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Review: Asian Place, Filipino Nation: A Global Intellectual History of the Philippine Revolution, 1887-1912 -- by Nicole CuUnjieng Aboitiz

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Asian Place, Filipino Nation: A Global Intellectual History of the Philippine Revolution, 1887-1912. By Nicole CuUnjieng Aboitiz, New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. Hardcover: $140.00, Pp. 264, ISBN 9780231192149.

Review by
CHARLES BROPHY

In *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, Nicole CuUnjieng Aboitiz sets out to write the history of the Philippine Revolution beyond the nationalist and imperial historiography which has hitherto dominated its narration. In doing so, Aboitiz gives focus to the Philippine Revolution as part of a "global moment" in which its unfolding emerged not through a dichotomy between imperial centre and periphery, but also through interactions between peripheries. With this perspective, she renders the experience of the Revolution as not only a national one, but as regional and global as well.

In studying the Revolution beyond a dichotomy between imperial centre and periphery, Aboitiz turns to the place of the Revolution within Pan-Asianist thought, as a site of inter-Asian imaginaries. Yet, in giving focus to the importance of Pan-Asianism for the Revolution, Aboitiz highlights another centre-periphery dynamic, one within the historiography of Pan-Asianism itself. The historiography of Pan-Asianism is dominated by a focus on the concept as emanating from Japan, with peripheral Southeast Asian countries seen as pursuing a derivative Pan-Asianism. Against this, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation* gives an account of the Philippine Revolution which expands its intellectual horizons, highlighting the Revolution's Asian scope, whilst situating Filipino political thinkers as generative of Pan-Asianist thought. In doing so Aboitiz's book calls for a focus on the study of global political thought through interactions within the periphery, which gives renewed focus to the other foundations of the modern nation-state system in Southeast Asia.

Central to this is Aboitiz's reading of the Philippine Revolution through an emerging field of global intellectual history. In doing so, Aboitiz builds upon transnational anti-colonial thought in the work of Partha Chatterjee, Erez Manela and Cemil Aydin,[1] and roots the emergence of the nationalist Philippine Revolution in a "transnational transmission of ideas",[2] highlighting the way in which Filipino nationalist thought emerged within a global intellectual space. Where Aboitiz's work further contributes to this literature is in its greater concern with how Filipino nationalists moved from global and universalist concerns towards local and national demands. The text is particularly concerned with how Filipino thinkers moved from a global and Pan-Asianist consciousness to a

1 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Erez Manela,. *The Wilsonian Moment: Self Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

2 Nicole CuUnjieng Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation: A Global Intellectual History of the Philippine Revolution, 1887-1912* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 3.

sense of Filipino identity—localising the global.

Here Aboitiz's work turns to the concept of place. The standard account of anti-colonial nationalism has centred around the work of Partha Chatterjee. He argued that nationalism emerged in the colonial world through an appropriation of the universalism of Western modernity, yet in a way which asserted the national difference of the colonised. In *The Nation and its Fragments* Chatterjee has argued that reacting to the Western modern, anti-colonial nationalists first asserted their national sovereignty within the 'spiritual domain' of religion and culture, marking a difference between the spirituality of the nation and the materialism of Western modernity.[3] In Aboitiz's work this distinction emerges as a division between the transnational flows of global thought and the embeddedness and locality of place as a "non-universal plane" of particularity: national, ethnic, and geographic.

As Aboitiz recounts, whilst European empires asserted sovereignty over their colonies through reliance upon a regulative idea (Christianity in the case of the Spanish Empire, technological improvement in the case of the British) it was through a juxtaposition between this idea and the colony's place that nationalist movements emerged, challenging the universality of claims to imperial rule within particular, or national, claims of difference. Yet where Aboitiz's account diverges from Chatterjee's is in its insistence that this assertion of difference and of place did not take the form of a detachment from a global and regional space. Rather, Aboitiz argues that the Filipino assertion of place occurred *within* a regional and global space. In this sense Aboitiz's account resonates with the work of Andrew Sartori on the global history of Bengali culturalism, in which—critiquing Chatterjee's assumption of anti-colonial nationalism as occurring through an opposition between fixed pre-modern notions of community and the colonial state—Sartori seeks to highlight the global space within which such culturalism was constituted.[4]

To highlight this dynamic, Aboitiz turns to the way in which Filipino nationalists thought through questions of race, with particular attention to the newspaper *La Solidaridad*. As Aboitiz outlines, Filipino nationalists mixed pre-colonial forms of identity with European thinking around race and Social Darwinism to assert a Malay racial identity as a basis for a future Filipino national identity. Yet in keeping with her arguments around place, this identity was not subordinated to a narrow nationalism.

3 Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*.

