

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Frontier Constitutions: Christianity and Colonial Empire in the Nineteenth-Century Philippines by John D. Blanco

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Philippine Studies vol. 57 no. 4 (2009): 579–581

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Book Reviews

JOHN D. BLANCO

Frontier Constitutions: Christianity and Colonial Empire in the Nineteenth-Century Philippines

Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009. 372 pages.

Despite the incredible growth in colonial and postcolonial studies over the last forty years, the outermost frontiers of Europe's imperial projects have yet to receive full critical attention. Particularly in the field of Hispanism and in that of Comparative Literature, the histories of Spain's incursions into Southeast Asia, as well as into North and Sub-Saharan Africa, have only begun to be mined. In his recent book, Professor John D. Blanco sets out to explore one such understudied moment—that of the crisis of colonial hegemony in the Philippines in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In doing so, he points out how the unusual historical and political situation in the archipelago in this era gave rise to a unique cultural production by indigenous peoples, mestizos, Creoles, and Spaniards. Building on close readings of the colonial archive, as well as religious practices, newspaper articles, popular painting, and literature, Blanco keenly addresses the challenges and contradictions presented by Spanish colonialism in the age of enlightenment, modernity, and the birth of liberalism.

Blanco's study generally follows Josep Fradera's outline of the Philippines's "long nineteenth century," moving chronologically from the 1760s to the 1896 Philippine Revolution. However, the author states that his overall focus is more abstract than Fradera's and less preoccupied with the historical arc. He identifies two key concerns behind this study—the conflict between the Spanish desire for native consent and Spain's will to preserve colonial

rule in the islands, and the new public cultures developing at this time in the Philippines. Proceeding along these two lines, Blanco first examines social and political attempts to reconcile the emergence of a constitutional government in Spain with the conditions afforded by the Special Laws in the archipelago, in order to later examine the intersection of colonial aesthetics with such an ambiguous political culture. While at times Blanco's dense prose clouds the connections between these political and cultural productions, his overall argument is most clearly substantiated when he carries out detailed readings of primary "texts." Particularly successful is the introductory analysis of José Honorato Lozano's *Letras y figuras* that stresses the duplicity of these paintings. By noting that these artworks both suppress the agency of native ideas and entrepreneurship and give rise to it, Blanco sets the stage for a recurring theme of his study—how the oscillation between the grip of Spanish rule and threats to this very power produced widespread social and cultural instability in the nineteenth-century Philippines.

Blanco looks to all aspects of colonial Philippine society to understand how exceptional rule could have held for so many decades and yet still led to the dismantling of the modern colonial project at the end of the century. In this regard, two chapters are particularly provocative. "Special Laws and States of Exception" shows how the state attempted to absorb the power of the religious orders into the colonial bureaucracy in this era by shifting administrative roles to native secular priests. Blanco goes beyond merely demonstrating how such attempts failed; he considers how the debate surrounding the condition of religious authority in the Philippines became a foundational element of exceptional rule in the colony. The chapter "Gothic" is likewise suggestive in its discussion of how the invocation of historical discourse served to question "colonial modernity" in the late-nineteenth century. The chapter examines the ways in which artists and authors hollowed out traditional narrations of conquest to give new voice to native desires that went well beyond simple consent to colonial rule, and thus began to herald a distinct future for the Philippines.

Frontier Constitutions draws from an incredibly broad range of theoretical readings, from Kant to Marx, Foucault, Lucács, Fradera, and Eagleton. Blanco deftly balances the insights of these philosophers and cultural critics with his own nuanced readings of Tagalog and Spanish texts as diverse as Mas's *Informe secreto*, Casademunt's "Agapito Macapingan," and Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*. While this study offers a detailed roadmap of the political and cultural impasses

affecting the archipelago during late colonial rule, one wishes Blanco's epilogue had done more than connect the Philippines's moment of decadent colonialism to broader questions of contemporary imperialism in the U.S., Iraq, and elsewhere. Specifically, I was left wondering about the connections between this period in Philippine history and the nation's postcolonial era. Do, for example, the cultural armature that resulted from the Special Laws, the backhanded invocation of native consent, and the processes of historical disavowal and reinvention at the end of the nineteenth century continue to speak to the present condition of Philippine society?

This monograph will clearly interest scholars of Philippine culture and history, as well as those interested in the colonial era in Southeast Asia. Furthermore, Hispanists in general, and specialists in Latin America colonial studies particularly, will likewise find numerous contacts with their own fields of study. One of the greatest contributions of *Frontier Constitutions* is that it will raise questions for scholars working in the field of colonial studies, specifically those focused on the late Spanish empire. Was the struggle for interpretive control of the meaning of colonial modernity as heated in Puerto Rico and Cuba, and did it give rise in those colonies to an atomization of national interests, as was the case in the Philippines? What results from the nineteenth-century transformation of Spain from a unifying seat of Christendom to a mere nation? Blanco's study suggests that frontier sites of analysis reveal far more about the indefinable nature of colonialism in this era and the cultural processes of nation formation than the empire at its core.

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RONALD K. EDGERTON

People of the Middle Ground: A Century of Conflict and Accommodation in Central Mindanao, 1880s–1980s

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2008. 439 pages.

As one colonial official almost a hundred years ago mused, "Nowhere else as here [in Bukidnon] does the Philippines seize upon one's imagination" (16). Edgerton's history of Bukidnon, with its extensive research, clear style, and