ariel: a review of international english literature
Vol. 53 No. 4 Pages 41–63

". . . in the extremity of an impotent despair"[1]: "Whatever Singularity," Postcolonial Ab-Use, and Erik Matti's *On The Job*

Jeremy Centeno De Chavez and Vincent Pacheco

Abstract: This essay investigates how concepts with a European provenance may be productively utilized as tools for analysis in the postcolony without reproducing the epistemic violence characteristic of colonial discourse. More specifically, this essay examines the key ideas of Giorgio Agamben, a philosopher repeatedly accused of insufficiently addressing the role empire plays in shaping history, to determine how his political ontology might be conscripted to understand the biopolitical logic of postcolonial states. We subject Agamben's ideas to what Gayatri Spivak refers to as "ab-use" by placing them in a staged confrontation with a postcolonial text, which we argue could stand in as a generative dialectical antithesis. We argue that Erik Matti's *On the Job* (2013), a cinematic text about prisoners who serve as government agents, is marked by the Philippines' history of multiple colonizations, a historical legacy that serves to mark the limits of Agamben's philosophy. We examine the discourse of religion and benevolent assimilation—emblematic of Spanish and American colonization of the Philippines, respectively—which are expressed metaphorically in the film in terms of sacrifice and cleanliness. We suggest that this method of discrediting the universal address of Agamben's thought clarifies its utility as it renders legible the unique form of biopower exerted by the Philippine postcolonial state.

Keywords: Agamben, cinema, biopolitics, American colonialism, Spanish colonialism, Philippines

> Nevertheless, until a completely new politics—that is, a politics no longer founded on the *exceptio* of bare life—is at hand, every theory and every praxis will remain imprisoned and immobile, and the "beautiful day" of life will be given citizenship only either through blood and death or in the perfect senselessness to which the society of the spectacle condemns it.
>
> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 11

Giorgio Agamben's "political ontology"—that is, the "intertwining of ontology and politics," a relation of "mutual determination" (Abbott 4)—is a rich theoretical resource to understand how the postcolonial nation-state manages and controls its subjects through the politicization of their bodies. If the core of Agamben's "political ontology" is the idea that the biopolitical logic of sovereignty allows for the arbitrary production of states of exception (the legitimacy to decide which lives are valuable and which are dispensable), then in the context of the postcolony those decisions are unavoidably colored by the perdurable legacy of colonialism. However, as many commentators have noted, often with bewilderment and exasperation, Agamben's *oeuvre* neglects the role of empire in the shaping of history, both material and intellectual. Simone Bignall and Marcelo Svirsky note that "Agamben maintains relative silence about colonialism and appears disinclined to engage with those anti-colonial and postcolonial writers and activists" despite his philosophico-political concerns being immediately relevant to the "political exclusions and abandonments characteristic of colonial situations" (3–4). Perhaps as a preemptive gesture to parry accusations of "theoretical imperialism" (Lee et al. 652), Agamben even conscientiously limits the scope of his transhistorical pronouncements by restricting his claims to Western or European history. But, as Stewart Motha rightfully and justifiably points out, such a gesture should not "insulate [Agamben] from criticism" for it is "no alibi," considering that the process of "becoming-world goes hand in hand with imperialism and capitalism" (128–29). We thus do not presume that Agamben's ideas could be unproblematically conscripted to critique and diagnose postcolonial conditions; instead, we identify

the limits of theories with a universal address by redefining and revising their utility and paying regard to specific postcolonial histories. We take our cue from Gayatri Spivak who advocates for the productive "ab-use" of Western theory to initiate what she refers to as a "productive undoing" (3). Our agenda is to render serviceable Agamben's ideas for postcolonial cultural inquiry by reading them alongside postcolonial texts and theory. We aim to ensure that Agamben's ideas do not fossilize into what Edward Said refers to as "cultural dogma" (247) by making them respond to (con-)texts well beyond the ambit of European and Western history. By showing the very deficiencies of Agamben's theory, we advance the utility of some of his concepts in the postcolony, a space that may refigure the constellation of "bare life, victimization, and resistance" (Lentin qtd. in Svirsky and Bignall 3). In what follows, we place some of Agamben's concepts in a staged confrontation with a cinematic text that we suggest dramatizes the injurious legacy of the Philippines' colonial history. Erik Matti's *On the Job* (2013), while set in the historical present, traces the socio-political problems of the Philippine state stemming from its long history of multiple colonialisms. We suggest that the film identifies two such discourses in particular: the Christian discourse of redemption (emblematic of Spanish colonialism) and the discourse of benevolent assimilation (emblematic of US colonialism). Those two discourses, perverse implantations of the two colonizers of the Philippines, are placed in bold relief by the very inability of Agamben's theory to unfold as originally theorized; that is, the theory works as a form of postcolonial critique, signaling the continuing operations of discourses of colonialism, by virtue of its failure. We suggest colonialism manufactures conditions that normative theories of the subject cannot fully anticipate and account for. And, as we shall demonstrate in the pages that follow, the sovereignty of the Philippine postcolonial state depends not only on the sovereign exception—the parsing of good lives and bare lives as Agamben avers—but also on the pernicious blurring of that very distinction.

