial relationships influence policies that facilitate the socio-economic selectivity of individuals who migrate even in the post-colonial period (Choy 2003). Third, the institutional and cultural influences of colonial regimes 'prepare' members of the colonized society to migrate. Potential migrants in these societies possess cultural and institutional familiarity with the colonizing nation long before crossing international borders. This familiarity in turn facilitates the decision to

migrate and the ability to assimilate into mainstream jobs, neighbourhoods and organizations (Portes and Rumbaut 2001). Such findings should not at all suggest that colonialism should be framed in any positive light. Scholars show that colonialism breeds feelings of racial inferiority among immigrant groups even after the colonial period has ended, which in turn can lead to detachment from one's co-ethnic community (David and Okazaki 2006).

While studies have examined how colonialism affects the immigrant generation, few address how it distinctly influences second-generation outcomes. As Jiménez (2010) argues, immigration scholars should be more precise about colonialism's effects across generations, rather than assume that it permanently relegates immigrants with colonial histories to second-class status. Without discounting the exploitative history of colonialism, Waters (1999) notes that European colonialism has served as a basis of panethnic consciousness among second-generation West Indians from different societies – although Waters' study is among the few that considers how colonialism creates connections with other *minority* populations. Building on this research, this study shows how Filipino children of immigrants negotiate their colonial history when navigating panethnic boundaries with other ethnic groups. Warikoo (2011) provides a template of how this might occur. Her research shows that second-generation Indo-Caribbeans inherit South Asian cultural practices from their immigrant parents' society, but the degree to which it shapes their identity depends on the value that Indian culture carries within their racial context.

Historical context

The Philippines became part of the Spanish Empire during the early sixteenth century, the period when Spain established *Nueva España* in modern-day Mexico. Considered an extension of its empire in Latin America, Spain established the Acapulco–Manila galleon trade, which facilitated extensive cultural exchange between Filipinos and Mexicans for three centuries (Guevarra 2012). The Spanish period ended in 1899 but left enduring imprints on modern-day Philippine society. Spanish language has had a strong influence on Tagalog, which along with English is the current lingua franca of Philippine society (see Table 1). Filipinos were also given Spanish surnames (e.g. Torres, Rodríguez, Santos) during the colonial period. And similar to Spain's Latin American colonies, the Philippines remains a predominantly Catholic society, one of only two throughout Asia.² Over 80 per cent of Filipinos living in the Philippines and abroad are Catholic (Rodríguez 2006).

Despite Filipino revolutionary efforts in 1899, the Philippines was acquired by the USA following the Spanish–American War. Under the guise of 'benevolent assimilation', the Americans used cultural

Table 1 *Everyday words in English, Spanish, and Tagalog*

English	Spanish	Tagalog
Household		
Table	mesa	mesa
Living room	sala	sala
Chair	silla	silya
Kinship		
Uncle	tío	tito
Aunt	tía	tita
Godfather	nino	ninong
Godmother	nina	ninang
Clothing		
Pants	pantalones	pantalón
Jacket	chaqueta	dyaket
Shoes	zapatos	sapatos
Food-related		
Fork	tenedor	tinidor
Spoon	cuchara	kutsara
Snack	merienda	meryenda
Days		
Monday	Lunes	Lunes
Tuesday	Martes	Martes
Wednesday	Miércoles	Miyerkoles

imperialism to subjugate the native population, establishing US-style schools and English as the medium of instruction and national language (Choy 2003). Colonial policies granted Filipinos the status of US ‘nationals’, a legal status created by the US government specifically to facilitate large-scale migration of mostly male labourers to low-wage agricultural and factory work. Despite their ability to migrate, Filipino workers encountered violent resistance from white nativists, who eventually helped lobby Congress to pass the 1936 Tydings-McDuffie Act,³ which granted the Philippines independence and effectively halted Filipino migration (Baldoz 2011).

