

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Rick Baldoz. *The Third Asiatic Invasion: Empire and Migration in Filipino America, 1898-1946*. New York: New York University Press, 2011. viii + 301 pp. \$79.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8147-9108-0; \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8147-9109-7.

Reviewed by Stephanie Hinnershitz (University of Maryland)

Published on H-Empire (May, 2013)

Commissioned by Charles V. Reed



The Legal Entanglements of Empire, Race, and Filipino Migration to the United States

Sociologist Rick Baldoz's monograph *The Third Asiatic Invasion* is an important work for historians seeking to bridge the fields of immigration and imperial studies. Following the lead of historian Paul Kramer (*The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* [2006]) and English/American studies experts Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (*Cultures of United States Imperialism* [1994]), scholars are closely examining the impact of American colonial projects overseas on the development of domestic policies and social/racial structures within the United States itself, emphasizing the influence of the periphery on the metropole. Within the past ten years, such historians as Dorothy Fujita-Rony (*American Workers, Colonial Power: Philippine Seattle and the Transpacific West, 1919-1941* [2002]) and Catherine Ceniza Choy (*Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History* [2003]) have focused on Filipino migrants (agricultural workers in the case of Fujita-Rony and female nurses in Choy's work) who settled in America during the early twentieth century and their experiences as both racial minorities and colonial subjects as a way to explore a reverse flow of influence from the Philippines to the United States. While Fujita-Rony and Choy have centered their work on specific groups in order to expose the role of colonialism in shaping Filipino migration to America, Baldoz employs the wider lens of American imperial laws and policies, analyzing the complicated legal status of Filipinos who came to the United States between the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898 and the Philippines' achievement of independence

in 1946. With the publication of *The Third Asiatic Invasion*, Baldoz is at the forefront of an exciting new trend in American imperial and immigration history that advocates for the analysis of a transnational legal system which shaped both foreign and domestic policies during the interwar years.

The focus of *The Third Asiatic Invasion* on empire and migration in Filipino America is not a new topic, but Baldoz's fascinating analysis of the interplay between colonial, federal, and local laws in relation to the racial and political status of Filipinos adds a new layer. As Baldoz effectively argues, transpacific migration between the Philippines and the United States "highlights the contentious politics surrounding Filipinos' migration to the United States and the ways in which their arrival confounded authorities charged with enforcing racial and national boundaries" (p. 7). Baldoz uses a combination of historical synthesis and archival research (sources include personal accounts, newspapers, labor records, and, most important, legal cases) to analyze both the experiences of Filipinos as nationals (not American citizens, yet not aliens under colonial and immigration policies) and the reactions of American politicians, lawmakers, nativist organizations, and social scientists to another "Asian invasion" of the United States during the early decades of the twentieth century.

Baldoz begins with an examination of race-based colonial rule in the Philippines and traces the impact of

empire on Filipino migration, race relations, and American law. The chapters lay out the social, political, and racial drama that unfolded when the first Filipino laborers arrived in the United States to work in agriculture along the Pacific Coast, resulting in outcries from labor leaders and workers who feared the negative impact of Filipino men on fair wage competition and the racial purity of America. From calls to restriction on Filipino migration (as nationals, Filipinos were able to enter the United States even under the restrictive Immigration Act of 1924, which barred all other Asians from migrating to America) to brutal violence, nativist groups attempted to curtail the influx of Filipinos and maintain racial distances between themselves and the “Little Brown Brothers” living in the United States. Although a series of legislative victories for nativists, including the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934 (which reclassified Filipinos as aliens), and the granting of Filipino independence in 1946 succeeded in restricting the relatively free movement of Filipinos between the United States and the Philippines, Filipinos repeatedly used the American courts to challenge antimiscegenation laws, labor discrimination, and alien land laws. This “entanglement of domestic and international boundary controls” and the complex relationship of Filipinos to the American racial and imperial legal systems form the basis of Baldoz’s study and guide the reader through the early history of Filipino migration to the United States and the resulting debates concerning empire and race (p. 23).

The Third Asiatic Invasion’s major contribution to our understanding of both Filipino history and America’s imperial undertakings is the detailed look at how empire and migration played out on various levels of legal battles in the United States. Although Baldoz fills out well-known incidents in the Filipino American experience with interesting details (such as his inclusion of the influence of sociological studies on the “Filipino boy crisis” leading up to the brutal Watsonville riots of 1930 in California) in the early chapters, it is his careful analysis of court cases involving Filipino claims to citizenship and accompanying rights based on their status as nationals that sets *The Third Asiatic Invasion* apart from other work. The third chapter, “It Is the Fight of This National against the Filipinos,” is the most ground-breaking section of Baldoz’s study, providing an interesting look at how Filipinos and local, state, and federal courts and legal officials clashed over the ambiguous racial and colonial status of Filipinos. As Baldoz explains, “the arrival of Filipinos exposed the shifting and uncertain boundaries of the nations’ ascriptive [racial] hierarchy ... and cre-

ated dilemmas for American law makers who had to reconcile official proclamations of imperial liberty on the international front with established traditions of racial subordination and exclusion on the domestic front.” While federal law may have dictated that Filipinos were American nationals, few local and state officials knew quite what to make of this legal category and what it meant for racial traditions and customs. And while American “gatekeepers including judges, state officials, and local bureaucrats” attempted to decode the ambiguous meaning of “national” and decipher exactly where Filipinos fell on the racial scale (Were Filipinos members of the Mongolian race and therefore subject to the same restrictions as other Asian groups? Or were they Malays, a racial category distinct from the Chinese and Japanese?), Filipinos themselves “contested their assignment into disadvantaged social categories, often using the federal government’s own bureaucratic machine against itself” (p. 71). Filipinos took advantage of ambiguities in their legal status and, as Baldoz highlights, often used the U.S. court system to challenge racial and social discriminatory local and state laws.