4 Andrew Sartori, *Bengal in Global Concept History: Culturalism in the Age of Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

On the one hand it linked up to broader ideas of Malayness and Pan-Malay sentiments, linking Filipino nationalists to questions of national belonging in Indonesia and British Malaya. On the other hand, it asserted Malayness as a broader category capable of including a wider array of Asian populations, particularly the Japanese. Thus, while Japan provided a future model of a non-colonial Philippines, it was through a sense of geographic and racial brotherhood that early nationalists could imagine forms of cooperation outside of colonialism.

In Chapter 3 Aboitiz then traces the development of the Filipino revolution from the nationalist thought of Rizal to the formation of the Katipunan under Bonifacio. Aboitiz argues that the turn to a more direct political nationalism did not shrink away from earlier Pan-Asian visions of the Filipino Revolution, but remained transnational in its scope. The Katipunan vision was neither a nativist reaction to an earlier cosmopolitan intellectual culture, nor a proletarian corrective to bourgeois liberalism, and remained caught up within the transnational intellectual history of the Propaganda movement: adopting the language of liberty, equality, fraternity, progress, and enlightenment; cheering on the rebels in Cuba; following the Japanese victory in 1895; and forging transnational connections and bases across Asia. Here Aboitiz highlights the role of cities like Hong Kong and Yokohama as "safety valves" and as "cosmopolitan cities in which Asian subversives could act with greater political freedom as well as cities in which they imagined richer alternative lives counter to their colonial conditions".[5] In doing so, she echoes Tim Harper's recent work on the Asian underground, as transnational spaces in which Asian revolutionaries organised against colonial regimes.[6]

The importance of such transnational networks is further explored in Chapter 4 where Aboitiz turns to the figure of Mariano Ponce, who handled the "international desk" for *La Solidaridad* and became an ambassador of the Filipino Revolution. As Aboitiz highlights, this role wasn't merely the expression of a national revolution reaching out for regional or international solidarity, but was rooted in Ponce's own Pan-Asianist thought—thought that was manifest in his earlier scholarship on regional folklore and his comparative accounts of colonial Southeast Asia, as well as his reflections on the rise of Japan. It is by studying Ponce's meetings with other Asianists such as Kang-Yu Wei, Sun Yat-Sen, as well as Japanese Pan-Asianists such as Hirata Hyobei and Fukushima Yasumasa, that Aboitiz highlights the "affective ties" which brought Asian nationalists and revolutionaries together in a shared sense of destiny and struggle.

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5 Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 92.

6 Tim Harper, *Underground Asia: Global Revolutionaries and the Assault on Empire* (London: Allen Lane, 2020).

It is in reference to Ponce that Aboitiz highlights how her understanding of the Filipino Revolution's transnationalism differs from that of earlier scholars. Whereas Sven Matthiesson has argued that – while Ponce and others had a sense of inter-Asian solidarity – it would be "far-fetched" to refer to them as Pan-Asianists, against Matthiesson, Aboitiz argues that if a pure Pan-Asianism untainted by geopolitical and nationalist considerations did not emerge in the period, Pan-Asianism remains central in spite of its impurity. As Aboitiz argues: "for the colonized, an unmitigated idealism in the negotiation of fields of power was simply impractical and unrealistic. As such, there was basically no 'true' Pan-Asianism among the colonized or in Southeast Asia… because during this colonial era in Southeast Asia essentially no activist political thinker was untouched by priorities of self-determination and geopolitical realism".[7] Yet as she continues, "It is important, however, to recover the Pan-Asianism of the 'periphery' and to understand the ways in which it interacted with that of the center, rather than merely dismissing or occluding to its existence for failure to conform to the center".[8] The important methodological consideration which needs to be further addressed is how we are to separate out Pan-Asianist thought from concrete political and geopolitical considerations.

In the final chapter Aboitiz builds upon such concerns by turning to the afterlives of the Filipino Revolution, and the way this peripheral Pan-Asianism came to subsequently influence political movements in China, Indonesia, and the broader Malay World. She argues that the Pan-Asian legacy was continued in the Philippines in the later thought of Artemio Ricarte, Benigno Ramos, and President Jose P. Laurel, building upon earlier racialised and Darwinian understandings of Asianism— which in the case of Jose P. Laurel could justify the Japanese Occupation. Finally, Aboitiz turns to post-war projects of Pan-Malay unity, ones which in transgressing imperial borders highlighted the potential for an Asianism from the periphery, in the form of an Indonesia Raya or Melayu Raya, or in Diosdado Macapagal's later Maphilindo (an amalgamation of Malaysia, Philippines and Indonesia), uniting the peoples of the Malay World within a confederation of states.

It is then in highlighting such alternative geopolitical imaginings that Aboitiz's project encourages us to study political thought beyond the hegemonic projects of the imperial centre. And in giving emphasis to the globality and transnationality of these peripheral imaginings of place, nation, and region, Aboitiz's work should— more generally— encourage a greater focus on the global dimensions of Southeast Asian political thought.

7 Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation,* 132.

8 Aboitiz, *Asian Place, Filipino Nation*, 132.