I. Ab-Using Agamben

How do we propose to productively undo Agamben's ideas that have often been regarded as making claims to universality? It might be

instructive to recall Said's reflections on what happens to a theory when it travels to new places, is installed into other histories, and is interpreted by new and unintended reading communities. For Said, "traveling theory" is "transformed by its new uses, its new position in a new time and place" (227). However, the potential of theory to transform is accompanied by a quite opposite tendency: the elevation of theory to "cultural dogma" (247). Theoretical dogma, while less noxious than "grosser forms of cultural dogma like racism and nationalism," nevertheless "dulls critical consciousness, convincing it that a once insurgent theory is still insurgent, lively, responsive to history" (247). Said seems to suggest that an inevitable transformation occurs as theory is relocated to a new socio-historical context; however, blind reverence to theory, often perpetuated and cultivated by institutions and teaching-machines that regulate knowledge, can function as a conservative force. We take Said's reflections as an invitation to "ab-use" (Spivak 3) theory, a process that entails a confrontation between Agamben's theory and cultural difference while guarding against uncritical veneration that characterizes the deification of theory to "cultural dogma."

Spivak elaborates on her use of the term ab-use as a concept that emerges from the double bind experienced by the "postcolonial and the metropolitan migrant" (4). This is particularly captured, according to Spivak, by the prefix "ab," which "indicat[es] both 'motion away' and 'agency, point of origin,' 'supporting' as well as 'the duties of slaves'" (3–4). Thus, for Spivak, while ab-use principally means to "use from below" (11), the "misleading neographism" also points to the splitting of desire that wants "public sphere gains" (particularly referring to Enlightenment thought but also Western thought enabled by the Enlightenment's legacy) while also wanting to relate theory to "our own history" (4). What this underscores is the presence of a double bind, a moment of "contradictory instruction" that characterizes "global contemporaneity" (2). While the double bind might be experienced as a condition of crisis, an "aesthetic education" prepares one to think through double binds by meaningfully stimulating the "sensory equipment of the experiencing being" (2) that occurs "in the singular and the unverifiable" beyond the grip of globalization, which "takes place only

in capital and data" (1). It is in this context of the "singular and unverifiable" that we would like to relocate some of Agamben's ideas that we conscript for our analysis of cultural texts from the postcolony.

It must be said that our use of religious metaphors to speak of the deification of (Western) theory is less a secularization of those concepts than an attempt at profanation. In his writings, Agamben underscores the crucial difference between secularization and profanation when speaking about the process of making what is sacred available for common use. The difference is between "repression" and "neutralization" (Agamben, *Profanations* 77). While both are "political operations," secularization retains, albeit in repressed form, the power of the sacred. Agamben uses as an example the power that remains intact when the sovereign power of the divine monarch is merely displaced to an earthly monarch, revealing how secularization "leaves intact the forces it deals with by simply moving them from one place to another" (77). In contrast, profanation involves "neutralization," which "deactivates the apparatus of power and return[s] to common use the spaces that power has seized" (77). By pointing this out, we suggest that Agamben's ideas are hospitable to postcolonial ab-use.

Our itinerary therefore follows the work of scholars who have found Agamben's thought particularly effective at making sense of cultural phenomena scarred by colonial histories. Among more recent forays into that area are the works of Seung-Ook Lee, Najeeb Jan, and Joel Wainwright (2014), Anna Ball (2014), and Simone Bignall (2014), who have all taken Agamben's concepts out of the exclusive ambit of Western philosophy and into varied postcolonial contexts, ab-using them in the process. Lee, Jan, and Wainwright examine the South Korean political context through Agamben's theories on the state of exception, sovereign power, and bare life (650). They argue that "Korea's postcolonial condition" (663) is best represented by the division of the Korean Peninsula and primarily maintains the "violent operation of sovereign power, [the] permanent state of exception, and the camp" (653). We concur with their position that "sovereignty cannot be regarded simply as the timeless feature of the state/monarch's right to kill" (663). Ball's "Kafka at the West Bank Checkpoint: De-Normalizing the Palestinian Encounter before

the Law" offers an incisive reading of the films *Route 181* by Michel Khleifi and Eyal Sivan and *like twenty impossibles* by Annemarie Jacir as visual representations of the "checkpoint" in Palestine (75). She argues through Agamben's thought that these films "de-normalize" checkpoint encounters and reveal how Israel's sovereign law reduces the Palestinian into *homo sacer* (Ball 84). Transporting Agamben's ideas down under, Bignall examines the Australian context where the European settlers are at odds with the Indigenous population (29–30). She first offers the predictable reading that the colonial administration framed the Australian Indigenous population as *homo sacer* and suggests that merely giving this reading will accomplish nothing (37). She recognizes how Agamben's notion of "redemption" could lead to concepts such as "shared sovereignty" (45) and co-belonging, which could capitalize on the potentiality of Australia's postcolonial condition. To an extent, she suggests that the redemption of the colonists (or their descendants) would only be possible by also rethinking the relationship between continental philosophy and the postcolony (51). We consider the aforementioned as instances of postcolonial ab-use that Spivak advocates for—moments when universalizing thought is made to confront and therefore respond to the singular. The challenge, however, is to resist collapsing various postcolonial experiences into one generalizable essence while being nevertheless attentive to fortuitous moments of instructive and insightful comparativism.

