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Truth and Lies about the Philippine-American Century

Kimberly Alidio

***The Star-Entangled Banner: One Hundred Years of America in the Philippines.* By Sharon Delmendo. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2004. 229 pages. $23.95 (paper).**

This book takes its title from a catch phrase that appeared in several Manila newspaper articles of July 1996 covering the semicentennial commemoration of formal independence and Philippine-American Friendship Day. On July 4, 1946, officials representing the governments of President Manuel Roxas of the Philippines and President Harry Truman of the United States convened in the city's Luneta Park to end forty-eight years of American colonial rule, inaugurate the Philippine Republic, and pledge future cooperation between the two nations. Fifty years later, American and Filipino officials gathered in the same spot to reenact the historical proceedings. During one part of the ceremony, as the Philippine flag was raised and the American one lowered, the two banners intertwined for several moments. As reported in the Filipino media, many audience members took the entangled flags to indicate an alternative, messier version of the past. Newspapers reported the ceremonial glitch with comments on Filipinos' "love-hate" relationship with America, and America's neocolonial hold on Philippine sovereignty.

The anecdote illustrates Sharon Delmendo's objective to understand the complex connections between the Philippines and the United States. She tells a story of two nations drawn into conquest, invasion, insurgency, military alliance, and economic dependency from the late nineteenth century to the present. The author argues that, over the last century, the Philippines and the United States forged a "mutually constitutive" relationship in which they asserted their national integrity through and against one another. Notwithstanding the oft-celebrated Philippine-American alliance, Filipino and American nationalists alike have taken pains to deny altogether the historical entanglements between the two countries. The book is valuable for articulating one of the central guiding questions of Filipino studies, a field that has expanded in

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conjunction with rising scholarly interests in diasporic and transnational cultures. As an attempt to unravel the complex tensions between nations sharing an imperial past, Delmendo asks whether American empire has a useable past for Filipino national and diasporic communities. *The Star-Entangled Banner* is a commendable, if ultimately unsatisfying, study that calls for a history of American empire beyond nationalist frameworks.

Delmendo demonstrates nationalism's heavy hand in forging colonial and neocolonial ties, spurring virulent disputes, and, above all, distorting the historical record of Philippine-American relations. Throughout the book, we see nationalist ideology at work in children's literature, public veneration of national founders, wartime film, Filipino literature, and war memorials. These cultural texts are contested terrain for interlocutors from both countries, or, in a few cases, from within one country, over two broad controversies: first, the significance of Philippine-American relations to national integrity on the world stage, and second, the holidays, heroes, and wars that mark the Filipino nation's existence. Delmendo's methodology includes a "tripartite axes model" in which nationalist ideologies manipulate psychological identity, social values, and state power (14). Despite its ahistorical rigidity, the model allows for a critique of both Filipinos and Americans who seek to recast "history in the interests of developing or defending particular visions of the nation" (16). In both countries, nationalism has greatly diminished what is known about the history of Philippine-American relations.

Delmendo finds that American "imperial nationalism" constructed historical narratives about Filipino anticolonial resistance, artfully blending fact and fiction (4). Building upon existing studies of colonial photography and imperial commodity culture, Delmendo argues that cultural texts deployed new technologies of representation to create "quasi-official" images of Filipinos for American popular consumption (48).[1] The chapter "Marketing Colonialism" presents a close reading of a children's book published in 1904 at the tail end of the Philippine-American War. This book depicted Filipino insurgents as armies of monkeys and red ants. In addition to supplying a juvenile narrative of colonial conquest, *Brownies in the Philippines* capitalized on photography's popularization by marketing an Eastman Kodak camera to young readers, and featured a character using the Brownie Box camera to document his encounters in the new colony. "*Back to Bataan* Once More" focuses on the 1945 Edward Dmytryk film that portrays a fictional grandson of the Filipino nationalist Andrés Bonifacio learning to pledge loyalty to a U.S. general, the thinly disguised Douglas MacArthur. As Charles Hawley has argued, Dmytryk complied with U.S. Office of War Information directives to avoid "negative

