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## <Book Review>

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**Vicente L. Rafael. *The Sovereign Trickster: Death and Laughter in the Age of Duterte*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022.**

*Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, April 2023, pp. 202-206.

**How to Cite:** Webb, Adele. Review of *The Sovereign Trickster: Death and Laughter in the Age of Duterte* by Vicente L. Rafael. *Southeast Asian Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, April 2023, pp. 202-206. DOI: 10.20495/seas.12.1\_202.

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Shiraishi observes that “the government was as much a hostage of its own political intelligence as the Indies population, . . . the [police reporting] . . . provided the government with its only way of mapping the terrain and guided it in formulating its policy to the native movement” (p. 237). Arriving at this conclusion makes one wonder what would have happened to the Indonesian popular movements if the colonial government had been unhinged from political policing.

Since there is only a handful of dedicated Indonesianists who can archivally evaluate and single-handedly create a new periodization for an entire subperiod of twentieth-century Indonesia (in this case, the Age of Digul), anything that Shiraishi Takashi publishes is guaranteed for its intellectual and historiographical contributions. However, Shiraishi discusses the global and regional conditions of Dutch political policing, including global policing (p. 7), the interwar British hegemony in Southeast Asia, Dutch neutrality (p. 21), white supremacy (p. 27), and carceral archipelago (p. 31), only in passing. If scholars of any discipline further pursue these questions, more contributions could be made to the fields of comparative colonialism, police studies, racial capitalism, and abolition geography from the Indonesian standpoint. Quite undeveloped also is the question, posed by the author himself both in the book and the blurb, of the relationship between political and economic crises—the prospect of war and the Great Depression—and the conservative turn to consolidate imperial power (p. 15). In addition to the psychoanalysis-derived approach (exemplified by ideas of phantom, perversion, haunting, and mirroring) and comparative historical colonialism (comparing and contrasting the Dutch East Indies to French Indochina, British India and Malaya, and American Philippines), a political-economic analysis of empire and trans-imperialism may be able to shed light on the interrelations between the conjunctural forces—global, regional, national, and local—conditioning the Dutch empire to resort to political policing amidst the interwar crises. All these questions for further research aside, this long-awaited sequel opens new and innovative ways of understanding late colonial Indonesia through political policing and all the contradictions therein.

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### ***The Sovereign Trickster: Death and Laughter in the Age of Duterte***

VICENTE L. RAFAEL

Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022.

Vicente L. Rafael begins his most recent book, *The Sovereign Trickster*, with a personal story about once meeting the former Philippine President, and subject of the book, Rodrigo Duterte. It is a fascinating testimony, both for what it says about the celebrity-like status held by the firebrand

leader, even among those with wealth and status, and for the reminder that those like Rafael who write scholarly work about the Philippines are often tangled up (through family ties) in its elite society. Rafael is deeply reflective about the encounter, describing feelings of complicity and even contamination upon shaking Duterte's hand. The pages that follow are an attempt, Rafael says, to distance himself from those who would celebrate, or even acquiesce, to Rodrigo Duterte's authority.

The complexity of this intimate moment is an apt and engaging way to begin what is, in essence, a complex and careful interdisciplinary reckoning with the man himself—his characteristics and behaviors, as well as the magnetism of his persona. After all, Duterte sustained a Teflon-like appeal that cut across almost all intersections (class, gender, age, sexuality, religion) of Philippine society during the six years of his presidency from 2016 to 2022. Pushing aside the compulsion other scholars have felt to label or define Duterte and his politics (whether as populist, fascist, or strongman style), Rafael runs headlong and with determination into the contradictions and dialectics that best capture the self-professing mass murderer turned national leader.

The contradictions that characterize Duterte are both near impossible to understand and yet crucial to any credible explanations of the sustained appeal of his rule. Even the title of the book alludes to the permanence of such contradictions in the world of Duterte. He had, as is a loose organizing metaphor in Rafael's notes, "an impossible, because split, subjectivity": he was the "vengeful sovereign" who conjures fear while being the "irascible trickster" who makes people laugh (p. 56). Exuding benevolence, he exacted a "barbarian notion of justice," deciding for himself who must die for others to live (p. 71). Even his mostly vulgar and obscene stories were simultaneously boastful and self-deprecating (p. 5).

