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Castilian, or the Colonial Uncanny:

Translation and Vernacular Theater in the Spanish Philippines

Let me begin by setting the stage for the settings and stagings I'll be talking about today. This paper is part of a book project on the origins of nationalism in the nineteenth century Philippines from the perspective of translation practices. But why translation? What does nationalism, which has been the subject of a steady and unrelenting torrent of recent studies, have to do with translation?

I. Translation and Conversion.

To answer this question, it is necessary to inquire into the origins of Filipino nationalism. As in the case of other formerly colonized areas, nationalism in the Philippines emerged within the conditions set by colonial rule. Such conditions included the intimate association between political conquest and Catholic conversion whereby one enabled and legitimized the other. At the very tail end of the Reconquista, the Spanish colonization of the Philippine islands enjoined the simultaneous subjugation of native bodies and souls. Such subjugation however, had a linguistic basis. The task of spreading God's Word required using native words. Given the great distance of the archipelago from Spain and the Americas, there was an acute shortage of missionaries. It thus became more practical for the Spanish clergy to learn the numerous local languages—nearly 80

distinct vernaculars-- and convert the natives in the latter's idiom. In this way did translation become an essential technic of evangelization.

Following the practice in the New World, Spanish missionaries systematically codified native languages starting the late sixteenth century. They replaced the local script (baybayin) with Roman letters; used Latin categories to reconstruct native grammars; and Castilian definitions in constructing dictionaries of the vernaculars. Catholic teachings were then translated and taught in the local languages. At the same time, the missionary policy insisted on retaining key terms in their original Latin and Castilian forms. Such words as Dios, Espiritu Santo, Virgen, along with the language of the mass and the sacraments remained in their untranslated forms in Latin and Castilian so as not to be confused, or so the missionaries thought, with pre-Christian beliefs and rituals. Spanish translation practices were thus underwritten by an ideology of untranslatability meant to safeguard the putative purity of sacred concepts.

Through the translation of God's Word, natives came to see in Spanish missionaries a foreign presence speaking their "own", that is, the natives,' language. This appearance -- as sudden as it was unmotivated from the natives' point of view -- of the foreign in the familiar and its reverse, the familiar in the foreign -- roused native interests and anxieties. For what they apprehended in the friar was the force of communication, that is, the power to establish contact across borders and speak in ways otherwise unanticipated and unheard of; and to do so in a language other than their, that is, the Spaniards,' own. Conversion, as I've tried to demonstrate in my earlier work, was thus a matter of responding to this startling because novel emergence of alien messages from alien speakers from within one's own speech. It was to identify oneself with this uncanny--we might say, magical--occurrence and to submit to its attractions which included access to an unseen yet

omnipresent source of all power.

Conversion also had the effect of translating the vernacular into another language, converting it into a medium for reaching beyond one's own world. The intermediary for addressing what lay beyond was the Spanish missionary. He stood at the crossroads of languages, for he spoke not only the vernacular but also Castilian and Latin. And because of his insistence on retaining untranslated words within the local versions of the Word, he evinced the limits of translation, the points at which words became wholly absorbed and entirely subservient to their referents.

Conversion as conquest meant that translation would be at the service of a higher power.

Evangelization encapsulated all languages and messages within a single, ruling Word, Jesus Christ, the incarnate speech of the Father.

Through the missionaries, converts could hope to hear the Word of the Father resonating within their own words. Put differently, Catholic conversion in this colonial context was predicated on the transmission of a hierarchy of languages. Submitting to the Word of the Father, one came to realize that one's first language was subordinate to a second; that a foreign because transcendent presence ruled over one's thoughts; and that such thoughts came through a chain of mediations: roman letters, Castilian words, and Latin grammatical categories superimposed on the vernaculars.

In this context, we can think of the missionary as a medium for the communication of a hierarchy of communications which was thought to frame all social relations. Through him, native societies were reordered as recipients of a gift they had not expected in the form of a novel message to which they felt compelled to respond. What made the message compelling was precisely its evocation of a linguistic hierarchy. To experience language hierarchically unfolding, as for

example in prayer or in the sacraments, is to come to believe in the fatality of speech. All messages inevitably reach their destinations, if not now, then in the future. Moreover, they will all be answered, if not in one way then in another. The attractions of conversion thus included the assurance that one always had the right address.

Given these historical matters, it is not difficult to appreciate the depth of Filipino nationalist fascination with the friars and their obsessive concern with the Spanish fathers' influence over the motherland reflected again and again in their writings. As "sons" of the motherland, the first generation of Filipino nationalists, called ilustrados, or enlightened, wanted to speak in a language that would gain them recognition from colonial authorities. They came from different parts of the archipelago and spoke a variety of vernacular languages. However, they were also beneficiaries of the increasing commercialization of agriculture thanks to the penetration of European trade starting the later eighteenth century. Thanks to their wealth, they managed to gain access to universities in Manila where they learned to speak Castilian. In many cases, they traveled to and studied in European cities such as Madrid, Barcelona, Paris and Berlin. Ilustrado nationalist sought not a separate nation--at least not yet--but a claim on the future and a place on the social map. To do so meant supplanting the position of the friar. They sought to become agents of translation, capable of speaking across class and linguistic boundaries, and up and down the colonial hierarchy in order to make audible the interests of those at the bottom to those on top. Initially, their appeal was not for the abolition of colonial rule but for its reformation in ways that would expand the limits of citizenship and political representation. This wish brought with it the imperative to communicate in a language that could be heard and understood by those in authority. Such a language was Castilian.

