

SCENES OF TRANSLATION: RESPONSES TO RESPONSES

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Abstract

In his “Response to Responses,” Vicente Rafael thanks and answers the questions raised during the forum. To Gary Devilles’s comment of his “remaining silent” in the way translation can be “radicalized into an ethical technology or a strategic pedagogy,” Rafael offers the trope of revenge—a desire for justice, which results from the Spanish misrecognition of Filipino attempts at translation—and the language of secrecy and solidarity of the 1896 Revolution—which results from the failure of Castilian to become *lingua franca*—as political technics in themselves. To Ramon Guillermo’s comment of the book’s impoverished, restrictive, and imprecise notions of translation, Rafael reiterates and contends his multivalent conception of translation: always doubled and open-ended; dialectical and dialogical; “that which is new and for this reason yet to be assimilated and understood;” in sum, “that which is always inside *and* outside, eccentric yet inherent to the social order,” constitutive as well as disruptive. To Remmon Barbaza’s Heideggerian reading, Rafael thankfully re-emphasizes the recurrent motif of the foreign as *call* and the affinity of this with the foreign as *promise*. Finally, to Roland Tolentino’s “disconcerting” series of questions, Vince Rafael warns against the fetishization of translation when detached from its particularity, and its envisagement as “the subjugation of the other in order to realize one’s sense of self, a self predicated on the mastery of the other’s discourse.”

About the Author

Vicente L. Rafael, Professor of History at the University of Washington, is the author of *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History* (2000) and *Contracting Colonialism* (1993) (both from Duke UP), and editor of *Figures of Criminality in Indonesia, the Philippines and Colonial Vietnam* (Cornell, 1999) and *Discrepant Histories: Translocal Essays on Filipino Cultures* (Temple UP, 1993). His most recent book, which he discussed in the Kritika Kultura Lecture Series, is *The Promise of the Foreign* (Duke UP, 2005 and Anvil, 2006).

I thank Gary Devilles, Ramon Guillermo, Remmon Barbaza, and Roland Tolentino for their very spirited and careful engagement with *The Promise of the Foreign*, and Lulu Reyes for her tireless efforts at organizing this gathering. In responding to these responses, I’d like to link their observations and criticisms with some of the recurring concerns of the book. I will take them in the order that I received them.

Gary Devilles has provided a succinct summary of some of the major arguments of the book. He faults me, however, for “remaining silent” on the way translation can be “radicalized into an ethical technology or a strategic pedagogy.” The book, he says, fails as a project of “political criticism.” If this were the case it would indeed be a serious lapse. But I think that his concerns with the political and pedagogic uses of translation have in fact been addressed throughout the book. The first three chapters track the ways by which

Filipino attempts at translation fail to yield recognition from Spain, and how this chronic misrecognition results not in assimilation but in phantasms of revenge. Revenge as a kind of desire for justice is certainly political. And it has many lessons to teach, as the endless conversations between Elias and Ibarra in Jose Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere*, and Simoun and Basilio and Padre Florentino illustrate in *El Filibusterismo*. The desire for revenge is what brings about the fevered figure of the "filibustero" which remains radically eccentric and thus foreign (because subversive) to colonial society. What I had hoped to show were the ways by which translation becomes political to the extent that it entails the promise of communication at the same time that it generates estrangement, conflict, and violence. In this way, mistranslation is not something accidental and external to translation; rather it is the latter's condition of possibility.

Deville's second concern has to do with the question of translation as a basis for "a strategic pedagogy of emancipation." In fact, I try to deal with this problem in Chapter 7 on the Revolution and the Afterword (which unfortunately he doesn't seem to have read because he nowhere makes references to them in his response). As I show in these sections, the Revolution of 1896 was in part instigated by the failure of Castilian to become what the ilustrados hoped it would be: a lingua franca with which to solicit Spanish recognition of Filipino rights and promote progress in the colony. That failure produced momentous events, such as the growth of secret societies, especially the Liga Filipina and the Katipunan, which functioned as "subterranean public spheres." Modeled after Masonic lodges, secret societies engendered cryptic symbols and new practices of belonging and solidarity. We can see this especially around the blood compact, or *pacto de sangre*. It was precisely this new language of secrecy and solidarity that connected Filipino nationalists across social and geographical divides while sending menacing messages to the Spaniards. On the eve of the Revolution, Spaniards saw how the technics of translation could be used against them as they found themselves confronting the emergence of a revolutionary language that they could neither fully comprehend much less control.

