

CRIP COLONY

*Mestizaje, US Imperialism,
and the Queer Politics
of Disability in the Philippines*



Sony Coráñez Bolton

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Sony Coráñez Bolton

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For Dave

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This book is a love letter to my immediate family. The more I'm alive, the more, it seems, our love for one another has grown. It's a love that seems effortless, that seems natural, that seems to be the foundational architecture of the world. To my siblings, Jeffrey Bolton, Brandilyn Hadjuk, Ashley Mejías, and Danica Malo: it is unreal, the supremely amazing people that you have transformed into. To my father, James, words cannot travel to where I need them to go to express the simple idea that you are my hero. You are a template for wit and grit. I find that as I get older that I am surprised that I am not a wholly terrible person and that I even have positive qualities like humor, cleverness, and deep reserves of energy, dedication, and resiliency. I look at you, Dad, and I see why. You might be the best human being I have ever met or that any person will ever meet. To my mother, Charlita, I know that it has not always been easy living in a place where you perhaps never truly felt that you belonged. But you carved out an impassable and incorruptible space of love and belonging for me even while it took me so long to feel like myself or to be completely truthful. I thank you and I love you, *mahal kita*.

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Crip Colonial Critique

READING MESTIZAJE FROM THE BORDERLANDS TO THE PHILIPPINES

Then there were my fights at Chinese school. And the nuns who kept stopping us in the park, which was across the street from Chinese school, to tell us that if we didn't get baptized we'd go straight to hell like one of the nine Taoist hells forever. And the obscene caller that phoned us at home when the adults were at the laundry. And the Mexican and Filipino girls at school who went to "confession," and how I envied them their white dresses and their chance each Saturday to tell even thoughts that were sinful.

—MAXINE HONG KINGSTON, *The Woman Warrior*

Confession

When I was a child, no more than nine years old, I was a new transplant to the midwestern United States. My formative years until college were spent living in a racially diverse working-class rural exurb about an hour due north of Chicago.¹ My white father was initially stationed at a naval base in Alameda, California, before work forced him to relocate somewhere near the city of North Chicago—the then and still current site of the Great Lakes Naval Base on Lake Michigan. I suspect that he deeply wanted a change after serving multiple tours of duty during the Persian Gulf War, tired of fighting over oil. Sometimes I mourn the loss of a life I could have spent as a denizen of the East Bay area of San Francisco, mostly because this move signaled a rather prolonged detachment from a connected Asian American

or Filipino American identity normalized on the West Coast.² I was a mixed-race kid, growing up in the rural cornfields of northern Illinois, resentful of the itinerancy of my youth and yet craving global connections that would explain the brownness of the mestizo skin I saw reflected back in the mirror.

One of the clearest and first midwestern childhood memories I have is being recruited by my mother to move a piano across the living room shortly after our move to Illinois. This was a recent acquisition, as my parents thought it would be an enriching activity for my sisters to learn to play. My brother and I were forbidden from playing. I suppose because it was too artistic, was considered a feminine activity, or was “too queer.” (It was awkward to have to disappoint my mother by coming out approximately ten years later.) With two of my sisters and me in tow to help push the impossibly heavy instrument, my mother coordinated our efforts by counting down in three languages: “Uno, dos, tres, *push!* Uno, dos, tres, *push!* Ulit.”³ Not being raised speaking Tagalog or Visayan at all, it was jarring for me to hear my mother utter what even I knew to be Spanish words. When we finally finished, physically spent, I reflected on the words my mother used to align her and her Asian American children’s efforts. As I look back on this moment decades later, it is still curious to me that numbers in Spanish came to her more naturally. As an adult haggling at a *tiangge* (bazaar or market) in Quezon City, I relived that childhood curiosity when I discovered that Spanish numbers are almost always used in these negotiations. Might there be an unconscious association at play between Spanish and labor? Was it simply because reciting Spanish numbers was simpler than the multiple syllables of “Isa, dalawa, tatlo”?

The curiosity that this banal moment sparked has led me to become a professor of Spanish, which is somewhat surprising to me given that I consider my main field of inquiry to be Asian American studies. In some ways my intellectual trajectory is set into relief by Maxine Hong Kingston’s observations in *The Woman Warrior* on the ways that the perpetual foreignness ascribed to Chineseness provokes the manifold indignities that she and her family had to endure. Notably, Kingston’s memoir illustrates a truism in much multiethnic American literature, which, as literary critic David Palumbo-Liu has argued, presents narratives that are protagonized by racialized characters that harbor a defective, eccentric ethnicity that is rehabilitated by the hard work of American liberalism and assimilation. Authors like Palumbo-Liu and Allan Punzalan Isaac have demonstrated how the trope of the eccentric ethnic immigrant presents them as generally unhealthy, damaged, and ill-fitting aliens whose physical and intellectual labors do not

contribute advantage to the United States.⁴ Therefore, we could reasonably position the work of the genre of assimilation as itself the representational instantiation of a rehabilitative logic that ramifies and reengineers alien laborers to be compliant with the mandates of ableist racial capitalism.