Ironically, the legacies of the American colonial period set the stage for a highly selective group of Filipinos to migrate when the Hart-Cellar Act reopened US borders to non-white immigrants in 1965. US-modelled schools socialized Filipinos to American ways of life and provided widespread access to higher education. Filipinos had access to health care training institutions, initially established to aid US military stationed in the Philippines (Choy 2003). After US colonialism, the Philippine economy remained underdeveloped, and unemployment was rampant, creating a surplus pool of highly educated, English-speaking Filipino workers. During the 1970s, the Philippine government implemented aggressive labour emigration policies,

transforming the country into a 'labor brokerage state' (Rodríguez 2010, p. 6). Millions within the surplus labour pool were primed to fill shortages in US professional sectors, particularly within health care.

These legacies explain why Filipinos are more linguistically and residentially assimilated than their Asian counterparts. Over two-thirds of Filipino migrants speak English 'very well', in contrast to less than a third of other Asian migrants (Portes and Rumbaut 2006). In addition, there are no culturally homogenous ethnic enclaves for Filipinos that compare to Chinatown, Koreatown or Little Saigon, as they generally reside in racially integrated neighbourhoods (Vergara 2009). These factors also explain why higher proportions of Filipinos enter mainstream, English-speaking occupations versus ethnic economies. Filipinos are actively recruited by US employers into health care, teaching and other professional sectors (Ong and Azores 1994). However, the language barriers and residential concentration more common among Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese mean that these groups can remain in occupational sectors that are ethnically insular (Zhou 2009).

Like their parents, Filipino children of immigrants are distinct from their second-generation Asian peers. Among second-generation Asians, Filipinos by far have the highest rates of being monolingual English speakers (Zhou and Xiong 2005). Interestingly, while Filipino migrants generally have more mainstream occupational pathways than other Asian migrants, their children fare less well in their educational outcomes than their other Asian peers. While most second-generation Filipinos pursue higher education, they are less likely than their Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese counterparts to attend four-year universities, more likely to opt for less prestigious institutions and less likely to graduate with a four-year degree (Teranishi et al. 2004; Zhou and Xiong 2005). Moreover, research by Teranishi (2002) shows that Filipinos are treated like remedial students, while their East Asian counterparts are automatically perceived as more high achieving – all part of what Espiritu and Wolf (2001, p. 157) have termed a 'paradox of assimilation'.

Espiritu (1992) argues that the cultural differences rooted in colonialism also explain why Filipinos of different generations have faced challenges in developing panethnic consciousness with other Asians. She suggests that the history of Spanish colonialism presents the possibility for Filipinos to build panethnic alliances with Latinos, or in the least can be utilized as political leverage within pan-Asian organizations (Espiritu 1992, p. 172). While Asian cultures and experiences are indeed heterogeneous, there are cultural distinctions unique to Filipinos historically rooted in their dual colonial past.⁴ This article explores how the cultural residuals of this past influence how Filipinos negotiate panethnic boundaries between themselves and other ethnic groups.

Methodology

In-depth interviews

This study draws from in-depth interviews with 50 second-generation Filipinos from two middle-class, multiethnic neighbourhoods in Los Angeles: Eagle Rock and Carson. Unlike other Asian immigrants in Los Angeles, there are no ethnically homogenous Filipino neighbourhoods in the region comparable to Chinatown, Koreatown and Little Saigon. Filipinos live in multiethnic neighbourhoods and are often the primary Asian-origin group in the area (Census 2010). Eagle Rock and Carson are two such neighbourhoods that are also well-known Filipino settlements (Gorman 2007; Ibañez and Ibañez 2009). There are Filipino restaurants, community centres and immigrant service centres, although they do not dominate the neighbourhood landscape in the same fashion as other Asian ethno-burbs (Zhou 2009).

Eagle Rock and Carson are majority–minority neighbourhoods that are also middle class – the median household income in both Eagle Rock and Carson is about \$67,000, well above the national average (Census 2010). In both neighbourhoods, 20 per cent of residents are Filipino and over 35 per cent are Mexican. However, in Eagle Rock, the remaining population is white, whereas in Carson, it is mostly African American with a small, but visible number of Samoans (about 3 per cent). Lacy (2008) suggests that comparing neighbourhoods with distinct racial contexts yields insights into the heterogeneous identity trajectories of middle-class minorities. While neighbourhood racial context is not the central focus of this article, I do examine how it may mitigate the relationship between colonialism and identity.