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colonial stereotypes" and instead portrayed neocolonialist visions of the Philippine Republic remaining subservient to U.S. global agendas.[2] Moreover, *Back to Bataan* depicts Bonifacio as an admired enemy of the U.S. forces, although the revolutionary leader was executed before the Philippine-American War began. While a minor point in the film, Delmendo sees the "specious construction" of Filipino anticolonial resistance as a major offense against historical truth, a fiction substantiated by the wartime film's documentary elements.

The chapters on national holidays and heroes root out similar problems in the Filipino historical imagination. Delmendo discusses the Philippine Centennial, held between 1995 and 2000, in which government officials, scholars, and media weighed in on the question of whether to commemorate Emilio Aguinaldo's declaration of independence from Spain on July 12, 1896, or the semicentenary of formal independence from the United States, July 4, 1946. The official centennial unwittingly stressed the latter date, safeguarding the country's collaboration with the U.S. "to achieve the benefits of an officially disavowed neocolonial dynamic" (5). The author contends that Filipino nationalism distorts the history of Philippine-American interdependence as well as present-day Philippine dependency on U.S. military aid, loans, and trade relations. Two strands of nationalism—a "pro-American" view of collaboration with the U.S. as a necessary component of national prosperity, and an "anti-American" strategy to reclaim sovereignty by rejecting U.S. influence—perpetuate myths about America's place in Philippine history. Delmendo does battle as well with "anti-American" historians for downplaying evidence of Philippine-American cultural interactions. She tells a well-known story of José Rizal, considered by many to be the Filipino national hero, attending a Wild West show at the 1899 Paris Exposition, where he became inspired by the American Indian performances and named his newly formed nationalist organization *Los Indios Bravos*, or the Indian Braves. As Vicente Rafael has noted, Rizal reconstituted the term *indio* to signify Philippine national manliness, in contrast to the Spanish regime's reference to racial differences between the colonizers and the Filipino natives.[3] Delmendo offers a new interpretation of this story that underscores the historical presence of American culture in Filipino nationalist thought.

What we learn from Delmendo is that a historical narrative focused on national autonomy and sovereignty often comes at the expense of learning about the cross-national cultural and ideological interactions of American empire. A number of Filipino historians reject Rizal as a national hero largely because the U.S. colonial government promoted his moderate, liberal politics as a model for Filipino nationalism. In deliberate contrast, Delmendo uses

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Rizal to propose new models for a postnational history of the Philippine-American century. Noting that Rizal's encounter with the Wild West show and his analysis of U.S. imperialist ambitions in Asia, "The Philippines a Century Hence," preceded the Philippine-American War, Delmendo proposes that we pay attention to Philippine-American cultural interactions before the U.S. colonial era.[4] I would add, too, that Rizal's encounters with American culture suggest the presence of Europe and, to an even greater degree, Southeast Asia within the broader global context of high imperialism. Turning to F. Sionil José's 1993 novel, *Viajero,* Delmendo shows that the current global context of the Filipino diaspora—eighty million overseas workers and immigrants—provides a new ideal of postnationalist nationalism. The novel tracks the development of nationalist consciousness through the protagonist's identification with the Filipino poor and kinship solidarity with American people of color. Salvador dela Raza has had several fathers, a biological father killed during World War II, a peasant farmer, and an African American. The latter is a Vietnam War veteran, who adopted dela Raza while stationed in the Philippines, and raised him in the United States. Traveling back to the Philippines, dela Raza finds a place with the peasant insurgency. He attributes his nationalism not only to his Filipino fathers but also to his American father's civil rights activism. Delmendo argues that Sionil José's Filipino nationalism can be considered anti-American, and yet it arises from solidarity with dissident American democratic movements and even to the economic privilege gained through U.S. immigration. Remarking that *Viajero* is "as much a novel of America as it is a Filipino novel," Delmendo's analysis suggests that Sionil José's unofficial, populist nationalism may be a starting point for a new approach to the Philippine-American century (161).

