



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Writing the Nation

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

Villaescusa Illán, I.

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Villaescusa Illán, I. (2017). Writing the Nation: Transculturation and nationalism in Hispano-Filipino literature from the early twentieth century.

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Summary

Writing the Nation: Transculturation and Nationalism in Hispano-Filipino Literature from the Early Twentieth Century

This thesis is a study of a selected corpus of Hispano-Filipino literature written in the first half of the twentieth century. It approaches the imagination of an independent Filipino nation expressed in texts by Jesús Balmori (1887-1946), Adelina Gurrea (1896-1971), Paz Mendoza (1884-1967) and Antonio Abad (1894-1970) through the concepts of nationalism and transculturation. The immanent approach of independence, finally achieved in 1946, made the identification of the characteristics of a self-defined Filipino nation a primary concern of this corpus. Yet, at the same time, given the historical conditions of a double colonisation, first by Spain and then by the US, and the Japanese occupation of Manila during WWII, it was a struggle to define Filipino cultural and national identity in relation to the many cultural influences that shaped the archipelago. It is on the various ways in which this struggle manifests in the texts that this study focuses.

My approach is that of cultural analysis, which, as developed by Mieke Bal, privileges close reading and sees the encounter between the object and the researcher, who frames the object from her situation in the social and cultural present, as yielding the conditions for the co-creation of new meaning. Accordingly, by bringing the framework of transculturation into dialogue with the selected Filipino texts in a series of close readings, I show how these texts expand concepts such as orientalism, translation and (cultural) nationalism in new ways by developing forms of transcultural orientalism, working towards intercultural translation and putting transculturation as an active, future-oriented process in the service of nation-building. Rather than producing a genealogy of Hispano-Filipino literature to be studied in its historical and social context, this study seeks to reveal how Hispano-Filipino literature from the early twentieth century interacts with contemporary debates and theories.

All the texts I analyse conceive of the Philippines as a realm of transculturation, variously considered as a process achieved in the past, negotiated in the present or actively pursued for the (independent) future. Fernando Ortiz, the Cuban anthropologist, first used the term transculturation in the 1940s to combine previous conceptualisations that aimed at describing the transformations derived by cultural contact, mostly as a result of colonisation. According to Ortiz, transculturation encompasses *acculturation* (assimilation), *deculturation*

(loss) and *neoculturation* (innovation). I rely on Ortiz's definition and on further elaborations of the notion of transculturation by literary scholars such as Ángel Rama (1982) and Mary Louise Pratt (2002) to analyse the ways in which the intersection of transculturation and nationalism is portrayed and evaluated in my corpus, paying specific attention to the forms - assimilation, loss, innovation - transculturation is seen to take in the Philippines of the early twentieth century and the attachments to and detachments from a variety of cultures (Spanish, American, Japanese and many others) it involves. Significantly, I understand Filipino transculturation not only as the outcome of colonial exchanges and global modernity-coloniality, but also in terms of an active desire for transformation. That transculturation exists in more passive and more active forms is conveyed by the difference between the adjectives *transcultured* and *transcultural*. The Hispano-Filipino writers I discuss in this study, then, are not only seen as *transcultured* writers (Rama) but also, to different degrees, as *transcultural* or even *transculturating* ones.

To summarize, the aim of this study is to explore the intersection between literature and nationalism in the complex context of the early twentieth-century Philippines. Through close readings of the selected texts, I will, on the one hand, shed light on a largely neglected literary tradition and, on the other hand, trace the struggle of Hispano-Filipino writers to formulate a notion of Filipino identity able to serve as the basis for their imagined nation, adequate to its status as a transcultured and transcultural realm.

In **Chapter 1** I focus on the poetry of Hispano-Filipino author Jesús Balmori (1886-1946), which expresses transcultural attachments to the Philippines (as a meeting place of indigenous and Spanish culture) and to Japan in an orientalist mode. Balmori's poetry is considered as an example of Filipino modernism that clearly follows Hispanic modernist aesthetics in terms of its orientalist themes and style. Consequently, it provides a fertile ground to look at the role orientalism played in the attempt by Hispano-Filipino authors of the early twentieth century to imagine and present the Filipino nation. Given the geopolitical circumstances of the Philippines as a Hispanized culture located in Asia, it is not surprising that the modernist orientalism found in its literature is shaped in two ways: as a form of self-representation and as the idealisation of other locations in the Far East, specifically Japan. This demonstrates a significant change in terms of what and who is being orientalised and by whom. In the chapter, I identify and analyse the various types of orientalism articulated in Balmori's poetry, focusing on three poems contained in the poetry collections *Rimas Malayas* (1904) [Malayan Rhymes] and *Mi casa de Nipa* (1941) [My house of Nipa]. My argument is that Balmori's poems engage with the two models of orientalism conceptualised respectively

