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DINAH T. ROMA

Empire's Trail of Bodies
A Review Essay

NERISSA BALCE

Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017. 223 pages.

VICTOR ROMAN MENDOZA

Metroimperial Intimacies: Fantasy, Racial-Sexual Governance, and the Philippines in U.S. Imperialism, 1899–1913

Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2015. 286 pages.

E. SAN JUAN JR.

Racism and the Filipino Diaspora: Essays in Cultural Politics

Naga City: Ateneo de Naga University Press, 2017. 79 pages.

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"History has moving, inexhaustible frontiers," writes historian and cultural critic Resil Mojares (1981, 178). His remark refers to an earlier body of works on Philippine historiography that witnessed the rise of new methodologies in the study of local and national history. Yet Mojares's words may aptly echo an urgency among contemporary Filipino American scholars whose efforts at demythicizing the US empire have led to groundbreaking works.

Three recently published books—Nerissa Balce's *Body Parts of Empire*, Victor Roman Mendoza's *Metroimperial Intimacies*, and Epifanio San Juan Jr.'s *Racism and the Filipino Diaspora*—locate history's "inexhaustible frontiers" in the archives that have largely been the source of so-called official historical narratives. For these authors, to read the US colonial archives anew is to illumine the violence of empire if Philippine history were to retrieve bodies that had been ravaged and whose stories had been silenced on account of imperial modernity.

The works are the outcome of the authors' long engagement in the academe and advocacy to disclose the US empire's machinations as it ceaselessly impacts on the Filipino global diaspora. Nerissa Balce is an associate professor of Asian and American studies at the State University of New York at Stony Brook; Victor Roman Mendoza holds an appointment as associate professor of women's studies and English at the University of Michigan; while Epifanio San Juan Jr. is a multi-awarded academic and staunch public intellectual on Philippine–American relations and the Filipino diaspora, who carved his career teaching at key American universities.

The three books rupture the munificent veneer of the US empire. They expose the "cracks in the façade" (Fast and Francisco 1974, 350) through methodologies that are cognizant of the self-serving knowledge produced by colonial functionaries and orthodox historians. The books' arsenal of interdisciplinary critical tools is wide-ranging—postcolonialism, literary studies, cultural studies, area studies, historical materialism, feminism, ethnic studies, gender studies, and queer studies. The concomitant use of these critical tools highlights how complex the undertaking is to categorically unmask the American colonial legacy for what it really was—brute force and rhetoric. To do so is vital in putting into perspective the invasion of the Philippines not as a discrete historical occurrence in the name of a noble mission but one in the same expansionist spirit as the conquest of the Native

Americans, Africans, and Mexicans (San Juan 2017, 5). The three books thus foreground the genocidal nature of these imperial subjugations to assert that the Philippine conquest is a major period in US imperial history and one that is unique in the Asia-Pacific, whose aftermath is still evident in the phenomenon of Filipino migration and diaspora to the US.

Body Parts of Empire, which won the 2018 Best Book award in Cultural Studies from the Filipino Section of the Association for Asian American Studies, unravels the "complicity of culture in historical violence" (Balce 2017, 15). It consists of five chapters that stand for an inventory of the colonial cultural products teeming with literary and cultural tropes through which the Filipino native body has been vilified. Each chapter analyzes the particular rhetoric that produced the tropes of abjection of body parts which Balce (ibid., 17) catalogues in the following pairings: face (colonial photographs), skin (newspapers), bile (women travel writings), and blood and bones (race romances and ethnographic images). *Metroimperial Intimacies*, Mendoza's landmark work, shares Balce's stance of delving into culture but this time "to look for the queer in the colonial" (Claudio 2016). Mendoza reexamines the colonial archives to dissect the menace of same-sex intimacies between the Filipino male native body and the American colonial soldier alongside the regulations established to control such encounters. The book consists of five chapters that explore varied manifestations of "queerness" during the American colonial period in the Philippines. These manifestations range from the scandalous sodomitic act of an American colonial officer on his Filipino wards, to the visual obsession of US newspapers with the Filipino male native's bottom as the target of corporal punishment, to the operatic fascination of the Midwestern writer George Ade over the Sultan of Sulu's practice of polygamy, and lastly the conflicted desire of *pensionados*—brilliant young Filipino students who were provided a monthly pension by the US government—for acceptance in the US metropole. Epifanio San Juan Jr.'s *Racism and Diaspora* comprises of three powerful essays that contemporizes the Filipinos' struggle to break free from the ruins of the American colonial past as recognizable in the country's ailing political and economic systems. The last two essays underline the marginalization of Filipinos in the global work force.

