

Book Review

Plural Entanglements: Philippine Studies edited by Dada Docot, Stephen B. Acabado, and Clement C. Camposano. Quezon City: Bughaw, 2023. 451 pages. ISBN: 9786214482610

“The future of Philippine Studies is on trial,” Charlie Samuya Veric (2021) forebodingly announces in a reflective piece that calls for a reevaluation of the field in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which exacerbated the occultation of the political and historical conflicts that have entrenched the country into “a culture of dependency.” Veric’s apprehensions are not without ground. Coopted by the American empire especially during the Cold War, Philippine studies must continue severing its ties with the epistemologies, methods, and language of neocolonial knowledge production where it emerged as an academic field. Furthermore, the project of decolonization has long been deterred by the Philippines’ subservient economic, political, and cultural relations to the US and other superpower countries. These challenges, among others, may impede the development of the field toward what Ramon Guillermo (2016) proposes as an “autonomous Philippine studies” (“*nagsasariling araling Pilipino*”) that forges its own concepts, methods, problems, and agenda that are relevant to the Filipino peoples (33).

Seemingly engaging this “trial,” emerging and mid-career Filipinists from around the world, influenced by previous and ongoing efforts of Filipinization, decolonialization, and even anti-imperialism, have been doing much work in knowledge generation through inclusive and innovative ways. Many of these scholars also participate in global conversations on involving stakeholders in designing and crafting academic research. *Plural Entanglements: Philippine Studies* (2023), one of the most recent edited collections of Bughaw, an imprint of the Ateneo de Manila University Press, brings together some of these Filipinists to offer new or corrective perspectives on Philippine history, politics and governance, social relations, and culture. Dada Docot, Stephen B. Acabado, and Clement

C. Camposano—all at home with the anthropological sciences—edited the fifteen-chapter book, prologued by an incisive foreword by Caroline Hau that situates the collection in the process of reclaiming the “margins” as multivalent sites of intellectual exploration and knowledge production.

Chapters of *Plural Entanglements* delve into the historical and contemporary involvement of the Philippines in the global economy, weigh on established theories on Philippine culture and history, and critique urgent issues anchored on social justice. By examining these areas, the collection provides a space for the communities, knowledges, and experiences that have been marginalized or excluded in earlier projects in Philippine studies. In this way, the book “contributes to the long history of decolonial scholarship in the Philippines and Filipino scholars’ work in the last four decades[,] respectfully nodding to [the] long genealogy of anticolonial and decolonial work by Filipinos” (10). To fulfill its objective, *Plural Entanglements* covers various themes tied together by their relevance to Philippine studies.

Several chapters emphasize the utter importance of Indigenous and community-based ways of knowing and understanding the world. Articles engaging this theme remind readers of the Indigenization movement in the academe during the long 1970s. At that time, scholars realized that translating Western concepts and approaches into the dominant Filipino language is not enough to renege their colonial origins and negative framings of the Filipino people. The perceived panacea was to create a body of knowledge that incorporated Indigenous concepts and views. The intellectual movement flourished, and generated invaluable methods, approaches, and theories from local ways of knowing. However, several scholars in this persuasion resorted to plucking terms from Tagalog, the language of lowlanders in Central and Southern Luzon, to contrast foreign concepts. While their revitalization of Philippine studies is laudable, some of the concepts they developed—mostly under the auspices of Manila institutions—have been circulated as universals of Philippine culture and society.

Some of the contributions in *Plural Entanglements*, such as Grace Barretto-Tesoro and Stephen B. Acabado’s “Incorporating

Indigenous Perspectives in Chronology Building: Rejecting the Three-Age System in Philippine Archaeology” (Chapter 1), are careful not to create new universals by instead emphasizing the plurality of voices and experiences in our history and communities. Barreto-Tesoro and Acabado’s piece proposes a new chronology of Philippine archaeology that relies on a behavioral model of tangible archaeological evidence that interrogates the three-age periodization imposed by Anglo-European imperialism on the Philippines and Southeast Asia. Such a chronology draw on evidence described as “sinauna pa” (“ancient”) or “mas matanda pa sa lolo ko” (older than my grandfather) by older members of communities who live in and protect sites of archaeological interest.

Contributions such as “The Bangsamoro as Imagined Future” (Chapter 10) by Rosa Cordillera A. Castillo also rely on community viewpoints to construct a historical model fit for understanding quests for self-determination. Through long stretches of ethnographic fieldwork in Mindanao, especially in the Cotabato region, Castillo discusses the imaginary of a utopian Bangsamoro wrought from an idealized and violent past and the uncertainties of the present. In this chapter, “imaginary” is used to describe a framework through which the Maguindanaon adherents of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front imagined the world and designed their actions. Castillo’s rich descriptions of the everyday lives of their interlocutors show how their memories, feelings, and narratives about their experiences animate their pursuit of self-determination and the Bangsamoro itself.

Other chapters reinvestigate Philippine history outside established categories to un/recover narratives of movement, circulation, and agency hitherto occulted by colonialism and neocolonial knowledge production. Jely A. Galang’s history-from-below of the Chinese working class in 19th century Philippines—then considered by the Spanish colonial government as “social undesirables”—presents a collective biography of these “people without history.” Their contribution, entitled “Emergence of ‘Undesirable’ and ‘Proletariat’ Chinese in the Nineteenth Century Philippines” (Chapter 3), explains how these people, treated as dangerous by the colonial state, viewed their daily activities as necessary for their survival. By using previously unutilized source materials

from the National Archives of the Philippines, Galang presses the importance of serious but, if I may say, adventurous archival work in understanding better the histories of Philippine communities. I would also use “adventurous” to describe Ruel V. Pagunsan’s “Foundations of Philippine Environmentalism: Science, Citizenship, and Nationalism” (Chapter 4). In order to uncover the colonial precedents of ecological knowledge and the relation between science-making and power, Pagunsan draws from archival documents and academic journals to discuss three objects of analysis: nature-studies as scientific education, promotion of environmental consciousness through practices such as Arbor Day and, national parks. All conducted by the government, the eclectic set of initiatives that they examine reveal how early state-led environmentalist projects empower not citizens-as-environmentalists, but the flows of capital, which only extend the extractive operations of empire.

