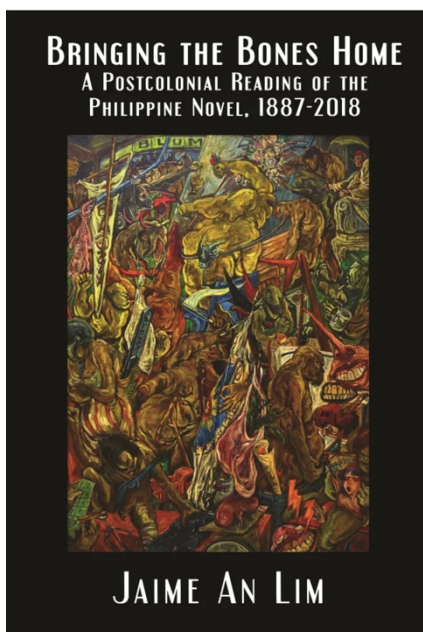


Book Review



Bringing the Bones Home: A Postcolonial Reading of the Philippine Novel, 1887-2018. By Jaime An Lim. Quezon City: The University of the Philippines Press, 2024. ISBN 978-621-09-0083-5. 300 pages; 23 cm.

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Novels Narrating the Philippine Postcolonial condition

The evening news on the unrelenting rise in oil prices (since March!) reminded me that the geopolitical tension between Iraq and the United States has involved me rather involuntarily. A couple of weeks ago, I kept track of the Commission on Higher Education's dehumanizing proposal to reframe the General Education Courses, which would displace arts and humanities education to advance a neoliberal agenda and prepare college graduates as globally competitive machines. The analysis of the Philippine society as semi-feudal and semi-colonial engenders

nation-building initiatives for activists. Despite good intentions, they are prone to red tagging and state violence, as evidenced by the Toboso killings.

A mere awareness of events with an ahistorical, uncritical way of viewing allows us to kowtow to the world order that oppresses us. I wonder how we would benefit as a nation had we been equipped with theories to scrutinize our postcolonial reality. Jaime An Lim turns to literature to examine the country through his 2024 book, *Bringing the Bones Home: A Postcolonial Reading of the Philippine Novel, 1887-2018*.

In characterizing the Philippines within and beyond foreign subjugations, Lim ruminates on the 12 novels by marrying the conventions of formalist and Marxist criticism. He organizes his essays into four historical periods, with three representative texts each: the 333-year Spanish regime (Jose Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*, Linda Ty-Casper's *The Three-Cornered Sun*, and F. Sionil Jose's *Po-on*), the American rule (Maximo Kalaw's *The Filipino Rebel*, Juan Laya's *His Native Soil*, and Bienvenido Santos' *The Man Who (Thought He) Looked Like Robert Taylor*), the Japanese Occupation (Stevan Javellana's *Without Seeing the Dawn*, Edilberto Tiempo's *More Than Conquerors*, and Wilfrido Nollado's *But for the Lovers*); and the post-independence period in 1946 to 2018 (Ninotchka Rosca's *Twice Blessed*, Miguel Syjuco's *Ilustrado*, and Gina Apostol's *Insurrecto*).

This review of *Bringing the Bones Home* provides an overview of the critical essays by engaging with the following salient notions: novelistic interpretations of revolution, imperialism of suasion, forms of anarchy, and the repercussions of colonization in the post-independence era. I remark that Lim's

work could be read as a historical resource, a political critique, and a literary rumination. The nature of this book could hold pedagogical value in a nation where the liberatory potential of literature and critical studies remains underrecognized by the public.

Philippine Novels as Keepers of Colonial Memory

The first part frames the novelists as political actors articulating their vision of independence under the Spanish colony. The section aptly starts with *Noli*, published in 1887. Jose Rizal's literary impact is unmatched, and his reformist ideology in *Noli* might have been the reason that elevated him to the status of a national hero. Lim situates the abode of Capitan Tiago to render the banquet as a microcosm of Philippine society held captive by the colony. Rizal was adamant about targeting the Spanish friars as tyrants, yet the novel does not endorse revolution as a response. The contradictions, among other symbolic binaries, "are not modes of ambivalence but modes of accommodation (Lim, 2024, p. 29)." And to extend the interplay, Rizal followed up the assimilationist *Noli* with *El Filibusterismo*, marking a more militant political posturing (Mojares, 1983).