These are indignities that Kingston famously litanizes for us in a stream-of-consciousness style in *The Woman Warrior* epigraph that opens this introduction. Even so, couched within these painful recollections is the intimacy drawn between Mexican and Filipina girls, whose Catholic devotion, however glib, ties them together in the practice of confession. This cross-racial intimacy stands out to me for the ways that, as Michel Foucault has argued, the transhistorical “scope of the confession” whose iterations across dogmatic cultures increased its rhythms in an effort to prompt and “impose meticulous rules of self-examination,” though “above all . . . it attributed more and more importance in penance.”⁵ It’s ironic that what troubles me in Kingston’s words is the ways in which the colonial power of the ritual of confession—which presumes to know and hollow out the native claiming to divine their mind better than they—would indeed prompt autodisciplinary self-examination. This moment of confession, in one of the most famous books in Asian American literature, sticks out in my mind delineating a difference that Filipino American subjectivity brings to Asianness by way of their likeness and propinquity to Mexicans—an intimacy to which the Chinese American Kingston is only ever an observer but which hails *me* as a Filipinx American. *The Woman Warrior* foundationally introduces the ways in which the violence of American assimilation unfurls between China and a borderlands space in the US West. The echoes of Spanish colonial subjectification through Catholicism serve as a partial though unmistakable backdrop. These echoes ripple through the multivalent threads of the tapestry of Asian racialization within a US multiethnic imaginary.

Given this analytical vantage, the ironies of being a Filipinx professor of Latinx studies and Spanish in the United States do not escape me. I feel as if I restage daily the girlish literary confessions described by Kingston, seduced by the discursive power to name that which must remain unnameable. I teach in a liberal arts context in which close colloquy with students is quite routine. After I’d had an unusually successful semester teaching a Spanish language course on bilingual Latinx experience, a bright Cuban American student from Miami dubbed me an “honorary Latino”—definitely in jest, but also in recognition of the intellectual camaraderie that we had cultivated throughout the semester. I did include material about the Hispanic history and heritage of the Philippines as a way to bring my own identity and

perspective into the conversations in order to demonstrate that I was not coming at the topic of the course as a total outsider. Yet any claims of mine to an “insider” bilingual Spanish identity are, *a fin de cuentas*, circumspect, even though I and some of my students heard our mothers chanting in a language that was introduced by the same historical and colonial processes.

When I was hailed an “honorary Latino,” my anxiety peaked. “I want you to know that that’s not my objective!” I explained; I did not want to assume a sameness between Filipinx and Latinx Americans that overwrote important distinctions in our experiences, relationships to the state, and migratory histories. I wanted to convey that racial drag was not the outcome that I desired and yet I *did* feel an affinity with my students and was indeed honored that they would entrust their experiences and vulnerability to me as was organic to the topic of a class on bilingual identity and autobiography—to be seen as a part of the same batch of peoples descended from colonial processes that were global in scope. I want my reader to understand that this affinity goes beyond a simple common experience of all of us being “people of color” in the United States. I told my students that I felt like we were *primxs*, cousins—*mga pinsan*. Much like Latinx peoples, Filipinx Americans live, work, and study at the intersection of contradictory origins of the same two imperial powers—a Venn diagram of which might feel more like a complete circle at times. While I don’t want to assume Filipinx experience is exceptional in terms of the ambivalent racial meanings negotiated as a result of colonialism, I am also often confronted with how unassimilable Asianness is into what normatively constitutes “Hispanic” or mestizo identity. The Philippines simultaneously challenges and corroborates Asian exclusions from *mestizaje* (racial admixture, miscegenation) as an American racial landscape.