Towards that goal, we focus our inquiry on the Philippine film *On the Job*, which dramatizes ideas that represent an unthought limit of Agamben's philosophy and which we therefore argue could be positioned as its generative dialectical antithesis. By virtue of its provenance, the film dramatizes the conditions of the Philippine postcolony and enacts a contemporary reckoning with the nation's history of multiple colonizations. In particular, we suggest that the film confronts two emblematic legacies of Philippine colonialism: the discourse of religion and the discourse of benevolent assimilation. Those two discourses, which are perverse implantations that are emblematic of Spanish and American colonialism respectively, are represented in the film as opportunistically utilized by the Philippine postcolonial state to maintain

colonial structures of power. The film exposes how the structural depth of corruption in the Philippines intersects with the discursive infrastructure of the history of multiple colonizations.

In its representation of the contemporary Philippine political situation, *On the Job* deftly captures how the corruption of the postcolonial state is a product of colonialism rather than a perverse consequence of the postcolonial state's failure to properly embrace the values of colonial modernity. The film is consistent with scholarly arguments that have traced the link between contemporary state corruption and the history of Philippine colonialism. Scholar Jon Quah writes that "corruption was introduced into the country [the Philippines] during the Spanish colonial period" (158) through a bureaucratic system that favored the Filipino political elite. When the Americans took over, it became their "manifest destiny to liberate the islands of its corrupt mestizo leadership and educate its people in the arts of civilized government" (Pertierra and Ugarte 192). However, as Julian Go argues, "corruption proceeded unabated" (243), and while the Americans established "new institutions and mechanisms of discipline" such as the education system and the electoral process, their brand of "discipline and punishment did not have a widespread, sustained or consistent effect" on minimizing the corrupt practices of the political elite dating back to the Spanish period (246–47). Rather, the local Filipino elite merely found a way to continue their corrupt practices in the new system established by the Americans (Go 251–53). Our claim is that the colonial discourses we examine, specific to the history of the Philippine postcolony, fundamentally change how one should think of the sovereignty of the state (at least as conceptualized by Agamben) in which the difference between the useful political subject (*bios*) and the dispensable subject (*zoë*) is sometimes collapsed to expand the sovereignty of the postcolonial state.

II. Overview and Summary of *On the Job*

On the Job premiered in the Directors' Fortnight of the 66th Cannes Film Festival where it received a standing ovation. The film also received nominations and awards at the 17th Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival and the 46th Sitges: Catalonian Film Festival.

In the Philippines, *On the Job* was critically acclaimed and has garnered awards from film institutions such as the Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences and the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino, or "Filipino Film Critics." The film was also positively reviewed in 2013 by western critics from *Variety* (Chang), *The Hollywood Reporter* (Young), and *The New York Times* (Catsoulis). The film was primarily inspired by a "service driver" for one of Erik Matti's films who "just came out of prison" (Matti, "Eric Matti"). While in prison, "he made a living by coming out to kill and then going back to prison; and he gets paid . . . US$120 to kill." While there are no specific journalistic accounts of prisoners who work as hitmen, this trope has been represented by internationally acclaimed director Lav Diaz in his film *Norte, the End of History*, in which a prisoner briefly mentions that he will momentarily go out of prison to kill a town mayor. Diaz mentions in an interview that he "researched prisons" in the northern Philippines and that "most of the prisoners there are hitmen" (Diaz) who are usually hired by local politicians as assassins.

On the Job is presumably set around the same time it was released—in 2013—and contains two parallel storylines: the first involves Francis Coronel (played by Piolo Pascual), an agent of the National Bureau of Investigation, and the second involves Daniel (played by Gerald Anderson), an apprentice prisoner/hitman to Mario Maghari (Joel Torre). The film opens with Daniel and Mario eliminating a drug lord/businessman named Johnny Tiu in a city festival. The murder of Johnny Tiu, a known public personality, sparks an investigation by the local police. Police Sergeant Joaquin Acosta (Joey Marquez) employs brutal interrogation tactics on a local criminal to get leads related to Tiu's murder. Consequently, General Pacheco (Leo Martinez) and Congressman Manrique (Michael De Mesa) decide that it is necessary to transfer Acosta's case to a different investigation body (the National Bureau of Investigation), and the case is transferred to Francis Coronel, presumably as a means to suppress the investigation as Francis is Manrique's son-in-law. Despite Acosta's loss of jurisdiction over the case, he still conducts his private investigation concurrently with Francis' investigation.

With Mario's parole date nearing, Thelma (Vivian Velez), his immediate handler, who acts as a middleman for an unknown political figure, asks him to train Daniel to be his replacement as Thelma refuses to employ hitmen who are not prisoners. Daniel and Mario are then assigned to kill a woman named Linda Carag (Cristy Fulgar). They kill Linda and this prompts her now-widowed husband, Pol (Lito Pimentel), to ask Police Officer Acosta for protection. It is then revealed that Pol was involved in the lucrative prisoner hitmen business. Pol attests that there is a massive political conspiracy behind these assassinations and that the head of this business is an army general named Pacheco. General Pacheco, however, is running for senator, and it is imperative for him to disassociate himself from his illegal activities, which explains why he eliminated Tiu at the start of the film.

