

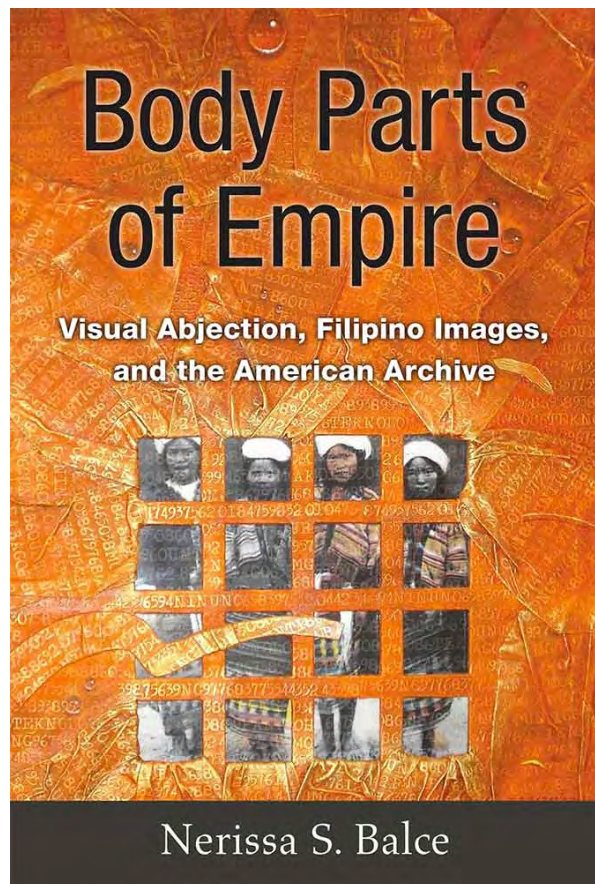


## BOOK REVIEW

***Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive* by Nerissa S. Balce  
Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017**

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Although the quest for a one-sentence summary of Philippine imperial history seems futile, a common Filipino saying exists: “300 years in a Spanish convent followed by 50 years in Hollywood.” The association of American imperialism in the Philippines with Hollywood and visual representations of empire may appear charming, but some would beg to differ. Nerissa Balce’s *Body Parts of Empire* deals with issues of race, gender, and imperialism in the context of American-administered Philippines at the turn of the twentieth century by analyzing contemporary language and media. *Body Parts of Empire* represents an important moment in the historiography of the Philippines in the early twentieth century and American imperialism in the Pacific because its analysis centers on corporeal aspects of empire— how physical Filipino



bodies were understood, manipulated, and subjected.

Balce looks closely at a historical moment when the popularization of visual media such as photography and film made the creation of new conceptions of Filipino natives possible, and how these conceptions transferred to the larger collective consciousness of the American people by relying on the promise of an imperial future with the mission of benevolent assimilation. Besides these sources, Balce also analyzes texts such as contemporary fiction, music, advertisements, and memoirs—forms of representation often romanticized and disparate from the realities of empire. Balce accesses questions of masculinity, femininity, race, and sexuality by utilizing tropological analysis, which refers “to the production of figures of speech in American fin de siècle culture that drew on earlier racial and gendered grammars from the histories of U.S. wars.”<sup>1</sup> Tropes associated with indigenous populations such as savagery, docility, and domesticity also draw a link between the rhetoric and treatment of Native American and black people in the United States to Filipino natives.

Balce’s first chapter, “The Abject Archive of the Philippine-American War,” introduces the concept of abjection “as a discourse and theory for understanding how race...and gender frame the narratives of the history of the Philippine-American War,

the Philippines colony, and, by extension, the global Filipino diaspora.<sup>2</sup> In this chapter, Balce asks readers to consider how representations of Filipino natives drew upon corresponding notions of “inferiority” and “savagery” applied to African-American and Native American populations.<sup>3</sup> Chapter 2, entitled, “Face: Necropolitics and the U.S. Imperial Photography Complex,” covers the popularity of stereoscopic cards—mounted photographs which, when viewed through a stereoscope, appeared to be three-dimensional.<sup>4</sup> The rise in popularity of stereoscopic cards, photographs, and postcards or war corpses and the aftermath of battle is, according to Balce, indicative of how the American public understood the Philippine-American war.<sup>5</sup> This visual mode of consumption allowed Americans to conceptualize the structure of imperial power in place.

The third chapter, “Skin: Lynching, Empire, and the Black Press during the Philippine-American War” considers the experience of African American soldiers in the Philippines during the war, as well as how homeland ideas surrounding race influenced the American approach to war and their interactions with Filipinos. Balce draws connections between how African American and Filipino people were characterized based on the color of their skin.<sup>6</sup> Balce’s inclusion of African American

<sup>1</sup> Nerissa S. Balce. *Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive*. (Manila, Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 45.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 90.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, 92.

perspectives on how white soldiers characterized Filipinos in their personal letters and the press provides a unique view into how ideas of race were transported from the mainland United States to its overseas holdings. Finally, Balce's final chapter, "The Bile of Race: White Women's Travel Writing on the Philippine-American War" explores how white American women were "both agents and critics of empire."<sup>7</sup> Balce asks readers to consider what can be gleaned about Filipinos from texts written by white women. In doing so, Balce argues "we encounter what has been repressed and forgotten in official narratives of the empire."<sup>8</sup>

Balce writes, "the term American empire has lost much of its charm."<sup>9</sup> In doing so, she draws from and contributes to a greater historiography that aims to analyze the repercussions of American empire. Prominent historians in this field such as Alfred McCoy and Paul Kramer attempt this feat by analyzing the history of torture methods, drug trading, surveillance, and capitalism. McCoy's *Endless Empire* (2012) and *Colonial Crucible* (2009), as well as Kramer's *The Blood of Government* (2006) in particular speak to these topics. Yet, perhaps Balce's most significant contribution to the existing historiography is the scope of her analysis. By placing the native body and its representations at the center of this work, Balce deconstructs the façade of empire. She does not reintroduce the story of Filipino natives into their own history in

a misguided attempt at redistributing agency but instead demonstrates how understanding individual bodies is helpful in accessing larger narratives of race, gender, and American imperialism.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 129.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 157.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 10.