Officially, Eagle Rock is characterized as a neighbourhood with a population of about 34,000, and Carson is considered a city with a population of 90,000. However, individuals rarely conceptualize the areas in which they live by official government designations (Gottdiener and Hutchinson 2010). This was the case with Filipinos in the study, who referred to Eagle Rock and Carson as ‘neighbourhoods’ without hesitation. In using the term ‘neighbourhood’ to describe Eagle Rock and Carson, I am choosing to remain consistent with respondents’ particular use of the term.

The interviews were conducted between March 2009 and January 2010, and each lasted approximately ninety minutes. Half of the respondents were recruited through messages distributed on an online networking website. One fourth of respondents were recruited through contacts established during casual interactions in coffee shops, churches, parks and shopping centres in the neighbourhoods. The remaining were referred by those already interviewed. Respondents in the study each had Philippine-born migrant parents, were born in the

USA (or had migrated by age five) and were between twenty-one and thirty years old at the time of the interview.

Several interview questions addressed panethnic identity. I asked respondents: (1) What would you consider to be your racial identity? (2) Which ethnic and racial groups do you feel you and other Filipinos are most similar to? (3) Have you ever identified as Asian American? I also asked *why* Filipinos might or might not identify with certain panethnic labels or groups. The interview included topics that previous studies have linked to identity formation, such as neighbourhood experiences, school experiences, and interactions with family and friends. I noted moments when respondents discussed panethnic identity both explicitly (e.g. 'I am Asian American') and implicitly (e.g. 'We [Filipinos and another group] are the same.').

While the scope of the article discusses colonialism, this was not a theme originally included in the interview protocol, nor was it a topic that I introduced during the conversation. However, the majority of respondents brought up the theme of colonialism of their own accord when discussing Filipino identity. When they did, I probed further into the way they used this frame when negotiating panethnic boundaries. I also paid attention to whether the association between colonialism and identity was mitigated by other factors, such as neighbourhood context, socio-economic status or interracial encounters.

Following each interview, respondents were asked to fill out a brief demographic survey with questions about their level of education, socio-economic status (SES), and ethnic and racial identity choices. Respondents first answered the open-ended question: 'How do you self-identify?' For a subsequent question – 'What is your racial background?' – respondents were asked to indicate whether they identified as white, African American, Latino, Asian or Pacific Islander.

Quantitative data

Immigrant and Intergenerational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles (IIMMLA)

The IIMMLA is a cross-sectional survey of second-generation adults in the greater Los Angeles area conducted in 2004. Researchers targeted adult children of immigrants⁵ of Latino and Asian origin. Participants were surveyed during a thirty-five-minute telephone interview and asked questions related to their incorporation and mobility, including national origin, SES, educational background, occupation and cultural involvements. In this article, I draw only from surveys of the 1,617 respondents of the four primary Asian groups included – Filipino, Chinese, Vietnamese and Korean – also the four

largest Asian ethnicities in Los Angeles (Census 2010). To examine panethnic identity, I focus on their responses to the question: ‘For classification purposes, we’d like to know what your racial background is. Are you White, Black or African American, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian, Alaskan native, or member of another race, or a combination of these?’

Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study (CILS)

The CILS is a longitudinal survey of second-generation immigrants from San Diego, California and Fort Lauderdale/Miami, Florida. Three waves of the survey were conducted in 1992, 1995 and 2001–03, when respondents’ average age was about fourteen, seventeen and mid-twenties, respectively. The CILS shares similar objectives to the IIMMLA in that it aims to elucidate the mechanisms underlying second-generation assimilation and acculturation. Key variables included language, educational achievement, SES, and ethnic and racial identification. I draw only from the San Diego sub-sample because the number of Filipino-origin respondents in Miami is negligible. My analysis is limited to the four primary Asian descent subgroups included in the survey – Filipino, Vietnamese, Laotian and other Southeast Asian (mainly Hmong and Cambodian). Because wave two of the study (1995) was the only one that asked respondents to both self-identify⁶ and choose from a discrete set of racial categories, my analysis is based on the 921 Asian-origin respondents surveyed during this wave. To examine panethnic identity, I focus on their responses to the question: ‘Which of the races listed do you consider yourself to be – White, Black, Asian, Multiracial, Other?’