The history of translation at the origins of both Spanish colonial rule and Filipino nationalism show that language, whether Castilian, Tagalog, Latin, or any other vernacular, resists full assimilation into any ideology. And it is this resistance that gives to language, *any* language, even our "own," an irreducibly foreign quality. (For after all, what does it mean to speak in our "own" language? How can we "own" language" when the very terms of ownership are themselves linguistic? How can we dominate that which we are dependent on for any act of dominaton? How can we speak of a "mother tongue" that is meant to express our being in all its plenitude when the very act of speaking always

already entails syntax, grammar, delay, error, deferral: in other words, time and space that distance and thus alienate us from the “mother”?)

But by the same token, the structural foreignness of language, the fact that it resists reduction and assimilation into any political project is also what makes it a resource of hope, if by hope we mean a sense of futurity, an afterlife that is historical and worldly, rather than transcendent. Simultaneously inside and outside of us, language always leaves open other possibilities, sustaining against all odds the sense of what is yet to come. Language is not life itself, but a supplement without which life would be unlivable. It is not society itself, but that without which the very terms of sociality would never emerge. It is not freedom itself, but the gift without which the giving and taking that underpin a sense of justice and therefore freedom would remain unthinkable. And finally it is not discourse itself, for language always exceeds any given discourse, even as it is that without which any sort of discursive formation would be untenable. Without language there can be no human future just as there cannot be a just reckoning with the past. This uncanny and thus essential foreignness of language constitutes its promise (of contact and communication, for example) and threat (of misunderstanding and violent conflict, for example). This is one of the lessons conveyed by the Revolution of 1896—the “pedagogy” of the *pacto de sangre* and the demands of *Kalayaan*, for example—when considered in relation to a history of translation and untranslatability.

Let me now move to Ramon Guillermo’s comments. His main criticisms of the book are that 1) it offers an impoverished, or as he says, “restrictive” notion of translation, and 2) its use of the term “foreign” is too confusing and imprecise.

On the first point, that my notion of translation is “restrictive,” I say “read what I wrote.” Guillermo quotes one definition of translation that I offer in the book: “a *double* process of appropriating and replacing what is foreign while keeping its foreignness in view.” A few sentences later, he gives a critical paraphrase, a translation if you will, of my view of translation in the following way: “to define translation as a process in which the end product always keeps its opacity or ‘foreignness’ in view arguably does not hold for a vast majority of translation and lexical borrowing.” It is curious that he drops the word “double” in his rephrasing of my definition, thereby eliding the dialectical, rather than merely mechanical, process of translation that I am concerned with. The doubleness of translation—its ability to both negate and conserve the foreignness of the original—is precisely what makes every act of translation open-ended and subject to revision. Good translations are those that keep and sustain this open-endedness. They assume the necessary errancy of every translation from the original. In doing so, they keep

the original alive as its living double. Bad translations are those that merely negate the foreignness of the original. They entomb the latter, keeping it buried and forgotten in the translated language. Good translations are invitations to return to the original and thus begin translating anew. Bad translations discount the originals as definitively dead and safely buried, out of sight and out of mind. Good translations recognize that the task of the translator is never over, given the ineluctable foreignness of language. Bad translations disavow this foreignness and regard language as a mere object that can be dominated and then forgotten. Finally, good translations acknowledge their on-going contamination by aspects of bad translations, whereas bad translations remain oblivious to its limitations.

That translation is necessarily dialectical (which is to say dialogical, entailing endless conversations between translations and the original, among different translations, and indeed between the living the dead) implies that it also entails an ethical relationship between the translator and what he or she translates. Even those that I've been calling "bad translations" must work to repress this dialogical relationship. For the translator, the act of translation places him or her in a position to decide what and how to convey the original in another language. Translation thus always involves decision, and decision always risks losing something of the original. Put another way, the risk of loss is inherent in every act of translation precisely because the translator takes on the burden of deciding what aspects of the original to convey and how to convey them. In doing so, the translator bears responsibility for the original and its afterlife in the other language. Once the question of decision and responsibility is set aside, translation becomes purely mechanical and conventional, treating words as if they were mere instruments of communication. Guillermo is right when he says that the vast majority of translation practices tend towards forgetting the original. But that forgetting is something arrived at, not simply given. The process of forgetting—or what in some instances can be thought of as the work of mourning—the foreign origins of one's "own" language is precisely what is at stake in the origins of nationalism emerging from a colonial history of translation. These ethical, political, and methodological dilemmas of translation proliferate throughout the book. They are hardly the elements of a "restrictive notion" of translation.

