

methodological level, it clearly highlights the power of the visual. While Heng’s competency in this regard is high—he previously worked as a professional photographer—there are other mediums that might be put to productive use by scholars. This is particularly true regarding participatory methodologies and the deployment of certain exercises with research participants, such as mapping exercises and photographic diarizations of everyday life. Many journals now encourage visual abstracts, which provide novel openings through which the visual might play a more central role in our analyses. On a more theoretical level, Heng’s visual sociology raises critical questions about what is not captured by photographs. In Singapore especially, questions concerning the economics of religion—its supply and demand, and the religious economies that emerge in response—are integral to any analysis that is difficult to capture visually. This is especially apparent when we consider the demographics of Chinese religion and how the ageing of society threatens the loss or dilution of rituals, traditions and practices in the intergenerational transfer of belief. The visual also tends to favour the spectacular, which poses problems when one moves the analytical gaze beyond the clearly bounded practice of “religion”. What of the spiritual practices of yoga, mindfulness, or even humanism? My point is that the most welcome scholarly innovations require critical balance if mainstream traction, meaning and value are to be realized.

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*The Sovereign Trickster: Death and Laughter in the Age of Duterte.*  
By Vicente Rafael. Durham: Duke University Press, 2022. xii+173 pp.

Written during the height of the pandemic in the Philippines, Vicente Rafael’s book offers a “prismatic” history of former president Rodrigo Duterte’s regime through a sustained engagement with

the aesthetics of death, authoritarian discourse and colonial history (p. 3). Rafael draws upon Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics and Achille Mbembe's thoughts on necropolitics to interrogate why Duterte was popular (enjoying a ninety-one per cent approval rating in 2020) despite his regime's impotent response to the pandemic. He makes the case that Duterte was popular because he was a "sovereign trickster" (p. 83) who was endearing precisely because of his vulgarity and brutality. The "war on drugs", which has left behind thousands of widows and orphans, is primarily what makes Duterte popular, according to Rafael. The book, as a whole, offers thought-provoking insights into the "Age of Duterte" and Philippine populism through a historical and aesthetic approach.

The book is divided into five main chapters on topics such as electoral dystopias, neoliberal citizenship, authoritarian vulgarity, the figure of the sovereign trickster, and coverage of the drug war. As an interlude between these chapters, Rafael inserts incisive essays or "sketches". He starts off historically foregrounding Duterte's regime by tracing it as far back as the Spanish colonial era. Rafael argues that the flawed electoral system established by the Spanish Empire was continued by the Americans and eventually the Marcos dictatorship. This history created an electoral dystopia that enabled the rise of Duterte. The second chapter closely examines "Marcosian modernity" (p. 25) and "the biopolitics of neoliberal citizenship" (p. 26). Here, Rafael argues that "[t]he biopolitics of neoliberalism ... requires a necropolitics of moral cleansing" (p. 31). Thus, the dismal conditions of the Marcos dictatorship and the liberal democracy that emerged after the people power's revolution of 1986 created the conditions for Duterte's ascent to power (p. 33). Arguing that Duterte "revels in what Achille Mbembe calls an aesthetic of vulgarity", chapter 3 is an engagement with Duterte's crass and misogynist discourse (p. 42). Through an analysis of selected speeches, Rafael makes the case that through "Duterte's phallogocentric politics" (p. 47), the "biopolitical is subsumed and structured by the necropolitical" (p. 56).

In the fourth chapter, Rafael provincializes the concepts of Foucault and Mbembe by using them as lenses to examine the

inherently postcolonial conditions of Duterte's regime. He argues that as the "sovereign", Duterte had the right to decide who must live and die, and as a "trickster", he rendered his critics impotent and charmed his supporters with his vulgarity (p. 81). Thus, Duterte was the "sovereign trickster" of the Philippines.

The final chapter examines the limitations of photojournalism in critiquing Duterte's war on drugs. Rafael notes that "when these photographs began to appear, polls showed Duterte's approval rating higher than ever" (p. 125). He also elaborates on the capacity of "dream images" to create "phantasms of revenge" (p. 129) that Duterte's regime "can extract and exploit" (p. 130). Rafael concludes the book on a pessimistic note, which is his "way [of] coming to grips with reality and embracing rather than spurning tragedy" (p. 142). While he argues that Duterte facilitated the "autoimmune construction of community on which [the] authoritarian flourishes" (p. 141), he points out that the proliferation of "community pantries" during the height of the pandemic may provide hope for a better future (p. 144).

Like Rafael's *White Love and Other Events in Philippine History* and *Contracting Colonialism*, this book too provides fresh and timely insights into the intimate relationship between colonial history and Philippine populism. Its "prismatic" history will undeniably provide a thoughtful glimpse into the politics and aesthetics of Duterte's regime to scholars across disciplines. I must be forthright with my biases, however, as I recently wrote an article in *Kritika Kultura* (2022) that extended Rafael's arguments on the limitations of photojournalism in fostering resistance to authoritarian regimes. While I personally agree with Rafael's sentiments, it should be emphasized that this mode of critique can be wilfully misread and misrepresented by scholars who have different political leanings. It must also be said that while the brevity of this book is welcome, it leaves room for further elaboration. An example would be the third chapter, where a more nuanced analysis of gender can be supplemented by recent research on masculinities and populism in the Philippines. Ultimately, *The Sovereign Trickster* represents a powerful treatise

on the necropolitical and biopolitical aesthetics of Duterte's regime that will shape future scholarship in Philippine studies.

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*Riverine Border Practices: People's Everyday Lives on the Thai-Lao Mekong Border*. By Thanachate Wisaijorn. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. 204 pp.

While projects to dam the waters of the Mekong move forward, infrastructures of crossing expand to facilitate and regulate movement. The fifth Friendship Bridge connecting Thailand and Laos is slated for completion in early 2024, ready to change the flow of people and goods across this winding water border. The many meanings of "border crossing" in the lives of local people living along the river is taken up by Thanachate Wisaijorn in this book, with particular interest in understanding how people practise mobility around quasi-official border points.

Wisaijorn employs Homi Bhabha's notion of the Third Space, stressing the importance of hybridity in the expression of transitional identities in this borderland area. Central to his argument is the assertion that people's daily lives encompass a plurality of connections and frictions as they experience the national border drawn by the