Postcolonial disorientations: colonial ethnography and the vectors of the Philippine nation in the imperial frontier

DANIEL P S GOH

Introduction

Within a fortnight of the beginning of Spanish-American hostilities over Cuba in April 1898, warships of the imperialist powers of the age filled Manila Bay. The final gasp of the decaying Spanish Empire meant that its colonial remnants had become frontier zones of uncertainty and opportunity in a crowded imperialist global arena. Witnessed by German, French, British and Japanese warships, the US Pacific Fleet destroyed the Spanish squadron in the Bay and landed Filipino revolutionaries from the rump of the abortive 1896 revolt. The latter rapidly raised a popular peasant army and surrounded Manila. The Filipino revolutionaries were later suppressed in a brutal war by American troops, inaugurating over three decades of colonial rule in the Philippines before Filipino self-rule was granted in the Commonwealth of 1935. The Philippines was not treated as America’s backyard to be protected against the schemes of the European imperialists, as Cuba was, but as America’s ‘frontier’, in which restless natives were quelled and the territory prepared for democratic self-rule and assimilation into the Union. Here, I am not treating the frontier as an indelible fact in imperial formations that can therefore be analyzed typologically in terms of its function. Rather, I am concerned with the discourse shaping the knowledge of the colonialists tasked to deal with the frontier and govern the natives and settlers peopling it. In short, I am interested in the question of governmentality in the imperial frontier and its postcolonial consequences.

The fact that the Filipino political elites eventually chose independence in 1946, after the interruption of the Japanese occupation, did not change the momentum and direction, that is, the vectors of the Philippine nation established by colonial frontier governmentality. It meant that this frontier governmentality was successfully Filipinized, a process which began in earnest in the second decade of American colonial rule. Indeed, the Philippines soon found itself in the Cold War frontier, as China fell to Mao’s communists and communist revolts consumed the European colonies of Southeast Asia. Its own Hukbalahap insurrection was confined to Central Luzon and the rebellious peasants were easily persuaded to return to the
democratic framework by the promise of benevolent capitalist development. Up till the late 1960s, the Philippines was the most developed of all Southeast Asian countries, a stalwart ally of American capitalism and a model for the rest of the newly independent countries of the region. By the 1980s, the Philippines had become an economic backwater ruled by a corrupt dictatorship, as the Asian economic dragons and tigers sped past it. Uncannily, the past twenty years of democratization since the ‘People’s Power’ Revolution of 1986 have been very similar to the thirty years of American rule between 1902 and 1935, with the country’s relative political stability marked by a few political reversals, the undercurrent of subaltern revolution, the shadow of paramilitary violence, and the visceral dependency of slow bleeding to the inner frontiers of empire, this time Americanistic and neoliberal rather than American and liberal. The slow migration of labor from the archipelagic nation continues unabated since the first mass migration to the plantations of Hawaii and farms of California under American colonial rule. Ironically, the balikbayan Filipinos from the earlier chronotope of labor migration to the United States and contemporary ‘overseas contract workers’ in rapidly developing Asia and new American imperial frontiers in the Middle East form the artificial life support of a nation. The country’s agricultural surplus has been excavated dry by multinationals and their Filipino mestizo elite allies—an alliance wrought in the previous imperialist age—and they now turn to the reserve army of displaced peasants to feed their special economic zones, which are in themselves frontiers of Asian capitalism.

This is not the empire striking back to ring the death knell of the Philippine nation that rose inexorably in the last imperialist instance. There is something qualitatively different in this round of capitalist globalization and its attendant political restructuring, yet the momentum of the past and, in the Philippine case, the vectors of frontier governmentality continue to influence present trajectories. The question is how the momentum of history and culture established by colonialism has driven the trajectory of the post-colonial nation into the age of neoliberal empire. This is the pertinent question that postcolonial studies must ask today. The particular case of the Philippines provides an interesting case of continuity given its close relationship to the United States in both eras.

Philippine postcolonialism is probably the most advanced in Southeast Asia. Space will not permit a critical review of this scholarship here. My aim is to examine American colonialism as an ethnographic discourse inflected by an imperial frontier orientation. This discourse interdicts the mobility of cultural elements to render them knowable and thus accessible to disciplinary regimes, and is driven by the contradiction between two types of interdiction I call the ‘home’ and ‘base’ vectors. These are the vectors that have directed the disorientation of Philippine postcoloniality, trapping it between American dreams Filipinized to the hegemonic dictates of elite nationalism. I begin by outlining the frontier discourse as a question of governmentality that plagued the nascent American colonial state, and then proceed to detail the planting of American frontier dreams in the state’s education and land policies. Colonial ethnography was central in this frontier governmentality. Thus, its
Filipinization entailed an elite autoethnography, which produced a nation with an orientation that seeped into the American Southeast Asian frontier.

