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*Versus Exclusion:
The Political Dynamics Between
the "National" and the "International"
in Contemporary Philippine Literary
History (1946-2006)*



The recent advent of globalization from the West may have seemed to open new spaces for the creative writer to explore, but in the Philippines, it has simply revived the tension between the "national" and the "colonial" in the discourse on the development of a distinct identity for Philippine Literature. Such may be explained by the history of Philippine-American relations since 1898 and the persistence of the impact of colonial experience on the writers' collective consciousness up to the present.

US occupation of the Philippines was sanctioned by the Treaty of Paris of 1898, in which Spain turned over “colonial control” of the 1898 Republic of the Philippines to the US for the sum of \$20 million. The deal was consummated without consideration of the existence by 1898 of a republic that had taken control of the country from the Spanish colonizers by virtue of the victories of the Revolution of 1896.

The Treaty of Paris may be said to have drawn the parameters of the Filipino’s sense of identity. For one, it did away with the illusion of American protection for Filipinos against Spain, which had been invoked in the declaration of independence in Kawit, Cavite, when the presence of American troops in the Philippines was taken by the revolutionary government under President Emilio Aguinaldo as a gesture of American support for the Filipinos’ struggle for freedom. The Treaty drew the line clearly demarcating the interest of Filipinos as a sovereign people from the interest of Americans as purported friends of the Philippine Revolution. Thereafter, the Filipino people as a nation knew where their interest lay and it was not where “colonial” power exerted its hegemony.

In the initial years of US colonial rule, national identity, however, was a concept that remained to be clarified. In 1904, for instance, when the US colonial administration, in the St. Louis Exposition, displayed indigenous peoples drawn from the ethnic ranks of Igorots, Manobos, and Muslims principally, educated and propertied Filipinos collaborating with the colonizers had protested that the tribal people could not represent Filipinos. In effect, the protests coming from the elite urban families were claiming that only Hispanized natives deserved to be recognized as “real” Filipinos. At this early historical stage, “exclusion” was already being set up as a determining principle in clarifying the issue of identity. Carried over to the realm of culture, the principle was to occasion a split in the consciousness of what “Filipino” culture was.

On the one hand, cultural expression asserts itself as “national,” when it uses the indigenous tradition, as this may have been modified by the history of the people, as the base for poetry, music, theater and fiction. On the other, cultural expression is deemed “colonial,” when its base comes from an outside culture, principally that of colonizers, bearing their hegemonic motivations and their racist assumptions. But the line demarcating what is “national” and what is “colonial” is seldom unmistakable; historical events, policies promulgated by colonial administrations, institutions set up with varying motivations, and personages and personalities with a variety of advocacies, tend to blur the line that defines what is foreign and what is Filipino. The creative imagination, whether one finds it at work in literature, the visual arts, music, and other cultural forms, is a highly volatile faculty, and the process of discriminating between what is “national” or “colonial” is mediated by innumerable factors that do not readily identify themselves. It is in the process of discriminating that the creative Filipino artist finds the services of cultural

historians necessary. It is their task, in a society that has gone through two colonial regimes, to map out the contradictions that enter into the growth and development of cultural expression that is authentically Filipino. Unfortunately, the early cultural historians available were invariably American.

As early as 1901, the colonial administration was quick to establish “a highly centralized public school system,” even as Filipino guerrillas were still fighting the Americans in the countryside. The eminent historian Teodoro A. Agoncillo notes in his account of the beginnings of American colonial rule, that the school system was to turn out to have “the greatest and probably the most lasting effect in the political and cultural development of the Filipino.”¹ That same year, English was decreed as the medium of instruction in all schools.

The continuing muddle in Filipino artists’ search for identity may be seen to date back to the inception of the 20th century when colonial policy fortified its hold on the consciousness of young Filipinos through the public schools. In effect, the colonial administrators then were drafting unwary future generations of young Filipinos to pass on to their countrymen their dubious heritage of cultural captivity. No longer would the US need to bring more American schoolteachers after the first batch had come on the SS *Thomas* in 1903; history was to prove that the early products of the public school system were enough to indoctrinate young Filipinos on “the American way of life.”