Traversing ethno-linguistic differences, Castilian served as the *lingua franca* of the *ilustrados*. It furnished them with a medium for communicating with one another and, equally important, with those within and outside of colonial society. With the exception of the small group of *criollos* for whom Castilian was presumably a first language, the majority of Filipino nationalists found in Castilian a second language common to each because native to no one. The foreignness of Castilian, the fact that it did not belong to them, was precisely what made it indispensable as a *lingua franca* for seeking recognition.

Filipino nationalism thus did not originate with the discovery of an indigenous identity by the colonized and his/her subsequent assertion of an essential difference from the colonizer. Rather, its genesis lies in the transmission of messages across social and linguistic borders among all sorts of people whose identities and identifications were far from settled. These transmissions were in Castilian for the most part, a language long heard in the colony but, because of the friar practice of dissuading natives from learning it (out of fear that it would lead the spread of liberal ideas), it was largely misunderstood and barely spoken by the vast majority of those living in the archipelago. (Indeed, at the end of Spanish rule in 1898, barely 1% of the population were fluent in the language). Castilian was in this sense a foreign language to most; and among *ilustrados*, it was a second language with which to represent the interests of the majority of the colonized. Thus we can think of Filipino nationalism as a practice of translation, here understood first as the coming into contact with the foreign and subsequently its reformulation into an element of oneself. It entails, at least in its formative moments, the discovery of an alien aspect residing within colonial society and its translation into a basis for a future history.

It is important to note, however, that the fascination with Castilian was not limited to the

first generation of elite nationalists. There also existed a popular interest and investment in the capacity of Castilian to furnish a kind of lingua franca that pre-dated the rise of ilustrado nationalism and arguably shaped its contours. Given their facility and fluency with the language, it is easy enough to understand ilustrado attachments to Castilian. But how do we explain the belief in the telecommunicative capacities of Castilian among those in the lower rung of society who had only the most rudiment knowledge of the language? How was the foreignness of Castilian understood among the masses of who could not speak it and yet eagerly sought it out? What were the sites of this popular encounter with a language whose allure was predicated on its opaqueness? One way by which we can begin to answer these questions is to turn to what might at first seem an unlikely source: vernacular theater. As we shall see, vernacular plays expropriated Castilian, mobilizing its potential for amplifying communicative power across geographic and social distances. Plays in the different local languages began to be performed in the eighteenth century and became increasingly popular by the nineteenth. Ironically, vernacular plays, as I will argue, depended for their popularity on their use of untranslated Castilian words. They commanded wide attention because of their ability to convey something of Castilian's opacity and therefore its capacity to communicate at a distance in and through local languages across the broad spectrum of social classes. It is to the historical significance of such a genre in popularizing the telecommunicative power of Castilian that I now want to turn to.

II. Comedya: the Recurrence of Untranslatability.

Vernacular plays came to be known by a variety of names: *corridos*, *linambay* (in Cebu), *moro-moro* (at least by the later nineteenth century). However, they were most widely known as

comedy from the Spanish *comedia*, metrical romances with its roots in the sixteenth century. By the eighteenth century, comedias had become staple features of lowland Christianized communities. They were performed on makeshift stages in conjunction with the celebration of the town's fiesta which commemorated the feast day of the local patron saint. Actors were taken from among the town's populace, though by the nineteenth century, professionals emerged especially around Manila who were contracted by near by towns to perform. Professionals, however, at no point displaced local performers and writers. Comedias continued to enjoin popular participation and support, especially in the provinces, until their gradual eclipse by other entertainment forms such as the zarzuela (a kind of operetta) and the cinema (both foreign and local) in the early twentieth century.¹

Comedias were one of the earliest forms of mass entertainment in the Philippines. Literary historians point out that the earliest comedias date back to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Written by Spanish clergy in Castilian and in the vernacular, these had explicitly religious themes dealing with the lives of saints meant to promote piety among viewers. Reference is also made to at least one *comedia* from 1637 based on an actual historical occurrence: the victory of Governor General Sebastian Corcuera over Sultan Kudarat's forces in Mindanao. Such themes, however were relatively marginal. The most popular kind of *comedia* that emerged by the eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century involved the fictionalized and formulaic recounting of the "lives and loves of royal characters" from Moorish and Christian kingdoms of medieval Europe and Persia in the various vernacular languages. It is this most common and wide-spread *comedia*, often referred to in Tagalog as *moro-moro*, which will be the focus of what follows. Such plays were sanctioned by the Catholic church and performances had

to meet the approval of the parish priest. However, the writers and actors did not, as we shall see, merely reproduce the logic and interests of the colonial-Christian order. For the very popularity of comedias suggested, as I shall argue, other interests at work which, while appearing to re-affirm the social and ideological boundaries set by colonial authorities, also tended to re-draw these.⁶