Visions of the traumatized Filipino body pervade the three books. From the literary and visual tropes of imperial abjection to disruptive queer intimacies and brutalized bodies of overseas workers, the Filipino body betrays

the vestiges of colonial history that remain unaccounted for in the present. The temporal continuum within which the three authors trace the ordeal of the Filipino colonized body begins with the onset of the Philippine–American War in 1899 and moves into the vicious years of the US's modernizing project up to the present when Filipino migrant workers succumb to harsh working conditions abroad in order to provide for their families back home.

Balce's *Body Parts of Empire* begins with a lexicon of remnants: ruin, reliquary, vestiges, ephemera, traces, archives. This universe of words provides readers the signposts with which to maneuver through the intricate and deceptive pathways of the US empire. At the outset is absence—of humans and objects effaced from their natural habitats. Yet, more than absence, what prevails in the book is the persistence of specters whose stories need to be told. Once part of the material world, they are "bodies" seen as hostile to the pursuit of imperial modernity. They stand for the uncivilized, the savage, the fallen, and thus should be eliminated and forgotten. These shadows are what Balce assuredly draws out into the light to resolve the paradoxes that drove the US empire to justify the violence it wrought on the lives of Filipinos through the last century.

Balce's arguments interlink with those of scholars who have done work on the US empire. She builds on these studies by unpacking the rhetorical strategies of the American colonial period in the Philippines as inhering in the very same discourses of racialization and sexualization that had "roots in the conquest of the frontier, the appropriation of Native lands, and the legacies of the institution of slavery" (Balce 2017, 12).

Body Parts of Empire adopts the critical strategy of imperial abjection to probe into the tropes that have been produced, circulated, and disseminated through literary and popular texts and, taken as a body of work, subsumed into the supposed innocuous realm of culture. Moreover, Balce (ibid., 10) reminds readers that "American imperialism is a visual and textual language, and the U.S. colonial archive is not merely a source of knowledge but an object of analysis." The notion of archive, in this regard, as the sole source of "official" narratives must be destabilized by juxtaposing it to a "shadow archive" (ibid., 11). In the latter can be found "obscure or forgotten cultural texts" that can function as counter-narratives that free the "abject bodies" lurking in the interstices of empire (ibid.).

To "interrupt," as Balce asserts, what has already been written on the Philippines out of the fields of Asian American studies, Asian studies, and postcolonial feminist studies is to again scrutinize the exclusionary dichotomies that had governed the lives of Filipino colonial subjects. Furthering the works of Allan Isaac (2006) and Oscar Campomanes (1995), Balce (2017, 15) recalibrates the scholarly lens to introduce the abject bodies as the "negative boundaries of the American empire." The suggestion alone of "body parts" undeniably speaks of the sheer violence that upheld the claimed virtues of modernity on which empire had pursued its quest. And it is here that Balce achieves a metonymic masterstroke.

In chapter 1, titled "The Abject Archive of the Philippine–American War," Balce efficiently goes to the heart of the matter—the imperial archive, which has been afflicted with historical amnesia as it relates to the Philippine–American War. The stark forgetting is glimpsed in the debates over the "casualty figures" during the Philippine–American War. "*One million*," writes the anti-imperialist Mark Twain (ibid., 26). Yet, this staggering figure did not significantly influence the way war narratives were forged. Instead, the number was merely a "footnote," with the war consigned to being called an "insurrection" (ibid., 25). White masculinity, considered as key to the pursuit of modernity in the wild tropics, triumphed. Against this lush terrain, the colonial administrators codified matrices of race and sex into abjection, thereby rendering the bodies of Filipino colonial subjects as filthy sources of disease and degeneracy.