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THE LITERARY HISTORY of the post-Pacific War years was clouded over by dark memories of the brutal years under the three-year military rule of Japanese invaders. Moreover, America’s Cold War with the Soviet Union trapped the Philippines into the political paranoia induced by US contestation of Communist hegemony in the world. The fear of Communism induced by American propaganda was aggravated by the victory of the Chinese Revolution and by Russian sponsorship of Communist states in Eastern Europe. In Korea, war had broken out between the South (in the US camp) and the North (in the Russia camp), and the likelihood of a North victory invited armed intervention by the US.

In the Philippines itself, a homegrown revolution was ongoing, with the HUKBALAHAP forces challenging the army of the one-year-old republic headed by President Manuel Roxas. Against this setting, the American government invested heavily in a cultural campaign intended to keep the Philippines on the side of democracy.

Professors and artists from the academe were inveigled with grants and scholarships to travel to the US for graduate study and observation tours. Return on US investment took the form of literary projects, brought back by returning grantees and scholars, with output that affirmed the virtues of American literary

production and aesthetics. A mentality abetted by the desire to rise to the standards of achievement set by the former colonial master lured the creative artists to compete with their Western counterparts, and the resulting game set into motion the dynamics of the “national” and the “colonial.” At this historical juncture, “colonial” inauspiciously dropped out of the pairing and was replaced by the politically neutral “international.” The change in the designation of the culture of the former colonial master did not, however, occasion a corresponding change in the implied political relationship. “International,” it must be noted, simply indicated that the US had succeeded after the Second World War in achieving universal recognition as a dominant international power, and it had successfully engineered its rise to the status of exemplar of internationalism in the arts.

The spread of New Criticism world wide signalled the triumph of the U.S. as the emergent cultural center of the Western world. Initially a method for reading literary works, New Criticism was later transmuted as a method for creating verbally sophisticated literary pieces that New Critics would explicate with great dexterity. As critical doctrine, New Criticism was the capitalist answer to Social Realism of the Soviet Union. It privileged the “artfulness” of the literary work and insisted on the autonomy of the literary work as an object made out of words, valuable in itself and valid as intellectual currency anywhere in the world. Its arrival in Philippine academe early in the 1960s changed the traditional way of approaching a literary piece which was then focused on authorship and its relevance to the community being addressed. By dispensing with biography as key to interpretation (dismissed as “intentional fallacy”), and by de-emphasizing historicity which tied the work to sociopolitical realities, New Criticism made the reading of literature fairly easy to teach, having isolated the literary work from its origins in the author’s life and the social context of its creation.

Filipino writers writing in English did not find the entry of New Criticism much of a problem. As early as the 1920s, poet Jose Garcia Villa, breaking away from the “national,” had already divorced the art of poetry from the social milieu and gained adherents among creative artists for his aestheticism. It was among writers using Tagalog that New Criticism took some time to register conversions. The reason for this was cultural. Rizal and other writers from the Propaganda Movement of the 1880s had by example passed on to vernacular writing the theory that a writer writes for no other reason than the social and political needs of his time. Villa, and his advocacy for art that deliberately eschewed any social and political links to the life of the community, broke off from a critical tradition hallowed by the Revolution of 1896. English writers in the 1950s accepted New Criticism as a systematized affirmation of what Villa was advocating.

Tagalog writing, however, was not to be easily won over even when New Criticism had already established itself as a trend in Philippine writing in general. Literary practice that had the sanction of history could not be easily dislodged from

the consciousness of writers and teachers by a theory coming from abroad that was only too ready to ignore the contribution to national literature of writers like the heroes Jose Rizal, Andres Bonifacio, and Marcelo H. del Pilar. The purposive writing the three nineteenth century authors represented was taken to be the noblest service a writer could render his countrymen in a society still in the process of unshackling itself from the thrall of the West.

