

Book Reviews

Imperial Abjection

The Philippines in the American Popular Imagination

Balce, Nerissa. *Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016.

In *Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive*, Nerissa Balce studies the archival “relics” of the Philippine-American War, exploring selected texts and images produced in the “forgotten war” against the Philippines that established the United States as an imperial power at the dawn of the twentieth century. Balce locates the “Filipino native as an idea” in a wide range of materials such as “war photographs, newspaper accounts, letters, and essays by African American soldiers, travel writing by white women, and obscure American romance novels and other cultural artifacts,”¹ all of which, she argues, became instruments in the creation and promotion

¹ Balce, Nerissa, *Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2016), 8.

of racial and sexualized ideas about Filipinos in the popular imagination of Americans.

Balce employs the concept of “abjection” which she initially defines as the “process for analyzing the sensory conditions for perceiving the American empire through the actual bodies subjected to its violence and benevolence.”² This is one of the several definitions provided for this term, making it difficult for readers to distinguish what it really means as employed throughout the work. What stands out to be the most comprehensible, however, is its hermeneutic nature, as in “abjection” as the process of reading and analyzing politically obsolete figures in public texts and images.

As Balce puts it, “abjection” is the “practice of reading images of the Philippines through figures, repetitions, patterns, and histories that reveal the American romance of counterinsurgency and war.”³ Thus, in tracing and examining the “abject” object, whether this had been made invisible, forgotten, deprecated, or diabolized, Balce seeks to analyze the epistemological nature of the American empire-building project in the Philippines, an understanding based on depictions of native bodies that are rendered “racially repugnant and sexually erotic yet formative to American imperial identity.”⁴ As “abject” figures, Filipinos became

² Ibid., 181.

³ Balce, *Body Parts of Empire*, 181.

⁴ Ibid., 9.

definitive elements in the American public's imagining and comprehension of the mission behind the imperial project.

Confronted by the seemingly inexhaustible wealth of the archives, Balce succeeds in unearthing and choosing engaging materials that respond to the chosen theoretical approach. What lacks is an explanation of their significance as materials privileged by Balce, why they are selected and what purpose each selection serves. "Cultural" objects in this book are simply those listed down and provided by Balce, without explanation of their differences and/or similarities in form, content, and historicity, especially in their employment as sources and the methodological approach used in weaving them together. How does analyzing photographs differ from reading a travel essay? Are there materials *not* considered cultural artifacts? In other words, the undifferentiated mass of texts and images lumped together as "popular objects," "cultural texts" or "literary forms" without explanation of their clear-cut boundaries as archival products possessing their own historical nature and defined by their respective internal and external structures make Balce's choice of sources arbitrary and even questionable.

Images and texts as objects of analysis are interchangeably used, as if both are identical materials in form and content. Such a lack of explanation obfuscates the methodological approach which consequently weakens the otherwise innovative and elaborate reading and theoretical analysis of

the archival materials. Two more unaddressed questions are the definition and extent of “public culture” in the United States in the early twentieth century, and what makes a specific cultural material “popular” or “noncanonical.” These are important terms to distinguish in order to assess and understand the perception and significance of the imperial project to the broader American public.

Despite its shortcomings, Balce’s work is an invaluable contribution to Philippine studies, offering a unique approach in analyzing and interpreting unexplored “archival bodies” that infuses contemporary ideas from scholars of various disciplines. It is a challenging work that explores different intersecting subjects and social processes, well-situated within the broader academic debate on empire, race, and cultural studies. Balce fulfills the difficult but necessary task of looking back in history and confronting the violent beginnings of American colonialism in the Philippines.

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