In the chapter "Necropolitics and the U.S. Imperial Photography Complex," Balce makes a strong case for the paradoxical intent of the photograph as a visual artifact. Although images freeze moments in time, she argues against their static nature by referring to Jimmie Durham's belief in the "limitless meanings of a historical photograph" (ibid., 48). In this generative space resides the continuum of agency and abjection in empire. As a visual artifact, the photograph powerfully embeds sentiments and aspiration into the images. The dead bodies of Filipinos that made the figure of the corpse as the iconic depiction of abjection during the American colonial period suffused the quotidian life of the American public in the US through newspapers and magazines. The stereograph, which generated huge profits for camera companies, reproduced these ashen images. Paradoxically, they argued for the goodwill of American empire by convincing consumers that the Filipinos' lynched and executed bodies ensured the safety of the American public. Necropolitics exposed American empire as both violent and tender (ibid., 55). Balce cites two key texts in this chapter to explore

the suspicious politics of colonial photography—Achille Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* (2001), which initially developed the concept of necropolitics as the power to coerce a person to death, and Laura Wexler's *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (2000), which unveiled how white domesticity aided US imperialism.

Chapter 3 focuses on how racial colors intensified conflict and violence during the American colonial period. Balce looks at the trope of black skin to trace the kinship that African American soldiers felt toward Filipinos. African American soldiers eventually awakened to the truth that the Philippine–American War was not carried out by the US empire out of benevolence, but it was simply a continuance of the racial brutality back in the US. The chapter examines private letters and journalistic writings of African American soldiers and reporters that betrayed the racial prism through which the Filipino body as an abject icon, akin to that of the black body, suffered shifts in perception, which became more pronounced after the Filipinos became hostile to the newly arrived Americans, the next invaders.

The final chapter, titled "Bile of Racism," examines travel writing as a tool of empire. During the days of empire, travel writing largely aided the traffic of information—both official and personal—about the colony, while the metropole eagerly waited for these writings to reach home. These narratives served as textual barometers that gauged the efficiency of colonial governance at executing measures that hastened the goal of the US empire's utopian project in the archipelago.

In a fitting conclusion, Balce further argues how the camera plays the same role now as it had in the past. The chilling images of prisoners in Abu Ghraib, Iraq, resonate deeply with the abject bodies of native and black Americans and of Filipino colonial subjects. As visual testimonies, these images speak loudly of how the American empire continues to perpetuate its ideology of white supremacy into the present. That Balce ends the section with a discussion of the works of Dean C. Worcester, the American anthropologist who carved an illustrious career out of his collection of ethnographic photographs of native bodies, brings us back to how it all began—of dichotomies, binaries, of a white man wielding a camera, resolved to record all that was erotically savage. These images, mostly of women manipulated into nudity, echo the darkness of that period, of how someone of monstrous appetite for the flesh and its pleasure could carry on the work of empire in the name of scientific knowledge.

Body Parts of Empire, however, sees more clearly than what the literature in the field offers. By scouring the spectrum of colonial images and representations of the Filipino native body, Balce seizes the optic to shed light on the unseen. And what makes for a clear seeing is her cogent writing, unburdened by the jargonistic mishaps of many scholarly books, to deliver the message: forgetting is impossible. Traces and remnants haunt us. Through remembering, we are made to look at the liminal, to trace out the abject bodies from those spaces. To put these pieces together, slowly and painfully, is to locate ourselves, own our memory, in the vast expanse of history.

Where *Body Parts of Empire* examines the technologies of visual production that fragmentized the Filipino body, *Metroimperial Intimacies* takes a distinct route into Philippine colonial history. Here, Mendoza scrutinizes the US empire's legislative texts to determine how the social and sexual intimacies that blurred the normative colonial notions of gender were penalized and policed through jurisprudence.

The focus of these legislative ventures was the same-sex acts that did not fall into categories of deviant behaviors earlier criminalized under US law. According to Mendoza (2015, 36–37), vagrancy laws were the only ones that had long responded to any incident of atypical sexual contact in the US metropole. In its second decade in the Philippine islands, however, US colonial governance realized that it had to take more severe steps when it began being troubled with cases of scandalous same-sex encounters between American soldiers and Filipino male native subjects. For this reason, the term sodomy was introduced to the colonial territory. The ensuing colonial laws, however, did not make for any nuanced readings of such encounters but only solidified the image of the Filipino male as pervert, filthy, and degenerate, whose sexual proclivities had to be managed to rid the public domain of its unsettling outcome.

Metroimperial Intimacies invokes the term "queerness" in its conceptual framework before it was appropriated in contemporary critical theory. The "queering" of the racial divide emerged as another layer of boundary in the US empire's attempt at classifying and controlling bodies. Yet unlike the color divide, "queerness" in its wide range of sexual strangeness was a realm beyond the known, the visible, a disturbing gap in knowledge that could only be apprehended by resorting to fantasy.

