

Book Reviews

John D. Blanco. *Frontier Constitutions: Christianity and Colonial Empire in the Nineteenth-Century Philippines*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009, 372p.

Frontier Constitutions: Christianity and Colonial Empire in the Nineteenth-Century Philippines shows the benefits of bringing contemporary cultural and literary theory to bear on questions of nineteenth-century literature and history of the Philippines. Blanco has an impressive command of the nineteenth-century texts and subjects about which he writes, as well as the various scholarly and theoretical literatures that he uses to interpret them. The book will interest scholars of Philippine history and literature, as well as a broader audience of those invested in cultural studies and postcolonial studies. In the field of Philippine Studies, it probably comes closest to the work of Vicente Rafael [1988; 2005] in character and ambition; it also calls to mind Andrew Sartori's work [2008] on nineteenth-century colonial intellectual and cultural production in Bengal.

Blanco argues that the nineteenth-century Philippines was a "state of exception" that is also exemplary of "colonial modernity." The "state of exception" is defined in principle and abstractly by the condition of coloniality, but also more specifically, in the nineteenth-century Philippines by legal and institutional history: Blanco theorizes the significance of how "Special Laws" were supposed to pertain to the Philippines (by definition, what is "special" is an exception), and yet those "special" laws never obtained, making the colonial state in practice even more, and perpetually, exceptional.

For Blanco, the project of the Philippine colonial state in the nineteenth century reflects a general project and condition of "colonial modernity." Blanco describes "colonial modernity" as the

Spanish state's response, starting in the late eighteenth century, to the crisis of colonial rule that followed the fall of the evangelical model of Spain's Catholic mission in the world: "the structural formation and cultural habitation of an impasse between not only different orders of representation, but also different imperatives facing the colonial state after the breakdown of Spanish imperial hegemony" (p. 5). Blanco focuses on the representations of this impasse, or these contradictions of colonial modernity, as they manifest in the nineteenth-century Philippine texts — fiction, non-fiction, and visual — which are the primary sources of his work.

Blanco's "colonial modernity" is a state of productive contradiction. "Colonial modernity" requires consent — it solicits the acquiescence of colonial subjects, or rather, incites their consent to being governed — but it is also based on racial dichotomization and the exclusion (or exception) of the colonial native from those whose consent rightly constitutes sovereignty. While modernity demands consent, coloniality is its denial. "Colonial modernity" is, however, itself something of a perpetual crisis, and in Blanco's analysis, it is both necessary and impossible, and so turns out to be unsustainable: the state demands, solicits, conjures into existence the consent of subjects who, it turns out, make demands of their own. But rather than describing a triumphal version of how contradiction is resolved by transformation, Blanco's book dwells in the space of that necessary but impossible colonial modernity, reading texts of Spanish colonial officials and commentators as they illustrate attempts to describe, incite, contain, or quantify native consent to Spanish colonial rule. Blanco's emphasis nicely captures the often self-contradictory tendencies and aspirations of different agents, branches, and ideologies of the late Spanish colonial state in the Philippines, and notes how political subjectivities that challenge colonial logics are unintentionally but necessarily engen-

dered.

Blanco advances this thesis by weaving together theoretically-driven analysis with close textual readings. Blanco's fluency with cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and literary theory is evident throughout, and these fields orient the work. The language and frameworks of Michel Foucault are particularly evident, but references to theorists both historical and contemporary abound — Immanuel Kant, Antonio Gramsci, Hannah Arendt, Carl Schmitt, Partha Chatterjee, Walter Mignolo, and Mikhail Bakhtin, among others. Blanco's writing style is often poetic, and sometimes opaque, as often is the case in such theoretically-inclined works. For readers without particular background or interest in these theorists, Blanco's text still offers valuable readings of his primary sources and incisive summations of their historical contexts, nicely bringing fresh readings of more canonical texts (e.g. Rizal's *Philippines within a Century* or Balagtas's *Florante at Laura*) into conversation with lesser-known pieces, including some which I have never seen treated in contemporary scholarship. The range of Blanco's primary sources is impressive, as is his ability to quickly offer insightful contextualizations.

