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Author

Blanco, John D

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The Prose of Pacification and Spiritual Conquest in the Philippines

John D. Blanco
Department of Literature, UC San Diego

If we were to identify something like the origins of Philippine Literature in Spanish, one would need to look no further than the voluminous tomes of pious and self-congratulatory rhetoric written by the religious or missionary orders from the beginning of the seventeenth century – the Augustinian, Dominican, and Franciscan monks, as well as the Jesuits.¹ While depending heavily on the language of theology and Scholastic philosophy, missionary chronicles belong to neither field of knowledge and writing; and, despite the fact that they record factual events and testimonies around those events, even later missionaries do not find them reliable.² The historian Gloria Cano illustrates the degree to which US pro-imperialist officials reinforced the view that missionary chronicles ought to be treated with suspicion. She analyzes the 52-volume compilation of Spanish documents and reports between 1493 and 1898 on the Philippines, produced by editors Emma Blair and James Robertson, which framed these chronicles as the most obvious and damning evidence of the retarding effects wrought by the religious on the intellectual and moral advancement of native Filipinos (Cano 31-34). Excluded from the canons of theology, philosophy, history, and anthropology, these writings inhabit a kind of discursive netherworld. Is it possible, however, that their blurred outlines perhaps reflect both the fiction and reality of Spanish colonialism better than any historical study? For in the place of historical fact or philosophical or theological truth, the baroque turns of these chronicles and reports ceaselessly invoke the phantasmagorias of a legal,

political, and social order that either never arrived, never finished arriving; or had arrived and stayed for only a short time before leaving. Why do we remain reluctant to recognize these as fictions? And what do their shortcomings and failures tell us about the historical and cultural realities they distort?

Considering further the disavowal and abandonment of these texts by even the orders that were responsible for commissioning them, one might argue that these works remain among the greatest *Filipino* cultural treasures of the colonial past; bearing witness to the enigmas surrounding the role that early Spanish colonial past has played in the constitution of the present.³ Acknowledging this, however, would entail not only a critical literary study of the symbols, analogies, metaphors, and phantasmagorias that constitute their rhetoric; but also a genealogy or counter-history of the events they pretend to describe and narrate.⁴ I will try to sketch out both projects briefly, by analyzing the discourse of *pacification* and the stakes in promoting a *spiritual conquest* in the Philippines in these texts: both of which have not only had a profound, distorting effect on Philippine historiography but have also exercised a major influence in Philippine Catholicism and religious culture in general.

From conquest to the discourse of pacification

Any study of literary fiction should take into account the historical context in which it was written. But what if the historical context itself remains unknown, contested, or overdetermined by ideologies? In one of Philippine historian Reynaldo Ileto's well known essays on historiography, the author argued that historical writing "should throw into focus a whole range of phenomena that have been discredited or denied a history. It

should have a conception of historical beginnings as lowly, complex, and contingent. It should give equal status to interruptions, repetitions, and reversals, uncovering the subjugations, confrontations, power struggles and resistances that linear history tends to conceal” (125).

Ileto’s critique provides a point of entry into exploring the acknowledgment of the missionary chronicles as willful or perhaps wishful histories, whose objectives included the installation and perpetuation of a general fiction: the fiction or myth of the [Spanish] conquest itself. Matthew Restall’s *Seven Myths of the Spanish Conquest*, drawing on the historiography of Edmundo O’Gorman and others, exposes the content of this myth in the Americas, highlighting the stakes of explorers, conquistadors, missionaries, and colonial bureaucrats alike in promoting a “myth of completion” through a narrative in which the colonization of the Americas has supposedly taken place (65-76). This myth portrayed the conquest as both a contract fulfilled between Columbus and the King, on the one hand, and the manifestation of divine providence under Catholic Spain, on the other (see also O’ Gorman 1-9; Moffitt-Watts 73-102; and Zamora). In contrast to this myth, Restall argues:

[T]he Conquest of the core areas of the Andes and Mesoamerica was more *protracted* than Spaniards initially claimed and later believed, and when warfare did end in these areas it was simply displaced out to the ever-widening and never-peaceful frontiers of Spanish America.... The spiritual and cultural conquests were equally complex and protracted, defying completion to the point of rendering the very concept of completion irrelevant (75).