In the 1979 novel *Three-Cornered Sun*, "Ty-Casper can only take the revolution as a given, not a choice (Lim, 2024, p.32)." Beyond the proverbial bloodshed in fighting the colonizers, the novel perceives the revolution as a political and, more significantly, a moral act: "the idea of the revolution as a mass movement, a physical as well as an ideological and a spiritual process of becoming (Lim, 2024, p. 33)." Meanwhile, readers stand on the cusp of Spanish colonization and the dawn of the American period in F. Sionil Jose's 1984 novel *Po-on*. The theme of liberation was harkened back to, more so as it was portrayed

as a formative moment in the birth of a national consciousness: transcending the self, the family unit, and the ethnolinguistic group, and extending to the country of allegiance.

Lim prefaces the section on the American Period by exposing the justification for their entry into the Philippines: Benevolent Assimilation, the notion of Manifest Destiny, the expansionist project through Progress and Modernization, etc. The book exposes that the American colonizer waxes romantic, not to exonerate their war crimes but to pivot to imperialism of suasion in our three novels.

Maximo Kalaw's *The Filipino Rebel*, published in 1930, was among the first novels to use the new colonial language. Lim assesses the literary language as "terribly flawed" and symptomatic of "imaginative and linguistic poverty." As in Filipino poetry in English, Gemino Abad (2004) covers this novel's publication as belonging to the Romantic phase, the writers' first attempt at English. But Abad clarifies that the apprenticeship was linguistic and cultural, since the country has already accomplished literary feats in both Spanish and regional languages. It seems, then, reductive to assess the text by a different standard. Even if Lim finds the literary qualities quite wanting, he describes it as a preeminently political novel, with its lucid anti-colonial sentiments at a period when artists involved in "seditious" plays could face imprisonment (Rafael, 2000). "While Kalaw's writing style is clumsy and already dated, his political insights remain surprisingly relevant even during the postcolonial era of the country (Lim, 2024, p. 75)."

It is interesting to note that the two succeeding "American occupation" novels, compared with the texts previously discussed, have their politics underpinned rather than

confrontational. His *Native Soil* by Juan Laya in 1941 depicts the insistence of Martin Romero, a Filipino repatriate, on transplanting his acquired American values upon his return to his hometown. With his acquired sensibilities in enterprise, sanitation, and culture, he inadvertently consents to subjugation by cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971). In the end, his renewal led to de-Americanization, his native soil telling him that the supposed superiority of American values is nothing compared to the rediscovery of the traditional customs that shaped him.

Lim also analyzed the 1983 novel *The Man Who (Thought He) Looked Like Robert Taylor*, by renowned diaspora writer Bienvenido Santos. Readers are acquainted with the bachelor Solomon King in the eleventh hour of his life in America. He evokes an affinity with recently dead Robert Taylor, a virile actor who starred in films like *Waterloo Bridge* and *Bataan*, even though the actor looks more like his colonizers. Lim (2024) writes, “Santos weaves an elegiac tale of unrealized dreams, betrayed loves, and wasted time (p. 104).” He subsisted on every menial job and retired as a butcher as a means of survival, which is a fate too common among Filipino immigrants in the USA. “The sad thing about Sol—the old-timer and the marginal man—is that he leaves no footprints behind, that his life has made no difference to anybody else (Lim, 2024, p. 117).” Neferti Tadiar (2022) calls this predicament remaindered life, “modalities of living that exceed the necessary reproduction of the becoming-human as a resource of disposable life for capital (p. 14).”

The third part of the book encompasses the Japanese Occupation from 1941 to 1945. The book asserts that this invasion is contingent on the prior colonization of the

Philippines; as the Philippines was an American colony, the country would serve as a base for a potential offensive against Japan. It adds that the Philippines' national integrity as Orientals is one of the agendas of the invasion through the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. This project presses Pan-Asianism, "which espouses the principle of a fundamental unity among all Asians and often presupposes a prominent role for Japan in leading an Asian renaissance (Schneider, 2012, p. 14)."