Particularly valuable is Blanco's facility with sources (primary and secondary) in both Spanish and Tagalog. With his guidance, we read texts written by creoles or mestizos in Spanish, as well as texts written by peninsular Spaniards in Tagalog. This exemplifies one of the book's insights, which is that these are literatures of *transculturation* rather than *acculturation* (a rhetorical shift that emphasizes the production of subjectivities in relation to each other, rather than focusing on purported origins. See especially Chapter 3). Moreover, Blanco is one of a very few scholars writing in English about the Spanish colonial Philippines who is as comfortable in the worlds of Spanish literature as he is in the worlds of Philippine studies and history. His fluency with

Spanish literature allows us to see the late nineteenth-century print-culture of the Philippines as part of a broader, unevenly-global "Spanish" literature that may not have been dominated by or centered in Spain itself. Instead, the Philippines appears as one of the centers from which this Spanish literature was produced. In Chapter 5, for example, he thinks through and with the peninsular literary practice of Spanish *costumbrismo* — in which tableau and "types" appear in illustrated periodicals as well as novel form — in order to read Philippine literature of the late nineteenth century as a variety of colonial *costumbrismo*.

The book is organized into three sections, including seven chapters and an epilogue, preceded by an introduction. Individual chapters could stand on their own, especially as some of the clearest articulations of Blanco's overall argument appear towards the beginning of chapters, as summaries of earlier chapters or sections.

Blanco emphasizes the contingency of politics and history. The book is not about the inevitability of the nation, but instead about "a dialogue stretching across the long nineteenth century among concerned writers and artists about the future of colonialism and the possibility of a future without it" (xvi). Yet despite this emphasis on contingency, and the detailed and vivid renditions of the contradictions of Spanish colonial rule during this period, Blanco's theorizations sometimes flatten out that contingency: we get the impression of "a" singular colonial project, one whose contradictions form a well-oiled meaning-making system. Yet the texts that Blanco brings to our attention sometimes suggest a more haphazard, less fateful world of meaning (or perhaps multiple worlds of meaning). Overall, however, this is clearly an important first book from a scholar to follow.

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References

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Resil Mojares. *Brains of the Nation: Pedro Paterno, T. H. Pardo de Tavera, Isabelo de los Reyes and the Production of Modern Knowledge*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2008, 565p.

"A shameless display of erudition."

FILIPINOS are notorious for having short memories. This may explain why history is used in schools for nation building because many young Filipinos cannot see the past beyond their lifetime. This may also explain why history, both either as a discipline or an academic subject in schools becomes contested territory. Since history is never innocent and always has a point of view the question of whose version and why is often debated. To understand the past one must go beyond the dates, names, and events that fill textbooks and look at the way history is written; this is why an archeology of the sources for Philippine history is important, why a genealogy of Filipino thought is essential. Resil Mojares, eminent scholar from Cebu, has spent the past two decades writing up lives, biographies of Filipino thinkers of the nineteenth century from years of reading and note-taking. The tip of the iceberg is a timely and surprisingly readable book, *Brains of the Nation*:

Pedro Paterno, T. H. Pardo de Tavera, Isabelo de los Reyes and the Production of Modern Knowledge.

Many Filipinos have been reared on the idea that "nationalist history" or a history written and understood from a Filipino point of view began in the 1960s with the popularity of the works of Teodoro A. Agoncillo and Renato Constantino that became and remain standard history textbooks today. Their works obscure the fact that the writing, or re-writing, of Philippine history from a Filipino viewpoint began earlier, in the late nineteenth century, with a generation of expatriate Filipinos in Europe that formed a constellation whose shining star was Jose Rizal who published in Paris, in 1890, an annotated edition of Antonio de Morga's *Sucesos de las islas Filipinas* (Events of the Philippine Islands) first published in Mexico in 1609. Unfortunately, this ground-breaking work is overshadowed by his novels *Noli me Tangere* (1887) and *El Filibusterismo* (1890). Rizal's edition of Morga is seldom read today because Rizal did not write a history, he annotated one, but his notes, though obsolete, reveal the first Philippine history from a Filipino viewpoint. Rizal, however, was not alone as can be seen in a letter to him from the painter Juan Luna, from Paris on November 8, 1890, that reads in part:

I made a sketch of the death of Magellan based on the description of Pigafetta: it is a very important event in our history. If I give it the title "*La Muerte de Magallanes*" [Death of Magellan] it will be an admiring homage to this great man (a Portuguese to boot, according to Blumentritt) but if I give it the title as I want it to be "*Victoria de Si Lapulapu y huida de los españoles*" [Victory of Lapulapu and Flight of the Spaniards] instead of *La Muerte de Mgallanes* every silly fellow will criticize it and the painter and poor citizen will be pushed to a wall. At any rate, this sketch is dedicated to you if you like it. [Rizal 1961: Vol.II, Book III,