Comedia performances drew large crowds from within as well as outside the town. Such plays were amalgamations of the various motifs, characters and geographical settings derived from European, mostly Spanish, metrical romances. Their titles suggest as much: “La Guerra Civil de Granada,” “Reina Encantada o Casamiento por Fuerza,” “Los dos Vireyes,” “Principe Baldovino,” “Don Gonzalo de Cordoba” and so forth.² Plots revolved around the forbidden love between a Christian prince or princess and his or her Moorish counterpart. Disrupting the filial relationship between royal parents and their children, such love invariably led to a series of abductions and searches, highly choreographed battle scenes, magical encounters with monsters, extended discourses on love lost and regained, vows of vengeance, and boasts of physical prowess. Stretching more than three or four hours through each of the several nights of the town fiesta, performances abruptly ended with the hurried, almost casual conversion of the Moors to Christianity and the reconciliation of the warring families.

Comedyas were translations of such stories into Tagalog, Cebuano, Ilokano and other local languages. However, no Spanish text was ever translated as a whole. Rather, comedyas were composites of various metrical romances and their prior translations. They are translations of translations for which literally no original existed. Yet, as with missionary translations of God’s Word into the native languages, comedya writers and performers also retained a notion of untranslatability. They kept certain words and appearances in their original Castilian form. These

included proper names of persons and places, titles, stage directions, and other words for which there were no local equivalents. And as with language, so with dress. Costumes were made not so much as faithful copies of their original forms but in ways that suggested their alien origins. As with untranslated bits of Castilian embedded in the vernacular, costumes draped on native bodies sought to evoke foreign places. In the absence of an indigenous pre-colonial classical tradition of royalty and court literature in the Philippines, “kings”, “queens”, “princess”, “dukes” and so forth could only be depicted in ways that suggested vaguely European, vaguely medieval fashions. Similarly, musical accompaniments when these occurred (especially by the later nineteenth century), were also foreign in origin. Battle scenes for instance featured the “Himno de Riego”, derived from a Spanish military march from the later nineteenth century.

Untranslated words, “European” costumes and Spanish military music in effect announced the recurring appearance of the foreign in the familiar. Indeed, it was precisely the repeated return of what came from the outside and which now lodged itself inside the local language that constituted the literary specificity of the *comedia*. As we shall see, it was what gave the plays their vernacular quality and lent to them their wide appeal. Audiences with little or no knowledge of Castilian and Europe found themselves periodically exposed to a spectacular surplus of foreign signifiers. We could think of performances as scenes of translation occurring around the appearance of untranslatable elements. In this sense, they remind us of the missionary translation of Christianity into the local languages. Missionary translation localized Christian discourse while at the same time retaining certain Castilian and Latin words deemed sacred in their original forms. Certain foreign terms thus came to have a privileged status within the local languages. Such terms transferred but did not translate from one language to another. Translation predicated on

untranslatability instituted a linguistic hierarchy that made it seem as if local languages were naturally subordinate to Castilian and Latin. Thus did a second language come to rule over the first. Foreign words left untranslated came to inhabit and punctuate the flow of native speech within a Christian-colonial order.

Comedyas in some ways recapitulate the missionary logic of translation premised on untranslatability: of the vernacular coming to be by bearing the traces of a foreign arrival. The foreign whether by way of costuming or language, lie at the basis of colonial literary expression in the vernacular. As with Christian discourse, the prospect of coming into contact with the foreign and witnessing its arrival in the vernacular drew people toward performances of plays and rituals alike. A colonial public was shaped in large part by this anticipatory relationship to alien appearances in local contexts, whether these happen in Churches or on the streets during theatrical shows. Yet as much as comedyas may have reiterated missionary logic, they also differed significantly from their ends and by extension from their politics. Such a difference, I want to suggest, comes to foreshadow nationalist understandings of language and power.

III. Phantasmagorias of "Europe."

There is no record of the first comedya written in any of the vernacular languages, though Spanish accounts indicate that by the first half of the eighteenth century, vernacular plays based on Spanish metrical romances had become widespread. Written in verse structured into quatrains of eight or twelve syllable lines, these plays were divided into numerous acts, featured large casts of characters, and ran for a number of hours for the duration of the town fiesta. While the majority of the comedyas were written in Tagalog, almost every low land Christianized area witnessed the rise

of similar dramas in local languages. In Cebu, they were called *linambay*; in Pampanga, *kumidya* or *kuraldal*; in Leyte, *hadi-hadi*; in Hiligaynon and other parts of the Tagalog regions, *moro-moro*.³

“Natives are fond of comedyas and farces,” wrote the Augustinian Fray Gaspar de San Augustin in 1720, “and there is no fiesta of consequence unless there is a comedya.”⁴

