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**After Postcolonialism, by San Juan, Jr.**

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## Book Reviews

**After Postcolonialism: Remapping Philippines-United States Confrontations.** E. San Juan Jr. New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000.

On 21 December 1898 U.S. President William McKinley issued his "Benevolent Assimilation" Proclamation declaring that Americans were coming to the Philippines "not as invaders or conquerors, but as friends" (Constantino 217). Less than two months later the Filipino-American War began, culminating in the deaths of over one million Filipinos and establishing the U.S. as the new colonial master of the Philippines. Throughout fifty years of colonial rule, the political, social, and economic terrain of the country was radically altered. What McKinley's "Benevolent Assimilation" doctrine translated into was the establishment of an elaborate U.S. ideological and cultural program geared towards "de-Filipinizing" Filipinos. To put it another way, one of the most crucial components of U.S. imperial conquest in the Philippines depended upon converting and re-creating the colonized into the image of the colonizer.

While successful in inculcating a "colonial mentality" among Filipinos (the overwhelming majority of the population speaks English as a result of U.S. based education, the July 4th celebration of Philippine "independence" day, and the idolization of anything and everything "American"), U.S. imperialism has had an overwhelmingly disastrous impact on the country.

Today, the Philippines has the distinction of being one of the most impoverished countries in the region with Filipinos ranking among the most malnourished in the world even though it is a leading producer of food and other important exports. To compensate for a sagging economy and unrelenting immiseration, over eight million (ten percent of the population) Filipinos find themselves scattered throughout the world as "overseas contract workers" (OCWs) employed in low-paying, labor-intensive jobs.

Although 1946 marks the official end of U.S. colonization, U.S. hegemonic rule continues to be the most salient feature of contemporary Philippine life. Of course, not everyone sees it this way. A substantial amount of scholarship exists devoted to understanding the alleged "special relations" between the

Philippines and the United States. However, the bulk of this work, produced primarily by U.S. academics, has ignored the role U.S. intervention has played in the development and evolution of Philippine society. Instead, these apologists for U.S. empire blame the failures and problems currently plaguing the country on Filipino culture and an inability to fully absorb the lessons of the colonial master.

*After Postcolonialism: Remapping Philippines-United States Confrontations* by E. San Juan Jr. is a radical departure from the aforementioned apologist texts. In one of the most thorough, hard-hitting, perspicacious analyses on the subject, San Juan dismantles the myths surrounding U.S.-Philippine relations and lays bare the harsh realities U.S. imperialism has wrought on its former "showcase of democracy."

What differentiates *After Postcolonialism* from other commentaries is San Juan's emphasis on understanding Philippine history from a nationalist perspective. After being colonized for 400 years by Spain and another 50 years by the United States, Filipino society is best understood as a "historical-political construction. It is a product of mercantile capitalism that happened to be inserted into the Spanish Empire in the sixteenth century and later into the domain of imperialism, a phase of finance or monopoly capitalism" (2). Thus, while Filipinos share some similarities with other Asians, they are distinguished by the fact that their "country of origin was the object of violent colonization and unmitigated subjugation by U.S. monopoly capital" (13).

Unfortunately, however, over half a century of U.S. tutelage has resulted in instilling a sanitized view of U.S.-Philippine relations—one that is characterized as "special" and somehow equal. The challenge for those interested in forging new and emancipatory possibilities for Philippine life is to unlearn and transcend the limiting historical framework provided by U.S. (neo)-colonial education. Changing one's historical perspective is an essential component to liberating one's self from colonial domination.

This point was crystallized for me on a recent Sunday afternoon while reading the New York Times. In the Arts and Leisure section, I was surprised to see photographs of the recent theatrical production of *Dogeaters* by Jessica Hagedorn, dominating the front page. Accompanying the photographs was an article praising Hagedorn for, among other things, bringing her successful novel to the stage. Since it is not often that Filipino artists receive much attention for their work in this country, I was quite happy to finally see a Filipino cultural worker receive recognition.