The hitmen (Daniel and Mario) eliminate Pol, but Mario sprains his ankle during an encounter with the police. Francis then confronts his father-in-law, Congressman Manrique, about General Pacheco's operations and becomes disillusioned when Manrique admits that he once used General Pacheco's services. Manrique tells Francis that arresting General Pacheco will implicate everyone in their family, and it will be the end for them all. Francis then confronts Pacheco regarding the death of his father, an officer in the military. Pacheco reveals that he and his colleagues ordered the death of Francis' father (it is implied that he was killed because he was trying to expose the corruption in the military). Daniel is then assigned to kill Francis and is told by Thelma that he will be replacing Mario. It is revealed that Pacheco ordered Francis' death, with Manrique's approval, in order to silence him. After the job is done, Mario stabs Daniel, presumably to ensure that Francis' death can never be investigated. At the film's ending, Mario remains in prison, and it is implied that he will continue his work as a contract killer.

III. "Whatever singularities" and the Postcolonial Condition

In *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, Agamben theorizes the nature of sovereign power through his concepts of *homo sacer* and bare life. He uses the Greek notions of *zoē*, which refers to mere biological life, and *bios*, which refers to biological life that can participate politically,

to elaborate on his account of the *homo sacer* (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 1–3)—"life that may be killed but not sacrificed" (82). Agamben posits that the state draws its sovereign power from its ability to define what constitutes *zoē* and *bios*, and the result is the politicized *zoē* or bare life (83). This practice of "sovereign exception" allows states to make a distinction between those who may live good lives and those who must live bare lives (83–85). This distinction is necessary for the sovereign state to systematically exert power on populations (131).

On the Job encourages spectators to read the ontological status of Mario and Daniel as bare lives. That is to say, while they are technically incarcerated, they nevertheless enjoy restricted freedom when executing tasks for the corrupt state and are able to infiltrate the domain of the *bios* as status-less "war machines," "armed men . . . with complex links to state forms" (Mbembe 32). What we wish to underscore here is how the postcolonial state has found a way to utilize bare lives as a means of surreptitiously restructuring the domain of *bios* without openly violating the law. In other words, bare life, which is "life exposed to death" (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 88), in turn exposes *bios* to the actuality of death. This, we argue, represents the perverse form of Agamben's "whatever singularity" (*The Coming Community* 19).

Agamben describes a "whatever singularity" as a being "an infinite series of modal oscillations" (*The Coming Community* 19), a "pure singularity" that is "determined . . . [by] the totality of its possibilities" (67). Agamben's whatever singularity is a being that is not defined by its identity predicates or by any set of social categories and therefore has an undetermined potentiality. So optimistic is Agamben in the disruptive potential of the whatever singularity that he refers to it as the "enemy of the state" (86). Part of our intervention, however, is to ask to what extent that very potentiality could be conscripted by the state. Is it possible that the "enemy of the state" becomes its conspirator, willingly or otherwise?

In *On the Job*, the contract killers, Mario and Daniel, challenge and complicate the normative understanding of what bare life is because they are able to blur what constitutes the sovereign exception, the distinction between *bios* and *zoē*. This is because Mario and Daniel are

technically outside and inside the realm of law. As subjects of/to the law and the state's penitentiary power, they are supposedly locked up to protect other citizens, the *bios*; however, they are state-less when under contract as "war machines" (Mbembe 32). Scholars such as Aaron Mallari and Áine Mangaoang have noted that the Philippine penal system was part of the American colonial project. In his study of the Bilibid prison, the "largest prison in the Philippines" during the American colonial era, Mallari writes that "the prison and the penal system under the Americans became another arena to showcase American 'exceptionalism,' the discourse which figured vital in their legitimation of the empire, arguing that they were exceptional, different from their European counterparts" (167). Mallari argues that the Americans used prisons as places of "rehabilitation" (176) to further the principle of benevolent assimilation that justified the "colonial order" (185). By "maximizing the potential of the prison as a colonial project, the Bilibid was showcased to the world as a bastion of American benevolence and the success of the civilizing mission" (Mallari 187). *On the Job* exposes this colonial artifice by representing the prison system not as a site of rehabilitation and redemption but as an important necropolitical facility for the postcolonial state to sustain and expand its power. During the American colonial era, the prison functioned to demonstrate the benevolence of the American empire and the efficacy of its civilizing mission. However, when state power was transferred to the ruling elite after the Americans left, the Filipino elite still used (and subverted) the same penal system for their own benefit. To further complicate these categories, in the film, the prison is represented as a place bereft of the usual biopolitical measures found in such institutions: prisoners are free to walk around, they fight with an understanding that guards will not interfere, and political figures can use some of these prisoners as hitmen (through correspondence with the authorities of the prison). This enables the perverse potentiality of the "whatever singularity" to actualize itself as Mario and Daniel are placed outside the law when they are contracted by political figures, standing in for the law itself, to eliminate several *bios* that the state deems as adversaries. These "whatever beings" distort the idea of the state of exception as they have the qualities of both *bios* and bare

life. They are *bios* because they have traces of freedom and livable life: they can earn money from their work, which they send to their families who are outside of prison. These "whatever beings" are also bare lives because they can easily be erased by the state since they are technically not subjects of the state. Instead of becoming *bios* that can form the basis of Agamben's so-called "coming community" (Agamben, *The Coming Community* 11), the postcolonial state exploits these "whatever beings" as instruments to enforce and maintain its own power.