The common thread holding the three novels of this period speaks of carnage and anarchy. In the 1947 novel *Without the Break of Dawn*, Stevan Javellana portrays two parts: Day, about an idyllic life in a Filipino barrio, and Night, about the harrowing nightmares of the villagers through the war against the Japanese forces. In condemning sadism for which the Japanese Occupation is remembered, Lim (2024) writes:

Rape, because of its prevalence in the novel, has come to symbolize the ultimate desecration of the country, the violation of both body and spirit of the people... Even the young men are not spared the ultimate atrocity and dishonor. Live coals are heaped on Poncing's genitals and body before he is killed. Lucio, Flora's betrothed, has his genitals cut off. Teniente Paul, the village headman, is beheaded. The emasculation is both sexual and symbolic (p. 143).

This sufferance lingers in *More Than Conquerors* by Edilberto Tiempo, published in 1981. The physical and psychological brutalization of Filipino prisoners is the central action of the text, of which Lim (2024) recounts the acts of torture found in the novel. One instance:

Jose, the youngest of the Bantayan brothers, is not so lucky. In the public square, four stout two-inch square pegs are driven into the ground. Tilting outward, the pegs form the corners of an imaginary rectangle five feet by eight feet. With ropes tied to his wrists and ankles and then pulled around the pegs, Jose is stretched so taut that his body is lifted off the ground and his head left hanging backward. For two days and one night, he is thus spread-eagled like a human net, in the hot sun, with neither food nor water. (p. 156)

Torture not only shows the tenacity of the tortured but also the moral gauge of the torturer, Lim interjects. It is the sanctimony that drives the Japanese invasion; their force co-opted an anti-imperialist tenor through Asian values, and by opposing imperialism, they revealed themselves as another band of imperialists.

Completing the Japanese period is *But for the Lovers* by Wilfrido Nollado, published in 1970. The prose, characterized as hallucinatory and surreal, depicts Manila in the final days of the Japanese occupation in World War II. Lim (2024) generously praises his mastery of the language:

That he has chosen to structure his novel in so disorienting and so elliptical a manner already embodies his vision of the world's and the times' anarchy. In a sense, then, as an artist-falconer, the author can be said to have perfect control of his falcon. Chaos, paradoxically, has become a measure of order. (p. 170)

Lim also dissects the characters, their intersecting lives, and how they represent the country's historical struggles. The

complexity is intensified with the allusion and subtext, which makes reading it a triumph.

The fourth act represents the post-independence Philippines. The section used Ania Loomba's statement as one of the epigraphs, incisively capturing the conditions of our generation: "A country may be both postcolonial (in the sense of being formally independent) and neo-colonial (in the sense of remaining economically and/or culturally dependent) at the same time (as cited in Lim, 2024, p. 185)." Foreign occupation ceased, and anti-imperialist and liberation movements have been organized, but the ubiquitous soft power through former colonizers' influences shackles us surreptitiously. A postcolonial reading of newly published novels is crucial, if not more so, to challenge how we connect with ongoing epistemic violence.

When Ninotchka Rosca's *Twice Blessed* was first published in 1992, it was almost a decade after the Marcos Sr. dictatorship. (It is chilling to interject the Sr., as today's sitting president is the dictator's son who bears the same name). The novel satirizes the greed and political maneuvering of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. and former First Lady Imelda Marcos, with the presidential election as the central event. It is a cacophony of political family rivalry, backroom dealings, smear campaigns, the US backing reminiscent of *The Filipino Rebel*, and most of all, killings. Lim highlights the pivotal incident in the story; the plane crash killed everyone, except for our antihero, Hector Basbas. He was spared, but the novelist has to denigrate him.

Miguel Syjuco's 2010 novel *Ilustrado* casts a fictional Miguel Syjuco in contact with the deceased mentor, Crispin Salvador, by exploring/recounting his body of work. This premise allows the novelist to assemble disparate objects into a

loose narrative: scholarly works, news clippings, appropriations of real-life texts and personalities, etc. The characters' alienation in a foreign land is reminiscent of the previously discussed *Bienvenido Santos* novel, except that we are witnessing an *ilustrado* experience far removed from a common Filipino: "Despite their privileged lives, both take the option of living abroad as a means of escaping social and family pressures... Two lonely exiles in a wintry world. In each other's company, they are somehow less lonely and less cold (Lim, 2024, pp. 210-211)."

