BOOK

Weaving Cultures: The Invention of Colonial Art and Culture in the Philippines, 1656-1850 by René B. Villanueva, SJ

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Jesuit historian and critic Fr. Rene Barrios Javellana puts to particularly deft use his decades-long experience in mining church and literary archives, plus a range of other cultural ones, in this book. *Weaving Cultures* posits intertextuality as means to surface the negotiations and access to "the native face." This is undoubtedly the strength of *Weaving Cultures* and its substantial research on the multifaceted and multisited encounters between bearers of Spanish colonial and Filipino precolonial culture. Well aware of the nationalist discourse that precedes this attempt at circulating another, hopefully nuanced narrative that does not merely play up our already cultured state even before Spain came upon us, Javellana lays out how his work comes underpinned by a desire to mitigate claims which "overzealous Filipinists" exercise upon the precolonial and relatedly, colonial, story of the Philippines. In attempting a less simplistic engagement with Spanish colonialism in the country, *Weaving Cultures* coaxes the reader to recognize a more complex globality, one caught in cycles of resistance and challenge to a composite monarchy and monolithic empire under threat and as it lashed back in a bid to preserve itself.

The research is expectedly prefaced with an affinity to Southeast Asianist Benedict Anderson's still seminal ideas about the social constructedness of the nation-state and its later undeniable erosion in the face of globalization. In the course of establishing his arguments, Javellana occasionally dangerously sets off some

raw nerves particularly in the instance when he contests the charges of Spanish destruction of precolonial culture on the grounds that not enough archaeology supports this by now well-worn rant dating back at least to the Propaganda period. Javellana eventually builds up his case about the early Spanish colonial period (in some parts trailing off to the last century of occupation) as being primarily "dialogic." His rather uncommon invoking of communication theory is premised on a much more agentive stance among those who would eventually be called Filipinos progressively encountering the Western exotic and colonial designs on their thought patterns and lifeways. The assertion inevitably masks the power aspect of cultural aggression and makes for an arguably benign transactional picture of the colonizing encounter spanning several centuries. Javellana himself seems unfazed by this and articulates the implied hubris: "To contemplate cultural exchange, then, following a design/communication model might just bypass the unwitting diminution of the colonized."

The latter half of the book, however, brings up enough instances of seemingly unconscious as well as artistically interventionist ways that suggest a way to destabilize the idea that these potentially traumatic occasions entailed mere "data information transfer" between the Spanish and the native. To start with, taking on the Jesuit naturalist Georg Joseph Kamel's work as exemplar is a part of the book that is transparently rendered, ethnocentric seams and all.

In asserting the formative potential of culture (specifically aspects relating to architecture, space/time, literature, clothing, visual and performing arts) as this comes deeply embedded in the Spanish empiric project, Javellana crafts a nuanced representation of the colonial experience. The author is resolute about what he sees as a notion of reciprocity operative in the skewed relations between colonizer and colonized. In drafting the early images of the Philippine world seen through the mind's eyes of the colonial plantilla, Javellana also makes room to show how the applied art of drawing then went hand in hand with a nascent natural history that was critical to the work of empiric mapping, most keenly pursued through the Malaspina expedition (1789–1794).[1] The repeated reference too to the work of Jeronimo Nadal, Ignatius de Loyola's closest assistant and imaging done via a pre-montage vignette rendering of constructed narrative is instructive. This is just among some artifacts which kept to de Loyola's injunction to activate the imagination of the would-be Christian, underlining the key role aesthetics played in tutelage and the navigation of meaning.

The robust account that *Weaving Cultures* offers is also replete with such history-bound intangibles such as the still very basic technology behind the practice of illustration, which with its early dodgy veracity (what Javellana calls slavish copying [150]) and reliance on pressed rather than live specimen literally enabled a too static imagining of aspects of the natural world.

That said, both research and writing remain eminently engaging, particularly in some curiously idiosyncratic episodes that prove a rising empiricism was shifting the colonial frame. We see this in the citation of Francisco Ignacio Alzina's *Historia natural de las Islas Bisayas* and his take on whether the dugong was a pig or fish, the ramifications weighing heavily in regard to Catholic strictures regarding meat-eating during Lent. And so while there are some understandable limits to the analysis as it hinges almost solely on communication theory, the interpretative logic is ably situated within those bounds.

Though casually averring to how "cultures collide," the writing does at times seem to precariously presuppose that native acquiescence manifested in facile replacement of one cultural practice in deference to a presumably superior colonial option. There are indeed points in the text when reassertion of mutuality verges on overstatement such as when Javellana writes: "what is clearly shown by the historical evidence is that colonial culture grew from the interaction between colonizer and colonized. Acquiescence, therefore, is presupposed"(5). But Javellana essentially takes this tone only at the beginning as he establishes his framing. On the whole, however, the author squarely confronts the lingering postcolonial project with a tenacious insistence on a far less cowering native population that did exert a stake in its own sense-making, this despite the contrary representation that still sees print in too many texts on the periods under study.

Note

[1] Rene B. Javellana, *Weaving Cultures: The Invention of Colonial Art and Culture in the Philippines, 1565-1850.* Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila UP, 2017. 78. Print.

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