From early on, the pattern of vernacular dramas seemed to have been set. Mixing Castilian with the vernacular, “it unfolds,” writes Resil Mojares, “a highly elaborated story of war, love and supernatural enchantments against the abstracted background of distant foreign kingdoms.”⁵ In this regard, vernacular dramas never made references to Muslim slave raiders targeting coastal Christian communities nor Spanish attempts at conquering Muslim-held portions of Mindanao and Sulu through the centuries of Spanish rule. Instead, they referred only to what the Spanish writer, Wenceslao E. Retana called “faraway places” such as,

Spain, Portugal, Granada, Turkey, Jerusalem, Hungary, Albania. . . and the names of characters: Florante, Laura, Pelayo, Dona Ines. . . Infantes de Lara, Doce Pares de Francia. . . And I ask: to what must we attribute the fact that in the artistic productions of Filipinos, there exist hardly a note that is genuinely Filipino? . . . Why this migratory enthusiasm (*afan emigratorio*), why this systematic exoticism (*exotismo systematico*) of the artistic concepts of Filipinos?⁶

Retana stumbles into something curious about comedyas that other scholars have echoed in his wake: that there is not a single reference to the Philippines, to Filipinos, Chinese, Spaniards, or to local Muslims in the entire range of vernacular dramas. Unlike Rizal’s novels which are anxious

to portray the social realities of its time, comedias are more interested in foreign scenarios. They appear to be spurred by a “migratory zeal” (*afan emigratorio*) to escape their social context. They invoke a past that is utterly fanciful and geographies that are wholly imaginary. “Princes, dukes, counts. . . extraordinary adventures, incredible tragedies, all of them lavish. . . and *all of them outside of the Philippines.*” (Principes, duques, condes.... aventuras extraordinarias, tragedias increíbles, todo ello a granel ... y *todo ello fuera de Filipinas.*”(sic)⁷

Comedias conjured a phantasmagoric “Europe.” Social types such as Christians and Muslims were decontextualized into alien figures speaking local languages about the most distant locations. In the world of comedias, there were neither “sangleys” nor “indios,” “frailes” nor “mestizos,” but only Moros and Cristianos ruled by sultans and kings, dukes and queens, rather than *gobernadores* or *alcaldes*. Populated by characters and scenes foreign to the Philippine colony, comedias nonetheless present such foreignness in a familiar idiom. Regardless of religious differences or geographical settings, all of the characters in a comedia spoke a common language.

“Europe” in the vernacular dramas thus came across as a collection of appearances and signs that were lifted from their putative origins and grafted onto native bodies and speech. To Spanish observers, such a process created absurd juxtapositions of the foreign and the local that rendered comedias barely comprehensible. Vernacular dramas estranged “Europe” from itself, splintering if from any unitary concept as a distinct place with its own history. Translation placed European identity in motion, as it were, so that it surfaced in odd ways on colonial stages. Staging comedias meant, among other things, bringing both spatial and temporal distances up close. The unknown regions of the Western past now suddenly became accessible to native audiences. As fragments attached to non-European bodies and speech, “Europe” and its past were converted into

spectral signposts from which issued a native present.

But even as comedyas brought the foreign up close, hosting it within the limits of the vernacular, they also rendered the vernacular other than itself. They did so first of all by virtue of their prosodic features. All plays were set in verse. They were recited with the rhythmic regularity demanded by eight or twelve syllable lines organized around an invariant caesura on the fourth or sixth syllable respectively. For example, from the comedya *Princesa Miramar at Principe Leandro*, written in 1920 but based on earlier nineteenth century texts, we hear the princess addressing her absent lover:

Walang kailangang mabuhay pa ako,
 Kung ikaw ay wala mahal kong Leandro,
 tapos na ang lahat, tapos na irog ko,
 ang kaligayahan layaw ko sa mundo.⁸

No longer do I need to live,
 If you are gone, my dear Leandro,
 everything is over, over my darling,
 the happiness that I enjoyed in this world.

As with all verse, comedyas recast ordinary speech into another form. The style of theatrical speech sets language apart from everyday discourse. The latter is usually meant to serve as a means for conveying messages or forging connections outside of what is said. The former, by contrast, calls attention to the act of saying itself. Language comes across as material artifice, palpable and audible apart from any instrumental function. In other words, speech in verse

demands to be attended to as if it were another kind of language, one split between a regulated relationship between rhythm and rhyme on the one hand and a range of references crafted by layers of tropes on the other. The very form of the *comedy* hence gives to the vernacular the sense of being two languages, not one. And to speak or hear lines from a play is already to be caught up in a practice of translation between the theatrical and the everyday with neither beginning nor end.

Coupled with the recurrence of untranslated bits of Castilian along with references to unknown regions, the declamatory style of the *comedy* makes for the estrangement of the vernacular as well. A double translation was involved. Not only did *comedias* entail the prosodic transformation of everyday speech. They also entailed the transfer of foreign words into the local idiom. Tagalog, Cebuano, Ilongo, etc., now bore the traces of alien presences of indeterminate origins and destinations. Bearing the recurrent passage of the foreign, the vernacular becomes other than itself: not exactly a wholly different language, but not the same either.