One of the strengths of *The Star-Entangled Banner* is that each chapter proposes numerous tantalizing connections between Filipino and American national cultures over the past century. Yet the dense arguments and awkward writing tend to muddy rather than clarify the complex dynamics in each country and across both countries. Unlike the close readings of literature and film, which are quite effective, the chapters on public debate lack a main text. For example, the discussion on José Rizal's visit to the 1899 Paris Exposition relies on secondary source material that the author furthermore criticizes for poor interpretation. In addition, the chapters analyzing public commemorations and war memorials assume, rather than delineate, the distinctions between state officials and popular commentators, and between Filipinos and Americans. It is unclear who can represent the nation at diplomatic and cultural levels, and how such authority has been claimed and challenged.

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Delmendo acknowledges that contradictory images of America as "oppressor and liberator" are rooted in the Philippine colonial past (1). Facing American colonial rule by the official end of the brutal Philippine American War (1899–1903), leaders such as Manuel Quezon and Carlo Recto debated differing views on whether engaging with or rejecting U.S. colonial tutelage would safeguard Filipino sovereignty. The author's call to focus on the cultural and ideological entanglements between the two nations would indeed recognize the paradoxical tensions of empire. To make this point, *The Star-Entangled Banner* concludes with recent debates over a Philippine-American War monument in Cheyenne, Wyoming. The monument consists of two church bells taken as war booty during a counterinsurgency campaign in Samar, an island in central Philippines. In 1901, Filipino guerrillas ambushed a U.S. infantry unit in the town of Balangiga. The U.S. retaliatory operation targeted noncombatant civilians, as well as guerrilla insurgents, throughout the island. In a single day, the military campaigns resulted in the deaths of 51 American soldiers and 250 Filipinos. Following a 1997 compromise proposal to return one of the bells to the Philippines, "anti-compromise" and "pro-compromise" factions dominated the transnational debate. Delmendo examines the competing moral claims over the historical record, arguing that American military historians and veterans' groups perpetuated inaccurate information about the Balangiga "Massacre" to support their anti-compromise position. The author also finds fault with the Philippine National Centennial Commission, who sought to appropriate the monument for a public commemoration that had little to do with the actual events at Balangiga. Asserting that "for both sides—indeed, for everyone except those who simply believe the bells should be used for their original purpose, to call Catholics to Mass—the real issue is national history," Delmendo charges nationalists with egregiously distorting what she sees as the historical truth of the matter (191).

Yet is there a knowable truth to episodes of conquest such as the 1901 counterinsurgency campaign at Balangiga, when Americans at the time did not hold hard and fast ideas about who their enemies were, among the Filipino population?[5] In spite of the author's resounding criticisms of historical distortions, the persistence of ideological fictions seems interesting in itself. Because Delmendo so strongly condemns cultural texts and official representatives for ideological fabrications, the book leaves us with a lingering question about whether the Philippine-American relationship existed as a set of historical facts that can be recovered from nationalist manipulations.[6]

Without much discussion of debates in American studies, Delmendo's work addresses future trends in American empire scholarship. With *The Star-En-*

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tangled Banner, Delmendo joins the ranks of numerous scholars who, over the past two decades, hailed the centennial of the Philippine-American War (1899–1903) as an occasion to advance new research agendas. As I mentioned above, Delmendo synthesizes recent studies of American empire in worlds' fairs, anthropology, photography, and cinema. She follows suit in questioning the premise of American exceptionalism, and asserting the need to investigate the effects of imperial conquest on American society and culture. More recently, scholars have called for comparative and transnational frameworks that incorporate studies of the peoples and historical contexts beyond the United States.[7] *The Star-Entangled Banner* investigates both American nationalist constructions of the Philippines and Filipino nationalist constructions of America. What comes to mind is George Fredrickson's *The Black Image in the White Mind* juxtaposed to its rejoinder, Mia Bay's *White Image in the Black Mind*; the comparison would reveal the dialogic relationship between the two, rather than the unidirectional phenomena of domination and resistance.[8] What often gets muted in the process, however, is the unequal cultural and ideological authority that accompanies unequal relations. Delmendo mentions only in passing that Philippine nationalism cannot help but grapple with American power, while American nationalism is privileged to ignore the Philippines at will.