As late as the 1960s, whenever English writing by Filipinos and Tagalog writing were juxtaposed, the latter always suffered in comparison. English works were always privileged, being writing that had been able to keep abreast of the literary fashions in the West, its writers having had access to the latest creative and critical innovations that the newest publications had propagated. Tagalog poetry and fiction purveyed by the commercial weekly magazines were soon to be objects of scorn among college campus writers writing in Tagalog, who had begun to draw from their classroom readings examples of modernist themes and techniques for their own creative works. Thus an unspoken rivalry with writers in English began to permeate the consciousness of Tagalog poets and fictionists, who always felt humiliated by the fact that they had only campus newspapers and magazines as venues, while their counterparts using English enjoyed the prestige of being published in metropolitan and national publications.

In 1962, two university professors who had earned their graduate degrees in the US came home and founded the first writers' workshop in the Philippines in Silliman University in Dumaguete City. Both Dr. Edilberto Tiempo and his wife Edith had attended the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop in the US and were fully persuaded that the art of writing could be learned, both of them having been honed as critics in the tradition of New Criticism. In the following years, young writers from all over the Philippines were to travel to Dumaguete City to learn craftsmanship during their three-week sojourn in Silliman. The experience in the workshop was to fortify the orientation that in creative writing, it was craft above all that allowed the writer to discover what he wanted to say.

Such sophisticated theorizing about their art was not available to the Tagalog writers whose language kept them out of the Silliman workshop. The cultural lag between them and their peers who wrote in English accounts for the gradualism in their response to "internationalization," allowing them perhaps a more reasoned application of what they were learning about modernism in the art of writing. Thus, in 1964, when a group of young Tagalog writers put out an anthology of their collective literary output in fiction, critics were to sit up and note how the young fictionists had been able to graft lessons of modernism into the essentially traditionalist content of their stories. *Agos sa Disyerto (Streams in the Desert, 1964)*, brought together socially conscious stories that were "new" in Tagalog writing because the technique and the perspective had brought out insights hitherto uncharted by traditionally written fiction. Specially noteworthy was how the writers

had judiciously employed devices decidedly cosmopolitan but with attention focused on a “national” audience. The anthology was to earn its authors considerable respect from readers who had previously underestimated the power of Tagalog writing, their previous encounters with it being mainly with works in weeklies patronized by readers reading on the run.

The situation of the Tagalog poets was different. There was a revolt against the strict formalism of traditional Tagalog verse for which rime and meter were obligatory and time-honored aphorisms and metaphors were necessary adornments. Poet Alejandro G. Abadilla, in the 1950s, was the first to rebel by introducing free verse, thus altering the musicality of native verse and alienating lovers of traditional Tagalog poetry. New poetry by young poets who had previously published only in campus publications appeared in the anthology *Manlilikha (Creators, 1967)* and their pieces announced the arrival of Tagalog creative artists openly, even violently, testing their language in modernist innovations inspired by American and European models like Eliot, Quasimodo, Brecht, and Rilke. Indeed, Tagalog poetry had gone “international.” Indeed, it might be asserted also that finally Tagalog writers had begun to stand toe to toe with English writers. In the process, however, they had sacrificed readership in a milieu that had barely begun to be initiated in the literary developments outside the country.

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A DIFFERENT TREND was asserting itself in writing in English. Writers who had conditioned themselves to the limited reach of their literary production, and had forged ahead in their quest to keep in step with writing abroad, could not turn a blind eye to events in the political scene. Filipino authors who write in English mainly come from the middle class and are quite sensitive to changes in the political temper of the times. The 1960s were highly volatile times, and the restlessness of the period was evident in the many creative initiatives that may be traced back to those years.