Escaping reference to colonial society, vernacular dramas instead bear witness to another history. It is one that is largely unremarked upon but everywhere present in colonial (and post-colonial) society: a practice of translation that expects the vernacular to forebear the untranslatability of certain words. Hosting such words, bringing their foreignness up close, vernacular plays like vernacular prayers, hold the local language in reserve for the coming of that which is alien to it. We see in the *comedy* then a double estrangement. They displace fragments of the foreign into the local. But in doing so, they also dislocate the local, denaturalizing the native speech and rendering it beholden to foreign signs and appearances. Through translation, what comes from the outside is given a place inside. And it is this giving place that converts both the outside and the inside into something other than what they were.

Calling attention to the materiality and malleability of languages, comedyas also staged the arbitrariness of appearances in colonial society. They showed that it was possible, for example, for a native to speak as if he or she were the embodiment of European or Persian royalty. Addressed as “duke” or “Your Highness” by actors who were in turn referred to as “prince” or “sultan”, natives on stage appeared other than whom they were in everyday life. Just as vernacular speech came to possess and be possessed by foreign words, so the highly stylized manner of moving and costumed appearances of actors suggested the presence of someone else alongside the speaker. It was as if the speaker were two “I’s”. There is the “I” who speaks within the plays, addresses others and is addressed by them; and another “I” that exists underneath his or her role, concealed by layers of clothing and rhetoric. Comedyas in this sense enacted something of the fundamental capacity of language, whether foreign or local, not only to reflect the world but also to separate itself from it.

Of course, this simultaneous ability of language to refer to and peel away from the world also lay at the basis of Christian conversion predicated on translation. For missionaries, however, all words spoken here on earth found their way to a final destination there, in the other worldly sphere where they were received by God. He is regarded as the privileged locus of address and for that reason, the sole respondent to all appeals.

By contrast, comedyas had no interest in reaching a Divine address, much less construing a providential source of all responses and responsibility. Their locus of address was more problematic and uncertain, and this is perhaps what gives them their secular quality. Comedyas were directed to an audience at large. Those who attended performances did not all necessarily know each other. And while local actors would have known some members of the audience, it was more likely that there were many others with whom they had no prior dealings. A degree of

anonymity characterized the crowd qua crowd at any given performance.⁹ The keen Augustinian observer of colonial society, Fray Joaquin Martinez de Zuniga, for example, describes the crowd attending a performance in the southern Tagalog province of Batangas in 1799 in the following way: “We went for a stroll and saw innumerable natives of both sexes coming into the pueblo from different directions, some on foot, others on horseback, all of them coming to the fiesta. The comedy had attracted many people. All of the houses were swarming (*hormigueaban*) with people and it seemed as if everyone in the province had gathered in the pueblo of San Jose ”¹⁰

Given the large crowds that came “swarming” to the pueblo to watch the plays, there was no way of determining from the outset the “who” who saw and heard the comedy except to say that they came from the town and its surroundings, and that they occupied different social positions in colonial society. Their social identity, even if that could be ascertained, did not exhaust the question of who they were. Similarly, the comedy could not be and was not interested in controlling the “what” of what was actually received and registered by the audience. With the comedy, we begin to see the possibilities of translation unhinged from evangelization. Less concerned with the identities of those it addressed beforehand, while explicitly playing out the possibilities of speaking and appearing as someone else, comedias opened a way to reconceptualize conversion and social identity in more worldly terms.

We can better appreciate the significance of the comedy by going back to the question of its popularity, that is, its ability to call forth a mass of people in anticipation of a performance. To do so, it helps to recall that the comedy also contained a notion of untranslatability analogous to but also distinct from that of the missionaries. In the comedy as in evangelization, untranslated terms induce the flow of translation in the vernacular. Castilian is given a place in Tagalog or

Cebuano prayers or plays, but nevertheless retains a discernible Castilian form. As Mojares points out with regard to the Cebuano *comedy*, plays “are replete with [such] Spanish words as *potencia*, *batalla*, *causa*, *criado*, *ejercito*...” and so on.¹¹ The same holds true for other vernacular plays. In them, Castilian becomes a part by being set apart, encrusted and hence visible and audible on the surface of the vernacular. The language of the *comedy*, as I have been suggesting, stands in historical relationship to the missionary logic of translation. The former mimics even as it slides and skids away from the latter. Where the notion of untranslatability is concerned, the chief agent for establishing and guarding the purity of words in evangelization is the priest. In the vernacular plays, the agent of untranslatability is the actor.