Can Restall’s thesis serve as a model for understanding early Philippine history?

While a full account of the protracted nature of the conquest of the Philippines remains to be written, anecdotal evidence and regional histories all seem to suggest that the constitution of the Philippines as a “frontier” outpost of Spanish rule looked remarkably similar to the frontier zones of northern Mexico and Alta California, the pastoral landscapes of the Southern Cone of Latin America, and even parts of the Amazonian rainforest.⁵ As for the immediate aftermath of the conquest, the Philippines experienced depopulation and mortality rates that, while not proportional to the precipitous decline in the Americas (currently estimated at 95%, which comprised approximately 10% of the world population), still amounted to a death toll of about 1/3 of the pre-Hispanic population overall.⁶ Early reports of the conquest by Augustinian priests like Frs. Diego de Herrera (OSA) and Martín de Rada echoed the same atrocities and acts of impunity on the natives that took place in the Americas, as documented by Fr. Bartolomé de Las Casas and others.⁷

On both sides of the Pacific, Spanish conquerors and settlers established themselves in areas where concentrated populations had already settled. Yet outside these cities, the authority of the Crown and episcopal authority of the Church ceded to the intermediary agency of the religious missionary orders: whose members were called regular clergy (from the Latin *regula*, [monastic] “rule”), opposed to the secular or ordinary clergy under the rule of the bishops or ecclesiastical hierarchy. These frontier zones designated the spaces where Spanish authority only existed in a partial, uneven, and fragmentary way: if at all (see Sheridan Prieto). Such areas might be characterized as what Southeast Asian anthropologist James Scott (following Willem van Schendel’s work) called “shatter zones”: where fugitives of imperial conquest and rule established

and sustained alternative societies and cultures alongside the establishment of states and oftentimes in dialogue or negotiation with that state's limits (7-8).

One of the immediate implications of raising this question in Philippine history is to show just how overstated the Philippine "difference" regarding the nature and impact of conquest and colonization is with respect to the early histories of New Spain and Peru. What, then, distinguished the conquest of the Philippines from that of the Americas? One unexamined facet of the problem has less to do with Spanish methods and justifications of violence than it had to do with the way(s) in which both Crown and Church agreed to *represent* the conquest. Specifically, Philip II's royal Ordinances of 1573 attempt to suppress the history of the Conquest in order to pronounce the Spanish Crown's legitimate title over its overseas territories; and to enforce the use of the word "pacification" in place of any mention of conquest.

According to José Rabasa, the publication of Philip II's royal Ordinances pronounced the official "end" of the conquest by proclaiming "the Crown's monopoly over all expeditions and formulate models for the pacification [*pacificación*] and settlement of new territories" (Rabasa 89; see also Newson 6 and 254). The Ordinances also laid out the procedures for the Pacification and Laying out of Towns [*Ordenanzas para descubrimientos, nuevas poblaciones y pacificaciones*], which made clear that the settlement of lands not already settled would have to take place not under the rights of conquest, as it had under the conquistadors, but rather *pax Hispanica*, Spanish peace: [*Forbear that any titles and the name of conquest accompany any present and future discoveries*: for insofar as the matter [of colonial settlement] ought to be conducted with all the peace and charity that we desire, we do not want the name [of "Conquest"] to give

any occasion or excuse for using force or injury against the Indians].⁸ The 1624 *Recopilación de las Leyes de Yndias*, which consolidated the various decrees, ordinances, and laws overseas, used even stronger language: “In those agreements in the matter of the discoveries *let the word Conquest be excised*, and the words Pacification and Population be used instead” (italics added).⁹ The 1573 ordinances also outlined the role of the religious in teaching the Indians how to live in a “civilized manner” [*policía*, lit. political or civil society]; and sternly insist on the avoidance of conflict and theft of any Indian property on the part of the Spanish settlers.¹⁰ The identification of the Spanish conquest of the Philippines and other Pacific possessions as a *pacification* rather than a *conquest*, then, owes itself to primarily this new principle of Iberian governance under Philip II.¹¹