The question of colonial governmentality in the imperial frontier

The conquest of the Philippines in the closing years of the nineteenth century confirmed the status of the US as a Western superpower and inaugurated the American century, but the violent repression of an anti-colonial revolution evoked discomfort for a nation that claimed the same lineage. American historians thus tend to see the Philippine episode as an aberration in their national history of anti-imperialism. It was ‘an accidental conquest’ in America’s struggle for global democracy, which therefore led the US to introduce democracy to the Philippines like no other colonial powers did. The more contrite see the episode as the US succumbing to ‘a natural temptation’ or ‘cosmic tendency’, but they invariably add that the nation quickly regretted that.

Apologists and apologias aside, the historiography of American imperialism contains an internal tension in its discourse that reflects the actual and material contradiction driving American expansion, which made it exceptional to European imperialist expansion. The thesis of democratic exceptionalism that appears on the surface of the discourse barely papers over this historical exception. The first element of the tension is the sense of the colony as a homestead settlement that would soon become part of the domestic body politic, which renders colonial rule as a juvenile stage of learning to become part of the national-imperial family. For Robin Winks, two characteristics made American imperialism in the Philippines and elsewhere ‘only briefly, somewhat incidentally’ comparable to and yet benevolently distinct from European imperialism. These were the employment of colonial rule as a temporary means to incorporation of colonies into the Union through democratic institutions and their economic integration into a free market guarded by tariff walls that benefited the colonies more than they were exploited.

The second element can be found in William Appleman Williams’ critique of American imperialism as a manifestation of the US pursuit of global free trade to keep markets open for its surplus products and capital, where he observes that American policymakers saw the conquest of the Philippines as an ‘unfortunate exception’ but a ‘regrettably necessary’ means to ‘the realization of an ultimately just and progressive end’ of maintaining its ‘open door’ policy in China. The colony is not to be merely home, but a base in the continuous expansion of empire westwards, across the American prairie, the Pacific, the Philippines, Asia and beyond.

The tension between the home and base vectors is one that elicits imaginaries and anxieties of staying and leaving, of returning and disappearing, of stasis and movement, of roots and rhizomes, of feminine domesticity and strenuous masculinity. Since its inception, American society has been identified by its orientation to its western frontiers, where interaction with the dramatically different and varied Amerindians haunted the white imagination. This westward frontierism is specific to the American national
imagination, and therefore inflected its imperial grammar. Malini Johar Schueller maps American Orientalism as fixated on Asia, specifically India, as the natural, maternal origin of civilization, which had then traveled resolutely westward until it reached the New World to be reinvigorated by the rise of America. Old World nations were seen as retrograde members of Western civilization who had passed on the torch of human evolution to the Anglo-Saxon British and American nations. In this discourse, the Americanization of Spanish Philippines was ‘manifest destiny’, a calling that the American nation could not refuse or regret. Yet, the Philippines was not to be simply land for the expansion of homeland picket fences. Richard Drinnon has shown, in his aptly titled tome *Facing West*, how the Orientalist frontier discourse was the foundation of late nineteenth-century US foreign policy in East Asia, as profoundly expressed by frontiersman John Hays’ *Open Door Notes of 1899*, which defined the Philippines as the key that would unlock the closed market of China.

The key difference that marked the Philippines as a different frontier was the fact that native resistance to imperial expansion did not come in the form of confederate bands marauding from dispersed villages. The ‘Indians’ in the Philippines, when not mimicking the tactics of the Minuteman, fought as a modern army marching from agricultural concentrations, and talked the constitutional language of the American Revolution. Furthermore, the ‘civilized’ world saw this irony very clearly and watched as the US Army tried, brutally but in vain, to exterminate the Filipinos in the same manner as the Amerindians. The question of governmentality that confronted the Philippine Commission, tasked in 1899 to recommend the course of civil government and led by university professor Jacob Schurman, was therefore profound. The home/base tension of the American frontier was resolved in emptying the land of original inhabitants and white settlement, where the homes of settlers would serve as the base of prospective settlers pushing westwards. This was not an option in the Philippines.