The first half of the decade saw the writing community divided by what was then referred to as “the language problem.” Buoyed by raucous rallies and demonstrations calling for the liberation of the masses from the combined forces of “feudalism, imperialism and fascism,” activist youths tended to see the language problem as “Pilipino vs. English,” with Pilipino as the language of the masses and English as the language of the ruling class. Writers using English, because their medium is “the” international language, did not have to worry about their relation with literary developments abroad, but they began to be perturbed by isolation from the local scene where the nationalist rhetoric would accuse them of abandoning the “national” by writing in a language the masses did not understand.

When Kabataang Makabayan (Nationalist Youths) was organized in 1964, its members saw themselves as one with the masses and, of course, speaking as one of

the masses. The quandary of the literary establishment consisting mainly of canonical writers in English was how to relate to the “national” without excluding themselves from writing in the West. Alejandrino G. Hufana, Ricaredo Demetillo, Cirilo Bautista, and Wilfrido D. Nolledo were major authors for whom shifting to Pilipino was out of the question unless they were prepared to turn “minor” as Pilipino writers. Their response to the spirit of the times was to engage themselves in major projects using history and indigenous subjects.

Hufana, who had tried his hand at writing lyric pieces in the Ilocano language, chose to produce an epic about a real rural coastal community and the Ilocano people there. He retained the modernist idiom he had been using in his earlier works, but created portraits of the folk that when pulled together told about the lives and struggles of the community. *Poro Point Anthology* (1961) was a non-traditional epic about an Ilocano community that could be read as the story of the Filipino people. Demetillo, for his part, borrowed the narrative of legendary tales about the Bornean datus who were the early settlers of Demetillo’s native province of Panay. Cast in the more traditional epic mode, the poet told his “national” narrative in metered and riming verses, the re-created legendary characters and adventures alluded to contemporary events in Philippine society in the late 1950s. *Barter in Panay* (1961), more than Hufana’s epic, was emphatic about its intentions of being “national.”

Like Hufana, Cirilo Bautista wrote in the idiom of Western modernist poetry. His epic trilogy, *The Trilogy of Saint Lazarus* (*The Archipelago*, 1970; *Telex Moon*, 1975; *Sunlight on Broken Stones*, 1998) drew its narrative material from history starting from contact times and extending to contemporary times as these were lived by Filipinos. According to the critic Isagani Cruz, who had read deeply into Bautista’s magnum opus, the individual epics privilege the author’s voice, but Bautista’s sensibility as a creative artist is unmistakably “national.”²

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NOLLEDO’S GESTURE TOWARD the “national” came in the form of a novel unprecedented in the literary history of the country in the complexity of its technique and thematic intentions. *But for the Lovers* (1970) is “international” as well, defiantly avant-garde in its language (which is laced with numerous Tagalog words and allusions) and in the narrative devices employed. Although its time-span is limited to the period of Japanese Occupation, the allegorical construction of the characters and events allude to a larger narrative about the Filipino people and their grotesque experience under three colonial regimes.

As far as the tension between the “national” and the “international” is concerned, Francisco Sionil Jose never had any problem with either. His fiction is “national” in its consistent championing of the Filipino peasant and his quest for land of his own and its excoriation of the Filipino intellectual and his betrayal of his own personal

ideals of liberation for the poor and the oppressed. The *Rosales Novels* (*The Pretenders*, 1962; *My Brother, My Executioner*, 1973; *Tree*, 1973; *Mass*, 1979; and *Po-on*, 1984) are Jose's epic about the Filipino nation and its long history of struggle for freedom and social equity. Jose's creative output is unquestionably "international" and the twenty-five languages into which his works have been translated attest to their universal appeal. Jose and his writings are proof that the "national" and the "international" are not mutually exclusive.