The last few chapters of *Plural Entanglements*, all worth the reader’s attention, engage the theme of diasporic identity and belonging. Dada Docot’s reflexive chapter, “Postcolonial Monuments in the Hometown: Decolonization and the Im/possibilities of Repair” (Chapter 13) focuses on the politics of memory-making in their hometown Nabua in Bicol. In light of worldwide efforts of tearing down monuments that memorialize oppressive power, Docot analyzes three post-war monuments as historical workers of multiple colonialisms that shape contemporary understandings of place and identity. What this ethnographic venture reveals is that postcolonial peoples see through multiple veils that complicate local imaginings of decolonial (and anti-imperial) praxis. While Docot situates the hometown in a transnational project, Clement C. Camposano casts the home as a transnational project itself. “Resisting Generosity: The *Balikbayan* Box and the Crafting of Selves within the Contemporary Transnational Filipino Household” (Chapter 14) investigates how the traffic of goods through the sending of balikbayan boxes complicate householding, long-distance intimacy, and identity production. By examining the narratives of seven Ilonggo migrant women and their respective households, Camposano shows how those boxes set the stage where the lives of transnational families play out. Camposano’s elucidation of how migrant women workers’ reshaping of power relations within and between households continues the overarching moods of unsettlement and resistance that pervade the book as a

whole. Ultimately, Chapters 13 and 14 illuminate the inextricable links between diaspora and home.

Plural Entanglements represents the diverse scholarly endeavors that emphasize the significance of broadening analytical perspectives beyond Manila in two ways. Firstly, a good number of its chapters examine either the discourses or structures perpetuating the marginalization and impoverishment of communities across the country, including rural, urban, and Indigenous populations which have been subjected to colonial framings disseminated through education and other popular institutions. Aiming to contribute to the rectification of colonial-era discourses surrounding our culture and history, *Plural Entanglements*, as the editors themselves mention in their introduction, responds to Veric's assessment by presenting several works that, while not traditionally positioned in the field of Philippine studies, engage with the problems mirroring the Filipino experience and hindering our self-determination.

Secondly, the contributors write on the Philippines not only from within its national borders, but around and beyond it—that is, from the many Filipino communities in countries that maintain a labor-exporting relation to the Philippines, such as the US. The editors candidly admit the socio-economic privileges held by most of the scholars involved in *Plural Entanglements*, as “the majority of contributions to this collection are products of Western educational institutions” (21). This positionality, however limited, can demonstrate the socio-political commitment of Filipino perspectives from the Philippine diaspora. The transnational orientation of the book's selection showcases scholarship on the Philippines vis-à-vis the world.

Despite its veritable breadth, the book does not come without limitations, fortuitously foregrounded by its title. Early on, the editors explain that “this collection is not designed to be a Philippine studies reader” (11). One must appreciate the candor of this admittance; surely, any and all anthologies face issues related to selection, cohesion, and even (de)canonization. Nevertheless, the promise of plurality from a one-volume book directs the reader's attention to what is excluded. There is the question, for example, of the plurality of disciplines: most of the contributing specialists come from anthropology, sociology, and history. The collection could have

fit in humanist studies that can shed light on artistic, literary, and performed projects of decoloniality.

With chapters all written in English, the monolingual collection could have given space for contributions in Filipino and other Philippine languages. As Guillermo (2016) already explained, Philippine studies need not shut its doors to non-Philippine tongues. What is crucial in the onwards march of the field is the sustained interaction among Filipinists doing scholarship in different languages, potentially through translation. This gesture of plurality is especially relevant to an anthology that seeks to bring to light marginalized perspectives.

I also looked forward to reading about radical, especially anti-imperialist, movements, in a collection that critiques the complicity of generations of our scholarship with empire. In a different Philippine studies project published only a year prior, Karlo Mongaya (2022) calls for research that echoes and responds to the anti-imperialist critique of working-class and peasant movements in the country. For sure, critical engagement with Filipinos committed to decolonial and anti-imperialist praxis on the ground could have benefitted the book's disentanglement of cemented colonial discourses.

These could-haves do not mean to say that the collection failed its mission. On the contrary, the limitations of *Plural Entanglements* must leave readers with the drive to delve further into the entanglements of Philippine society as many of its contributors did. Given the collection's emphasis on Philippine communities, policymakers, community organizers, and activists can refer to chapters that demonstrate how culture and history inform policymaking, public morality, and government accountability. Meanwhile, Filipinists and socially committed scholars can appraise the developments in the field showcased by the book's strongest contributions—for my part, those mentioned in this review—to arrive at potential answers to the question, “what else is to be done?”

Through its exploration and critical analyses of marginalized perspectives, experiences, and histories, *Plural Entanglements* challenge prevailing narratives about and among Filipinos,

demonstrating how Philippine studies scholarship in the last few decades has broadened its scope of inquiry. By shedding light on the intricacies and complexities of the country's past and present, the collection contributes to a broader project of forging a more nuanced and holistic appreciation of the Philippines and its diverse communities.

Jose Monfred C. Sy

University of the Philippines Diliman

jcsy3@up.edu.ph

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