The book's investigation of the post-independent period closes in on my personal favorite, the 2018 novel, *Insurrecto* by Gina Apostol. Lim (2024) espouses that the metafictional construction is "how we construct or reconstruct history and memory. It challenges our traditional assumption that history is a linear and sequential fleshing out of events with verifiable or objective facts, that history is a record of what actually happened, that it is quintessentially a kind of truth-telling (Lim, 2024, p. 214)." The reader gets to know Magsalin, a local contact from Samar hired by filmmaker Chiara Brasi. As Brasi is piqued by the Balangiga Massacre for her film project, Magsalin (as the travel guide, translator, and collaborator) has a crucial way of reframing the version of the mass murder, contrary to what is perceived in the history books.

Lim may have downplayed the significance of Duterte's drug war in the book, as the recent rash of violence is markedly parallel with the US-American war. My reading of the novel zooms in on how familiar the Balangiga massacre is with the Tokhang: the institutionalized segmenting of an enemy group from a marginalized sector that should have been helped rather

than killed. The quote from General Jacob “Howling Wilderness” Smith shares the same rhetoric as the former President Duterte: “I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn. The more you kill and burn, the better it will please me (Apostol, 2018, p. 22).”

As with Lim (2024): “History is not always a written account. It is also a record of erasures, suppressions, and silencings (p. 225).” On December 11, 2018, the same year *Insurrecto* was released, comes a reckoning. The Balangiga bells were returned in Eastern Samar, 117 years after the US troops stole them from us.

The Pedagogical Value of Bringing the Bones Home

As early as 1956, the Rizal Law offered a reading campaign to the masses, recognizing literature's emancipatory power. But the paradox of Rizal as an omnipresent figure is that he is unread. Caroline Hau (2000) concedes to the reality that literature has no place in Philippine everyday life and culture. Additionally, Rolando Tolentino (2007) holds the education system responsible for Filipinos' reading attitudes, as schools remain sites of the banking model. In a Freirean perspective, the teacher adopting the banking model becomes the instrument that isolates the learner from the world. Because of systemic struggles pushing literature away, we miss out on the promises of critical literacy: “literature not only formulates the relationship between knowledge and action; it helps to actualize the action (Hau, 2000, p. 19).”

This book could address the disparity by positioning itself as pedagogical material that cuts across different bodies of knowledge, in an educational space aiming for a critically active

citizenry. Jaime An Lim tends to be multifarious and eclectic in his postcolonial analyses, influencing my treatment of his book as a historical resource, a political critique, and a literary rumination. By cleaving these dimensions, I hope to advance the instructional capacity of this Lim's work.

He deliberately juxtaposes historical accounts to back up his claims. He lifts accounts and direct quotations from public figures, for example, to demonstrate McKinley's phantasmagoric vision of the benevolent assimilation in the Philippines. Lim also quotes notable Filipino historians, including Resil Mojares, Teodoro Agoncillo, Caroline Hau, and Renato Constantino. Perhaps Lim intimates that a history education is made meaningful by reading literature, and a literature education should be historicized.

The order of essays by colonial period makes a point, to say the least, by rejecting the notion that history is linear and presenting it instead as circular and cyclical. For instance, in the section on post-independence Philippines, Lim purposefully includes a reading of *Insurrecto*, a reconstruction of the forgotten Balangiga massacre in 1901. In the essays on Spanish colonization, all but one were written in the 1970s to 80s, rather than choosing works from the era (e.g., *Ninay* by Pedro Paterno, *La ojeva de Nathan* by Antonio Abad). Meanwhile, Santos' novel represents the section of American rule when this milieu was recounted only in flashback. The book is set in 1969, when the protagonist Solomon King read about the death of Robert Taylor in the newspaper.