On the Job dramatizes the tension between image and essence, artifice and substance, surface and depth through the trope of cleanliness. The trope of cleanliness in the film functions as an invitation to spectators to adopt a hermeneutics of suspicion—for things are not always what they seem. Incidentally, cleanliness is a recurring concept in Philippine colonial discourse, whether it is a concern for the cleanliness of the soul in Spanish colonial discourse or a more medicalized form of cleanliness in American colonial discourse. In *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical Medicine, Race, and Hygiene in the Philippines*, Warwick Anderson examines how the American Empire instilled an idea of medical cleanliness in the Philippine archipelago as part of their civilizing mission. Anderson writes that "the American colonial authorities had eagerly taken up the burden of cleansing their newly acquired part of the Orient, attempting to purify not only its public spaces, water, and food, but also the bodies and conduct of the inhabitants" (1). While Anderson notes that "[e]xperiencing hygiene thus could also be a means of experiencing empire and race" (2), we suggest that this experience is re-appropriated by the postcolony at the political level. The postcolonial state repeats the civilizing mission of cleanliness, but a politics of erasure subverts the ideology of colonial rehabilitation and maintains the image of cleanliness. In his recent examination of Duterte-era Philippines, Janus Nolasco similarly critiques the image of hygiene and cleanliness, but he suggests that this image speaks to a broader state ideological campaign against what it considers to be forms of disorder. In the film, there is the same obsession with cleanliness as well, and it is arguably central to what Achilles Mbembe calls "necropolitics," in which "the ultimate expression of sovereignty, resides to a large degree, in the power and the

capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (11–12). We argue that the recurring trope of cleanliness operates on two levels in *On the Job*: first, the film presents the local political elite adapting the discourse of cleanliness shaped by the legacies of American and Spanish colonialism, and second, the postcolonial state utilizes the notion of cleanliness in its necropolitical practices and categorization of life.

Throughout the film, we see state officials disregard the law through acts of corruption. An instructive scene in the film is when General Pacheco and Congressman Manrique asks Francis Coronel to cover up the death of Johnny Tiu. Pacheco and Manrique will transfer the murder case from the local police to the National Bureau of Investigation. From there, they expect that Francis will sweep the case under the rug, thereby cleansing Pacheco and Manrique from any involvement in Tiu's death.

What is shown here is the political elite's attachment to the notion of cleanliness, which is necessary for Pacheco and Manrique to maintain their power, as any blemish on their image can jeopardize their future political plans. However, the morally upright Francis becomes disillusioned when it sinks in that Manrique also used prisoner hitmen to maintain his power. In a confrontation with his wife, Francis angrily remarks when referring to Manrique, Pacheco, and the political elite that "[n]o one is clean in this line of work, they are all the same" (01:11:58–01:12:04). Francis' recognition of his complicity in the state's fetishistic desire for cleanliness paradoxically made him unclean in the eyes of the political elite. Towards the end of the film, Pacheco and Manrique order prisoner hitmen to kill both Francis (a person who officially exists within the state as *bios*) and Daniel (a prisoner hitman whose life was made bare by the state) to maintain the image of the postcolonial state.

Other scenes in *On the Job* dramatize how the Filipino elite is able to repurpose the American discourse of cleanliness to further enforce class divisions. The discourse of sanitation has been translated to the policing of elite spaces to ensure that they are free from traces of what they consider the wretched of the Earth. In the film, Pacheco, Manrique, and other politicians live in affluent guard-gated private communities. They wear designer clothes, drive luxury cars, and frequent golf courses. These scenes were strategically depicted to contrast with those set in prisons

Figure 1. The death of Johnny Tiu from two bullet shots, one in the chest, and one in the head (00:04:30)

and slum areas where Mario, Daniel, and other prisoners and slum dwellers loiter in tattered clothes. Nolasco argues that the aesthetic of cleanliness in the Philippines has been associated with "class and wealth" and that the state's "obsession with beauty and cleanliness is matched by an aversion to the dirty, delinquent and disorderly." That aversion is made manifest by the lack of meaningful interactions between the political elite and the lower classes, as "disdain for dirt often translates into disdain for the poor" (Nolasco). The discourse of cleanliness reemerges when the contract killers are repeatedly instructed by their handlers to leave no traces of their presence. In one scene, Mario instructs Daniel on how to murder a target using a knife, saying "that is not where you stab someone repeatedly, it should be clean, simple. Make sure you don't make a mess out of it" (00:38:39–00:38:53). Ironically, the various execution scenes in the film are blatantly gruesome (for example, see Fig. 1).

The lighting in this scene is bright, exposing the disfigured head of Mario and Daniel's first victim. Tiu is recklessly executed in broad daylight around numerous bystanders. The scenes of cleanliness and uncleanliness discussed above point to how the postcolonial state was able to perversely adapt the colonial discourses of cleanliness to maintain its own power. This aesthetic of cleanliness embodied by the political elite

is ironically made possible by nefariously utilizing and subverting the very potentiality of "whatever singularities," such as Daniel and Mario, even though the state deems them as filth in society.

