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Jennifer C. McMahon, *Dead Stars*: American and Philippine Literary Perspectives on the American Colonization of the Philippines

Jonathan O. Chua
Ateneo de Manila University

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Book Reviews

Jennifer C. McMahon, *Dead Stars: American and Philippine Literary Perspectives on the American Colonization of the Philippines* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2011), 146pp.

The American occupation of the Philippines remains fertile ground for investigation. *Dead Stars: American and Philippine Literary Perspectives on the American Colonization of the Philippines* by Jennifer M. McMahon is an illuminating and welcome addition to the field, using as an angle from which to view the dynamics of the American colonial experience the intersection of education and literary expression. In a way, the book enlarges on *Bearers of Benevolence*, edited by Mary Racelis and Judy Celine Ick. Primarily a collection of first-hand accounts by American teachers in the Philippines, that book ended with a plea for further research into the reception to colonial education. McMahon's book does that and more.

McMahon first provides a brief historical overview of the conditions and events leading up to the occupation. Then, she analyzes the works of three anti-imperialist writers—Mark Twain, W.E.B. DuBois, and William James—showing how multi-faceted the debate in the United States was. Twain saw that expansion betrayed American innocence and exceptionalism; William James objected to a wholesale “transplantation” of a culture, which colonialism entails, as threatening another American value, individualism; and W.E.B. DuBois exploded the benevolent facade of colonialism as racist capitalism. Of the three, McMahon opines that DuBois's argument, given his own racial location, was “the most potent” (48); against it, Twain's was naive, and James's limited.

McMahon proceeds to show how, ironically, the very ideals with which Twain, James, and DuBois buttressed their critique of colonialism were what were taught in the literature curriculum of the colony. These ideals were contained in three key texts: *The Alhambra* by Washington Irving, *Up from Slavery* by Booker T. Washington, and “Self-Reliance” by Ralph Waldo

Emerson. *The Alhambra* portrays Spanish culture as “indolent, corrupt, and static” (58); implicitly, America stood for progress. *Up from Slavery* sent out the message that hard work (in America) transcends racial boundaries, glossing over the evils of systemic racism. “Self-Reliance” taught a kind of independence that was non-threatening to the state and that, in fact, could be useful, for Emersonian self-reliance was a rejection of traditional social networks, networks that the Philippine revolutionaries against Spain had relied on. The three texts, in effect, represented America positively to Filipinos.

How Filipino writers received this representation is the subject of McMahon’s next chapter. She chooses Maximo Kalaw’s *The Filipino Rebel: A Romance of the American Colonization of the Philippines*, Juan Laya’s *His Native Soil*, and Paz Marquez Benitez’s “Dead Stars” as instances of Filipinos writing back to the colony. The picture painted is a bleak one and, astonishingly, harks back to the themes of the anti-imperialists. Like Twain, Kalaw’s novel explodes the myth of American exceptionalism and innocence; through the character of Don Pedro, Spain, in fact, comes out as being more honorable than the United States. Like DuBois, Laya betrays the racism lurking beneath the rhetoric of progress and hard work; Martin, who has returned from the studies in the United States to his hometown, exhibits the same superiority complex of his American tutors and disdains, ultimately to his ruin, local cultures and practices. In Paz Marquez Benitez’s Alfredo Salazar, one sees a picture of the paralysis which James feared as the upshot of colonialism; in love with the vibrant Julia but already betrothed to the staid Esperanza, he simply drifts and succumbs to pressure. McMahon concludes that “Philippine writers in English demonstrate in their fiction that, in spite of intense ideological pressure, they were able to discern the dark undercurrents of American innocence, equality, and self-reliance and write back against them.” (105)

McMahon’s succinct and straightforward writing is one of the things that recommend the book to anyone interested in the American occupation of the Philippines or early Philippine literature in English. The titles of the main chapters of the book alone show the trajectory of her argument: “Self-Examination,” “Self-Presentation,” and “Re-Presentation.” She uses three key figures or texts in each chapter, which correspond to one another with an almost paint-by-numbers precision. Thus, what Twain is in “Self-Examination” is *The Alhambra* in “Self-Presentation” and is *The Filipino Rebel* in “Re-Presentation.” One may object, of course, that such a schema is too neat; surely the connections were more complex. But if McMahon’s purpose is to isolate and enlarge on the theme of colonial imposition versus

local resistance, she succeeds.

