

*White Love and Other Events in Philippine History.* By Vicente L. Rafael. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000. 288 pp.

The Introduction to this collection of eight essays posits that Philippine history and the essay form are complementary. Because the essay lends itself to the episodic, in contrast to epic, style of narration, the essay embodies what it seeks to portray: the ironies, contradictions, and instabilities of history which escape the grand overarching framework of nationalist historiography. Collectively, the essays seek to convey the “conditions of possibility and impossibility for the historical emergence of the nation and its various states” (p. 4). Rafael contends that “the fundamental irony of Philippine nationalism” (p. 13) is that anti-nationalist forces are themselves already embedded in the constitution of the nation. Nationalism’s project of exorcising colonialism converges with the return of colonialism’s ghosts in the form of the state apparatus and persistent socioeconomic inequalities. Philippine history is consequently “fractious” (p. 2), overflowing with revolution and counter-revolution, advances and reversals, self-sacrifice and duplicity, freedom and unfreedom.

The essays that follow teem with incisive, charming, and sophisticated insights. But the essays also display instances of haziness, excess, and deflected explanatory force. The overall coherence of the book is therefore compromised. And so this review will proceed chapter by chapter. Perhaps the discrepant quality of the essays is to be expected as the essays were written in the course of the 1990s admittedly “with different audiences in mind and for different occasions” (pp. 15–16). Unavoidably, “the chapters are full of gaps and hesitations, imperfect arguments that already anticipate their revisions” (p. 16). Rafael hopes, nonetheless, that the book “might provoke other connections and conjectures” (p. 17), and it certainly will.

Chapter 1, “White Love: Census and Melodrama in the U.S. Colonization of the Philippines”, juxtaposes the technologies of power, surveillance, and discipline entailed by the first American colonial census in 1903, on the one hand, and the resistance posed by “seditious” Tagalog plays, on the other. The census’s racializing project stands in

marked contrast to the absence of “a discourse on race” (p. 48) in nationalist melodramas. In the census gender is “naturalized in relation to the paternalism of the colonial state” (p. 48), whereas in Tagalog plays gender is open to questioning and negotiation. The binarism pitting vicious colonizer and virtuous colonized is subtly replicated in this essay. The colonized subject’s racial prejudice — *vis-à-vis* “the Chinese” and aboriginal Negritos — is occluded, and the relationship of racism to nationalism elided.

In Chapter 2, “Colonial Domesticity: Engendering Race at the Edge of Empire, 1899–1912”, Rafael examines the ambiguities of White American women’s double identity in the colony, how they invested the colonial project with both domesticity and sentimentality by concomitantly performing and disavowing the everyday inequalities of U.S. imperialism. Written explicitly to engage with “the constitutive role of empire in the formation of U.S. nationhood” (p. 53), this essay’s role in explicating the ironies of Philippine nationalism is not apparent.

Chapter 3, “The Undead: Notes on Photography in the Philippines, 1898–1920s”, highlights the elusiveness of photography by dissecting photos of the Filipino-American War, which invariably memorialized U.S. mastery and superiority, and the portraiture of wealthy Filipinos who circulated such photos as gifts and personal mementos. Photographs in the latter set were suggestive of “the fantasy of an autonomous space” which, as enjoyed by the Filipino bourgeoisie, “may well have contributed to entrenching and rationalizing Filipino collaboration with U.S. rule” (p. 100). The discussion of non-resistance encoded in portraiture, however, ends rather abruptly in the suggestion that photographs are not reducible to “either colonial or anticolonial narratives” even as these evoke “an alternative temporality” (pp. 100–2).

In Chapter 4, “Anticipating Nationhood: Identification, Collaboration and Rumor in Filipino Responses to Japan”, the “uncanny permeability of emergent national identities” (p. 103) of Rizal and his cohorts is said to “haunt . . . the formation of Filipino identity throughout the first half of the twentieth century” (p. 107). These ambiguous identities would come to the fore in the élite’s collaboration with Japanese rule and in the “emptiness” of collaborators’ rhetoric based on the then new

language of English (pp. 109–14). Rumours during the Japanese occupation were similar to collaborationist rhetoric in being “epistemologically empty” (p. 117), but these were different in not being “predicated on dissimulation and duplicity” (p. 121). Avoiding a simplistic dichotomy, Rafael does not privilege rumours over collaborationist rhetoric by noting that rumours do not necessarily represent anti-colonial nationalism. Rizal’s porous identity, in his view, pervades rumour-mongering despite the half-century in between. What would explain such persistence?