Although the interviews are not from respondents of the IIMMLA and CILS, the surveys provide a baseline comparison of panethnic identity patterns among second-generation Filipinos and Asians, which complement the qualitative findings. In addition, both are based in southern California, where Filipinos negotiate ethnic boundaries vis-à-vis the large numbers of Latinos and Asians in the region. While surveys may not address respondents’ reasons for selecting panethnic labels or may not show implicit forms of panethnic consciousness, they illustrate how Asian panethnicity resonates differently among Asian-origin groups.

Cultural marginalization within Asian America

Author: Do you ever identify as Asian American?

Ronald: Not really. It’s like denying what I am. It’s like denying that I’m Filipino, like not really acknowledging my *culture*.

Despite its political origins, Asian panethnicity has evolved to take on cultural meanings, as Ronald's remarks indicate. When presented with the question 'What groups are Filipinos most similar to?', respondents interpreted this to mean 'Whose *culture* is most similar to that of Filipinos?'. Filipinos were generally reticent about identifying as Asian, and this had to do with cultural factors. Few felt cultural connections between themselves and other Asians, and the ones they noted were superficial at best, such as food or geography. As one respondent noted: 'Filipinos' diet is very Asian, like rice, fish, and stuff a normal American wouldn't eat.' Beyond this, most associated Asian American identity with East Asian cultural stereotypes, which they felt did not fit Filipinos. As Kevin asserted: 'The face of Asian Americans is an East Asian face, literally. Not a Filipino one.'

Respondents referred to the Americanization of Filipino culture as a reason to demarcate themselves from other Asians. Some felt different from other Asians because the latter had a 'real history and therefore, had a real culture.' Jenn noted that, in contrast to other Asians, Filipino culture was associated with hybridity because of the colonial influences throughout Philippine history:

We're not really Asian. I feel like on a cultural level, we don't relate. The Chinese have this long history that's very established, and it's written. We've been colonized like how many times? Where's the identity in that? Are we Spanish, Muslim, Chinese, and now, are we American? Because if you go to Manila, it's practically like Los Angeles. It's so Americanized.

Echoing Jenn's remarks, others felt that this colonial history was antithetical to being Asian American because 'real' Asian culture is 'untouched by Western influences'.

Others framed the post-colonial American influence as an advantage that made Filipinos 'less foreign' than other Asians. Franky noted: 'When whites see other Asian groups, they seem them as being "fobbier" [more "fresh off the boat"]. But then they see Filipinos and we're more assimilated to American culture.' Eddie pointed to the Americanized aspects of Philippine media: 'A lot of the popular culture and styles and music are based on [America]. When you watch Filipino variety shows, what do you see? They're playing Usher, Lady Gaga, and American pop and hip hop.' Implicit in such comments is the assumption that Asian culture is inherently foreign, while Filipino culture is more westernized, and thus, *not* Asian. By contrasting up-to-date trends in Philippine culture with a 'fobbier' Asian culture, these remarks also imply that Asian identity is 'uncool', which may further explain Filipinos' aversion to pan-Asian identity.

Respondents also said that the English proficiency of Filipinos in the USA – an outgrowth of American colonialism – distinguished

them from Asians. Lynette recalled an uncomfortable moment in an Asian American studies course in college when her class had a discussion about the typical Asian American experience:

I felt like there was a difference between those who were Chinese, Korean, and those who were Filipino. It just *felt* different. I think because a lot of the “Asian American experiences” that we read about in our class talked about language. The other Asians would talk about their parents only being able to speak Mandarin or Vietnamese and having to be the mediator between two cultures – *that* was the Asian American experience. But I felt that wasn’t the case for me. I was like, “You know, my parents speak English just fine.”

Ironically, while Asian American studies was created to foster a shared sense of panethnic identity among different Asian ethnicities, Lynette’s experience served the opposite function – it highlighted differences between Filipinos’ experiences from those of East Asians, who many felt dominated mainstream Asian American narratives.