But try as they did, the Schurman Commissioners could not see beyond the frontier discourse and its racist gaze. The Commission considered the applicability of the British Malaya model of government by protectorate, but rejected it on the basis that the Filipinos had advanced beyond the feudal chains of submission to a hereditary aristocracy. The Commission also considered the applicability of the Australian and Canadian Commonwealth model, but rejected it on the basis that the Filipinos differed too much among themselves in terms of blood, race, and language and were too atrophied by despotism to be a self-governing dominion. Predictably, the Commission emphatically placed the Philippines in the path of American’s westward expansion by recommending a Territorial plan of government based on the Jeffersonian scheme of government for the territories of the 1803 Louisiana Purchase. Quoting Thomas Jefferson, ‘our new fellow-citizens are as yet as incapable of self-government as children’, the plan proposed to organize the political structures ‘in the paternal fashion’, with Congress possessing the right to veto legislation enacted by the local legislature, and the President appointing the governor and his deputy.
The Second Philippine Commission, tasked to set up civil government according to this plan and led by William H Taft, began by cultivating the Filipino mestizo elites through patronage of the pro-assimilation Federal Party led by ilustrado collaborators, and promoting American planter migration to partner the mestizo elites in Americanizing the newfound home so that it would become a stable base for strategic American maneuvers in Asia. However, the home/base tensions were exposed once the Filipino elites started to make nationalist claims through nascent democratic institutions ranging from municipal ‘home rule’ to provincial elections and, eventually, the elected lower legislative chamber, the Philippine Assembly, established in 1907 with a Nationalist Party majority. American reactions to nationalist agitation revolved around the home/base moment, with Progressives supporting direct and autocratic colonial rule to forcibly Americanize the Philippines, the Democrats favoring a nation-building program towards eventual independence of a client state that would remain an American base in Asia, and the mainstream Republicans led by Taft pulling the opposing elements together in its collaborative rule policy of maintaining political stability while gradually Americanizing the economy and polity.

The frontier-oriented reactions created much internal conflict among the American colonialists and politics oscillated between the Progressive and Republican positions. The trajectory of state building culminated in a major stalemate in the Philippines when Progressive officials in Governor-General Cameron Forbes’ cabinet, which formed the upper legislative chamber, revolted against their Republican chief executive and confronted the nationalist Assembly in a deadlock from 1911 to 1913.10 Likewise, in the metropole, Theodore Roosevelt staged a Progressive uprising against his successor and incumbent president, Taft, in the 1912 elections and the split Republican vote led to the election of Woodrow Wilson. Under the Filipinization policy of the Democrats, a loyal group of nationalist mestizo elites strengthened their political stranglehold and were feted by generous colonial state support for land-grabbing and agro-industrialization. In this cozy relationship, the hybrid Hispanic culture of the mestizos became less a crucible of resistance against colonialism and a marker of elite distinction, paving the way for the rapid Americanization of the mestizo aristocracy and the national high culture it promoted.

It may seem ironic that the Progressive aim of Americanization was successfully achieved by Democrat methods, but this apparent Americanization was very different from the one envisioned by the Progressives. Under the Democrats, Americanization began an inexorable process of client-state decolonization which was interrupted by attempted Republican reversals in the 1920s and then sealed by the Commonwealth compact that began the transformation of the Philippines into an American base (briefly interrupted by the Japanese occupation). For the Progressives, the Philippines was an experimental field for their utopian project of transforming a patronage society into a corruption-free homestead landscape of independent proprietors and craftsmen through severe colonial education and practice under paternalistic guidance.
Colonial education and the homestead paradise lost

Besides employing colonial officials with anthropology doctorates to conduct detailed ethnographic research on the Filipino peoples, the nascent colonial government proceeded on two fronts to Americanize the new frontier: mass education and land reforms. At the heart of these three enterprises of colonial governmentality was a young anthropologist, David P Barrows. Raised on a ranch in California, Barrows was no stranger to the frontier. He spent the summers of the closing decade of the nineteenth century studying the Coahuilla Indians of southern California, which earned him an anthropology doctorate from Chicago. A liberal with strong Progressive leanings, Barrows dreamt of going to America’s new frontier across the Pacific to contribute to the civilization of the Orient. In 1900, he was appointed superintendent of schools for Manila, and a year later, he was appointed chief of the Bureau of Non-Christian Tribes, which was set up to study the peoples of the Philippines and provide ethnographic intelligence for the American colonial government. Always driven towards the pragmatic good, when he was satisfied that his ethnographic research work was complete he sought to return to his original desire of educating a new generation of modern Filipinos. In 1903, the Commission placed Barrows in charge of transforming the whole education system in the Philippines.

In his anthropological studies, Barrows held the view that the Filipinos were a singular national people belonging to the Malay race who were merely divided culturally, rather than socio-biologically, along regional and dialectal linguistic lines. This was against the ethnographic position of the acclaimed Philippine expert on the Commission and his immediate superior, Secretary of the Interior Dean C Worcester, who saw strongly divided pluralistic ‘tribes’ analogous to the Indians of the American West. Barrows’ rejection of the comparability between Filipinos and Amerindians was made after he spent six months traveling in the American West studying the Indian Reservations in 1901. For Barrows, thus, the Philippines was a different frontier, more akin to established Hispanic settlements in the American Southwest and his native California that required integration into the nation-building program of the frontier territory. The combination of Hispanicization and Malay racial essence was the key problem for the nation-building program in the Philippines. Because the ‘poor Malayan instinctively dreads and submits to the power of the stronger, especially where that power is of a material kind’, and because Spanish colonial rule aggravated ‘these social distinctions’, Filipino mestizo ‘caciques’ formed local socio-economic despotisms that prevented the Filipinos from gelling into a nation.