With regard to Guillermo's second criticism, that my use of the term "foreign" is too "confusing," let me try to clarify that term. It is of course the question of the other, which has as many aspects and qualities as there are positions from which to see and speak with it. The "foreign" or the "other" can be language itself (whether Spanish or the vernacular, for after all, language comes *before* us in both the temporal and spatial sense of that term. Language for this reason always exceeds the human even as it is essential to the making

of humanity). The foreign can also be the “*filibustero*” who haunts colonial society by virtue of being everywhere and nowhere at the same time. It can be the figure and name of “Rizal” that stirs the imagination of both colonizers and colonized though for different reasons. The foreign at one point may refer to the weirdness of the comedy when viewed by Spanish and European audiences, though not by natives for whom its alien allusions have already been conventionalized. It can refer to Ibarra, newly arrived from Europe like some arrogant *balikbayan* from the perspective of the friars, even as the friars themselves can appear foreign from the perspective of the ilustrado propagandists and the modern day Filipino readers who have inherited ilustrado conceptions of the Spanish regulars. Maria Clara’s stunning beauty appears foreign in comparison to the appearance of other women in colonial society; at the same time her bastard origins gives her foreignness a malevolent cast in contrast to her idealization as an image of the immortal and no less alien Virgin Mary. Florante when heard, then seen, by Aladin appears foreign, yet no less seductive, and vice versa. Death, whose envoys haunt all of nationalist discourse, is radically foreign to life, yet that without which life would have neither shape nor meaning nor history.

The “foreign” then is that which is new and for this reason yet to be assimilated and understood. It is excessive of existing social and epistemological categories, and its appearance seems always sudden and shocking, causing indeterminate effects. Once it is domesticated and recognized as such, the foreign is shorn of its novelty. It becomes obvious and familiar and so no longer really foreign. It is given a privileged place in the social order, either elevated and deferred (like God, or the Governor General, or a missionary priest when viewed by colonial-Christian subjects), or denigrated and spurned (like evil spirits or their literary equivalents: Doña Consolacion and Doña Victorina in Rizal’s novels when viewed by male ilustrados, or the “katipunized” Filipinos feared by the Spaniards, or the “despotic” friars as viewed by the ilustrados). If the foreign seems confusing, that is because the same figure or person can appear at one and the same time wholly familiar and wholly out of place. The foreign can be the colonizer when seen from a postcolonial perspective; but so, too, the first generation of nationalists when seen from the perspective of the colonial order and from the vantage point of the nation-state barely capable of recognizing the strangeness of its origins. Capital is inherently foreign due to its defamiliarizing and alienating effects on the world. Given its promiscuous and predatory movements and uncertain origins (as I try to explain in the Introduction of the book), the foreignness of capital (whether it comes from within or outside) gives merchants associated with capital’s workings an alien quality. But the face of laboring classes can also come across as foreign when they rise up and take on the power of life and death over the

capitalists who depend on the extraction of labor power.

The foreign, in sum, is that which is always inside *and* outside, eccentric yet inherent to the social order, capable of constituting as well as disrupting its institutions and conventions. It thus possesses an inexhaustible power to set society in motion towards different historical paths, which include revolution. And this is why the foreign is the focus of expectations and anxieties, fetishized and struggled over, the object of dread as much as desire.

Turning now to Remmon Barbaza's response, I am grateful for its openness and generosity. He makes explicit a number of themes that can only remain implicit in the book by translating, as it were, my arguments into the more technical terms of Heidegger's philosophy. He strikes a particularly important chord when he stresses a recurring motif in my description of the foreign: it is that which, above all, *calls*. It is this calling that comes across in languages that is always yet to be understood (including one's own vernacular) that creates the relationship between all sorts of speakers and all sorts of hearers. Opening up a passage between and among colonizers and colonized, the call, or what I also refer to as the promise, of the foreign sets up a kind of public sphere. Always fraught, it is a space of recognition predicated upon misrecognition, and where translations of all sorts circulate by various media: Christian rituals, comedias, newspapers, novels, rumors, gossip, and at certain key moments, violent confrontation, and even death. (Two examples: the space opened up by Ibarra's return and carriage ride through Manila discussed in Chapter 3; and the secular public sphere opened up by the rhetoric of pity and the forging of horizontal ties in "Florante at Laura" discussed in Chapter 6).

At the same time, the call of the foreign, because it requires translation and thus the ever present possibility of mistranslation, lends itself to reification. It poses the danger of restoring rather than rescinding the metaphysics of domination so characteristic of colonial regimes. Rather than a call for justice yet to come, for example, the foreign could just as easily be mistaken as a threat to the existing order or to an essential identity—whether colonial or national—and thus become an object of fear and a target of repression. Hence the strangeness of "katipunized" Filipinos under Spanish rule was transformed into the threat of peasant armies calling themselves "katipunan" under the Malolos Republic, and into "bandits" under US rule. Both official and popular nationalism on the left and on the right have sought in the foreign (e.g., the United States, the "Chinese," the "Japanese," the "Arabs," "Muslim terrorists," or just plain "Muslims," "Igorots" and other non-Christianized peoples, etc.—a list that is as long as the racial epithets that accompany them) a source of the country's oppression or embarrassment, and an enemy against which to

consolidate their own identity and power.

