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Displaying Filipinos, by Vergara

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Book Reviews and Notes



Displaying Filipinos: Photography and Colonialism in Early Twentieth Century Philippines. By Benito M. Vergara. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1995. x, 180 pages.

Most Americans first heard of the Philippines when news of Dewey's victory against the Spanish armada in the Battle of Manila Bay reached the United States. To satisfy a growing curiosity among Americans, news correspondents, travel writers, and investigative missions journeyed to the Philippines to gain first-hand knowledge about these new "possessions."

It was through them that the American public would first get a glimpse of the Filipinos and the Philippines. The photographic images produced by these men would, according to Benito Vergara, play a crucial role in legitimizing America's colonial experiment in the Philippines.

Given the possibility of reproducing photographs and circulating them among a large audience, Vergara presents photography as an effective tool for presenting and justifying America's colonial ideology. Photographs of Filipinos and Philippine scenes that circulated across the United States in the early twentieth century helped shape the image of the Filipinos as a racially inferior and heterogeneous people who were incapable of ruling themselves. Hence, the propagation of such an image helped to legitimize the American occupation of the Philippines.

People generally accept the notion that a photograph captures truth. However, it cannot be denied that a photograph can actually distort reality so that the image one sees does not actually mirror the truth. Distortion can be achieved through framing, posing, and cropping, all of which, Vergara argues, may "decontextualize" reality. The meaning of the image is further manipulated by (1) the use of a caption; (2) the genre (whether the photos are, for example, part of a travel memoir or an anthropological study); and (3) the grouping of a photo with others. All these strategies restrict and direct a viewer's interpretation of the photograph before him. Vergara proposes that images of the Filipinos were already constructed even before their photographs were taken. As such, the photos became "powerful bearers of colonial ideology" (14).

Vergara then outlines what he calls "the colonial narrative," i.e., the ideology of Manifest Destiny that influenced America's occupation of the Philippines. Two features of this narrative are detailed: the sense of predestination, given America's history of acquisition and expansion, as well as the "civilizing process." The principal justification for colonial rule was the Filipinos' perceived incapacity for self-government. There was something that the Filipinos lacked that only the colonizers could provide. Thus, the "colonial narrative" required that America subjugate the Philippines.

In the final three chapters of the book, Vergara analyzes photographs found in various genres, focusing on their framing, their "representativity," their "authentication of presence," and their captions, in order to provide deeper insights into America's understanding and representation of the Philippines. Chapter 4 deals with America's ambitious census-taking project in 1903. Vergara notes that the process of taking the census was a means of imposing discipline on the colonized, as well as a demonstration of American discipline. Civilization was linked to the imposition of order, and that order was seen in the classification of the colonized into neat categories. That classification, however, was also based on the colonial narrative whereby eight tribes were categorized as "civilized" and sixteen were classified as "wild." It should come as no surprise that the "civilized" tribes were Christian and the "wild" tribes non-Christian (Christianity, as part of American culture, was quite naturally seen as a condition of civilization). The fact, however, that the census contained 24 categories (as opposed to three in the Spanish census of 1878) pointed to the great diversity of Filipino society, which in turn made self-government impossible. The Filipinos were not viewed as "a people." Civilization, therefore, also meant the homogenization of diverse groups into one people and one "nation."

From a discussion of the census-taking project, Vergara then focuses on the captions to the photos that appeared in the census documents. He notes that the photos reinforced the opinions expressed in the text, but improved on them since the photos gave the impression of scientific authority. The stark contrast shown between the "civilized" and "uncivilized" Filipinos further reinforced the plurality of the colonized and hence, their incapacity for self-rule.

Following his analysis of photos from official state sources, Vergara turns his attention to the genre of travel literature. The photos that appeared in such sources had to conform to the requirements of the genre—an emphasis on adventure, entertainment, and the exotic. Given the inaccessibility of the Philippines to the greater majority of Americans, they resorted to travel accounts to satisfy their curiosity about their new possessions. The reading public's perception of the Philippines was thus largely shaped by these travel accounts.

The photos that Vergara analyzed presented the Philippines as a technically inferior people, reinforcing the Americans' self-image of superiority and justifying their "civilizing mission." By emphasizing the differences between

themselves and the Filipinos, the photos also reflected the civilizing process. Vergara thus concludes that "[t]he almost standardized images that were produced, reproduced and consumed as commodities, in turn created, perpetuated and substantiated truthful and fictionalized notions of the Philippines—ultimately supporting the need for colonial government" (107).