Several noted the cultural construction of Asian panethnicity on a global level. They recounted times when others referred to Filipinos as the ‘wetback Asians’ or the ‘Mexicans’ or ‘blacks’ of Asia. Raymond said: ‘[Filipinos] do the manual labor all over the world.’ Kevin, in turn, argued that when people think of Asians, they automatically refer to China, Japan and Korea, or as he noted: ‘The three countries that have power.’ While Raymond and Kevin grew up middle class and have professional parents, their remarks show how their sense of pan-Asian identity is influenced by the international community of Filipino labourers. Their comments illustrate that panethnicity is not entirely a US-based construction, but rather, at least in part, a transnational ideological construction (Espiritu 2004; Roth 2009).

The lack of other Asian ethnicities in their childhood neighbourhoods also explains why Filipinos expressed weak panethnic ties. Proximity facilitates opportunities for people to identify commonalities across ethnic lines and develop a panethnic consciousness.

In Eagle Rock and Carson, Filipinos had minimal opportunity to interact with other Asians. Most did not interact with Asians until their college years. As Jacob noted: ‘College was the first time I really was around a bunch of Asians!’ Grace described her first days at UC Irvine (where non-Filipino Asians are 40 per cent of the student body) as a ‘culture shock’ because ‘everyone is super Asian’. Such characterizations imply how both felt that Filipinos were not part of the pan-Asian collective.

Post-colonial panethnicity: Filipino and Latino cultural connections

Even though respondents used colonialism to distance Filipinos from other Asians, they used the colonialism frame to blur boundaries with

Latinos. While no respondent identified as Latino outright, many more closely associated Filipinos with Mexicans and other Latinos because of the shared history of Spanish colonialism, including some who checked 'Asian' on the post-interview survey. Lia noted the 'Latinizing' effect of this history on Filipino culture, saying that Filipinos 'have more similarities with Latin culture than other Asians'.

Some felt Filipinos 'must have Spanish blood' because both co-ethnics and Latinos commonly mistook them as Mexican due to their phenotype (e.g. they 'looked' Mexican) or their Spanish surname. Nearly half of respondents recalled being spoken to in Spanish by Latinos, and some were even mistaken as Latino by other Filipinos. In her first days working as a nurse, Adriana recalled that her Filipina co-workers spoke Tagalog to each other yet conversed with her in English. When Adriana replied in Tagalog, one co-worker expressed her surprise: 'I didn't know you were Filipina. I thought you were Hispanic!'

Respondents bonded with Latinos based on three main cultural similarities: language, surnames and Catholicism. Jon, a hotel manager, recalled being mistaken as Latino by the Mexican immigrants he worked with:

When they see me in the hall, they speak to me in Spanish. Then I tell them, "No hablo español," and they're like, "Why don't you speak Spanish?" and then I tell them I'm Filipino. And then they insist, "Well, some Filipinos speak Spanish. You have Spanish last names, right?"

Respondents recalled efforts by Filipino and Latino immigrants to communicate with each other when interacting in the neighbourhood, given the heavy overlap in everyday words in Spanish and Tagalog (see [Table 1](#)). When I asked him whether he saw Filipinos and Latinos interact much, Jayson answered:

All the time! My mom, for example, whenever she goes to the market, she [and the Latino workers] will be like, "Hola, amigo. Hola, amiga." Because of the similarities in our language, you can communicate in [each others'] native tongue.

While language bridged Filipinos with Latinos, it created further rifts with Asians. Ronald said that interacting with other Asian immigrants was relatively more difficult 'because there's virtually no overlap between Tagalog and say, Chinese or Vietnamese.'

Catholicism was another colonial legacy that Filipinos used to liken themselves with Latinos. Diana said Filipinos were 'definitely' more similar to Latinos because:

[My] parents have *santos* and the Virgin Mary all around the house, and that's just like Latinos. I'd go to my Guatemalan friend's house, and you'd see the same thing. There's a lot of religion intermingled with her culture and my culture.

Many Filipino and Latino ethnic practices also have a religious component. Alma noted how religion was embedded in rites of passages for Filipina and Mexican young women (debutts and *quinceañeras*, respectively). She added: ‘When you hear Filipino and Latino, you think Catholic automatically. I don’t think religion when I think of Asians. Or if I do, maybe I think of Buddha, but not Jesus or Mary.’ Although Catholicism might not have prompted outsiders to racialize respondents as Latino, it nonetheless affected how Filipinos racially positioned themselves vis-à-vis Latinos and other Asians.