The book is an exercise in political imagination, as evinced by the comparison of ideologies in the novels set against the backdrop of the Philippine Revolution. By foregrounding the

Japanese executioners' torture methods central to *More Than Conqueror*, Lim (2024) cautions the "morality of torture [listing the water cure, bastonado, hanging by the thumb, and Atlas Monument] as a tool of human control. The question is no less pertinent when the torturer wears a Japanese mask, than today when his face, ironically, has become our very own (p. 165)." Having read the 1993 version of this essay, I conjecture that Lim wrote "today" to point to the Marcos Sr. regime, when Tiempo's rendering of torture is not different from the human rights violations inflicted to activists and dissenters.

The book notes the portrayal of butterfly politics as early as the American occupation in *The Filipino Rebel*, that is, the politicians' sycophantic behavior to appease the ruling class. He would then remind us of this shameless opportunism as part of the political circus while discussing *Twice Blessed*.

The crucial deal about the list, as in this book, is that it highlights what is excluded. Of the 12 novels chosen, only three are authored by female writers, and most are situated in Luzon and a few in Western Visayas. None of these are in Mindanao. It must have been difficult for Jaime An Lim to reconcile, as a writer hailing from the south of the Philippines, to not feature texts representing a people subjected to a legalized land dispossession through the National Land Settlement Administration in the Commonwealth regime, the Lumad and Moro struggle, and widespread poverty. Nonetheless, this critique must not be framed as fault-finding but as an invitation to anthologize texts with the goal of fair representation and to provide footing for Mindanao literature.

Jaime An Lim is foremost a decorated literary figure in Mindanao. Born in Cagayan de Oro, he studied English at

Mindanao State University, earned an MA in English and Creative Writing from Silliman University, and then spent a significant time pursuing graduate studies and a PhD in Comparative Literature at Indiana University. He remains the writer who devastated me in his short story *The Homing Mandarin* or, *After the First Death There are Others*. In his preface to *The Axolotl Colony: Stories*, Lim (2016) chalks up his literary achievements to his access to stories, his persistence in writing, and his supportive literary friends in Dumaguete, gathered through the writers workshop experience. I establish his writing life to appreciate the craft of literary analysis he demonstrated in the book. But I am curious whether one finds the essays in *Bringing the Bones Home* primarily more formalist and less postcolonial.

An anthology of literary critiques, though less published and less lucrative than popular literature, undoubtedly has a place in cultivating readership. It brings me honor to compare notes with Jaime An Lim as we read *Insurrecto*. The essay on Noli also verifies its studiability and relevance. He also features a critique of *But for the Lovers*; this once-out-of-print magnum opus is now available through its publisher, Exploding Galaxy (Unjieng, 2023). Reading is usually a solitary activity, but literary criticism, as a companion piece, provides company.

The choice of language is the contention he confronts; it appears ill-suited to conducting a postcolonial analysis of literary works written exclusively in English. Nationalist literary critics, at least in 1980-90s, regard Philippine literature in English as “highbrow” or “first class,” an art written in the language of the ruling elite and for the few (Torres-Yu, 1996). Sicat (1996) points out the Philippine novel in English as “a literary practice

plagued by divisions in conceptualization and belief... the novels... fail to produce intersubjective meanings towards an imagined community (p. 428)."

Lim's justification is mainly practical, that is, an issue of access and limited mastery of regional languages. But he acknowledges the inextricable link between language and the psyche, and cites postcolonial theorists to warn about the hegemonic potential of English to strengthen imperialism. The language has been forced on us in every public sphere: in schools, business districts, the media, and our government. Now, English has become malleable enough that we could call it our own.

Tope (2008) takes the Filipino writer in English to illustrate that we have undergone the process of abrogation. We have begun the "conceptual dismantling of English as a pure (Western) language and the unequivocal, unhesitating exploration and exploitation of its properties to absorb and express the sound and spirit of local cultures (p. 271). In addition, Hau (2008) affirms that Philippine English has gained traction in the academe, with Filipino writers such as Wilfrido Nolledo contributing significantly to its flourishing. As the language is rooted in colonialism and elitism, Hau proposes that there needs to be the formation of linguistic public spheres, inclusive of classes and groupings, to promote social justice and welcome dialogue—a daunting task in an unequal society. But Lim (2024) concludes the book optimistically: "...if a language can indeed enslave a people, it is equally true—as Rizal has shown—that it can also be used as an instrument of their liberation (p. 244)."

