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Writing the Nation

Transculturation and nationalism in Hispano-Filipino literature from the early twentieth century

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Conclusion

In this study, I have analysed a selection of texts by Hispano-Filipino authors of the early twentieth century (when the Philippines was under American rule) in order to explore how they imagine the country's future as an independent nation with its own cultural identity. Central to all these imaginations is the question of how to forge such a cultural or national identity in a space that, because of its double colonisation and its position in a globalising world, was a space of transculturation. Transculturation had produced, especially in the Spanish-speaking elite on which my corpus focuses, enduring attachments not just to Spanish and US culture but also a tendency to look to other nations for inspiration and guidance. All the works I have explored, to various degrees and with different results, reflect on and engage with transculturation as a process that may be situated in the past or conceived of as a project for the present and future, and that can take the shape of acculturation, deculturation, neoculturation or a mix of these.

Throughout my chapters, I have argued that my corpus, far from belonging to a “zombie literature” that is all but dead, in its engagement with transculturation, has an important contribution to make to rethinking the history of Filipino nationalism and to thinking nationalism and cultural identity in general. I have shown how transculturation, in the work of Jesús Balmori, Adelina Gurrea, Paz Mendoza and Antonio Abad, is variously presented as the result of cultural contact, derived from colonialism, and as an active desire for cultural transformation geared towards achieving not just independence but also (western) modernity. Transculturation, as it appears in my corpus, is understood as an ongoing and creative process that is not just about the uncritical adoption of foreign cultural paradigms and the loss of one's “own” culture. Crucially, Ángel Rama, besides affirming the creative function of transculturation, also recognises it as an idiosyncratic quality of Latin American culture with a double function:

por una parte registra que la cultura presente de la comunidad lationamericana (que es un producto largamente transculturado y en permanente evolución) está compuesta de valores indeosincráticos, los que pueden reconocerse actuando desde fechas remotas; por otra parte corrobora la energía creadora que la mueve haciéndola muy distinta de un simple agregado de normas, comportamientos, creencias y objetos culturales, pues se trata de una fuerza que actúa con desenvoltura tanto su herencia particular, según las situaciones de su propio desarrollo, como de las aportaciones provenientes de fuera. (34)

[on the one hand, it records that the present culture of the Latin American community (which has long been a transculturated and ever evolving product) is composed of idiosyncratic values, which can be recognised from remote dates; on the other hand, it corroborates the creative energy that moves it, making it very different from a simple aggregate of norms, behaviours, beliefs and cultural objects, because it is a force that acts out with ease both its particular heritage, according to the situations of its own development, as well as contributions from outside.

In my analyses, I have illustrated the difference between these two functions: the recognition of Filipino culture as both transculturated (as an outcome of the colonial past) and transcultural/transculturating (as a present condition). This can be seen, for example, in Balmori's poem "Blason" and Gurrea's poem "España, América, Filipinas," which highlight the mixed heritage of Filipino society and show its transculturation as forged in the past and negotiated in the present. Mendoza's *Notas de viaje* takes a step further to explore the possibilities of transculturation as a future project, one in which the "aportaciones provenientes de fuera" [contributions from outside] are actively looked for and appropriated for the imagination of a future independent nation. My corpus, significantly, not only points to the potentialities of taking up transculturation as an active process but also to the risks involved, most crucially the danger of idealising other cultures because they are only partially perceived or perceived through stereotypes and entrenched literary modes like orientalism (Japan in the case of Balmori's poetry and the character of Don Lino in *Los Pájaros de fuego*, and fascist nations in the case of Mendoza).

Rama's explanation of the two functions of transculturation is followed by an explanation of the circumstances and places where the workings of transculturation appear:

Es justamente esa capacidad para elaborar con originalidad, *aún en difíciles circunstancias históricas*, la que demuestra que [la transculturación] pertenece a una *sociedad viva y creadora*, rasgos que pueden manifestarse en cualquier punto del territorio que ocupa, aunque preferentemente se los encuentre nítidos en las capas recónditas de las regiones internas. (34, my emphasis)

[It is precisely this capacity to elaborate with originality, *even in difficult historical circumstances*, that shows that [transculturation] belongs to a *living and creative society*, traits that can manifest in any part of the territory it occupies, although they are most outstandingly found crystal clear in the remote layers of the inner regions.]

In the case of my corpus, the difficult historical circumstances in which most of the texts I analyse (except for Gurrea's) were written - in the Philippines under American rule, with the threat of another world war looming, as well as the promise of immanent independence, and with Spanish no longer the dominant language - produce originality but also show a struggle

with how precisely the Philippines as a realm of transculturation should be dealt with and given shape. As I have shown, this struggle is not necessarily resolved in the texts, which sometimes, as in the endings of Balmori's and Abad's novels, shy away from fully embracing transculturation in favour of a reaffirmation of Hispanic culture and Catholicism. However, the creative engagement with the Philippines' multiple cultural attachments found in most of the texts I have discussed confirms that Hispano-Filipino literature in the early twentieth century was by no means dying but was very much alive and developing original, if ambivalent ideas about the shape of the nation to come.