The migration of “Conquest” to the spiritual realm

The omission and prohibition of the word “conquest” in the official correspondence and memoranda among Crown officials, with words like “pacification” and “population” to be used in its stead, coincided with the curious proliferation of the word “conquest,” and of conquest rhetoric more broadly, in missionary chronicles and correspondence. While the early modern period in Europe saw the migration of theological terms and concepts to the secular realm, here we have a case of the opposite. Here, the Spanish Crown rejects conquest as an explicitly acknowledged precondition of law and justice (best captured in the Roman but rather unchristian *vae victis* [to the victor go the spoils]); after which the term then migrates to the spiritual realm, where we encounter the religious missionary prose of *spiritual conquest*.¹²

A study of the rhetoric of "spiritual conquest" reveals that it responds to a series of specific circumstances associated with the expansion of pacification discourse in the late sixteenth century. On the one hand, the prose of spiritual conquest underlined the specifically *political* task the Crown would assign to the missionary orders: that was to effectively *complete* a truncated conquest by not only preaching and teaching the Christian religion but also persuading and coercing native populations to live in concentrated settlements.¹³ What obscures an acknowledgment and analysis of this political task, however, is the way the missionaries represented it in *religious* or theological terms: frontier wars with indigenous people routinely appear as a constant battle with the Devil or devils [*demonios*] for the "conquest" of souls; and the disenchantment [*desengaño*] of natives from the Devil's deceptions regarding their presumed abuses and superstitions.

Examples of spiritual warfare against the Devil and his deceptions in the Philippines abound. As early as 1598, Fr. Marcelo de Ribandiera (OFM) describes the necessity of certain friars to maintain their contemplative lives in isolation, while others lead "the spiritual war that the religious who are engaged with the conversion of the unfaithful have with the princes of darkness, rescuing the former from the devil's enslavement" [la Guerra espiritual que con los príncipes de las tinieblas tienen los religiosos que se ejercitan en la conversión de los infieles sacándoles de la esclavonia del demonio] (Ribandiera 57). This theme of the Devil as a predatory (?) slave owner is echoed in the Dominican preacher Fr. Francisco Blancas de San José (OP), who describes the Devil's reign over the world as follows: "nangangahas siyang magbansag na siya ang hari sa sanglibutang; at di man gaua niya manga tauo, ay quinacaniyang alipin, at

quinacaniyang holi, at quinacaniyang bihag [he dares to call himself the king of the world; and moreover makes people his slaves (*alipin*), his prey, his captives] (105; see also Rodriguez, *ibid.* 363).

The slide from spiritual war to spiritual *conquest*, however, seems to coincide with the self-identification and self-recognition of the missionaries as the sole arbiters of “pacification.” The ambiguity of whether religious chroniclers were speaking of a purely metaphorical “war” and an actual one, however, is difficult to determine. In Cecilia Sheridan Prieto's insightful work on Mexico's northern frontier, missionaries like Fr. Guillermo de Santa María (OSA) and Fr. Andrés de Pérez Ribas (SJ) would invoke the existence of a war that continues even after the stated goals of “population, pacification, and conversion” had been ostensibly met - *una guerra viva*, a living war on the frontier of northern Mexico and Sonora, which rendered the establishment of military forts and religious churches and convents indistinguishable (Sheridan Prieto 63-64).¹⁴ In the Philippines around the same period (1665), Dominican Fr. Hector Polanco (OP) would echo this rhetoric of an “ongoing spiritual conquest” in the Philippines as a main reason that missionaries should not be subject to the authority of the king's royal Patronage:

no se siguen en el Perú y México en donde los Yndios ha muchos años que están reducidos a la Fe y obediencia de Vuestra Magestad y los ministros en quieta y pacífica posesión de las Christianidades. En Filipinas están los ministros *en viva conquista espiritual*, enarboladas las banderas de la Fe y Religión Christiana... [y] *si no se tratara de reducir estos con humildad, paciencia, buen tratamiento, ejemplo y doctrina no se contuviera la ferocidad de su natural, y costumbres, y*

destruyeran a las Christianidades que ya están formadas (cited in Francisco Colin [SJ] and Pablo Pastells [SJ] 734-735: italics added).