The metropolitan government did not disagree on the diagnosis, only on the prescription. The US Bureau of Labor wrote in 1905 that ‘peonage, serfdom, and slavery’ plagued agricultural labor in the Islands and advocated special measures to ‘attract and create a resident population in the vicinity of new plantations’ and import Japanese labor if ‘very great deficiency in the local supply was manifested’. Barrows attacked this metropolitan version that was espoused by ‘American investors and promoters in the Philippines’,
seeing it as a modern version of the peonage the Filipinos were already suffering from: ‘it is apparent that what they really want here is a great body of unskilled labor, dependent for living upon its daily wage, willing to work in great gangs, submissive to the rough handling of a “boss”’. Explicitly rejecting the formation of ‘a proletariat’, Barrows spelled out the alternative vision of developing ‘everywhere the peasant proprietor’:

If he has his small home and plot of ground, the possession of English, the ability to read, the understanding of figures and those matters of business which affect him... It will . . . increase his contentment as it increases his independence, and as it raises his standard of life and comfort and increases his desires it will make him a better producer and a larger purchaser.\(^{14}\)

Primary instruction in English and arithmetic was seen as the way by which the Filipino masses would gain cognitive independence and rational thought, freeing them from their Hispanic servitude to become independent smallholders. English was seen as the vehicle for the spread of Anglo-Saxon ideas of freedom and liberty, counterpoised against Spanish as the vessel of ‘cacique’ tradition, while arithmetic would teach the peasant ‘something of the rights of a man in such business operations’ and reduce bonded indebtedness.\(^{15}\) In the intermediate schools, the focus was on agricultural training. Each school was even equipped with a model Filipino house, complete with proper rooms and kitchen to train girls in homemaking and with gardens and windmill to train boys in farming (Figure 1). Handicrafts, known as ‘industrial training’, were also promoted so as to encourage the development of cottage industries and to teach a particular lesson ‘the average man of the Filipino race needs badly’: ‘utility, honest solidity of construction, and graceful form of the object made should not be lost sight of nor overshadowed by the less important decorative details’.\(^{16}\) This appreciation of the ostensibly rational virtues of straightforward Anglo-Saxon simplicity was the economic counterpart to the political critique of the masses as being deceived by the flowery Hispanic eloquence of the mestizo ‘caciques’.

![Figure 1: Illustration of the side view of the model Filipino house, 1904.](image-url)
Barrows’ ambitious universal education program formed the basis for the modern Philippine education system. The expansion of primary education to cultivate his ‘peasant proprietors’ was temporary stalled when Governor Cameron Forbes abandoned universal education in 1909 and focused instead on expanding commercial and industrial secondary education to prepare Filipinos for the lower rungs of investing American corporations. For Forbes, economic independence was not the solution to ‘cacique’ domination but wage labor was, which happened to fit his metropolitan-favored policy of promoting American-owned plantations and agro-industrial processing. This was merely a temporary setback, as the Democrats who took over in 1913 expanded universal education and independent homestead instruction to push Barrows’ nation-building education program to its logical conclusion. The real casualty of Forbes’ policy was Barrows himself, who wrote of the demoralization prevalent among American officials caused by creeping patronage politics under Forbes, in 1908, a year before he retired from the colonial service because he was himself demoralized, and took up a professorship at the University of California, Berkeley. But he knew he left a legacy that was not easily scuttled by the conspiracy of American machine politics and Filipino ‘caciquism’.

Ideologically, Barrows’ homestead education program was clearly an extension of the independent smallholding utopia of the American West. But despite this expression of the home vector of the American frontier discourse, Barrows’ program also contained the base vector that would paradoxically undermine Americanization and yet make the new Philippine national culture American in essence. In fact, Barrows himself recognized this paradox just before he left the Islands when he wrote that his program aimed, ‘not to make Filipinos into Americans but to make better Filipinos’, enhancing the ‘equally good ensemble’ of Filipino racial traits with ‘new benefits of civilization’ adapted to the race’s ‘own genius’. His program could therefore outlast the assimilationist Republican administrations and even the Democrat administrations to extend into the postcolonial era.