Rama's argument that traits of transculturation can manifest anywhere but tend to be more vivid in the "regiones internas" [internal regions] of the country is also supported by my corpus, with the most positive portrayals of the Philippines as a realm of transculturation occurring in Gurrea's stories, set on La Carlota on the Island of Negros, and Abad's animal fable, on a small village on Cebu. Both Gurrea and Abad emphasise how, in rural areas, Catholicism is creatively combined with indigenous mythologies and traditions like cockfighting.

Significantly, although the texts I have explored display an ongoing attachment to the Spanish language, Catholicism and, in some cases, even Spanish colonialism, contemporary Spain and Spanish writers largely absent from the map of attachments. Characteristically, Mendoza's travelogue does not present Spain as a nation on which the Philippines should model itself, but identifies instead with the Catalan struggle for independence. In contrast, there are strong transcultural attachments to Latin America, perceived, for instance, in the resonances between Balmori's poetry and that of the Nicaraguan Rubén Darío, in Mendoza's positive comments about Cuba and in Abad's insistence that Filipinos should imitate Mexico instead of the US. Similarly, Rama has noted how the originality of Latin American literatures after independence relied on an eagerness to be nurtured by international sources ("un afán internacionalista") as well as local ones ('indigenismo'), while skipping "el acueducto español" (Rama 1982: 11) [the Spanish aqueduct] in order to underline their emancipation from the 'mother' cultures of Portugal and Spain.

In my corpus, the lingering attachment to the Hispanic heritage, predominantly in the form of Catholicism and anchored in the past (as is emphasised by the curious vision of a return to the beginnings of Spanish colonialism that closes Balmori's novel) is balanced by a detachment from Spanish peninsular culture in the present, as evidenced not only in Mendoza's travelogue but also in Gurrea's use of satire to overcome the censorship of the Franco regime. Yet, it must be acknowledged that the expression of resistance to the (former)

coloniser in the texts I have analysed is not as radical and revolutionary as that of, for example, José Rizal, who directly challenged the Spanish colonial authorities. This is mainly due to the fact that, in the early twentieth century, the US had taken Spain's place as the occupier (the texts are noticeably more critical of the encroachment of American culture than of the Hispanic legacy). I would argue, however, that these texts are nevertheless worth reading, precisely because of their articulation of the struggle, specific to the Hispano-Filipino elite, to carve out a space for themselves and their culture and language under American rule and in imagining the independent, transcultural nation to come.

In the preceding five chapters, I have traced how the texts in my corpus present this struggle, in more or less critical ways, through their portrayal of cultural attachments to (as assimilation, acculturation or, in cases of creative combinations with other attachments, neoculturation) and detachments from (as a loss of, distancing from or deculturation) Hispanic, American, Japanese and other cultures, including, most notably in Gurrea's and Abad's work, the indigenous cultures of the islands.

In my analysis of the poetry of Jesús Balmori in Chapter 1 I have contended that writing orientalist poems does not mean doing Orientalism in the hegemonic sense denounced by Said or as a mere imitation of French literary exoticism. Balmori's orientalist poems demonstrate that the Orient, rather than being a static object of (self-)study, inert and silenced can be an interactive repertoire of literary motifs serving the aims of aesthetic experimentation but also a political purpose (national self-affirmation and differentiation from others). Moreover, while in his poetry the various cultural attachments that constitute Filipino transculturation tend to be depicted as harmoniously entangled (as, for example, in the love story between the indigenous speaker and the Spanish princess in "Rima Malaya" and in the playful staging of a new orient in "La Gueisha"), Balmori's war novel *Los Pájaros de fuego* (1945), discussed in Chapter 4, highlights the dangers of looking to other cultures for models of national becoming. By having the characters in the novel appear as embodiments of the various political discourses circulating in the early 1940s Philippines, *Pájaros* suggests a mournful vision of the nation's elite as overly attached to both the Hispanic past, the American present and an idealised Japanese future, which constitutes a betrayal of the Filipino people, whom the novel portrays as ready to fight for their country.

Adelina Gurrea engages with the transcultural conditions that characterise life in the rural Philippines. Based on her childhood memories of growing up on the island of Negros, *Cuentos de Juana* presents, as I have shown in Chapter 2, a nostalgic but also critical account of the processes of transculturation that occurred in the Philippines under Spanish

colonialism, told from the perspective of both Spanish colonisers and indigenous Filipinos. The framed narratives question the borders between these perspectives and reveal them as deeply intertwined. My analysis of Gurrea's poem "España, América, Filipinas" (1918) [Spain, America and Philippines] in combination with the play *Filipinas: Auto histórico-satírico* (1951) [Philippines: A Historical-Satirical Allegory] has shown that, whereas the poem reflects the hegemonic type of orientalism attached to a colonial discourse in having the colonised valorise the civilising colonial mission, the play engages with the same idea of the Philippines as the grateful recipient of Spanish (and American) culture, but also mocks it through its satirical tone. The play mimics colonial history to reveal its arrogance and absurdity, and also critiques some specific aspects of Spanish colonialism, such as the role of the clergy. On the basis of an analysis of some of her poems, moreover, I have argued that, for Gurrea, orientalisating the Philippines is not so much an exercise of literary modernism as an effort of transcultural orientalism by which the Philippines is imagined and remembered as the oriental homeland in a mode of reflective nostalgia. Symbols of the Philippines, especially its landscape, are nostalgically evoked to act as a catalyst for Gurrea's poetic expression and to express her (rebellious) disillusionment with modernity.

