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Faye Caronan

Legitimizing Empire: Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican Cultural Critique

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Legitimizing Empire: Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican Cultural Critique

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015. 208 pages.

Why compare? And why now? In the wake of the transnational turn in area studies wherein borders that constrain knowledge are opened up, such questions may appear outdated. Their implications, however, remain robust especially for the future of comparison in the Global South. Faye Caronan's *Legitimizing Empire: Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican Cultural Critique* shows us why.

In the West the comparative imagination has a relatively long history. The discipline of comparative literature, for example, flourished in the US after the Second World War, a development that coincided with the escalation of the Cold War, during which the culture of others became an integral part of statecraft and international diplomacy. More recently, American studies—the larger field within which Caronan's work is situated—has seen the rise of transnationalism, expanding the investigation of US history and culture to include those of other state formations in the age of globalization. The literature embodying such developments that put comparison front and center is too broad to be enumerated here.

But such breadth cannot be said about Philippine studies, a field that *Legitimizing Empire* also addresses, whose emergence as an academic domain corresponded with the rise of comparative literature on US shores after the Second World War. It is not unfair to say that comparison has yet to find its rightful place in the study of Philippine society, history, and culture. The late Benedict Anderson, himself a comparatist, gestured toward this possibility in *The Spectre of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia, and the World* (Verso, 2001). The title of his book comes from no less than José Rizal, a point that may suggest the deep roots of comparative imagination in Filipino consciousness. But comparative scholarly studies done by local scholars are still hard to come by in the Philippines.

This lack is ironic given the ecological and cultural diversity of the archipelago, a condition that suggests quite the opposite. Given such a diverse ecology and culture, the lay of the Filipino mind should be comparative, so to speak. The reality, however, could not be more untrue. Consider the lack of comparison in literary studies, which is rather bizarre given the fact

that Filipino scholars—Bienvenido Lumbera comes to mind—had been formally trained in comparative literature at American universities as early as the 1960s. Indeed, comparative literary studies remains marginal in Filipino scholarship, especially those that tackle American themes alongside Filipino questions. Since the publication of Lucilla Hosillos's *Philippine–American Literary Relations, 1898–1941* (University of the Philippines Press) in 1969, for example, nothing similar has been done by a Filipino scholar on this side of the Pacific.

Such a lack is a scandal given the prominence of American influence on Philippine history in the last hundred or so years. Caronan's work is accordingly significant in that it throws open the underlying principles that define cultural relations between the Philippines and the US. What is more, she includes another dimension that expands the scope of comparison—the case of Puerto Rico, a US Commonwealth.

The origins of *Legitimizing Empire* go back to Caronan's undergraduate years at Cornell University, when she heard fellow students in the Latino Studies Resource Center talking about US colonialism in Puerto Rico while she was poring over an article by E. San Juan Jr in the nearby Asian American Resource Center. Caronan would later pursue the connections between the Philippines and Puerto Rico while completing her dissertation at the University of California, San Diego. The final product is *Legitimizing Empire*, Caronan's first book.

Legitimizing Empire argues that US exceptionalism has delegitimized, and therefore neutralized, the critiques that are expressed in cultural texts produced by people of color, primarily Filipino American and US Puerto Rican. Looking comparatively at novels, documentary films, performance poetry, travelogues, and travel guides, Caronan illuminates the workings of US exceptionalism and highlights the deep but concealed connections that not only bind the two diasporic communities with common histories of subjugation, but also advance a critique of American imperial innocence. "U.S. hegemonic culture," she writes, "maintains the narrative of U.S. exceptionalism by incorporating Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican cultures while marginalizing their critiques that underscore the contradictions between the rhetoric of U.S. exceptionalism and the practices of U.S. imperialism" (20).

Such cultural critiques involve the laying bare of the American history of imperialism, a history that for Caronan "looms large in both Filipino

American and Puerto Rican writing in the United States, testifying to its important role in shaping Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican subjectivities" (15). As must be clear, comparing the two communities, each with its own distinctive histories and geographies, is a tall order, but Caronan does not shirk the challenge. In the popular American imagination, for example, Filipino American and Puerto Rican communities are thought to signify such opposing stereotypes. If a Filipino American belongs mainly to Asian American formation, a US Puerto Rican belongs largely to Latino culture. And where the former represents the model minority, the latter denotes the undocumented immigrant.

But Caronan rises above such stereotypes to uncover the link between the two. What is accordingly brought apart by popular imagination, Caronan brings together by uncovering the resistance to American imperialism that cultural texts from these communities keep alive. Namely, Filipino American and US Puerto Rican cultural texts serve as repositories of anti-imperial cultural critiques.

Such a strategy is of a piece with the emergent critical tradition within Asian-American studies, particularly Filipino American studies, whose most current practitioners include Dorothy B. Fujita Rony in *American Workers, Colonial Power: Philippine Seattle and the Transpacific West, 1919–1941* (University of California Press, 2005); Allan Punzalan Isaac in *American Tropics: Articulating Filipino America* (University of Minnesota Press, 2006); Denise Cruz in *Transpacific Femininities: The Making of the Modern Filipina* (Duke University Press, 2012); and Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez in *Securing Paradise: Tourism and Militarism in Hawai'i and the Philippines* (Duke University Press, 2013) to name a few. In such works, there is a comparative pivot toward the Pacific, specifically the Philippines. Caronan builds on these studies and does even more. By including US Puerto Ricans, for instance, she highlights the possibilities that come with turning to Latin America and its diaspora. Indeed, this comparative direction has been gaining traction in transnational American scholarship, but the Philippine connection to Latin America remains an untapped prospect.

Viewed from the vantage point of US-based scholarship, what Caronan achieves in making such a comparative pivot is to blast the provincialism of the teaching and appreciation of the ethnic canon at the American university. In doing so, she makes an argument for approaching the minority cultural texts as nodes for making systemic analyses of power, which she

terms a genealogy of global power. For Caronan, this genealogy presents a record of the inequities that American imperialism and its afterlives have wrought throughout history.

More important, the Pacific and Latin American connection promises to open up new historical vistas, especially in the context of the postcolonial study of the Philippines and the Global South. A bit of personal history is relevant here. As a graduate student in American studies at Yale, I attended the Tepoztlan Institute in Mexico as a member of the Working Group on Globalization and Culture, a cultural studies laboratory led by Michael Denning. The institute promotes transnational approaches to historical writing and facilitates the exposure of North American scholars to those who are based in Latin America and beyond. More recently, Filipino American scholars are getting involved in the institute, including the comparatist John D. Blanco. Taken together, the involvement of scholars with Philippine background in the institute and the publication of Caronan's book represent headways into new comparative practices wherein the anticolonial critique proves vital.

Notwithstanding the minor typographical errors, heavy reliance on Michel Foucault at the expense of providing the anticolonial prehistory of Filipino American and US Puerto Rican cultural critiques, and chapters that can benefit more from editing for coherence, Caronan accomplishes a singular feat. In *Legitimizing Empire* she formally connects the Philippines and its diaspora not only to the fate of the American empire but also, and more important, to other global histories in Latin America. This book bodes well for the promotion of scholarship that pays more attention to the dynamics of global critiques of empire that can emerge from peripheral places like the Philippines and Puerto Rico.

Why compare then? And why now? We have long known the virtues of comparison in making cultures connect. But only recently are we beginning to know the good that can emerge when people with deracinated histories discover similarities that can change the world for the better. This, as *Legitimizing Empire* demonstrates, is the promise of postcolonial comparison as method and critique.

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