However, a puzzle remains. Despite Barrows’ best efforts, the Philippines did not become a homestead paradise for the Filipinos. The answer lies in the failure of American land reforms to meet the dreams called up by Barrows’ pedagogy. American land reforms aimed at creating the homestead paradise and breaking the power of the mestizo ‘caciques’ entitled every Filipino to 16 hectares (39.5 acres) of public land for a homestead. Expecting an exodus, the government received only a trickle. By 1910, only a total of 3,785 homestead applications had been received. When the exodus came, the Bureau of Lands was unable to handle the flood of applications. In 1915, the number of applications for the year had risen to almost double the total for the first decade of colonial rule. Applications numbered over 13,000 in 1926, but only 2,054 applications were processed and approved, with a backlog of over 55,000 applications. Barrows’ children, now adults, instead of scattering, appeared to have treated the homestead dream with all seriousness.

But Forbes’ attempted adoption of metropolitan plantation policy and the Democrats’ policy of using state resources to fund Filipino elite agrarian
development and agro-industrialization meant that homesteading was relegated to the bottom of the priority list. In any case, the Democrats lacked the political will to carry out the homestead program it had inherited, mainly because its economic policy called for the promotion of wage labor rather than independent farmers. With blunt honesty, Democrat Governor Francis Harrison pointed to the lack of appropriations and personnel and the ‘insistent demand by large landholders, including the government, for the employment of surveyors in connection with the sudden industrial development of the islands, as for example, upon sugar lands as security for the erection of modern centrals’. In 1921, Harrison abolished the Court of Land Registration and transferred its cases to overburdened subordinate courts, despite an accumulating backlog. By 1933, there were 376,903 homestead applications pending.

Indefinitely delayed homesteading suited the *mestizo* agrarian elites, for what they needed was a captive labor force, whether in the form of tenancy or wage labor. The ambiguous land-title situation also allowed the elites to use costly litigation, political influence and state coercion to dispossess those peasants who pioneered independence. The planters opposed state welfare assistance to workers of any kind but sought all forms of state assistance to obtain and keep labor on plantations, from the rescinding of safety limits for inter-island shipping, to the implementation of labor registration, to the exercise of legal coercion. Poignantly, some sugar planters copied the model house of Barrows’ homestead education program to establish workers’ villages on hacienda grounds (Figure 2), motivated by the need to maintain a captive labor force but inspired by American frontier utopianism. Perversely, the success of Barrows’ homestead education program and the failure of American land reforms made sure that the new Philippine dream of independent smallholding would

---

**Figure 2:**
Laborers’ houses at La Carlota, Occidental Negros, circa 1941.28
become more potent by remaining unrealized for the masses but enviably possible in the very figures of their mestizo landlords.

**Hybrid utopia: racial blending and the Filipinization of the frontier**

Barrows might have planted the seeds of the base vector under the sign of the homestead utopia of the American West during the assimilationist Republican era that was politically wrecked by the home/base tension, but it was the Democrats’ Filipinization that grew the seeds into the American-dependent political and economic nationalism of the mestizo elites. The Americanization of the imperial frontier thus became the Filipinization of American frontierism. The emerging nationalist elites were the vehicle of this Filipinization, comprising landlords, agro-industrialists, merchants, intelligentsia and professionals, united by their Hispanic and increasingly American modernist education and orientation. While Homi Bhabha celebrates cultural hybridity as containing the sword of subversion, ‘mestizo power’ in the Philippines shows that the sword is truly double-edged. 29

The native elite was trained and modeled after the Western subject but always reminded that he was not quite white. As a result, the modernist-native political consciousness, as Gwendolyn Wright notes for the Vietnamese elite, tended to synthesize key Western political concepts with ‘the integrity and autonomy of their own traditions’. 30 At the same time, because of its open posture towards the Modern, the elite modernist subject tended to participate with the Western subject in the ethnographic objectification of the masses, as Mitchell describes of the modernist Egyptian elites who on the whole were just as concerned with the ordering of the crowd in the streets and country as the colonialist. 31 Combining these two insights, it may be argued that the modernist elites claimed their Janus-faced identity based on two differences, that they were different from the colonizers because of their native characteristics, and that they were different from the masses and did not exhibit degenerative native characteristics because they had blended the best of the modern attributes of the colonizers with the best native elements. As a result, the elites’ hegemonic project would claim separation from the paternal largesse of the colonialist while assuming the same paternal attitude toward the masses.

The racial blending discourse of the Filipino mestizo elites vividly illustrates this strategy. They initially adapted to the American colonial regime either by buying into the ‘benevolent assimilation’ program altogether or by championing nationalist separation through the emergent legitimate channels of imperial democracy. The Federal Party represented the former while the Nationalist Party represented the latter. But both had to deploy and get around the terms already defined by the American colonial state, specifically to prove that they were capable of self-government, that they were ‘model children’ of Western civilization. To show that the Filipinos were ready for assimilation into the United States, the Federalistas had to downplay the Hispanic and native difference of the Filipinos. On the other hand, the nationalists asserted precisely this difference; for example, in a
memorial to the US Congress presented to Taft when he visited the Islands in late 1905, nationalists in Cebu led by their rising leader Sergio Osmeña wrote that the capacity for self-government should not be defined in exclusively American terms because ‘the Filipino people are a Christian and civilized people having characteristics of their own, and, in a word, are a developed people, that to remold after a civilization lasting back over three hundred years, would be not only dangerous but useless to human progress.’