These "whatever singularities" make the politics of erasure possible as their very existence is beyond the sovereign exception. The sovereign state of exception again is supposedly contingent on the assumption that states can easily categorize populations based on several definitions, but as we show here, this is not necessarily the case in this specific postcolonial context. Agamben writes that [t]he novelty of the coming politics is that it will no longer be a struggle for the conquest or control of the State, but a struggle between the State and the non-State (humanity), an insurmountable disjunction between whatever singularity and the State organization" (*The Coming Community* 84). However, in this film instead of the whatever singularity becoming an opportunity to undermine state power, it has become a tool of the state.

In the succeeding paragraphs, we turn to an often-ignored section of Agamben's *Homo Sacer* to analyze the patrilineal lines that structure the narrative of the film.

IV. On Patrilineality, Redemption, and State Power

In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben also theorizes that the modern state's sovereign power is structured after the ancient Roman concept of *vitae necisque potestas* or a father's absolute power over his sons (87). The sovereign state in Agamben's thought is therefore the macro expression of a microfamilial relation. We suggest that the film picks up on this meaningful trope of *vitae necisque potestas* and offers generative ways to rethink paternal authority as the basis for state power in postcolonial conditions. In the Philippines, this particular patrilineal configuration of authority follows religious lines. Catholicism, arguably the most forceful and enduring legacy of Spanish colonialism in the Philippines, continues to enforce structures of thought that support the necropolitical state. Needless to say, as Foucault theorized in *The History of Sexuality*, that which could be used to repress could also paradoxically animate resistance—and indeed, Christian discourse was also utilized to challenge state oppression in multiple ways. What is crucial, however, is to discern

when such discourses operate in the service of power or against it. We contend that Agamben's notion of *vitae necisque potestas* might be of use in that regard.

In Christian tradition, the decision of God the Father to sacrifice his "only begotten son" (*King James Bible*, John 3:16) is considered necessary for salvation since the death of Christ is an act of atonement for the sins of humankind. Sacrificial salvation is mimicked in the film, but there is only bloodshed, no redemption. The parallel stories of the film also represent two patrilineal lines: 1) the father-son-like relationship of Mario and Daniel and 2) Congressman Manrique and his son-in-law Francis Coronel. In both plotlines, the fathers (Manrique and Mario) ultimately kill their sons (Daniel and Francis). It is easy to dismiss both acts as mere exercise of "the unconditional authority [*potesta*] of the *pater* over his sons" (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 87). However, the difference between the two patrilineal lines is that one line ends in a sacrificial act that supports the state apparatus and the other ends in an act that can potentially be redemptive and might undo the state's configuration of power. The killing of Francis by Daniel at the order of his father-in-law is done to protect the corrupt state, while Daniel's death by Mario's hands is committed in the hope that it will bring an end to, or at least expose, state corruption. But tragically, the corrupt state emerges unscathed. Francis' execution is committed by the status-less "war machine" Daniel, who cannot be punished by the law that does not recognize him as a subject. To underscore this, Daniel kills Francis right in front of the headquarters of the Philippine National Bureau of Investigation, a space that synecdochically stands for the law. However, Daniel's ontological status of bare life is what in the end makes his death an ineffectual sacrifice—the idea of sacrifice being an important concept in Agamben's thought, as we shall explain below.

In the film, the relationship between Mario and Daniel starts out uneasily, as the former is constantly annoyed by the latter's arrogance and carelessness. This changes throughout the film as Mario is tasked with training Daniel to be his replacement. Mario gradually sees Daniel as a surrogate son, and likewise, Daniel sees Mario as a father figure, telling him, "after all that you did for me, you are like my father"

(1:22:19–01:22:24). Their bond stands in contrast to the idea of detachment, which Mario encourages to ensure the cleanliness and efficiency of their work. Mario reveals that he served as an apprentice to a senior hitman for three years until he was tasked with killing his mentor. He then muses on the possibility of Daniel doing the same to him:

> MARIO. We can't say for sure, one day, I might fail on the job, and you will be asked to do the same to me. You should just remain detached, just treat this as work. Just part of the job, nothing personal.
>
> DANIEL. That's impossible 'Tang [Mario], you won't fail right?
>
> MARIO. [half-jokingly] You will kill me right, you motherfucker.
>
> DANIEL. Fuck it, that will never happen . . . that will never happen. (00:42:27–00:43:04; authors' translation)

Daniel denies the possibility of committing fratricide, while the cynical Mario accepts the possibility of dying by Daniel's hand, knowing that it is part of the natural order of succession inadvertently sanctioned by the extra-judicial system. Mario is fully aware that training his replacement is signing his death sentence, but out of love for his surrogate son, he continues to do so. Seeing Daniel kill an old and decrepit man (as part of his training) is hard on him, and he even gets teary eyed, which is reminiscent of an ideal father who disciplines his son for his own good, even if it hurts the father to do so. At the end of the film, however, in a subversion of the trope of succession, Mario, tearfully and reluctantly, kills his surrogate son after a lengthy embrace.