Rafael asks how Duterte's murderous ways can be so widely accepted. How has he succeeded in persuading people that the means to secure life is death? In its whole, the book presents a complex description of pathology that draws heavily on the co-dependence of two regimes of power to describe what is at the core of Duterte's governing logic: Foucault's (2010) concept of "*biopower*," or power over life, and what Mbembe (2003) calls "*necropower*," or power over death. In short, Duterte claimed the legitimate authority to separate the population into those deserving life and those who must be put to death.

For a treatise on politics, the structure of the book is unconventional, though perhaps not surprising to readers familiar with Rafael's previous works. An introduction, conclusion, and five longer essays form the bones of the book. These are interspersed with extracts taken from social media posts and online news pieces that Rafael penned in response to the various events unfolding during Duterte's term. In this way, the book weaves historical-structural analysis with rich empirical details and vivid description, all while referencing critical social theory. Undoubtedly, this zigzagging gives the book a unique flair, not to mention Rafael's exemplary writing skill. In the author's own words of the essays and intermingled sketches in the book: "Both come across as

bits and pieces of an assemblage whose parts do not necessarily amount to a unified whole . . . more like shards awaiting excavation in the future to help puzzle through this current moment” (p. 4). It should be said, however, that such excavation work might not be a welcome task for some readers, who may find the lack of sequential explanations of the central themes potentially frustrating.

The first substantive chapter presents content that is not new but important context in answering the question of how a figure such as Duterte could be elected in the Philippines. Importantly, and in sharp relief to other accounts that make Duterte and his style of politics appear exotic in the lineage of Philippine leaders, the chapter connects Duterte to the nation’s long colonial history, including the bastardisation of elections under both the Spanish and Americans, as well as to the electoral dystopia of the post-Martial Law era. By situating Duterte in the reality of Janus-faced elections, the book depicts his rise to power not necessarily as an inevitable outcome, but certainly an unsurprising one.

The book’s second chapter essentially pits the rise of Duterte against a simplistic narrative of the restoration of liberal democracy in the post-1986 “People Power” era. Rafael connects the governing logic of the late President Marcos to Duterte’s playbook, particularly usage of the security/insecurity dialectic—that “the need for discipline required security, which in turn, required the creation of insecurity in order to justify its operation” (p. 25). He further connects this to the power relations established in the era of neoliberal governance, and its associated dichotomy of “deserving” and “undeserving” citizens—precisely the reasoning that Duterte applied to drug addicts and drug pushers, and which helped him rise to national prominence.

The next chapter moves away from structural and historical-cultural elements that make sense of Duterte’s rise to focus on the aesthetics of his authority and his rhetorical practices, which were heavily reliant on obscenities and vulgarity. It was Duterte’s “obsession” (p. 42) to put his penis at the center of his stories, whether he was addressing the country’s wealthiest businessmen at the Makati Business Club or audiences at local campaign stops around the nation. The book details how Duterte’s “phallogocentric politics” (p. 47) and shameless use of violent misogyny propelled his popularity in both contexts. As opposed to simply decrying this, the chapter intelligently considers the narrative structure of Duterte’s jokes, pointing out how laughter was used to shadow violence and fear.

Diving deeper into the literature on “*biopower*” (Foucault) and “*necropower*” (Mbembe), the fourth chapter provides an analytical scaffolding to help make sense of the Duterte phenomenon—both the figure and the regime—as something other than native. Perhaps it comes too late in the book, as an earlier introduction to this theoretical literature would have helped to decipher previous references to it. Nonetheless, Rafael frames both Duterte’s macabre stories and jokes, as well as the “war on drugs,” through these two regimes of power. Ultimately, the framework explains how Duterte’s insistence on exterminating drug users—a barbarism that lies at the heart of his authoritarianism—was both an assertion of complete sovereignty, and a performance of the power

to put to death. Aware that the former alluded him, he became obsessed with the latter.

