

**Faye Caronan.** *Legitimizing Empire: Filipino American and U.S. Puerto Rican Cultural Critique.* Asian American Experience Series. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015. 208 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-03925-6.



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Faye Caronan's *Legitimizing Empire* critiques the use of dominant historical, literary, and visual representations of Filipinos and Puerto Ricans to affirm narratives of American exceptionalism. It further argues that prior Filipino American and US Puerto Rican critiques of such representations have often been excluded from the cultural mainstream, allowing the reaffirmation of revised (modern) American exceptionalism, sometimes in the guise of multiculturalism. Caronan convincingly claims that Filipino American and US Puerto Rican challenges to this narrative have come primarily in the realm of culture, as culture provides a space where critiques of such institutionalized narratives can more easily emerge. Finally, she seeks to relocate Filipino American and US Puerto Rican cultures within the historical context of US imperialism and neo-imperialism rather than within distinct multiculturalist or nationalist narratives.

Caronan's work effectively challenges the myth of the United States as a reluctant empire.

The assumed "incapacity" of these outlying regions for self-government, without the intervention of beneficent white men, and their inhabitants' lower status in a gendered and racialized hierarchy are the common starting points of such narratives. Caronan claims that the legitimization of such presentations by American historians was complete by the mid-twentieth century. In light of the recent revival of overt American exceptionalism in the historiography, presenting the United States as an enlightened democratic teacher rather than an imperial conqueror, Caronan's work is particularly welcome and necessary.[1]

Caronan highlights continuities between the early twentieth century and the present, noting that "young students [continue to be] taught that the United States reluctantly intervenes in other nation's affairs only to ensure the development of democracy" (p. 6). Furthermore, she contends that the reproduction of colonial inequalities and racial hierarchies are clearly visible in either locale in the age of globalization. Indeed, the citation of Puerto Rico and the Philippines as exem-

plars of “successful” American intervention remains central to claims of American “anti-imperial” exceptionalism. Against the current backdrop of debt-laden Puerto Rico as “America’s Greece,” subject to brutal austerity and asset-stripping, this exceptionalist reading is under renewed challenge. Yet, as Caronan notes, Puerto Rico continues to serve as a model of a “covert U.S. empire, one without official colonies” (p. 9).

Chapters 1 and 2 analyze two novels, the Filipino American Jessica Hagedorn’s *Dog eaters* (1990) and the US Puerto Rican Esmeralda Santiago’s *América’s Dream* (1975). Caronan seeks to free both books from the confines of minority literary canons (Asian American and Latina/Latino respectively) and instead examines the novels’ shared critique of US “benevolent assimilation.” Caronan contextualizes the authors’ treatment of the tourism industry through use of travel literature. Indeed, she claims that in “their commodification of ethnic cultures, ethnic novels and contemporary travel guides are today’s equivalent to the photograph catalogs of the United States’ new island territories at the turn of the twentieth century” (pp. 21-22). Her analysis of *Our Islands and Their People* (1899) and the *Lonely Planet: Philippines* and *Lonely Planet: Puerto Rico* travel guides largely proves this claim through these texts’ use to manufacture consent for US global power. Particularly intriguing in her analysis of the *Lonely Planet* guides are the contrasts drawn between narratives of racial harmony in Puerto Rico, where the United States remains sovereign, and narratives of racial and sexual danger in the Philippines where previous US influence (such as the presence of the Clark Military Base in Angeles) has been carefully expunged.

Caronan’s focus on tourism’s reproduction of colonial inequalities and the need to cater to foreign expectations demonstrates continuing neocolonial relationships, which result in Filipino and Puerto Rican officials devaluing the priorities of their own populace to serve tourists. The mar-

keting of both locations first as colonies with abundant natural resources, and then as tourist sites with exotic cultures and “untouched” natural environments, serves to emphasize such continuities between the formal colonialism of the 1890s and the informal (Philippines) and unacknowledged (Puerto Rico) colonialism of the present (p. 44). Further, the classification and packaging of counter-narratives authored by Filipino Americans and US Puerto Ricans, including Hagedorn’s *Dog eaters* and Santiago’s *América’s Dream*, subtly undermine the critique offered by the authors, by presenting both colonial spaces as escapist fantasy lands divorced from the reality of American power.