Whereas Balmori's poetry and Gurrea's works predominantly situate transculturation in the past, for Paz Mendoza it is a future-oriented project based on the question of what the Philippines *could or should be like* as a modern, independent nation. *Notas de viaje* measures the modernity to be achieved in the Philippines against Western modernity and selects what Mendoza perceives as signs of progress that could be assimilated in her country, while rejecting what she believes to be signs of backwardness. Mendoza is trying to enter the realm of central modernity from her peripheral location by picking and choosing idealised models, sometimes ignoring the more problematic aspects of certain cultures, such as the fascist ones of Italy and Germany. A text like Mendoza's travelogue is uniquely significant, I have suggested, in demonstrating the possibilities of thinking transculturally while, at the same time, showing that transculturation cannot be made into a global project but requires an engagement with the given conditions at a local level.

I have read Antonio Abad's novel *El Campeón* as an expression of cultural nationalism that retrieves the rooted Filipino (but also transcultural) practice of cockfighting to connect past colonial history with the present and to imagine a new future for the country based on its own traditions. Through the fable of the rooster Banogón, the novel questions forms of ethnocentricity based on homogeneity, celebrating hybridity instead. The novel addresses the way a particular form of masculinity acts as a symbol of colonialism and

nationalism, and suggests a more balanced model of heroic leadership in which strength is combined with care and affection, and power with passive endurance, in line with the Catholic notion of martyrdom. Despite its rather complacent ending, *El Campeón*'s overall imagination of the nation recognises Filipino national identity as thoroughly transcultural: multi-coloured, multi-gendered and mixing Asian, Hispanic and (selectively) American traditions and customs.

The common denominator of my corpus is the way the texts expropriate elements from other cultures to produce their own meanings. My contention is that this is not a form of subjugated imitation (between colonial/central and postcolonial/peripheral) but a creative reworking. In terms of the system of literary centres and peripheries presented by Pascale Casanova, then, Hispano-Filipino literature of the early twentieth century does not assimilate to or radically differentiate itself from the centre (whether that of French or Latin American literature) but develops its own voice by innovatively recombining elements, such as in Balmori's transculturally orientalist poems. In relation to Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of minor literature, invoked in the introduction of this study, my analysis of early twentieth-century Hispano-Filipino literature has shown that the use of Spanish is minoritarian, serving to convey discontent with American rule and aspirations to independence, but simultaneously signals a lingering attachment to the ideologies of Spanish as a major language. Daniel W. Smith, in his introduction to Deleuze's *Essays Critical and Clinical* (1997), writes:

Minor languages are not simply sublanguages (dialects or idiolects), but express the potential of the major language to enter into a becoming-minoritarian in all its dimensions and elements. Such movements, to be sure, have their own political ambiguities, since they can mix together revolutionary aspirations with reactionary and even fascistic tendencies (archaisms, neoterritorialities, regionalisms) ... The acquisition of power by a language and the becoming-minor of that language, in other words, are coexistent movements that are constantly passing and converting into each other in both directions. (xlvi)

The use of Spanish by Filipino nationalists, as noted above, bears out this ambiguity, as it combines its demand for independence from the US with an archaic valorisation of the Spanish colonial legacy (especially Catholicism) and, in the case of Mendoza and Balmori, positive assessments of fascist and imperial regimes. The position of Spanish as becoming-minor, also in relation to the encroachment of English in the Philippines, is thus coexistent and in tension with its position, on a global scale, as a major language standing for a major (western, Christian) culture.

In addition to presenting an argument about the role of literature in prefiguring Filipino national identity, my other important aim with this research has been to bring back to

life what has been called a “zombie” literary tradition. This is the first research project in English or Spanish to analyse in detail the collection of Hispano Filipino classics of the Cervantes Institute and other works by Hispano-Filipino authors of the same period, laying bare their shared concerns with the past, present and future of an emerging nation situated at the intersection of various cultures. Whether digitisation, academic research and translations can make Hispano-Filipino literature as a whole more central in the World Republic of Letters that Casanova conceptualises remains to be seen, but I hope to have filled a gap in the field of Hispanic studies by close reading some central but little-known works of early twentieth-century Hispano-Filipino literature in order to show their relevance for thinking both the past and the present, with regard to questions of (emerging) nationalism and transculturation.