As Baldoz explains, one area in which the racial and national status of Filipinos confounded local and state officials was interracial marriage. During the 1920s and 1930s (when Filipino migration to the United States increased), Filipino men often entered into relationships and marriages with white women, to the dismay of nativist, West Coast organizations and individuals who feared “race-mixing” and the pernicious effects of “hypersexualized” Filipinos on vulnerable and pure white women. In California, where Filipino attempts to marry whites were common, a complex web of social and legal conflicts regarding intermarriage developed. Although California established antimiscegenation laws during the 1920s that prevented interracial marriage, many Filipino men circumvented possible legal road blocks to marrying their white sweethearts by declaring their membership to the Malay race (rather than Mongolian or Asian descent) on marriage licenses. While this tactic may have allowed some interracial couples to obtain a license to wed, problems arose when Filipino husbands and their white wives traveled to different cities or states or when outside social pressures resulted in petitions for divorce or annulment from either the husband or wife. In these situations, local judges were left to contend with the viability of the original decision of local officials to grant a marriage license, the national status of Filipinos, and the often puzzling task of assigning Filipinos to a specific racial group.

Baldoz uses the 1933 case of *Roldan v. Los Angeles and*

the State of California to tease out the various strands of race and empire that shaped legal battles involving intermarriage. In 1931, California Supreme Court Judge Walter Gates granted Filipino Salvador Roldan and Marjorie Rogers (Roldan's British fiancée) a writ of mandate after a Los Angeles county clerk rejected the couple's application for a marriage license on the grounds that Filipinos were Mongolians and therefore prohibited from marrying whites in California. In response to Walter's ruling, two county counsels filed an injunction with the California State Court of Appeals, leading to a complicated court case that was primarily concerned with determining the racial makeup of Filipinos. Eventually, the court ruled that Filipinos were members of the Malay race rather than Mongolians, and if the state of California wished to prevent Filipinos from intermarrying with whites, lawmakers were required to add "Malay" to the other racial categories in existing prohibitive legislation. Although the judges focused on the racial status of Filipinos in reaching their decision, the fact that Roldan used the court system to argue for both his legal and racial rights supports Baldoz's contention that the status of national created both obstacles and opportunities for Filipinos.

Despite the shallow victory in the Roldan case, Baldoz is quick to point to the retaliation of local and state officials against the court's ruling. While county clerks openly defied the state court by refusing to grant licenses to Filipino/white couples, state lawmakers were successful in passing bills in 1933 that outlawed marriages between whites and Malays. When Filipinos responded by seeking marriages in states that did not have restrictions on interracial marriage, such as Utah and New Mexico, California lawmakers counterattacked by strongly encouraging officials of these states to enact antimiscegenation laws, warning of the trouble that lay beneath the surface of interracial marriages. In spite of the legal restrictions, Filipinos continued to pursue intermarriage, eliciting extralegal responses from nativist Americans in the form of violent, vigilante justice and a push to restrict and/or prohibit Filipino migration to the United States. By focusing on the Roldan case, Baldoz exposes the legal parlay between Filipinos and state, local, and federal law officials that was a product of the ambiguous racial and legal status of migrants from the Philippines. Baldoz clearly demonstrates the ways in which Filipino migration to the United States continually challenged Americans to respond to the racial and legal perplexities of empire. As a result, Baldoz makes a compelling argument for the further integration of immigration, racial, and imperial history.

In fact, Baldoz's emphasis on the connections between migration and empire in U.S. history leaves the reader yearning for more details on the relationship between Filipinos and other marginal groups, such as Mexican and Puerto Rican migrants. Although Baldoz provides tantalizing references to the existence of "Pacific borderlands" that encompassed interactions between and among a variety of migrant groups (including Filipinos) (p. 70), these interactions never become an integral component of the larger narrative of *The Third Asiatic Invasion*. While discussions of interactions between Filipinos and Mexicans, for example, who shared similar experiences in such areas as labor organization and contested racial status are not necessary for advancing Baldoz's arguments, a more inclusive discussion of similarities and/or differences among Filipinos and other groups would usefully complicate the role of American imperialism in the construction of domestic policies relating to race and migration.

A more in-depth explanation of the roles of geography and demographics (in addition to the complicated colonial status) would also help to further clarify how and why the Filipino experience in the United States was unique. While Baldoz explains in his introduction that nativist attitudes against Filipinos were particularly strong along the West Coast where a series of "Asiatic invasions" shaped racist and discriminatory responses to Filipino migration during the 1920s and 1930s, it would be interesting to hear more about the experiences of Filipinos in other parts of the United States. How did the Filipinos' complex national status influence their lives in other regions, such as Chicago, for example? Also, the uneven ratio of male to female migrants during the early twentieth century was an important factor in shaping Filipino life in America and deserves more interrogation. By reading through the chapters, it is clear that this Filipino wave of migration between 1898 and 1946 was overwhelmingly male, but Baldoz does not outwardly address this issue. Again, these points do not detract from Baldoz's overall argument, but they do raise some important questions relating to the nature of Filipino migration in comparison with other groups.

Overall, *The Third Asiatic Invasion* is a well-researched and interesting study of the legal complications of empire, shown through the lens of Filipino American history. Baldoz creates exciting avenues for further areas of inquiry relating to the connections between migration and colonialism and the impact of imperialism on American domestic policies and laws concerning race.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-empire>

Citation: Stephanie Hannershitz. Review of Baldoz, Rick, *The Third Asiatic Invasion: Empire and Migration in Filipino America, 1898-1946*. H-Empire, H-Net Reviews. May, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38974>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.