Despite its flaws, *The Star-Entangled Banner* is a valuable book-length study that looks squarely and specifically at Philippine-American relations. This work moves us forward in understanding how tenets of Filipino national sovereignty were foundational to American empire in the Philippines, rather than mere rhetorical dressing. While Delmendo is not the first to explore the comparative cultures of Philippine-American nationalism, she makes it clear that those of us who are interested in understanding and teaching the history of American empire need to engage with the history of modern Filipino nationalism.[9] While the historical record may not be the redemptive force that Delmendo wishes it to be, her book shows that present-day global inequalities indeed haunt narratives of the past.

Notes

1. Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* (New York: Routledge, 1995); and Benito M. Vergara, *Displaying Filipinos:*

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Photography and Colonialism in Early Twentieth Century Philippines (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1995).

2. Charles V. Hawley, "'You're a Better Filipino Than I Am, John Wayne': World War II, Hollywood, and U.S.–Philippines Relations" *Pacific Historical Review* 71. 3 (August 2002): 414. Delmendo makes similar arguments as Hawley but does not cite the source.
3. Vicente L. Rafael, "Nationalism, Imagery, and the Filipino Intelligentsia in the Nineteenth Century," in *Discrepant Histories: Translocal Essays on Filipino Cultures*, ed. Vicente L. Rafael (Manila: Anvil Publishing, 1995): 133–58.
4. José Rizal, "The Philippines a Century Hence" (1889–1890), in *José Rizal: Life, Works, and Writings*, ed. Gregorio F. Zaide (Manila: National Bookstore, 1992).
5. For contradictory images of Filipinos by Americans witnessing the Balangiga "Massacre," see Kimberly A. Alidio, "'When I Get Home, I Want to Forget': Memory and Amnesia in the Occupied Philippines, 1901–1904" *Social Text* 59.17 (1999): 105–122.
6. For relevant essays on war monuments and the Philippine Centennial, see Oscar V. Campomanes, "Casualty Figures of the American Soldier and the Other: Post-1898 Allegories of Imperial Nation-Building as 'Love and War,'" in *Vestiges of War: The Philippine-American War and the Aftermath of an Imperial Dream, 1899–1999*, ed. Angel Velasco Shaw and Luis H. Francia (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 134–62; and Vicente L. Rafael, "Parricides, Bastards and Counterrevolution: Reflections on the Philippine Centennial," in *Vestiges of War*, ed. Shaw and Francia, 361–75.
7. A pioneering work in the field is Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993). For a critical assessment of Kaplan and Pease's work, see Gilbert M. Joseph, "Close Encounters: Toward a New Cultural History of U.S.–Latin American Relations," in *Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.–Latin American Relations*, ed. Gilbert M. Joseph et al. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1998), 3–46. On "contact zones" as a model for comparative American Studies, see John Carlos Rowe, "Post-Nationalism, Globalism, and the New American Studies" in *Post-Nationalist American Studies*, ed. John Carlos Rowe (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 26.
8. George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817-1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971); and Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind: African-American Ideas about White People, 1830-1925* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
9. Vicente L. Rafael, "White Love: Surveillance and Nationalist Resistance in the U.S. Colonization of the Philippines" in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, eds. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 185-210; and Michael Salman, *The Embarrassment of Slavery: Controversies on Bondage and Nationalism in the American Colonial Philippines* (Berkeley: University of California, 2001).

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