As creditable is that McMahon presents the empirical evidence for what is now taken as an axiom, viz., that the American occupation was a moment of “epistemic violation.” Not simply a close reading of key texts in the curriculum from a postcolonial perspective, this is a validation of such readings. McMahon quotes samples from student compositions from the period which demonstrate the extent of that damage. One only wishes that she had presented more of these. Perhaps finding more evidence like McMahon’s is the challenge for other scholars.

Where one may take exception is her reading of “Dead Stars.” Unlike Laya’s and Kalaw’s novels, “Dead Stars” is a more challenging text to read, because it is on the surface apolitical. Taking Julia and Esperanza to be symbols of the lost dream of Philippine independence and of America, respectively, she asserts that Alfredo’s marriage to Esperanza obliquely signifies the effect of American rule. To quote McMahon: “Alfredo has no will at all and is utterly acquiescent to his community’s demands. Benitez suggests that his lack of will is a result of the amorphous oppression personified by Esperanza. The Americans may teach self-reliance, but they create an atmosphere in which it could never survive.” (95)

What is emphasized by a reading strategy like that which McMahon uses is that it is, after all, a *reading*; and while many readers may find that situation unproblematic, there are others who prefer a more secure (though some would say the security is only illusory) approach to literary analysis. McMahon notes, for instance, that Paz Marquez Benitez describes Esperanza as “the efficient, the literal-minded, the intensely acquisitive” and that these “qualities were often associated with the Americans and were used as evidence by Americans of their cultural superiority.” (80) But the case she makes for Esperanza as standing for the United States ignores other textual evidence that could, in fact, point to a different interpretation of her character and also Julia’s. For one, Esperanza’s religiosity and moral conservatism would align her with Spain instead of America; Julia’s vitality, in contrast, would associate her with America, especially since the 1920s, when the story was written, had brought in images of the flapper and the “liberated” woman. One could also say that Esperanza belongs to that line of pious women, like Rizal’s Tia Isabel, who populate Philippine Literature—usually members of one religious society or other, sticklers to rigid moral codes, they are apt to gossip about and condemn other people’s indiscretions (like Calixta’s), and, if unmarried, act as chaperones and tutors.

An American reader like McMahon would see in Esperanza America, and a Filipino reader would see in her Spain. Perhaps there, ironically, is the

validation of McMahon's overall project—that of showing the plasticity of the texts and consequently of colonial relations, which operate through texts.

This is not the space for a full account of Paz Marquez Benítez's story (or of the novels), or indeed for a critique of the method of the "political allegory" in general. Suffice it to say here that *Dead Stars: American and Literary Perspectives on the American Colonization of the Philippines* is a significant contribution to the scholarship in Philippine-American relations. In going back to the primary materials and sharpening its focus on the key texts, it is certainly one of the most lucidly written. No burden this, white man's or brown brother's.

Jonathan O. Chua
Department of Interdisciplinary Studies
Ateneo de Manila University

Melba Padilla Maggay, *A Clash of Cultures: Early American Protestant Missions and Filipino Religious Consciousness* (Mandaluyong: Anvil, 2011), 235pp.

Reading Melba Padilla Maggay's *A Clash of Cultures: Early American Protestant Missions and Filipino Religious Consciousness* gives one a sense of trepidation at the magnitude of the subject's scope. Maggay admits as much in presenting her work as "an initial reading of the immense material gathered from the insights and works of these esteemed colleagues and various other sources."(xix)

Nonetheless, the book sets lofty goals for itself by proposing to study the resulting reaction when a religion insinuates itself into a host culture that is in the process of political turmoil and social upheaval. The author outlines her main concern of analyzing the consequent patterns of cultural transactions between American Protestant missionaries and Filipinos during the early American period. According to Maggay, this requires a study in two separate tracks: the first, a study of the efforts of the American protestant missions in their attempt to bring a different brand of Christianity into the Philippines; the second, an attempt to discern patterns of indigenous religious consciousness by looking into oral and written traditions during the same period.