In Chapter 5, “Patronage, Pornography, and Youth: Ideology and Spectatorship during the Early Marcos Years”, the staged romance of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos is finely linked to the aesthetization of patronage politics, the complementary difference between the President and the First Lady serving as weapon to depoliticize spectator crowds. Imelda Marcos’s spectacular rise is located side-by-side with the explosiveness of sexually explicit movies (*bomba*). The Marcos conjugal hegemony began to erode with the rise of a new type of explosion: the youthful street demonstrations which eventually led to “the destruction of spectacle” (pp. 150–61). In this essay, Rafael brilliantly traces the beginnings of “authoritarian wishfulness” which enabled the couple to portray themselves as the fount from which emanated “the circulation of political and economic power” in the country (p. 122). However, the essay begs the question of why the Marcoses succeeded in doing so. It provokes us to ponder the unanalysed relationship between authoritarianism and nationalism during this period.

Chapter 6 on “Taglish, or the Phantom Power of the Lingua Franca” takes up the question of linguistic hybridity and its relationship to a social hierarchy dominated by “mestizos” and “mestizas” envied and adulated by the lower classes. Rafael adduces the capacity of “Taglish” to blend the otherwise unequal languages of English, Spanish, and Tagalog, thereby collapsing hierarchy in their substitutability and “relation of constant interruption” (p. 176). But the flattening of linguistic hierarchy is illusory because social inequalities remain undisturbed. If anything, the use of “Taglish” reinforces the social structure. Rafael argues that the seeming access to power through language is nothing more than a mere phantasm. The essay, however, makes no theoretically

cogent explanation why, in the first place, assertions of equality in the linguistic sphere should materialize in the transformation of the social structure. The term “Chinese mestizo” is also used as if it were on the same epistemological ground as “Spanish mestizo”, without factoring in the major shift in terminology which has ensured that, in the late twentieth century, the word “mestizo” denotes only those of mixed White ancestry.

Chapter 7 on “Writing History After EDSA” offers an explanation for the popularity of the writings of historian Ambeth Ocampo. The obvious “features of Ocampo’s writings — an ironizing sensibility, an alertness to the crossings of fiction and fact, and a materialist fondness for the everyday” (p. 196) — inscribe political ambivalence, which captures the desires and anxieties of the élite-educated generation of “martial law babies”. Rafael further locates Ocampo’s appeal to his use of “post-EDSA English” which is “colloquial”, “decolonized and domesticated” (pp. 200–1), the use of which, paradoxically, reinforces the privileged position of its users—just as “Taglish” does. If this English “readily incorporates Taglish inflections” (p. 201), what distinguishes it from “Taglish”? Indeed, in this and the previous essay, the concept of “Taglish” is vague as the term subsumes a wide range of linguistic practices. This essay also triggers the question of whether the general deterioration of Philippine tertiary education, including the teaching of English in supposedly élite schools, may be an important factor in the popularity of vernacularized English.

The final chapter, “‘Your Grief Is Our Gossip’: Overseas Filipinos and Other Spectral Presences”, inquires into attempts by state actors and public intellectuals to contain the “dislocating effects of global capital” (p. 204) as embodied by “overseas contract workers” (OCW) who return as corpses, Flor Contemplacion being exemplary. What Rafael terms “nationalist mourning” ultimately fails due to money which, like gossip, insinuates itself into everything, commodifying even mourning, as in the profit-driven movie production of Contemplacion’s story. This essays feeds, rather than questions, the stereotypes of the “arrogant” but “envied” homecoming *balikbayan*, mainly from North America, and the “self-sacrificing”, “victimized”, and “pitied” OCW.

Many studies have shown that in their localities migrant workers are admired and envied, and they do not see themselves as victims. The essay's fundamentally economic view of international labour migration (p. 205) is oblivious to the non-financial motivations and concerns articulated by migrants themselves, discussed in recent additions to the migration literature. The ambivalences of homecoming actually-living OCWs are muted by the focus on the returning dead, the possibilities of haunting by the former eclipsed in the dissection of the spectral corpse. Ultimately, the essay fails to analyse the spectrality of money in the form of remittances by overseas Filipinos. How is this spectre to be distinguished from the haunting effects of money, given that, in the Philippines as elsewhere, circulation always appears to exist apart from production?

In the Introduction, Rafael notes that the sensation of vertigo the Philippines generates has its advantage in that Filipinos and the Philippines elude outsiders' attempts to understand and master them. This elusiveness provokes many questions. Why should it be peculiar to the Philippines alone? Do Filipinas/os feel this vertigo, and sense their national history to be "fractious"? Why does elusiveness seemingly not elude the historian?

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