As the Nacionalistas rose to political prominence and the Federalistas fortune faded, the nationalist elites began to look for an appropriate discursive soil to plant their claims of difference. Around the same time, a researcher and instructor at the Anatomical Laboratory of the Philippine Medical School in Manila, Robert Bennett Bean, was conducting various anthropometric surveys on Filipinos and publishing the results in Worcester’s *Philippine Journal of Science*. Impressed by the tallness, dark skin, long noses and large eyes of certain inhabitants in a town called Cainta, he measured thirty-eight men and concluded, ‘the differences are invariably in the direction of the European’. During one school vacation period, he spent two months at Baguio, the summer capital of the American regime, and studied the Igorot inhabitants. The result was a paper that offered a counterintuitive fact—that is, given that the intuition in the imperial racial discourse was that the Filipinos were irrevocably native. Bean announced, ‘No casual observer would expect to find white people inside of brown skins, but I found European types among the Igorots.’ His conclusion on the origins of the Igorot was,

First the Iberian and the Negrito blended and were in the condition of no Mendelism represented by type A or by the Senoi; then they were joined by type M, which was also in the condition of no Mendelism, resulting from the fusion of the Bavarian and the Negrito. The fusion of types M and A was in progress when the Negrito was again encountered since the arrival of the Igorots in the Philippines. The mingling of the types was probably more frequent than I have represented it, the crossings and recrossings more complex, and out of the moil of men through ages is evolved the Igorot.

The concept of racial blending proposed by Bean became a central element in elite autoethnography. A 1916 edition of *The Filipino People*, the nationalist mouthpiece in the metropole, published a paper entitled ‘The Filipino Racial Complex’ which was read before the Anthropological Society of Washington, DC by a Filipino, Manuel V Arguelles. Arguelles hypothesized that centuries of migratory waves of ‘Mongols from the north’ and ‘Malays from the south’, together with ‘the great Spanish tidal wave’ and ‘the stagnant aboriginal Negritos’, met in the Islands and formed ‘a Filipino racial complex’. He then reviewed the anthropological literature, including Bean’s studies, and concluded that the Filipino racial complex consisted of the Malayan migrator ‘with some probable infusion of Hindu’, the Chinese migrator from the north, ‘a very small extent’ of Negrito, the Spanish element, which had ‘impregnated the Malay-Chinese stock’ more than previously thought, and none of the American element. Not coincidentally,
on the cover of the magazine, published by Manuel Quezon and targeted at both American and Filipino political elites, as evident in its English and Spanish bilingualism, the nation is expressed in the home vector, symbolized by a comely woman looking out into the beautiful frontier wilderness (Figure 3).

The racial blend autoethnography was appropriate for the Filipino elites’ nationalist hegemonic project. By anchoring the ‘Filipino racial complex’ in the basic Malay-Chinese stock, the elites claimed its identity with the Filipino masses they sought to dominate. But by emphasizing heavy Spanish ‘impregnation’, the mestizo elites accomplished two things. They claimed their superior difference from the masses, registering their Hispanic superiority through sexualized masculine agency, and their relative difference from the American overlords, who were placed as intruders into a conjugal relationship. Thus, it was specifically mentioned that the American element was not found in the Filipino racial complex. This did not mean that the elites were rejecting Americanization. Rather, they rejected blending into the American nation and sought to preserve what they saw as their unique Filipino blend, which formed the racial bedrock for erecting Philippine-American frontier culture.

Underlying the overt nationalist symbolic maneuvers was a concern with social antagonisms that could not be resolved without a fundamental revolution in social relationships. As the Filipino-blend theory proposed the fusion of different and contradictory elements in the emergence of a distinct Filipino race, it was a fitting ethnographic frame to adopt in the formation of a strategy of postcolonial rule that had to deal with the social antagonisms. Like the ethnographies adopted by the American colonialists, the Filipino-blend autoethnography attempted to transcribe rising agrarian and proletarian and concurrent Muslim opposition to mestizo power into predictable resistance. Like the colonial ethnographies, it was as utopian as it was practical, producing idealistic ideological discourses and defining the strategy of rule. Thus, settler colonization of the southern frontier was to bring about ‘the blending of [Christian and Moro] sentiments and ideals’.36 Thus, the Commonwealth was to assume the character of benevolent authoritarianism, with Quezon as the Hispanic father figure mediating between quarreling Filipino children—agro-capitalists, planters, tenants and workers—through his ‘social justice’ program, while the American-led Constabulary was unleashed to discipline those who continued to disobey.37

