

## Book review: Stephanie Coe: Clothing the Colony - Nineteenth-Century Philippine Sartorial Culture, 1820-1896

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Suriname. Swamy highlights how young women, heavily influenced by images in media, create a Hindu identity for themselves through dress.

As noted in the introduction, the study of the consumption and styling habits of South Asian youth – who are presently a significant portion of the world’s 26 per cent youth – not only has ramifications for the global fashion industry but for many other industries as well. A slight dissatisfaction with this otherwise excellent book was the collaged cover image. This is a lost opportunity in design, as the cover was not as evocative as the topic merited. As a researcher and designer, I felt this space was underutilised. We know strong cover images can lead to greater engagement with the content, as is demonstrated within the volume by the evocative figures and plates in the individual chapters. The writing in the book is as strong as the internal imagery, and I have already assigned the introduction as a reading for my students of Costume, Fashion and Cultural Studies at City University of New York. As fashion and culture scholars, we hope for more books built on such decolonial fashion studies methodologies.

*Deepsikha Chatterjee*

STEPHANIE COO, *Clothing the Colony: Nineteenth-Century Philippine Sartorial Culture, 1820–1896*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2019. 550 pages, ₱1,500.00. ISBN 978-971-550-891-9

Dress is perhaps the most fundamental way that people share, without words, who they are, where they belong and what they want. In *Clothing the Colony*, Stephanie Coo highlights how evolving modes of fashion provide a critical lens to understanding nineteenth-century Philippine society, culture and politics. Utilising a vast array of sources, including colonial records, literature, artwork, photographs and historical pieces of clothing and fabric, Coo examines sartorial culture to reveal the politics of empire and nationalism, as well as evolving understandings of class, race and gender.

Coo argues that clothing served an important function in the colonial Philippines, revealing or concealing “status, affiliations, and values” (p. 1). In her book, she traces how clothing evolved over the course of the nineteenth century, highlighting a shift in colonial hierarchies from being primarily race-based to a multilayered definition of status influenced by race, wealth, education and social and political connections. By the late nineteenth century, Coo argues, sartorial culture stretched across lines of race and ethnicity, blurring lines between previously distinct classes. As men increasingly turned to Western dress for professional attire, women’s dress, and particularly the *baro’t saya* (blouse

and skirt), which had evolved from the *traje de mestiza* (mestiza dress) to the *traje del país* (national dress), increasingly represented an emerging Filipino national identity.

Despite stressing the gradual convergence of dress, Coo also emphasises that dress was both fundamentally personal and flexible. Philippine elites would have owned both European and native articles of clothing and could choose to wear either, or some combination of both, depending on the situation or event. In addition, dress could be used for a variety of means; clothing could be functional but also aspirational, representative or transformative, conformist and radical. Certainly, as Coo shows, Spanish colonisers and Philippine elites spent quite a lot of time agonising about native non-elites wearing clothing associated with status and wealth, acknowledging the importance of public appearance for maintaining the imperial status quo.

Moreover, even as the *baro't saya* became the fashion for rich and poor, urban and rural, *mestiza* and *india* (the Spanish term for Filipinos) small differences in dress, including the quality of fabric, cut of clothing, fineness of embroidery and richness of accessories could still indicate status and allow one to position oneself in the colonial hierarchy. Coo notes, for example, that the choice to wear or discard the *tapís*, or overskirt, became connected with the choice to align with a European or native identity.

Over six chapters, Coo traces the evolution of fashion and clothing production in the islands. The first chapter provides context for the nineteenth-century colonial Philippines, including initial divisions along lines of race and the emergence of a middling class, which blurred the lines of race and class. Chapter Two delves into the actual production of textiles and clothing, including the changing economic and political contexts that led to the use of native fabrics like *piña* and *jusí* in garments for special occasions and in elite dress, while cheaper imported fabrics were used for non-elite garments and everyday clothing. Chapters Three and Four examine the changes in lowland, Christianised fashion for men and women. For women, this meant the emergence of *traje de mestiza* as a blend of European and native styles, and its adoption as the national costume, while men alternated between Western suits and native *baro*, depending on the occasion. Chapter Five explores the connection of clothing and presentation to Spanish and Philippine notions of cleanliness and propriety, as men and, especially, women were expected to balance the use of clothing to demonstrate both status and adherence to colonial mores. Coo's final chapter highlights the complexity of the dress of Europeans and Chinese in the Philippines. While ostensibly faithful to home fashions, Europeans utilised native clothing for a variety of reasons, including personal comfort and diplomacy, while Chinese migrants were less apt to use dress to claim status, and when they did do so, it was more frequently according to Chinese notions of hierarchy and appearance than Filipino.

Coo argues that as dress in the Philippines evolved over the course of the nineteenth century, fashions for mestizos and indios converged, and “local and regional variations in clothing slowly disappeared” (p. 428). This convergence of dress, she continues, supports the claim that a sense of national identity had emerged by the late nineteenth century. This connection between fashion and national identity is one of the most interesting parts of Coo’s work, and one that could be developed further. The importance of clothing, and material culture more broadly, in helping lowland, Christianised peoples in different parts of the islands to see themselves as one people is worthy of further study.

There is also at times some slippage between Coo’s sources and her own scholarly voice. The use of phrases like “fossilized state of savagery” (p. 47) when referring to non-Christians, or the of the idiom “a monkey, however richly dressed, is but a monkey” (pp. 45–46) when discussing a play about an Aeta man wooing a Tagalog woman, without attribution to a specific source, could be misread as part of Coo’s analysis, rather than as an echo of her sources or the beliefs of nineteenth-century elites.

Ultimately, however, Coo’s work is an impressive piece of scholarship. It is thoroughly grounded in the recent scholarship on the Philippines, and she deftly weaves an understanding of the changing colonial context into her discussion of the evolution of dress. The book is also beautifully printed, with almost one hundred illustrations to track the evolution of fashion throughout the century. Her descriptions of fabric and clothing are so evocative that one can almost imagine holding samples of the textiles while reading about them. *Clothing the Colony* is an invaluable guide to the history of Philippine fashion and clothing production. This book will be essential reading for a wide audience, from scholars of the Spanish empire and colonialism in the Philippines to students of dress, fashion and textiles.

*Sarah Steinbock-Pratt*

KATHERINE MEZUR / EMILY WILCOX, *Corporeal Politics: Dancing East Asia*. (Studies in Dance History). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020. 372 pages, 32 illustrations, \$39.95. ISBN 978-0-472-05455-8 (pb)

Katherine Mezur and Emily Wilcox should be congratulated for not only contributing to but also expanding the field of East Asian Dance and Performance Studies. Their co-edited volume, *Corporeal Politics: Dancing East Asia*, deserves recognition as a milestone in this growing field. Emily Wilcox’s introduction expresses the importance of a regional approach to the varied styles of dance throughout East Asia and highlights “corporeal politics” as a unifying method-