While Mendoza cites psychoanalysis as his take-off point for the use of fantasy, he utilizes it to stress the irremediable gap between knowledge and

reality. Being in the dark over certain things, people make sense of these by ascribing their versions of realities to them.

The passage on "frames of war" (ibid., 30) clarifies what *Metroimperial Intimacies* sets to achieve by disclosing the diverse chronicles of queerness. To frame, that is, to set definable parameters to an event, is by reality an act of containment. To narrativize history, we must rummage through the detritus to render most useful the stories we choose to tell. It is thus that Mendoza decides to narrate stories of queerness that have not received critical attention in studies of Philippine colonial history. If only for this scholarly breakthrough, *Metroimperial Intimacies* readily achieves a scholarly feat. The book's intellectual force is marked in how Mendoza frames the colonial archives' legalistic facet to indict its authors of the bigotry and racism that glossed much of the titillation and desire that underlay the drive to regulate what was deemed as the native body's excessive sexuality.

Mendoza reveals these queer narratives starting in chapter 2, titled "Unmentionable Liberties." It is about the scandal that broke out in 1910 among the ranks of military officers in the US-occupied Philippines. At the forefront of the story was the famed 29-year-old officer Captain Boss Reese, who was court martialed for acts of sodomy. The Filipino scouts under his command alleged that Captain Reese abused them for months, with these incidents particularly occurring after a drinking spree. To control public outcry and mitigate the military's disrepute, the colonial government "sanitized" the newspaper accounts on Reese's "misdemeanor" and subsequent court trials by censoring the messy details about the story.

US imperial legislators viewed sodomy as a hideous act that went against the values of white masculinity and valor. What emerged out of this "encounter" was a complex interweaving of racial and sexual identities which the US colonial government sanctioned to restrict the Filipino body. While many in the US metropole considered the Reese scandal as "immoral" (ibid., 71), in the hierarchies and binaries produced within the metropole such crime was well within the expected range of deviances that could take place in the colonial tropics. The colonizers regarded the Filipino male colonial subject as effeminate and childlike, a perception that preserved the imperial heteronormative code of the masculine colonizer and the feminine colonized subject.

The third chapter, "Menacing Receptivity: Philippine Insurrectos and the Sublime Object of the Metroimperial Visual Culture," is consistent

with Balce's main argument of how the visual is a compelling tool for subjugation. Mined prodigiously in the cultural realm, images of the brown, unkempt, and savage Filipino body were emblematic of the "abject"—the outcast—which the US empire saw as its raison d'être for occupying the Philippines. The chapter analyzes editorial illustrations as cultural artifacts that accompanied discursive assertions on the rationale of the US colonial presence in the Philippines. Embedded in these political cartoons are sexual undertones that were metonymic of how the unruly, brown Filipino body was deserving of the colonizer's benevolent discipline. Mendoza (ibid., 126) sharply points out the obsession of colonial newspapers with the "Filipino bottom" in the act of being beaten. The principle of this act was that "what he needs is a rod" (ibid., 123) to effect optimal discipline. As part of the arsenal of corporal punishment, this image of Uncle Sam in his virile poses had seen variations in the images of politicians or lawmakers holding down on his lap a Filipino boy (often appearing to be a truant), with his buttocks glaringly outlined as the target of punishment.

Noteworthy is how Mendoza extends his analysis of colonial governmental attention to the Filipino subject as intrinsic to how the US viewed the autochthonous Filipino body as its exemplary laboratory. Citing studies on colonial public health, Mendoza argues how the effort to control the Filipino subject was nothing more than the complete dominance of all its physiological functions. The rectum, in this instance, exemplified the extreme end of the degeneracy intrinsic to the Filipino body. "A slutty people with a slutty shit," Mendoza states (ibid., 126), prompted the American colonial government to establish extensive public health interventions.