This cultural closeness became evident in situations where other Filipinos were not even present. Alex attended a private college with many East Asians and Latinos, but few Filipinos. Coming from Eagle Rock, he initially felt disconnected from his Asian classmates, yet noted a sense of closeness with his Latino peers, who also invoked the colonial frame. At a party sponsored by one of the Latino organizations, Alex recounted:

I never felt out of place at the party, even though it was all Latinos. Funny enough. My one friend who was half-Mexican, but looked more white and was from like a bougie [rich], all-white town got flack for being there. They kept calling him “white boy.” But with me, a bunch of the guys would come up to me and be like, “Oh what? You’re Filipino? It’s practically the same thing [as Latino]. We all got punked by Spain anyway, right?” Most of my friends in college ended up being Latino because they were the next closest thing to Filipinos.

Alex’s experience shows that the negotiation of panethnic boundaries is not determined solely by national origin – otherwise his ‘white-looking’ friend should have felt more at home at the predominantly Latino event. Alex’s comfort stemmed from his experiences growing up with Latinos, which allowed him to fit in more than someone who was ‘biologically’ Mexican. Alex also noted that Latino events were ‘more fun’ and ‘cooler’ than those sponsored by other Asians, whom he and other Filipinos stereotyped as studious and bookish.

This idea that Filipinos and Latinos were ‘the same thing’ was echoed in conversations about interracial dating. While having dated Mexican women in the past, Nelson expressed a new-found anxiety about dating a Vietnamese woman:

Nelson: I’m kind of nervous about the girl I’m dating. She’s Vietnamese, so this is the first time I’m dating someone from a different culture.

Author: Didn’t you say that you dated a bunch of Mexican girls before?

Nelson (laughing): Ha, that doesn’t count. Mexicans are the same as Filipinos!

For Nelson, cultural differences between Filipinos and Latinos are less salient than those between Filipinos and Asians. Such comments illustrate how the cultural boundaries of racial categories

subconsciously influence Filipinos' sense of 'we-ness' with Asians and Latinos.

Respondents' identification with Latinos is interesting given that Filipinos, on the aggregate level, have a higher SES than Latinos. At the same time, Eagle Rock and Carson have a large minority middle class, including middle-class Mexican Americans. The narratives suggest that there was more class convergence between Filipinos and Mexicans in these neighbourhoods than statistical data might indicate. While nearly every respondent identified as middle class, most noted having close connections with relatives who were working class (both in the USA and abroad) or recalled having been working class earlier in life. As such, class differences did not necessarily disrupt the connections they felt with Latinos who lived in the 'less nice parts' of Eagle Rock or Carson. However, Filipino–Latino connections did weaken when negative media stereotypes of Latinos were discussed. Franky said that while he felt close with Latinos in terms of religion and culture, he did not relate to the 'stereotypical Cholo [gangster] looking ones'. In addition, Filipino–Latino connections seemed to break down in the school context. Those attending public high schools said that while teachers viewed Filipinos as high-achieving students,⁷ 'Latinos weren't seen as honors students by school officials'. These findings suggest that Filipinos' connection with Latinos might decline if the association potentially compromised their middle-class standing or mobility.

Filipino panethnic identity patterns

Post-interview survey

Respondents filled out a brief survey that asked an open-ended question about identity and then chose a racial identity from a set of discrete options. I had the opportunity to observe respondents as they answered these questions. For the open-ended question, every respondent wrote 'Filipino' without hesitation. However, when asked to select their racial background, many vacillated between the given options. Half inquired whether they could write in 'Filipino' as their race. [Table 2](#) shows that respondents were split between choosing 'Asian' and 'Pacific Islander'. There was also a clear relationship between panethnic identification and neighbourhood.