We read this act as a ceremonious sacrifice that brings the sacrificed to the realm of the sacred. Drawing from Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, Agamben interprets sacrifice (which, again, entails the elevation of an object from the profane realm to the sacred realm) as an act that results in the "destruction of all possible use" (*Profanations* 84) for an object. Does the death of Daniel at the hands of his father mean that his utility in the realm of humanity is eradicated? For Agamben, an object (sacred or otherwise) must undergo "profanation" (73–74) in order for it to be useful to humanity. However, we suggest that, in this case, the

Figure 2. As Mario (the father) and Daniel (the son) embrace each other, the father thrusts a dagger into his son's side. (1:47:18)

act of sacrifice makes the sacred still useful by enabling the necropolitical system to endure. Daniel's death allows the state to further deny his existence and erase all evidence of his state-sanctioned extra-judicial killing of Francis Coronel, the agent who was determined to expose this sinister necropolitical apparatus.

Along the same lines of patrilineality, Francis Coronel is paired with his father-in-law, Congressman Manrique. Throughout the film, Manrique thinks of Francis as his successor, and he encourages Francis to take up politics. Manrique dotes on Francis, and he gives the honest agent an expensive car (which an average government official could not afford) and fatherly advice. The congressman also dreams that his son-in-law will be the next chief of the National Bureau of Investigation. However, Francis finds out that his father-in-law is complicit with the necropolitical structure controlled by General Pacheco and that exposing the prisoner hitmen business would politically destroy them all. Despite this, Francis still attempts to end the system and, to an extent, destroy the patrilineal line that produces the necropolitical apparatus through a seemingly patricidal act that endangers his entire family. At the end of *On the Job*, Francis fails when his own father-in-law consents

Figure 3. Francis Coronel as he is sacrificed by his father-in-law in a perverse ceremony to the system (1:40:46)

to his summary execution. This act is also reminiscent of a sacrificial act, as Francis is ceremoniously killed in front of the National Bureau of Investigation's headquarters.

What is interesting with these patrilineal lines is that the father figures for Daniel and Francis are the ones who kill their sons, subverting the trope of the son succeeding the father. We interpret this as an extension of Agamben's assertion that the exercise of a state's sovereign power comes from a Roman custom that grants "the unconditional authority [*potesta*] of the *pater* over his sons" (*Homo Sacer* 87). The necropolitical system in the film is held in place by the power of the father, who sacrifices his "son" to the system itself. We argue that the patrilineal relationships, or more importantly, the power of the father, extend the value of Agamben's theories in a place where unique postcolonial legacies endure.

V. Conclusion: The Limits of Postcolonial Redemption

Erik Matti's *On The Job* narrates a postcolonial experience that, in part, represents the limits of Western thought. In this essay, we have traced how colonial discourses, such as paternal governance and benevolent

assimilation that are emblematic of the Spanish and American colonialization of the Philippines, are part of the very institutional and discursive infrastructure that allows the postcolonial state to exercise its distinctive form of biopower. The state is able to maintain and expand its power not only by distinguishing between *zoē* and *bios* but also calculatingly blurring that very distinction, a move enabled paradoxically by colonial discourses that it supposedly opposes. Trying to understand how power operates in the postcolony requires a new form of thinking attentive to such vicissitudes.

One of the more alluring aspects of Agamben's philosophy is that it seeks a "potential politics" that paves the way for the "coming community." And while Agamben repeatedly admits that he speaks from the solipsistic position of Western philosophy, the force of his ideas nevertheless depends on an "event of the outside," which is "the absolutely non-thing experience of pure exteriority" (Agamben, *The Coming Community* 66). Simone Bignall perceptively draws attention to the troubling similarity between Agamben's "outside" and the colonial fantasy of *terra nullius*—"an empty space available for the self-development of Western forms" ("Postcolonial Redemption" 46). So, while Agamben's neglect of colonial history may seem like a humble admission of limitations, his theory of the redemptive potentiality of the "outside" and its yet-to-be-realized promise of the "coming community" benefit from that very neglect. As we hope to have demonstrated, the postcolonial subject, despite being stripped of identity—what Agamben might call "whatever singularity"—is nevertheless folded in colonial histories from which it cannot escape, and by that virtue remains an exploitable tool for the postcolonial state that wishes to uphold existing power structures that define its colonial past.

In the epilogue of Agamben's *homo sacer* project, he optimistically envisions a "theory of destituent potential" (*Use of Bodies* 263)—a politics that cannot be reduced to the normative structure of Western politics that draws force from its capacity to define forms of life (*Use of Bodies* 264–68). Agamben's theory of "destituent potential," however, remains a Eurocentric vision that inexcusably neglects colonial legacies. Unsurprisingly, that theory is unable to account for how various colonial

histories, which run asynchronously with European modernity, necessarily shape his vision of the "coming community," since the process of "becoming-world goes hand in hand with imperialism and capitalism" (Motha 128–29). While we are energized by the redemptive force of Agamben's thought, the brute and harrowing density of the Philippine postcolonial experience impresses upon us that the coming community, which brings with it the promise of a new politics, does not reside in a theory that overlooks enduring colonial legacies. However, by ab-using Agamben's ideas, one can at least rethink the operations of biopower in the postcolony and begin to imagine optimistic futures that are neither woeful nor cruel.