The most recent example of the intractable ambivalence of the Filipino relationship to the foreign, one that resides, as I've stressed, inside *and* outside the country and the individual, can be seen in the rise of the Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW). As Guillermo and Barbaza allude to in their responses, the OFW is but one in a long series of social formations that have troubled the shape and substance of national identity. The phrase itself is worth unpacking. The original term "Overseas Contract Workers" was changed—translated?—into "Overseas Filipino Workers" in the wake of EDSA I in the later 1980s. Replacing "contract" with "Filipino" simultaneously politicizes and domesticates the globalized transformation of contractual labor. Renaming the expatriated worker "Filipino" means that s/he belongs to the nation, yet derives his or her identity (not to mention salary) from foreign sources. The basis of his or her humanity as "worker" (and not merely abstract labor power) is split between the nation and global capital. The OFW is thus "Filipino" only by being "overseas." S/he is at home only by being abroad, and thus present only by being absent. Recognized as a "bagong bayani" for the remittances s/he sends home, the OFW is nonetheless misrecognized as sheer labor power indentured to both the economic needs of the nation-state and the demands of their foreign employers.

"Filipino" by virtue of being away from and alien to both the nation and the world, OFWs exceed every existing social category. It is their excess that constitutes their novelty and hence lies at the basis of their foreignness. The OFW is the familiar that becomes foreign that becomes familiar that becomes foreign all over again. The state has sought to domesticate (which is to say, dominate) their troubling and unstable identity by calling them "heroic," as if their travels were epic and their work revolutionary. Yet their presence, realized through dollar remittances, comes across as a state of permanent displacement and on-going absence. Disposable yet essential to both the nation and global capital, the OFW is untranslatable into the conventional categories of the nation-state or into the terms of liberal or even socialist cosmopolitanism. The fact that the Philippine is dependent upon OFW remittances to keep its economy afloat, and that thousands upon thousands of Filipinos continue to seek employment abroad, says something about the complicated ways by which the call of the foreign continues to haunt the Filipino present and its foreseeable future.

Finally, let me turn to Roland Tolentino's response which I must admit seemed the most disconcerting of all. At the end of a blistering series of questions, Tolentino writes, "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."

He admits that he is not being fair with my text, that he is treating it the way one would a foreign object (to wit, “his foreign,” though I might ask, “foreign what?” Note how quickly the foreign is fetishized when it is left detached from anything in particular). He throws a “battery of questions” at the book, the fury of his questioning is startling; I am stunned by this violence and wonder at the cause of this rapid fire “barrage.” Perhaps, this is because he already has the answers to his own questions, and so seeks not engagement but rather power over the text. This insistent questioning entails a practice of translation that seeks to gain purchase over “his foreign” so as to realize “my own relationship with his discourse.” Translation is thus envisaged as the subjugation of the other in order to realize one’s sense of self, a self predicated on the mastery of the other’s discourse. It is a familiar notion of translation, one that has its roots in the Spanish missionary project of evangelization that entailed the translation of the Word of God into the vernacular on the one hand and the reduction of the vernacular into the grammatical and semantic terms of Latin and Castilian on the other. In Tolentino’s style of questioning, I cannot help but hear the echo of the Spanish priest at the confessional intent on tracking down the sins of the convert.

I do not, of course, mean to return his unfair treatment of my text with an equally unfair treatment of his questions or mode of questioning. That would be too much like Simoun in the *Fili*, seeking to return like for like, violence for violence. And thanks to Rizal, we all know the grave consequences that such an approach leads to. To be fair to him, I do think that a number of his questions are well worth considering: the fate of the baybayin (which in fact I’ve taken up in my first book, *Contracting Colonialism*, but which is of course far from the last word on the subject); the place of English in the wake of the Filipino-American War and the US occupation of the Philippines (a topic that I hope to return to in my future work, but which I had begun to broach in Chapters 6 and 7 of my earlier book, *White Love and Other Events in Filipino Histories*); the foreign origins of nationalism (which in fact is a major motif in the present book and which I’ve sought to clarify above); the workings and effects of bilingual education in the contemporary Philippines (which would require at least three books and two lifetimes to even begin to approach). The other questions on the vernacular, on untranslatability, on Castilian’s role as a lingua franca, etc.: some are addressed in my remarks above, while the rest are taken up in the book.

I do not want to be unfair by reproducing these discussions here chapter and verse, but I suspect that even if I did, even if the editors of *Kritika Kultura* opened up their virtual pages to the reproduction of the entire book, it would still prove unsatisfactory. There would always be a lack. Something would always escape, remaining untranslatable, eluding the mastery of an insistent and unrelenting interrogation. Perhaps it would be

something that would have already fled across the Pacific, retracing the route of the Galleons that carried an assortment of foreigners and natives, each a stranger to the other and to themselves, and who would in time come back to visit, again and again and again, the scene of translation.