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# philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints

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**Resil B. Mojares's**

*Interrogations in Philippine Cultural History:  
The Ateneo de Manila Lectures*

Review Author: Renato B. Lucas

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## **Interrogations in Philippine Cultural History: The Ateneo de Manila Lectures**

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017. 191 pages.

In 2013 the Ateneo de Manila University bestowed upon Resil B. Mojares the prestigious Tanglaw ng Lahi award, which recognizes those who have made significant contributions to Filipinism and Filipino identity. In his acceptance speech Mojares stated that “for one who writes about the Philippines, lives in the Philippines (and not having thought, even once, of actually leaving it), nationalism is not something abstract and intellectual; it is deeply existential” (Resil B. Mojares, “Response of 2013 Tanglaw ng Lahi Awardee Resil B. Mojares,” Online, <http://www.ateneo.edu/response-2013-tanglaw-ng-lahi-awardee-resil-b-mojares>, accessed 12 Oct. 2017). From the perspective of Philippine cultural history, this statement is a call to recognize nationalism in its concrete expressions. In the wake of this award, Mojares delivered a set of lectures at the Ateneo de Manila from 2014 to 2015 on various topics that crisscrossed disciplinary boundaries. The eight lectures covered diverse subjects: Nick Joaquin, Andrés Bonifacio, colonial printing, Cebuano devotion to the Santo Niño, literary studies, film, a certain Pascual Racuyal, and Philippine scholarship. The lectures have been compiled in *Interrogations in Philippine Cultural History*, which brings to the fore critical and thought-provoking insights.

Cultural history is a road less traversed by historians than other fields of inquiry. Most of the topics studied by historians and presented to lay readers, without prejudice, tend toward political history. As opposed to politics, culture is such a complex term that, although understood by almost everybody, defies an all-encompassing definition because it practically includes everything. Mojares, however, does justice to the concept of culture by distilling the varieties of the “everything” in Filipino practices through writing narratives about diverse human expressions, from rituals to film, from comics to historiography.

Historiography is the key to appreciate Filipino cultural expressions as concrete manifestations of history. In Mojares’s evaluation of facets of Philippine culture, his “no-holds barred” questions reverberate to stir critical engagements. For example, in the opening chapter, he calls for a reevaluation of Nick Joaquin, who is often disregarded in the historiography of the

Philippine Revolution. Similarly, in the second chapter, Mojares revives the question of Bonifacio's socioeconomic position by considering both the semantics of terms such as "plebeian" and "masses" and the prejudices in the historical judgment of heroic characters.

The wealth of Mojares's wisdom cannot be denied. Again, in his chapter on Joaquin, there is a thin line between historical fact and literary imagination, between the objective (an ambiguous term traditional historiography holds on to) and the subjective, between the intended and the unintended. The dichotomies can go on. For example, Mojares mentions that Nick Joaquin did not write as a historian or a sociologist—Joaquin wrote because he was a writer (5). Nevertheless, Mojares validates Joaquin's significance as a historian and asserts that Joaquin himself and his life works are historical texts in themselves.

Aligned with Joaquin's regard for Spain's legacy in Philippine history and society, Mojares, in writing about colonial printing (ch. 3), debunks the oft-repeated mantra that Spanish colonialism was primarily counterproductive. In this light, Mojares makes a clarion call for a more nuanced portrayal of that period. Many characters involved in this narrative are worth recognizing. Firstly, the Dominicans introduced printing to the Philippines, beginning with *Doctrina Christiana en Lengua Española y Tagala* (1593), and subsequently led the way in printing religious paraphernalia. Mojares also mentions "good Spaniards" like Gov.-Gen. Carlos María de la Torre and José Felipe del Pan and calls for a more favorable attitude toward them because of their contributions to the history of publishing. Many of the natives involved in the world of colonial print are now nameless in history, but a handful of them can still be recognized: from Tomás Pinpin, the first native to author a book, to the *ilustrado* and folklorist Isabelo de los Reyes. By the 1900s, the press had grown alongside an increasingly literate society.

