

REVIEWS

BOOK

**The Filipino primitive: Accumulation and resistance in the American museum**

By Sarita Echavez-See

Philippines: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2018, 236 pages

ISBN: 978-971-550-880-3

The book entitled *The Filipino primitive: Accumulation and resistance in the American museum*, written by Sarita Echavez-See and published by the Ateneo de Manila University Press in 2018, offers an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of literary, historical, and anthropological materials associated with the Philippines' colonial past. This work best caters to those who are interested in the fields of Philippine history, anthropology, colonial literature, and art studies, as it applies various anthropological and literary frameworks in analyzing the portrayal of the colonial-era Philippines and the effects of colonial rule on the modern-day Filipino consciousness.

See introduces art and cultural critics to the concept of taking a “second look” at existing portrayals of the colonial Philippines in museums and literary pieces as “primitive”. This second look thus necessitates gazing at colonial materials through a lens that takes into account not only physical characteristics, but also the special conditions surrounding the acquisition of such objects during the colonial period.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part—composed of the first two chapters—focuses on the process of accumulating colonial cultural property as a way by which colonial states are dispossessed of knowledge. The second part—composed of the latter two chapters—demonstrates how the succeeding generation has dealt with such dispossession of knowledge.

In detail, the first chapter focuses on the anthropological objects of Philippine origin, currently on display at the Michigan Museum of Natural History in Ann Arbor Michigan. Part of this collection was amassed by American Anthropologist Carl E. Guthe during the American colonization

of the Philippines in the early to mid-1900s. With the framework of knowledge production, See analyzes how the display in itself, including, the size of the exhibit, its specific location in the museum, and the way by which the artifacts were arranged and portrayed, can actually suppress information and contribute to the stereotyping of Filipinos instead of promoting an objective history of the Philippines. The methods by which these colonial cultural objects were acquired, including the desecration of indigenous graves, were also described as the amassment of colonial capitalism and can be considered as “a euphemism for looting and imperial adventure” that “may not be entirely acceptable in today’s standards” (2018, 37–9).

The same second look is used in analyzing Filipino objects on display at the Frank Murphy Memorial Museum in Harbor Beach, Michigan, in the second chapter. Frank Murphy, the last American Governor-General of the Philippines when it was still a colony, served as the first High Commissioner of the Philippine Commonwealth in the 1930s. Aside from containing domestic objects of Philippine origin, the exhibit also features a number of letters of request written by Filipinos addressed to Marguerite Murphy Teahan, Murphy’s sister, who was also considered as the Philippines’ First Lady during the American rule.

See’s textual analysis of each of these letters revealed a general tone of indebtedness shown by the Filipinos to Murphy and Teahan, which was simultaneously, a tone of flattery they used as leverage to be able to successfully secure their demands, such as jobs and monetary assistance. This clever way of utilizing flattery to reverse indebtedness into pressure served as the main approach by which the Filipinos then were able to use benevolence at their disposal.

Looking at museum display pieces beyond their physical attributes and being critical of the objectives of the colonizers’ accumulation of such materials can reveal new narratives that debunk the primitive portrayal of Filipinos in American museums. This is the “second look” that See hopes museum-goers would take when encountering Filipino exhibits in foreign museums. By not wholly accepting the knowledge that foreign museums wish to impart, Filipinos need not conform to the existing image of a primitive Filipino that their colonizers wished to transform. With this attitude, today’s Filipinos can construct a new narrative of the Filipino identity prior to colonization without relying on what has been laid down by the colonizer.

Now, if the first two chapters introduced instances wherein a second look can bring about new perspectives for the Filipino, the next two chapters introduce works that have given a second look at the existing narrative of the Filipino primitive. Chapter Three centers on Carlos Bulosan’s short story,

*The romance of Magno Rubio*, which was written in the 1940s to depict the lives of seasonal Filipino field workers in California during the American Colonial period vis-à-vis its contemporary stage adaptations by the Ma Yi Theater Company in New York City in 2003, 2004, 2008 and 2011.

