<Book Review>

Vincent Pacheco

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Postcolonial Configurations: Dictatorship, the Racial Cold War, and Filipino America

Josen Masangkay Diaz

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Josen Masangkay Diaz's book is a timely intervention on issues of Filipino identity vis-à-vis the Philippine diaspora, postcolonial specificity, and authoritarian history. Indeed, Bongbong Marcos's victory in the 2022 elections necessitates cutting-edge scholarship on the New Society's aesthetic regime and its legacies of violence. *Postcolonial Configurations* emphasizes the centrality of Filipino American history in Philippine studies by juxtaposing representative cultural texts alongside the discourses of Marcos's New Society and the US empire. In each of the four chapters, Diaz uses what she calls "postcolonial configuration" as a lens to unravel the cultural, racial, and political relationship between the Philippines and the United States (p. 8). She uses an interdisciplinary approach in mapping out this configuration through an eclectic examination of policy reports, newspapers, and magazines. These include documents from the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women, the National Housing Authority, and the World Bank.

Diaz also interrogates how the conjugal dictatorship's discourse fits within the broader geopolitical configuration that resulted from the Cold War. Thus, the author proposes unraveling postcolonial configurations by analyzing works such as *Empire of Memory* (1990, Eric Gamalinda), *Insiang* (1976, dir. Lino Brocka), and "Teacher, It's Nice to Meet You, Too" (1985, Ruby Ibañez). For Diaz, the simultaneous location and dislocation of these configurations can potentially "forge other critiques and imaginations" (p. 26) that extend the subjectivity of Filipino America. These postcolonial configurations reveal how the Marcos regime was inextricably entangled with the hypocrisy of US liberalism, which enabled authoritarianism in Asia in order to contain Communism in the region.

The first chapter, "The Fictions of National Culture," explores the "underlying political investments of the Cold War cultural exchange" between the United States and the Philippines (p. 29). Diaz begins by contextualizing Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society campaign, which envisioned a United States built on freedom, multiculturalism, and racial justice. The fabrication of this "national culture" allowed the US empire to "supply a discourse for employing racial pluralism and national progress" (p. 32). Diaz reads the 1966 Manila Summit (centered on the Vietnam War) as a place that enabled the transnational exchange of national cultures in service to foreign policy. In the summit, First Lady Imelda Marcos and the Bayanihan dance troupe employed "national culture" to integrate "state fictions . . . within cohesive narratives of global cooperation" (p. 35). Diaz argues that Marcos similarly constructed a national culture that reconfigured the Philippine postcolonial condition, which in turn helped legitimize the use of martial law as a way to "manage economic and political crises" (p. 38). Thus, the construction of the US-funded Cultural Center of

the Philippines allowed the regime to rehabilitate national culture in its image. Diaz then reads Eric Gamalinda's *Empire of Memory*, a novel centered on two officers from Marcos's censorship department (Agency for the Scientific Investigation of the Absurd). The protagonists of the novel are tasked to create a new history for the Marcoses. Diaz uses this novel "to reconsider national culture as a configuration of empire and authoritarian statecraft" (p. 29). She argues that the novel's distortion of history unmakes the fictional constructs of national culture in the New Society. By challenging the "historical coherence of Filipino subjectivity" (p. 56), the novel "defamiliarize[s] any one configuration of Filipino America" (p. 57).

The second chapter focuses on another postcolonial configuration, this one made up of the *balikbayan* (returnee), squatter communities, and the state policies of the Marcos dictatorship. The author examines Floy Quintos's article in *Balikbayan Magazine* to unmake the "strangely innocent" figure of the *balikbayan*, arguing that the figure is intertwined with a "Cold War discourse of postcolonial raciality" as embodied by US immigration law (p. 64). Diaz makes the case that the Marcos regime created an economic and masculine configuration of the *balikbayan* that rendered invisible the role of women in that very configuration (p. 68). Diaz also analyzes how Ferdinand Marcos's management of Philippine Airlines and the reconstruction of Manila International Airport (MIA) regulated the mobility of the Philippine diaspora. The regime was able to harness the returnees' economic potential while limiting their exposure to the dismal urban conditions of Manila. While MIA allowed the regime to isolate new arrivals from the urban squalor of Manila, its construction necessitated the displacement of squatter communities. The regime's rhetoric and policies deemed these communities as a hurdle in the goal to transform Manila into the City of Man. Thus, as Diaz writes, the "mandates that governed both the balikbayan and the squatter used transnational mobility to define the structure of the Filipino polity" (p. 78). Diaz makes the case that the squatter communities during the Marcos dictatorship "point to the historical and political circumstances" that "made legible the configuration of the balikbayan" (p. 83). Toward the end, she contends that the present historical moment in both the US and the Philippines speaks "to the incapacity" of the *balikbayan* configuration to "address the multiple forms of marginalization and subjugation enabled by Cold War conflict and its attendant transnational alliances" (p. 84).