The portrayal of rape in both *América’s Dream* and *Dog eaters*, Caronan argues, represents the history of invasion and subjugation by the United States. The widespread presentation by US policymakers of colonies as feminine figures successfully “courted” by the United States certainly rings true. The issue of consent becomes obscured by such narratives, however, as the contention that either region willingly chose to join the American Empire in return for protection and economic growth is, at best, highly contested. In both novels, the rape victim, *América* and Daisy Avila respectively, represent their nation. Neither rape is reported or publicly acknowledged. Caronan interprets the rape of the women by Puerto Rican and Filipino men as representing “local complicity in the perpetuation of U.S. neocolonialism in Puerto Rico and the Philippines.” “Ironically”—she continues—“the revised metaphor articulates neocolonial power *too well*” as “corrupt postcolonial governments can easily be held completely responsible” for the poverty and economic stagnation caused by Spanish and US colonialism (p. 69).

Chapter 3, “Bastards of U.S. Imperialism,” builds on the metaphor of heterosexual relations to explore the byproducts of those encounters: “the resulting governments, the hybrid cultures”

and above all “the subsequent im/migrants to the United States” (p. 73). Caronan examines these themes primarily through two documentary films, Camilla Griggers’s *Memories of a Forgotten War* (2001) and Rosie Perez’s *Yo soy Boricua, pa’que tu lo Sepas!* (I’m Puerto Rican, Just So You Know! [2006]). Both seek to challenge narratives of American colonial benevolence by reviving the metaphors of heterosexual romance and benevolent paternalism to describe the colonial relationship. In this way, classic narratives of American Empire and US exceptionalism, such as “benevolent assimilation,” are successfully challenged. The chapter concludes by noting that the deployment of the paternal relationship shines a light on an “Uncle Sam [who] only recognizes his children when it benefits him” (p. 103).

Chapter 4, “Performing Genealogies,” focuses specifically on Puerto Rican activist performance poets in New York City and their American Filipino contemporaries in Los Angeles. These groups recognize the centrality of public education and the language of “tutelage” to American imperialism in the Philippines and Puerto Rico, and the subsequent shaping of Puerto Rican and Philippine history to legitimize American intervention (p. 106). In response, rejecting narratives of national progress, the performers instead focus on decolonizing identities through individuals’ narratives. This chapter is based on a series of personal interviews conducted in 2005-6. Caronan adeptly situates the performance poets as products of colonial history, and convincingly describes their work as a means to recover histories deemed institutionally “illegitimate” (pp. 107). This is the most overtly theoretical and therefore controversial of Caronan’s chapters. However, her section titled “Authorizing Other Speakers,” focuses on Puerto Rican performance poets’ emphasis on educating a new generation in their method of knowledge transfer, is informative. It demonstrates how something as simple as the identification of the narrator with the students can have a potentially transformative impact in legitimizing

otherwise excluded voices within both society itself and historical work. Despite their hard work, Caronan notes, unlike popular novelists such as Hagedorn and Santiago or famous film producers like Rosie Perez, they are unable to challenge hegemonic narratives of US exceptionalism for a mainstream American audience.

Caronan’s *Legitimizing Empire*, although challenging and sometimes controversial, would make an excellent supplementary text for history classes examining the American Empire or for classes exploring the tensions and complexities of multiculturalism in the modern United States. Clearly this should not be the first book to confront students unfamiliar with the issues raised. However, in such specialized classes it would be an excellent addition. The book is not the taste of all due to its interdisciplinary approach. Yet its successful location of both mainstream American culture and the subcultures examined in the context of historic American imperialism (and ongoing neo-imperialism) is impressive and thought provoking. It very effectively challenges enduring narratives of “benevolent assimilation” in the history of American imperialism, and of multiculturalism as retrospectively justifying such US exceptionalism (p. 143). It also draws a sharp distinction between those forms of Filipino American and US Puerto Rican cultural productions that can be easily repackaged to support such narratives of US exceptionalism (including *Dogeaters* and *Yo soy Boricua, pa’que tu lo Sepas!*) and those that cannot, such as the work of the performance poets discussed in chapter 4. This book has much to say to a variety of academic and popular audiences. This is made most evident in the final pages when the author speculates on the future cultural products resulting from American intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan, noting that “the United States will take credit for the new beginning it has given to Iraq and Afghanistan but not take responsibility for the consequences of insisting on that new beginning” (p. 154).

Note

[1]. See, e.g., Jeremi Suri, *Liberty's Surest Guardian: American Nation-Building from the Founders to Obama* (New York: Free Press, 2011); and Elizabeth Cobbs Hoffman, *American Umpire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

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