The "inassimilable" Muslim population was not exempted from the US colonial government's queer fascination with its colonized subjects. Cognizant of the unbeaten, fierce nature of the Muslims, who topped the colonial list of the "non-Christian tribes," the US colonial government chose instead to "befriend" the group's leaders who were widely known to practice polygamy and slavery—"twin relics of barbarism" (ibid., 132). George Ade, a Midwestern writer who remained a bachelor all his life, wrote the operatic comedy *The Sultan of Sulu* based on the renowned leader Sultan Kiram, who was notorious for having twelve wives. Aside from satirizing the practice of polygamy, Ade's *The Sultan of Sulu* imagines homosexual tensions between Sultan Kiram and Brigadier-General John C. Bates, fictionalized through the character Budd, who negotiated for the alliance between Sulu and the

US colonial government. The opera, greatly patronized during its run in the US, was admittedly Ade's fantasy that did not "attempt to show what . . . happened, but merely what might have happened" (ibid., 134).

Metroimperial Intimacies concludes with a reference to the short story of a colonial student, Pacifico Laygo, titled "On the Battlefield." Laygo, a Filipino pensionado, recreates the battlefield with an affectionate scene between a Filipino insurrecto and an American soldier. Laygo's short story is inarguably an aspiration for a more harmonious relation, a "dear embrace," between the US and its colonial subjects (ibid., 168). Yet the reality for him along with the other pensionados and pensionadas was that they continually suffered the racializing slur of the US public, who viewed them as threats to the white supremacist's racial and sexual genealogy. The Filipino students' response to these racial insults often displayed a defensiveness that upheld their superiority over the other Filipino ethnic groups who were largely the targets of American ridicule.

The trail of Filipino bodies continues, and painfully so, in the deceivingly small book of San Juan. Essay after essay, the author uncompromisingly analyzes the complex hyper-capitalist global system, of which the US is a key mover that preys on the Filipino people. The Filipinos' desire to escape decades of injustice and poverty has only entrapped them in the worldwide net of racial inequality and violence. This prompts San Juan (2017, 15) to state how the "relentless marketing of Filipino labor is an unprecedented phenomenon, rivaled only by the trade of African slaves and Asian indentured servants in the previous centuries." Diaspora and migration, for San Juan, do not indicate movement and freedom, as some aspiringly suggest. The exportation of "warm bodies" hark back to the 1970s, when the Marcos regime was deeply caught in the "persisting US stranglehold" that manifested in "onerous foreign debt" and "widening social inequality" (ibid., 19).

Although overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) are presently hailed as the country's heroes for filling up the national coffers with their ever-growing remittances, they nonetheless remain unprotected by an inveterately corrupt government from the threats, insults, and dangers that face them in their workplaces. A scholar on Philippine colonial history, in fact, considers them as the "artificial life support of the nation" (Goh 2008, 260).

Among the OFWs, Filipino migrant women are identified as the most vulnerable group, suffering sexual advances and degradation in their employers' households. San Juan (2017, 22) highlights the sociocultural implication of such a fact when he points out that separation and absence tear at the very heart of marriages, families, children, communities, and, thus, the nation. The "phenomenon of the Philippine dismemberment," as San Juan (ibid., 36) terms it, suspends the OFWs' return to home and prevents the "Filipino subjected to a repressive tutelage" from achieving national autonomy.

San Juan's concluding essay, titled "Reading the Stigmata: Filipino Bodies Performing the US Empire," weaves seamlessly with the assertions of *Body Parts of Empire* and *Metroimperial Intimacies*. From the Filipino writer Carlos Bulosan to the present-day self-confessed undocumented migrant Jose Antonio Vargas, there is still much to learn from how the American colonial legacy in the Philippines has bred the fissures that Filipinos struggle with at present.

The Filipino body was the exemplary laboratory of the US modernizing project. Each part of it was examined for how it could be best controlled. But its transformation into the image of its colonizer did not bestow the gift of independence and freedom. On the contrary, the exclusionary dichotomies that had long governed it persisted even as it was able to set foot on the US mainland. It was here, the backdrop to many of the Filipinos' dream for a better future, where race became the border and boundary that impinges on the everyday lives of Filipinos.

For the three authors, only by comprehending the breadth and depth of our colonial legacy can the nation gain strength from its history. Invoking Walter Benjamin's words, Mendoza (2015, 31) argues that there should be no distinction between the study of minor and major events in history. For Balce (2017, 19), "the ethical responsibility of scholars writing after the end of empire" remains a pressing reality, that for San Juan (2017, xii), quoting Karl Marx, is "not only to interpret but also change the world." Hopefully, by doing so, Filipinos will come upon a time when fractures and fragments will no longer weigh upon their lives but instead glimpse a home where their bodies can harmonize with the world, albeit body part by body part.

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