IV. Actors, or the Fetish of the Foreign.

Actors were recognizable in the first place by virtue of their attire. It was common for them to dress up in costume and parade around the streets accompanied by a band publicizing the evening’s performance.¹² European travel accounts remark on the fascination such costumes held for both actors and onlookers. Fray Martinez de Zuniga, for example, notes that before and after the play, actors were seen going about in their costumes “which by Spanish standards are very elegant. They strut about, adopting an affected manner [in their walk and in gestures] so that they seem to consider themselves above their countrymen because of the roles they were playing that day.”¹³ In provinces like Albay, the Spanish journalist Alvarez Guerra remarks in 1879 that *comedy* costumes were made at great expense. The more prominent actors might have as many as five to seven costumes, each as lavish as the next.¹⁴ Regardless of whether they pertained to a Moro or a Cristiano, such costumes tended to be “adaptations of European dress, brightly decorated with sequins, beads, embroidery, fringes, and feathers” that signaled a kind of aristocratic splendor.¹⁵

Dressed in such extraordinary attire, actors were often compared to images of patron saints (*santos*) which were always draped in regal clothing. Both actor and *santo* exuded an otherworldly sight that attracted attention. They seemed to stand apart from everyday appearances. It was as if they were in touch with another realm from which they acquired an abundance of things signaled by what they wore. The lavishness of their costumes meant that they stood in close proximity to a source of gifts. Among those who saw them, they triggered fantasies of benevolence and generosity even when these might be at times tinged with envy. What we today might refer to as their glamorous appearance connoted their connection to a powerful channel for the circulation of possibilities, including possibilities of being other than what one was suppose to be.

Like the texts of the *comedia*, costumes were translations for which no original existed. They did not mean to accurately copy medieval European fashion but rather disclose something beyond the limits of colonial society.¹⁶ That is, they were technics for bringing distances up close. What they brought, of course, was an image of that distance the way a photograph, for example, would convey the sense of nearness of what was absent. Their eccentric appearance made it seem as if costumed actors were in contact with some other place. They became citations of foreign figures and kingdoms in an unseen and indeterminate past. Hence, they, too, became a way for bringing distances up close as much as rendering distant what was close at hand. In costume, actors assumed a telecommunicative capacity. They drew audiences into proximity with imagined sources of colonial power even as they contained colonial authority within the boundaries of vernacular forms.

Costumes allowed native actors to leave behind one identity and assume a second. Colonial law regulated identity by way of racial classifications and dress designed to limit movement within the colony and facilitate the collection of taxes.¹⁷ In the *comedia*, as we saw, racial categories

ceased to matter. Identity no longer becomes subject to the law but now becomes a matter for popular recognition. Actors came to be recognized by audiences both during and outside of performances as figures capable of quoting and retaining the traces of a foreign authority. “The natives are very fond of comedyas,” write Martinez de Zuniga, noting that “the most prominent persons in the towns are the actors.”¹⁸ One can speculate that the popularity of actors had to do with their ability to embody something of the linguistic power of the Spanish missionaries. They managed to divorce language from appearance, looking one way yet speaking in another. In doing so, they made explicit the arbitrary relationship between language and identity. They thus seem to possess the power of translation that brought with it the insistent presence of untranslatable elements.

Other European observers, however, note the peculiar nature of this possession. The Spanish journalist Juan Alvarez Guerra, for example, remarked on the sound of actors’ voices during a Tayabas comedia in the latter nineteenth century. To someone like him who did not speak Tagalog, they all seemed to speak in the same uniform fashion. The rhythmic delivery of their lines worked to flatten the tone of their voices and, at least to a foreign ear, drained their words of affect.¹⁹ About a century later, Filipino scholars would hear something similar. Resil Mojares, for instance, writes that actors in a late twentieth century Cebuano comedia delivered their lines in a “stilted recitative manner which allows for limited tonal variations for such situations as boasting and lamentation. Verses are also delivered segmentally, line by line to the rhythm of the dictation of the prompter (*dictador*) in his make shift cubicle at the foot of the stage.”²⁰

The flatness of their tone was matched by the “immobile” and “expressionless” faces, Mojares further notes, so that ,

the players are subordinated to the play itself. They do not, as in some forms of modern theater, develop the expressive potential of their personalities, faces or voices. They do not aspire to give an individual coloring to their voices nor do they exploit the semiotic qualities of the face (for in this they could as well be wearing masks...). In this type of play, the dissolution of personalities into flat characters enhances the play's overall expressive power.²¹

The sonic quality of the actors' voices made it seem as if language of the play was mechanically reproduced rather than organically produced by the speakers. That is, their voices did not seem to express a self behind and in front of its words. Instead, no one in particular inhabited their speech. The words they spoke belonged neither to them nor to the characters they portrayed. Rather, they served as the media for the passage and transmission of language that they received from the prompter or *dictador*, literally one who dictates. In most cases, the dictador was also the playwright who composed the play by way of stitching together scenes and characters from other plays. Given that comedias were translations for which, as we saw, no originals existed, the author of the play could not properly be considered its origin. His authorship was a function of translation, as provisional as it was derivative. In this sense, the author-dictador was like the actor. His language was not his own, but always something taken from elsewhere: a second language, as it were, that lodges in his first.