Every time I step in front of a class that I will be teaching in Spanish, I convey to my students that while I am not nor ever will truly identify as Latinx, Latin American, or even as the much broader Hispano or Hispanic, I do not come to stand before them simply because of an impersonal avid interest in the language, its literature, and culture. In any event, what are the stakes in claiming, cultivating, and protecting a hybrid bilingual identity elaborated at the intersection of the colonial languages of English and Spanish whose introduction to the Americas was fundamentally rooted in Indigenous displacement, slavery, and racial capitalism? Even so, I really do view the better part of the past two decades meticulously studying the Spanish language as an extension and exploration of my own *Asian American* heritage and history; I don’t actually feel a keen attachment to a journey to claim

Hispanic identity even if, ironically, the mechanism of that exploration has been learning Spanish. While identity markers like *Asian American* and *Latinx* index very real and different political experiences, they can't always account for how some experiences and identities vex the stable identitarian delineations to which they sometimes aspire. A Filipinx American person and scholar who serves as a professor of Latinx studies and Spanish, who even *teaches* Latinx heritage students the Spanish language, is not there by accident. There are deep, colonial histories that have set the conditions of possibility such that this pedagogical encounter between Asian America and Latinx America is indeed somehow inevitable, even *necessary*. It is encounters like this one—and, more pointedly, the deep geographies that subtend them—that animate the study of race, colonialism, disability, and *mestizaje* in this book.

I neither propose recuperation of Hispanic identity for Filipinas, Filipinos, or Filipinx, nor really advocate for the mere inclusion of the Philippines in “Spanish studies” or Hispanic studies such as they are. While I am struck, for instance, by sociologist Anthony Christian Ocampo’s claim that Filipinos are the “Latinos of Asia,” I cannot claim a shared objective of unearthing the ways that Filipinos sociologically confess to or come to claim *latinidad*.⁶ The ways that queer studies is positioned as a critique of normativity rather than the archival excavation of factual LGBTQ people is rather analogous to the ways in which I think about Filipinx *hispanidad*. That is, rather than an empirical possession of or propertied relation to the Hispanic, what are the regulatory and disciplinary rubrics through which we come to know of ourselves in racial, ethnonational terms in the first place? How do we resolve the conflicting meanings forged in the crucible of contradictory colonial origins? Or, do we defiantly reject resolution wholesale? And, more pointedly to the frameworks that are animate in this book, for which bodyminds does Spanish colonial humanism and US liberalism serve as a refuge and space of enminded political power? Spanish—the language, the history, the people, and the culture—has perennially signified a bastion of intellectual power and racial aesthetic beauty through mixture, the intersection of which is readily encapsulated by the disability concept of the bodymind.⁷

Fetishizing a recovery of the Hispanic as an empirical fact about myself or people like me is rather beside the point, particularly given the multilingual archives that I prioritize in this book. Spanish *is* a Filipino language. The Philippines was a part of the Spanish Empire. These facts aren't really debatable from my vantage. Moreover, Filipinx Americans and Latinx Americans have lived together, worked together, and shared community

with one another for more than a century—even longer if we consider the exchanges of the Manila Galleon Route. There are deep, overlapping histories that have brought these communities—across continents and oceans—into contact. I thus view Spanish colonialism, and its collusions with US empire, the Spanish language, and the abstract Hispanic mestizo identity it inspired, as part of a field of meaning making that secured ability, capacity, and privileges for some while relegating others to the underside of political modernity. The Spanish language nourished an intellectual discourse that attained robust cognitive capacity in the face of colonial debilitation by eviscerating native self-determination and autonomy.

The archive through which the contradictory origins of these multifarious political landscapes intersect continues to be the discourse and archive of mestizaje, which binds such diverse geographies together while simultaneously being the source of the radical differentiation among them. I confront the historical and cultural representations of mestizaje and its constitutive imbrications with disability as a colonial logic that proposed the rehabilitation of the native Filipino into a fully fledged democratic subject with the colonizer existing in a propertied relationship to ability itself. In what follows, I elaborate how the rehabilitation of allegedly diminutive native capacity was seen to be an effect of colonialism whose rationalizing and anchoring cultural logic was secured through mestizaje.

On the Queer Colonial and Racial Life of Disability

Crip Colony: Mestizaje, US Imperialism, and the Queer Politics of Disability in the Philippines is an interdisciplinary study engaging an ample archive in literature, visual culture, and historical analysis of Anglophone and Hispanophone texts, which proposes the analysis of disability and colonialism as a unified ideological structure. Temporally, I privilege the transition of the Philippines from a Spanish colony in the late nineteenth century to US imperial territory during the early twentieth century. I suggest that the ideology of colonial disability “hails” subjects to be rehabilitated through a colonial reform ethos while endowing others that are at the interstices of the modern civilized subject and “savage” Indian with the ability to rehabilitate. I mark and archivally locate such interstitial spaces within racial fusions that foment, as part of mestizaje’s project, intermediary subjects at the crux of ostensibly monolithic racial identifications. For this reason, the transitionary period from late Spanish colonialism to early US imperialism is striking, as we can view a snapshot into how racial meanings shifted from

one epoch to the next through an already ambivalent and multivalent discourse like mestizaje.

