ABSTRACT

“Little Americans”: Filipino World War II Veterans and the Role of Race, Bodies, and Empire in Citizenship Formation

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More than half a million Filipino soldiers, from both the Philippines and the United States, fought under the American flag during World War II in the Pacific theater. The majority of the Filipino soldiers recruited in the Philippines anticipated their service as a means to formal US citizenship, while the Filipino soldiers recruited in the US hoped that theirs would bring full acceptance into the American society. After victory, however, the US classified the Philippine-based Filipino veterans’ service as inactive, denying them recognition as “American veterans” on racial grounds, while those in the US still experienced second-class citizenship. Citizenship theory often narrowly focuses on the designation of status, rights, and responsibilities, and cannot yet explain why and how the Filipino veterans can justify belonging to the US given their exclusion. Drawing from in-depth interviews with 88 Filipino World War II veterans in the Philippines and the US and analysis of primary sources such as recorded interviews from the veterans’ families’ personal collections, I analyze how the lack of formal citizenship does not obstruct feelings of belonging towards a nation, especially for a population who has already performed the ultimate duty a nation asks of its citizens: to fight, kill, and die in its name. My data show variations and patterns of feelings of belonging and perceptions of citizenship among Filipino World War II veterans, which depend on their military affiliations and the quality of their interactions with Americans, whether convivial or fraught with racial tension. Since racial formation and citizenship formation are not separate processes, citizenship theory must consider how the state produces racialized bodies in its efforts of nation- and empire-building, as well as how racialized populations perceive their bodies as belonging to the state.