The book's final chapter takes us into the bloody and gruesome details of the drug war by considering the role that photographs of the dead played in sustaining and opposing the regime, and the very personal and existential crisis faced by those behind the cameras. The book ends as it begins, with the puzzle of Duterte's popularity. How is it that a mass murderer could gain and maintain such widespread appeal? And why were the forces opposing his authoritarianism so ineffective and weak?

The strength of the book lies in its painstaking diagnosis of Duterte's pathology. Rafael uses the term "authoritarian imaginary" to assemble the book's insights into what is its primary focus—the mindset of Rodrigo Duterte and what Rafael calls the "political aesthetic of Duterte's rule" (p. 5). What is it that "at once repels and attracts his followers and detractors alike" (p. 5)? The book's answer is ultimately ambiguous, and there is no clear and unified argument about Duterte's regime being an "instance of" something found in political analysts' repertoire. Indeed, the dialectics and dichotomies at the center of the book's account are not resolved. This epistemic depth, and the enigma of the account, is at the heart of the book's intelligence.

Notwithstanding, a criticism of the book may be its conflation of the analysis of Duterte's own "necessary fictions" (how he imagines himself in relation to others p. 147), with analysis of the collective imaginary of a receptive Philippine populace. The book uses the term "authoritarian imaginary" to refer to both. Helpfully, Rafael links the global rise of authoritarianism to an imaginary of the nation, not as a community of anonymous members held together by fictions of equality and inclusion (an "imagined community," as in Benedict Anderson's seminal work on nationalism), but rather as a site of struggle between good and evil, insiders and outsiders, law abiding citizens deserving of justice versus those against whom violence is justified (pp. 135–136). Yet it would seem important to bracket this discussion, of why and how the Philippine polity found Duterte and his regime necessary and legitimate, from analysis of how Duterte thinks about himself. Otherwise, the account risks overstating the co-opting power of Duterte himself at the expense of attention to the agency and negotiated reasoning of ordinary citizens.

In conclusion, for those searching for a carefully contextualized and empirically rich account of the Duterte phenomenon, this book is essential reading. Rafael's grasp of multidisciplinary theory, his skill in rhetoric, together with his commitment to history, make this a rare, if sometimes graphic interrogation into the charisma of a man much of the world is satisfied to label a vulgar tyrant.

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*Angkor Wat: A Transcultural History of Heritage, Volume 1 Angkor in France. From Plaster Casts to Exhibition Pavilions*  
*Angkor Wat: A Transcultural History of Heritage, Volume 2 Angkor in Cambodia. From Jungle Find to Global Icon*

MICHAEL FALSER

Boston: De Gruyter Art & Architecture, 2019.

The Angkor ruins in Cambodia were inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 1992, and today they have become a national icon of Cambodia as well as a symbolic image of world cultural heritage. As is well known, the ruins of Angkor were “rediscovered” by Westerners in the mid-nineteenth century. This was followed by archaeological research conducted by the French, the results of which were disseminated throughout the world. During the colonial period, the ruins of Angkor were used to tout the success of France's colonial endeavor. Michael Falser's two-volume study describes “the 150-year transcultural heritage trajectory” of the Angkor monuments.

Four years after its publication, the work has already received numerous reviews and is highly appreciated. Readers will be overwhelmed by the magnitude of the volumes, which contain 1,000 pages of text, more than 1,200 illustrations, and a lavish 80-page appendix of photographs and illustrations. This is an unprecedented “reception history” of the Angkor Remains rich with literary documents and visual materials. It is also a result of the dramatic increase in digital material databases since the 2010s.

Falser's achievement is more than just a collection of documents, however. The greatest feature of the work is its constructive structure and underlying concept. The author divides the modern history of the Angkor monuments into the two “topos” of Europe and Cambodia, and discusses reception of the monuments in each cultural and political context. Volume I describes the process by which the colonized Angkor monuments were incorporated into the complex framework of the colonizers' cultural heritage in Europe, while Volume II reveals the process by which they became the new national cultural heritage of post-colonial Cambodia. The author then interprets the two histories as a single contiguous and transcultural one. Although reception in France and in Cambodia have been studied separately, this work is the first attempt to synthesize the receptions as one continuous history, rather than opposing, or distinct, phenomena. In this respect,