by Edward Said and Araceli Tinajero: as a hegemonic discourse promoting assimilation to Spanish colonisation and Western modernity, and as an expression of literary modernism that re-inscribes the poet's assimilation of Hispanic and French aesthetics. Crucially, in some of his poems Balmori also moves beyond these models by giving voice to what I call *Filipino transcultural orientalism*. This form of orientalism articulates Filipino identity as both orientalised and orientalising, with texts variously attaching to and detaching from the various cultures that have historically constituted it, as well as the forms of representing the orient specific to these cultures and their literary expressions.

In **Chapter 2** I expand on the concept of transcultural orientalism by arguing that Adelina Gurrea's work emphasises its *transcultural* dimension over its *orientalist* one. I look at three of her texts: a satirical play entitled *Filipinas: Auto histórico-satírico* [Philippines: A Historical-Satirical Allegory], which was staged in Valladolid, Spain, in 1951; a selection of poems from the collections *En agraz* [Before Time] (1968) and *Más senderos* [More Paths] (1967)¹¹⁰; and a story called "El Talisay," part of the collection of short stories *Cuentos de Juana. Narraciones malayas de las islas Filipinas* [Juana's tales. Malayan stories from the Philippine Islands] (1943). I will show how, like Balmori's poems, these texts draw on various cultural influences in order to orientalise the Philippines. However, rather than establishing a hierarchy of cultures or following modernist aesthetics, Gurrea orientalises the Philippines in three different ways that represent a move towards a more transcultural position. First, the satirical play revisits Filipino colonial history by having allegorical characters - The Philippines, Mother Spain, Uncle Sam and Mrs. History - discuss their role in the transculturation of the Philippines, and orientalises the country by infantilising it and presenting it as grateful to both Spain and the US for shaping it through their colonial rule, while also, through its satirical bent, including mild critiques of the colonisers. The historical perspective of the play shows transculturation as a colonial heritage in which various cultural traits are visible but not entangled (for example, young Philippines has inherited, on the one hand, the industrious and pragmatic mentality of American culture and, on the other, a spiritualist view on the world derived from a Catholic education). Second, Gurrea's poems, written in Spain during Franco's regime, approach the Philippines through what Svetlana Boym (2005) calls reflective nostalgia, a nostalgia that is used to imagine a new transcultural

¹¹⁰ Both *En Agraz* and *Más Senderos* were published by the author and the editions available online in the Cervantes Virtual Library at the University of Alicante date from 1968 and 1967 respectively. Gurrea died in 1971, so those editions are probably not the first ones, but I have been unable to find other publication dates. In *En Agraz*, it says that the collection includes poems written between 1916 and 1926, indicating that these poems belong to Gurrea's early work.

future. Third, the short story “El Talisay” uses a narrative structure that supplements the orientalising perspective with that of the orientalised in order to challenge binary oppositions such as native/foreign, orient/occident and religion/superstition. The terms of these oppositions are instead presented as deeply intertwined in everyday cultural practices in the rural Philippines.

In **Chapter 3** I elaborate the concept of *active transculturation* on the basis of the imagination of a future, modern, independent Philippines based on the comparison with other countries around the world that Paz Mendoza conducts in her *Notas de viaje* (1929) [Travel Notes]. Mendoza’s rich and provocative travel notes are the departing point for my analysis of her construction of a peripheral vision of modernity as an active process of transculturation. I build on the work of Fernando Ortiz, Angel Rama and Marie Louise Pratt, in which transculturation appears as a dynamic process of intercultural connections that creates possibilities for transforming one’s own community by appropriating parts of other cultural systems. Mendoza’s text exposes the active attachments to and detachments from foreign influences - especially around the idea of modernisation - that affected Filipino culture during the Spanish-American period. I argue that, in the travel notes, transculturation does not appear as an outcome of past colonial contact, as in Balmori’s poem and Gurrea’s play, but as a strategic tool to compose a future vision of an independent Philippines. At the same time, her text and its ambivalent reception (it was criticised for making unrealistic proposals) shows the tension between the imagined transculturated future of the Philippines and its cultural and political realities: as long as it is not yet an independent country, no decisions can be made and, more crucially, it continues to be perceived, both in other countries and within the Philippines itself, as incapable of governing itself.