At base, I argue that Filipino mestizaje simultaneously becomes a marker of difference from the colonized *indio* and a vehicle evoking and evidencing their reform—the mestizo body then is the evidence, product, and agent of colonial rehabilitation. I thus claim that mestizaje is itself a *racial ideology of ability* marking a preference for able-bodied and able-mindedness aligned with the colonial project. More specifically, I contend that mestizaje is a liberal form of colonial ableism that adapts a preference for able-bodiedness through the projection and representation of a queerly deviant Indian in dire need of reform and rehabilitation.⁸ Characterizing mestizaje as a racial ideology of ability similarly picks up on Chicana literary studies scholar Julie Avril Minich's contention that mestizaje functions like a "national prosthesis." That is, it serves as a unifying discourse that "bolsters the formation of national identity [through] a body politic predicated on able-bodiedness."⁹ Blending disability analysis with Chicanx studies, Minich adapts David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's critique of narrative structure in literature, in which a protagonist's autonomy is secured through the secondary disabled characters who serve as metaphorical scaffolds.¹⁰ For my purposes, I will similarly argue that the mestizo architects of the political community of the nation are assumed to possess and are afforded the capacities of able-bodiedness and able-mindedness, thus authorizing their arguments for national cohesion. The so-called Indian is the crip presence that augments or prostheticizes the rational powers of the mestizo.¹¹

Broadly speaking, Filipino mestizaje is a racial, political, and aesthetic discourse that blends Spanish humanist and US progressivist thought in order to identify adequate beneficiaries of colonial rehabilitation and capacitation.¹² The Filipino "mestizo mind" also becomes the actualizer of colonial rehabilitative mandates for an Indian from which it has evolved.¹³ I suggest that Philippine mestizaje colludes with US benevolent reform by interiorizing settler colonial logics surrounding and producing the Indian. Through an attention to the Philippines, I seek to confirm what Chickasaw theorist Jodi Byrd suggests: that the "Indian" need not be limited to understandings of settler colonial violence only in North America. Byrd argues that "Indianness has served as the field through which structures have always already been produced . . . [it] moves not through absence but through reiteration, through meme."¹⁴ US imperialism in the Philippines reiterates settler colonialism and, where the Filipino *indio* is concerned, Indianness is also a "transit . . . site through which US empire orients and replicates itself by

transforming those to be colonized into ‘Indians’ through continual reiterations of pioneer logics, whether in the Pacific, the Caribbean, or the Middle East.”¹⁵ Mestizaje is a troubling racial discourse through which its subjects aspire to the vaunted capacities of the colonizers while navigating being weighed down by an Indigenous past. Rather than slough this past off, they rehabilitate and re-semanticize it. In order to understand these dynamics, this book positions and aligns with Jina Kim’s calls for a “crip of color critique” in order to actualize a trenchant reckoning with genealogies of Spanish humanism, US liberal progressivism in the form of “benevolent assimilation” (which I analyze in more detail in chapter 1), and their various entanglements within mestizaje.¹⁶ I break, however, with the orientation of crip theory, which is often geographically limited to the United States. I hold in tandem the various intersections of disability and colonialism that conspire in the racialized management of the native. In doing so, this project develops a framework I denote as *crip colonial critique*.

Crip colonial critique is a queercrip heuristic through which we grasp the racial-sexual and racialized gendered relations of disability within the developmentalist telos of colonialism more broadly.¹⁷ Crip colonial critique unearths and scrutinizes the ways in which disability discourses fundamentally inhere within, animate, and propagate colonialism generally. Relations and ideologies of ability are always imbedded in colonial relations of power. This analytical frame imagines a union of colonial critique and crip theory that draws on concepts of race germane to Latin American coloniality. The term *coloniality* was originally coined by Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano in his canonical essay “Colonialidad del poder, eurocentrismo y América latina” (Coloniality of power, Eurocentrism and Latin America), which foundationally argued that the notion of race emerged at and developed from the founding moment of modernity: the conquest of the Americas. Race’s purpose was to give a framework to hierarchize bodies racially; to categorize and justify the valuation of their labors; and to facilitate the hyperextraction of surplus value from said racialized labor in order to introduce and sustain the order of colonial capitalism as the prominent global economic system.¹⁸ Building on this foundational concept in Latin American studies, I read the ways that disability inherently structures the mechanisms through which the political rights of sovereignty and autonomy were annulled in order to effect the colonial hierarchization of race in the first place. Relevant to *Crip Colony*’s racial framing, a powerful aspect of Quijano’s original formulation is the ways that race underwent shifts with the introduction of a new labor class of racially mixed mestizos who had