Chapter 3 focuses on the New Filipina, a configuration constructed by the dictatorship. This figure is an "important compromise" between Western and Filipino feminism that simultaneously valorizes agency and the natural role of women as homemakers (p. 85). This configuration sought to integrate women into the New Society's narrative of progress and development. What it created was a culture of labor export built on a narrative of "Life giving labor" as valorized by Imelda Marcos (p. 92). The figure of the New Filipina is also a configuration shaped by the wider Cold War and its ensuing politics. The Marcos regime drew from a wider transnational discourse on human rights to simultaneously contain the subjectivity of Filipino women in the name of global capital. Thus, Diaz closely analyzes Lino Brocka's *Insiang*, a social realist film that articulates the universality of

gendered suffering. She argues that the "cinematic juxtaposition between beauty and violence in the film illustrates the extent" to which the regime "structured Filipina women's suitability for transnational circulation and labor" (p. 105). Thus, the film shows that the "New Filipina is not a promise of empowerment but an overdetermination of Filipina women's being" (p. 109).

In the next chapter, Diaz analyzes a configuration that consists of Filipino "raciality" (p. 114), US Cold War liberal discourse, and international humanitarianism. She argues that the dictatorship "cultivated a discourse of race and gender grounded in the 'ultimate ideology' of humanism" that further enabled "the regime's state of exception" (p. 114). Diaz examines the role of the Philippine Refugee Processing Center (PRPC) in allowing the Marcos regime to "better position itself within the demands of Cold War politics" (p. 119). The PRPC became a transit point that allowed the US to justify its liberal agenda through refugee rehabilitation. The Marcos regime, informed by its own conceptualization of "human potential," employed Filipino English teachers to take part in humanitarian work that would help Vietnamese refugees (pp. 125–126). The postcolonial subject thus became a tool for the US empire to "facilitate the refugee's transition into modernity" (p. 133). The author then presents a letter written by Rudy Ibañez as a manifestation of how the US empire "overdetermined" the figure of the refugee. The letter is written from the point of view of a refugee named Sombath and is addressed to a teacher. Diaz argues that the text tries to undo the "overdetermination of liberal rehabilitation and postcolonial subjectivity pronounced by the PRPC" (p. 136). Diaz concludes her book with a reading of R. Zamora Linmark's poem titled "What Some Are Saying about the Body" (p. 145). She writes that the poem articulates the "the paradox of Marcosian logic," which demands "that the balance of power must be suspended to preserve the sanctity of liberal governance" (p. 145). The poem's multiple narrators (or masses) "gestures toward another kind of people power" that draws from a force that is "not predetermined" (p. 153).

Postcolonial Configurations sets out to unmake dominant perceptions of Filipino America and makes an invaluable theoretical contribution toward that goal. The book is driven by the spirit of Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, and Giorgio Agamben, who have collectively critiqued the paradoxes of democratic state power and the biopolitical and aesthetic regimes it has engendered in the West. Diaz follows a similar line of thought in her inquiry that allows a reconfiguration of the Philippine postcolonial condition within the wider ambit of Cold War geopolitics, the global diaspora, and US liberal hypocrisy. The urgency of such forays cannot be understated as vestiges of the New Society continue to endure in the present. Diaz provides an astute analysis of archival, theoretical, cultural, and literary material that becomes a configuration in itself; the interdisciplinary approach she utilizes allows an engagement that is not possible if one is methodologically bound. Her seamless analysis allows her to propose ways to potentially unmake the configurations she writes about. Of note are the second and fourth chapters, which convincingly highlight the role of the oft-ignored displaced communities in the legitimization of Marcos's regime.

Thinking in terms of configurations is indeed an insightful way to confront the Marcos dictatorship. However, the author's engagement with Filipino texts would benefit from further contextualization. It might be useful to indicate in the first chapter that Reynaldo Ileto's *Pasyon and Revolution: Popular Movements in the Philippines, 1840–1910* focuses on the Tagalog regions of the Philippines rather than the entire country. While empirical and economic concerns are outside the main scope of the book being reviewed here, the use of economic concepts and terms such as "transnational finance" (p. 38) would benefit from further elaboration. Regardless, Diaz's incisive work will be invaluable to scholars working on the Marcos regime and its political, social, and aesthetic legacies. Scholars working on postcolonialism and cultural studies will also find Diaz's theoretical contribution very rewarding.

Vincent Pacheco
Department of South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of California-Berkeley
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1812-5528