One cannot follow [the model of replacing missions with secular parishes] that obtains in Peru or Mexico, where for many years the Indians have been reduced to the Faith and in obedience to Your Majesty and the ministers in the tranquil and pacific possession of these Christian lands. In the Philippines the religious remain in a state of an ongoing [viva] spiritual conquest, hoisting high the banners of the Faith and Christian religion...*and unless one attempts the reduction of these Indians with humility, patience, good temperament, example, and orthodoxy, the ferocity of their nature and customs will not be held in check, and they will destroy the Christian kingdoms already fashioned.*

Missionary writings as a form of literature

It may be said that Philippine national martyr José Rizal anticipated a consideration of the missionary chronicles as imaginative literature when he denounced the fiction of pacification in Antonio de Morga's 1603 *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas* [Historical Events of the Philippine Islands] with the following statement: "Acaso el verbo *pacificar* significase entonces *meter la guerra*" (Maybe the verb *to pacify* thus means *to wage war*). By serving as a euphemism and smokescreen for continual recourse to war and conquest, the fictions of a completed conquest and ensuing pacification foreclose a proper historical evaluation of Spain's precarious presence in the Philippines outside the capital city Intramuros. Under the prose of spiritual conquest, the colonial

government labored to efface the catastrophe of depopulation and displacement, along with the constant irruption of uprising and rebellion throughout the colonial period, in favor of promoting a gradual, progressive, and planned expansion of a legal formula in its application. Moreover, pacification discourse masked the coercion involved in acts of conquest with a juridical discourse that the subjection of the natives was free and unforced. Once in place, ideology rewrites its origins: it is through this erasure that official histories and documents of the conquest take on the opacity of what William Henry Scott has called a “parchment curtain.”

A second consequence pertaining to the migration of “conquest” to the spiritual realm has to do with the productive confusion between legal and theological meanings of the word on the missionary frontier. Through the prose of spiritual conquest, missionaries obscured the absence of civil and ecclesiastical law outside Manila with an imaginary matrix of Christian phantasmagorias – divine punishments, miracles of faith and devotion, apparitions of the Virgin Mary, the charade of enchantment, disenchantment, and re-enchantment. Holy amulets protecting the faithful (or superstitious) from demons. Serge Gruzinski (borrowing a term from Lacanian psychoanalysis) calls this matrix a Christian *imaginaire*, which provided a field of signification that ceaselessly called for interpretation, verification, and demystification – in a word, the law – even as these acts generated a proliferation of other symbols, signs, and images (Gruzinski 147-159).

Third, the study of missionary chronicles as a form of literature anticipates and clarifies the necessity for going beyond a critical history of the conquest of the Philippines and its aftermath – to arrive at a more coherent and comprehensive understanding of Spain’s presence or absence in the Philippines. Of equal importance, the

literature of spiritual conquest should also inspire readers to further connect the dots in the patchwork of fragmented histories, legends, fables, and bits of folklore that hint at the genealogies or counter histories of Philippine culture, which is what transforms a historical narrative of the past into a memory-screen or interface with the present. (see Gruzinski, *ibid.*; and Iletto, “Rizal and the Underside of Filipino History”).¹⁵ The fictions of contemporary Philippine novelists have attuned us to the way that historical experience is encoded in the colloquial expressions, customary habits, cultural artifacts, and even dreams as wish-fulfillments that populate our every day. Would this not also hold true for the dreams, hallucinations, and hauntings that missionaries reported among natives struggling to reconcile the erosion of their former ways of life while simultaneously accommodating a new order that never managed to arrive? Or the gods and monsters that populated the colonial frontier: where the experience of native displacement and disorientation turned familiar landscapes into netherworlds and living hells?

¹ As far as I know, Isaac Donoso seems to have been the one of the only critics to consider these works as a form of Philippine baroque literature: see “La literatura filipina en español durante la era barroca” 26-28. For an exhaustive account of these chronicles and their historical context, see the doctoral thesis of Jorge Mojarro, “Crónicas de las Indias Orientales.”