Given the racial ambivalence of Filipinos in both neighbourhoods, what explains this difference? The interviews suggest that choosing 'Pacific Islander' was a function of not wanting to choose 'Asian'. Eagle Rock respondents selected Pacific Islander, but had few concrete notions of what this identity 'meant'. When prompted about why he felt Filipinos were 'more Pacific Islander than Asian', Vince said:

Table 2 *Panethnic identification of respondents (N = 50)*

	Neighbourhood		All
	Eagle Rock	Carson	
Asian	20% (5)	84% (21)	52% (26)
Pacific Islander	80% (20)	16 (4)	48% (24)
	100% (25)	100% (25)	100% (50)

'I don't know. Probably because the Philippines are islands in the Pacific?' Others displayed the same lack of investment, noting merely that it was 'better than choosing Asian'. Carson respondents had more concrete ideas of Pacific Islander identity because of their interactions with Samoans. Bryan said: 'Pacific Islander is for the Samoans. And there's no Asians in Carson besides Filipinos, so I guess we can fill that in.' Such responses illustrate that Carson Filipinos did not necessarily express strong attachments to Asian identity, even if they chose it on the form. These findings show that Filipinos' identity options depend largely on the availability and meaning of categories within their local context.

IIMMLA and CILS

Filipino identity patterns on the IIMMLA and CILS parallel those from my interview respondents. Less than one half (47 per cent) and two-thirds (63 per cent) of Filipino IIMMLA and CILS respondents, respectively (see Tables 3 and 4), identified as Asian, in contrast to about 90 per cent of other Asians. These findings are interesting given

Table 3 *Panethnic identification by ethnicity, second-generation Asians (N = 1,617)*

	Filipino	Chinese	Vietnamese	Korean
Asian	47% (189)	96% (395)	98% (393)	98% (393)
Pacific Islander	45% (182)	1% (5)	1% (4)	1% (2)
Other	8% (31)	3% (13)	1% (4)	2% (6)
N	100% (402)	100% (413)	100% (401)	100% (401)

Source: IIMMLA 2004

Table 4 Panethnic identification by ethnicity, second-generation Asians (N = 921)

	Filipino	Vietnamese	Laotian	Southeast Asian
Asian	63% (351)	91% (172)	93% (98)	89% (59)
National origin	22% (121)	5% (9)	4% (4)	2% (1)
Other	15% (89)	4% (8)	3% (3)	9% (6)
N	100% (561)	100% (189)	100% (105)	100% (66)

Source: CILS 2001–03

that 'Asian' is stereotyped as a middle-class or upwardly mobile identity (Zhou 2009). One might expect that Southeast Asians, the most socio-economically disadvantaged subgroup, would be least inclined to identify as Asian, given that studies show panethnicity to be a function of class commonality (Carter 2005). Ultimately, these findings complement the interview data by illustrating that Filipinos' panethnic ambivalence occurs across different contexts (Los Angeles and San Diego) and ages (adults and teenagers⁸).

Conclusion

Despite linguistic, socio-economic and cultural differences, ethnic groups develop panethnic consciousness by organizing for political interests, emphasizing cultural commonalities or highlighting shared racial experiences. Filipinos have done all these things with both Asians and Latinos, and thus can justifiably be categorized as either. Ultimately, they are officially Asian, according to the US census. Despite this, individuals do not always ascribe to the panethnic labels imposed on them, and the unique colonial history of the Philippines has prompted Filipinos to be vocally ambivalent about their racial designation. In Espiritu's (1992, p. 107) seminal book *Asian American Panethnicity*, one Filipino respondent asserted that Filipinos were Asian because of a 'geographical accident'. Espiritu has noted the possibility of Filipinos joining Latino panethnic coalitions, but ultimately acknowledges that both the pan-Asian and pan-Latino option bring significant challenges.

If these historical and cultural connections mean that Filipinos are 'kinda Asian and kinda Latino', as one respondent put it, how did the young adults in this study negotiate panethnic identity? The term 'Asian American' was born as a politicized identity, yet it was not a lack of political engagement that prompted their ambivalence. Rather,

the cultural legacies of Spanish and US colonialism in the Philippines played a more significant role in how respondents negotiated panethnic boundaries. It is worth noting that despite the cultural links between US and Philippine societies, no respondent identified as an unhyphenated American, signalling the continued significance of race in American society.

As the narratives revealed, the cultural hybridity resulting from Spanish and US colonialism was a central part of Filipino ethnic identity. Whether talking about culture, language or religion, respondents would embed them within colonial contexts. This culturally based understanding of ethnicity extended to their negotiation of panethnicity. US colonialism created a rift between Filipinos and other Asians. Their experiences of feeling more Americanized, having English-speaking households, and being less bicultural than other Asians prompted their feelings of disconnection. This social distancing was further amplified by their internalization of the Asian 'forever foreigner' stereotype and lack of interaction with other Asians in their neighbourhoods. Moreover, the surveys reflected the lukewarm resonance of Asian panethnicity for Filipinos, relative to other Asian ethnicities.