Conclusion

Bringing the Bones Home is a gesture that recognizes the role of Filipino novelists as teachers, especially when colonial memory and forgetting are at stake. I remember Chinua Achebe (1989) stating that the writers' task of re-education and regeneration is self-evident:

Here then is an adequate revolution for me to espouse—to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement. And it is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word. Here, I think, my aims and the deepest aspirations of my society meet. (p. 44)

The avarice and unequal systems we confront now take their origins in colonization, Lim's essays expound. As a result, we hear a national spectacle of political and economic dysfunctions and a livestreamed genocide from Gaza. I return to the assumption I raised earlier: In seeking solutions to the crises of our time, there is literature and the capacity for critical examination waiting to be tapped. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2013) says it best, "The world needs an epistemological change that will rearrange desires. Global contemporaneity requires it (p. 2)."

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NOTES

¹ I offer some news cycle on the mentioned present issue while I was on the writing process: See Manila, 2026 and “Iran war splits global markets,” 2026 for the oil price hike in the Philippines; See Panaligan, 2026, and Agustin, 2026 for the reframed GEC by CHED; See Gomez, 2026, Chi, 2026, and Beltran, 2026 for the Tobos killings.

¹ In 1993, Jaime An Lim published *Literature and Politics: The Colonial Experience in Nine Philippine Novels*, an early version of the work. The present book prioritizes the Philippine colonial and neocolonial condition as the thematic focus of the critiques, and expands a fourth chapter on the novels in the post-independent society.

¹ Constantino (1972), on his claim that Rizal is an American-sponsored hero: “The public image that the American desired for a Filipino national hero was quite clear. They favored a hero who would not run against the grain of American colonial policy. We must take these acts of the Americans in furtherance of a Rizal cult in the light of their initial policies which required the passage of the Sedition Law prohibiting the display of the Filipino flag. The heroes who advocated independence were therefore ignored. For to have encouraged a movement to revere Bonifacio or Mabini would not have been consistent with American colonial policy (p. 6).” On the other hand, Bienvenido Lumbera (1996) praises Rizal’s novels for firmly setting “the direction for the development of a nationalist tradition in Philippine Literature (p. 3).”

¹ I remember Luis Teodoro (1996) weighing in on the critical attitudes to literature and society. He does not discount artistic execution in literary criticism, but he hopes to attenuate deficit-based evaluation especially among radical writers with little to no writing background: “...unlike Minerva, the writers who will emerge from the ranks of the people will not emerge full-grown and fully armed. The committed critic must be constantly aware

of development and process: of the substages of social development within a given historical period, during which quantitative changes begin to assume a qualitative character under the impetus of the rapid changes which we know we will eventually lead to a leap for one stage of history to another. Literature itself reflects this process; like society, it is never quite “finished” nor completed (p. 311).” He was pertaining to the discourse on radical literary criticism in the 60s-80s, but his proposition still holds water.

¹ Santos’ choice of actor as an unattainable aspiration is compelling. Robert Taylor plays a white savior on military uniform against the Japanese army in the film *Bataan*. He also served in the United States Naval Air Forces during World War II. Most of all, he is unapologetically anti-Communist and helped investigate Communism in Hollywood (“Reds are blasted by Robert Taylor”, 1947). He seems to be a perfect American role model to maintain US imperialism.

¹ See Evangelista (2023) for a comprehensive account of the Tokhang, a Philippine drug war resulting in many Filipinos killed extrajudicially. Additionally, former Philippine President Rodrigo Roa Duterte is presently on trial in the International Criminal Court for the alleged crimes against humanity (“Duterte Case,” n.d.).

¹ See Gotinga, 2018.

¹ In the matters of the debates on the “proper” literary approach in Philippine tradition, Lim admits that the commonly subscribed “art for art’s sake” reading engenders the text’s politics misread or unread. Conchitina Cruz (2016) has more to say on the politics of creative writing education and on the incompatibility of the dominant Philippine literature production with enacting social change.

¹ Isabel Pefianco Martin reconstructs Kachru’s Three Circles model by maintaining that Philippine English has three circles within the Outer Circle, depicting a more realistic sociolinguistic landscape for Filipinos. See Martin, 2014.