² Consider, for instance, the introduction to Augustinian priest Fr. Joaquín Martín de Zuñiga (OSA)’s history of the Philippines: “Las historias de Philipinas se componen de volúmenes grandes, y tomos en folio mayores... Para llenar estos libros ha sido preciso a nuestros Historiadores, que por lo común son Regulares, tratar muy por extenso las vidas de muchos Religiosos, y las determinaciones de sus Capítulos, noticias poco interesantes al resto de los hombres.... Para no caer en este error, he suprimido varias reflexiones, que se debieran hacer; arreglándose á las Leyes de la Historia, he callado otras, por que no se debe decir todo lo que se sabe, dejándolas de intento, para que el Lector imparcial las haga por si mismo . Si se encuentran otros defectos, procederán a veces del fin que me he propuesto, que ha sido atender todo lo posible á la concisión sin dejar de referir todas las circunstancias de los hechos, y cuidar de la claridad, aunque sea á costa de descuidar un poco de la hermosura, que no es tan necesaria para el fin, que he tenido en escribir esta Historia. Vale.” Martínez de Zuñiga, *Historia de las Philipinas* iii-v *passim*.

³ See Joaquin 52.

⁴ For an explanation of this distinction, see Foucault 146; and Blanco 131-140.

⁵ An early pioneer of this opinion was Renato Constantino, whose two-volume history of the Philippines describes this explicitly (see Constantino; as well as Scott; Lessing; and Majul).

⁶ For the Americas, see Diamond 78; for the relationship of the estimated population in the Americas to world population, see <https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-01-31/european-colonization-americas-killed-10-percent-world-population-and-caused>. For population estimates of the early modern Philippines, see Corpuz 62-127 and 598-668; and Newson 9-24.

⁷ See Herrera, in Blair and Robertson [BR] 34, 229-235; and Rada, *ibid.* 286-294.

⁸ “Los descubrimientos no se den con títulos y nombre de conquista: pues habiéndose de hacer con tanta paz y caridad como deseamos, no queremos quel nombre, dé ocasión ni color para que se pueda hazer fuerza ni agravio a los indios” See Gibson, in Lamb, ed. 126. Translation modified by author.

⁹ “En las capitulaciones de descubrimientos se excuse la palabra *Conquista*, y se use de las de *Pacificacion*, y *Poblacion*” [ley 6. Tit. I. Lib. 4] (italics added). Cited in *Recopilacion de leyes de los reynos de las Indias, mandadas imprimir y publicar por la Magestad Católica del Rey Don Carlos II ...: va dividida en tres tomos, con el indice general, y al principio de cada tomo el indice especial de los títulos que contiene : tomo tercero. por la viuda de D. Joaquin Ibarra, 1791.* 79

¹⁰ See Nuttall 743-753; and Sheridan Prieto 61-90. “It is clear,” Newson writes in an understated manner, “that the Ordinances of 1573, aimed at bringing about the peaceful subjugation of newly discovered territories had little impact on the course of conquest in the Philippines” (254).

¹¹ For an incisive contrast between the changing role of the missionaries in the New World vs. the Philippines, see Elizalde and Huetz de Lemp 185-220.

¹² For the "reoccupation" of theological terms in early modern Europe, see Blumenberg, *The* 64-65 and 103-124. Robert Ricard's classic work *Conquête Spirituelle du Mexique* [1933] (Eng.: *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico*, pub. 1966) documents the foundation and spread of Christianity by the mendicant and missionary friar religious orders (Franciscans, Dominicans, and Augustinians) in New Spain between 1523-1572. More than any other work in recent memory, it popularized the term "spiritual conquest" [*conquête spirituelle*] as a shorthand way to describe both the complementarity and the tension that has always existed between the religious and worldly or "temporal" goals of Spain's overseas conquests. The precise origins of this phrase, if such exist, remain undocumented by Ricard and later scholars who have employed it.

¹³ See Mingo 83-101. The author writes: "Los once capítulos finales de las ordenanzas, referidos a las «pacificaciones», suponen el definitivo esfuerzo por parte de la Corona para concluir la guerra indiana. A fin de conseguirlo proponen una serie de actuaciones, cuyas piezas claves serán los misioneros, y cuya finalidad es realizar la penetración y el contacto con los indios de forma pacífica, lo que supondría su voluntaria integración en la dinámica de los repartimientos" (92).

¹⁴ On the violence of "spiritual conquest" in northern Mexico, see Hausberger 27-54; and Rozt Dupeyron 76-108.

¹⁵ Two of the more insightful reflections on the interface of culture as history and history as culture are Neferti Tadiar, *Things Fall Away*; and Caroline Hau, *Necessary Fictions*.