In **Chapter 4** I examine how Balmori’s novel *Los pájaros de fuego. Una novela filipina de la guerra* (1945) [Birds of Fire, a Filipino War Novel], a family melodrama set in Manila, instead of imagining a hypothetical future for the Philippines on the basis of the positively conceived models of other countries, uses the historical developments of the early 1940s, leading up to the Japanese invasion, to address the potential negative effects of uncritically seeking to emulate other countries. This chapter, then, is about the limits of active transculturation. The bleak ending of Balmori’s novel, which sees the main protagonist, a former Niponophile, and most of his family killed, suggests that there is no future for the country, at least not unless the Philippines stops aspiring to be like Japan, fighting for/with the US and refusing to let go of the Hispanic colonial legacy. To analyse how past and present events (the rise of fascism in Europe, the emergence of Japan as a pan-Asian power,

the American rule of the Philippines and the Hispanic colonial legacy) are woven together in the novel, I use the concept of translation, which I understand as a technique of transculturation capable of creating new meaning from a pre-existing one. This approach to translation, inspired by the work of Rey Chow (1995; 2008) and Vicente L. Rafael (1999; 2000) entails a rejection of translation as merely a linguistic process that renders words in one language intelligible in another; instead, it conceives of translation as a complex process of reinterpretation, appropriation, expansion and exchange between cultures, across national borders or within them. I use Chow's conceptualisation of translation as an exercise of simultaneous betrayal and mourning towards the 'original' to investigate how Balmori's novel translates various cultural influences into a conception of the Filipino nation. In addition, I look at how the novel takes up Rafael's notion that Filipino nationalism was translated into Spanish and circulated among the Hispanic elite.

In **Chapter 5**, finally, I analyse Antonio Abad's *El Campeón* (1940) [The Champion], an animal fable about a cockfighting rooster that presents an allegory of the Filipino nation as it tries to define itself in the wake of a double colonialisation. *El Campeón* tells the life story of Banogón, a champion fighting cock who, after a successful career in the urban arenas, returns to a chicken coop in the village where he was born. Upon his return, he struggles to fit into the local community. The struggles of Banogón and the other poultry characters with the transformations that are taken place on the farm (most notably the arrival of American leghorns) metaphorically illuminate Abad's vision of Filipino society - as affected by political, cultural and identity-related crises - and his concerns with reconfiguring Filipino national identity. Where Mendoza's *Notas de viaje* (1929) and Balmori's *Los Pájaros de fuego* (1945) sought to develop Philippine nationalism primarily by comparing their country to other European nations, Japan and the US, Abad's novel, in contrast, locates a basis for nationalism in Filipino rural culture, using the long-standing Filipino tradition of cockfighting - which is at the same time presented as a transcultural practice - to propose an alternative view on Filipino national identity. Ultimately, the novel argues for the impossibility of smoothly translating the prevailing European ideologies of the nation-state, based on cultural homogeneity, racial supremacy and masculinity, to the doubly colonised, deeply transcultural context of the Philippines. By presenting cockfighting, from the perspective of the human characters in the novel, as a traditional Filipino practice that survived the various colonial attempts, on the part of both the Spanish and the Americans, to eradicate it, Abad transforms the practice of cockfighting into an anti-colonial metaphor. In my analysis of the novel, I also reflect on the relationship between masculinity and cockfighting by reading the classic article

by anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1972) on Balinese cockfighting in dialogue with Jerry García's (2007) interpretation of the importance of the cockfight for Chicano (masculine) identity in the US. I argue that the novel, despite its complacent ending, presents a different type of masculine hero that also allows for a different, transcultural mode of national identity.

My study concludes that in all the texts I have examined there is a lingering attachment to the Hispanic heritage, predominantly in the form of Catholicism and anchored in the past. This attachment, however, is balanced by a detachment from Spanish peninsular culture in the present, which can be taken as a discreet form of critique of the former coloniser. Still, it must be acknowledged that the expression of resistance in the texts I have analysed is not as radical and revolutionary as that of, for example, José Rizal (1861-1896), considered the first Filipino who directly challenged the Spanish colonial authorities with his novels. The reason for this is that in the early twentieth century, the US had taken Spain's place as the occupier; hence, the texts are noticeably more critical of the encroachment of American culture than of the Hispanic legacy. I would argue, however, that this particular juncture is precisely where the interest in reading these texts lies: 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 addition to presenting an argument about the role of literature in prefiguring Filipino national identity, the other important aim of this study is 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.