And then it hit me. Why was Hagedorn and her 1990 novel about the turbulent Marcos years so successful? Why had she become such a media darling for U.S. audiences? The answer, again, can be found in history. The Manila of Hagedorn's imagination is a pastiche of colliding images and postmodern identities that obfuscates the violence of U.S. imperialism. The view of Philippine life she offers can be packaged and commodified by U.S. audiences—we can now see the Marcos years acted out on a New York

stage—totally removed from the widespread violence his dictatorship, with the complete and total support of the U.S. government, inflicted on the Filipino masses. Had her novel been written from a nationalist historical perspective, it is doubtful that she would be such a hit in the United States.

Thus, it is no wonder that we hear so much about Hagedorn, but so little about Carlos Bulosan, why I can find countless copies of Karnow's *In Our Image*, but have to specially order Renato Constantino's account of Philippine history. The strength of San Juan's work is his belief that Third World scholars and artists can transcend the limits of historical possibility, limits imposed by neocolonial dependency, and begin to reorient their work towards the liberation and self-determination of the peoples involved. At this particular juncture, when theoretical inquiries have all but abandoned trying to understand the structural causes of oppression, his emphasis on historical specificity is especially important.

By understanding this lengthy history of colonial subjugation, one can also begin to make sense of the complex set of factors surrounding Filipino identity. What does it mean to be Filipino? Who does the term "Filipino" really designate? Considering that over two million Filipinos currently reside in the United States, what does it mean to be Filipino American? How does Filipino identity factor into the overall space of "Asian America"?

San Juan suggests that the "colonized ward from 'las islas Filipinas' occupies a space between the indigenous Indian and the 'inscrutable Oriental'" (3). As a result, Filipino identity (particularly for those born and raised in the United States) cannot be easily reduced into the more general category, Asian American. Commenting on scholarship promoting a pan-Asian framework, San Juan writes that the diverse groups classified as "Asian American" manifest "more discordant features than affinities and commonalities.

The argument that they share similar values (e.g., Confucian ethics), ascribed racial characteristics, and kindred interests in politics, education, social services, and so on cannot be justified by the historical experiences of the people involved, especially those who came after World War II" (50). Acknowledging that U.S. Asians might form coalitions and alliances from time to time, he maintains that the insistence on pan-Asianism can "only obscure if not obfuscate the patent problems of underemployment and unequal reward (the "glass ceiling"), occupational segregation, under-representation, and class polarization" (50). This is particularly true for Filipinos who often find themselves relegated to low-paying jobs—despite attaining high levels of formal education.

Realizing the shortcomings of the homogenous "Asian American" framework, some scholars have begun promoting a postcolonial, hybrid, transnational model for analyzing diasporic subjectivities. In this scenario, immigrants are conceived as possessing "multiple identities" as a result of their fluid positioning in and between nation-states. When applied to the lives

of colonized subjects, San Juan argues, the transnational model falsely assumes the "parity of colonized/dominated peoples and the U.S. nation-state in contemporary global capitalism" (54).

Considering the far-reaching influence postmodernist/postcolonialist thought has had on the academy, San Juan's critique of its seductive potential cannot be overstated. Favoring a historical-materialist approach, he pursues further questions of identity and representation in several chapters focusing on the literary and cultural production of Filipino artists.

The centerpiece of this work is Chapter 3 "Spectres of United States Imperialism." Here San Juan delivers one of the most thorough critiques of U.S. ideology and its attendant knowledge-production industry. As I alluded to earlier, there has been an immense amount of scholarship produced on the subject of U.S. intervention in the Philippines. Stanley Karnow's *In Our Image: America's Empire in the Philippines* (1989) is one of the most celebrated and popular among the revisionist texts. Like others before him, Karnow argues that Filipinos "'submitted voluntarily to their own exploitation'" (72). In an attempt to account for the underdevelopment and corruption plaguing the Philippines, Karnow resorts to blaming the cultural values and "tribal texture" of Filipino life.