Finally, Vergara details the St. Louis Exposition of 1904 as an attempt to associate the colonization of the Philippines with the narrative of Manifest Destiny. The physical layout of the exhibits at the Philippine Reservation were meant to present an image of order (order being associated with civilization). For example, the model of Manila was placed at the center of the Philippine reservation, with the other models of towns and villages spreading out in order to represent the movement from backwardness to progress. The ethnological exhibits, on the other hand, again showed the plurality of "tribes." Moreover, the scientific atmosphere of these exhibits lent legitimacy to the racial hierarchies presented.

After his discussion of the structure and organization of the St. Louis Exposition, Vergara focuses on the photos that appeared in the Exposition catalogue that constructed specific images for each of the represented groups: the Igorots were savage but docile, respectful and polite; the Muslims were civilized and backward at the same time; the Visayans (deemed highest in the hierarchy of types) were submitted as evidence that civilization meant a closer relationship with America, as represented by their white suits, their display of the American flag, and their having organized an orchestra. The Macabebe Scouts were exhibited as representations of the colonial vision of discipline, uniformity, and loyalty. Thus, the St. Louis Exposition constructed a series of images that visualized the civilizing process. The aim is to present the United States as being worthy of its imperial status.

Vergara's monograph is a unique and refreshing perspective on what many may consider a saturated topic. With persuasive and well-reasoned argumentation, he convincingly establishes the effective role that photography played in the dissemination and legitimization of the ideology of Manifest Destiny. Moreover, his creative use of photographs as historical texts makes his works a significant contribution to Philippine historiography.

There are a number of ways, however, by which his work can still be improved. One such way is by extending the analysis to include other genres. Vergara refers at one point to the competitive business of the production of Philippine picture postcards. Given its cheaper price in relation to travel books, we can presume that postcards were more accessible to the American public. He does not, however, include them in his study because of his admitted difficulty in gathering such postcards (although collections of postcards have already been published). It would also have been helpful had he included data on the sales and circulation of travel books (although Vergara does say in his work that he was unable to this) since this could determine which specific photos were viewed more often and by more people.

While the study is generally very well reasoned out, certain points raised by Vergara remain on the level of speculation and cannot be satisfactorily confirmed. For example, the notion that the possession of photos was construed by individuals as a way of possessing the Philippines is a provocative thought. But how does one validate such a claim? Did the individuals who bought the travel books actually say that they equated the possession of photos with actual possession of the islands?

Moreover, in his conclusion, Vergara presents an alternative reading of the photographs as a reminder of death. This he bases on the remarks of one particular colonial official who expressed regret over the destructive effect of colonization on the Filipinos' culture. These were the sentiments of one colonial official. Vergara, however, does not determine whether these sentiments were also shared by others.

Not all the photos discussed by Vergara were reproduced in the book. The reader may also find the quality of the photographs' reproduction rather disappointing, as some of these were too blurred to be appreciated. Considering that the photos are what this book is all about, then this is a major shortcoming of the book.

These deficiencies notwithstanding, Vergara has effectively used his anthropological and communications backgrounds to provide new insights into the nature of the American colonial enterprise in the Philippines. The academic community looks forward to more works from this promising young historian.

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Dulaang Hiligaynon. Edited by Rosario Cruz Lucero. Translated by Ricardo Oebanda Jr. and Rosario Cruz Lucero. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1996.

The study and enjoyment of Philippine literature would be incomplete without the works in the different vernacular languages. Unfortunately, a large number of these works remain uncollected or untranslated, left to perish in some moldering *baul* (wooden chest), or else filed in remote and cavernous archives for only the itinerant specialist to peruse. *Dulaang Hiligaynon*, then, edited by Rosario Cruz Lucero, comes as a welcome addition to anybody's collection of Philippine titles, whether one is a literary scholar, historian, critic, creative writer, or simply a "common reader."

The book comes with an introduction written by Doreen G. Fernandez and translated into Filipino by DM. Reyes, in which one reads an historical overview of Hiligaynon drama from the indigenous rituals of the precolonial