The short story is about a gullible Filipino field worker who falls madly in love with an American woman he saw in a magazine. He then spends all his money and contracts debts to court her, only to find out that she is already with another man. In this case, the Filipino field worker in America is the illiterate primitive, but See decodes this as Bulosan's way of showing that the Filipino's illiteracy actually enabled him to withstand colonization. Each of the subsequent stage adaptations had their own way of portraying this theme and tackling the Filipino concepts of *kapwa* (fellowman), *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude), and resistance to capitalism.

In the final chapter, the works of US-based Filipina multimedia artist Stefanie Syjuco are put on the spotlight as modern-day methods to resist previous portrayals of the colonial Filipino. Her installations use actual-sized digital photo prints of museum artifacts mounted onto laser-cut wood to mimic original artifacts, such as ceramic vases and plates, that are actually on display in museums. Another one of her digital creations is an audio-visual depiction of edited and cropped scenes from foreign movies filmed in the Philippines but portrayed as different countries. Through Syjuco's use of parody, she challenges lessons in civilization by making a mockery of the authority that the actual objects symbolize.

Mainly because it uses a very technical language that may not be readily understood by those with a minimal background in anthropology and literary analysis, See's work is one of the few books that deconstruct a foreign museum's portrayal of colonial Filipino and further enriches previous analyses of Filipino colonial discourse in the context of literary works. See's nitty-gritty analysis of museum work—starting from the collection of materials, to the spatial assemblage of exhibits on to the specific arrangement of artifacts—aptly explained how the removal of the object from its actual context and its display in an entirely different context can distort their actual image. Thus, a colony can be portrayed as primitive or “savage” based on the gaze of both the collectors and exhibitors.

See's main objective is to instill in the readers the notion that existing knowledge disseminated by previous colonizers of the Philippines may be one-sided as a result of their aim to accumulate objects for the proliferation of knowledge, which served their own purpose of perpetrating the image of the colonized as primitive, and the colonizer as those in possession of power. It is thus crucial to take a second look at the information promoted by the colonizers so as to resist the ensuing stereotypes. As presented through the

literary work of Bulosan and its subsequent stage adaptations by the Ma Ying Theatre Company, as well as the multimedia art installations of Syjuco, such second look can create a new narrative for the existing image of the Filipino primitive.

Resistance to existing colonial depictions is currently a widespread topic in former colonies in Africa and Asia. The recent voluntary repatriation of colonial cultural properties by museums in France, Germany and England to former colonies in Africa have prompted similar discussions in resisting colonial depictions, with the goal of rewriting the colonial history of now independent states. In relation to this, the recent return by the United States of the three Bells of Balangiga to the Philippines may also prompt similar discussions once the circumstances of their historic return is brought into the context of sociological and anthropological analysis. Perhaps a second look at these circumstances can further enrich the discussion on colonial resistance and accumulation that See has ignited in her work.

A related reading on this matter is the book entitled *A continuing project: Hats, g-strings, girdles, ornaments: Selections from the Philippine Ethnographic Collection, National Museum of Ethnology Museum Volkenkunde, Leiden, The Netherlands*, by Dorus Ko Jansen and colleagues (Jansen et al. 2009). This work has extensively documented a sizeable collection of Filipino ethnographic objects, taken during the American colonial period by Dutch nationals working in the Philippines at the time. In a prefatory remark, Corazon S. Alvina, former Director of the National Museum of the Philippines, wrote: “This catalogue offers a chance for a re-evaluation and valuation of Philippine material culture in the care of others. It could also be an opportunity to ‘own’ them as documents and remembrances of our past to inspire (more) work.” Museums other than the American museums may also have the image of the Filipino primitive that must be resisted. Clearly, there is a clamor by today’s Filipino to take the second look that See hopes to instill in the audience.

## Reference

- Jansen, Dorus Kop, Marian Rocas, Ramon Villegas, Corazon Alvina, and Jesus Peralta. 2009. *A continuing project: Hats, g-strings, girdles, ornaments: Selections from the Philippine ethnographic collection, National Museum of Ethnology, Museum Volkenkunde, Leiden, The Netherlands*. Metro Manila, Philippines: Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

## REVIEWER

Kathleen Felise Constance D. Tantuico  
University of the Philippines Diliman  
kdtantuico@up.edu.ph