Another implication of the Filipino-blend autoethnography is that it redirected the elites’ gaze from the United States towards Asia. The believed Malay racial base oriented the elites specifically towards Southeast Asia. In 1931, Rafael R Alunan, the Secretary of Agricultural and Natural Resources and a sugar planter himself, accompanied Governor-General Dwight F Davis on a good-will cruise to the major port cities of French Indochina, the Kingdom of Siam, British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies. In his report, Alunan compared the agricultural development of the different countries and found the Philippines wanting in terms of state economic policy and support:
Figure 3:
Front cover, The Filipino People.38
all the scientific principles these countries used or have developed by them can, we are sure, be taken advantage of by us, in order to replace certain unscientific makeshift measures which we have been compelled to adopt because of the dictates of that curse of modern democracy called Expediency.

British Malaya and the Dutch East Indies were particularly important for Alunan, who saw these fellow Malayan countries as ahead in economic development because they were led by colonial development states with centralized technocracies. But the positive difference in the Philippines was that its democratic state sought ‘to create an oriental Nation that [would] be governed and developed by and for the native population’—democratic in the sense that development did not aim to serve Western capitalists but ‘to secure the greatest measure of happiness for all the inhabitants’. Thus, Alunan took pride that though the development of Java was ‘far above’ that of the Philippines, the Filipino peasant was ‘in much better condition and perhaps [had] a greater measure of happiness’. With the lessons learnt from the cruise, the Philippines could achieve a democratic developmentalism and become a model for its fellow Malayan countries.

Alunan’s report was addressed to a mixed audience of American overseers and Filipino elites. It was prescient because it brought together the elements to extend the Filipinization of the American imperial frontier into an Asianization that served the expansion of the frontier in the post-war era. Democratic developmentalism would keep the Barrows homestead dream alive and also position the Philippines as the base for America’s imperial entry into Southeast Asia, in which the Americanized hybrid European-Chinese-Malay Filipino would serve as the conduit of the transmission of superior American culture and political economy to fellow Malays and Asians in the frontier. It is in this light that we may read President Diosdado Macapagal’s abortive attempt to set up the MAPHILINDO confederation of Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia to unite the Malay peoples of Southeast Asia in 1963. Macapagal’s frontier nationalism, which included a revived land reform program and the symbolic shifting of Philippine Independence Day from 4 July to 12 June, the day General Emilio Aguinaldo declared independence in 1898, was in part motivated by increasing tensions in domestic politics over American military bases.

As Southeast Asia entered into the politically turbulent decade of the 1960s, the American frontier expanded amidst decolonization and communist insurgencies. To the west of the Philippines, American involvement in Vietnam was stepped up in the mess left by the French. To the south, a pro-Western Malaysia was formed with the federation of British Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak with an already independent Malaya, but this bristled non-aligned Sukarno Indonesia, where communists were a major political force. Through MAPHILINDO, the southern part of the frontier could be stabilized, so that the US forces could deal with the spreading communist insurgency in Indochina. But the tensions contained in the Filipinized frontier discourse undermined the MAPHILINDO project, for at the same time that the Macapagal administration advanced the Malayan utopia, it
vociferously asserted the Philippines’ territorial claim on Sabah, now Malaysian territory. In 1965, the Americans began the pacification of its Southeast Asian frontier. That year, the US-backed Suharto coup brutally eliminated the communists in Indonesia, US marines landed in Da Nang as the war in Vietnam escalated, and Ferdinand Marcos won the Philippine presidency and signed agreements that secured the presence of the American military bases. In 1967, the American allies in the frontier, including the three countries of the abortive MAPHILINDO and Singapore and Thailand, formed the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) as a pro-Western Cold War bloc with democratic developmentalism as its ideological bedrock.

**Conclusion: postcolonialism and the multitude**

Anderson’s recent study of the anarchist underpinnings of incipient anti-colonial nationalisms at the turn of the twentieth century indicates that connections between anti-colonialists on the move across state and cultural boundaries have woven a tapestry of political resistance in Asia and beyond, which continues to threaten to unwind the bounded postcolonial nation. I am wary of capturing the subaltern sphere, an abject space of practices that were unrepresented or unrepresentable in colonial and postcolonial ethnographic governmentality, under a Western political sign as paradoxically clear as ‘Anarchism’. The frontier is full of unbounded movements, and the home/base vectorial moments of frontier ethnography are hegemonic attempts to pin down these movements for disciplined governmentality and imperial formation. With Anderson mimicking neoliberal-speak when he ends his study of two Filipino nationalists with anarchist connections describing them as ‘crucial nodes in the infinitely complex intercontinental networks’, is social science today replicating the role of colonial ethnography of the past in interdicting the movements into predictable vectors?