In turn, Spanish colonialism bonded them with Latinos, a sentiment that at times was mutual, as the opening quote from Junot Díaz illustrates. In their everyday lives, reminders of Spanish colonialism are present in their parents' language, surnames and religion. The presence of Latinos in their neighbourhood further 'replenished' the Spanish aspects of Filipino ethnic culture (Jiménez 2010), making the Filipino–Latino link especially salient. These findings challenge previous studies that suggest that Filipinos should align themselves with Asians, a group stereotyped as upwardly mobile. Within the context of a middle-class neighbourhood, colonial commonalities prompt Filipinos to blur boundaries with Latinos (except in situations where it compromised their social standing).

Are Filipino Americans a unique case? Certainly the extensive colonial history in the Philippines distinguishes them from other Asians. Nonetheless, colonialism also represents an extreme case of cultural shifts in pre-migration societies that persist today, due to US militarism, foreign policy, transnational media and migration-related cultural exchanges (Kim 2008). Cultural shifts in the pre-migration society shape the identity 'toolkit' that children of immigrants use to relate with groups in a multiethnic society (Warikoo 2011). However, the use of this toolkit is also contingent on the value of 'symbolic repertoires' that children of immigrants possess. In a 'Latinized' city like Los Angeles, there is symbolic value to aligning oneself with Latinos rather than Asians, particularly for young adults who at the time may be more concerned with social standing than economic

mobility. Although a study of Los Angeles may not be generalizable to second-generation experiences across the country, the choice of research site elucidates important social phenomena bound to take place in other parts of the country affected by migration: negotiation of race beyond the black–white binary, the emergence of new panethnic categories, and the interaction of historical legacies with new racial contexts. Ultimately, the Filipino case highlights the ever-evolving process of panethnic identity construction – a process that is not US-centric in nature, but one shaped heavily by the interaction of historical legacies with the changing racial landscape of American society.

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Notes

1. Studies of European migration have more thoroughly detailed how colonialism affects assimilation among post-colonial migrants. Studies of the Indian migration in the British colonial era show how colonial policies facilitated the movement of Indian professionals to East Africa during the early twentieth century (Poros 2010). British–Indian colonial relations allowed Indians in East Africa to then migrate to the UK when African societies later gained independence. While their colonial status allowed them entry into Britain, it also became a marker of their second-class citizenship in their new host society (Dhingra 2012).
2. East Timor, a former Portuguese colony of one million people (1 per cent the size of the Philippines), is the only other Catholic society in Asia.
3. Filipino migrants of the early twentieth century encountered hostility and violence from white nativists hoping to halt Filipino migration. However, it was not until 1934 that nativists coalesced with Midwestern agribusiness players who were worried about competition with Philippine agricultural products. These constituencies lobbied Congress to pass the Tydings-McDuffie Act in 1936 and grant the Philippines independence following a ten-year transition period succeeding its passage (Baldoz 2011, pp. 156–193).
4. The Philippines is not the only Asian country with a colonial past. While countries, like Korea, experienced colonialism, they are qualitatively different in many respects. First, the Philippines was colonized for longer than most other Asian countries. Second, the legacies of both Spanish and US colonialism are more deeply embedded within the mainstream culture of contemporary Philippine society. The closest parallel is British colonialism in India, which lasted nearly as long as in the Philippines. This partly explains why besides Filipinos, there are challenges to including Indians within the pan-Asian collective (Kibria 1998).
5. Second-generation studies generally includes both 1.5 and second-generation individuals.
6. Before asked about panethnic identity, respondents were asked the open-ended question: 'How do you identify, that is what do you call yourself?'
7. Teranishi (2002) revealed that Filipinos were treated as remedial students while Chinese were dubbed model minorities. In this study, Filipinos were the only Asians present in the

school, leading teachers to designate them model minorities relative to the other groups present.

8. When surveyed, IIMMLA respondents were adults, while CILS respondents were teenagers.

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