Language passes through the author-dictador as much as it is passed down to him. He then gives it to the actors who in turn disseminate it to the assembled crowd. What audiences hear is their own language, of course. However, given its provenance and style of delivery, it comes across as a

language that also belongs to no one in particular. It is in this sense like a *lingua franca*: common to all by virtue of being native to no one. In the context of the *comedia*, the vernacular takes on a foreign quality. It is heard in the same way that it is spoken: at a remove from everyday speech and unlike Christian discourse, traceable to no ultimate source. The flatness of the voices and expressions on faces make it appear as if expression is divorced from intention. Actors come across as figures bearing a language they do not own but which they nonetheless body forth. That is, they embody an estranged vernacular, appearing to possess what in fact possesses them.

As a medium for broadcasting the vernacular now rendered uncanny by its emanation from somewhere else, actors gain a peculiar sort of recognition. Accounts of *comedyas* from the eighteenth to the twentieth century consistently remark on the absence of applause before and after performances. “People drift in and out of the crowd as the play progresses,”²² eating, sleeping, playing games, gambling and on occasion addressing actors on the stage. There was then no “audience” in the sociological sense of a group that consciously sees itself to be separate from the actors on stage, constituting itself by judging what it sees, most immediately by way of applause.²³ Instead, people watched *comedyas* in a state of distraction. The length and episodic repetitiousness of the plays seemed to demand this kind of fragmentary attentiveness.

Distracted attention, however, did not mean indifference. Other accounts report the widespread belief that great misfortune would befall a town that failed to host a *comedia* during its *fiesta*. *Comedyas* were regarded as offerings like food dedicated to the town’s patron saint in the hope of soliciting his or her protection. Similarly, the performance of a *comedia* required the active patronage of the town’s local elites who provided materials and money for rehearsals, costumes, musical bands and food. Just as the staging of a *comedia* was meant to perform a town’s submission

to its patron saint, it also staged the workings of patronage in colonial society. In some places, even rehearsals drew large crowds that gathered with “great interest and anticipation.”²⁴ Food was served for both actors and audiences during rehearsals and was of course in abundance during fiestas. One Spanish observer in 1899 noted the lively interest shown by audiences. They seemed aroused “by the shouts and threats, by the sweet diction, by the mourning of pain. . . these things the audience watch, hardly able to breath in anticipation”. Audiences alternated between distraction and concentration when confronting the stage. Like native converts attending Christian rituals and mass, they shifted between alertness and relative boredom.²⁵ The recognition they accorded to actors was thus sporadic. They assumed their position as the addressee of the play and therefore as the recipient of a gift of words and images. But they also drifted in and out of this position, leaving it yet to be consolidated and institutionalized. Similarly, audiences come to witness what we have been referring to as the history of translation predicated on the persistence of untranslatable elements. We can imagine them identifying not so much with the particular actors as with the latter’s ability to embody translation. They see, that is, the possibility of claiming for themselves the capacity to keep the foreign in reserve, bringing it up close yet keeping it distanced and contained. They responded, however sporadically, to the call of a vernacular whose reach was now enhanced by the supplementary potency of foreign terms and scenes.

Spanish accounts note how actors were treated with great interest and deference off stage. “Princesses and queens were addressed as ‘senora’ and they were treated like royalty,” Fray Martinez de Zuniga observes.²⁶ Even those who played the role of clowns, regardless of their humble origins were treated with respect. Their demands were readily granted during the days of the performances, from “a house to stay in, a horse to ride, an umbrella to shield him or her from the

sun,” along with sumptuous meals and drink.²⁷ In some cases, actors even had police escorts to protect them from being robbed of the jewelry they wore as part of their costumes. Actors then were treated in ways reminiscent of visiting Spanish officials that we saw earlier: as the recurring figures of what remains eccentric and unassimilable. For this reason, they were able to galvanize attention across social divides.

We can see then how comedyas furnished a context for domesticating what we might think of as the colonial uncanny. Prior to the consolidation of ilustrado nationalism, comedyas broached the possibility of intermittently imagined communities founded on the recognition of the foreign lodged in the vernacular. Preceded by the drama of Christian conversion, comedyas were also products of translation. They furnished venues for expressing and conventionalizing fantastic identifications with alien places and alien sources of power that lay at the basis of colonial-Christian authority. But unlike vernacular prayers which were directed to God, vernacular plays relied on the recognition of an audience which was yet to consolidate its position as such.

Along with Christianity, colonized subjects thus came to share something else in the form of the comedy. Holding something in common—an interest in vernacular plays—they could conceivably begin to think of themselves as other than who they were. For example, as an audience called forth by the appearance of a second, foreign language amid their first, an appearance which incited translation. In this sense, translation is a response to a prior call which, passing from writer to actor, gathered forth a crowd. But it did so *not* in the name of the Father. Addressing the crowd as an audience not always conscious of itself as such, the comedy anticipated nationalist attempts to invest a second language with the capacity to recast vernacular languages and local identities into something other that could then be commonly shared. Thus does the fetish of the foreign introduced

by evangelization run through vernacular plays and later on, nationalist discourse. Appropriating the inappropriable, both repeat even as they rearticulate colonial-Christian antecedents, borne by the promise of reaching beyond a colonial order to which they nevertheless remained fatally bound.