Scholars on Philippine postcoloniality have often marshaled the figure and writings of Jose Rizal as the antidote or the exemplar of resistance to the American culture nestled in the Philippine soul. San Juan, Jr reads Rizal as the materialist dialectician. Even when Rizal performs the colonial ethnographic gesture to mark the ‘ Orientals and Malays’ as ‘sensitive people’ who are willing to sacrifice everything for ‘an aspiration or a conceit’, San Juan, Jr reads him as couching Marx’s species being in explicitly oriental terms to posit the historical necessity for the inevitable progress of the Filipinos. For Rafael, Rizal’s ingenuity lies in another direction, as the performative ironist who, in the scene of Father Damaso’s failed Tagalog sermon in *Noli Me Tangere*, subverts the hierarchical ordering of colonial linguistic and ethnographic translation by showing how language ‘could also run amuck, rendering translation impossible, exploding the contract between ruler and ruled’. Reading the same novel, Anderson sees Rizal as the laughing iconoclast who had lobbed the literary equivalent of the anarchist’s grenade at the political severity and high culture of Spanish colonialism, which thus continues to undermine attempted nationalist ‘cacique’ appropriation of *Noli*
Me Tangere. I do not have an equivalent Rizal gesture to offer, except to suggest that the fact Rizal can be appropriated by the different postcolonialisms shows that he was indeed a multi-faceted polymath who could cross cultural boundaries with ease, yet aware of the postcolonial discomfort, and express the ‘rhizomal’ anarchies of the multitude, and the latter’s ‘common planetary needs’, providing ‘the specters of the past, tacking between the blowing winds of developmentalism and the flowing lahar of Philippines 2000’.  

Through this last pastiche of quotes on Philippine postcolonialism, I am alluding to Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of ‘the rhizome’, which through the interpretation of Hardt and Negri I have deployed as my theoretical frame throughout this essay. Space does not allow me to spell out my theorization here. Very briefly, the nation-state in the imperial frontier is more than a rooting device, for the frontier demands not the pruning of tree-roots but the disciplining of rhizomal movements, and the home/base vectors serve as the instruments of capture to bound the tracings to tight lines of channeled flows and rootedness. The Philippines is a special nation for this very reason, for it is a conduit of an Americanism that fades into the Asian frontier, though mainstream and radical scholars alike misunderstand this as founded in the special relationship between the political elites of the United States and the Philippines. The balikbayan and the ‘overseas contract worker’ are the lahar, the blood, the abjected fluids that flow through the neoliberal frontier conduit, giving force to the Americanism while threatening to unravel it at the same time. As Hardt and Negri observe, the movements of the multitude cannot be reduced to ‘a monologic history; they cannot but be carnivalesque’, springing forth ‘freedom of singularities that converge in the production of the common’. The Philippine nation may be bleeding out in this neoliberal globalization, but its exemplars of the multitude’s elemental resistance, laborers and intelligentsia, indio and ilustrado, carrying carnivalesque ideas on their backs, continue to steal through the postcolonial Asian frontier.

Notes
I would like to thank Chua Beng Huat, Lou Janssen Dangzalan and participants at the Asia Research Institute’s ‘Workshop on Mutating Postcolonial Cultural Modalities in Contemporary Southeast Asia’, November 2007, for their critical comments.


POSTCOLONIAL DISORIENTATIONS


17 The Philippine Teacher 1(1), Dec. 15, 1904, p 22.


19 Correspondence between the Secretary to the President of the United States and Luke E Wright, July 1908, file 2223/103, entry 5, BIA.


26 Report of the Governor General, 1933, p 12; in 1931, Davis reported that the growing agrarian unrest was due to landowners ‘grabbing the lands of the poor’ due to the latter’s ignorance (Davis to Parker, Feb. 19, 1931, file 1239/a/159, entry 5, BIA).


Manuel V Arguelles, ‘The Filipino Racial Complex’, The Filipino People 3(11), March 1916, pp 11, 21–24. I was unable to trace the institutional affiliation and background of the author. It is possible that this is the same Manuel Arguelles who organized the revolutionary government in Lucena, Tayabas, in 1896, and who later led a peace commission to Manila during the Philippine-American War to confer with the Schurman Philippine Commission. The power base of Manuel Quezon, the nationalist representative lobbying for Philippine independence in Washington at this time and the publisher of The Filipino People, was in Tayabas.


File 26073/15, entry 5, BIA.

Rafael R Alunan, Agricultural Development in Southeastern Asia and Malaysia: A Report on His Observations while Cruising with the Governor-General of the Philippine Islands, on the USS Pittsburgh, from February 28 to April 14, 1931, Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1931, pp 17, 99, 98.