Note

1 " . . . in the extremity of an impotent despair" is a quotation from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (16). The very graphic line is uttered when the novella's (in)famous narrator, Marlow, is describing the condition of "the contorted mangroves" he sees *en route* to the Belgian Congo. Afterwards, he says it filled him with a "general sense of vague and oppressive wonder" (16). This scene is, for us, symbolic of how the singularity of postcolonial experience means that it will always in part represent the limits of Western thought.

Works Cited

Abbott, Mathew. *The Figure of This World: Agamben and the Question of Political Ontology.* Edinburgh UP, 2014.

Agamben, Giorgio. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Translated by Daniel Heller-Roazen, Stanford UP, 1998.

———. *The Coming Community.* Translated by Michael Hardt, U of Minnesota P, 1990.

———. *Profanations.* Translated by Jeff Fort, Zone, 2007.

———. *The Use of Bodies*. Translated by Adam Kotsko, Stanford UP, 2016.

Anderson, Warwick. *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical Medicine, Race, and Hygiene in the Philippines.* Duke UP, 2006.

Angeles, Luis, and Kyriakos C. Neandis. "The Persistent Effect of Colonialism on Corruption." *Economica*, vol. 82, 2015, pp. 319–49.

The Authorized King James Bible. Oxford UP, 1998.

Ball, Anna. "Kafka at the West Bank Checkpoint: De-Normalizing the Palestinian Encounter before the Law." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 50, no. 1, 2014, pp. 75–87.

Bignall, Simone. "Postcolonial Redemption: Agamben's Thought as Transformative Chrēsis." *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2014, pp. 29–54.

Bignall, Simone, and Marcelo Svirsky. "Introduction: Agamben and Colonialism." *Agamben and Colonialism*, edited by Bignall and Svirsky, Edinburgh UP, 2013, pp. 1–16.

Catsoulis, Jeannette. "Both Sides of a Crime, Each Imperfect." *The New York Times*, 26 Sept. 2013, nytimes.com/2013/09/27/movies/on-the-job-directed-by-erik-matti.html.

Chang, Justin. "Film Review: 'On the Job.'" *Variety*, 12 June 2013, variety.com/2013/film/markets-festivals/film-review-on-the-job-1200496398/.

Conrad, Joseph. "Heart of Darkness." *Joseph Conrad: Three Novels*, Macmillan, 1995, pp. 1–92.

Diaz, Lav. "Cannes 2013. Crime and Existence: Lav Diaz's 'North, the End of History' and a Conversation with Lav Diaz." Interview by Daniel Kasman, *Mubi*, 26 May 2013, mubi.com/notebook/posts/cannes-2013-crime-existence-lav-diazs-north-the-end-of-history-a-conversation-with-lav-diaz.

Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction.* Translated by Robert Hurley, Pantheon, 1978.

Go, Julian. *American Empire and the Politics of Meaning: Elite Political Cultures in the Philippines and Puerto Rico during U.S. Colonialism.* Duke UP, 2008.

Lee, Seung-Ook, et al. "Agamben, Postcoloniality, and Sovereignty in South Korea." *Antipode*, vol. 46, no. 3, 2014, pp. 650–68.

Mallari, Aaron Abel T. "The Bilibid Prison as an American Colonial Project in the Philippines." *Philippine Sociological Review*, vol. 60, 2012, pp. 165–92.

Mangaoang, Áine. "Performing the Postcolonial: Philippine Prison Spectacles after Web 2.0." *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 9, no. 4, 2014, pp. 1–18.

Matti, Erik. "Erik Matti: Getting the Job Done." Interview by Andrew Heskins, *easternkicks.com*, 4 June 2014, easternkicks.com/features/erik-matti-getting-the-job-done.

———, director. *On the Job.* Star Cinema, 2013.

Mbembe, Achilles. "Necropolitics." *Public Culture*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2003, pp. 11–40.

Motha, Stewart. "Colonial Sovereignty, Forms of Life and Liminal Beings in South Africa." *Agamben and Colonialism*, edited by Simone Bignall and Marcelo Svirsky, Edinburgh UP, 2013, pp. 1–16.

Nolasco, Janus. "The Politics of Cleanliness in Duterte's Philippines." *New Mandala*, 2018, newmandala.org/politics-cleanliness-dutertes-philippines/.

Pertierra, Raul, and Eduardo F. Ugarte. "American Rule in the Muslim South and the Philippine Hinterlands." *Mixed Blessing: The Impact of American Colonial Experience on Politics and Society in the Philippines*, edited by Hazen M. McFerson, Greenwood, 2002, pp. 191–208.

Quah, Jon S. T. "Bureaucratic Corruption in the ASEAN Countries: A Comparative Analysis of Their Anti-Corruption Strategies." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1982, pp. 153–77.

Said, Edward. *The Text, The World, The Critic.* Harvard UP, 1983.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*. Harvard UP, 2013.

Young, Neil. "On the Job: Cannes Review." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 30 Apr. 2013, hollywoodreporter.com/review/job-cannes-review-560650.