Notes.

1. Histories of the *comedy* are taken from Wenceslao E. Retana *Noticias historico-bibliograficas del teatro en Filipinas desde su origenes hasta 1898*, Madrid: V. Suarez, 1909; Vicente Barrantes, *El teatro tagalo*, Madrid: Tipografia de Manuel G. Hernandez, 1889 among Spanish writers; Epifanio de los Santos, "Florante: Version Castellana del Poema Tagalo con un Ensayo Critico," in *The Philippine Review*, v.1, no.7, August 1916. In the 1960s and 70s, nationalist scholars rediscovered the *comedy* at the moment of its near disappearance. See Bienvenido Lumbera, *Tagalog Poetry, 1570-1898: Tradition and Influences in its Development*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1986; Nicanor G. Tiongson, *Kasaysayn ng Komedya sa Pilipinas, 1766-1862*, Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1982; Resil Mojares, *Origins of the Filipino*

Novel: A Generic Study of the Novel Until 1940, Quezon City: University of the Philippine Press, 1983; and *Theater in Society, Society in Theater: A Social History of a Cebuano Village, 1840-1940*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1985; and Doreen Fernandez, *Palabas: Essays on Philippine Theater*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1996. My own account is heavily indebted to these sources although it differs in its interpretation of this genre.

6. I am grateful to Nicanor G. Tiongson for calling my attention to the history and typology of comedias, and alerting me to their function for reproducing colonial-Christian ideology. However, it will become obvious in the discussion that follows that I have a somewhat different understanding of the historical roots and political effects of the comedia than Tiongson which necessarily builds on his earlier insights. See Tiongson, *Komedyas*, pp.1-9. See also Cristina Laconico-Buenaventura, *The Theater in Manila, 1846-1946*, pp.44-45 for a discussion of “Chinese comedias” performed among the Chinese community in Manila in the nineteenth century but which did not appear to spread to the provinces.

2. See Tiongson citing the titles of the late eighteenth century playwright, Huseng Sisiw, *Kasaysayan*, 18. See also the titles listed by Retana, *Noticias*, 122 such as “Historia y vida tristisima de los sietes Infantes de Lara y de su humilidismo padre en el Reino de Espana”.

3. See Mojares, *Theater in Society*; Fernandez, *Palabas*.

4. Gaspar de San Augustin, *Conquistas de las isla filipinas*, quoted in Mojares, *Theater*, 60.

5. Mojares, *Theater*, 59-60.

6. Retana, *Noticias*, 122.

7. Ibid., 123.

8. Cited from Fernandez, *Palabas*, 64.

9. See Tiongson, *Kasaysayan*, 35.

10. Fray Joaquin Martinez de Zuniga, *Estadismo de las islas filipinas, o mis viajes por este pais*, (1800), edited by Wenceslao E. Retana, 2 volumes, Madrid: Imprenta de la Viuda de M. Minuesa de los Rios, 1893, v.I, p.76.

11. Mojares, *Theater*, 85.

12. Tiongson, *Kasaysayan*, 53-54.

13. Martinez de Zuniga, *Estadismo*, v.I, 75.

14. Alvarez Guerra, cited in Tiongson, *Kasaysayan*, 62.

15. Fernandez, *Palabas*, 68.

16. One sees the persistence of this desire to evoke something beyond the everyday in the photographs of costumed actors during comedy performances in and around Manila in the 1950s found in Tiongson's book, *Kasaysayan*. The costumes come across as a pastiche of styles ranging from Hollywood costume romances and biblical epics to low rent Las Vegas shows. In any case, they all seem intent on generating in the viewer a generalized sense of exoticism that had little to do with producing historically accurate scenes and costumes

17. See O.D. Corpus, *The Philippines*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1965; *Roots of the Filipino Nation*, Quezon City: Aklahi Foundation, 1989; and Greg Bankoff, *Crime in Nineteenth Century Philippines*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1998.

18. Martinez de Zuniga, *Estadismo*, v.1, 300.

19. Juan Alvarez Guerra, *Viajes por Filipinas de Manila a Tayabas*, Madrid: Imprenta de Fortanet, 1887, cited in Tiongson, *Kasaysayan*, 60-61.

20. Mojares, *Theater*, 84.

21. *Ibid.*, 84.

22. *Ibid.*, 76. For comments on absence of applause, see Tiongson, 64-65.

23. For a discussion of similar cases of the formation of audiences in Southeast Asia from which I have profited, see James T. Siegel, *Solo in the New Order: Language and Hierarchy in an Indonesian City*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986.

24. John Bowring, *Visit to the Philippine Island*, cited in Tiongson, *Kasaysayan*, 64.

25. See Vicente L. Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.

26. Martinez de Zuniga, *Estadismo*, v.1, 75; Alvarez Guerra, cited in Tiongson, *Kasaysayan*, 61.

27. Tiongson, *Kasaysayan*, 61.