RESPONSE TO THE PROMISE OF THE FOREIGN

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Abstract
In his “Response to The Promise of the Foreign,” Roland Tolentino generates a battery of provocative questions that seeks to resituate Rafael’s trope of “the foreign,” particularly in the field of Philippine Studies. Here, Tolentino asks nine questions that open up “the foreign” into zones of contacts with other contexts: the foreign in relation to the linguistic context of the period; its relationship with the vernacular, particularly in the case of the recodification of the baybayin; its involvement with act of writing and rewriting; its viability as a social project and its political efficacy; the foreign and its relation to social class; the foreign in light of the present bilingual condition; its relation to a second colonial language, American English; its reckoning with the indigene/colonized/native/vernacular; and lastly, its relation to the untranslatable.

About the Author
Roland Tolentino is Professor at the University of the Philippines Film Institute. He has a PhD in Film, Literature and Culture, from the Critical Studies Division, School of Cinema-Television, University of Southern California. His scholarly books include Sipat-Kultura: Mapagpalayang Pagbabasa, Pag-aaral at Panunuri ng Panitikan (Cultural Eye: Towards a Liberating Reading, Study and Criticism of Philippine Literature, forthcoming, 2007), Transglobal Economies and Cultures: Contemporary Japan and Southeast Asia (co-editor, 2004), and the six-volume Popular Culture Series (2004). His books of fiction include Sakit ng Kalingkingan: 100 Dagli sa Edad ng Krisis (2005), Kuwentong Syudad (co-editor, 2002), and Sapinsaping Pag-ibig at Pagtangis: Tatlong Novella ng Pagsinta’t Paghinagpis (1999).

Rafael presents us another thought-provoking study on late 1800 nationalism. I am especially interested in the forces and affects of subjection and agency in what he terms as translation or the circulation of the foreign for active and inactive viable use value for the nationalism of the period. My reaction revolves around the process of translation and how this trope can be used in my area of discipline, Philippine Studies. At this time, I am provoked to raise more questions than try to figure out the links between Rafael’s translation and Philippine Studies.

First, are there particular historical linguistic shifts in translation tactics from the early efforts of the natives of the colony to the exemplary intellectual nationalist pursuits of the ilustrados? How has Spanish evolved in relation to the evolution of various vernaculars in the colony? Might not the analysis of Rizal’s novels, Baltazar’s play, the Katipunan newspaper, and the various comedias come into varying translation contacts and shifts in
language, its regimentation by the Spanish colonizers, and its alternative use by the native intellectuals in the various historical periods concerned?

Second, how does Rafael’s translation figure in the first great translation project of the Spanish colonizers, i.e., the recodification of baybayin (native alphabet writing and linguistic system) to romanized Spanish? How does Rafael’s notion of foreign figure in the massive linguistic, social, political, cultural, and economic paradigm shifts from precolonial to Spanish colonial periods? From what historians have revealed to us, the baybayin was still very much in use even up to the 1800s. Does this mean that the vernacular—at least in writing—has remained untranslatable? What does this refusal to be translated mean for the foreign?

If the Filipino word for translate is “salin” and originally used in the recodification of the baybayin writing into Spanish, the acts of writing and rewriting, not just words and phrases coming into being, also come into play in translation. How does the original baybayin defy Spanish translation? How does translation account for a divergent writing native writing strategy that remained in use even in the 1800s?

Third, on the one hand, can the foreign be always just out there, refusing to be domesticated but still sustaining the viability of a future social project? How does it lose its social and linguistic efficacy to stir nationalism and simply be co-opted for colonial and neocolonial formations? At what point can the foreign be discarded, not vital to linguistic and nationalist discourse? On the other hand, is the foreign truly untranslatable? In what the ilustrados have undertaken in their Castillian translation for nationalism, is the translation the only optimizable linguistic discourse to carry out the nationalist project?

Fourth, is the Castillian language the metalanguage to localize the nationalist discourse? It seems that the analysis of major language formations through literature has to contend with the Castillian language. What is then the political efficacy of choosing to be regimented with the language of colonial power? Is there no way out for nationalists except to choose to engage primarily with Spanish? If not, what are the gradations of subjection in which contending nationalist projects can emanate from various vernacular languages and ilustrados’ writing in Spanish?

Fifth, to speak of the ilustrados is to speak of a small yet critical segment of Filipino intellectuals of the pre-Philippine Revolution period. How might a further class analysis of the contending and dialoging forces that lead up to the ultimate nationalist project—the Philippine Revolution of 1896—inform us of a more nuanced rereading of the history and nationalism of the period? Outside the divergent translation tactics used, how does class reconceptualize the period’s various nationalist projects?
Sixth, for Filipinos of the present time, the bilingual education has created a nation of everyday translations, and the classroom as site of everyday translation. We are asked a question in English by our teachers, and we are told that our mind goes through a delicate process of translation: first, how does the question translate in the vernacular first language; second, what would be our response; third, how do we translate our response to English? How does this everyday translation of the foreign exhibit the characteristics of linguistic nationalism Rafael defines in his study?

Seventh, if the translation was indeed vital to the nationalist cause, how then does the coming into the fore of another foreign—American English—recodify the engagements? How does the study of the historical moment of late 1800 nationalism foreground the next major linguistic shift in the American colonial project of the Philippines? What remains of the phantom of Castillian translation in the next colonial setup? I would have wanted to know where nationalism lies thereafter, how it has engaged the newer colonial setup in a divergent and parallel take of Spanish colonialism.

Eighth, is it only the foreign that substantiates the translation process? How might the indigene/colonized/native/vernacular engage translation for nationalism? What are the primary operations for the vernacular, or in the Philippine case, for the vernaculars to substantiate nationalism via a primary engagement in its locus, rather than through the foreign? Or is nationalism already a foreign translation? As with what others have asked of Benedict Anderson’s project of nationalism outside the West—only through the frame of western nationalism—what are we then left with to imagine ourselves if we cannot imagine ourselves and our nationalisms outside the purview of the foreign? While theorizing a pragmatic use of the foreign, how then does one activate the processes of indigenization, democratization, agency and collectivity, adaptation, rewriting, and rereading of the foreign? What, if at all, is the political efficacy of the vernaculars, or one’s capacity to translate across languages?

Lastly, where in translation does the untranslatable lie? And what does it mean that the supplement—the untranslatable—remains as such? What is the untranslatable in the nationalist discourse of the period? What in the untranslatable gives weakness to the promise of the foreign, where we to paraphrase Derrida’s formulation that the letter does not always arrive, meaning that the promise is not always fulfilled? In these unfulfilled instances, how can it be read in favor of a productive nationalism which can be revitalized for the present counter-official nationalist time?

I realize, of course, that the battery of questions may seem unfair to Rafael. But then, I too am translating his foreign in order to realize my own relationship with his discourse.