In matters of popular culture rooted in tradition, Mojares assists readers in comprehending the fervor of devotees of the Santo Niño (ch. 4). He makes historical sense of how the Cebuanos' loving adoration of the Holy Child came to be and how the devotion goes beyond "promotional motives, religious and touristic" (71). Again, in his analysis of another popular practice, which is film, he poses the question "Is There a Philippine Noir?" (ch. 6). In this chapter Mojares critiques "noir" as a popular medium, assessing its *raison d'être* beyond entertainment. He is optimistic about the potentialities of this film genre because it could be a platform for social investigation and political critique (123).

The set of lectures is not without some comic relief, provided in chapter 7, which focuses on Pascual Racuyal, the so-called nuisance candidate for president who ran in all national elections in the postwar period until 1986 but never won in any. This essay must be Mojares's critique of the supposed democratic process in contemporary society, as he never really questions Racuyal's sincerity as opposed to the perverse and the farcical in mainstream Philippine politics (138).

With respect to literary studies (ch. 5), immodest as the title "An Immodest Proposal for Literary Studies" suggests, Mojares proposes to apply what the critic Franco Moretti aimed for—"to make the literary field longer, larger, and deeper: historically longer, geographically larger, and morphologically deeper" (107)—to the smaller field of Philippine literature. He lays out a set of observations on topics ranging from folklore to popular culture, including the contrasting and varied manifestations of nationalism since the time of De los Reyes. As in the 1970s, in vogue in Mojares's lectures is the relationship between local and national literatures. In short, he suggests a return to Bienvenido Lumbera's call for a critical scholarship built from "the ground up" (109).

In the last chapter, "Making a Turn: Thoughts on a Generation of Philippine Scholarship," Mojares makes a timely appeal, quoting Arjun Appadurai, to "think ourselves beyond the nation," that is, to appreciate the "world" within the "nation." (154). This chapter acknowledges the scholarship of colleagues of his generation and challenges the succeeding generation of writers regarding present-day challenges, including intellectual forms of "protectionism." Mojares asserts that the "nationalizing" and "internationalizing" forces in the intellectual field need not be antithetical to one another (153).

*Interrogations*, therefore, is a timely title that explores the topography of Philippine national, local, and even micro history, anchored on a tightly knit tapestry of meaningful narratives. It is high time that through *Interrogations* gaps in Philippine historiography are addressed to foreground cultural history. For example, uncovering the colonial history of printing reveals the tremendous gains of Filipinos from the colonial encounter. Doing so debunks historical stereotypes: the Filipinos' passivity; their lack of ingenuity and resourcefulness in dealing with the colonizers; their low levels of literacy, particularly the underrated extent of knowledge of Spanish among Filipinos, as countered by the examples of Pinpin, De Los Reyes, and various named

and unnamed *ladinos* (natives literate in Spanish and the local language) (44–48); and their lack of capacity and mobility in various disciplines.

As seen in its breadth and depth, this set of lectures reflects the author's years of contemplation over diverse subjects. However, writing in an interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary mode has its pitfalls, such as the seeming lack of cohesiveness among the issues tackled. Of course, such a compilation does not require cohesiveness as much as diversity. The topics are autonomous, and the only connecting threads are the various media of cultural expressions. Moreover, Mojares is much aware of the inquisitive labels as far as theory and the philosophy of history are concerned (e.g., deconstructionist, new historicist, positivist), labels that he considers "pedantic" (1). Nevertheless, these topics are held together like several movements of a classical symphony that remain distinct from each other. Finally, Mojares challenges present writers on Philippine cultural history to continue the tradition of Philippine historiography similar to that of Teodoro Agoncillo's essays on culture and history.

This book is a welcome addition to the roster of historical works, utilizing various modes of writing and converging with the previous writings of William Henry Scott, Doreen Fernandez, John Schumacher, Soledad Reyes, Isagani Cruz, Florentino Hornedo, Reynaldo Ileto, and Vicente Rafael. With the richness of Philippine culture, the receptivity of Filipinos, and their expressions in traversing challenges, much self-reflexivity is needed through interrogations.

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