Rejecting Karnow's flimsy thesis, San Juan exposes *In Our Image* for what it really is: a mainstream apologist text. Taking his critique one step further, San Juan indicts Karnow for being a "shrewd popularizer, a bricoleur of hackneyed notions and received doxa culled from the researches of mainstream scholars such as David Joel Steinberg, Peter Stanley, Theodore Friend, Glenn May, and other 'gatekeepers' who guard the parameters of acceptable, safe thinking on the problematic of U.S.-Philippine encounters" (73).

To be fair, San Juan explains that Karnow's analysis (one that purports to "objectively" describe the "Filipino") has its roots in a firmly entrenched tradition of U.S. colonial discourse dating back to 1914 with the publication of Dean C. Worcester's *The Philippines Past and Present*. For San Juan, this body of knowledge has been severely compromised by the "reality of seemingly ineradicable social injustice, unmitigated poverty of millions, rampant atrocities by the military, exploitation of women and children, and widespread violation of human rights by business and government" (73). Again, the importance of 1898 cannot be stressed enough when assessing the current realities faced by Filipinos.

Although I have discussed at length the subjugation of the Philippines by the United States, it would be irresponsible of me to ignore the resistance and revolutionary movements that colonialism has generated. Such movements constitute the durable tradition of anti-imperialism embedded in the popular culture of everyday life.

San Juan devotes a chapter to examining the possibilities of revolutionary transformation in the country by focusing on the prospects and problems of

the New People's Army (NPA). As the only Communist-led resilient insurgency in the world, the NPA has certainly suffered a number of setbacks throughout its history. These inadequacies have led to wide divisions on the Left, leading some to openly denounce Marxism-Leninism.

According to San Juan, the critique of Marxism being issued from a few renegade "leftists" could be largely attributed to their current fascination with postmodernist thought. He writes that "Foucauldian deconstruction substitutes for historical specification and totalizing hypothesis, individualist cultural politics for mass political struggle" (169). While I will not dwell on the vacuity of postmodernist thought and its constant but dogmatic dismissal of Marxism, I agree with San Juan when he convincingly argues that postmodernism is a "pretext for celebrating the virtues of market liberalism and such formal freedoms that have inflicted so much violence, torture, protracted misery, and painful death to millions of Filipinos and other people of color" (170).

Embracing Marxism does not translate into a crude economic reductionism as so many suggest, but allows us to confront the massive social injustices brought about by the rule of capital. In our present era of global economic restructuring, a historical-materialist method of inquiry is absolutely necessary if we are to understand the profoundly iniquitous relations between countries in the North and those in the South.

What we are witnessing at the beginning of the twenty-first century, under the guise of "globalization," is literally a phase of capitalist accumulation gone berserk. Everyday, millions of the world's poor are sacrificed by transnational corporations, their instruments for regulating trade (NAFTA, APEC, WTO, MAI), and international money-lending institutions (International Monetary Fund and the World Bank). Despite this, numerous scholars have chosen to replace a politics of revolution and transformation with a discursive analysis of free-floating signifiers. Their obsession with the "post-this and that" obscures the central relations of power necessary to understanding our current globalized order.

After Postcolonialism reminds us that there is nothing "post" about colonialism. Countries like the Philippines have been transformed into neocolonial appendages supplying the First World with the bulk of cheap labor. Confronting this stark reality head-on and understanding that what the United States did to the Philippines in 1898—what many consider the first Vietnam—has a lasting legacy that continues to shape and inform the lives of Filipinos as well as other people of color. The strength of *After Postcolonialism* lies in San Juan's passion and commitment to ending the neocolonial subjugation of Filipino people as well as others suffering under the dictates of U.S. hegemonic rule.

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