A radical break with English was called forth in a genre like drama which is wholly dependent on the patronage of a live audience, English playwrights like Wilfrido Ma. Guerrero and Alberto Florentino saw this in the 1960s and they sought the help of translation to draw in an audience beyond the college campus. Amelia Lapeña-Bonifacio abandoned English altogether and turned to playwriting for children's theater for which she employed Tagalog. Poet Rolando S. Tinio, who stopped writing English poems as his response to "the language problem," launched a grand project of translating modern Western drama into Pilipino for his theater company, and he was able to introduce a galaxy of American and European playwrights to Filipino audiences.

The politics of the "national" elevated the craft of translation from a purely functional role as a teaching aid to a vital link in the politicization process of a community. The rise of activist organizations in the mid-1960s necessitated the development of translation which would bring within the reach of the masses readings from Marx, Mao Zedong, Lenin, and other ideologues that had hitherto been available only in English. The translations were available only as mimeographed pamphlets but they were enough to convince intellectuals well-versed in two languages that here was a process which would yoke together the "national" and the "international" for a worthy end.

Once the issue of "national" vs. "international" had been satisfactorily resolved, the translation of the "international" ceased to be a question of foreign intrusion. The poetry of Mao Zedong in Pilipino translation opened transactions in ideology, ideas, themes, and techniques between Filipino and foreign authors. *Katipunán*, a progressive academic journal based in the Ateneo de Manila University, subsequently put together a collection of political poems from mainly Third World countries, which later appeared in pamphlet form as *Kamao (Clenched Fist)*, 1971). At this juncture, many translated pieces employed "bridge translation" (translation from a translation), with the English translation as the translator's base.

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SO FAR, THE flow of translation has been from the "international" to the "national," reflecting once again the colonial relations between the Philippines and the US. Prior to the rise of nationalism in the mid-1960s, dependence on US cultural exports

to the Philippines were a given. Thus, the Filipino's introduction to the cultures of other countries was always transacted through English, and this was specially true in literature. The study of foreign languages for the specific needs of translation was, therefore, sadly neglected. Translators working with the original language, however, are beginning to appear. Zeus A. Salazar has published his collected translations of French and German modern poetry. Jose F. Lacaba and Marra PL Lanot are translating Spanish and Latin American poetry from the original language. Teresita Alcantara has a Filipino translation of Juan Ramon Jimenez's *Platero y yo*. Mario Miclat translates from the Chinese, his major achievement being a rendition into Filipino of Cao Yu's *The Peking Man*.

More and more, the need for Philippine literature in native Philippine languages to be introduced to foreign readers requires the attention of Filipino translators. *Philippine Literature: A History and Anthology* (2004) has come out in an English edition with translations of selections which in earlier bilingual editions had been presented only in their original in Filipino. The anthology is intended as a sampler of poetry, fiction and drama for the interested foreign reader, supplementing the rather sparse collections available so far in English. These include translations by Epifanio San Juan Jr. (*Rice Grains*) and by Cirilo Bautista (*Bullets and Roses*) of key poems of National Artist Amado V. Hernandez. English versions of poems by National Artist Virgilio S. Almario (a.k.a. Rio Alma) have appeared in a single volume. Folk literature (ethnoepics, legends, myths, and tales) has been given English versions in Damiana Eugenio's volumes on the oral lore of Filipinos.

This paper had intended to demonstrate that a significant aspect of the growth of Philippine Literature stems from efforts by writers to avoid exclusion from literary developments outside of the Philippines and, in reverse, from the impulse to project a national image through works that are identifiably indigenous in subject matter and form. The historical base behind the double-faced avoidance of exclusion is US colonialism, which tantalized the native imagination with the prospect of democratic equity with the colonial master at some future time, at the same time that it was denigrating native talent and ability through its cultural hegemony.

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NOTES

1. Teodoro A. Agoncillo, *A History of the Filipino People*, 3rd ed. (Quezon City: R.P. Garcia Publishing Co., 1973), p. 338.

2. Isagani Cruz, "Kung ang Tanong ay 'Sino si Cirilo?'" *Bukod na Bukod* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2003), p. 201.